

Vampire Esquire's War

by Michael Wells jr,

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Dedication



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For my wife and daughter, my angels, always and forever.

Chapter 1

July 19, 64 AD, Rome

The fire raged throughout Rome. When the fire started, Quintus stood in the Forum at the Roman Law Courts. The fire separated him from his wife, Quinta. Although only a few miles away on Quirinale Hill, one of Rome's famed seven hills, Quinta might as well have been hundreds of miles away.

"Over here," a man shouted. The man's voice came from a door set between two Doric columns. Quintus passed by the door many times on his way to the law courts. He always thought it a facade and not a working door. Now it sat open with faint light coming from it as people, a mixture of citizens, plebs and slaves, scurried amidst the growing inferno, their shadows bouncing off the marble buildings and the dusty pathways.

"Are you talking to me?"

"Yes... you... the tall one. My name is Servus Marcellus. Follow me."

"Follow you where?"

"This way. There isn't much time. We must hurry." The mysterious man pointed to the narrow, torch-lit passage starting at the door's threshold.

Quintus turned down the dim passageway and followed the man. Marcellus carried a glowing torch in front of him. Quintus did not know why he followed Marcellus, for he had never seen him or at least he didn't recall doing so. The man's dark eyes shone with certainty, an absolute certainty that he alone knew the way out of the inferno. His eyes spoke with confidence words could not convey for in their dark implacability they allowed for no doubt. Ultimately the conviction in the man's eyes made Quintus trust him. The conviction Quintus thought he saw told him the stranger knew the way to safety. Quintus acted out of instinct, and his instinct usually proved correct. His instinct and the man's conviction told Quintus to trust the man. Quite frankly, he didn't have many other good options. He could panic among the hapless rabble of people or take a chance and follow the man. Besides, at least there wasn't fire in the passage.

Quintus felt like eons passed as they raced through the dank passage. His sandaled feet hit hundreds of bricks as he ran deeper under the ground. Occasionally his arm brushed against cold, wet stone, and he heard the constant drip of water around him. Probably from the aqueducts, he thought. In spite of the coldness of his surroundings, he felt a warm aura from what he assumed was the fire above. The passage smelled of wetness and burning at the same time. He ran for at least half an hour, and the distance along with the heat, wetness and cold meant he must have been deep under the earth because he soon felt no warmth from the blazing Roman inferno.

As he ran, he wondered if Quinta had found safety.
"Almost here. We are going to make it. This way..."
That glowing torch was Quintus' last human memory.



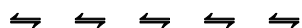
Quintus Gaius Antonious Maximus survived the "Great Fire of Rome" in 64 AD. Servus Marcellus helped him to escape—if losing your life as a human meant you escaped. Escaping human life for vampire existence guaranteed more years, but those years proved empty ones.

Servus's vampire name was Drago, and Quintus caught Drago's eye after Quintus skillfully defended his client to an acquittal in the Roman law courts. Servus saw promise in Quintus, and he wanted to make him a vampire. The fire provided the perfect opportunity.

Quintus finally escaped his maker, for he became tired of the carnage and the disregard for human and animal life. He retreated to Gaul, where he lived for hundreds of years, eventually changing his name to Pierre Leblanc.

Eventually he moved to the United States, Chicago in particular.

Leblanc decided long ago to use the law to preserve the peaceful coexistence between humans and vampires. He remained both a lawyer and a vampire.



Present Day

Pierre Leblanc loved to walk the Chicago streets for hours and lose himself in the teeming city. He lived vicariously through others as he watched them live their lives and imagined what it would be like them, to live and to be human once again. He envied them.

Their faces flashed before him like scenes on a movie screen, images, which faded into the smoky haze of time. The faces could never be more than detached images to him for he remained apart from the human world. And he had been since that day in July 64 A.D.

He spotted one couple walking across the Michigan Avenue Bridge over the Chicago River, hand in hand, and in love, and he recalled walking across a bridge over the Tiber River in Rome with his wife Quinta. It seemed so long ago—and it was—but the memories etched themselves in his consciousness so that they seemed near in time.

The man was tall with black hair like him, and the woman was athletic and beautiful with short, brown hair like Quinta. From behind they could have been he and Quinta. But they weren't and thinking about this ridiculous notion only made him feel worse.

He wasn't human anymore. He was a vampire, and, although he was of the human world, he was not in their world. An interloper, he never felt he fit, not for a few millennia at least. And he would never fit because he wasn't natural. He existed, but not the way nature intended.

Nature intended death and finite existence not infinite existence. So he tried to separate himself from humans and remain at most an observer. Sometimes, however, circumstances thrust themselves upon him and forced him to act thereby inserting himself into the human world. If he were going to exist for this

long, he might as well do his best to make sure humans and vampires both continued to exist.

Part human and part vampire, Pierre owed it to himself to honor both sides. He especially owed it to Quinta because the tragedy that had riven his life so long ago needed to be for a reason. There must be meaning. Otherwise, why was he here? He must embrace his humanity and fight against the negative aspects of his vampire nature.

The couple faded from view, and Pierre couldn't help but wonder if things would work out better for them. Maybe they wouldn't make it either. How was anyone to know?

He never imagined he would be in this situation, and it still seemed strange to him even after all this time.

And he blamed his maker, Drago (or whatever he called himself these days assuming he still existed), for this.



Pierre was troubled by vampires, who advocated for a vampire take over of the world; their numbers seemed to increase each day.

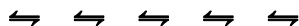
The Vampire League Restoration League, also known as the Nosferatu Vampire League, supported vampire dominion over humans at all costs. Restoration vampires viewed themselves as working to restore the natural order of vampire dominion. Although they claimed to be civilized and cultured, Leblanc knew better. No better than base animals, they would stop at nothing to enslave humans and use them as a food source.

Leblanc strove to find ways to lessen the influence of the Restoration vampires.

Leblanc's latest project involved creating a corporation that would allow for the set up of private blood banks. These blood banks would be used to supply vampires with blood. A majority of both vampire and human governments supported the idea. Certain high-level human government officials knew of the existence of vampires and had for hundreds of years. But it was thought to be better to keep vampires a secret because knowledge that vampires were real would cause mass hysteria as history had proven. Unfortunately, however, such plans had proved illusory, and the vampire presence wormed its way into and contributed to many conflicts.

Leblanc had worked on the private blood bank company for years, and he felt it would preserve the peace between humans and vampires. He believed vampires would not be able to attack humans or kill them if those humans acted as donors to the private blood banks. He pushed to make the penalty for feeding on humans staking.

It could be slow going, though, but he tried to use his acumen as a lawyer to lay the necessary groundwork. When the existence of vampires became common knowledge—and that was coming soon—the infrastructure would need to be ready.



Leblanc enjoyed the give and take of lawyering. Although many of the laws had changed over his almost 2,000 years of practice, the motivations that drove people remained the same: money and power.

He recalled the problem of concentration of wealth in the hands of a few; the problem repeated itself throughout history.

The conflicts in ancient Rome were not all that different than the conflicts now, but the law and the motives behind it remained constant even if the rules changed.

The law dealt with either money, power or avenging past wrongs. Keeping these three tenants in mind allowed Pierre to see through the most complex legal problems. Many of the same motivations drove humans and vampires.



Leblanc's private cell phone rang ending his reflections. "That's odd," he said aloud, "because I don't give that number out very often." When someone called him on that number, however, it meant something. So he answered.

"This is Pierre Leblanc. May I help you?"

"Mr. Leblanc, this is William Magnum. I live in Chicago just like you, and I've heard some unsettling news."

He'd heard that name before in various vampire circles, and he knew Magnum was no friend to the vampires. In fact, his kills were legendary. Most vampires didn't believe a vampire could ever fear a human, but Leblanc knew many vampires who feared Magnum and would never admit it.

Leblanc paused briefly, hoping for the best but expecting the worst. "Yes Mr. Magnum. Tell me please."

"Mr. Leblanc, I'm not sure quite how to say this. I have close ties to a powerful man, and we have a problem."

Mr. Magnum didn't need to tell Leblanc the nature of the problem. Leblanc knew it had to do with the Restoration vampires.

It had been a few hundred years since these Restoration vampires, who wished to enslave humans, had possessed enough clout to make themselves known and to be a real, credible threat. But these same forces now worked through dark, political channels. Leblanc feared Restoration vampires may be funding the Tea Party and other hate groups.

"I'm sorry to hear that Mr. Magnum, but I am not sure how I can assist you."

Magnum paused, gathered his words, and then he responded. "Unofficially I am working for a powerful man, but this is top secret. I cannot say more on the phone even though this line is secure."

Leblanc felt some skepticism about the meeting, but he supposed he had nothing to lose. He hated the cryptic nature of these kinds of discussion. "I want to believe you are legitimate Mr. Magnum, but I am sure you understand my skepticism."

Leblanc wondered which powerful man. He had offered his services to many powerful men and women, heads of state, business leaders, writers, movie stars and athletes. This call felt different, more important. He couldn't identify exactly what made him feel differently, but something did. This time it *was* different.

Something in the air; something in his bones; something in his blood, his vampire blood, felt different.

"Certainly Mr. Leblanc. I will communicate by a typed note tacked to the bench two blocks down the Michigan Avenue across the street. It will be tacked to the bottom of the bench by eight this evening. It will provide further instructions regarding the location of our meeting."

"Okay, I will retrieve it," said Leblanc.

Magnum breathed what sounded like a sigh of relief into the phone.

"Thank you Mr. Magnum. I will talk to you again soon." With that the two hung up. Leblanc felt a sense of dread, but he also felt excitement. The time had come.

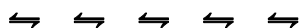
Leblanc left his office at 7:50. He walked north down Michigan Avenue toward the Bean near Millennium Park. The cold fall air blasted down the avenue, but he didn't feel it. Weather didn't affect him. Winter was coming soon, and the weather hinted at it.

People tried to get in and out as quickly as possible, which is why it was a good time and place for a note to be tacked to the bench. Leblanc would be inconspicuous, and, if someone were following him, he wouldn't look too suspicious. He could just bend over and tie his shoe. Even vampires sometimes had shoelaces that came untied. Leblanc always wore lace-up shoes. He found shoes that didn't lace up tacky, a silly matter of personal preference. But preferences told you a lot about someone.

When Leblanc arrived at the bench the wind was blowing quite hard. "I wish I could feel the hot and the cold," he thought.

He bent over to tie his shoe, and he leaned over with one fluid motion and snatched up the message. He tucked it in his camelhair blazer that was stylish but not haughty.

He would read the message in his penthouse. Even though it was important, he had to assume he was being watched, and he didn't want to arouse suspicion.



Pierre arrived at his penthouse off Michigan Avenue on Dearborn Street at 8:45. He went to his refrigerator and pulled out a gallon-size bottle of chilled blood. He drank it quickly and felt full and relaxed by the time he finished.

He turned on his Bose radio and the calming melodies of Bach soon soothed his nerves. He had been here before, on the verge of a great clash. But he lived for such things even though he feared the war. Otherwise his existence was a banality. But great risk made his existence less banal.

He reached into his overcoat and pulled out the note from the bench. He opened the paper and peered at the message. It read:

"Mr. Leblanc, I know you are a friend to humans and vampires alike. You have strived to maintain the peace between humans and vampires. There is a very real threat to that peace. I would like to meet you at 5 a.m. near the sculpture known as 'the Bean' where I will provide further instructions. Please be there. Your assistance is needed."

Leblanc closed the note. He recalled other times where relations between humans and vampires were threatened. Chief in his mind was the French Revolution. It had devolved into a horrible spectacle of senseless violence.

Vampires ran along the Paris streets at night and preyed upon helpless victims. There was such chaos the humans stood no chance.

Eventually Napoleon restored order, but he wanted to destroy the vampires all together. He was filled with such rage over their barbarity, but Leblanc, who was then a French lawyer and a leader in the vampire hierarchy, negotiated a secret provision in the law. It was secret to most humans but not to vampires.

This law said vampires would be free to feast on prisoners, who were captured in Napoleon's blind quest to conquer the world. Like all compromises, however, this proved to be temporary as it only increased vampire numbers. Many of the dead corpses were eventually made into vampires, and these vampires moved to what is now Germany. And they played an active role in German unification, supporting the Kaiser and later the Nazis.

Leblanc could recall other conflicts, other countries, but it was always the same theme: the peaceful coexistence of humans and vampires was tenuous.

Vampires are hunters by nature. Their very survival depends upon it. While all of them were once human, they tend to dislike humans. They view them as weak. And humans were the prey. It is hard to respect your prey.

Although not a majority, many vampires felt they were superior to humans and should take their rightful role as the overlords of humanity.

The Vampire Restoration League was mysterious by nature the league could trace its origins back several thousand years even before the Roman Empire. Some believed it grew out of the Spartans, but others thought it came from the Persians. Either way the league believed there was a time long ago when vampires were in control. Humans acted as their slaves, but those stories had been left out of the history books after humans achieved a victory against vampire forces. Alexander the Great defeated King Darius III, a vampire, in the Battle of Issus in 333 B.C.E., and from that point humans were in control.

Although Restoration vampires made a bit of a comeback in the Middle Ages, they never gained the power they had under the Persian Empire. But that didn't mean they failed to try. Restoration vampires simply couldn't coordinate their efforts, but, if they were ever able to coordinate their efforts, humans would be in trouble. Its resurgence over the past thousand years or so in Germany led to people referring to it as the Nosferatu Vampire League as well.

"Restoration vampires will not regain control. Not if I have anything to do with it," said Pierre aloud. He did, however, fear the meeting may have something to do with the more coordinated effort of the Restoration vampires. He'd heard rumblings of such plans through some of his backwater vampire spy channels, and he couldn't dismiss such notions. He always investigated these reports, and nothing had ever come of them.

Vampires usually only cared about themselves, and this made it very difficult to coordinate their efforts. Being out of power for several thousands of years made them rethink their approach, Pierre supposed. *Better to give up some freedom and independence in order to be more free and in control*, he thought.

The counterweight to the Vampire Restoration League was the Society of the Silver Stake. The society drew its name from the weapon its vampire hunters used to slay vampires. A stake through the heart killed a vampire instantly, and a

silver stake went through with greater ease. The society didn't believe in destroying vampires but in peaceful coexistence.

The note brought all these thoughts back. When he'd been summoned in the past, it always started with a series of a combination of cryptic conversations and correspondence. Then it eventually led to a head of state, who knew about the threat and wanted to stop it.

Here had cryptic communication, and William Magnum was involved along with the Society of the Silver Stake; Magnum always represented the society. From everything Pierre knew about William Magnum, he didn't get involved unless there was a large, credible vampire threat. He'd heard Magnum viewed himself as a modern day knight errant, but a knight errant always fought for kings. And they usually cost a lot.



Vladimir Lenin's intercom buzzed. Not his real name, but he liked it. Monique, who also served as his personal secretary, said, "Mr. Lenin, some documents just arrived. May I bring them in?"

Monique opened the gilded double doors and walked towards Lenin, her stiletto heels pressing sharply against the deep, Persian rug.

"Thank you Monique. You can leave the documents right there," Lenin said in perfect French. Monique gazed at him longingly, but he waived her off. He had made the mistake of having sex with Monique on several occasions, and it seemed she thought they were in a relationship. He didn't believe in relationships because he had no time for it.

Monique left the room, lips pouting.

Lenin picked up the documents. A cursory review indicated the documents pertained to a \$2 billion Super PAC he wanted to create in the United States. The first document was a letter from Fredrick Von Trapp, President of the European Vampire Restoration League (known in some circles as the "Nosferatu" League):

"Dear Vladimir,

I trust this letter finds you in good health. These are exciting times as we feel there is the real chance for vampires to achieve dominion over humans. The European Vampire Restoration League supports you. We have evolved over time, and that has allowed us to grow and gain influence.

We will need that influence for President Thomas Elder poses a threat to us. The continuation of the United States and its liberties for its humans keeps them powerful and us weak because we cannot subjugate them. And we can then take over the world.

Things are different now. The pieces are falling into place. The attached documents pertain to just a part of the plan. You are perhaps the largest part, but we all need to work together. If we work together, we will succeed this time.

Your Friend and Fellow Vampire,
Fredrick Von Trapp

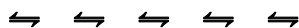
The Vampire Restoration League was a few millennia old, but it was reconstituted in Germany; its members believed vampires should dominate humans even if vampires had to use primitive means or resort to acting like “feral beasts” as its founder Wulfrick Von Trapp uttered in the first meeting in 980.

I can't stand President Thomas Elder, Lenin thought. He's a vampire hunter. Their kind presents a direct threat to vampires. I can't manipulate a man like him. I can't get rid of him. I've tried in the past. I knew he was a threat, but I couldn't stop him from being president. But I can stop him now. If I destroy him, then I can use his replacement to stage a vampire takeover, first of the United States and then the world; it will be my part of the master plan.

Vampires can't take over unless people aren't looking. I need lots of humans I can control, people who won't be missed or who are never known to begin with, but who when made into vampires will be loyal foot soldiers.

He needed President Thomas Elder out of the way, but the plan needed to remain top secret.

"But that time will come eventually," he said out loud to himself. "It has been a long time coming."



“Vladimir Lenin,” an ancient vampire, hated humans. He had once been a human though. He had been a vampire for thousands of years now. His real name was Golgotha Huttan. The new Vladimir Lenin admired the old Vladimir Lenin. So he decided to take his name even though he, unlike the original Lenin, loved capitalism. But capitalism was a tool because his ultimate philosophy was dominion over others.

Lenin lived in Paris, which was one of the cities most friendly to vampires. One of Lenin's favorite pastimes was to sneak around the Seine at night and attack young lovers. He enjoyed the look of utter terror on their faces. Their youth made their blood taste better, and Lenin never tired of asserting his superiority over humans.

Like most vampires who lived for a long time Lenin was wealthy, very wealthy in fact. He was one of the ever-growing list of vampire billionaires.

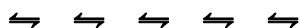
Vampire billionaires had expanded since the end of the Cold War because many of the new billionaires were Russian, and most of the Russian billionaires were vampires. Beluga caviar, oil, natural gas, metals, diamonds and coal all existed in abundance in Russia, and after the Cold War ended these men made vast fortunes thanks to such resources. Their natural vampire aggressiveness and ability to manipulate humans made it easy for them to take over.

There were actually more vampires billionaires than human billionaires, but most people didn't believe in vampires, let alone vampire billionaires. *And this was just as well*, thought Lenin. It made it easier for vampires to sneak up on people.

But they had never been able to coordinate their efforts. They indulged themselves too much whether it be with women, rare blood or yachts. Lust and greed distracted them and prevented vampires from taking over the world.

Vladimir Lenin was not impervious to the fires of lust, and he did, on occasion, feel himself drawn in to hedonistic pleasures. But he never sacrificed his business

or the ultimate goal of vampire domination. He did keep beautiful women around for his urges, the most recent one being a French beauty, Monique Laroche.



The thirty Malaysian teenagers didn't know where they were or how they had gotten there, but they were bound and gagged in a building under construction. The building appeared to be a future hotel.

"All of you work for me," said a tall figure looming in the shadows. This man wasn't Asian. None of the teenagers had seen him before.

Several girls and boys sniffled.

"There, there," said the man with mock sincerity. "You won't be doing hard manual labor. You will be part of one of the largest and most profitable industries in the world."

The teenagers had heard the stories of friends and family members who disappeared never to be heard from again or, if they did make it out, they came back different people, damaged people.

Human trafficking exists in every society. Millions are exploited each year, but the trade is fueled by human lust.

Roland Drum made hundreds of millions on real estate all over the world, and his latest project was the development of low to middle income housing in Europe and Asia. Vladimir Lenin and Nero Corporation would fund the construction projects, but Drum would develop the properties. And the most recent Malaysian project would likely be the most profitable.

Nero Corporation invested heavily in Malaysia and in the rest of Asia. Ronald Drum's name carried cache, and it drove money into most companies involved in the real estate projects.

Vladimir Lenin believed in overseeing various construction projects, and he loved popping in unexpectedly.

He walked out of the shadows, fangs bared. The teenagers' eyes grew wide, and he could hear the sniffing. Their fear imbued him with a sense of power and dominion, which he craved.

Lenin grabbed a girl and a boy. He yanked off their gags, and both cried out. "Shut up you vile humans," he yelled.

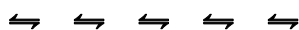
Then he bent the neck of the boy and buried his teeth into the boy's carotid artery. He drank the sweet blood of youth. He threw the girl to the side, and she ran, the dust from the construction site kicking up behind her.

Lenin tossed the boy's body into a grave. Then he went after the girl.

In one fluid movement, he grabbed the girl's leg and swung her up. He bit her neck and sucked all her blood out in less than a minute. Then he tossed her in a grave beside the boy.

With a blood stained face and blood soaked clothes, he said, "I look forward to snacking on all of you and many others. When I'm done, you will see me again for all of you will be my children."

And he did snack on them. The flight home went smoothly, and he relived the conquests.



Lenin recalled the recent conquest. Some men are never satisfied, and some vampires are never satisfied. Whatever satisfaction Vladimir Lenin felt from draining the Malaysian teenagers passed by the time he got home.

Vladimir Lenin had plenty of money. He longed for dominion, and the money didn't guarantee that. Many vampires were complacent at his age. Not him. He felt he didn't have all he should, and it tormented him. He had been tormented for centuries.

Lenin was also tormented by the thought of the vampire, Drogha, whom he made almost 2,000 years ago. Drogha had such promise, but he had not worked with Lenin to put vampires in their rightful place as the superior species, a species of which he was the rightful ruler.

Lenin glanced up from his desk to see Fredrick Von Trapp. Startled, he said, "How did you get in here?"

Von Trapp started quizzically, and then he smiled. "I've permission to enter for several thousand years. I am, after all, your maker."

Lenin relaxed. "True. Ever since that day at the Battle of Issus, I've been tied to you."

"Yes my child, and you have always made me proud."

"That's good to know," said Lenin.

"I trust you received my letter?"

"Yes. I did."

"Great. There is something I want to show you."

"Let's go." The two vampires chose to walk out of the office and down the avenue. Given their ages and superior genetic makeup, sunlight did not bother them. Contrary to popular myth, some vampires could face direct sunlight and not be affected by it.

If Parisians passing Lenin and Von Trapp had known the threat represented by these two vampires, they would have crossed the street and walked past on the other side. Lenin and Von Trapp walked up the Champs-de-Elysees towards the Arc de Triomphe.

"Such a large structure," Von Trapp said of the Arc. "I love it," said Lenin, "because it is grand and unapologetic."

"That it is," said Von Trapp. "Perhaps we will build a monument to great vampires one day."

"There certainly have been many."

"Vladimir, I want to show you something, but we need to go into the metro stop."

"The de Gaulle metro stop?" Lenin looked incredulous.

"Yes."

The two vampires went down the stairs with throngs of people, many of them tourists, bumping past in the tight labyrinth of passageways.

Von Trapp came to an isolated area with the *Expendables* movie poster on it. "I'm tired of seeing this American crap all over Paris. It isn't like any decent Parisian would go to this movie."

"That's why it is the perfect place to put a door," said Von Trapp. Von Trapp grabbed the poster's metal frame and pulled it aside to reveal an opening. People

passing by didn't seem to notice. Von Trapp motioned to Lenin to go inside. He did.

The two vampires walked down a dark, damp passageway into an open area. It took a little while for his eyes to adjust, but eventually they did. Then Von Trapp flipped a switch, which turned on low level fluorescent lights.

Beneath the lights Lenin saw flat, dark soil for what must have been several soccer fields. "Soil from the Rhine River Valley. Some of the richest in all the world. Perfect for making vampires."

"Vampires?" Lenin smiled pleased efforts were being made all over the world. They would need to work together for vampirekind.

"Yes my child. There are hundreds of new vampires down there. They will arise soon, and more will come after them. They are all from my bloodline—your bloodline—and all will be loyal to the Vampire Restoration League."

"How did you make so many?"

"My progeny has been busy. We proceeded with German efficiency." Von Trapp laughed. "But we need to coordinate our efforts."

"I agree, and I am sure you know of my plans to influence matters in America."

Von Trapp nodded his head. "Yes, I do, and I like it. Subways and metros around the world in major cities can be useful for hatching the critical mass of vampires necessary to take over the world. And, if we unite, then nothing can stop us."

Lenin hissed happily, his fangs bared, raising to his full height. Von Trapp responded in kind, tearing off his overcoat to reveal his Restoration Vampires t-shirt, which clung tight to his muscular chest.

Von Trapp snapped his fingers, and a light came on to reveal a naked, quivering man in his 20s bound by duct tape. "Care for a snack?"

"But of course. And he will be one more vampire for our plan."

"You are right," said Von Trapp. "See his grave down there?" Von Trapp pointed to a grave at the corner of the massive graveyard (temporary graveyard).

"I do," said Lenin.

Von Trapp tore off the duct tape and bit hard into the man's neck. Blood spurted on his face and stained the t-shirt. Lenin dug his teeth into the man's femoral artery. Soon after, they drained the man.

Chapter 2

"I've come a long way from working in my dad's pawnshop in Indiana," Mark Inman said out loud. "You would be proud of me dad." Inman's dad, Saul, died twenty years ago when Mark was a freshman at George Washington. He hadn't left Washington since, and he didn't plan to leave anytime soon.

His secretary put through a call from the chair of the Republican National Committee.

"Good morning."

“Good morning Majority Leader Inman,” said Raymond Jennings. Inman rolled his eyes. Jennings was the new guy on the block, and he was looking to make a name for himself by raising lots of money and getting the GOP back in power.

Inman loathed these kinds of calls, but he especially hated them with guys like Jennings who would love you for about as long a Georgetown prostitute and discard you the next morning. Not much is permanent, he thought.

“How’s it going?”

“Quite well,” said Raymond Jennings. “We are ahead of our fundraising marks, and we think we are going to be competitive. It helps we don’t have a popular President. He’s beatable.”

“Yes he is.” Inman knew President Thomas Elder wasn’t as popular as he had been when he started. Elder rode a wave of anti-incumbency into the White House, trouncing an ancient and very boring Midwestern Senator in the process. Campaigning and being president were two completely different things.

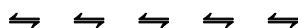
“You are going to be up at the top of the list for people to take Elder on. Just think: you could be President.”

Inman rolled his eyes. “How many different people have you said that to today Raymond?”

Without missing a beat, “Only a few.” Then Raymond laughed the same vapid laugh standard for many other Washington politicians. People who weren’t funny and thought they were all seemed to laugh the same, empty way. In many ways, they were former frat boys with arrested development issues.

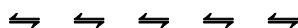
“I’m sure I will talk to you again soon Raymond.”

“You will. Keep up the good work.” Inman disconnected the call. He did like the idea of being president, but he wasn’t going to allow himself to be sucked into the talk. He didn’t want to get his hopes up only to have them dashed. Inman could handle about anything else in politics other than the losing.



Mark Inman became House Majority Leader at fifty. Despite his Jewish heritage, ironically, Inman played the part of a born-again Christian, who kowtowed to the Evangelical elements of the party. This dichotomy in thinking and the ability to suspend his own beliefs in the furtherance of his political future had served him well. Such duplicity is the mark of a stellar politician.

Inman walked across the deep, Persian rug to the middle of his office where his cherry desk sat. The solid wood felt permanent and sturdy. He’d had the desk since his first term in the House. A wealthy contributor gave him the desk back when you could get away with such things. Now things were different. But the goal was always the same: advance and move up the food chain until you were at the top.



Inman didn’t have much time to think. Fletcher Turner, his top aide, had been waiting patiently while Inman talked on the phone. Inman felt he needed to address the presidency issue with Fletcher, who was clearly interested.

"President Thomas Elder is going to be a one term president. His Chicago machine can't get him reelected in this awful economy. We will kill him in the midterms," said Inman. His aide, Fletcher Turner nodded in agreement.

"Sir, what is it James Carville use to say? 'It's the economy stupid.'" Inman laughed.

"You were about ten when he said that weren't you?"

"Nine sir, but who's counting?" Turner laughed in response to his own statement. "Bill Clinton should never have been President, and neither should Thomas Elder. No Democrat should be. That's not the natural order of things."

"True, but that should all change soon enough. Our party has a unidentified new donor or donors who set up a Super-PAC with two billion dollars in it. It can be used by the eventual nominee to defeat Elder. Defeat at any cost is the new mantra. Of course, just between us, if Elder somehow tricks the American people again, there are other ways to deal with the problem."

All political offices needed people like Fletcher because they were blindly loyal or at least they appeared that way. In Washington, only appearances mattered. People like Fletcher did all the work for shit pay, crap hours and little thanks. And they did it usually because they believed—at least for awhile—until they got burnt out. Then they used what they knew to secure more lucrative jobs elsewhere.

In many ways, Washington was run by young kids, who served as staffers for America's political leaders.

Inman used to admire the people he worked for in Washington, but that admiration changed. He'd hated politicians for a long time, an irony not lost on him.

The longer he worked in Washington the more he hated politicians.

While working as a staffer for a one-term Congressmen from Florida, Inman recalled his political epiphany. At one time he believed in his party and his party's ideals, but he tolerated the people he worked for and hated those on the opposite side. Eventually it dawned on him one crisp October day sitting on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, eating a soggy, tuna fish sandwich that you didn't work for these guys because you loved them. At best you didn't hate them. Anyone who understood politics realized any decent politician was in it for himself. If you didn't do it for yourself, then you certainly couldn't help anyone else. So he quit his job that day, went to Florida and ran for Congress, defeating his former boss.

Inman looked down at his private cell phone after it buzzed. *The sexy, Georgetown Law student he'd just started screwing a few weeks before. It was good to be in charge.*

Fletcher had seen them one Saturday when Turner was working on a memo. Inman almost never came in on the weekends. But he was there that day. Turner saw the girl rush out of the office with lipstick smeared. Turner acted as if nothing had happened, and so did Inman. They had never spoken of it again. Inman knew Fletcher knew, but Inman didn't care. A code of silence would keep Fletcher quiet. You don't tell on your boss, especially not about these kinds of things.

Inman didn't need Fletcher at that moment. He wanted Fletcher out of his office.

"Thanks Fletcher," Inman said, implying he was done.

"Glad to help sir," said Turner. Fletcher walked out and left Inman to ponder bigger and better things. The presidency. A perfect, 22-year-old female ass. The possibilities were endless.

Chapter 3

Like many girls from UVA, Bridgett was an irresistible combination of beauty, intelligence and ambition. This made her attractive to men, but it also made her intimidating. So Bridgett remained single, a depressing status and one that would continue for the foreseeable future primarily due to her job. And she wasn't single for the reasons people normally thought. Even though times had changed, she couldn't admit who she really was, and she certainly couldn't tell her mother. So she told herself the right person hadn't come along yet.

Working in the White House didn't allow for much else. She didn't do it for the money, but Bridgett kept telling herself it was worth it.

"Oh hey Mom. Sorry I didn't call you yesterday. I was up all night working on a memo regarding... well... I can't say what it was about," Bridgett chuckled.

"Glad to know you still have your sense of humor, but how long are you going to continue on with that job? It seemed great at first, but after almost two years, it seems the newness would wear off."

"Mom, that's the way things go. It isn't bad. Really. I like it."

"You aren't convincing me."

Hot anger rose up on Bridgett's neck. She and her mother had the same fight several times a week. Her mom married right out of college. She had Bridgett less than a year into her marriage, and she didn't know why Bridgett didn't feel the need to follow the same path. Her mom didn't understand her, not now and certainly not if she ever learned the truth.

Working in the White House taught her things were often not what they seemed. The world was infinitely complex, and "correct" answers rarely existed. Shades of gray existed in every facet of life, and she didn't realize this until after a few months of working in her position.

The world teetered on the brink of disaster and utter collapse almost everyday. Threats never thought possible often arose: plagues, chemical warfare and unexplained phenomena, the last of which concerned her the most.

Bridgett believed the world could be divided into two groups: those who knew the world was infinitely complex, much of it unknowable, and those who waltzed through life unaware and unaware that they were unaware. Bridgett was part of the first category, and her mother was part of the second category.

Bridgett spent her free time searching out the Internet for so-called "hair-brained conspiracy theories" because she found them interesting, although she did believe some of them were true.

"I've got to go mom," Bridgett said. She pressed the button before her mom could respond.



Roland Walker fought when he got drunk. And he drank far more than he should. It used to be he drank only when on a break, but, after seeing the Iraqi boy in Fallujah dying from the gunshot wound, he couldn't deal with his emotions.

While he was in Iraq—and after the war too—the military did a horrible job of addressing the mental health traumas and subsequent emotions inflicted by the sights, sounds and general atrocities of war. Men walked around either zombies, broken men or both. Roland, a vicious combination of both, sleep walked through battle, but then he felt the emotional weight of the things he did and saw later.

His drinking, which he used to escape the past, made the present worse because it dulled his judgment, allowing him to make more mistakes. He didn't intend to do bad things, but the results were the same.

"The usual Ronnie," said Roland. Roland preferred to drink alone at his favorite local bar known as the Honkey Tank Angel. It had been named for a line in the David Allan Coe song, 'My Long Hair Just Can't Cover Up My Redneck.'

Ronnie poured Jim Beam into a tumbler and added a splash of Coke. Roland liked his drinks strong. "I hope you will go a little easier than you did last time."

Roland waived him off with both hands. It was a friendly waive, but Roland didn't usually stay friendly. The death and carnage of war had a way of roaring back into his consciousness and searing itself on his brain. So he drank to forget, but it didn't always work that way.

Out of the corner of his eye near the blinking Budweiser sign he saw the television, and the ticker under it spoke of a "Mysterious Coming Threat." *The threat is already here, and it has always been here*, thought Roland.

"What do you think of that shit Roland?" asked Billy Jenkins, who sat a few stools down.

"I never liked the term coming threat. Best I can tell it is a threat is either a threat or it isn't."

Billy cocked his head and smirked when he met Roland's eyes. "Spoken like a true Marine. Nothing gets past you."

"That's right Billy. You were a Marine. First Gulf War, right?"

"Yep," said Billy proudly.

Roland glowered. "That was a different war. Didn't last very long. Hell, barely anyone died."

Billy didn't like this. So he walked off, and Roland let him go.

His mind drifted back to his own experience and the pointlessness of war. Few things were worth fighting for, and he wasn't sure if he would ever get over the death and destruction he saw. It made you question the viability of the human race long term.

Roland wasn't philosophical by nature, but liquor had a way of talking to him and summoning his inner demons. And those demons had a way of saying strange things to him. Lately it seemed these demons would never shut up. Eventually something had to silence them because they preyed upon his thoughts like vampires.

"Vampires," he said out loud and laughed.

"You want to watch *True Blood* Roland," said Ronnie. "We got HBO last week, and we host viewing parties on the Sunday nights."

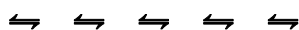
Roland smirked again. "No, I think I will pass. I already have enough bullshit in my head." Past hurts left room for little else, especially silly fiction like vampire stories.

Vampires sucked people's blood then killed them. Given his past sins, this hit a little too close to home. War taught him he didn't like killing or death in general.

Roland came to the conclusion there was rarely, if ever, a legitimate reason to kill any living person. Few causes were righteous. The president, Congress and the Republicans told him the Iraqi war and the Afghani war were righteous wars, but they didn't have to see the faces of the innocent dead with their dark, lifeless eyes. He found it hardest of all to see dead eyes because eyes show life, yet eyes also saw horrible things. Those children saw the guns drawn, and their eyes told them they were going to die. What an incomprehensible thing to see impending death.

Roland had no other place to go but where he was now in Springfield, Illinois, Abraham Lincoln's hometown. But he was no Abraham Lincoln. That was for sure. "I bet old Abe Lincoln could kick the shit out of a vampire," Roland said to himself.

"But that's just a shitty movie. Damn I think of dumb shit when I am drunk," he said



Roland knew he was going through a period of transition. The end of his military career made him feel bad, but he was glad to be home. The war and the military had disillusioned him, and he didn't want a part of either one. He just needed to figure out something else to do with his life, something to make up for his past.

He tapped the battered, mahogany bar for good luck. The bar had character, but it had seen better days—so had he, though. He sat down at the end of the bar, and he felt at home on the wooden stool. The bar personified Roland, battered yet reliable and substantial, and this realization comforted him. In this uncertain world, at least he could relate to something.

After the first drink he felt better.

Maybe he would go back to school and work part time at a sporting goods store. He supposed his skill as a marksman wouldn't hurt him. In fact, he was counting on that to allow him to start over again. The only problem with all of this was the dishonorable discharge. And that's what nagged him. How would he ever start over again with this mark on his record?

"Hey, get me a Jack and Coke. Three fingers of Jack. It's Friday. Why not?"

John leaned over in Roland's face, his whisky-soaked breath hot against Roland's cheek. He remembered John from high school, a real asshole, who was the star quarterback on the football team. He and John had fought several times usually to draws.

"Anything for you Roland. Just for the record, I know what happened to you over there was bullshit. Everyone knows you are a good guy."

Roland smiled. Maybe he could move past this. Perhaps he had misunderstood and been too on edge.

As soon Roland thought things might be looking up, Erik Butcher (another former football player) walked in the bar. Erik had been a high school football star,

although years before Roland, and he went to Southern Illinois on a football scholarship. Erik had never liked Roland, and he always made fun of him.

"I guess they will let anyone in this place," Erik shouted in Roland's direction. "How you been trailer trash?"

Roland tensed up, but he decided to ignore Erik.

Erik still carried himself like an athlete, but he moved a little too well for someone in his mid-30s who drank like a fish and didn't work out. He moved with an animal litheness, but his face bore an ashen pallor with light red veins on his neck. Veins lined his eyes too, and the skin under his eyes was yellow. Erik didn't appear to be a drug addict, but something about him wasn't well.

He'd seen the look before in battle. In battle he witnessed things he never thought he would see again, for sometimes he saw men move more like supernatural beings than soldiers. He thought this may be part of a mental illness or some sort of battle induced psychosis.

"I guess you aren't responding to that anymore. That's right. Your mama moved up in the world. So maybe that term's not accurate anymore. How about it coward? Isn't that why you were dishonorably discharged?" Erik roared with laughter. "I'm just kidding. We are friends now Roland. Get my man another drink, Ronnie. We're just two old high school buddies shooting the shit after not seeing each other for awhile."

Erik made the mistake of grabbing Roland's shoulder. Roland spun around. He hit Erik in the windpipe, but Erik seemed unfazed by the blow.

Erik roared, his veins growing more read. His muscles tensed, and they rippled like a bodybuilder. *Jesus, this guy is ripped*, thought Roland.

Instinctively Roland grabbed for a pool cue, and he broke it off to form a wooden stake. He wasn't sure why he made a sharp wooden stake, but something told him he needed to do it or Erik was going to kill him.

"That won't do any good against me asshole," Erik shouted, his voice, deep, loud and powerful.

Erik bolted forward at Roland with more speed than he'd ever had in high school. Roland jumped left and stabbed right, planting the stake into Erik's leg. Erik winced in pain, and he stumbled forward.

Neither man saw John in the background, but John ran forward at Erik trying to grab him. "You've always been a dick, Erik," John said.

Erik shoved John to the side, but John's head hit the bar. His neck snapped back.

The fight stopped temporarily.

A blond with big hair ran to John. She babbled, and tears rolled down her cheeks. She shouted something, and it her mouth seemed to say, "Someone get an ambulance. He's not breathing."

Roland couldn't hear her. He couldn't hear anyone. He saw blood on a wooden bench made of the same mahogany that had previously given him comfort. He didn't feel sad. He didn't feel afraid. He felt nothing. Feelings were overrated. He didn't care anymore.

Erik lurched towards the door, the stake still sticking out of his leg. Then he picked up speed and fled into the night. Roland chased after him, but it was too late.

Roland went outside and sat in his car. He knew the police would be there soon. He had a lot of explaining to do.

Chapter 4

Roland felt a mixture of sadness and self-pity. He started the series of events that led to a man's death, and he made worse his already difficult post-military life.

The first night in jail was the hardest as memories of the past haunted him while the emotions from his current situation jackhammered his mind.

He dreamed even though he didn't feel he ever slept. The faces of the dead children came to him. The boy lying on the ground with the stomach wound spoke to him. "You shouldn't have done this to us. We are children."

"Forgive me," cried Roland.

"Shut up," a drunk from a few cells over yelled waking Roland from his nightmare while pulling him into a living one.

The rest of the night went this way. Roland would drift off to sleep, but each time the dream was the same. "You shouldn't have done this to us."

He knew it was a prelude to what was coming. If he went to prison, it would be worse.

Roland expected bad news when he sat in the waiting room to talk to this lawyer. He'd become accustomed to the scratchy orange jumpsuit and the blue slip on shoes. He sat on the plastic chair behind the metal table and waited.

Instead of his attorney two men in blue suits walked in. Both flashed Secret Service credentials. The tall white man said, "I'm Agent David Davis." He motioned to the tall black man, who appeared to be an agent out of a movie, "This is Agent Thomas Watson."

"Where's my lawyer?" asked Roland. He'd seen enough cop shows to know he shouldn't say anything without a lawyer present.

"The DA has decided to drop all charges on a few conditions."

Roland laughed in disbelief. "Seriously? I don't even know why there are charges."

"Oh there are, and you don't want any of that. If you play ball, you are getting out of here. Your release is conditioned upon your following instructions."

"I've heard that kind of shit before," said Roland. "They told us to 'play ball' before the fuckers sent us off to war."

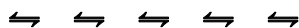
Neither agent responded, letting the comment pass.

This doesn't make sense, Roland thought. He'd heard crap stories like the one where he was supposed to tell in military court. He didn't buy that story and refused to tell it, and it hadn't ended well.

"Agent Watson of the Secret Service will escort you to Chicago where you will meet with the appropriate people. At this meeting, you will be told what you need to do."

Roland didn't have much choice. Besides, he didn't have anything better to do.

"I accept," Roland said without hesitation. How could his situation be any worse than it was now?



"Mr. Leblanc, I presume," said a man's voice

Leblanc turned around to see a tall man with a long olive trench coat, black hat, and CAT work boots. The man wore a brown beard, which appeared to be a similar shade to his intense, yet kind, brown eyes.

"That's me. I won't say the only one living because I'm...well...you know."

"Undead," the man responded with a knowing smile. "Let me formally introduce myself. I am William Magnum. I appreciate your meeting me. I assure you I would not have bothered you if the need were not great."

Magnum paused, giving Leblanc time to respond. LeBlanc said, "I discerned it was a matter of some urgency. And I am willing to listen to you. I believe I know what your need is."

"And what do you think that need is?"

Leblanc did not miss a beat. "There is a vampire with influence who wants to take over and who has the means to take over. Am I correct?"

"You are." A tall African-American man emerged. He looked familiar. "Pierre LeBlanc, let me introduce you to US Secret Service Agent Thomas Watson." The two men shook hands.

"Mr. LeBlanc, thank you for being here. I am here on behalf of the president. Only the president, Magnum and you are aware of this meeting."

Pierre had met the president just once when Elder was in his first term in the Illinois State Senate, but he knew Elder didn't remember him. He had heard the rumors of vampire hunting and membership in the mysterious Society of the Silver Stake, but no one knew who the members were other than the members.

Leblanc knew many great men (political leaders, captains of industry, writers and athletes) who had hunted evil vampires.

Chicago had a higher concentration of vampires than any city in the United States other than New Orleans, a fact which Leblanc contributed to the large number of Eastern European immigrants. Many of the immigrants were vampires and hundreds of years old. This made them stronger and less susceptible to the ill effects of sunlight.

Agent Watson stepped forward, and he spoke to Pierre, "Mr. Leblanc, what the president wants you to do is meet with a man he has chosen to be trained as a vampire hunter. The man's name is Roland Walker. We got his charges dropped condition upon him agreeing to be trained as a vampire hunter."

"Mr. Walker is not a bad person. He was also involved in a horrible accident that cost the lives of many Iraqi civilians during the war. Since coming home, he has lacked direction, and he acted out foolishly. But he is not without redeeming qualities; he is troubled, though. He is motivated because he has something to prove, and the president feels Mr. Walker is the only man for the job."

Leblanc considered this. Then he responded "What kind of job?"

"Staking the vampire who seeks to kill the President and stopping his plot. And Roland Walker will help you once you train him. Now there is more to the vampire plot as I am sure you've heard."

Leblanc nodded his head. "The Vampire Restoration League."

"I figured you had heard of them."

Leblanc didn't hesitate. Resolve flickered like a hot flame in his eyes. "What do I need to do?"

"We will be in touch with you," responded Agent Watson. "As you may have gathered, Magnum is part of the illustrious Society of the Silver Stake, so at least you know who one member is. Very few people know about this mission, and, if all goes well, very few people will ever will."

"And if it doesn't go well?"

"Then we will all grow fangs."



Thomas Watson went back to Springfield and picked up Roland. Then he dropped him off at the bus station in Chicago. Roland boarded a city bus.

The bus dropped Roland Walker at an abandoned factory in Chicago's meat packing district. He'd only been to Chicago a few times, but he had never been in this area. He did know whatever he had to do was a much better deal than years in prison, and that realization buoyed him.

He stood for several minutes, and his eyes scanned the area. The black street had gray dust on it. Even though it was bright outside, the metal buildings rose up around him blocking the light. He felt hemmed in by the buildings as he stood in their shadows. Roland imagined this area once teemed with workers but not anymore. Eventually, the buildings would be snatched up by developers; overpriced apartments buildings would be built; and the sad buildings would be forgotten. The struggles of the workers who toiled in the meat-packing industry would be forgotten as well. *Bury the misery of the past*, he thought to himself. When it was your misery it was harder to bury and forget.

He didn't see anyone, and the place was quiet other than the distant rumbling of the L trains.

Roland waited and waited. And because he forgot his watch he lost track of the time.

Finally he saw some headlights coming up an alley, and this made him uneasy. Maybe there was more to this deal than he realized. Maybe it wasn't even a deal at all, and people wanted him dead.

A black Ford Expedition pulled up and stopped in front of Roland. The Expedition's engine stopped and its lights turned off.

The car door opened. A tall man in a black trench coat, boots and a brimmed hat stepped out.

"Mr. Walker, I hear you are a pretty good shot with a gun and with an arrow."

What an odd thing to say to someone, thought Roland. *But then again that guy looks odd.*

"That's true I guess," Roland said. "But I don't see what that has to do with anything here in Chicago. It isn't exactly the backwoods of Illinois."

"True. Let me explain the relevance then. My name is William Magnum, and I'm a member of the Society of the Silver Stake. Do you know what that is?"

Roland had no idea, and he worried it might be some sort of trick question. He decided the best thing to do was to answer truthfully. "No sir."

Magnum smiled, "There is no reason you would know, Mr. Walker. There is much to say, but I be will brief. I'm going to give you some unsettling news." Roland appeared unfazed.

Magnum pointed to the side of one of the gunmetal gray warehouses where a lonely door with a glass window sat. Roland followed Magnum as he walked towards the door and unlocked it with a key from his belt.

The old door shut behind them, and the yellowed mini-blinds slapped against the door. Magnum reached up and pulled a cord, turning on a faint bulb that hung from a ceiling about fifty feet in the air.

What have I gotten myself into, thought Roland. How do I know these guys aren't crazy people and liars? I'm in a deserted warehouse with a guy who looks like Dr. Van Helsing.

Magnum continued talking. "The Society of the Silver Stake is a very old society, and it has as its goal the destruction of evil vampires and the peaceful coexistence of humans and vampires."

Roland staggered back, and then he laughed mockingly. "Vampires?" he said incredulously. "Is this a fucking joke? You drag me to this deserted warehouse with one light bulb hanging from a string. This is crazy man. Crazy."

He turned around and bolted towards the door. "This is bullshit man. You fucking people are crazy." As he started to turn the door, a hand yanked his arm and spun him around. Magnum stared implacably into Roland's eyes. *He believes this shit, thought Roland.*

"Get your damn hands off me, Van Helsing."

Magnum laughed. "I consider that a compliment, and I've heard it before. I'm going to show you Mr. Walker. You will soon believe me."

Chapter 5

"What am I in a fucking comic book?" said Roland. Roland slammed his duffle bag to the ground, and he folded his arms.

"Lot's of people have that reaction, but you don't really have a choice, do you?" said Magnum.

Roland shrugged. "The Society of the Silver Stake dates back to the American Revolution. Vampires tried to aid the British in winning the Revolution, but it didn't work."

Roland laughed. "God you are crazy? What am I in a *Blade* movie? Are you Chris Kristofferson?"

"Okay, I don't expect you to get this at first, but think of this. Vampires are deeply embedded in our consciousness. They are in our books, our legends, our

TV shows and are our deepest fears. Why do you suppose this is? Do you think this came out of no where?"

"I suppose not," Roland said incredulously.

"I'm going to prove it to you by showing you, but first of all we need to practice for our hunt."

"Our hunt?"

"The vampire hunt tonight. You will see then."

"Will you tell me why I'm here in this isolated place?"

Magnum smiled. "You will see. We have work to do."

Roland rolled his eyes unconvinced. Let's go inside this door right here. Magnum motioned to a metal door that had glass windows with bars over them. He pulled out a key, and he unlocked the deadbolt at the top and the lock at the bottom.

The door opened into a dark, expansive room. Magnum flipped on a light that illuminated the entryway, and Roland could see the outlines of shapes, although he couldn't make out what the shapes were.

Magnum motioned Roland towards the dark room with the faint shapes. Roland rolled his eyes. *Okay, you crazy old bastard*, thought Roland, *I will do what you say*.

"In order to facilitate you learning how to kill vampires, I've brought a vampire to tell you what to do." Magnum yanked the cord, and the light switched off to shroud the anteroom and larger room in darkness except for a faint ray of light coming from under the blinds near the door. Roland could not move.

Such melodramatic bullshit, thought Roland. *I don't get what all this buildup is about*.

Then faint lights came on. *What is a rock band about to come out? Jesus*. The inside of the warehouse could have been an indoor football practice facility, but it had various obstacles set up throughout the large room. Doors and doors lead to more rooms. It reminded him of his special forces training, but it was different because he wasn't being trained to go fight in Iraq and Afghanistan.

From behind one of the obstacles a figure emerged. The figure was about six feet tall, dark haired and wiry. Roland started to laugh with incredulity. *Who's this asshole supposed to be*, thought Roland. *Maybe he thinks he's in Wrestlemania*.

But, as the figure emerged, Roland could tell the man was different. There was an animal liveness in his movement that was preternatural. He didn't move like most men. His movements and his bearing made Roland feel a little uneasy.

"Roland Walker, meet Mr. Pierre Leblanc, Esquire... and vampire."

The guy was odd, but Roland still didn't buy it; and the man made him uncomfortable.

Leblanc grinned to reveal fangs, but he smiled in a warm and friendly way. Roland thought it must be a joke, but he stuck out his hand and shook it anyway. He would go along with this joke.

Leblanc sensed Roland's apprehension and skepticism, and he spoke. "Roland... may I call you Roland?" Roland nodded slightly still in disbelief and weirded out by the situation.

"Mr. Leblanc..."

"Call me Pierre. I know this is a lot to take in, and I will have time for your questions later. But we have a lot of work to do."

"No, I want my fucking questions answered," demanded Roland.

"Why am I supposed to believe you without more proof?"

Leblanc chuckled. "Roland, we really don't have the time. It will be proven to you soon."

"Bullshit," Roland shouted. "Fangs are easy to fake. Dentists put them in all the time."

"Roland—"

"Don't you fucking Roland me, asshole. Show me or my ass is leaving! I will do my time, but I won't be tied into this shit show anymore."

Roland felt himself flying in the air and Leblanc's arms on him. He saw red in Leblanc's eyes. Then Leblanc threw him, and he hurdled through the air. Before he could hit the dark ground, Leblanc caught him.

"That's some strong catgut string," said Roland.

"You are going to be a little harder," said Leblanc. "Let's go outside." He grabbed Roland and dragged him outside. Then Roland jumped and flew into the air. He circled the building and landed gently as if he were Superman.

Roland started incredulously. *Okay, there must be a logical explanation for this, he thought.*

"Convinced?" Leblanc asked Roland.

Roland couldn't think of anything to say. All three men walked back inside.



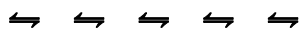
Everything was so new to Roland. He wasn't sure if he was hallucination or what he saw was the truth. He recalled stories he read as a boy and his history classes, and he felt like some knight errant. Chivalry aside he knew his cause, if what Magnum had told him about the Society of the Silver Stake were true, was a noble cause. In spite of what he just saw, he had his doubts.

Once they got back inside, Leblanc motioned to Magnum who pulled out a silver stake. "This is your weapon Roland, the silver stake. And you must learn how to use it. Silver bullets and silver bolts from crossbows are useful, but nothing works like a silver stake."

Roland had always felt there was a thin thread that held together established order. He could never pinpoint why. Maybe he felt this way because he always sensed there was more to the world than met the eye. Perhaps there was something unexplained and terrible, and vampires may be that terrible thing; if it were true, vampires were the true manifestation of that vague sense of dread.

If true, here he had found clear evidence of that thin thread. If it snapped, humans would be plunged into Hell on Earth with vampires ruling and enslaving humans.

If what he saw and heard were true, he didn't have time for philosophical questions. He needed to focus on the task at hand, and that meant learning how to hunt and destroy vampires.



"Pierre, why is it you help people like me hunt and kill vampires?"

Roland didn't know what he'd seen, but Pierre was different than any person he'd ever known. Perhaps he wasn't even a person. Maybe he was a vampire or a superhero, but once you saw someone fly you had seen the impossible. What was that saying? If you take away the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, is the truth. For the time being, he would go along with Magnum and Pierre Leblanc.

"I make sure the right kinds of vampires are hunted and killed. Perhaps a better way of putting it is the wrong kinds of vampires.

"Roland you will come to understand there are two kinds of vampires. There are Silver Stake vampires and Restoration vampires. Silver stake vampires make every effort to avoid hurting humans. They purchase blood from blood banks and try to coexist as peacefully as possible. They do not look down on humans. Silver stake vampires remember they were once were human. They try and retain their humanity even though they are undead.

"Restoration vampires are another story. They reject their humanity; they scoff at their humanity. They are vicious, and they kill humans for food, but they take joy in killing them. They enjoy the conquest of it. They fight each other, and they only care about themselves, which is the main reason they have not been successful enslaving humans. If they could ever get organized, they would pose a real threat to human and vampire coexistence, I hear they are unifying better than in years past. So it is imperative we kill as many of them as possible because, if they ever do organize, we want their numbers to be as thin as possible."

Roland nodded his head in silent agreement. If true, there was a clear logic to it. He viewed it as analogous to killing bacteria. If you kill the bacteria, you have a better chance of not getting sick.

"So almost like eradicating a pest of some sort. Let's say a locust is ravaging your crops. You get rid of all the locusts you can to save the crops."

"There will always be *some* locust."

"True, so you keep killing as many as you can."

"Exactly," Pierre smiled.

It had been awhile since Roland fired a gun or shot an arrow. He didn't doubt his accuracy, but he did doubt whether he could kill again. The events in Iraq had left their mark.

Roland decided to play along. If it proved untrue, he would be none worse for the wear.

"How will I know who they are or where to find them?"

Leblanc was happy to hear Roland took an analytical approach to vampire hunting, yet he did so with some trepidation. Blood lust alone would get him killed. Total fear would paralyze him. Better to balance both feelings. Too much of either emotion would get him turned into a vampire, more than likely a bad vampire.

Leblanc responded, "I know you will be good at it. It is in your blood.

"Roland, it is not mere coincidence we picked you. Lots of people can shoot well. That is a useful skill, but that's not all it takes. It takes a powerful sense of right and wrong, and you have this."

Leblanc walked up to Roland and looked him in the eye. Despite being a vampire, Pierre had kind eyes. And this comforted Roland. "You must not do

yourself this way Roland. I know how you feel. For hundreds of years I troubled myself with such thoughts. I thought there was something I could have done to save my wife, Quinta. I was wrong. My fate was to continue to exist and to hunt down evil vampires. I'm here to preserve the peaceful coexistence between humans and vampires. You are here for the same reason."

How could this man (or vampire) know or perhaps sense so much about him already? Did he wear his past on his sleeve?

Roland's eyes moistened, and he felt stupid for being moved by this stranger. Regardless of who or what Pierre was, the conversation had moved Roland. He still felt the pain of his past transgressions, but he felt more hope now, hope that he could make amends.

"All I ask is that you suspend disbelief. I'm going to teach you what to do, but I know you already know what to do. I just have to show you how to do what you already know. I know that sounds strange, but it is true. It is your destiny. I hope you believe in destiny, because I certainly do. We all have a purpose Roland. Don't you forget that. If we get our philosophies straight, the rest will follow."

The words of encouragement reassured Roland. Who would have thought he could derive comfort from a vampire? This assumed Pierre was a vampire. But the world was upside down. He was after all a vampire hunter, which when he thought about it wasn't that much different or bizarre than a ghost buster. Heck, maybe ghost busters existed as well.

Careful not to lose his focus, Pierre said, "Enough about your feelings. Let's get down to the particulars. Training is important."

Roland nodded, eager to get started.

"Magnum is going to teach you about the weapons."

Magnum said, "I've developed silver stabbing stakes and stakes you can shoot. A silver stake is much more effective than a regular stake. It goes through a vampire's chest like a hot knife through butter. The difficulty is getting the stake in a position to be stabbed. Even when weakened the vampire will still be much stronger than you. That is why it is essential to be in a place to strike quickly."

Roland asked, "Why is a silver stake more effective?"

"Good question. Silver weakens a vampire by its touch alone. It melts skin. It is like acid to them."

Magnum gestured towards a black blanket, and he pulled it off. He pointed to the crossbow sitting stacked like a medieval arsenal.

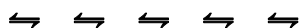
"The crossbow is a safer method, but this requires the shooter to be a great shot. You are good with a gun and bow and arrow, but the crossbow is a different weapon. You will need to practice with it on moving targets, preferably younger, bad vampires."

Roland picked up a crossbow and looked through the viewfinder. He liked the light weight yet substantial feel in his hands.

This was a lot to take in, and Roland was surprised there was such a methodology to killing vampires. He did know being a good shot didn't hurt. He could focus on the weapon. *Focus on the weapon. Hit the target. It's just a target*, he thought.

When he was in the Marines, the training took over. Emotion was taken out of killing, but that was one of the reasons he'd killed the innocent people in the

village. Sometimes it was important to feel things, but feeling a lot when fighting a vampire would probably get him killed.



Bridgett spent a few hours each night at her apartment in Georgetown reading websites some might call fringe websites about everything from UFO abductions to vampire sightings.

She noticed a large number of videos on You Tube showing attacks of so-called “vampires”. The attacks were short, brutal, and the perpetrator usually vanished, leaving a blood and dismembered corpse. Three out of every ten videos she watched ended with both the perpetrator and the victim disappearing.

Her natural inclination was to think the videos hoaxes, but the videos were remarkably similar in the movements of the perpetrators, regardless of size and gender. The reactions of the victims were similar as well. Both of these things made Bridgett feel there was more there.

Chapter 6

A sharp knock sounded against the mahogany door.

"Yes. Come in." The door opened, and in walked Inman's top aide, Fletcher Turner. "Fletcher, nice to see you. I've got a favor to ask you, but you will need to keep this secret."

Turner nodded in agreement. He always agreed with Inman, or at least he did outwardly. He understood the importance of loyalty. Loyalty was a key component of success in politics as was treachery. The two were sometimes at odds because on occasion you needed to screw over the people you were supposed to be loyal to. Ultimately, the loyalty was really to yourself and your own ambition. That is what Turner had learned from Inman.

Not a tall man, Fletcher was a beady-eyed troll well suited do his boss's dirty work. In fact, Fletcher was the sort of inside-the-beltway reptile who enjoyed such things. But he did not possess, nor would he ever, the charisma necessary to rise above the level of functionary or yes-man. He did long to rise above his station at some point, and he believed he could provided that he made the correct moves.

"Fletcher I would like for you to go to Paris and meet with a guy named Vladimir Lenin. I guess his parents were big admirers of the Vladimir Lenin. But's he's a billionaire many times over, and he's put \$2 billion in a Super-PAC to be used by the Republican nominee for president to defeat President Elder. I intend to be that nominee."

Interesting, thought Fletcher. *Perhaps this is my chance to make an impression.* He always believed Inman would run for president, and that he could win, which is why Turner sought out working for Inman after Turner finished college at Georgetown.

"Certainly sir, and I am glad to hear you are running for president. This country could use a man like you in the Oval Office."

Inman smiled and responded, "Thank you Fletcher, but for now let's keep this between us. And I'm not supposed to have a connection to the Super-PAC. Talk to our lawyers about how we can raise money for the campaign without being officially connected Lenin."

"It is often best to *not* know where the money came from."

"Certainly, sir." Fletcher turned to walk out of the office overjoyed with this new information.

"One more thing, Fletcher. I will remember this. If I am elected, I'm going to take you with me. You have always been loyal to me."

"Thank you sir. I won't let you down." He hated such canned responses, but, in Washington especially, one had to be obsequious.



Fletcher made it to Paris, enjoyed himself and got up early the next day to meet with Vladimir Lenin.

He arrived at the building off the Champs-de-Elyse at 8:30 a.m. for his 9 a.m. meeting. He didn't want to be late. Also, he wanted to look around Lenin's office.

"Show Mr. Turner in Monique."

"Certainly sir."

Fletcher Turner walked in through the ornate French doors, which contained elaborate wood carvings and inlaid marble.

Vladimir Lenin beamed a blazing-white smile when Fletcher Turner walked in the room. "Come in. Come in. Such a pleasure to meet you. Would you like a cigar?" Lenin opened a humidor and pulled out a large Cuban cigar.

"No thank you sir. I stopped smoking two years ago."

"Very well."

Fletcher sat down in a Chippendale-style chair. Lenin sat down behind a massive Louis XIV desk with gilded molding on the front, complete with cherubs.

"Mr. Turner I appreciate your coming all this way, although I trust there are worse places in the world to visit than Paris. In fact, I feel confident this trip is a welcome respite for you."

Fletcher smiled in recognition of the obvious point. "Sir, I'm not complaining." Both men laughed.

"I'm not one to mince words Mr. Turner. Your boss is a powerful and influential man. I am a powerful and influential man. But your boss cannot achieve his ultimate goal—the presidency—without my assistance. I am sure House Majority Leader Inman has informed you of the Super-PAC I set up for the Republicans."

Turner shifted in his seat, uncertain exactly what to say. "He has."

"I can get Inman elected with my money, and my money will also help the Republicans gain control of the House and Senate with workable majorities."

Fletcher nodded. "That's reasonable."

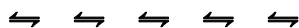
Lenin continued. "Second, I want an unofficial position of influence in the administration."

"I think that can be arranged."

Lenin paused to indicate an upcoming statement of some gravity. "Lastly—and this is my most essential term—I want a vampire of my choosing to be in the Cabinet."

Fletcher laughed out loud. He thought it was a joke. *Vampires weren't real.*

Before Fletcher knew it Lenin was in front of him, and, quicker still, his mouth was on Fletcher's jugular. Fletcher felt the sharp stabbing of fangs. *My God it is true*, he thought. *Vampires are real.* Strangely, after the initial sharp stab, he felt no pain. In fact, he felt pleasure as if he were drugged. As the pleasure reached its peak, all went blank.



After draining his blood, Lenin buried Fletcher in back of the building. Lenin enjoyed the process of picking out his prey, stalking it, biting it, draining it and burying it. There was something calming about it as if he played a part in the circle of vampire life.

When Fletcher arose again, he would be a vampire, the vampire of his own choosing in the soon to be Inman Cabinet.

Lenin said to himself, "Yes it is all taking shape very nicely. Yes indeed. Soon there will be nothing stopping me."

Chapter 7

Magnum stood in the background as Pierre talked to Roland. He remembered his initial skepticism about the existence of vampires even though he found out about vampires by seeing them, not hearing about them.

William Magnum enjoyed being a vampire hunter. He often thought about how he discovered vampires and what began his vampire hunting career. It all began with the grisly death of his mother at the hands of a vampire.

But he barely remembered his mother. Strangely, with each kill he grew stronger as the memory of his mother dimmed. Eventually he killed so many vampires that he couldn't recall the number.

Magnum found killing Restoration vampires made him forget the failings in his own life. He had three failed marriages and a string of dead end jobs until he became a vampire hunter. It was the only thing in life he succeeded in.

He supposed he could trace all his failures back to his mother. He didn't trust women, and he couldn't focus. He wandered through life rudderless until he discovered he could be a vampire hunter. He knew was good at that.

He was the best of the Society of the Silver Stake. There were many other members from better backgrounds, but none possessed his skills.

Although he'd been recruited by Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr (code names of course) both of whom attended Ivy League schools and were from prominent families, he never felt he fit. He was an outsider. Eventually, however, he embraced this renegade persona. It worked for him. People respected him. *I'm a cowboy*, he thought. *But I don't know if I will ever ride off into the sunset. My sunset may be darkness and a dirt nap if I'm lucky.*

He liked to think he was responsible for maintaining the delicate balance between humans and vampires. He didn't hate all vampires—just the Restoration vampires.

The Secret Service employed Magnum on a regular basis. He was kind of like an unofficial member.

He needed to quit thinking about his mother, who he could barely remember. Instead he should focus on Roland, the new project. He and Pierre would get Roland ready.

Magnum's cell phone rang, and he found a room to duck into so he didn't disturb Roland and Pierre.

"Magnum, this is Agent Watson."

"That didn't take long," said Magnum.

"I wanted to see how things are going."

"Hard to say at this point, but I think the boy has potential. Just a feeling I get." More or less, Magnum believed what he was saying, but he also needed to sell the decision makers on the importance of the mission as well as the likelihood of its success. The longer the mission lasted the more profitable for him it became.

Magnum would fight vampires for free, but he would be un-American if he didn't want a payday. Any self-respecting vampire hunter would demand some form of payment.

"I can't say a lot about the mission over the phone because we need to keep information on an as-needed basis, but there's going to be a meeting tomorrow early in the morning. I will text you the time and location."

"I guess it involves the White House."

Watson laughed, "Always trying to find out more information than you need to know earlier than you need to know."

"That's why I'm good at my job."

"True. Just follow instructions."

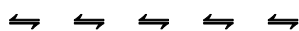
Magnum knew what the job would consist of.

Although President Elder wanted Leblanc's help, he had to maintain a level separation between himself, the Secret Service and Leblanc. That is where Magnum came in. Magnum would work with Leblanc and Roland Walker to hunt down Restoration vampires and kill them. The White House needed plausible deniability.

Pierre hadn't always been so friendly to humans. Although he possessed an amiable and kind nature—for a vampire—he had been vicious in the past, and he wasn't proud of this.

The last time he murdered a human though was in the 1920s in New Orleans, and it cured him of the desire to consume human blood. He couldn't do it anymore because he hated himself afterwards; whatever momentary satisfaction he may have felt always dissipated when he thought of his brutal vampire nature.

For a few years he subsisted on animal blood until he heard about private blood banks in Chicago. Then he moved there and began buying up blood for food and thinking about ways for humans and vampires to peacefully coexist. If he were going to continue existing, he needed a purpose, one befitting the memory of Quinta.



Pierre watched as Magnum talked to Roland, and he could see the flickering flame of doubt in Roland's eyes; but he also saw some recognition of the reality of the situation.

Pierre climbed some scaffolding at one end of the cavernous warehouse, and he pulled a rope, which drew up a rubber dummy dressed like a vampire. Then he placed the vampire on a hook attached to a clear microfilament fiber. The vampire could be released at the appropriate time, and, once shot (assuming it was hit solidly), it would fall off the filament to the ground.

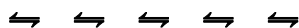
Once the dummy was secure, Pierre went to the other side of the warehouse at the middle of the field. He secured another vampire and prepared it to be released at the appropriate time.

He then secured several other vampires. They would be used to train Roland.

Then he glanced down and watched Roland and Magnum talking. Roland reminded him a little bit of Louis Abellard (the man he brutally killed in New Orleans) except Roland had seen more horrors. The only horror in the death of Louis Abellard was seeing Pierre right before he drained him. *So much regret*, he thought, *so many things I could have done differently.*

If I hadn't caught the eye of Servus Marcellus, vampire name of Drago, I would never be in this position. I would have died hundreds of years ago, naturally, like I was supposed to.

Now he needed to be strong, to be practical, and to focus on the task at hand of training Roland. Pierre had a job to do, and none of this would mean anything if he failed at his job.



Roland wanted to learn more about hunting and killing vampires, and Magnum was eager to teach him. The idea that a vampire could be in favor of killing other vampires perplexed Roland.

"I don't understand how Pierre wants me to kill vampires or how he supports the killing of any vampires. In fact, I am still unsure that vampires exist in spite of what I saw"

Magnum considered this a fair question. "From what I've heard of Pierre and from what I've observed, he understands the need for coexistence between humans and vampires. He is almost 2,000 years old. He knows vampires are as old as humanity. The two have always existed beside each other, but it has always been a precarious balance."

Magnum led Roland into the large, dark warehouse where Pierre had been setting up. He flipped on some faint lights. He climbed up on what appeared to be scaffolding with a clear plastic shield over it. Behind the shield was a control panel.

"I have no idea what to do," Roland shouted up to Magnum.

"That's okay. You will learn. Take the quiver filled with silver arrows and the silver stabbing stakes. Then put on the holster and the gun with silver bullets. Then pick up the crossbow."

Roland did as he was told. "Now what do I do?" he shouted.

The lights went off. Roland felt a rush of air pass him, and a spotlight shone on a pallid dummy with fangs. Instinctively, Roland rolled to the right, and the dummy swooped past him. Then he felt another rush, from the right side. He was ready this time. He shot the crossbow where he felt the presence of the dummy. He heard a metallic ping.

"Great shot!" Magnum cried out from the darkness. "Vampires move so quickly you must develop a sense of where they are moving and how they move. If you try and aim at them from a distance, you will miss. There are so few good vampire hunters because few know how to shoot a vampire.

"The idea is to strike a death blow with the first shot, but this is not always possible. The silver arrow, however, will slow down the vampire. This is key because if the vampire is slowed down then you will be able to attack it with your silver stake. The silver stake will slide deep into the vampire with relative ease, but the trouble is being able to aim properly and getting a clean stab.

"Okay, let's practice more. You haven't much time to train for your first hunt is tonight." Roland's palms began to sweat, and he felt his blood race.

"I believe it important to send you out right away. Don't worry because you won't be alone. There is a particularly nasty vampire in the South Side of Chicago, and we need to get rid of him. I will be there with you, but it is important you make your first kill. Restoration vampires are growing in number everyday. And this is a mission that will go on and on because we will never be able to eradicate bad vampires."

Roland knew he possessed unusually keen skills. However, he felt unsure. "Isn't it a little soon to be hunting vampires?"

"No. You learn by doing. I will be there with you." This answer didn't satisfy Roland. A lot about this situation didn't satisfy him, and it pissed him off.

"That's bullshit," Roland shouted losing his temper. "How the hell am I supposed to be ready to hunt vampires so soon? Let's assume you are telling the truth. If I screw up, I die or worse yet get made a fucking vampire!"

Magnum chuckled, and, before Roland could get even angrier, Magnum responded to Roland, "Roland, I know this is a lot to take in, but you can handle it. We need you."

"Save all the 911 Merica bullshit. I'm tired of that. I heard enough of it in the military." Then he calmed a bit, and said, "What if I'm not ready?"

"You will be ready for the ultimate test when the time comes. We don't have any other choice."

Pierre walked out of the shadows. "You did fine with the first few dummies, but that isn't enough. You need to be able to kill real vampires, and there isn't much time. You need to be ready soon. Tonight you will get your start. Either you will do well or you will end up dead or undead and a vampire. It's your choice."

Pierre turned around and walked off into the dark warehouse.

Chapter 8

Fletcher Turner awoke in darkness. He could smell dirt, and he felt its wet coolness against his skin. He wasn't hungry for food, and he wasn't tired. But he did have the strange, new desire to drink blood.

He dug up through the dirt, and he found he was much stronger than before he went to sleep. He broke through the ground, and he emerged in a large backyard behind a three story ornate house. Then he remembered he was in Paris.

Turner was naked, but he did not feel cold or warmth. He felt a presence near him, and it whipped around him.

"I hope you slept well," Vladimir said to him. He remembered Lenin biting him. Then the realization that he was a vampire hit him. He wept tears of blood.

Lenin came forward and embraced him. "There, there my child. Most react this way upon learning they are a vampire. It is a death of sorts, but it is also a rebirth. You are born to immortality. You will live forever if you continue to feast on humans. We vampires are at the top of the food chain.

"I have a mission for you."

"What is that mission?" Fletcher's tears stopped.

"I want you to go back to your country and help me gain even more influence in the government. But you cannot reveal you are a vampire. Your superior bloodline makes you impervious to sunlight, but you must not be overconfident. I have a book for you that explains what to do. It is an ancient survival manual so to speak."

Fletcher nodded his head, and Lenin led him towards the house. A second later Fletcher felt his back up against the brick wall with claws digging into his arms. "I hope you grasp the enormity of your task."

"I do," Fletcher said, his voice trembling with the sort of fear sons reserved for disapproving fathers.

Lenin's mood lightened as his fangs popped back in, his teeth gleaming like polished Steinway piano keys. "Good, then we will be fine. There is one thing to start I want for you to do."

"Yes," said Fletcher, submissively.

"Make Inman a vampire so that I can control him through you for now. We need to keep this a secret. If managed properly, no one will ever know. Inman is single and has no children."



Mark Inman gazed out of his hideaway office onto the Mall and allowed himself to consider the possibility that he may be president someday. "It is for the greater good," Inman mouthed to himself.

Fletcher Turner would be returning from Paris soon, and Inman was eager to hear about the trip. He had spoken briefly to Fletcher at the airport, but the conversation had to stay brief due to the secretive nature of the mission.

Inman thought of all the crap he had to take from the members in his party and from people he grew up with. Tough to be a Jewish Republican, he thought.

He had worked hard in business as a hedge fund manager and made hundreds of millions while still being in Congress; he kept his involvement quiet. But political power, power at any cost, was what he craved.

He succeeded at everything he tried in politics, and he would win the presidency too, he felt. He rose to House Majority Leader when the Republicans had major gains in the most recent midterms.

He needed the big money to win. Without the big money, he would be just another promising candidate.

He needed an infusion of cash to beat the big boys, and Vladimir Lenin might be able to provide that, although no one could ever know. But money had strings.

He also needed a mechanism to fan the flames of discontent. The Tea Party was replete with nut jobs, and the Teat Party would allow them to succeed under a cloak of legitimacy. The Democrats had malcontents too, but it wasn't the same.

A knock on the door stopped Inman's reverie. "Come in," he said.

Fletcher Turner walked in with a smile on his face. He appeared much taller and more sure of himself than he had been when he left.

"I take it from your expression it went well."

"You could say that," Fletcher responded with confidence and ease. Inman thought his teeth were much whiter. Strange.

"So tell me what he wants Fletcher. What's the ask?"

Fletcher considered how to respond. He couldn't tell him everything. Not all right now. "It involves some real estate deals. Some tax breaks on construction projects here financed by foreign projects."

Fletcher neglected to mention Lenin was a vampire or that he sometimes worked without the Restoration Vampire League. At least Lenin and the league realized it was to their benefit to work together until the humans were subjugated; but he wasn't sure if he could go through with their plan.

"That doesn't sound too unreasonable," said Inman.

"That's what I thought. Sounded like a fair trade to me."

"I'm sure there will be more, but I guess we will find out more later."

"I'm sure we will."

"Thanks Fletcher, but now we need to get back to our business here."

"Indeed we do sir," Fletcher said defiantly.

"Excuse me Fletcher?" Obviously Inman didn't appreciate the sarcasm.

"We need to get down to a different kind of business sir." Fletcher's opened his mouth to reveal gleaming fangs. Saliva strings gripped the top fangs and held to the bottom like cobwebs on a mummy's tomb out of a 1950s horror movie.

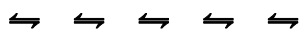
Inman's eyes glowered. "I don't know what's gotten into you. What's with those stupid fangs? Last I checked it wasn't Halloween."



"No sir it isn't." Fletcher grabbed Inman and slammed him on top of the desk. *This is where Inman soundproofing the office is to my benefit*, he thought. Inman gasped inaudibly, but no words came out. The bullshitting chatterbox couldn't talk.

Fletcher sank his fangs into Inman's neck and tasted the coppery blood. Delicious, he thought, *and so satisfying to control the man who has controlled my life. Now I am the boss*, he thought.

He continued to drink, and he thought about the place he would bury him, in an empty grave in Arlington Vladimir Lenin purchased years ago. Then he would rise from the dead undead and a vampire.



“Vladimir, we agree with the need to take the United States, but we must be unified. You cannot act unilaterally,” said Gustav Von Trapp, the Swedish scion of the Von Trapp family, and leader of the majority of the Restoration vampires in Northern Europe.

“I am not acting unilaterally. No one wants this plan to succeed more than I do. I’ve waited for it longer than any of you and sacrificed more.”

Lenin found it difficult to control his anger.

Plaintively, Gustav said, “All of us know that Vladimir, but we must work together.” He grasped Lenin’s shoulders in a fatherly way.

Then both men turned to the others in the room. Vampires from all over Europe sat in the audience around a giant round table in a dark, underground bunker. Restoration vampires had met for hundreds of years in this bunker, and they were all related through Lenin’s blood. Easier to meet in a neutral country rarely ravaged by war.

Lenin didn’t feel much better. He felt patronized. *Idiots*, he thought, *they have no clue what to do. They want to be gradual. Overwhelming force is the only way to go. We will have the numbers. Numbers are what matter.*

Lenin had his mole in the United States. They didn’t know about Fletcher. Not yet. He would tell them when the time was right or maybe he wouldn’t tell them at all. Some things they didn’t need to know.



Ronald Drum entered into real estate deals all over the world where Nero Corporation would do the construction, and Drum would develop the properties. Drum also sold his name, which was a well-established international brand, though whether the investors actually made money was another story. He even had a reality TV show called *the Protégé* where he hired and fired people. His trademarked line was, “You’re shit-canned.” All of this deflected attention from his unsavory business deals.

The latest development deal with Vladimir Lenin and Nero was by far the most sleazy. But each time Drum didn’t ask questions—and he wouldn’t now.

The outer structures of the buildings were built, and one day the buildings would be occupied by millions. The sheer scale of the projects meant each of the projects would take years to complete, but it was worth it.

Meanwhile teenagers and other young people disappeared. No one ever found out where they went, but they had to go somewhere.

Chapter 9

Thomas Watson arrived in Washington early that morning back from Chicago, and he went straight to the White House.

Watson had worked for the Secret Service for fifteen years. He started after his three-year pro football career was cut short due to multiple concussions. He could have kept playing, but he didn't want his mind to be a bowl of mush for the rest of his life.

So he applied for and was accepted into the training academy for the Secret Service where he excelled.

He had worked his way up through the ranks due to his imposing size and keen mind. He seemed to have a preternatural sense of when things were going to "break bad," so to speak.

His proudest moment came on the campaign trail in 2008. He was assigned to protect then candidate Thomas Elder. Watson was an unaffiliated voter at the time, but he ended up supporting Elder.

Elder had just gotten the nomination, and he was campaigning in North Carolina near Raleigh.

Elder walked off the stage to thunderous applause. Before Watson could talk to Elder about the speech, a vague figure—probably masculine—threw Elder against a wall. Watson didn't have time to defend Elder, nor was he quick enough.

The creature hissed, and it tried to bite Elder's neck. But Elder pulled out a silver stake and stabbed the creature, which popped like a tick, coating Elder in blood.

Watson remembered rushing to Elder, and Elder said, "That was a vampire. They are real. I'm sorry to say. Not my first encounter with them." Then Elder collapsed in exhaustion.

Elder missed the next few days of campaigning. The official word was he had a sore throat and a touch of the flu, but Watson knew better.

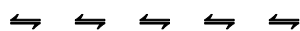
Watson thought of this day often, and he thought of the conversation too. He always felt he saved the future president by giving him enough time to react. The president agreed, and he put Watson in charge of monitoring vampire activity. This was not a task many others knew about, for, if this were discovered, people would think President Elder were a fool.

Over the past few years vampire activity had been relatively quiet. Eerily quiet. Consequently Watson and President Elder believed the vampires were planning something.

And they were planning something. But at night when his fears came Watson asked himself, *When are they coming for me?*

What he didn't notice on that day in 2008 was Vladimir Lenin lurking in the background watching. Lenin wanted to see how Watson fought, and Lenin was impressed with the movement and the natural skill Watson possessed.

Lenin had locked eyes with Watson from a distance. Just for a split second, but that was enough. Enough to be able to one day worm into Watson's brain and summon him when he saw fit at the right time.



As a White House aide, Bridgett Myers worked all the time.

She worked in the press office, and this meant she was in charge of keeping the Press Secretary abreast of topics in the news and topics that may be news. And she knew how to work the system. She'd been quite successful.

Her success certainly made her proud, and she knew she would be able to parlay it into a profitable lobbying career. The nagging single status bothered her mother and others more than she.

Her single status certainly didn't have anything to do with her looks. She resembled a taller version of Katie Couric.

But she was single for another big reason too, a reason that would break her mother's traditional heart. Bridgett was a lesbian, and that didn't exactly lend itself to acceptance in her society. Not even in Washington, D.C., which was known to be a great city for people who preferred same sex partners, but not the circles she dwelled in. For now she kept her love life on hold.

Bridgett continued reading conspiracy web sites, Twitter and Reddit boards. On Reddit she saw some insane things, but one issue that kept popping up was vampires. At first she dismissed it as fantastical. She'd heard of the clubs in D.C., but those were for fun. They weren't real.

But she continued to see references, and there were some You Tube videos that appeared too real. For example, she saw one video of a man and a woman each of whom had their heads ripped off in quick succession. If it was a fake video, it was certainly a good one. No human could be that strong, she thought.

Bridgett remained skeptical, but she did find the continued references to vampires unsettling even if it weren't true.

She started to hear people actually talk about it in public. On one of the few Friday night's she had off, she went to a bar near Dupont Circle.

Some cocky frat boy type was talking about vampires.

"Didn't you hear about the vampire attack in Chicago the other day? Fang bites on the neck."

"It was an animal," Bridgett responded. She dismissed the thought as the ravings of a drunk guy, but she didn't forget what he said.

She looked it up when she got home. She saw some stories on tabloid websites, and she doubted the veracity of these sites. She attributed the stories to the recent surge in popularity of vampires. DC had its share of grisly murder, but humans were capable of being just as vicious as their fictional vampire counterparts.

But she did not rule out the possibility that vampires existed.

She was not, however, without superstition. She didn't step on cracks or walk under ladders, but she still believed in the devil and his influence. Many people with her same level of education and her same level of intelligence dismissed such notions as superstitious gibberish and the obsessions of lesser minds. She realized there were some things she could not explain.

Bridgett knew that superior minds also understood there were things that could not be explained by the sciences. There were some mysteries that defied objective reality.

Bridget's phone rang. "This is Fletcher Turner, the new Chief of Staff for House Majority Leader, Mark Inman."

Bridgett rolled her eyes. She always thought Fletcher was a tool. She had known him since they were both Senate interns in the summer of 1999. Both had worked for senators in Dirksen Senate Office Building.

"Yeah Fletcher, I heard about your new post. Congratulations. Looks like you picked the right horse. You always did try and back the winner, not the person you believed in the most. I suppose you are a true politician in the making."

Fletcher laughed, a laugh filled with confidence. Bridgett was not used to hearing such a confident, masculine laugh from Fletcher. He usually had a soft, mousy laugh. Maybe he had convinced a girl to sleep with him the night before, and he was still feeling the high.

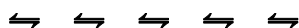
"Look, Bridgett, can we meet for a drink tonight? This is not a date. I've got something important to tell you."

Bridgett considered this for a minute. "I'm not falling for that shit Fletcher. Don't know you know I've heard that pickup line before?"

"I'm sure you've heard a lot of pickup lines."

Such witty repartee, she thought. "Okay, I will hear what you have to say." She agreed not so much because of what he may have to tell her but out of curiosity as to what imbued him with such self-confidence.

She agreed to meet Fletcher at the bar at Clyde's in Georgetown at 9:00 p.m. that night.



She arrived at 8:45. Bridgett walked across the white-tiled floors towards the mahogany bar with a mirror behind it. Clyde's bar was always packed with politicians and politico wannabes. Fletcher was already there sitting at the bar with an attractive woman on each side. One blonde, one redhead. He appeared much taller and better looking. *How odd*, she thought.

"Bridgett, so good to see you. Let's talk."

"Let's cut to the chase here Fletcher. Why am I even here?"

"Okay, House Majority Leader Inman wants you to work for his presidential campaign."

"He's running for president?"

"What if I told you he has the support of some very deep pockets?"

"I'd say you were bullshitting me." Fletcher laughed at the comment.

"I'm not, and, if Inman wins, which I think he will, you will have an even more significant position in his administration than you do now. By more significant, I mean White House Press Secretary."

Careful not to reveal her interest, Bridgett kept a poker face. "I'm flattered by your offer Fletcher, but let me make this easy on you. No. I would never work for Mark Inman in any capacity regardless of whether he is president. I'm ambitious, but I'm not willing to sell my soul to the devil."

Fletcher's corneas expanded, and his nostrils flared. He showed his teeth, which, to her alarm, appeared to be fangs. They appeared real, and she ran off weirded out by the whole thing. She also had to admit she was a little scared too. In the background, above the din in the room, she heard Fletcher call out, "Don't leave Bridgett. We can talk some more. I was just kidding."

When Bridgett walked outside on to the sidewalk her heart pounded. *That was weird*, she thought. *What's wrong with this town? Why is every man here a dork, a wannabe or some asshole who wants action on the side?*

Then she considered Fletcher's fangs, and she dismissed them as a stupid prank. She wouldn't rule out anything, but she still didn't believe in vampires. Too many TV shows and books made people overly imaginative. She would lay off the message boards, YouTube, Reddit and Twitter for awhile.

Chapter 10

Roland was nervous about the first vampire hunt. He believed in the cause, but he was unsure of himself. Ever since he killed the women and children in Iraq, he had not trusted his instincts. Prior to that he never questioned his instincts. He had absolute certainty in the rightness of his mission, but he still found the vampire thing implausible in spite of Pierre's flying around the building.

There had to be a reasonable explanation for it. Maybe they slipped him a hallucinogenic drug, and he imagined the whole thing. The world made even less sense than after he got back from Iraq where he'd seen a lot, enough for a lifetime for most.

"You didn't need to kill us."

Roland couldn't escape the words of the dying little boy. Sometimes he could silence the cries of the other people killed, but never the little boy. Would he always hear the boy's words?

He couldn't drown out the boy's words unless he dipped into the bottle, and that didn't work out so well before. He had a second chance now, something else to occupy his mind. Killing vampires (if they were in fact real) didn't leave room for much else, and that was good.

"Roland, I'm going to take you to a rough neighborhood on the South Side?"

"Isn't rough neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago a bit redundant? And I'm still not convinced you didn't slip me some drugs or something"

Magnum barked out a laugh. "I see you have a good sense of humor and a healthy dose of skepticism. Both are good things. It is important to embrace the fear and not to let it master you, but you also have to not be afraid to call bullshit."

Roland nodded his head in agreement. He trusted Magnum; he didn't know why, but he did. It helped Magnum had some age on him and had obviously survived lots of scrapes be they vampire or otherwise. Of course, it only took one loss before your ticket was punched. Kind of like gladiators, Roland thought. Then he thought he should ask Pierre about gladiators sometime. If what Pierre said was true, then Pierre had actually seen gladiators.

"I'm sure you wonder who we are going after, and I'm going to tell you. A Russian pimp and bookie. His name is Peter Petrovich. He's a few hundred years old. From what I've heard the guy used to hang out with Rasputin. He's just as big a scumbag too. He wants to control the entire South Side and possibly all of

Chicago if the vamps take over. We want to knock him off so that he never gets that far."

Magnum drove Roland to the South Side destination. As expected the place was bar with a pool hall in it. A red neon sign "Beer and Billiards" flashed against the dark sky.

"We aren't going to take any weapons in because they will frisk us when we go inside and when we enter Petrovich's room, but there will be stakes taped behind toilets in the restrooms. This assumes they let us use the restroom."

Magnum and Roland walked inside where they heard rap music blaring. Neither could make out what the music said or who it was. No one seemed to pay them any mind, and that surprised Magnum and Roland. Both were sure they did not fit in.

Just when they thought no one would notice them a short, well-muscled guy with an expensive suit and a cheap shirt walked up. He wore several gold rings on his fingers, and his knuckles were scarred—probably from fighting.

"I don't know either of you two stooges," the man said laughing contemptuously.

Magnum responded, "We aren't here to see you shorty. We are here to see your boss."

"He's busy."

"Go tell him William Magnum is here to talk to him. I guarantee he will want to see me." The man scoffed and turned around.

"Now, let's go get the weapons, said Magnum." They ran to the restroom to the right. Luckily no one was in there. They both went to the first two stalls and felt around on the backs of the toilets. Two stakes on each toilet. They rushed outside just as the bouncer walked up.

"Come with me," he said.

Peter Petrovich sat on a large chair that appeared more like a throne. Behind it was a red velvet background over which hung dim light bulbs.

Upon spotting Magnum, Petrovich hissed and his fangs dropped down. "What do you want William Magnum? Haven't you learned by now you can't kill enough of us to make a difference? We will always overpower you. I let you live just for amusement.

"Frisk them," ordered Petrovich ordered."

Magnum reached around and gripped the handle of the first stake. Roland did the same. The bodyguards came closer. Both were muscled vampires with large fangs. Roland didn't like the look of them, vampire or not.

"Is that so Petrovich?" said Magnum. "I guess that's why I was able to kill your number-two and number-three vamps. Yeah... for a vamp you are a bit of a pussy."

"Is this one of your new protégés? Doesn't look like much." Petrovich whipped his head around and sneered at Roland.

The bodyguards grabbed both Roland and Magnum. Both simultaneously said, "Get your fucking hands off of me!"

Roland blinked, and Petrovich pinned Magnum up against the wall. Roland could see Magnum gasping for air. *He's trying to suffocate him*, he thought. "You aren't so tough now are you Mr. Magnum?"

Petrovich looked over his left shoulder and stared back at Roland. "You are next, and it won't be long."

Without thinking Roland pulled out his stake. He rushed forward and stabbed through Petrovich's back. Blood sprayed out like a geyser, and it splattered all over the room. Before Roland and Magnum knew it, Petrovich was a pile of mush on the floor.

"Jesus, that was impressive," Magnum gasped, his voice still raspy. "You hit his heart from behind."

Then two more vampires flew out of the shadows. One came straight for Roland. He approached him head on but flung towards him in less than a second. *Aim for where the vampire will be*, Roland thought. He pulled out a second stabbing stake and drove it into the vampire's chest using the vampire's momentum to impale it. The vampire spewed blood everywhere and was soon a pile of gunk on the floor.

The last vampire stood and hissed at Roland. "Those first two were lucky. I'm going to rip out your guts and set them on fire while you are still alive."

"Sure," Roland said. In a flash the vampire flew at Roland, but Roland ducked. The vampire crashed into a marble column and fell back stunned. This was all the time Roland needed. Roland dove towards the vampire, his arms outstretched, thrusting a silver stake downward at the vampire's heart. Then he felt blood spray over his face, and he hurried to wipe it out of his eyes, preparing to land the next blow.

Before he could recover, he felt a hand on his arm. It was Magnum. "Come on. Let's go. This place will be crawling with vampires soon, and we can't kill them all. You are a natural Roland!"

Magnum walked out of the bar as if nothing had happened. Roland tried to show the same level of confidence, but he could not. He was too afraid. When they got in the black Expedition, Roland gasped and almost threw up. Magnum laughed and said, "Your first and second kills. The first is always the toughest, but you had two kills. That's even tougher, but you did great my boy."



Pierre wanted Roland to do well. Roland needed to do well. Without people like Roland, the Restoration vampires would take over. But he knew it would be a little while before he heard anything. If it didn't go well, it would be a long time before he heard anything at all.

Pierre tried to focus on other things, namely on his law practice, but current worries, future worries and burdens of past memories and the gravity of preserving the peaceful coexistence between humans and vampires distracted him.

"Pierre, this is Hamilton Parker, your New York counterpart. I hope things are going well for you. The reason I called is the private blood bank corporation you are trying to set up."

"I'm hoping the news is good."

"It is. The concept of allowing people to sell their blood to a private blood bank is a good one. It appears Congress and the state governments don't have a problem with it. Now I'm not sure what will happen when the Restoration vampires find out about it and try to influence Congress."

The majority of the blood would be sold to hospitals or sold to non-profit blood banks. Approximately twenty percent of the blood was designated for "scientific purposes." And this was a euphemism for sold to vampires.

"Thanks Hamilton. That sounds good. I'm encouraged. Sounds like it will work out. I will talk to you soon." Pierre could hardly contain his excitement. He couldn't eradicate bad vampires, but this kind of measure would slow them down somewhat.

Pierre couldn't get too excited though because he Restoration vampires and others were out there. That was why Magnum contacted him.

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Pierre tried to work, but he grew more and more anxious. His mind raced. A sharp knock hit his door. The knock startled him, and he turned on the security camera. Roland and Magnum still alive.

Magnum gazed up at the camera and grinned. "Petrovich is no more, and our boy killed two vampires. Not bad for a first hunt."

Pierre felt better now.

"No bad at all." Pierre let the two men in eager to hear about their adventures.

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President Thomas Elder knew poor black people and poor Hispanics would be easy prey for vampires if these people went unnoticed and unaccounted for by the government. People went missing everyday, and not much was done about it. When people went missing, the either didn't come back, they came back or they came back as something other than human.

Then it was just a matter of time before they became vampires. Eventually, they would seek out others as a food source. Then the numbers of vampires would swell. One day people would wake up to millions of vampires and wonder where they all came from.

Therefore, Elder knew he had to protect the poor and the vulnerable. The only way he could protect them was through the law and with the aid of the government. Sometimes this meant physical defense from domestic terrorists, and this meant vampires.

Private industry certainly hadn't helped these people, but, if he could get them back on their feet, they could work and be able to contribute. In fact, private industry probably had a hand in it. And that was why he could not allow key government programs to be unraveled, but it was more of a mentality, a lack or caring that let the vulnerable slip away. Ultimately it was an issue both of national and international security, but how could he explain that to people if they didn't know about vampires or wouldn't believe in them if they were told about them?

"Sir, I have a Mr. William Magnum on a secure line."

"Put him through please."

"Mr. President I suppose you heard Roland Walker performed very well the other night." He's a natural. A lot like you were."

"I heard that Magnum. That is great news. And that was an important kill. Petrovich has plagued the South Side for years. He was a nuisance when I started out, but I never had the chance to get rid of him."

The President reminisced about those early days. They were so exciting. He'd felt so alive. Strange how he felt most alive when death loomed close. He supposed this helped him live life to the fullest. What was it Thoreau said? "Live deep and suck the marrow out of life?"

He laughed. The idea of sucking marrow out of anything when you were hunting vampires gave one pause

The president continued as the wave of nostalgia ended. "Something about these Restoration vamps feels more connected this time. Ever since I became president I've sensed a great threat mounting. Maybe I am just paranoid."

Magnum responded, "I don't think you are sir. In the last few years, the Society has been much more active around the world, even in places we've never needed. I think the Restoration vamps numbers are growing."

"So you really think the Restoration vampires are a major threat? They've always been so disorganized."

"Not now. Now it is different."

"Let's hope we are ready then."

"We are doing what we can, sit, but the vampire threat may be multifaceted."

President Elder clenched his jaw. *Multiple threats*, he thought, *one threat is bad enough*.

"The more we hunt the more we will know. Vampires keep good records, and they aren't good about hiding their information. So, when we successfully kill them, we usually find a lot of good intelligence."

"I know you do."

"I will give you more details when we can speak offline, sir, but we think both threats come from Europe. They have competing interests too. Obviously Restoration vampires are one of the groups, but we are still trying to figure out the other group."

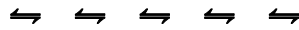
"I've got to go Mr. Magnum. Until then, happy hunting."

"I will try, sir."

The president hung up the phone and sat for awhile in the Oval Office behind his desk. As president he was never really alone, but he felt alone. He always knew there would be a clash with the vampires, and his election would force the issue. One side would win. He wanted to believe it would be humans. And he believed in the human spirit. I'm ready for the fight, he thought. *But is being ready enough? Are we the weaker species, and is this nature's way of disposing of us?*

Chapter 11

People from all over the world disappeared everyday. And no one knew where they went. That wasn't entirely true because people kidnapped teenagers and young women in their twenties. They sold them into sex slavery. But now the Vampire Restoration League did it on a much larger scale. They kidnapped people from every country. Not enough to make the CIA, Interpol and other intelligence agencies take real notice but enough to make a difference.



“Vampire hunters William Magnum and Roland Walker just killed Peter Petrovich and two of his lieutenants in Chicago,” blared an announcement from the loudspeaker. Other vampires blanched and shifted in their seats.

Idiots, thought Lenin. They have no clue about what they are doing. They’ve been around for hundreds of years, and they have yet to successfully subjugate humans. I’m the only one amongst them who actually subjugated humans.

Lenin seethed with the news of Peter Petrovich's murder as well as the murders of two of his lieutenants. It was one thing for vampires to get in fights and kill each other. That was to be expected. It was quite another thing for vampires to be systematically hunted down and killed by two vampire hunters.

Lenin knew of Magnum. He had killed many other vampires, and Lenin had had a hit out on Magnum for years. But the old vampire hunter was wily and careful. Also, the Society of the Silver Stake protected him. Lenin hated these kinds of groups, and the American society along with President Elder was by far the greatest obstacle to world domination.

Say what you want about Americans, Lenin thought, they are a tough lot. They don't put up with shit. Ever since the United States became a country, vampire rule was just a pipe dream. Lenin knew the only way to achieve world domination was to first take down the United States.

But who is this Roland Walker, he thought, I’ve not heard of him. New vampire hunters who don’t die and stay dead and turn into other vampires are always a problem.

Lenin's plan was simple. He was gain influence in the Republican Party through money. He would use this money to make Inman president and to create vampire majorities in both houses of Congress. With a vampire Republican in office and majorities in both houses he would systematically make more vampires that would allow him to take over the United States. If he could take over the United States, then he could take over the world. He would help with the slow, Restoration human trafficking plan, but he had designs on the U.S. first and foremost. Ultimately, if those plans coincided with the Restoration vampires, great. If not, no matter

No one would stop him. To further aid his efforts and weaken people, he would help Republicans dismantle all social welfare programs. This would allow him to consolidate power in the U.S. because people who are vulnerable can’t fight back as well.

This would allow the people using the services to “fall off the grid” so to speak. They would make these people vampires because it was easier to kick people who *were* already down. They weren't his ideal specimens, but they could be used to increase the vampire numbers over time. Ultimately he would be able to overcome humans and the traitorous vampires who aided their cause through sheer numbers, all through his bloodline.

Even though his vampires numbered in the thousands, and this number would have been sufficient to take over in the past, the weaponry now was much more advanced. The modern weaponry coupled with more humans made the task more

difficult, but vampire numbers would grow. He would see to it. His plan would guarantee the critical mass necessary.

The United States had always been such an impediment to vampire rule, but, if his plan could be carried out, it could be the greatest source of vampires ever created. He would use the republican form over government against the America people. Such a perverse irony, he thought, as their freedom would eventually enslave them.

"They have no clue," Claus Grimm's voice boomed. Claus Grimm believed in overwhelming force, a notion Lenin supported.

"That's why we should do some parallel planning," Lenin whispered.

"I agree. And we shouldn't rule out enlisting other species too. Mercenaries can be useful."

Lenin grinned. "You mean your regiments of werewolves?"

"But of course. They don't like humans either, and we need to learn to work together."

"I agree," said Lenin. "I agree."

Chapter 12

Fletcher Turner hadn't buried someone after draining them, and he knew it was the essential step to making his first vampire.

He arrived discreetly in Arlington National Cemetery in a nondescript white van, the kind of van usually reserved for the cemetery's grave-diggers. A quivering human unlocked the gate and let him in. Fletcher quickly tied up the man and threw him in the back of the van—a snack for later.

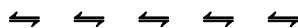
He easily found the grave, which was located in the middle of the cemetery and not visible unless you drove deep into the cemetery. *Better to be discreet*, he thought.

Fletcher easily lifted the body out of the back of the van. He removed the body Persian rug he'd wrapped him in. Persian rugs were carried in and out of the Capitol so often that no one paid it any mind. Good thing for him, and he was amazed how lax security was at the Capitol. *Americans and their freedom*, he thought. *It would destroy them eventually*.

When he saw Inman's face, he laughed at the strain of fear, the burst blood vessels in the eyes. But he laughed most of all at the cheap American flag pin with dried human blood on it. Soon flags wouldn't matter.

He dug like an industrial machine, the rapid THWACK of the shovel sounded for less than thirty seconds as he threw the dirt on Inman. He would come back in less than twelve hours to witness the birth of a new vampire, his vampire.

Lenin's superior bloodline meant only between eight to twelve hours were required to produce a new vampire. Contrary to popular belief, it didn't always take three days to make a vampire.



Fletcher Turner never experienced such power prior to being a vampire; he'd killed a man, had a threesome and began the process to make another man a vampire, a man who may be president.

Fletcher had taken two girls home from Clyde's, and they had indulged in hours of delight. And he had driven them near mad with pleasure, but he sent them home with the sworn promise that this would not be the last time they all got together. Even though he'd done some good work, he still had work to do. And he would know if they told about him because he could read their minds and control their minds. Once he glimmered them, he had them under his control. They didn't remember anything.

Fletcher's phone buzzed the whole next day from text after text from the two girls, who remembered him but not the threesome; he didn't want to burn his bridges with them, so he partially glimmered them. He said to himself, "I should have been a vampire sooner." But he needed to stay focused on the task at hand.

A number appeared on his cell phone's screen, and he didn't recognize the number. But he answered the call anyway.

"I take it you are enjoying being a new vampire. When I first became a vampire many hundreds of years ago I think I spent the first ten years screwing everything I could. Eventually I tired of it all. That is not to say I don't indulge myself now. I most certainly do, but there are other, more worthwhile endeavors."

Fletcher enjoyed Lenin's paternal pride. His own father had not been so proud of him. In fact, Fletcher always felt his father was ashamed of him. Lenin was a father to him—at least a father of sorts—and proud in a way his own father never was.

Fletcher knew the maker/vampire relationship certainly was a powerful one. He hoped it would remain one of affection, but he feared Lenin and his thousands of years or rage.

"I am glad you were able to begin the process of making Majority Leader Inman into a vampire. You will have to keep me posted on the development."

Clearly Lenin was interested in this future vampire, and he should be. A true Trojan horse.

"I wanted to fill you in a little bit more on the strategy, Fletcher. We will let a number of humans stay alive for the purpose of eating them. It is not all that different than raising beef cattle or owning a farm."

"That makes sense, sir."

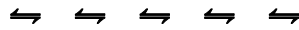
"We will make use of the various farms and resorts through out the world where we are growing vampires. Ronald Drum has been most helpful in that regard."

"I like that idea. The building projects will employ thousands, and foreign governments, especially in Asia, will look the other way. Besides, governments don't really do shit about human trafficking."

"People will let any kind of industry survive so long as there are jobs. How else can you explain the growth of the private prison industry? The human mind sweeps the unpleasantness under the rug. Vampires choose to not see the negative and the obstacles that prevent progress. Vampires aren't all that different than humans."

"Similar but better."

"True," Lenin laughed.



Fletcher Turner felt superior as a vampire, a feeling unlike what he'd experienced as a human. As a human, he only took pride in his brain. People mocked his dumpy exterior. Girls didn't want to date him. But everything was different now.

Fletcher achieved the sexual allure and confidence he'd always desired but never achieved during life as a human. He viewed himself as a sexual being with power, and he did have power, both physically and through influence. People would never mock his exterior again, for even that had changed. Vampirism had put him on the other side of the cutting edge of beauty.

In spite of his newfound traits, there were some adjustments. Old habits do diehard. Unlike most vampires he could not sleep during the day. He needed to work during the day. And since he was impervious to sunlight working during the day wasn't a problem.

Besides, he found he didn't need to sleep much at all.

He worked most of the night too, and that was fine with him. Not needing to sleep gave him even more time. He spoke to political operatives in all of the key states: North Carolina, Ohio, Florida, Pennsylvania and Georgia.

Lenin's money went a long way. He was able to hire a vast network of campaign workers loyal to the nascent Inman campaign. Of course they were loyal to the vampire cause above all else, but the two were essentially indistinguishable.

And, in a few hours, Inman would be a vampire, Fletcher's vampire.

Fletcher knew many Republicans thought Inman would eventually run, but there was nothing to indicate that in public. It was still idle speculation except for those who knew the truth.

Fletcher had always been loyal to Inman. He did everything he could to help Inman, and he supposed Inman had been like his master. Now Lenin was his master, and he served Lenin, which he felt would ultimately serve vampire-kind.

The dramatic shift in loyalties had occurred many times, thought Fletcher, although here the student had not merely become the master. Fletcher became one of the superior species, one animal better than the other. *Evolution occurring before his eyes.*

Vampires were the dominant species on Earth, Fletcher thought. He had not been a vampire for long, but he had total loyalty to vampires. He felt as if he had never been human. Existence as a human seemed like forever ago.

"This is Fletcher," he said to a voice that came in on his private line.

"Fletcher, this is Tom Elliott in North Carolina. Welcome to the ranks, and by the ranks I mean the best kind of vampires—the ones in control. The reason I called you is to talk about Mr. Lenin's plan. It is something many of us have known about for years, and we still have a way to go to achieve it.

"There has just never been a good way to carry the whole plan out. But we want Mr. Lenin's plan to put your guy in office with vampire voters."

Fletcher paused to consider the man's words.

"Fletcher, here's the deal. We need to make as many vampires as quickly as possible. And we are going to need to do it quietly in the swing states. North Carolina is one of those states. Ultimately that will allow Inman to win the

presidency as well as put the Republicans in power—extreme Republicans in power. The plan is the Republicans will privatize all the prisons and double the numbers of prisons. We will ramp up the drug laws to snag more minorities. But this isn't where we will get our vampire bump. It will come from the thousands of illegal vampires made from human trafficking, and we will ship in from all over the globe. All in shipping containers that won't be checked. We will take over regardless of the election outcome."

Throw them in prison where no one will miss them or know about them. I'd prefer that to this human trafficking. I don't have any problem with people from other countries. It is the leaches from this country, thought Fletcher.

"We've seen it work in North Carolina. We already have at least 100,000 new vampires we've made, but we need more. And we can unleash them at the right time. Eventually we can dismantle social welfare programs such as Social Security and Medicaid; then they will start in on the Affordable Care Act. But, once the right number is reached, vampires from the human trafficking will be sent in; a large segment of the population will essentially be off the grid or never on the grid to begin with; and the government won't keep as close tabs on them because they will be illegal. Ready made vampires. And they will infect others, but, even if they don't, our numbers should be sufficient. Eventually it is mathematical. There will be nothing to stop us."

So certain, thought Fletcher.

"We've already seen great success in North Carolina, where the governor and the legislature refused to extend Medicaid benefits to 500,000 people. Lots of vamps have been made because we go into houses of old people. No one notices them. No one cares. We make them in eight to twelve hours. No one knows the difference. Once you are off the dole, no one gives a shit about you."

If this continued, it could be the ultimate political victory he had always dreamed of, and it was what drew him to politics. It was more than just a victory of ideas. It was a victory of one species over the other. In his mind's eye, he used to imagine a great battle between the two parties with a total Republican victory. And this was that time.



Pierre didn't sleep very much because he didn't need to sleep. He also had too much to do. When he slept he dreamed, and he didn't usually dream about pleasant things.

He often wondered what became of Drago, and he believed he was still out there somewhere. He wasn't sure if he would recognize him if he saw him. Vampires changed over time, sometimes to the point that they were difficult to recognize.

He'd been entranced by Drago, so he followed him into the passage. That path led to the end of his humanity and the beginning of his immortality, but he would trade all of those years just to be a normal Roman. He wished he had lived and died with his love, Quinta. He knew that could never have been, but that did not stop him from thinking about it.

It all seemed so recent, yet so long ago. He had been back to Rome many times. Over time the city resembled less and less of the Rome he remembered, until he

could barely tell it was the place he grew up and the place where he spent his best years.

Those first few hundred years were spent with Drago in Rome and through out Italy and the Empire. They followed the Roman army as it expanded the empire, and they feasted on the prisoners and indulged in the spoils of victory.

Pierre supposed he did that more to distract himself from the loss of Quinta. It was a poor substitute, and the more he indulged himself the more he missed Quinta. He knew he would always long for her, and he often wondered why he didn't stake himself.

He could not explain it, but a mysterious implacable force drove him forward. He supposed he needed to give his existence some meaning. Sucking blood, making vampires and leaving human corpses didn't give existence meaning. In fact, quite the contrary, because it cheapened existence. People became a food source and not inviolable beings.

When Pierre came to this realization he decided to leave Drago behind. One night while Drago feasted on several prisoners simultaneously, Pierre fled. Drago didn't seem to notice, which was odd because makers and their vampires are closely tied together. The only conclusion Pierre could reach was Drago wanted him to go. Drago wanted Pierre to go and multiply the vampire species.

When he left Drago, he decided to change his name from Drogba to Pierre Leblanc. The French language had started to develop around that time, and the name Pierre was popular. He'd always liked the name Leblanc, and he felt it appropriate that his last name meant white. He wanted to live up to his name and search for truth and pursue justice. These were noble aims, and this was how he could derive some meaning from life.

Pierre spent hundreds of years wandering all over Europe. He made every effort not to hurt humans unless he was desperate for food. Then he made sure he only feasted on the most reprehensible of criminals. And this made it easier to justify his actions.

Eventually he moved to Paris. He stayed in Paris for several hundred years, and he finally left Europe after Napoleon was exiled. He moved to New Orleans where he experienced the aftermath of the Civil War and the struggles of Reconstruction, and he didn't leave until the 1930s.

Through out all of those hundreds of years, Pierre honed his skills as a lawyer. He learned thousands of different kinds of laws and the legal codes and customs of many diverse cultures. Never in history was there a lawyer with such extensive knowledge of the law over such a long period of time.

Although the laws varied somewhat from society to society, the logic was always the same. Regardless of the society, the law exemplified the noblest of human intentions, but it also demonstrated the pettiest of human intentions. It could be just and oppressive. Some strove for justice, while others strove for money. Pierre reached the conclusion that the law mirrored society.

Pierre liked to believe the law was an instrument of good. This was one of the things that drove him and kept him sane. He could use his abilities as a lawyer to create a legal framework that could preserve the delicate balance between humans and vampires. This system of order would protect them all, and it would allow his wife's death and Pierre's transformation into a vampire to have some meaning.

Pierre enjoyed thinking of these kinds of grand ideas. The ideas excited him, and he felt they made a difference. He had to believe that.

Pierre often thought of the many thousands of clients he served. Many of them were noble, decent human beings. More than he would like to admit were scoundrels. The same could be said for vampires, he thought.

Pierre believed Quinta would have wanted him to continue to exist even in his vampire form. Surely she could not have anticipated vampires existed, but sometimes he wasn't so sure. Sometimes he believed perhaps she knew about vampires.

He couldn't parse through all of the memories and assign meaning to them, but he did remember some things more. Some memories stood out, and, in retrospect, they seemed prophetic.

In particular, he recalled walking with Quinta on a scorching day in June. Walking on the Quirinale Hill (or anywhere in Rome) wasn't that safe, but he and Quinta enjoyed the excitement of it. And they also enjoyed walking down to the Roman Forum which was safer and teeming with people and vitality.

Quinta had turned around to him and asked if he would want to go on living if she were gone. He'd said no, but then she said, "The world needs you anyway they can get you."

Since that day, he wondered what she mean by anyway they can get you. A few days later the Great Fire of Rome occurred. The city burned, and circumstances tore them apart forever. Had she known something then?



Roland wasn't sure what to think about killing the two vampires. He didn't know if he believed in vampires, but the evidence was certainly mounting. Whatever beings he was dealing with weren't human, and, if they were, they weren't any humans he'd ever encountered.

Killing seemed an odd word to use too. He wasn't even sure if he should use the word "killing" as killing implied there was life. Vampires were not alive but undead. There was a difference, and to say they died cheapened life.

"How are you feeling?" Magnum asked Roland.

"I guess I'm okay. That was pretty intense."

Magnum furrowed his brow. "I know how you feel. I struggled with it too. How do we know who the goods ones and bad ones are?"

"Yeah, but I am unsure about a lot of things," Roland said apprehensively. So many strange things were happening, but he didn't have time to digest it, to consider it all.

Solemnly, Magnum said, "We don't know Roland. We are never sure. There is always some doubt, and we have to do the best we can. We know the Restoration vampires are the enemy. They want to enslave and subjugate humans. Figuring out who all of them are is another story."

You didn't have to kill us, Roland heard the little boy say. *I could kill the wrong vampire too,* he thought.

And Roland knew there would be a lot more vampire hunts. That was the price for his freedom, and he supposed it was some sort of atonement for his sins in

Iraq. But he did not believe he could ever atone for the deaths of those innocent people he'd killed in Iraq. Their innocence made their deaths tragic.

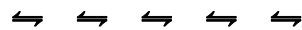
"I know what you are thinking," interjected Magnum. A few seconds passed, and Magnum said, "You know it is right to kill Restoration vampires. We will only kill vampires who attack us or pose a threat to humanity. The vampires we hunt will be carefully selected, and we will only those who are part of the grand scheme to conquer humanity. We aren't perfect, but we will have to do the best we can. No one ever said this was neat and clean."

Roland believed Magnum. And this made him feel a little better. "But what exactly is that mission other than killing vampires? I want to know about the greater plan"

"You know what the plan is. It is to stop vampires from taking over the world."

"I know that, but how do *we* do that?"

Magnum smiled. "We don't need to have all the answers now. We only need to do what we are told."



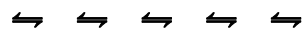
Whenever Pierre thought of Quinta, it inevitably led to thoughts of his maker, Drago.

He always thought Drago would come after him, and that Drago would find him with ease. But he never did. For the first few hundred years after he left Drago, he could feel him scrolling through his mind much in the same way someone would scroll through a call log. But Pierre had the remarkable ability to control his thoughts, block out his maker and to create false thoughts to mislead his maker. He felt these thoughts threw Drago off for long enough that he eventually gave up.

He couldn't help but feel he would see Drago again someday in some final clash. He wasn't one given to melodrama, and he supposed such a confrontation would be like a cheap, Hollywood movie.

Pierre had to focus on the impending Restoration vampire attack. Although the threat was greater than any he had faced, the strategy was the same: kill the leaders, and their followers would fight amongst themselves. They would not be able to function on their own. Put another way, cut off the head, and the body cannot function. The difficulty was in finding the heads, and, ultimately, the head behind everything.

Pierre feared the numbers of Restoration vampires would increase rapidly with the human trafficking taking place as well as the other legislative measures used in the United States.



Chicago, 1930s

Pierre enjoyed Chicago in the 1930s when the city continued to expand and become more cosmopolitan and less of simply a meat-packing town.

Pierre walked into a medium size room with high, elegantly molded ceilings and what appeared to be a Picasso painting on the wall. "Mr. Leblanc, my name is Elmore Thompson."

Elmore leaned forward on his desk. "I am the president of an organization known as the Society of the Silver Stake. The purpose of the organization is to hunt down Restoration vampires and kill them; I'm sure you've heard of the Vampire Restoration League. Our past members include, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt to name a few."

Pierre knew of the Restoration Vampire League, but he had never heard anyone confirm the existence of the Society of the Silver Stake

Pierre had heard whispers of the organization, but he always considered them rumors. He knew vampire-hunting societies popped up over the years, but few seemed to last

Pierre responded, "The problem with these organizations is they assume all vampires are Restoration vampires or somehow inherently evil. They aren't. I for one am not a Restoration vampire or evil. I don't seek to destroy humans. In fact, I have tried for hundreds of years to preserve humans and vampires."

Thompson listened. Then he responded, "I know that. That's how we found out about you."

"What is it that you want then?"

"We would like for you to keep a watch out and inform us of vampires who present a threat to humans. In exchange, we promise to do our best to make sure humans will not hunt down good vampires. We will follow your direction as to who you think need to be hunted down."

"That sounds reasonable."

Elmore smiled. "I'm glad you feel that way."

The men shook hands. Pierre turned to leave, glancing at the Picasso like painting. "It is a Picasso," said Elmore.

"Very nice."

"He had a different way of seeing the world as do you." Pierre nodded his head in agreement. "Pierre we will need you some day. I don't know when, but someday. So be ready."



And the day had finally come.

Pierre had worked with the society in way or another for decades now. Occasionally he went on vampire hunts with members. During the Reagan Administration, Washington was replete with vampires, many of them doing the president's bidding.

Presidents were supposed to be against Restoration vampires, but Reagan turned a blind eye—or he didn't know about them at all.

Restoration vampires came up with the idea of heightened criminal penalties for crack, and they also advocated for and helped build many private prisons.

Ultimately they failed because they couldn't coordinate their efforts. This is usually what happened. But something was different now. Pierre couldn't put his finger on it, but he knew the conditions were ripe.

Chapter 13

Bridgett didn't see Agent Thomas Watson coming, but she felt a presence near her desk. When she looked up she saw Agent Watson. He smiled at her.

"What's up Wahoo?"

Bridgett smiled. Agent Watson liked to give Bridgett a hard time for being a UVA fan, especially considering they were a basketball powerhouse. And Watson was a UNC fan, and UNC usually had the more formidable team.

"Something bothering you?"

"Fletcher Turner."

"Phew," Watson breathed out, "that shit-bag."

"Yeah... that shit-bag. Something's different about him. He weirds me out"

"Maybe he found some skank and got himself some." Agent Watson loved to rip on people working in Washington he thought were tools. And there were a lot according to what he told Bridgett.

"Yeah," she laughed, "maybe he did."

Watson turned and walked away.

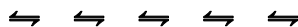
Something about Fletcher unnerved her. She'd always been an imaginative girl, and this meant she scared easy. After all, she did sleep with the bathroom light on, and she ran and jumped into the bed lest something reach out and grab her leg. And all the stuff she had read and seen online upset her even if the sources were dubious.

But she wasn't sure. Something was different.

She kept trying to read the days headlines. She had work to do, and she couldn't explain to her boss, the press secretary, if she was unable to her job. If she told him the truth, he would think she was crazy, and he probably would have been right.

Bridgett stared at her computer background of one palm tree on an isolated beach with aquamarine water. She wondered if she could ever relax again. Even if she could go to a place like this would she ever feel any peace or any security? How could she? How could any human being?

One thing at a time, she thought. One thing at a time, and don't panic unnecessarily. Most of the things she worried about never happened anyway.



Agent Watson walked down the hallway from Bridgett's office. He wondered how many weighty issues had been pondered in this place. What should he make of Fletcher Turner?

Fletcher Turner's supposed transformation interested him. Given what Watson knew about vampires, he suspected Fletcher had been turned into a vampire. But he wondered where it happened.

Agent Watson checked Homeland Security travel databases, and he saw Fletcher had been to Paris within the past few weeks. Given the large number of vampires in Paris and the Restoration Vampire League's presence there, he believed Fletcher, if he were turned into a vampire, it likely happened in Paris.

As luck would have it, and he had some vacation coming up. He would take his vacation and explore Paris while investigating Fletcher's activities. Maybe he would find something. He was sure he would encounter vampires, but he needed to get to the bottom of everything.

Agent Watson knew of virtually no vampires he liked. He tolerated Pierre Leblanc, and he wanted to believe the best about Leblanc. But he was a vampire, and vampires couldn't be trusted. He knew they needed Leblanc though. It was an odd marriage he had to admit, but a necessary one. As Sun Tzu said, "An enemy of my enemy is my friend."

But he kept his distance; he only wanted to deal with Leblanc when he had to deal with him. Hopefully that wouldn't be often.

Watson felt better about the vampire hunters through. He did feel a fondness for the new vampire hunter Roland Walker. He knew Roland possessed a steely resolve. He also liked William Magnum, who reminded him of Dr. Van Helsing from the novel *Dracula* because Magnum always seemed to know what to do. And he wasn't afraid or at least he didn't show it.

It comforted Agent Watson to know men like Magnum and now Roland fought the good fight. As a fan of the TV show 24, he liked to believe Magnum and Roland were like two Jack Bauer's. *Jesus*, he thought, *one was enough*.

"What were you doing in Paris, Turner? And who were you seeing?" Watson said to himself. He needed to know where to start, and he couldn't see that, not yet at least.

Chapter 14

The stress of the day had brought back memories, which gave rise to his present situation. Usually this spiral downward took him to the happiest, yet most painful part, of his past.

At these times he was able to talk to Quinta, yet she appeared more like a ghost than anything else. Although he couldn't explain it, he believed he was somehow communicating with her spirit and was not imagining the whole thing.

Quinta appeared to him. "Your time is soon to come, my love," said Quinta to Pierre as he sat at his desk in his Chicago office. He wasn't sure if these visions were real or if they were imagined.

"I know," Pierre said. He felt the emotions bubbling up in him. It had been awhile since he missed her this much. Whenever he thought he was getting past it, she came back to him to remind him of why he continued to exist.

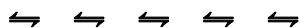
"I know it has been hard, and I miss you—I've missed you for a long time." Her ghostly presence reached out for him. He reached for her, and he could almost touch her.

Pierre placed his hand on what he thought was her arm, but it landed on his desk, the hard wood thumping empty and hollow. "Quinta, don't go. Please stay longer."

"I can't stay," her voice said, but he couldn't see her. "Remember why you are here my love. Don't forget the reason."

Bloody tears streaked Pierre's cheeks. "Don't go," he rasped hoarsely.

When he opened his eyes Quinta was gone, and her voice no longer spoke to him. But he knew what he needed to do. He had always known what he needed to do. Sometimes he just needed some reminding.



Vladimir Lenin was pleased with the graves located under the subway system in Paris, but it wouldn't be enough. An e-mail dinged his computer. He saw it was encrypted. He opened it.

It was a video of a hotel built by Nero and developed by Drum Industries, but this hotel was built in Canada, a perfect staging point for the United States.

The hotel sat a few miles away from the resort, Banff, in western Canada. Like all building projects between Drum and Nero, it wouldn't be completed for two to five years. *Just enough time*, thought Lenin.

Inlaid fieldstones hotels built like the Biltmore in Asheville, North Carolina took a long time to build. Most of the exterior was already built, but the inside needed to be "up-fitted". As usual, the ground was dirt and a vast expanse.

Lenin could see dozens of naked, muscular bodies both male and female lined up over ditches. "Do not be afraid," said Sulpicius Rufus (a former Roman henchmen who never changed his name). "You may have thought you were going to be sex slaves, but you will be so much more. We are giving you immortality."

With that a wall of naked vampires rushed in and plunged their fangs into the frightened men and women. Once drained the bodies were placed in shallow graves to become vampires in eight to twelve hours.

"Doesn't this remind you of days of old my master?" said Sulpicius. Lenin laughed. Sulpicius had fought with him in Caesar's legions in Gaul back when Lenin was Vorenus Hortentius. Those were some glorious days.

But he remembered Caesar's words to him, "People are always trying to take down the top man." Lenin longed to be the top man, but until then he would have to settle for taking down the top man, President Thomas Elder.



Lenin wondered if Caesar had seen his fate. Never was there a greater military commander or political genius. Such a great man, and he was right to be emperor. One man should rule, for it was the natural order of things. Rome reached its acme not as a republic but as an empire. In order to have an empire, there must be an emperor. But people betray emperors.

There was a saying that "Rome will rise again," and Lenin believed this. It would rise again under Lenin's control. He could claim that mystical lineage to the Roman Empire because he was a part of that empire. He helped build it in his own way.

Vampire rule, such a glorious rule, he thought. There would be no better way to honor his Roman heritage than for he, a Roman, to rule as their emperor. Just like the Romans were the strongest people on earth during their time, so to would his vampires be.

The plan would only work if vampires could trust each other. Lenin had trust issues due to the unfortunate incident with Drogba. The difference between he and Caesar was his “Brutus” hadn’t killed him, at least he hadn’t been able to yet.

Drogba betrayed him. He left him even though he should have been his Marc Antony.

His fangs dropped down, and he hissed. Anger overwhelmed him, and he felt the urge to go down to the Paris streets and hunt. He kicked open the double doors leading onto his balcony and swooped down into the streets.

Lenin saw a drunken fat man staggering down an alley. He pounced on the man. “You pathetic pile of shit. Blood is wasted on you.” His fangs extended, and the sight of the man filled him with rage. Such a wasted life form, he thought.

Before the man could scream, Lenin savagely ripped off his head. The blood sprayed like a fire hydrant. His face was coated in red, and his teeth dripped blood. “I hate humans. I will have all of you. All of you,” he shouted.

Lenin left the mutilated corpse on the ground. “He’s not worth being made into a vampire. So few of them are.”

Chapter 15

Roland longed to be transported to the time before he killed the people in Iraq and before he knew vampires existed. Life was better then.

He had always been able to shoot well. He could hit anything he shot at because he aim was always true. Roland didn’t miss. No matter who he was or what he came from no one could take away from him that he was one helluva a shot. And he could shoot with a bow or a gun. Heck he could even throw a spear accurately.

“Everyone has a gift,” Roland’s stepdad used to say to him. He remembered the first time his stepdad said this to him as Roland gazed down at his faded, red Converse All-Stars.

Then his stepdad did something unexpected, something that would change his life forever.

His stepdad said, “There’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about.” At the time, Roland had worried because most conversations that started this way never ended well.

Then his stepdad asked, “Roland, how would you feel about taking my name?”

Roland’s eyes welled up with tears. He felt embarrassed, and he turned away.

His stepdad hugged him. “There isn’t anything to be ashamed of. I love your mom Roland, and I love you.”

Hoarsely Roland said, “I’d love to have your name.”

“I’m honored. I’m proud of you Roland. I’m proud you are going to bear my name. You’ve got a gift son, and one day you are going to do great things. Roland Walker is a name we can all be proud of”

Roland thought of this day, often in Iraq, and even now. He thought about his old hurts, the insecurities and what brought him to this war. Mostly he thought about the terrible things he’d seen and done.

His stepdad was right. He did have a gift. No one could shoot like Roland Walker, but that gift had led to some awful things. He'd killed a lot of people, people who had never done anything to him, faceless people who died for no reason.

The guilt drove him to drink. There was never a shortage of free booze in Iraq. It seemed counterintuitive there would be alcohol around guns. Combat was hard enough without having alcohol around to dull senses even if it wasn't consumed while in battle. Sometimes rest and relaxation had to be cut short if a mission came up.

Before his last mission as a Marine he had been drinking for two days. His superior told him he would have three days of rest and relaxation, but it was cut short because military intelligence thought a village near Baghdad contained an Al Qaeda leader.

Roland thought he would use the third day to rest and recover not to go on a mission after a two-day bender.

He often rued the choice he made to drink for two days before the mission, and how he was drunk on the mission. *You didn't have to kill us*, the boy said to him in his dreams.

Roland did have a gift. His stepfather was right, but what good had it done him?



Thomas Watson boarded a commercial flight headed for Paris. He'd been there once a few years before when the president attended a G-8 summit. He knew there had been a lot of talk in the White House about the threat from Paris and the probable ties of Nero Corporation to some vast vampire conspiracy.

He also knew Fletcher Hunter had gone to Paris on behalf of House Majority Leader Inman to meet with officials from Nero. He thought the two were possibly linked, although it would not be unusual for a high-ranking staffer to travel to Europe to meet with unsavory and possibly unfriendly businesses. It was done all the time, but this time felt different especially in light of what Bridgett had told him about Fletcher.

While researching Fletcher, he came across information given to him by his friend at Interpol that indicated Fletcher met with a Nero official (possibly billionaire Vladimir Lenin), but then his whereabouts were unknown for three days.

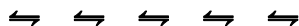
He pondered the last few years while the plane flew thousands of feet above the dark Atlantic. Playing a role in stopping Restoration Vampires, which he believed posed the greatest threat to man since the Bubonic Plague, was not something he planned on when he joined the Secret Service. The president needed to be protected, and his service to the current president and past presidents was vital. Knowledge and circumstances had thrust him into this struggle.

From the day on the campaign trail when he saw the future President kill the vampire he knew the man would be president. Fate ordained it. Fate plucked Elder out of obscurity and thrust him into the grand historical narrative. President Elder acted as humanity's protagonist.

Agent Watson did not know what he might find in Paris or if he would find anything. Maybe it was a dead end.

The plane landed.

Watson would have some time to relax and investigate Vladimir Lenin and Fletcher Turner. Something wasn't right with Turner. Watson intended to get to the bottom of things even if it killed him.



President Elder paced across the deep rug bearing the Presidential Seal in his office on Air Force One, which sat on the tarmac at Boston's Logan Airport where he had a fundraiser that evening. He didn't want to be here. Not now. He felt he needed to be back in Washington, but he needed to win reelection.

How would he stop the vampires? He didn't know how they would attack or how many would attack. So many unanswered questions lingered.

He thought of Abraham Lincoln and the challenges he faced. He'd held together a fractured union. President Elder faced similar challenges. Obviously it had ended badly for Lincoln, but the country survived. Would he, too, be sacrificed so humanity could survive? Was he willing to make that sacrifice?

We should have killed you when we had the chance, the words from the vampire echoed in his head. Elder knew the vampires wanted him dead or worse yet a vampire.

He stared down at the eagle holding snakes in one claw and arrows in another. He imagined those arrows as silver arrows capable of killing a vampire. Maybe the Founding Fathers had been hinting at something with this symbol.

What would people think if they knew the President of the United States destroyed vampires? The warrior king appealed to people. Why else did people thirst for a candidate with military experience? Elder never served in the military, but his bona fides as a tough guy wouldn't be doubted if people knew the truth.

People longed for safety or at least the illusion of safety. How did anyone ever know he or she was safe? Falling anvils smashing cartoon characters were funny for a reason: people could relate to the fatalistic notion expressed in the humor. These kinds of things did not happen. Reality did not allow it or it wasn't supposed to allow it. A modicum of safety must exist. Of course things that weren't supposed to happen happened all the time. After all planes did fly into the World Trade Center. And the belief in a benign universe didn't always bear fruit because people weren't always benign. But he also knew that people live out lives balanced on the edge of the abyss even if they don't see the abyss. Ultimately people choose.

And vampires reached out from the abyss. They came in the darkness and snatched people away from that "safe" world. Vampires plunged people into eternal darkness. Evil beget evil.

Pierre Leblanc's plan for private blood banks to curb vampire attacks on humans gave Elder some hope. This would not blot out the threat—nothing would—but at least it would make some difference.

Elder possessed the vague outline of a plan in his head. This comforted him. He could not kill all the vampires in the world, nor did he want to do so. He believed not all vampires were bad. Most of them never wanted to be vampires, and many of them still maintained some level of decency however faint.

Restoration vampires worried him the most. They would not care about private blood banks because they desired human blood not so much as a food source but

as liquid domination. They would do all they could to take over, and, if united, they would be formidable. But they hadn't been united for 3,000 years. Things changed though. Sometimes the stars aligned in malicious ways for nature could be a harsh bitch.

The plan would evolve over time, but he must stop the spread of the vampires who were wanted to destroy humans. And vampires preyed upon the weak and disenfranchised members of society. How else could you explain how vampires flourished in Eastern Europe where people lived in almost medieval environments?

Because vampires attacked the most vulnerable Elder inferred the poor in the United States would be the first victims after the hoards of vampires made from human trafficking would be shipped in. He had sent Magnum and Roland Walker on one successful mission, and he wondered how the second mission would play out in North Carolina. The leaders of the groups of Restoration vampires must be destroyed. If he could kill the leaders, then he could control the spread of vampires. And if he could control the spread of vampires, the threat would be minimized.

North Carolina concerned the president because it had once been a progressive, but that had all changed. Since 2010 the state had been hijacked by the Tea Party which hand managed to crush public education and further disenfranchise the poor.

The state had an alarming number of private prisons, prisons whose populations were fueled by arrests, indictments and convictions of minorities for arbitrary drug laws. Once convicts went in the prisons very little contact was allowed from the outside world, and not much was known about what went on in the prisons. All of this was done by statute so it was legal.

Governor Patrick McAngus had been the mayor of Raleigh in spite of his lackluster education. He'd gotten in bed with a Tea Party-backed political operative named Tom Bishop. And Bishop ran the show.

We want North Carolina to be a business-friendly state. There are about forty-seven percent of people in this state who don't do anything. I don't want to be a governor for those people. I want to be a governor for the rest of us. Those had been the man's words, and he still won, thought Elder. Scary.

Elder had heard McAngus might have ties to Restoration vampire money, perhaps to Nero Corporation although that couldn't be established yet. He needed Roland and Magnum to check on it.

Elder believed vampires planning to take over the United States hacked into databases and knew exactly who to go after. He thought of the list as a hit list.

I'm not sure if the attack will be as obvious as hackers directly trying to hack into government databases, Elder thought. No, it will be more subtle. The money will go to perhaps a lobbying firm or Super PAC. Maybe both.

North Carolina alarmed Elder most of all because of its progressive decline and its hackneyed approach to governing with voter ID laws, anti-Sharia laws, cuts to education, and, most significantly, failure to extend Medicaid benefits to 500,000 people.

"Mr. President, it will be thirty minutes before your motorcade is ready," said the Secret Service Agent.

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

The president seemed troubled. Sensing this, the agent said, "Is something the matter sir?"

President Elder nodded his head. "Something is always the matter. It is a question of degree I guess."

"Well, five minutes sir."

Without turning his head Elder said, "Please close the door behind you. I will see you soon. I just need a moment to myself."

Meanwhile Magnum and Roland prepared to go to Charlotte. Elder needed to know what was going on.



Fortunately the Republican presidential candidates floundered at every turn. Never had a major political party produced such a lackluster group of candidates, but money served as the panacea for the weak candidates and the strong candidates alike. None were real competition for Inman, and they were false choices to give the illusion there were choices. In reality, the nomination had been decided. Inman would be the nominee.

But politics is nothing if not a spectacle, be it real or contrived. The Republican candidates included a former senator from Pennsylvania, who had been trounced in his last election. The primaries gave new life to this political corpse. Other candidates included a thrice married former Speaker of the House, and a "doctor" who made millions selling newsletters, who also happened to be a congressman from Texas.

The hatred and narrow mindedness spawning this slate of candidates were what ripened the conditions for a vampire takeover because of the fractures in the Republican party. It was the perfect time for a sleeper candidate, a Trojan horse.

Elder believed in the free market, but he did not believe in pure capitalism. He must stymie the Republicans. By doing so he would go a long way towards preventing the vampire take over, but work still needed to be done to destroy the evil vampires. Otherwise this threat would fester and hatch from another place. He must squelch the threat—for now—and for all time.

Chapter 16

Roland and Magnum arrived at Charlotte Douglas International Airport ready to do a job. Roland strove to think of each mission as just a job with targets to be destroyed.

"Okay Roland this next guy is a real bad dude. For years his family ran moonshine, and then they got into NASCAR. He's got a lot of influence in North Carolina and throughout the South. This guy's head of a redneck mafia. Don't laugh. There is such a thing. He's tied into every kind of vice from prostitution to illegal gambling to dog fighting. He funds a huge Super PAC, and he is very anti-Elder. Secret Service has been watching him for awhile.

"No one is sure when Robbie Jernigan—that's his name—became a vampire. He is likely about 160 years old, and he fought for the Confederacy. And he's had a lot

of time to plan. I believe he had something to do with both the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations. He's a major human trafficker too. I think he's planning an attempt on President Elder at Bank of America Stadium during the convention."

A lot bigger fish than the last one, Roland thought. Robbie Jernigan. He decided to use the term "righteous kill" because it fit, regardless of whether he was vampire or a person. He was beginning to accept the vampire reality although grudgingly.

Roland wouldn't be haunted by killing vampires or scumbag humans, who meddled in businesses like human trafficking. The vagaries inherent in war didn't exist in human vampire war.

Magnum debriefed Roland. "The house where this asshole lives is set back on the property, so we can't drive in. There will be a party. We will need to drive about two miles down the lake and take a motorboat with a silent motor about 300 yards down the beach. There will be guards all around the back, but if we go late enough, the party will be in full force. It is likely the guards will be a little sloppy. I've hired several prostitutes to come on to the guards and distract them. I've also hired a contract vampire hunter code name Valkyrie to help us.

"Once we slink onto the property we need to walk into the house like we are supposed to be there. Blending in is key, but it shouldn't be a problem because everyone will be so drunk. Vamps will be there. Politicians, models, pro athletes, you name it."

A taxi picked Roland and Magnum up at the airport. It drove them downtown to the Marriott. They pretended to go into the hotel and check in. Instead they took the elevator to the parking garage. They went to the second floor. The door opened, and Roland could see a black Land Rover in the distance. As he and Magnum walked towards the Land Rover he could see their reflections in the shiny black metal.

A small and trim female figure appeared beside them in the shiny black metal. She wore jeans and a Jimi Hendrix t-shirt as if she were ready to hit a Hollywood club—not the kind of woman Roland expected to be hunting vampires. "Valkyrie," asked Magnum.

"That's me."

"You aren't very big."

"Who says I'm supposed to be?"

Magnum and Roland laughed. "No one did."

"Let's got kill some vampires then."

Magnum clicked the key, and the lights flashed as the Land Rover unlocked. He walked to the back of the jeep and opened it. The hatch slid smoothly as it swung upward. Several bags sat in the back of the car. Either they were body bags or they were gun bags. Roland supposed there wasn't a whole lot of difference.

Magnum reached down and unzipped the first bag. Sitting on top of several shotguns sat an envelop with a silver embossed seal reading "SS," for the Society of the Silver Stake. The note read 'Magnum and Roland, may these weapons prove true as you snuff out other evil lights. The Society of the Silver Stake.'

"Here we go," Magnum said with a smile as he pulled out a gleaming silver stake. *Such an elegant weapon*, thought Roland. He chuckled to himself. Magnum

bore the name of a gun, but he knew Magnum preferred the silver stake. Magnum would have been more comfortable fighting duels with swords, which is why he preferred to slow down vampires with silver bullets. Then he plunged the silver stake into the heart of the vampire. And he stabbed with righteous rage as if with each stab he chipped away at an impenetrable wall only he could crack and tear down.

"Which weapon do you prefer Valkyrie?" asked Roland.

"I'm more of a silver stake kind of girl. I like silver swords too."

"A woman after my own heart," Magnum said.

"The silver stake is his favorite weapon. He talks about it a lot," said Roland. "He lives for these missions. I'm still getting used to everything. It is a lot to take in."

"Sure it is, but you will get numb to it over time," said Valkyrie.

"Maybe," said Roland.

Roland felt the cool silver in his hand. The balance of the weapon felt natural in his grasp, and he believed it acted as an extension of him. Although a great shot, he knew the war against vampires would not be won with shots from a distance. They would need to stab the sons of bitches in the heart.

"Here is something else I know you will like." Magnum handed Roland a crossbow. Then he handed him a quiver with a dozen silver crossbow arrows. "This should slow the blood suckers down."

The three climbed into the Land Rover and drove for forty-five minutes, and Magnum cut off the lights.

Despite the dark, the humidity and the heat rose up off the lake. Roland could see a small boat moored to an abandoned dock. Magnum strode forward silently, and Roland followed. Valkyrie also followed, her steps silent.

The three climbed from the dock and into the boat. They rode in silence, the whir of the motor barely audible. "We will be getting out of the boat over there." Magnum motioned to a clump of trees in a bend in the shoreline. Valkyrie said nothing.

Magnum steered the boat forward up on the beach. The three climbed out of the boat and stashed it behind the trees.

They crouched as they trudged through thick undergrowth. They could see lights in the distance and hear loud screams and loud music. Before Roland knew it they were on the property, but there were no guards to be found.

"I suppose you used whores to distract them," Valkyrie said sarcastically.

"How'd you know?" chuckled Magnum.

"Men are so predictable and weak whether they be vampire or human."

"I suppose so," said Magnum, "but it works."

Several people were passed out on pool chairs. Multiple couples were having sex in a hot tub. No one seemed to pay them any mind.

The "whores" had worked their magic. He felt guilty for thinking of them as whores because they played a key role in this operation however unwittingly. And they weren't really whores. They were agents playing a part, actors in a real life play.

They entered the house through French doors. No one stopped them. "This way," Magnum motioned Roland up the stairs. Still they faced no opposition. *Maybe this would be easy*, thought Roland.

"This is it." Mangum motioned to the door. "On the count of three I'm going to kick the door open. You two pull out your weapon of choice and have your backup weapon ready."

Roland unsheathed a silver stake slanted to the right from his back carrier, and he checked his back for the stake slanted to the left. The stakes crossed like silver swords.

Valkyrie pulled both stakes from her back at the same time and pointed them outward, ready for action, a murderous, yet calm gleam in her eye.

Magnum counted, and he kicked the door. It shattered open to reveal a red velvet room. A naked vampire hissed and flew towards Magnum in a blur. He stabbed the vampire with his silver stake. Blood sprayed everywhere, and a blob of organs fell on the floor. *One down, no telling how many left to go.*

Something knocked Roland to the floor. Another naked vampire. *Jesus*, he thought, *these things love to be naked*. The vampire had no hair on its body, not even on its head. Muscles rippled on its back, legs, arms and chest.

"I hate vampire hunters," it said in an Eastern European accent. "Do you know how many of you I have killed?"

Roland strained as the vampire pinned down his right hand. "Too many," Roland said as he jammed his stake into the vampire's left side. Immediately he was drenched in blood and puss, but he had survived the first kill. He took his left hand and wiped the blood out of his eyes. He would worry about cleaning his face later.

Shots rang out, and he saw Magnum holding his gun. A vampire fell backward, weakened by the shot, and this gave Roland time to pull out his other silver stake and stab the vampire through the heart. Blood sprayed, and goo covered Roland. He wiped the goo out of his eyes. "I thought you preferred the silver stake," Roland shouted. "I prefer living more," said Magnum, a thin smile on his face.

In a gilded chair in the back near a roaring fire sat Robbie Jernigan, a smile on his face revealing long fangs. "You all fight well, but you killed young vampires with little strength compared to me. I will dine on both of you, and, when I'm gorged with your blood, I will go sleep for a few days."

"I don't think so Mr. Jernigan. This is your last rodeo," said Valkyrie. "You've been on the bull for too long. It's about time someone knocked you off."

Jernigan stood up and hissed. "Why the fuck did you bring a woman here? Do you have so little respect for me?"

"It isn't a matter of respect fang face. I'm better." Valkyrie smiled as a tuft of hair fell in her face.

Jernigan lurched towards Magnum, but Valkyrie tripped him. The two still collided, and they fell to the floor. As he knocked Magnum down the two slid into a wall, smashing plaster.

Jernigan yanked Magnum up and dropped him. Then he straddled Magnum, his fangs about to plunge into his jugular. Without thinking, Roland pulled a bolt from his quiver loaded it and fired it. It shot straight through Jernigan's head, but

it didn't kill him. Jernigan reared back in pain. Valkyrie began to casually walk over to the fight with the grace of a ballerina and the ease of an athlete.

Before Roland could fire another shot or Jernigan could regroup, Valkyrie unsheathed a silver sword, and in the same movement she chopped off Jernigan's head. Blood sprayed upward like a newly tapped oil well.

Roland pulled out a silver stake and stabbed the body through the heart. The body exploded into blood and entrails. "This is woman's work. Never get a man to do what a woman can do better," Valkyrie laughed.

"That's the first vampire I've ever decapitated," she said. "I will have to do it again. Some things are better the second time."

"Strange how the head is still in one piece. Most of the bodies turn to mush when stabbed."

Valkyrie brought down the sword slicing the head in half. Roland stared at her. "I didn't want to take any chances."

"Let's go," said Magnum. "Our work is done here, but we need to go into the basement and see how many people are chained up, buried or whatever."

They ran down the stairs and out the back door. The guards there lunged at them with fangs. Roland fired two more bolts each into the hearts of the vampires. Two more kills. "Thanks for shouldering the work load," said Valkyrie, a hint of irony in her voice.

"You are welcome, but that was your show," Roland said. He smiled. She smiled back. *God she is beautiful*, thought Roland. *Beautiful and lethal*.

"This way," said Magnum. Magnum opened a door onto a dark stairway. The must have down a hundred feet at least. It reminded Roland out of a passageway from a medieval video game he might have played as a kid.

They ran down the stairs in silence, but the floorboards creaked. When they got to the bottom they heard nothing. The floor was dirt. "Why is this a dirt floor?" said Roland.

"Because they buried people to make them into vampires. Jernigan must have kept them down here from the men and women he bought from sex trafficking. Sick assholes."

Just then one of the five-dozen or so mounds of dirt began to rumble. "Shit," said Valkyrie. "They are waking up."

"We need to torch the place," said Magnum.

"Or we can blow it up with this special silver encased bomb that will kill all these assholes possibly before, but definitely after they wake up—if they wake up."

Valkyrie walked over and stabbed down into the dirt. The moving stopped, and blood began to seep up from the ground.

Then she reached over and connected the bomb to the wall with strong putty. "We have two minutes to get clear of the blast radius which is a tenth of a mile, so we better run."

All three ran up the stairs and outside. They ran as fast as they could.

Roland, Magnum and Valkyrie felt a searing heat from behind and then a deafening boom. "Looks like we got rid of some old vampires, Robbie Jernigan and some baby vampires while still in the womb so to speak."

"That's right. Mission accomplished," said Magnum.

"Maybe we will save some people before they get made to vampires."

"When they are trafficked," said Magnum, "they are usually too far gone. The best we can do is contain their spread at that point."

They faced no more opposition. They ran down the beach, cleared the branches and hopped into the boat. The trio sped off in the water the moonlight leading the way to the dock. *Who is this Valkyrie woman?* thought Roland, *I'm beginning to like her.*

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"Pierre," this is Thomas Elder.

"Mr. President, nice to speak with you."

"Likewise. I wanted to let you know Roland Walker, William Magnum and Valkyrie (a code name I suppose) did well in their mission in North Carolina. They killed Jernigan, and they killed upwards of sixty vampires.

"As we feared and were somewhat aware of, there are vampire hives tucked away in multiple places through out the United States and elsewhere."

"Yes, from the human trafficking victims."

"That's right Pierre. Human lust used to fuel this industry, but now it is also part of the vampire plan."

Pierre paused, taking it all in.

"Anyway, I wanted you to know."

"Thanks Mr. President."

"Thank you."

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"I hear the mission went well," said Pierre to Magnum via speakerphone.

"It did. We knocked out a key player in North Carolina."

Roland smiled.

"And Roland is becoming more adept at killing vampires?"

"He is." Magnum paused a minute.

"I know about Valkyrie, too. It seems she is a useful associate."

Roland agreed. "She is. Quite useful. She's very skilled."

"I'm glad to hear that. Thanks for the update. I'm sure we will talk soon." Pierre hung up the phone.

Pierre had another thought, one that didn't occur to him as often as it had in the past, although he was happy the mission succeeded, he worried many of his fellow vampires viewed him as a traitor because he sanctioned the killing of his own kind. But he didn't consider vampires his own kind, not really anymore at least.

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The phone call with the president had been brief but happy; same thing with Pierre. Another mission completed. Magnum, Valkyrie and Roland slid the boat up on the beach and hid it under the trees. All felt powerful and flush with victory. They had killed a major figure in the North Carolina vampire community.

"I'm sure you are wondering how this all fits together," Magnum said to Roland. "I guess I do wonder what the grand plan is—if there is one—other than killing as many vampires as we can."

Magnum chuckled a little. "There is a plan. I'm not sure how "grand" it is, though. It is more of a strategy."

Roland arched his eyebrows inquisitively.

"I don't ponder the origins of the mission. I just do what I'm told, and I hope it works out," said Magnum. "Thinking too much about these things will blow up your brain. Leave philosophy to the philosophers. Such thinking is a luxury we can't afford."

Roland glowered, unconvinced.

"Okay, okay. You deserve at least some kind of answer. I know the threat comes from Europe."

"We knew that. All the Nero shit. Could it be more than one country?," said Roland.

"Russia, you mean," said Magnum.

Valkyrie rolled her eyes. "Why the fuck does it matter where it comes from or what the particulars are?"

"I don't think this is coming from Russia too. Origin isn't too important."

"Then what is important Magnum?" Roland turned around, his back facing Magnum. Magnum could tell he was troubled.

"All I know is these vampires suck. My ex-girlfriend cheated on me with a vampire. He then he made her a vampire. She and the bitch vampiress were the first vamps I killed. After that I never looked back."

Magnum let Valkyrie's comment go, more concerned with Roland.

"You are a lesbian?" said Roland with great disappointment and little tact.

"You got a problem with that?"

"No, I'm just disappointed."

Valkyrie laughed. The mood lightened. "That's one I've heard before."

Magnum got them back on track. "It is my understanding that the plan is to prey upon the weak people in the United States, those who get Medicaid and other government programs. Somehow this is supposed to give the vampires the power to take over the country and the world. But what the human trafficking is meant to provide the sheer numbers needed here. The Medicaid and cutting government programs is more of a distraction even though it is along the same lines of what they want to do which is stick it to the weak."

Jesus, thought Roland. He never thought the most vulnerable would be used to take over the country. It didn't make sense, but, then again, it kind of did.

Magnum didn't say anything else—he didn't need to. Make the most vulnerable into vampires. Where had Roland heard the saying, "breed them out" It applied here.

"I see more hunts in our future," said Magnum. "But we may be heading into places with superior numbers."

"Oh you will, but they are trapped in by silver bars and other devices to keep them confined. The key is to blow the motherfucker up."

This only gets harder, thought Roland, *but if Valkyrie goes on these hunts, I think I can manage. I enjoy looking at her even if I don't have chance.*

Thanks to the vampire hunters, President Elder had one less threat, but the greatest threat loomed across the dark ocean and all around them.

