

Vampire Chronicle

by Nik Edge

One

The vampires were a frightening and enticing facet of society. As their virus spread, many people simply surrendered. A Los Angeles Times poll provided the sobering percentages: 68% wanted to be metamorphosed immediately, in order to cut prematurely the daily torture of waiting; 19% determined to struggle to the last, in hopes of some preternatural intervention; 13% undecided. Meanwhile, the President ordered the citizens to go about their daily activities, which would discourage the “freedom suckers.” So businesses kept the flow of capital surging, and sports became ever more popular, providing a safe refuge for non-vampire aficionados. A National Enquirer story reported of a vampire aging quickly under the blinding bleacher lights, ultimately leaving as “an odiferous fleshy mass.” Many people, including myself, were surprised by the virtual literary style of a writer in a pulp magazine, but it soon became apparent that the sensationalist presses were rife with Ivy Leaguers intent upon immortality(the artistic kind, that is) with Homeric treatises on a catastrophic plague.

Strangely enough, only the U.S. was infested with the pestilence. When the chaos started, the President informed the diplomatic communiqués of every country, and proposed that “everyone should join hands to defeat this heretic.” But a week passed without any offers of aid. Another passed, and the President dropped the hint about “clever creatures,” inferring

that the vampires were just lulling the rest of the world into a false sense of security. The third week came and went with the plea to be patient. When the month had ended, the Commander-in-Chief asked for scientific help, reasoning that “obviously these subhumans have decided to target one country at a time.” But he still did not receive favorable replies. Some, like Russia, sent regretful letters with florid postage stamps of Vlad the Impaler, the supposed first vampire, penning “We all feel remorse for your great dilemma, but unfortunately we cannot risk being infected also, and thus can only pray for you in deep earnest.” Others, such as Iran, were a bit less sympathetic, intoning, “The Great Heathen of the West is finally sprouting its true Founding Forefathers”(sic). The President closed the borders of the U.S. with the remark, “We are alone in our fight, but our fires will burn brightly.”

Scientific tests at UCLA Medical Center had failed to kindle any hope, only reasonable doubt. This freakish vampiric malady was garnering all sorts of desperate hypotheses. As a freelance writer for the L.A. Times, I was given the opportunity to spectate at the sometimes barbaric coliseum with other journalistic dignitaries. There were two primary testing targets: 1. Micro-organisms, animals. 2. Humans. The first category, naturally, were tested first, but not without protests from the still thriving animal lobby. If the initial phase proved successful enough to gain support, its credibility was subsequently tested upon a

human. But this process, of weeding out the undesirables, did not take into account the various shocks of experimental failure.

After we, the onlookers, were escorted to our seats in a huge, circular metal dome built specifically for the testing, a loudspeaker droned out the official statement delivered every day at 12 noon before an experiment: “This is a test rendered under the auspices of the UCLA Medical Center, in conjunction with the directive of the President of the United States. Anyone who reports on anything said or performed inside this room will be detained by the FBI, with no possibility of bail, and will be held in federal prison indefinitely. If you feel nausea during the proceedings, please immediately vacate the testing room. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“And thank you for my ashen pallor,” quipped a rotund man chewing on licorice.

There were some restrained chuckles.

A Siberian Husky was rolled out, chained to a hospital bed, hissing and foaming at the mouth, which had unnaturally long incisors. The doctor, a tall and thin Spaniard, probably middle-aged, but appearing substantially older under stress, with a drawn face, fidgeting hands, and slow, unsure movement, explained, “This dog was reported missing a week ago in downtown Los Angeles, and was spotted two days ago outside the homeless mission”(here he paused and drew a long breath) “eating a man.” Obligatory horrified looks were exchanged

before he continued, "He was neutralized by a drugged dart shot by a sheriff, which immediately sedated him. I'm sure you've all heard that every police officer in this country now carries two types of guns. The dog was then chained and transferred to our facilities, where he has been ever since. Well, that must be the story," he said, trying to smile, as if he wanted to delay what was to follow. "Well, not quite," he continued, "because this dog is now a vampire, and unfortunately we have to use him without hesitation as a vehicle for a possible cure." He looked to the floor for a moment, then recollected himself. "But I'm wasting time with this sentimentality. I'm now going to administer the serum, which is a common rabies shot laced with extremely potent amino acids and enzymes. Its objective is to decrease the blood cell activity and enhance the natural nutrients, in order to cut down on the thirst for blood and increase the hunger for food. I cannot give you all the exact chemical formula, because only the ultimate cure will be made known." Suddenly, he seemed to realize that he had to administer the shot before he lost the nerve. He whipped the needle out of one of his deep pockets, held it up momentarily shining in the overhead lights, and plunged it into the dog's neck. It screeched and hissed, and the doctor's arm flapped with the effort to keep it inserted. Yet the dog became sedate when it was removed.

The doctor had his eyes fixed on the dog's, which seemed to be looking back with some understanding. Everyone in the

audience shared in the hope, until the dog started methodically eating one of its own front paws.

Later, back at my brick loft tower situated between two glass condominium towers, one blue-tinted, one red, I tried to release some tension by writing a column unrelated to what I had witnessed. But I kept returning to the scene of horror, and reliving how the dog, after satiated by devouring its own paws, started looking hungrily at the doctor, who started mumbling “Mí dios, what has happened?,” and backing away. Then rifles appeared from recesses at the top of the dome near the roof, and the dog was hit by a number of shots, practically exploding with the fired steel.

I took a hot shower, and it calmed my nerves enough to sit down and read for a while. I was reading an historical novel about a family in turn-of-the nineteenth century Chicago, and I was progressing fairly well until a scene describing in minute detail the bloody horrors of the butcher floors of factories. I stopped when I started to read about blood spattering the brick walls of the old building, which reminded me of my own brick walls.

I fell asleep with my gun within easy reach.

Two

My colleague at the Times, Leonard Williams, called me early, seven in the morning, and I cursed as I leapt from bed and knocked my gun on the floor. Fortunately it did not discharge. Leonard's voice was loud and deep, as my hand slightly trembled over the receiver. "Morning, Terry."

"Morning, Leonard. What's going on?" Sunrise was moving quickly now, and I squinted from a shard of light sneaking through the window blinds.

Leonard paused, and I could hear him trying to clear his throat discreetly. "Terry, I'm standing in a phone booth on the corner of Normandie and Olympic, where a man is rapidly disintegrating."

"Huh? Another disint?" I said. "Disints" were those that, because of the frailty of their health(usually the old and feeble, but sometimes the homeless) could not survive the painful transition toward living death(vampirism), and died within hours of being bit. These people decomposed almost instantaneously, often requiring police hoses. Thus, the fire department was called automatically when a "disint" was reported.

I drove madly, because, despite my attempts at sober consideration, I had not seen a "disint" case for over a year at that time. I almost ran over a pedestrian near Echo Park, who, busy admiring the still entrancing fountain near one end of the grass, stepped off the curb without looking. I swerved, and

almost hit oncoming traffic before I recovered control. I drove an old Buick Regal with special, reinforced tires. Vampires had a tendency to attack tires of vehicles at night, because night drivers would not stop for anyone walking the streets after dark. So vampires could not expect to cause cars to swerve around them. Instead, they usually resorted in such cases to sniping at the machines by throwing objects, including Molotov cocktails, at their moving targets. I had organized other tenants in my building to buy out the bottom floor, since it originally did not have a garage. It took a vast amount of demolition, but, when it was finished, we had a working parking garage. We knew that employing anyone to watch it would be problematic, so we invested piles of materials in making it essentially impregnable from outside interference. When a motorist exited the structure, he/she had to floor the accelerator, because the gate opened and closed at a phenomenally fast rate, an added detail that required the services of a very expensive but competent electronics and machinist genius.

When I arrived, Leonard, tall and thin, a former professor of world history at UCSB, was casting his shadow over the crumpled form on the concrete. As I approached him I heard the sirens of the ambulance and fire engine approaching. The police had cordoned the area off, but their department had an under-the-table agreement with the Times to allow its correspondents

access to crime scenes. Young cops joked amongst themselves, and passed a flask back and forth.

Leonard recognized my shadow and did not turn around, still staring at the body. The bearded face of the homeless man was puffing out, then sinking back into itself with the motion of a puff fish, over and over. I thought to myself that the numbers of homeless had become overwhelming, due to the terribly destructive force of the vampires not just directly, to human life, but also to the economy. Somehow, though, people continued to work at actual jobs, although lateness, inefficiency, and demoralization were the common norms.

I was worried about Leonard in particular, though. He had still not responded to my presence. Finally, I cleared my throat, and he said in a monotone, “The homeless are always the easiest prey.” He, half-dazed, walked over to his car, took out his keys, reconsidered, and sat down on the curb, some shouting from the building above us filtering down to us.

I sat down beside him, started to say something, then thought better of it. Finally, he continued. “I was just on my way to the Sports Arena when I saw him. He was squirming and moaning, but I wasn’t sure it was real serious until I noticed him literally starting to shrink.” What we both tacitly understood was that there was absolutely nothing to be done for the man, that even comforting him was outside the realm of possibility.

“Well, maybe they’re the fortunate ones, Leonard.” I watched a solitary palm frond being blown across the trashy street. I tried without success to find a topic to steer the conversation away.

Leonard shifted on his haunches, and flicked a pebble along the curb. “Damn, Terry, it’s supposed to get easier, right? Getting used to seeing all this chaos and carnage. But it’s getting worse for me. I dream about every one of the bodies. It’s like they accumulate in my mind without me realizing it.” One of the cops poured a splash of liquor on the man’s face, as if to see if it would have any additional effect on the decaying process, and I put a restraining hold on Leonard. He continued, “Okay. Okay. You’re right. I can’t do nothing about that, either.

“Hey, Leonard. It’s all right. I have nightmares, too. I admit I have a lot of worry about losing my car, my only freedom, but who doesn’t deal with his/her own demons? Jesus, Leonard, I know you’re trying to remain completely human with all the wreckage around, but you have to limit yourself, too.”

Leonard smiled. “I know you’re right, but, hell, you know what I’ve been through. Not to say you haven’t been through a lot, too, but, you know, the way I lost my family, trying to escape with them to the Channel Islands, and the damn shipwreck, then dining off shellfish for one year, and then returning to find things even worse-“

I patted his shoulder. “Take some deep breaths, Leonard. You’re a rational man, but too rational sometimes. You have to

surrender. I know it sounds negative, but you can't expect things to change back. If they ever do, we'll both be lucky."

Leonard laughed. "Easy for you to say. Your family is safe back east. And how would you react if you lost your car?"

I punched him lightly on the shoulder. "Damn you. If that happened I'd stay at home weeping under my bed covers, drinking gallons of vodka every day. That's what I'd do. But, seriously, I don't allow myself to anticipate much. I guess I try to act like I'm in a movie, and I only have to worry about my own part, not about others."

Leonard nodded his head, and wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. "Remember how stressed-out we thought our lives were before the world heard the news? Yeah, we were competing for tenure and literary prizes and such. I mean, I don't know how to say it, but a part of me wants closure to this fucked-up situation."

"I do, too." I could have continued, but at that time I was easily bored with my own talk. We watched the paramedics roll the husk of the homeless man into the body bag, like a huge, quivering fish, and I knew that I would have my own nightmares.

Three

In the morning, the sun rays were oblong and strong, but not altogether unpleasant, through my small bedroom window overlooking the empty Los Angeles river. A train passed like an empty jet on the proximate tracks, hording passengers through the scorching. Random mechanical noises vied for supremacy unawares(industry's teeming consorts), and a homeless person rummaged through a dumpster. Vampires were known to reside in any available space, although, because all indications were that they were the eternal night-dwellers of traditional imaginings, the homeless did not have to worry about daytime, dumpster surprises.

After the heavy steel garage door slammed shut, I slammed on the brakes, because I saw Bo, a homeless and graying black man, just to the left of the entrance. He had a sheepish look on his face, so I waved at him, yet also looking for signs that someone had forced him to approach me. It was unusual to see him in the morning, when was normally hung-over and, if not outright asleep, unwilling to engage in any lengthy chat-time.

I kept a vigilant watch on the street as he approached me. I rolled down my window and called out, "Morning, Bo."

"Morning, Terry. Good to see you again." He glanced around quickly. "No need to worry, Terry. The Bloods have given up on this neighborhood. They've moved on." Of course, the Bloods was the moniker for an infamous black gang, originating in L.A.,

that had, decades ago, spread its tentacles nationwide, pushing drugs. Now, however, they had branched out into every avenue of crime out of necessity.

“Is that so, Bo?”

Bo smiled. “Yeah, it is so, smartass. You always act as if you know everything already, that you can’t be told anything.”

“Sorry. It’s an unavoidable character flaw in me.” I noticed that the machinist’s shop across the corner had closed, and wondered how long I had overlooked the detail. It was the kind of confusion that contributed to the mind distortions caused by the vampires.

Bo shrugged, shielded his eyes from the sun, and said, “I’m worried about you, Terry.”

“That’s touching, Bo. No, really, don’t look at me like that. I’m worried about you, too. You won’t ever accept my invitation to stay at my flat whenever you feel like it. I guess-“

“Well, you know the truth, Terry. The less I have, for one thing, the less a fucking zombie can take away from me, you know?”

I chuckled. “You do have a way with direct language, Bo. I hand it to you there.”

“I don’t know any other way, Terry. I’m just waiting for this contagion to blow over.” He sounded confident, and looked up into the blue sky.

“Listen, Bo, if you’re right, I’ll give you a key to my place for the rest of your life, and I won’t accept any excuses. All right?”

Bo winced and turned, because a large concrete truck came lumbering past, with a lone, scrawny bearded driver waving apologetically. Bo reached into the large, outside pocket of his faded raincoat, lit it quickly, and took a few puffs. “I want you to talk to me, Terry, and no bullshit, all right? You don’t look right-“

“What do you mean? We’re all fucked up, right?” I revved the engine slightly in consternation without realizing it.

Bo leaned forward for emphasis. “You’ve been drinking too much, man. I have my moments, believe me, but you have a haggard look like I’ve never seen before on you. If there is a good woman left around these parts, drive that fucking Buick into the ground finding her, or, hey, even if you find a passable one, go all in.”

I revved the engine. “All right, Bo. I’ll do that when you take me up on the offer.”

Bo shook his head, and I tore off, crushing the wheel of an abandoned baby carriage. Halfway to the Times building on Broadway, I realized I had not checked my post office box for over one week, so I retraced half of my route, driving past a string of defunct movie theaters and bars, one, The Changeling, I had frequented a decade or so before, when I first joined the staff of the Times, directly out of journalism school. I parked in the underground garage, which was amply staffed by security,

one of the few remaining federal buildings that could be trusted with one's car. I noticed an old sign pasted to the wall of the security sentry booth-Signs of a Vampire-with quaint, numbered warning signs listed underneath the fanged caricature. It was while I was in college that the first, isolated cases were reported. Bodies were found in many modes of bloody displeasure, the chief touchstone being a swollen and blackened tongue, lolling like a huge, burred slug. Otherwise, there were no signs of physical duress, no signature puncture wounds or general disfigurement.

The P.O. box area was empty, which was usually the case. I could see my clear reflection off of the immaculate, waxed floor. Often, when I came to check my mail, I waved at my smiling reflection. I figured that the janitor was channeling a huge amount of fear and frustration into his assigned duties, resulting in a level of quality that was almost absurd to the extreme. Of course, everyone had their outlets, running the usual gamut, sex to alcohol, but there were innumerable combinations. I had curbed my womanizing enough to slowly become obsessed with writing poems, to the degree that I could not sleep unless I completed my daily quoting, with the fear that that would be the day of my death, one in which I had not been productive.

The box was close to bursting, with envelopes crushed into the space, because of one, oversized priority package. It was from my parents in New York, who rarely corresponded with me.

They were still disappointed in me for leaving behind the family business, a huge corporation of maritime interests owing its initial riches to a huge investment in Robert Fulton's steamship venture of the early 1800s. The fact that soon after I enrolled at UCSB to study journalism, the plague began, was utilized by them as a guilt complex against me, as if I was somehow partially responsible for it. The last correspondence I had received from them informed me about the company takeover of a huge dock in Baltimore, partly because the U.S. government was closing its naval base there. It was clear that their periodic updates of the business were meant to pique my interest, in hopes that I would return to ensure the continued success of the business. I was their only child, in part because they had married later in life, and they were averse to it passing to another family.

I threw the rest of the mail pile on the sorting table, and opened the package. It contained a heavy-duty, top of the line blue windbreaker, a pair of wool socks, and a letter. As I opened it a security guard came around the corner, nodded his head, and moved along. He had a machine gun obliquely pointed at the floor.

It read:

Our Dear Terry,

First, our apologies for not enclosing a certified check. We are desperate to see you, and yet you have recently refused our requests. Indeed, the “bad news” comes first. No, we are not planning on trying to force you to stay permanently, but, on the other hand, we feel that, since we continue to financially support you to some degree, we deserve a visit of some sort again. We will reinstate you when you honor the request, Terry. You understand that we are older, and that, on top of that, this plague makes our continued existence even more problematic. We love you, and do not want to force your decisions, but, at this time, we have to insist. Give us a visit here in New York City, and we will ensure that your financial security is again ensured. Since all phone lines are down, just send a brief note with your estimated arrival time. Take your time coming across the country if you like. We feel it will do minor miracles for you to get out and breathe some air.

**Love,
Mom and Dad**

Four

I shoved everything back into the box, and cursed aloud for a few moments. The patronizing tone of the letter, as usual, upset me, as well as the unavoidable decision. I could not expect to stay off the streets for long, or, at least I would have to accept staying with a friend with Leonard long-term, which I strenuously resisted, since I had become mostly a solitary creature. I needed some space, and my parents knew it. The only other option was the streets, which was a horrible alternative. "They are never subtle," I thought. My parents had always attempted to steer me toward their corporate mentality, but this was the most direct signal of their control. I clenched my fists, and looked over my right shoulder and looked at the security camera, which, before I turned my head away, was starting to go into retinal recognition mode. It made a low humming noise when this occurred, which everyone seemed to know, but the authorities had not been able to install new cameras in place of the outmoded ones. I took a quick look around and listened for footsteps and, when it was clear I had a moment to act, I slammed my fist into the cardboard packaging. The pain was a dull thud on the bottom of my hand, which I quickly massaged before putting the package under my arm, and exiting.

As I walked down to the garage, ignoring the looks of people because of my simmering rage, which I was unsure I could control, I recalled my previous visit to New York, about three

years previous, during my most reckless and irresponsible womanizing period. I had angered them by sleeping with the maid, and trying to convince her to return with me to Los Angeles. I still believed that my father purposely released the Rottweiler Achilles against me one night. Fortunately, he was trained to only attack legs, so I escaped with a few punctures, and a couple of rabies shots in the emergency room. My father had simply said, "You should be more careful, son. You know Achilles does not like strange men, especially the tomcat types. I suggest you curb your sexual appetite a little. And, if I may perhaps interject this one more time, take the helm, son. We have a stable board of directors, who will not let you loose mayhem on the company and the shareholders." He was standing over my hospital bed like an avenging angel, looking curiously at the intravenous tubes. "Ah, why must you haunt me? Don't you realize we all have enough trouble without you creating more? Why don't you understand that you are not expected to be like me. The only compromise is that you act like me when you become head of the company in public. In private, well, you know, one simply needs to be a little more discreet. Your life in L.A. is exciting, but in crude ways. I mean, how many more murders do you need to report before you grow tired of the endless exercise in futility? Huh?"

I remained silent, because, even though I was hardly in a condition that warranted not speaking, I knew that I could not

find the proper words for a denunciation. So I just let him continue in the dull gray hospital ward room.

“If you’re going to write, son, why don’t you pen an historical novel, or something of that nature? No, I know what you’re thinking. Not about Fulton and his scions, including the Chambers clan. How about a family drama surrounding organized crime, and other matters, say, in Chicago? If you want an escape, that is a far safer one than your endless sexual escapades. I mean, come now, you aren’t a kid anymore. You want to bed all the beautiful women, but can’t you see that’s futile?”

I moaned, because I hated his favorite word-“futile.” I always figured he was suggesting that I was somehow lacking in intestinal fortitude.

“Okay, you are a good looking guy, and can seduce women quite easily. But what’s the challenge, Terry? I’m not saying you should marry young like I did, but, even by current standards, you are uncontrollable. Did you even for a moment think before you came on to Judy? And could you have not at least taken her out once like a gentleman? Christ, have fun, by all means, Terry, but as Marcus Aurelius once said, “A man must check himself at all times.” Get it, son? Check yourself before you rush headlong into some unknown adventure. Doesn’t mean you should always decide to not act, but, many times, you will see the wisdom of those words. Don’t look at me like that. Yes, your mother and I

kind of forced your hand, in the respect of coming to visit us. But we did not, and will not ever, countenance you disrespecting our personal abode by bedding the hired help. Okay? Just keep that in mind.”

Halfway home, I took a turn, and headed to the Times headquarters, because I realized that I would be leaving within a couple of days. I did not want to delay the inevitable. I noticed a “disint,” a young woman, flopping on a sidewalk with her dress hiked up, but did not pull over to make yet another report. Instead, I honked and cursed at jaywalkers until my path was clear once more.

It was difficult, but before I entered the parking lot in a dangerous power slide, I calmed myself somewhat, pulling over momentarily to take some deep breaths. A dog trotted by, its tongue lolling out, swelled like a black eggplant. I thought it strange that a creature in such an advanced stage of decomposition was still living in the day. I read graffiti sprayed onto the brick wall of a boarded up salon: “Eat you guts, coppers!”

Five

I was on the company elevator without remembering parking in the underground garage. Momentarily, I thought I was once again in the Post Office building, not the Times', because the sentry booth looked the same, a drab reinforced concrete structure with a dark interior. The only difference was, instead of having an old placard about the threat of vampires, this one was graced with a nude centerfold. I gave the guard a thumbs-up, but he was busy reading a magazine, "probably a porn," I thought.

I went straight to my computer terminal, and only waved at the welcome gestures, as I usually did when I was concerned about getting a story down before I lost its fiber. Fortunately, the work station was situated in the corner of the huge newsroom, which still had large overhead screens tuned to every news channel in the U.S. I groaned every time another scene of bloody mayhem emerged, like an inexorable news ticker. I started typing an e-mail to my parents, glancing around from time to time, to make sure I was not being closely scrutinized.

Leonard was hovering over me before I knew it, rolling a toothpick around in his mouth. "You looked rushed, Terry. What's up?"

"Nothing. Other than that my parents have done one of their infamous blackmail routines on me again." I kept typing the

generic letter, as angry as I was. “They keep reminding me that I am second class in their superior eyes. That’s all.”

Leonard rolled the chair over from the opposite cubicle. “Ah. Damn. Not now. But then, it was inevitable, I guess. They’re pressuring you again. Why can’t they at least until-“

“What, Leonard? Until this insanity passes? Will it ever? Does it matter? They are stubborn people, my parents. They have a bunch of mean bodyguards, so they figure they’ll survive regardless of what happens outside their compound.”

Leonard momentarily frowned when confronted by a compelling monitor image overhead. “I don’t know. I guess you can’t fight them right now. I know you wish you could, but, realistically, I don’t think you can.”

I shrugged. “Any last minute revisions to take care of? Or any other business I should take care of before I leave?”

“Forget about all that Terry. Me and the guys have it taken care of. I mean, how many more disint cases do you have to be a part of? They’ll keep liquefying no matter what we do, you know?”

“Yeah, I know, Leonard. But, still, it’s a lot more interesting than hearing about stock dividends and all that crap. Sometimes I wonder if all my family cares about is the value of their stockholders’ shares.”

Leonard rolled back a few feet, and seemed to relax, his shoulders rolling back. “You really going to miss the fluorescent

lights and crappy coffee of this place? Hey, maybe you're scared that with your first cup of decent joe in years you might not be able to return to the stale brew of this place."

I laughed. "You know I only partake of caffeine in emergencies, Leonard. It does not agree with my stomach." I grimaced to myself then, because I felt it was the type of statement that my father would make.

"Right. Just think, though, Terry. You might have something different to write about when you return. Right?" He waved off a junior, assistant editor, who was starting to approach him with some paper. "Hey, finish up that message, and go home. Take your time packing, and, if you want some company, just mention it to Bo. I know he likes to do some messenger services when he can use a little pocket cash."

"Okay." He patted my back, but I was already finishing my typing. I felt that the fluorescent lights would give me a headache if I took too long.

I was still angry as I drove home, but without a reckless streak. I drove past a small, makeshift billboard claiming to exhibit a perfectly embalmed vampire corpse, at the introductory viewing price of five dollars. The crude drawing had highly exaggerated fangs, and huge Xs over the dead eyes. The adjacent sign indicated that one simply had to walk to the back of the dark alley, and...

That night I dreamt of a Laundromat with blinding fluorescent lights. A small boy dressed in filthy overalls pointed to the windowed wall washers. Inside there were miniature faces with fangs, eyes half as large as the skulls. As I walked along the row of washers, trying not to slip on the wet floor, the faces kept growing larger. They expanded until they broke through the hard plastic in a rush of blood.

I packed my bags as soon as I awoke, my eyes slightly itchy and foggy. I was having trouble ridding myself of the vivid Laundromat image: whenever I closed my eyes I saw a mesh of red. A hot shower slightly calmed my anxiety, and I was able to put on a light seersucker suit without trembling.

Dog carcasses littered the street. I sped away, doing a quick mental calculation: about six in the first block. Vampires had grown to favor dog flesh over the human variety. It was even rumored that it contributed to their exceeding level of physical agility.

Six

On the freeway, I settled my Buick behind a huge old Ford Thunderbird, a car with a hood half its length. It would dissuade nearby drivers from any overly aggressive maneuvers. My mind was settling into the radio fusion of Bach's fugues when it was interrupted by a traffic report. "Good morning, Los Angelenos. This is your traffic report for the morning of June 6. At this moment only incident has been reported, a twelve car collision on the 101 south on Vermont. Three fatalities have been confirmed and it should be backed up for another hour or so. Thank you and have a good day."

Most drivers were hunched over their wheels with clenched hands and twitching faces, like affrighted mice. Young and old, male and female, dark and light, all retained their distinguishing features, but the entire scene was a study in rodent impressionism. RATS EN ROUTE TO PLAGUE.

A collective psyche reigned on the freeways. Do not look around or you might see a reflection of yourself, haggardly distressed. So there were many aborted lane changes and blaring horns but no mouth shouting or finger pointing.

As I neared the airport I started to think of a first stopping point en route to New York. It gradually dawned on me that, since the outbreak, I was heading nowhere in particular, just in pursuit of or retreat from myself.

At this point, I almost rear-ended a new economy car, whose young rear occupant gave me the finger as she dispatched her ice cream drumstick. Her eyes had no mischievousness in them, only vacancy. She kept her finger sprouted even after I passed, while her mother applied makeup with an open mouth stretched into a grimace.

In the airport terminal, there were many canine units, bomb experts, undercover cops, and medical personnel. I felt as if I was being deported to another country, or, like the masses of others, self-admitting myself into a huge sanitarium. I studied the departure board, looking for the earliest, interesting flight choice:

St. Louis: 11:20. Chicago: 11:35. Dallas: 11:40. Newark: 12:00. Memphis: 12:05. Denver: 12:20. Taos: 12:35. Boston: 12:55.

Taos and Memphis appealed to me, because they were not huge metropolitan centers like the others. Memphis had been until recently, when an anarchistic group calling itself the Avengers had succeeded in a series of bombings which made large swaths of the area uninhabitable. So, there was still vestiges of my craving for danger. Strangers rarely spoke to each other, especially in airports. An old man did approach me at that time, as if to contest that generalization, and asked for the time.

“10:47,” I said, and the old man crested his porkpie hat over bushy eyebrows, and shuffled off.

I momentarily considered Taos. I could see myself stretched out like a lizard in sand, with a vampire tearing out my gizzards, while the sun sank on the horizon, the isolated snow flakes becoming thick as I was eaten.

I went to relieve myself, and almost collided with a young couple holding hands under long, dark overcoats, as if their hands were the only private matters they could continue to protect.

The urinals reeked of vomiting. I was thinking that Memphis might be a good starting point for a type of brief travelogue covering spaces of the country between L.A. and N.Y.

Eagerly and quickly, I made my way over to the ticket counter shining in the concourse. Where I was going I did not know anyone, but it was still with relief upon the question posed by the strained voice from the red lips to reply, “One way to Memphis, please.”

Takeoff. The DC-10 ascended smoothly. “We are leaving the haunted verdure below,” I thought. My mouth was dry, but a stewardess brought me a smiling Coke. I watched her from behind and thought of simple pleasures.

Los Angeles became a toy city. I wondered if I would ever see it again, then shrugged off the nostalgia, and waited for my roast

beef sandwich to arrive, with mashed potatoes and peas. The meat was a small, dry square, so I piled the potatoes and gravy on top. After taking the first bite, a small boy appeared in front of me.

He was pale, red-headed, and had on a yellow-and-black checkered shirt, which did not cover his stomach. His holey Levis were baggy.

“Sir, I’d like you to meet Larry the Clown.” He pulled a raggedy doll out of his pocket with some trouble and held it about one foot from my face. “Sir, what is your name?”

“Terry.”

“Hi, Terry,” he squealed, ‘my name is Larry the Clown, and when I’m not making fun for people I suck their blood and watch them turn into nothing.’ His small, red lips parted in a smile.

I stepped out of the air-conditioned terminal into a gush of humidity. Memphis. People had long sanguinary faces hardened like clay. I saw a helicopter patrolling over the nearby downtown area, and thought that I wanted a rural experience.

“Taxi!” I shouted.

A short, clean-shaven man with chew in his mouth approached me jawing away. In his eyes was more than a trace of suspicion. Behind him was a wide expanse of grassy knolls and a blanket of trees straight as flagpoles.

His pockmarked face twitched a little. “Where to?” he asked, then looked down, found a spot a foot from my left foot and spit out a wad. He peered back up adjusting his orange Tennessee Volunteers cap.

“Not quite sure.”

“Well, you’ve got to see it through my eyes, mister. I’m a taxi driver, not a fortune teller.”

“I was thinking more of a rural than city area. I’m just here to take a breather from city life.”

He studied me and my bags. “What you going to do in a rural area?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, I was just thinking of some kind of lodging near a stream or some other picturesque place that’s not too expensive.”

He chuckled. “Out of a job or something?”

“No, not exactly. On a short break to see my family. Kind of laid off temporarily, I guess you could say.”

“How cheap you looking for?”

“I don’t have a low limit. Just want to have some peace and solitude.”

“Well, tell you what, do you know how to use a rifle?” He said it in almost a conspiratorial whisper.

“Yeah, it’s been a little while, but I could use a little brushing up.” In truth, I had never shot a high-powered rifle.

“Well, I know this old guy who is always looking for strangers to tell his stories to, because he’s running out of curious people in these parts. Those freaking Avengers have torn out a large part of the area’s soul, but, hey, at least they were finally cornered and blasted. Anyway, he’ll make you some sort of deal, either you pay a bit, or you do some scouting, hunting, and work on his property. I hear his wife’s a damn good cook, also. So that might work in favor of the bargain, also.”

I laughed. “Sounds good to me. I’m tired of eating grease and dried meat.”

He patted my back. “Not a beef jerkey kind of guy, huh? Well, let’s get going. By the way, it’s a bit of a long drive from here, but I’ll do a flat rate of twenty bucks for you, in cash, of course.”

“Fine.” He was already picking up one of my bags. “Now listen here. The way should be safe, but just in case-“

“I’ve got a gun, and I’m not afraid to use it.” We looked at each other for a moment, appraising each other. Then we both nodded, and climbed into the taxi.

Seven

“You say your name is Terry?” the old man asked, wiping sweat from his brow. A cloud of cooking smells escaped the large cabin-style house behind him. His tone was familiar and friendly, a distinct shock after the prolonged trauma of L.A. We were standing on a slight rise, overlooking an endless series of rolling hills heading west.

“Yes, nice to meet you-“

“My name is Will, Terry.” He shook my hand. By the way, you ever seen a buck breaking through branches in a clearing?”

“No.” I was startled by how quickly he was taking me into his good graces. I had assumed that, because of the contagion, that everyone was particularly hesitant to be open with strangers, especially with someone from L.A. Yet it was as if we were instant cousins.

Will scratched his chin. “He says he’s never seen a buck? Well, Terry, you’ll be seeing one shortly, all right. I’ll stake my life on it.” He waved me forward.

We started out early, before his wife awoke. Will made flapjacks, and put out a plate for her. “She is not a morning person,” he said, and I nodded my head. We walked about three miles, until we could not see the rise where their cabin was situated.

I walked about five paces behind Will. “Incidentally,” he said, “when you walk on through the trees, look for squirrels. They like to huddle over you in the branches, and if you walk under one unsuspecting, your hunt will be cursed.” His tone was still friendly, but his words had an increased intensity.

“Cursed?” I stammered.

“Yes, cursed, young man. As accursed as these wrinkles on my face. As cursed as the vampires, and us. You walk under a squirrel you will have no chance for big game for at least a year, possibly for eternity.” He shook his head, as if he did not appreciate the import of his own words, and almost slipped on a patch of wet leaves.

“I suppose it’s not easy, because squirrels are sly.”

“Yes, that’s it, all right.” He chuckled, took off his backpack, and removed a coffee thermos. He poured himself a cup, and sat down crosslegged, his black-and-red plaid flannel shirt at odds with the still, pale leaves.

I sat down across from him. He finished his cup in short gulps, wiping his mouth with the back of a leather-gloved hand. He refilled it and held it out to me.

“No thanks, Will. Not much of a coffee drinker. I try to keep awake on my own power, which is never easy.”

He wagged a finger in the air. “There’s something about you, but I can’t place my finger on it. What I want to know is, and you

explained it a little to my wife and I a little last night is, surely you have some sort of pressing concern?”

“Yeah, my parents have kind of forced my hand. I wasn’t planning on visiting them, but they used financial blackmail-“

“You don’t have to say more. I get the picture. But then why did you not go directly there, instead of hang out with old codgers like me?”

“Yeah, I’m unable to think about the outbreak. So you could say that, while I’m out about the country, I’m trying to understand the mystery in some way. I know it sounds naïve, but maybe, just maybe, this trip of my will unlock some doors.”

Will scowled. “Leave it alone, trust me. I don’t think you’ll be successful, Terry. I don’t need to tell you that, but then, I guess it doesn’t hurt, either. Anyway, our ambition is to hunt down a four-legged beast, not a two-legged one. Yes, even we are beasts to a degree, aren’t we? For all of our so-called sophistication, right?”

I shuddered a little. “I can’t argue with you about that. I’ll take my chances with anything besides the two-legged freaks that are running around.”

Will stood, using his shotgun for leverage. I was skeptical about our chances, as I had never heard of an effective stalking utilizing anything other than a standard hunting rifle. I had never fired a shotgun, but I knew that it was accurate only at short

range. Moreover, it was extremely loud, which could scare off potential targets.

We arrived at the first major rise, and Will lowered to his stomach, leaving only his head exposed. I followed his example, the slowly munificent sun raising beads of sweat on our foreheads. Below was a virtual carpet of trees, with thin but widely spread branches. The rise leveled off after about twenty yards, ending in the dense forest of trees. Scant light was able to filter through the branches down to the soggy ground.

“You don’t see anything yet, do you, Terry?” Even as he spoke, he pulled out a pair of binoculars and started scanning the flats.

“No.”

“Well, it isn’t easy to see, that’s for sure. I’ve never spotted one from this exact spot, but I’ve always wanted to. You know, it would be a long, involved stalk from here. Too long for a good shot. My eyes are a bit dim, but my memory is still sharp. A man by the name of Jimmy Walker built himself and his family a cabin here decades ago. His father was a farmer, until the corn dried up on his land, and the corns ended up on the bottom of his feet. Jimmy abandoned it when his father died, found himself a job and a woman about the same time, planted a seed in her, and built a cabin. She had the baby around the time it was finished. It was perfect, as they say. But I knew that something was wrong, cause the first time I was around the way to help finish putting

up a fence to keep the critters out, I saw a woman's shape through the draped windows, moving sluggishly. I said, "Jimmy, why don't you introduce me to your wife and baby girl?" He stopped the sledge halfway between the stake and his head, turned his attention to me, only five-and-a-half-feet tall, and said, "She isn't here now, went into town for a spell."

"Well, when she is around," I ventured, only to be cut off again by his wall.

He smiled with no humor, and said, 'Besides, when she is around, she's too busy with the house and baby.'

I could tell that if it wasn't settled, then we weren't, either.

"Right," I said. "My wife and I are older now, but we keep a type of schedule, too."

'Lazy people are hungry people,' Jimmy said, 'and thirsty people are just thirsty people,' taking an unexpected turn to philosophy. He smiled and nodded his head, as if both pleased and surprised by his sudden bent, then said, 'I'll go get us a few beers.'

Will paused in reverie. "So what happened? Your eyes are asking me the question. Well, about five years after that curious incident, the place burned down, with Jimmy and his wife and daughter in it. No one ever found out how it happened. Jimmy kept the grounds meticulously free of weeds and other potential tinder, so that the fire had to crawl towards the trees. I was the first one out there vainly trying to fight it with shovel-fulls of dirt

before the firemen got there. They finally put it out before it continued its spread, but the cabin was a burned husk by that time. Firefighters were making comments along the lines of ‘A jealous kind, I hear...carried the biggest knife you’ll ever see...was polite, almost too much so, as if he would strike you for being less polite than him...always bottled up with something.’ The Fire Marshall, a tall and thin fellow up near my years, an Ahab type devoted to saving lives, was the first in after the cabin was checked for stability. The way the men watched him enter, you knew the men had the utmost respect for him. He walked back out almost immediately, turned back, said, ‘Ah, go to hell, Jimmy,’ and in the profile his brown, leathery face was fixed eternally on the rebuke. Then he turned, said, ‘Let’s go, men,’ nodding to me as he passed, in recognition of my aid. Like the late Jimmy Walker, he wasn’t talkative, but then he didn’t have to be. Anyway, the Marshall was the only white helmet in the group.”

Will swallowed hard, then coughed. He pulled out a whiskey flask. “Ah, that hits the spot. Would you care for some?”

“I would, in fact. I took a large gulp, swallowed fast, and grimaced.

He laughed. “Now you’re smiling, I see. My story was a little tough, I guess.”

“Well, I’m still wondering about that fire, and how it was started?”

“Oh, there are still all sorts of rumors about that. One is that Jimmy rubbed a young ex-con the wrong way, who formed a fire posse in Memphis in order to exact revenge. It leaves a bad taste in the mouth. That’s part of the reason I took out the whiskey.”

“Yeah, it reminds me of the mystery of the vampires. Why and where they came from, or if they were always inside us, like a slumbering virus, a plague.”

“Give that whiskey back. I think it has gone too much directly to your head. Listen, it’s like the earth spawned them or something. I don’t know how, it just happened. Maybe it’s our payback for creating the myth of the vampire, writing about it, filming it so much, as if too many people actually wanted it, were willing it to happen. The Hollywood movie people didn’t help matters there, Terry. Sorry if you know some of those folks. Anyway, take another sip from this. It will keep you warm until all the mist burns off. When you finish, we’re going to get vigilant, not belligerent, and find us a deer.”

I finished off the flask, feeling the brisk warmth in my stomach. “You mentioned last night that this was going to be an unorthodox hunt, right?”

He smiled widely with the effects of the alcohol. “You bet, my friend, this is going to be head-on. You take care of the rifle business, I’ll keep the shotgun in reserve, just in case. I’ve got old lungs and creaky legs, but I’ll still have a go.”

“I’m with you, Will.”

“Very well, Terry, just follow me and watch an old goat at work.” He walked off briskly, with springy legs. We covered the rise, then plunged into the trees.

Eight

Will stabbed through the branches with his shotgun. I followed close at his shoulder. After we had meandered for about two hundred yards through slightly prickly shrubbery he stopped, and pointed his finger to the right. My eyes followed to encounter a deer in profile, twitching its head, about forty yards away.

Will whispered, "That's a beautiful doe, but I want a buck, a large male, to test my mettle against. It wouldn't be right for me to take a young female. It would be a sacrilege, and she might alert another, which would create a type of chain reaction. So let's tread lightly, and veer off to the left for a bit."

He stepped gingerly, keeping his eyes on his feet at all times. I could not resist the temptation to look at the doe, which had its head pointed in our direction. I glanced back in midstep from time to time and saw it still staring at us. But it did not appear at the time that it was ready to bolt away.

Will craned his head from side to side to hear his steps, trying to lighten each crackling of the leaves. "Whoa, watch it there." He said, pushing me back. "We're at the second rise. We'll take a short rest here and have some jerky and whiskey before we continue."

The rise was higher than the first, but there were less trees beyond it, and the sun was scorching. "You seem preoccupied with something. What is it?" He sat down wearily.

“I’m still seeing the look of a disint, and the effect it had on a friend of mine. The same friend who convinced me I should accept my parents’ demand to come visit them, despite the strained circumstances.”

Will refilled the flask from the fifth secreted in his pack. “You watch the news much these days, Terry? I go through times when I watch it almost constantly. Other times I unplug the t.v., in part because Hannah can’t stand all the violence. Can you actually follow all the scientific experts’ studies of things like chromosomal abnormalities and extraterrestrial studies? And all those people out in the desert living in caves until the plague passes? I can’t. This is where I’ve lived, and where I’ll die, thank you.” He passed the flask.

Suddenly, the leaves around crackled like electricity, as if folding upon themselves. Bushes and branches snapped, opposing another force. Then a deer burst through the cover directly below us, heading directly uphill. It was tall and sleek, covering the terrain in graceful sweeps. Its head was raised high; its eyes shot through us.

Will raised his shotgun quickly while I fumbled with the rifle, cursing myself. When the buck was nearly upon us, Will pointed his shotgun into the sky. The deer veered off and kept running, plunging down the rise behind us. Will lowered the shotgun and watched the buck disappear in the pool of trees below and behind us. “Sorry, I couldn’t do it, Terry. I don’t know, maybe I

had too much to drink, or maybe I was just enjoying your company too much.” He laughed to himself. The talk of rotting disintents turned my stomach a little, I guess. Hard to think about eating meat after thinking of rotting things. I hope you forgive me.“

“No need to. Just pass the flask, and we’ll take our time finishing off this batch. All right?” We sat down in almost the identical positions we had recently taken on the ground. I brushed some wet leaves off my posterior.

“Ah, why go to your folks with blood on your hands, even an animal’s. Hannah will have us a good supper regardless, I think. She’s been talking about some kind of pasta for about a week, so I don’t think she’ll be able to surprise us. But don’t give it away, all right?”

“That’s a deal.” We stayed quiet for a while, just passing the flask between us and admiring the shadows made on the canopy of forest. I thought I saw a silver sign of a stream far in the distance, and decided to not ask Will about it. I did not want to be disappointed if it was not a body of water.

Hannah was watching television when we returned. We heard the loud volume before we entered the cabin, rippling through the outside branches. Will was prepared for an explanation, but he sensed that there was some important news being reported. So he leaned our weapons against the corner of the room near the

front door, and motioned for me to take a seat. I was dreading a some sort of report which would make my visit to N.Y. even more problematic.

The television voice said, "...the President of the United States issued a statement today confirming the discovery of an unknown probe in the New Mexican desert near Las Cruces. Electromagnetic imaging did not indicate any extraterrestrial life forms. However, the metal composition of the aircraft is not related to any known combinations recently used in military construction. Extra precautions will be taken on intercontinental flights, and travelers will notice longer waits due to increased security. Reports of outbreaks have remained at the same level since the last investigation, and there are no new safety precautions to take note of for the time being."

Hannah nodded and smiled at us, and motioned toward the kitchen table, where a potpie was cooling. "...In other reports, hotspots were targeted in Columbus, OH and Charleston, SC today, owing to unacceptable levels of contamination. Many infected were exterminated, and cordon of military ensured that no one suspected of carrying the virus could break out of the secure zone. The President stressed that the contagion has stabilized, and that he hopes there were be no more future spikes before it extinguishes itself. Stay tuned for more news momentarily..."

Will had already cut steaming slices of the pie, not showing his disappointment that it was not the pasta he had predicted, and placed the plates on the table. “All right, Hannah, it’s my turn to be annoying. There is nothing else to wait for on the tube, is there. So let’s all sit down and have a real meal.”

Nine

Late at night, while Will and Hannah were in deep sleep, I pulled out my pocket-sized writing pad, and wrote the following:

Skeletons

I see you, thin-casting shadow, behind your barred windows, in a black-towered cathedral, prosaically elegant. I see your crisp movements, lighting your delicate chandelier, daintily wiping your blood-dripping mouth with silk kerchief. You master of deception lure your subjects out for a speech and rain stones down on them. You collect their blood in a gold goblet, and drink to their philanthropy. Your eyes, mysterious, peer out of sunken cheeks, your skeletal inheritance. The skeletons of your ancestors you shine daily, their lustrous decay unburdening you. You dress them in the most precious material, you turban, tophat, turquoise them with the utmost diligence, and parade them in cars haunting the streets. They people cower, they pray for a release, while you laugh, immune to your folly, behind the ancient gables. The people ask you for understanding in their time of need, they say it is an age requiring more compassion, but you turn your back to them. You avert your proud, bald crown. Babies starve, mothers hold them weeping with dried breasts, destitute men masturbate in the filthy streets, and somewhere someone is killed. You applaud and smile roguishly as the butter drips off your manicured fingers. To your ultimate

demise then, despot. When your black spires crumble, when your skeletons are stripped of their cloth by the unclothed, when you are left naked before your subjects, I will laugh, but I will not pummel you, because your proud, bald crown will have already fallen to the ground for the earth to reclaim. You will age quickly without your creature comforts, to die prematurely, in the streets. Soon someone will notice your skeleton laying neglected, and bury it alongside the ones you paraded.

I snuck out in the early morning. I nearly tore a mole off my face with the razor, and pressed it with toilet paper as blood oozed out. It started to run down my arm, but I caught it with the faucet. "Great," I thought, "I am leaving near dawn, and I have drying blood on my face."

I changed into my seersucker suit for a modicum of Southern gentility. "A discerning vampire might actually take pains to keep it unstained by my fountain of blood. He would carefully undress my body, and walk off in a jaunty two-step, on the way to a fresh dry cleaning.

The road was fairly straight, with some smooth bumps and bends. I began to perspire profusely, while the mask of mosquitoes afflicted me. Most did not bite, but kept me fanning away at them. There was not much to see, but it was charming: Regal trees, riveted road, and royal blue sky. Planes roared overhead from time to time, uprooting the stillness.

A thin and tall figure separated itself from the heat haze. It looked like one of the trees had been dissected, and here was the short orphan looking for the giant master. Sweat ran, giving my eyes a liquid current. I imagined my body odors forewarning the walking statue. As I approached, it went from being white and bending to black and unbending in the sun.

It was a man dressed in the garb of a preacher. As we approached one another I noticed he was young and freckled. His movements were loose and gawky, like those of a giant chicken. He walked directly up to me, smiling familiarly, like Will. "It's a hot one to be walking in, isn't it?" There was a bit of tension in his voice.

"Yep, I'm afraid so."

"Still," he surmised aloud, "it isn't too hot, cause the Lord don't put nothing on us we can't rightly bear." He said it strangely, as if it was the foregone conclusion of the opening admonishment to me which was already planned. He smiled shortly, then went stone-faced. His freckles were like little stars caught in the craters of the moon; bright and unreal.

"Don't believe we've met," I said, to break his stone façade.

"Oh, gosh darn"(he slapped his knees theatrically), "I'm Priest Jones, and I preach to all homes, sick or poor, whether it rains or pours."

"Pleased to meet you, Priest Jones. My name is Terry."

He did not shake my hand. His jaw had a ball in it, as if the fire in his eyes had sired a brimstone egg. “You ain’t been teaching atheism now, have you?”

“No.” I started to walk, but he turned on his heels.

“But are you atheist?” He spat out “atheist” like a curse.

“No, I don’t know what I am.”

“You saying you don’t know what you believe in?” His head craned down next to my ear like an ostrich while his gangly legs carried him along.

“No.” I tried to change the tone, but it sounded defensive.

“Aw, hell, you’re a sophist then.” It struck me that he did not care what I was doing, how I had arrived there, or why.

“Well, respectfully, you’re the priest, and I’m sure a good one, so you know what I am.”

“You know what you are!” There were little gobs of spittle in the maw. He stood in front of me to block an escape, but I just as stealthily slid around him. He rested for a moment. It was as if he could not walk and think at the same time. Then he was at my shoulder again, with the same zeal.

“You’ve got to understand something. You’ll end up with all those Satanist souls who take orders from the devil. And you know who I’m talking about.” He did not shout any more, but all the transferred energy increased the sting of his bitterness.

“You should not seek to live short hell on earth.”

“I don’t.” I was wondering how much longer it was to the airport.

“They why don’t you listen to me? You see, the Lord singled me out to be a beacon, I don’t know why, I was a sickly child, but now I’m fed with his love and wisdom.”

The sky had turned to powder white and blue, specks of clouds cavorting with the solid color.

“You’re quiet, and that’s good. I was like that until I received my divine inspiration. And let me tell you,” he chuckled, “women appreciate that great sign of manhood.”

I could not help but smile. “You mean to say they cannot resist the power of the Lord?”

He began to shadow box, doing his loose impression of an Ali shuffle. “You’re an evil man, I tell you, but a good one, too.” He stopped and repositioned his sharp nose like a dagger near my ear. “What I mean to say, Terry, is that you have some bad in you, but you mostly keep it under control.”

“Well, thank you, Priest Jones.”

He pointed his nose upward. “Liver and onions, can’t you smell them?” he asked.

“No.” I smiled. “All I can faintly smell is exhaust from jet planes.” I could already see the terminal, squat and square, like a demon box dropped from the sky.

Suddenly Priest Jones was running away. “There ain’t no liver and onions here!” he yelled back. “It’s mama’s blessed cooking

back this way! And there ain't enough for you. I can always trick a sophist! God bless you!"

A madman running. It appeared he was trying at once to throw apart and gather his separate body parts. His black form coalesced in its oscillations, then disappeared around a bend, leaving me to rest before my final surge to the airport.

Ten

There were no direct flights to New York on the departure board, so I opted for Chicago. The airport was eerily dark and neglected, with refuse blown around by the gusting air conditioning, creating swirling stenches. Near the baggage claim area a young woman sat, wearing yellow polyester, with a dirty bandage over one eye and a beret tying her greasy hair. She was moaning and soliloquizing:

“You know why my eye is gone? Huh? I’ll tell you why. My husband skewered it out and ate it for breakfast with his coffee and toast. He then soaked it in vinegar and oil. I awoke with him tearing it out of my eye socket with a kitchen knife. He had it out quick, before I had the chance to reclaim it. I thought, all right, let him eat, and get sick and die, I’m not going to try to put it back in and make it work myself. Well, when he finished I took out my gun from my purse, walked up to him calmly, said, “How did it taste, honey?” and shot both of his eyes out. Mind you, I wasn’t too hungry at the time, so I sold him to some street urchins to buy this new dress.”

The takeoff was delayed. A vampire had lodged itself in one of the engines. The Police Chief and Fire Marshall sauntered out and tried to talk it out. It was wedged in, with its back toward the ground, like a giant bat.

“Hey, vamp,” the Marshall said, a rotund man with severe sunburn. “You better get out of there, it’s getting light, and you’ll get fried.”

“He’s right,” the Chief added, a lean man with a square jaw, “you’ll set yourself on fire.”

There was no response. Apparently the vampire had made up its mind squarely.

“Hey, pilot!” shouted the Chief.

“Yeah?” He was still seated in the cockpit, and just had to look back over his shoulder to see the goings-on.

“How long till takeoff?”

“Two minutes.” He turned back to admiring the sun. The light was skating across the runway like long, narrow leaves.

“All right, vamp, it’s your last chance. You heard the pilot. Two more minutes, and then your ass is grass.” He barely held back a chuckle.

“You’re not going to cause any damage, you know,” warned the Marshall, wagging his long finger at him. “Small conflagrations-“

“Or explosions,” interrupted the Chief.

“Anyhow,” the Marshall continued, mopping his face with a kerchief, “you’ll cause no damage to the plane.”

There was still no response.

The Chief started to laugh, and the vampires back seemed to vibrate from the sound.

“What’s so?” began the Marshall.

“Time’s up!”

Inside the pilot yawned and flipped the switch. The Chief and Marshall ran in a zigzag pattern as the engine blew apart the vampire, trailing away red as the plane shot down the runway.

“Oh, what a bore!” exclaimed an old woman reclining back in her seat with a shrug.

I fell asleep quickly, waking up during the descent. I reached for a water bottle, because the shot of whiskey had dried the inside of my mouth into a soft, uncomfortable paste.

My taxi stopped in front a huge, defunct winery. Ironically, the building was burgundy-colored.

“Well, this is it,” my driver said, combing back his greasy hair. “It’s been turned into a lodging of sorts on account of the takeover of all the hotels.”

“By the vampires?”

“Of course the vampires. You act as if you’re from bumfuck Alabama, not L.A. And I’ll give you some free advice, don’t mention them in there. They don’t want to hear it, all right? They might not let you stay just for asking.”

“Okay.” I stepped out and he peeled out.

Inside the lobby was a lion fountain and all sorts of gold brocade. I felt like an inspector entering a medieval castle.

People stared at the lion or sat in plush chairs reading. They gave me brief glances, and returned to their mental dances.

The streets had been surprisingly clear coming in. My driver had mentioned that the town had just about emptied out overnight. Only the rich, with ample security and connections, could hold out. Big towns, even cities with millions of people hankering for escape, could become deserted in a week or two. I hoped that L.A. would not suffer a similar fate while I was absent.

I decided to take a quick stroll before bedding down for the night. Outside the sky was purple. The buildings were reminiscent of downtown L.A., commercial and virtually windowless. There were many abandoned cars with bodies in various phases of decomposition, like idiosyncratic stage props, ludicrous but real.

At the end of the first block, a fireman in yellow, sporting long dreadlocks, started busting out the cars' windows with a sledgehammer. Then he pulled a fire hose up to the opening and yelled out, "Give me pressure!" He struggled with the hose momentarily before a fellow firefighter ran up and helped steady the hose. "You dirty, rotten corpses!" he proclaimed, ignoring the shocked glances of passers-by. "This water is like a giant piss to dismiss you all. Leave this place and enter the abyss!" As I walked past, I saw the water laser decapitate a corpse.

Eleven

My dinner consisted of a chicken breast and a simple oil penne pasta. I spread it out on the bed and ate it while watching the news. The UFO found outside Las Cruces had been removed for study, and had, according to the news anchor, “yielded no substantial clues as to its origins”, and did not indicate a connection the outbreak. One so-called “expert” opined that another species might have sent down an exploratory pod, in order to determine if the outbreak had the possibility of infecting other planets.

More than I had experienced at Will and Hannah’s, I felt a strange sensation in connection to sleeping in a strange bed. On one hand, I felt comforted by the novelty, and the fact that I would not be disturbed by the identical noises, mostly related to vampire scavengings, that usually bothered me in the middle of the downtown L.A. night. However, my loft was, comparatively, a fortress when placed alongside a Chicago hotel room, with only a pane of glass separating me from the outside world.

Brief panic struck me a couple of times in the middle of the night, but I was able to ignore the drapes being fluttered by the powerful air conditioning. It was not until just before sunrise that I heard the tortured screaming of a dog being prepared to be eaten.

I was still able to enjoy my breakfast of French toast and scrambled eggs. My plan was to stay in my room until check-out

time, then catch a direct cab to the airport. I took a long shower, packed, and reclined on the couch, watching television with the volume off. New Mexico desert images continued to be spilled off the screen, and it was a type of solace to me, to imagine what was happening out on the high western plateau, and I wondered if, somehow, I could arrange, through my press credential, to be a part of it. It did not take me long to decide to send a Western Union telegram to Leonard at the Times to try to arrange a visit. I had a messenger arrange one for me through the concierge while I kept watching the silent television.

I was hardly enthusiastic about the trip to New York. I was already imagining the possible conflicts, and wished I had a usable excuse to not go through with it. I simply wanted to lose myself in a huge desert, without any chances of being returned to another disintegrating city.

Yet, two in the afternoon found me in the airport, trying to calm my nerves with bottles of beer. The many television monitors surrounding my terminal were all tuned to the developing situation in New Mexico. I figured that, based on the normal procedure within the Times hierarchy, it would take at least a couple of days before a plan, much less a budget, would be put in place to underwrite a journalistic foray into the arid land. I also thought that Leonard might be my chief competition for the duty, even though he was anathema to flying and often spoke of his intense desire to die in his own hometown, not

somewhere else. Therefore, it was likely that any potential competition would come from Reed. But he was on sabbatical, with his young wife out on an isolated island in the Great Lakes region, and, even if he wanted to, could not shorten his vacation. “Besides,” I thought, “I’m sure I can convince Leonard to fire off a quick telegram to my folks in order to notify them of my emergency assignment. I’ll offer them a chance to receive my correspondence. This could potentially be the most important news for quite a while.”

In anticipation, I went to the telegram office, and fired off a short message to Leonard, entrusting him with volunteering me for the assignment. I stressed that he should provide me with the necessary passes, in case travel to the Las Cruces area was already being shut down. I ended with a type of apology, expressing regret about the pressure exerted on him; but he had to understand my thinking, and excitement about the potential project, in all of its dynamics.

I told the clerk that I would return in a while, in case Leonard replied, and fought against my anticipation by seating myself at a sports bar, where half of the monitors were tuned to a World Cup soccer match between Algeria and France, while the others exuded more of the endless New Mexico desert images. One station was airing an old nature series program about the flora and fauna of the high desert; another devoted its attention to the colorful history of New Mexico itself. An older gentleman sitting

at the bar was cursing every time Algeria threatened to score: “Damn! You know how much money I’ve got riding on this pitiful match? Fucking former France, former colonial power, can’t do it against a piss ant tiny friggin’ country.” He violently shook the large ice cubes in his tall bourdon glass, while most of the handful of people were able to ignore him. One lady paid more attention to her compact cosmetic mirror.

When I could no longer wait, I returned to the telegram office, where a small line was beginning to form. I made a gesture at one particularly old woman behind the counter, who nodded and waved me off at the same time, but went to the back of the office. She returned ten minutes later, commenting, “I’ll be frank, sir. I’ve never seen something expedited like this. Rest assured we maintain strict modes of confidentiality, but I’ve got to say that either you are some type of big shot, or else you certainly know some people in higher ranks.” She peered over her reading glasses at me with an imperious gaze.

“All I can say is that it’s related to the New Mexico situation—“

“That tells me nothing and everything. Well, you’re obviously on some sort of official mission or something. I wish you luck, but I’ve never taken to the desert. Snakes, scorpions, lizards, cactus, and blazing sun.”

I smiled, despite myself. “Well, I’m from southern California, and I’ve taken some trips through Death Valley in the past. I think I’ll do all right in that regard.”

She leaned forward. “Well spoken, young man. I miss well-spoken, polite people. It’s probably what I miss most since the outbreak. Everyone now in a mad rush to get nowhere, is the way I see it. Do you know how many people die every day trying to get away? A lot, that’s how many. But how are people supposed to run away when it is coming from every direction? That’s what I’ve been wondering. Sorry if it puts a damper on your trip, but there is not one sacred direction to feel safe behind. A bunch of friends of mine left at the outset, promised they would contact us once they found a safe haven, and not one, no, not even one person ever contacted us. Now, it stands to chance that at least one would follow up honestly. Right? But no letters ever came after all the lines and towers went down.”

I paused for a moment, watching a man fumble, and drop, a telegram form, cursing himself openly: “Damn idiot!”

“Well, in my case, I guess I’m kind of going to a hot spot of some sort. No one seems to know what the desert wreckage means, but I have a feeling that it has to have some relevance to the virus.”

She snorted. “A cure? Is that what you’re talking about? No, I don’t think so. Don’t leave it up to people to find a solution, that’s for sure. You’ll dry up in the desert waiting for some small miracle like that. Anyway, I’ve got to get back to work. Good luck to you, young man.”

Twelve

The flight to Albuquerque was quite smooth, a kind of floating capsule experience. Even the cola glasses were clean, in decided contrast to the spotted thin glass cups on the flight from L.A. to Chicago. It was also at a low altitude, which allowed me to capture mental images of the landscape, deep valleys and tan gulches, and the small, distant spines of low mountains. Amazingly, I had obtained all of the required documentation, including a special red passport. It had a red-and-blue watermark inside, and the first splotch of customs ink. I perused it from time to time to confirm that I was, indeed, making my first foray into the unknown territory of New Mexico. I nibbled at the quite starchy ham-and-cheese sandwich, and kept the cheese and crackers for a later point in time.

I stood on the airport tarmac with some level of amazement, admiring the looming Sandia mountains, a slightly jagged crest actually similar to the one beyond Las Cruces. I had anticipated heading for the rental car station as soon as I arrived, but the awesome spectacle kept my attention fixed on the picturesque east. It reminded me of movies I had seen years before as a child in which the main character is filmed turning in circles, in a kind of microscopic and cosmic scene. Security stood at various

corners of the runway terminal area, looking, as usual, lethal and casual at the same time. I threw one the peace sign, and did not, as usual, receive a reply. “Afterall,” I thought, “I’m supposed to be in a movie. Right?”

A huge cloud in the shape of a saucer appeared over the range, and, slowly, crept across of the face of the mountain area that was the most jagged. There were hints of pink and blue throughout, because it was approaching sunset. It struck me that, despite L.A. having its own backdrop of mountains, if less spectacular, I had never taken the time to admire them from afar, or venture up into them in a prolonged and appreciative manner. On the other hand, I realized that it was part of human nature to take some priceless gifts for granted when present. Therefore, the need for the comforting hand of the eternal warmth in the palm of tectonic uplift. “A travel movie?” I thought to myself, noticing that, despite the intensity of my reflection, only a couple of minutes had elapsed.

As I took one more turn, I noticed a strong shard of light reflected off something, then saw it metastasize into two black globes. The security detail was approaching me, with a burly, middle-aged military type at the head.

“Mr. Miles. We are your escort to the facility outside Las Cruces.” He pulled out an orbital scanner. “Just look in the lens quickly so we can confirm.” I stared into something approximating the multi-colored eye of a snake, but the size of a

giant anaconda's. A computerized female voice said, "Miles, Terry. DOB 11-5-65. Male. O Blood. Hazel eyes."

"Mr. Miles?" He briefly reached into his pocket for a small notepad.

"Yes?"

"Do you agree to have every movement of yours, from here to Las Cruces and beyond, monitored, for the purposes of national security?"

"Yes, I do." He wrote in a jabbing way with stubbing fingers, the wind briefly propping up the small patch of blonde hair on the crown of his head.

"Additionally, Mr. Miles...do you agree to sign a gag order pledging to not, under any circumstances, relate what you have seen or heard about the following circumstances."

I was, frankly, beginning to get a little nervous.

"Mr. Miles, you will have a recording chip installed behind your right ear once we reach Las Cruces. But, in the meantime, for the purposes of secrecy, you will not be out of the sight of myself and the other agents. We will proceed directly to a car, and will utilize a fast food drive thru on the way." A couple of agents made a choking motion behind him. "Mr. Miles, do you both attest to the authenticity of this conversation, and the fact that you will completely abide by the rules of the agreement, on the pain of federal prosecution?"

Hair was rising up on the nape of my neck, and I could no longer enjoy the breeze. The background agents were talking in undertones. “Yes, I promise.”

As soon as we were on the freeway heading south, across a grey, cream, and pink landscape of stark mesas and buttes, the agents started debating the merits of the various fast food chains. Meanwhile, sitting in the back of souped-up Hummer, with a live video feed to the continuing investigations at the Las Cruces site, I purposely turned my head away from time to time to continue my admiration of the enchanting landscape. I espied a coyote loping through sagebrush and prickly pear, with its jackal-like head, and noticed the frenetic form of a roadrunner skittering around dust into a cloud. I thought of Bo, and how much I wished he was there alongside me to marvel at the scenery.

“Oh, by the way, Mr. Miles. For the purposes of discretion, you will be staying at a type of dude ranch some ways distant from the investigative site. You will be able to do investigations periodically from that site, make your journalistic reports and such. But, under a directive from the Justice Department, you will not have unlimited access. Of course, all of your work will have to be cleared before it can be disseminated. I guess it will

be an interesting time and place for a city type like you, Mr. Miles. I'm pretty sure of that, all right."

Thirteen

One of the agents was licking the grease off of a yellow cheeseburger wrapper, while I kept my eyes affixed to the landscape. I had not seen any critters since the outskirts of Las Cruces, only high-wheeling hawks, falcons, and eagles in the pastel blue sky. The throbbing air conditioning kept the enclosure cool, despite the exterior being a heavy, heat-seeking black color. Otherwise, I appreciated that even the head security man, who had not given me his name, turned the volume off on the overhanging television monitor. It was if he knew that, however amazing the updated information might have been, he also realized, at the same time, that, not only he did not want to be surprised, but that he could not be alarmed by anything. His large, squarish head was propped against the headrest.

An average of two to three corpses rested in various stages of decomposition on both sides of the freeway. One still had on a pair of cowboy boots, although the leather was flapping in stringy fibers below the bleached leg bone. I kept up a count during the trip, reminding me of the time as a child when I counted the number of cars passing in the opposite direction.

At about ten miles outside of Las Cruces, I could no longer restrain myself. The television monitor was fixed on images of a large cave, dark from the vantage point from the exterior,

because the interior had not yet been explored. Of course, because of a plentitude of bats, vampires were known to favor keeping caves, but especially wet caves, as prolonged sanctuaries. The only downside was that, during the day, when vigilantes were afoot, they could easily be smoked out, into the scorching day, or else simply perish as the flames licked back. Yet, although this particular cave complex was not nearly as large as Mammoth Cave, it had many holes affording convenient entrances and exits. The footage varied, from shots high from a helicopter giving one a definite idea of the immense size of the complex, and how challenging it would be to finish a competent survey.

The head security man stirred from his nap, and looked up at the screen. “Now there, Mr. Miles, is near where the strange wreckage was found. You’ve probably heard it already, but it probably won’t hurt to say it again for your benefit. The area is chief evidence for possible links to an extraterrestrial origin for the outbreak. The entire state of New Mexico is being cordoned off as we speak, utilizing satellites, drones, and electrified, magnetic fences, not to mention hundreds of thousands of soldiers and security officers. But, until the entire state is under quarantine, no one will be allowed to enter. So, in the meantime, you will be in a type of holding pattern. We are just chaperones really, transferring people across the state, but, luckily, we do not just operate between Albuquerque and Las Cruces. That

would be too boring. At any rate, you will not be forgotten out on the ranch. Once things become stabilized in the cave area, whenever that is, you will be summoned, so that you can do a full report.”

I shrugged, but did not make a sound.

He continued, “I advise you to be careful around here at night. A lot of researchers are claiming that there is already a dependable technology for determining whether vampires are in a given area, using specialized satellites created at the old atomic bomb facility. But the rest of the area, as you will notice, is stuck in the nineteenth century. A lot of people refuse to be bothered about recent developments.” He winced, because the Hummer rattled over a pothole. “Your drop off point is a couple of miles after we hit the first highway. My advice to you is just to sit tight. I know it will be hard to sit still, but I think that, under the circumstances, it is probably the best thing you can possibly do.”

“Okay.” My voice sounded hollow, connected to the forbidding landscape. Despite frequent jolts, the Hummer grooved into the dirt road. I was surprised that I did not see any vultures or bodies, because I smelled death.

Fourteen

The federal agent was not kidding, or wrong, about the time warp effect of the New Mexican desert. When I first arrived, it was as if it was the most natural thing in the world to welcome a city slicker to the land of dudes. There was only slight amusement over my appearance in the town center, which was a total of three blocks long. As if from a movie, I saw a sign with an arrow pointing northeast toward the ranch.

I was a curious mix of cowboy during the day, writer during the night, refusing to chew tobacco while plugging away about my experiences on a common notepad. My most common complaint was that most of the ranchers were generally reticent about the vampires, refusing to give more than brief responses, mostly in the form of simple “Yes’ and No’s.” It was absurd to me that anyone could reach such a level of isolation during a modern time.

It would be very difficult to recover the uniqueness of that time and place, so I will simply return to the journal I kept, an effective device to convey my thoughts at the time.

It has been months since I have written anything philosophical. I have purposely hampered the ingenuities of my mind with the toil of work. Keep your mind clear, milk the cows, keep your mind clear, find something to do when it is raining on Sunday, if that situation should arise. It has arisen. There is

nothing to do, because I finish my week's chores Sunday morning, in order to write letters and catch up on sports.

I sit on the porch listening to the rain, I listen to its pouring, rushing hale, I see its transient yet ageless falling, I feel it impelling dormant reminiscences to the surface, the largest splashes waves of memory.

"To kill a festering vampire," I thought. I watched the rain splashing into mud splashing back up and thought, "a festering vampire is like an overabundant crop gone to seed. It grows lushly out of control, there is no time to cure its indulgent ways, and ripe turns into overripe into decay." I adjust Grandpa's old Stetson, which he sent to me over Christmas. It has softened so that after being in the rain the sun will make it wilt. But I am not in the rain. Rain is a revelation. It makes one come to grips with nature, and your place in it. You realize your pain, but also your joy. I breathe deeply. Rain is ambulatory, it helps your thoughts get from one place to another. Whether you like it or not. I like the rain. I sit sheltered, cloistered, I am like a fetus in a mother's womb, dependent on her. As she breathes I breathe.

I jingle my spurs. The ranch has disciplined me. Its earth has hardened me. I dig into it with a shovel and my arms ache. It is hard. It is not that the earth is fighting, it is simply thick and heavy.

The ranch owner Cody's shepherd Willy is out. He loves the rain. His white-grayness flits here and there. He barks proudly. I smile. Wiley Willy shepherd me out.

Willy, I do not drink coffee in the morning. I pat his head. Willy, I drink tea, you know I like the red kind that Cody hates. He says, "A man should only drink that which is white or black. Red is especially bad." Willy, you're wet. I retrieve his favorite brown towel hanging by the fireplace. It is thick and has some of his fur still in place. Willy barks eagerly. I dry him off. He makes the low, whimsical sounds that happily contented dogs make.

I pour the tea. Cody cannot harangue me, because he is at church. When he comes back, he has a shot of whiskey and puts his feet up by the fireplace, not mentioning my impatience about being able to visit the crash site. He tells me about a couple of pretty women I missed again, adding that some had asked about me. But I rarely go to town, because its activity, as slight as it is, reminds me about the reason that I came here in the first place. I have commiserated with Leonard in L.A. a few times, but the frustration with my delayed project quickly returns.

Cody's main hand Kyle is at a rodeo. He still feels stabs of pain where a bronc got him in the ribs, but refuses to be angry about it. His wife Yvette is on her way from Arkansas, where she spent the Holidays with here parents. Kyle said he had better

things to do around the ranch and, besides, both of his parents were already deceased.

Yvette lives in a small hotel in town, where she works, doing the laundry and dishes in exchange for room and board. I see her occasionally, usually when she comes out to retrieve Kyle, driving her faded Chevy Nova. They roar off in a cloud of dust.

Strange to mention, but there is too much time to think. I wonder about L.A., the town that turned the best people into animals, and fret about Bo. In my last letter I signaled to Leonard that he should do everything to convince Bo to house sit my place until I return. This situation strikes a chord of guilt in me. At night the horses whinny fearfully, as if a vampire is on the loose, in the immediate vicinity. I tense, waiting for further signals, but they never come. It is as if they are spirits, not the actual living dead.

Fifteen

This is a small house. Cody built it himself over forty years ago. It is a gray stucco with wood floors and white walls. There is one room, where Cody has slept since his wife Pam passed away seven years ago. She had breast cancer and refused treatment, fighting it off for two years while off his limited tractor and farm equipment. “I didn’t want to farm without her anyway,” he said. “Without a woman’s soul around, the earth won’t be fruitful for a man.” There is one picture of her in the house, a young redhead sitting atop a spotted sorrel, long white legs stretched out, face wide and smiling. Cody calls it her Norma Rae(Marilyn Monroe) picture.

The only furniture in the living room is a shiny black leather lounge chair, just three years old, which I am currently occupying, and a crusty old brown leather couch, which Cody inherited from his father Jody. As local legend has it, Jody brought it over personally, and said he wanted to sit in it a final time before he passed it on.

“Sure, Pop,” Cody said.

Jody had looked around quizzically and said, “You know, this place looks real Western.”

“That’s because it is, Pop,” Cody said.

I first heard the story at a bar, and I was rewarded for simply asking about it by four whiskey shots on the house, which I was obliged to pour back quickly in honor of the fine storytelling.

My tea is almost finished. I start to read the paper when Kyle and Yvette, with a baby in her arms, barge in. I flinch, because the solitude of the ranch life, especially after L.A., makes me easily spooked by people.

Kyle is a short and wiry guy with dark features, with Cherokee blood. Before the outbreak he was a soldier overseas. "I don't believe it, Terry," he says, waving his arms in some exasperation. "She adopted a baby, and a black one at that."

I look over to Yvette. She just smiles and kisses the baby's head. She is a bit heavysset, and towers over Kyle. "Well, Kyle," I begin to say.

"Well, what?" He has his hands on his hips trying to sound mean, but it does not suit him at all. He quickly glances at the baby.

I adjust in my seat. "Well, what is it?" I say.

Kyle coughs. "What do you mean, it's a little baby."

Yvette is busy giggling and cooing.

I repeat, "Is it a boy or a girl, Kyle?"

"It's a boy, and that's what I can't understand." He looks at his muddy feet. "Damn, Cody's not going to be happy about me making this little mess."

"Don't worry about that, just tell me what you don't understand."

He draws a breath. "Damn, you're never hesitant, are you? We barely know each other, but you put me on the damn spot

quickly. Okay, here it is. Everyone knows a lot of black men end up in prison and, hey, you know, I'm not that prejudiced, but, come on, you know, all the gangs and such-"

Yvette slapped his shoulder with her free hand. "Kyle, you've always watched too much t.v., you know that. And, besides, Terry has told you about how bad it is in the cities. Just take it easy and have some faith in us."

"She's right, Kyle. A rough place like this, and people like you, will make him quite fine, I'm sure of that."

Kyle smiles. "Damn, Terry, you sound a little like Cody. Maybe you should have been an actor instead of an actor. Have you ever thought about that. Doesn't he though, Yvette?"

As is in response, she kisses the baby's head, who blinks its eyes in wonder.

"What's his name?" I get up and walk over and put his tiny hands inside mine.

"Earl Bell is his name. We took his birth mother's namesake. She died giving birth, you know."

The next morning we were sitting at the breakfast table, and something was bothering Cody. He said "Good morning" to us, but that was all. He was eating his blueberry muffins particularly slow, picking the berries out one at a time.

Kyle was abrupt. "What's the matter, Cody?"

Cody clenched his jaw. “I went out to the stable this morning and found Chester laying out, his throat all gone.”

Kyle and I ran out, the ground the consistency of sticky oatmeal, suction under our boots. It was as if the earth was a living substance, even conscious, not wanting us to see the evidence.

Kyle backed away a few steps when he saw the blob of blood and stringy throat ligaments. He moaned, “Chester was just a pony.”

I was a bit numb. I could not quite grasp the fact that, in a sense, vampires had discovered me again. I wondered if the crash site was an indication that more were on the way. “I don’t think I actually want to know what this means, Kyle.”

“You damn well know what this means, Terry. Jesus, nowhere to hide, all right. Maybe L.A. is not any worse.”

“This is it, huh? Just like this? I start to think there might be some letup, even a short break, and then this. I guess I thought that waiting for word to come to my investigation made me complacent. You want to bury him now or later, Kyle?”

Sixteen

Cody and I sat on the porch. It had started to rain again but Willy was not out being his usual self, goofy and impulsive, gnashing his teeth at the rain. Cody was smoking his corncob pipe, trying to settle his nerves. Meanwhile, Kyle was out gathering as much ammunition as he could, from the town square.

I regretted the words as soon as they were out of my mouth. "Bad luck seems to follow me around, Cody."

"Aw, hell, Terry, back luck is following everyone around lately, not just stalking you. I know that deep down you realize that." He tapped off some incinerated tobacco onto the porch, and the last embers raised small clouds of steam. "Hey, I know you're here temporarily, but it's growing on you, right? Sorry to act like Old Man Wisdom, young fella, but sometimes, moving on is the best thing to do. Know what I mean? If your family does not accept you, fuck them, Terry. Make your own family. Know what I mean?"

"I guess. Seems like I can't ever get a fair reception from my father."

"You think he's going to change, Terry?" He poked off another chunk of tobacco from his pouch. "The world is going by the wayside and you're worried about how you're being perceived still? Get over it."

I leaned back and tilted my Stetson. “You know, whenever I start thinking a lot, something will happen. Always like that. And I’d been thinking a lot about Chester before he was found.”

Cody’s voice fired. “Don’t talk about it anymore. You might have had an inkling about it, but you definitely could not have caused it.” He took a big puff. “It’s like when animals get crazy before an earthquake hits. We don’t blame them for causing it, do we?”

“No.”

“Good, I’m glad you see that, Terry.”

“There’s something else I’m having trouble with.”

“What’s that?” He said it in a more agreeable sort of way.

“Whenever I run away from it, it follows me.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, from the vampires. The first time I tried to run away, I took off on a fishing boat to the Gulf of Mexico. The whole crew, excepting the captain Ramon and myself, were killed.”

“How so?”

“Well, Ramon told me he always picked one person from his crew to go see a ‘national treasure,’ as he called it, and I happened to be the one this time. We went to a small, brown adobe church, and were taken by a priest down some steps into a dungeon. There we saw a preserved vampire, a young boy, with an actual black cape on. I can’t tell you how strange the appearance was, out of some movie. He was blue in the face and

was, as the priest himself described, “sleeping peacefully, because he is a preserved vampire corpse, and does not require a hearse.” When we got back to the bar where we had left them, the bartender shook his head solemnly, ran his finger across his throat and said “todos miedos”(all dead). We found them floating in the water near the boat, and set sail in the moonlight.”

“You left the bodies?”

“Yes, Ramon said their families needed to see their bodies but, more than that, we had to live, so we could not risk having a crew of vampires on the way back.”

“I see, so what did he do when you got back?”

“He said we should both go our separate ways, that he could not report it because the police could not be trusted. So he set sail for the Pacific, and I, after mulling it over for a few days, hitchhiked to Montana, sleeping in a car during the day, and staying wide awake all night, safely away from the road. After a brief rest in the Rockies, I returned in resignation to L.A.”

We could see the dust raised by Kyle’s horse from a mile away. I had seen enough cyclones to know that he was coming in at a terribly rapid clip. Kyle always did everything full speed.

“Goddamn, that rodeo didn’t temper his ways any, did it?” said Cody. “Five years working on my ranch, ten for the normal man, we’d just better get him off the bull of the vampires a bit, or five years will be all for him.”

I saw the other clouds first. Cody's eyes were not what they once were. "I used to be able to spot a skirt from a mile away," he often joked.

They came in at a forty-five degree angle on the flat plain, and intersected Kyle a quarter mile out on the brown plain.

I waited a minute or two. "You see what I see, Cody?"

He squinted. "Hell, I do. Looks like Kyle's got a few friends with him now, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, they've got him stopped for the moment. Looks like there are still six of them. Now they're coming again, look like partners, all right."

"Okay, Terry. You've got your gun just in case?"

"Yes." I had become accustomed to wearing a gun out in the country.

"Should be no trouble but, since one of those vampires got Chester, I'm a little more cautious. You recognize any of the faces yet?"

"Yep. Riding on the left are the three Andersons brothers, and"

"They all dressed up like Doc Holliday again?"

"Sure are." My anxiety was coming to the surface.

"Goddamn, you'd think they wouldn't have to put on airs, the way they shoot and carry on. Who's on the right?"

“Burly Harry Scanlon, with his shiny chaps and ivory pistol handles reflecting the sun, grizzly Broderick Hacker in his black wool-“

“Damn you writers,” Cody chuckled, “the last one must be the crazy Indian with a top hat and serape, Sioux River.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Whenever there is a posse he is in it.”

Seventeen

They trotted their horses up to the porch, still in a line with Kyle in the middle. All of the faces were sweaty and grim. There was an uneasy silence.

Even though some were still shrugging and clearing their throats, I finally broke the silence. "What's the news, Kyle?"

"We talked to Sheriff Walton, and he told us that the Waters' daughter Karen is missing."

"Goddamn." I felt nauseous, and stood and walked to the edge of the porch, no one paying me much mind.

"Goddamn is right," said Harry. "She's only fifteen, just starting to look for love, and then this happens."

Cody's jaw was tight. "You have some idea of a trail?"

Harry shrugged. "You got me, Cody. Karen disappeared last night, and it has rained buckets since, so that the tracks are gone by now."

"No late sightings or anything?"

"No, you know the townsfolk on a stormy night, no one ever goes out and, besides, Sheriff Walton has questioned everyone already. We can only hope she is still alive."

"Okay, well, I figure all you can do is look for clues along the way."

"Yep, I guess that's about it."

Silence again. The Anderson brothers were studying me. It was as if they were closely studying me to confirm their

suspicions that I was not a legitimate cowboy. They were clearly mystified by my quick friendship with Cody.

Sioux River simply sat impassive. He spoke few words. People said he was an alcoholic, but Cody maintained that the label was unfair. Rather, he drank neither more nor less than the average man. “No every Indian is an alcoholic,” Cody liked to say. Everyone agreed Sioux River was not too fond of white men, yet he was very protective of those he knew.

Finally, Cody spoke again. “Somebody will have to stay and look after the ranch.”

Everyone looked at me. I had always been the one to stay. Clearly, I had not yet paid my dues. And, after all, this was a potentially lethal posse being formed.

“I’m getting a little long in the tooth, Terry, so you go on ahead. Besides, you have better aim.” Cody stood up and walked inside.

“All right, Cody.” I walked around the back out of sight to the stable, excited and proud, and watched my movements closely around the horses, especially the cantankerous ones. I saddled up Danny, a dependable brown horse neither fast nor slow, and trotted around the house to meet up with the posse. Broderick, Harry, and Sioux River nodded their heads. Only the Anderson brothers did not acknowledge me. Then we were all looking around. Where was Kyle? He had the rare gift of making himself invisible.

“Over here, boys!”

We turned. He was on top of the storage shed. Then he jumped onto his “Black Bucky,” as he called him, and they tore off.

My Stetson was quickly soggy. We were in the hills on the outskirts of town. We had been riding to close to five hours already, and had failed to unearth anything. The overhanging branches gave us a brief respite from the rain. We were tired. Our eyes had been focused for too long, and too intently, and were starting to play tricks on us. When I looked up, it seemed as if the raindrops were clinging with tiny hands to the leaves, slowly losing their grips and falling.

Harry had talked of blanketing the targeted area, but I did not imagine that we were doing a thoroughly professional job of it. As the day wore on, we lost track of some areas we had already covered, operating on too much adrenaline. Each rider was supposed to maintain a certain distance between him and the next one, but the balance was erratic at best.

Harry had peculiar notions about cigarettes. He felt they were a prime undoer, that they curbed stress, but also made one less sharp. He was the leader, no one had to call him “Sir,” but his orders were to be implicitly and good-naturedly followed. The only person he followed himself was Cody.

He had a good story about cigarettes, all right. Before he came to New Mexico he had personally taken care of rustlers, since the law was more involved in domestic matters and drunk driving. It was a dangerous chore. He had two scars, one on his cheek and another on his shoulder as proof.

It was five in the morning. He had been filling his horses' trough when he saw a flash of steel out of the corner of his eye. It happened so quickly that all he could do before the impact was to move his head a fraction. It was only the difference of a few inches, but it meant that instead of entering his temple and killing him instantly, it went through one cheek and out the other side, breaking some bone but no arteries.

He said he had to be the luckiest man alive. He fell after the shot but, when he was about to get to his feet, he realized the shooter was gone from immediate sight.

"I remembered being there frozen, in shock, of course, for some time, just staring, with blood pouring out of me. The way I was positioned on the ground he obviously couldn't tell that the blood pouring out was not from my temple. He must have thought I had a death stare, because he holstered his gun and moved off. When I realized I was alive, I got up, and walked around the back of the house and found him by his horse smoking a cigarette. I was sneaky, but my foot upset a small rock. He must have thought the sound was simply from a small animal/critter of some sort, because he turned around

nonchalantly, without unholstering his gun. Of course, if he did not stop to smoke a cigarette, he would have been gone by the time I came around the corner at him. There was disbelief in his eyes, and he swallowed hard and chewed on his cigarette. “I, I wasn’t trying to kill you,” he stammered. “I was just sending a message, and-“

“He was visibly shaking, a tall, handsome guy, not one would think was a hired killer, not country at all, wearing an expensive long black trenchcoat over a white dress shirt with a red tie. He said “Please,” and I saw liquid come down his leg. I shot him, of course, hardest thing I’ve ever done. In my condition, I could not trust myself to get the police out without taking another attempt on my life. I cleaned up all the evidence and buried him, very deep. My only concession to him was making sure that he would not be dug up by critters.”

“I know it’s a little crazy, but, believe me, a cigarette doomed that man, took away the upper hand from him.”

Eighteen

Harry muttered, “Damn rain,” meanwhile shouting out from time to time to make sure that no one was straying too far.

“What’s got him?” asked Broderick, riding tall in his saddle. His nose was running. He wiped it with the back of his hand, then onto his wool pants leg.

Sioux River laughed. “Brod, nothing ever gets to you only because you never notice.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, now, can’t you see that Harry is mad because it is raining? There are no tracks and people have excuses to smoke.”

“No, because what is, is.” He smiled benignly, showing off a few missing teeth.

Sioux River shook his head. His top hat was gleamed by the drenching. “Don’t you understand you’re not an Indian? Only Indians are supposed to say things like that.”

“It’s all in the mind. Like one famous philosopher once said, there is no way to prove that we are not all dreaming this up anyway.”

Sioux River spit. “Hit yourself in the face, and you’ll be sure that you’re not dreaming.”

Harry piped in, “I wish I was dreaming, because this is going too damn slow. Isn’t it, Andersons?”

He always grouped them together like that, because the three of them seemed like one person. They encouraged their individual anonymity and collective autonomy. They never argued, and always said the same thing, if they spoke at all.

“You three sour or what?”

They did not answer. Riding next to me, they were like three tall black mechanical pillars, faceless but strong.

“Sour Andersons pea soup,” said Harry.

Only Harry could get away with the statement. Any other man would have been filled with bullets. Short-tempered and militaristic, they were what Sheriff Walton called “The Three Jokers.” Funny they were decidedly not, but then they were interchangeable, like those in a card game, and lethal. “Only good to be around when they’re on your side,” Walton said.

Their mother was a fledgling actress in B movies, their father an extremely successful doctor who sent them money every month from L.A. They spent their money on women, “fat women,” as local gossip had it, hotel rooms, and card games.

They were obsessed with Doc Holliday. They spend days seemingly without end scouring through every book written on him, like vultures. They said he was always the most distinguished and dangerous gun in the West. To them, Jesse James and Billy the Kid were “hoodlums” or “uncontrolled psychopaths.”

“What does that make you guys then? Controlled psychopaths?” Harry once said.

Doc Holliday was their myth and, yes, their solace through troubled times. To them he held some sort of key to immortality. His demeanor was meant to be mysteriously identifiable in their guises. They fought the passage of time with him.

It was getting late. “It’s time to go, boys,” said Harry. He pulled his reins sharply to the left, and the horse circled around. Everyone followed except the Andersons. “What’s the matter?”

“We’re staying,” one of them said.

Harry was clearly unhappy, but controlled his voice. “What for?”

“There’s a vampire around here.”

“Well, what do you plan on doing, having a nice chitchat with him or what?”

“No, we plan on killing him.”

Broderick guffawed. “Don’t you boys know that no vampire has ever been taken at night in these parts? I know you three have stalking skills, but you might want to consider the fact.”

“There’s always a first time, right?” We all looked toward the town, because a helicopter was hovering over it.

“Hey, don’t be surprised if those government helicopter guys take over this area in the near future. No use putting your lives

on the line when other people will do it in the near future. Don't you think?"

"We think the government doesn't care whether we live or die."

Harry laughed. "That's true, but I think you guys should look at the whole picture. The outbreak might have reached its high point already, so why risk your lives unnecessarily at the last moment? But you're looking away from me. All right then. Good luck. Let's go, boys."

It was pitch dark when we rode into town. It was a moonless night, with hotel tenants' cars still on the street. I felt like the quintessential cowboy seeking a pleasurable night's sleep. We stopped at Jake's, a little red two story saloon, with the best food and drinks in town. It also had rooms next to a private stable which was a pricey necessity, with the undead roaming the area. The stable was enclosed in a barn, roof and all. Jake liked to say, "Only a real crazy, no, I'd say only a completely insane vampire would try to get in." He prided himself on having the most secure stable in the county.

Kyle kept heading down the street, whistling some tune or other.

Harry shouted, "Hey, Kyle, where the hell do you think you're going? To play cards with some feds or something? They'd take all your money anyway."

Kyle did not pause. “Down the street to see Yvette. I’m mixing business with pleasure.”

“Just make sure you’re here by seven in the morning, cause that’s when we’re heading out.” Harry muttered a curse, then approached the front doors, which had a narrow horizontal slot through the thick wood. “Hi, boys,” a jocular voice called out. “But where are the Andersons?”

“Still out looking for a vamp,” said Sioux River.

“Well, we could never figure them out anyway.” A bright light flashed out, and we all blinked and averted our eyes. “Good. It blinds you but doesn’t burn. I’m glad to see you boys are still with us.” The doors were opened and we hurried in out of the rain. “I’ll send Joe out for your horses.”

Nineteen

Jake was a visionary. While everyone else in town panicked at the news of the first outbreak, he had kept calm, investing in making his business into a fortress, while the rest of the town continued on a wild spiral including complete denial and stubborn acceptance. He was called everything from a pessimist to a heretic, but took it all with amazing good humor.

“You boys want the big table in the corner?”

“Sure,” said Broderick, scratching his beard. “You know, Jake, this is a mighty fine place.”

“Why, thanks. We just got in new mahogany tables, and glass behind the bar. We also refinished the floor,” he added, appreciatively sliding a boot across the smoothness. “I’d like to think of it as a safe oasis in the middle of the high desert. Oh, can I start you boys off with the hard stuff?” he asked from behind the bar.

“No thanks, Jake,” replied Harry. “I’m afraid of not having them ready tomorrow. Bring us some draft and some of those roast beef sandwiches, with horseradish on the side. We’ve got to get warmed up.” We were still removing hats and slickers.

“You got it.” He disappeared into the kitchen for a moment, then filled a large pitcher and carried it out in one hand with the chilled glasses in the other. “That should hit the spot.”

“No kidding,” said Sioux River. “This is the most beautiful pitcher of beer and glasses that I’ve ever seen.”

Broderick chuckled. “You’re right. The beer is frothy and the glasses are frosty.”

Jake raised his eyebrows. “I’d better get back to the kitchen. You boys are intimidating me with our humor.”

The steaming sandwiches were brought out, with coleslaw and pickles on the side. “Watch that horseradish now,” Harry said to me, “I don’t want you losing your sense of smell.”

I put on a good coating. “It’s okay, I’ve had plenty of practice with it.” Everyone was watching me. I took a bite and, initially, I was fine. Then it hit my nose and I smiled at them as my eyes began to water. “Hits the spot, all right,” I said, while they shook their heads. We discussed the plan in between bites.

Harry began. “Now, I believe the way it has been going, if we just move a little faster, we can finish up the big square are between here and the government fencing within two days.”

“What if we haven’t found her yet?” said Broderick. “Then what are we going to do? There will be no telling where she is then.”

“I don’t know about much, all I know is what Mayor Redding and Sheriff Walton told us to do yesterday. When the time comes, they’ll give us further instructions. Until then, I guess we’ll just go according to plan.”

“Plan?” said Broderick. “Remember, we are cowboys, not soldiers. We’ve got to be left some room for instinct.”

"I don't like it any more than you, but it won't do any good to fight about it now."

"What about the caves?" Sioux River intervened.

"What about them?" Harry shot back, red in the face.

"They're just on the other side of the hills."

"So?"

"So, since they're so close, we might just take a peek. You know what I mean, right? We might be able to find an opening on our side, away from the crash site. I mean, even their satellite technology can't find everything, especially if the openings appear far below the surface of the ground."

Harry put a hand under his chin, and grimaced. "Trouble has really started, hasn't it? Andersons on the loose and the Feds around the corner studying who knows what. Well, we won't rule that out at some point. But let's take things one at a time. All right, boys?"

"How do you want your eggs?"

I started. I was not a morning person, it was seven in the morning, and I had slept too hard. I rubbed sleep from my eyes and slightly squinted in the light.

"Over easy, please."

"You better get yourself some coffee," said Harry, sipping away.

"No, thanks. It makes me too edgy, so I stay away from it."

Broderick spoke up. "You're as far as edgy as you ever could be."

"I'll be all right in an hour or so. It just takes me a while to wake up."

Jake walked downstairs. His hair was freshly slicked back. "How you boys feeling this morning?"

"All right," we mumbled.

"Good. Your horses have been fed already, so they're ready and itching to go. You just go on out the back and get them when you're finished with chow."

"Thanks, Jake," said Harry.

"And how's the service? Drew just started, still getting his feet wet, but I hope he's got things under control."

"Don't see anything wrong with him," said Sioux River, a bit loudly.

Jake's eyes turned icy for a moment. "You boys have a good day," he said, and walked outside.

"You being ornery with Jake?" Harry asked.

Broderick tried to intervene. "Aw, come on, leave him alone."

"I wasn't talking to you, Brod. I was asking Sioux River a simple question. What's your answer, and I don't want you lying to me."

"Yeah, I guess I was being ornery with Jake."

Harry leaned forward and spoke softly. Listen, I know he used to treat you like dirt."

“I’d say more like shit,” interrupted Broderick.

Harry’s jaw clenched, and he looked ready to explode. But then the eggs arrived. Drew was a frail looking guy with a crewcut. He set the plates down carefully, calling out the orders curtly: “eggs well done, eggs over easy, scrambled eggs, and hard-boiled eggs,” shaking his head as he walked away, as if he had never seen such a vast assortment of eggs in his entire life.

Twenty

Harry resumed his thoughts. "Now, Sioux River, like I was saying before, he used to treat you like dirt, but now, since you're with us, he treats you with a little more respect." We were still sitting chatting, waiting for Kyle to arrive.

Sioux River smiled. "The only difference is that before he called me Indian Bob, and now he calls me nothing."

"Well, you know he's resented Indians ever since his wife ran off with one."

"Harry, I'm sorry about that, but I do not like being blamed for what someone else did. I do not like being, I forget what you call it."

"Scapegoat?" I said.

"Yes, that's it, the scapegoat. And what I want to know, Harry, is if I can forgive his ancestors killing off my people, why can't he forgive just one of my people running off with his wife. And you never know, maybe some day she will return."

"I don't know. I guess it's a little more immediate to him. At any rate, just try not to act ornery inside his establishment, okay? Do what you will outside."

"Okay." Sioux River slowly nodded his head in assent, while Broderick called out for a coffee refill.

There was an upwelling of screaming and shouting outside. We ran out to encounter Kyle and a surreal scene. A vampire

was hanging high above the crowd on a light post, its mouth propped open so that its fangs were clearly revealed. The Anderson brothers were standing below it, boasting about how they had killed it.

A black Ford Thunderbird came honking down the street, attempting to clear away the crowd. It stopped in front of the effigy, but for at least one minute no one got out. I figured that the Mayor and Sheriff were as shocked and transfixed as everyone else, and were collecting themselves as best as they could.

Sheriff Walton was out first, shouting commands to the crowd: "Everybody go on home! This is a street! It must be kept clear of traffic! Go back to work!"

"But it's not time for work yet," a guttural voice shouted above the din.

"Then go home and twiddle your thumbs or something!" yelled back the Sheriff. Of course, no one obeyed. Sheriff Walton turned to the tinted windows and shrugged. Meanwhile the Andersons still played up to the crowd, like they were actors in a vaudeville circus.

The Mayor got out escorted by three bodyguards. "Please! Your Mayor would like to speak to you! If you keep this up, I'll have to leave! This is an emergency!" He yelled in such strains for about five minutes, while the noise of the crowd slowly abated.

Finally, he could be heard. “Andersons,” he said, “your actions are usually appreciated, but never your antics. Take the body down immediately.”

Some people in the crowd booed. The Andersons did not move or say a word.

“If you do not take it down, I will have you placed under arrest.” The crowd was slightly hushed.

One of the brothers took out a knife, put it between his teeth, and climbed up the pole. He cut the rope, and the body fell, thudding limply on the ground. “Leave it to real men to do a man’s job,” he said gruffly.

“Sheriff.” Walton turned to his supporter. “Go into the car and call an ambulance. I want the coroner to take a look at this, this body immediately.” His voice was quivering.

“You got it.”

It was difficult to tell when it was hanging. Now it was clear. The corpse was a girl, a young woman who must have been beautiful. Her blue eyes were innocently anguished, as if she did not know what she had been transformed into before she was killed.

“It’s the one we were looking for, it’s Karen,” said Harry, pointing hypnotically.

“Andersons, get in the back of the car, we’re not through with you yet. And Harry, you and the boys meet me over at my office immediately.” He did not look toward us, but, nevertheless, the

Mayor had spoken. He got in the car and it roared off, swirling up some dust.

“Goddamn you, driver!” yelled an old man, rubbing his red eyes.

Twenty-One

“We know you basically did the right thing in killing her, Andersons, but your ethics were way off,” said Mayor Redding. He was not pacing because there was not sufficient room to do so. We were all packed into his small office like proverbial sardines.

“What do you mean?” one of them said.

“I mean, it was bad enough that it was a girl you had to erase, but then you have to come into town to gloat about it! It could have easily turned into a riot.”

“We wanted to make a strong message.” This time, they said it in unison, as if they were one person, afterall.

“You did, all right. But I’ll tell you one thing now. If her parents had been there seeing her hanging there like a huge slab of meat, I would have put you in jail for as long as I could find enough excuses to keep you there, and put you on a concentration camp type diet!”

Walton was also seething. “You went too far this time, Andersons,” he spit. “You’ve got the whole town shaken up so badly, it’s going to be almost impossible now for us to keep things together. If you had been smart, you would’ve told us first, at least, before coming in with the body.”

“Harry,” said Redding, “did you give these boys permission to go on their witch hunt?”

“I guess I did, unfortunately.” He stared pure hate at the stoic brothers. Everyone was getting sweaty, and there was only one overhead fan spinning desultorily.

“Well, I can’t hold you responsible for their actions, Harry. Now, about these caves, Andersons, you went there unlawfully, and found a vampire. That’s a curse, because who’s to say they would’ve invaded town?”

Andersons’ adopted a truculent tone. “It’s inevitable that the undead will invade.”

“And that makes you the authority?”

“We’re quoting a study-Disintegration of the Vampire Species; When and How.”

The Mayor laughed acidly. “One of those extreme mercenary papers, huh? Listen, I think you are brainwashed, I know you disagree, but I should have known from the minute you all started dressing up like Doc Holliday. He was a cold-blooded killer like you three.”

One of them said, “He was a genius.”

“Well, genius or not, he was poison to a town, just you. And you know what? I’ve changed my mind again. I think I have to mete out a harsh punishment, and I think I’ll have Harry and Cody decide on one. I’d start praying if I were you three, because they both knew Karen when she was a little girl. So they’re angrier than the rest of us, including me. I’ll try to dissuade them from having you hanged.”

They tensed up. It was clear that they were looking for an opportunity to use their guns, but, owing to the tight quarters, they knew that they did not have a chance. From the moment we entered the office, we had overpowered them with our collective weight, as the veins bulged in their necks. Now Broderick, Harry, and Sioux River held their arms as Kyle and I took away their guns. Their cool exterior had finally dissolved; they tried to spit on us; they cursed us.

Mayor Redding was smiling. "I was just kidding," he said. "You won't get hurt as long as you don't talk back to Cody, Harry, and the boys." He walked over to his desk, opened the bottom drawer, and pulled out three leg chains. "My secret. I've done a few arrests in my time in this office." He handed them to Walton. "Here, Sheriff, put those on the Andersons, and we'll have no trouble putting on the handcuffs. Now you boys go ahead and cooperate, or, like I said, you'll be at their mercy."

Walton went to put on the first pair and was kicked in the chin. All three Andersons laughed. He stood tall holding his jaw gingerly. He smiled through the pain. He turned to Redding. "Well, now, it looks like I've got an excuse, Mayor."

"It sure does, Sheriff."

The other two did not try to kick him, but their laughing was not appreciated. When he took them chained out to their horses, their faces were unmarked, but then they were bent over in pain from punches to their ribs.

As we headed out of town, people ran alongside our horses and asked why the Andersons were being taken away.

“For disregard of authority and brutal insensitivity and assault of an official,” Harry said equably, tipping his cap.

“I thought you were on our side,” Andersons said bitterly.

“No, I thought you were on our side,” said Kyle. “We want to take care of business also, but not stir up too much trouble, either.”

We were passing through a meadow. The tall green grass brushed wetly over our feet. It was still raining, but only drizzling. The yellow sun was slowly bursting through the nimbus clouds. It was, after all, Spring. “The bittersweet passage of criminals,” I thought, looking at the Andersons. They were bitterly mulling over Kyle’s response.

“I don’t know how I ever thought you were cowboys after seeing what you did with Karen,” said Broderick, chewing on some jerky.

“Cowboys we are!” one of the Andersons yelled. They looked and sounded ridiculous, three men dressed up as Doc Holliday in chains, arguing that they were “real cowboys.”

“No,” said Sioux River. “The cowboy is not a braggart. He says things matter-of-factly, and always has his eyes fixed on the wide expanse of land.”

Andersons' sneered. "Cowboys are also heroic, which you are not. Remember, we were the ones who took down a vampire. We have guts, like Custer and Carson."

Harry chuckled. "Custer was not a cowboy. He was a dandy from back east, Civil War glory had gone to his head, made him sick. A cowboy was too foolish to get himself in a bind like Custer, which led to his death. Custer was not a cowboy, and neither are you three."

We negotiated a rocky trail winding up and over a hill with a lone cottonwood tree. Near a large rock was a nest of lizards. They arched their backs when the rain fell on them, and they opened their mouths wide hissing with pleasure.

"Look at those freaks of nature," said Kyle.

"Never seen so many clumped together," added Sioux River approvingly.

"Those creatures are gods," said Broderick.

We could already see the ranch through the light mist, a small, square shadow bridging the concrete distance.

Twenty-Two

From where Cody and I sat on the porch drinking lemonade, we could see the Andersons. Far out in the distance, bent over picking up weeds, their leg chains reflected the sun. We heard Yvette and Kyle inside with the baby, and its occasional bursts of laughter.

"They haven't tried to escape yet, Cody," I said.

"Yeah, they're smart. They know they wouldn't get far, and that they'd have to deal with my rancor."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, I'd, oh, I don't know, but, when I first saw what they had done to Karen I asked myself, Why me? Why bring them to me? You see, I didn't want my rage dictating to my judgment."

"How long do you figure on working them like this?"

Out there the Andersons were huddled sluggishly.

"Oh, just till the end of the day."

"Just a day?" I was more than a bit surprised. "What then?"

"Oh, we'll take them back to the Mayor and Sheriff, and have a little talk."

Yvette came out holding a pitcher of lemonade. "Anybody need any more?"

"Yeah, I think we're both empty, Yvette," said Cody. "Thank you."

We held out the glasses, and after she poured, she stood back looking out to the chain gang. “Those men are sick, but I guess they’re thirsty just like us.”

“Yep, I’m sure they are,” said Cody. “I tell you what, Yvette, why don’t you leave the pitcher with me?”

She looked slightly relieved. “Sure, Cody.” She handed it to him, and walked back inside.

“You plan on giving them-“

“Let’s go, Terry.” He walked back, toward the stables.

It seemed clear what he was planning to do, but the way he went about it seemed peculiar to me. It seemed too formal somehow. The way he was walking and talking seemed a bit off key. It was as if a force greater than him had invaded his body and got a hold of his allegiance. He seemed slightly disturbed.

I had to hustle to catch up with him. When I gathered Danny’s saddle, he was already on his way. He held the pitcher in his right hand extended straight out in front of his body, like a holy chalice.

When he reached the Andersons their eyes widened. They licked their lips, and stood up with grimy faces and dress shirts.

“Did you bring us some lemonade?”

The way Cody was holding it so proudly, still mounted on his horse, one would have thought it was not a question.

“Maybe,” he said.

Their eyes darted back to me. “What do you mean maybe? We’re real thirsty.”

“You haven’t been working hard, because I’ve been watching you three closely.” Cody’s eyes were filled with justification.

“Not working hard enough? It’s about one hundred degrees out here. How are we supposed to work hard when we have no fluids?” They struggled to not curse Cody, because they were desperate. As long as there was a chance that they would still get it, they were loathe to become hostile. I had a feeling that Cody might make them beg for it.

“Andersons, do you believe in God?”

They looked at each other, as my stomach began to turn.

“Yes.”

“Then you must also believe in penance.”

There was a slight spark of defiance in their eyes. “Well,” they said, “we believe in penance, not torture.”

Something unnatural left Cody’s face. He handed them the pitcher and said, “Now don’t drink too fast, boys.”

It was close to five. Cody, Kyle, Yvette, and I sat on the porch taking turns holding the baby. He liked pinching my nose and ears, then patting the top of my head. I felt like I was the baby, not him.

“Terry,” Cody said, “I want you to go to Jake’s and tell Harry and Broderick and Sioux River to have another drink, cause Kyle

and me and the Andersons, and the Mayor and Sheriff, are going to meet there tonight.”

“What for?” Kyle said, taking his hand off Yvette’s shoulder.

“Well, Kyle, we’ve got to decide what to do with the Andersons.”

They were still out wandering around like two-footed jackals.

“What do you mean? We should just kick them out of the county, and then have nothing to do with them. Let them get arrested by the feds for snooping around the wreckage site or something.”

Yvette walked over and took the baby away from me. It was time for a breast feeding.

“Well, that’s what I mean, we’ve all got ideas about what to do with them, but we’ve got to be a little more unanimous about it.”

“Aw, hell, Cody,” Kyle remarked, “I think we should let it rest for a few days. Things are happening too fast right now for people to think properly.”

“I know they are, but once a pattern has started, it is hard to change it. It, if anything, gets faster.”

“What do I do if they’re not at Jake’s?” I said.

“Don’t worry about it. Whoever’s at the meeting must decide, cause we’ve got to get this out of the way.”

“Why do you say that?” Kyle said.

“We need to have some clarity on where we stand in relation to the, uh, undead.”

“See you later.” I began to move off.

“Oh, Terry?” Cody asked.

“Yes, Cody?”

“On your way out, tell the Andersons to come in. They’ve got to get washed up before we head in.”

“Sure, Cody.”

When I reached Danny, he looked a little drowsy. “Come on,” I urged him, holding up his huge chin. “It could be a long night.”

The Andersons let out a collective sigh of relief. “You mean to say we’re going to be treated right?”

“I don’t know. All I can tell you is that you’re going into town soon to see the Mayor and Sheriff again.”

Twenty-Three

It was a fairly pleasant ride, except for the sun shooting into my eyes. Without the urging of my spurs, Danny moved along at a rapid clip. He seemed to enjoy himself more when less horses were present. The horizon was purple. It looked like its own unique galaxy transferred to the sky above New Mexico. The ground was crisp after a recent rain, with delicate branches crackling under the horse's hooves. I felt like the only human left on earth, and was slightly thrilled by the sensation.

It was not completely dark when I arrived in town, which was still bustling. People ran last errands and picked up secretive snacks on the street. A few economy cars trailed like snails through horse and human traffic.

Danny was jumpy when we arrived at Jake's. He hesitated momentarily when Joe came around to escort him to the stable. But Lucky Joe always had a way with horses, whereas Kyle might have been kicked.

"I like this horse, Terry."

The doors had not been locked yet, so I sauntered in and accosted Jake, who was behind the bar.

"Hi, Terry. What can I get for you?" His face was red. He could always be counted on to have a few shots himself.

"I need a word alone with you."

I received some irritated looks at the bar, which I ignored, figuring that it was not time to get boisterous about my prerogative with the belligerent.

“Okay, Terry, come on back into the kitchen.”

I followed him. I felt the cold stares at my back. “Drunks are very needy, dependent people,” I thought.

“What is it, Terry?”

I could see he was expecting the worst.

“Cody is holding a meeting here tonight with the Mayor, Sheriff, and the Andersons.”

He reached over and grabbed an onion ring off the grille. The cook gave him one perturbed look, then went back to tending to his stew.

“Damn, what for?”

“He wants everyone to make decisions about what to do with them.”

He sighed. “Well, there goes business. I wish I could get someone to help me clear out all the beer and booze hounds. But I guess I’m the only one who wouldn’t be physically abused.”

“Damn, those free drink stamps for tomorrow sure got them out quick, didn’t they?” said Jake. He was jovial now, his entrepreneurial spirit had overcome his protective instinct. He had each of us set up his own pitcher of beer, and was reveling in his avuncular concern.

“You boys sure that only one pitcher is enough?”

“Yes, Jake,” said Harry. “This could be a night filled with trouble, so we can’t get too soused at the outset.”

Broderick laughed. “Harry the Prophet now, huh? I don’t believe it.”

“No, really, the vampires are probably real mad now, real unpredictable. Not to joke, but maybe they’ll try to attack the federal crash installation instead of us.”

“Well, they want some sort of sacrifice. I’m pretty sure of that,” said Sioux River.

“Okay,” said Broderick. “I believe you. You’re an Indian, and you’re supposed to say wise things like that.”

We all laughed, savoring the moment.

The Andersons were still handcuffed, but they had snide smiles on their faces. Cody followed them close behind with a shotgun at their backs, wearing his ten gallon. Kyle was dressed carelessly as usual, meanwhile whistling a tune, Mayor Redding had on a pinstriped suit and Sheriff Walton looked menacing in his beige uniform. Jake, Harry, Broderick, Sioux River, and myself, who all had been drinking the largest portions of the beer, did our best to put on more sober miens for the proceedings. It was momentarily so quiet that it seemed like the whirring fans were huge windmills driving all other sound away. I was high and antsy. The empty pitchers rested on our table, and,

when I looked up at the chandelier, I had a wild impulse to shoot it down. The newly arrived just stood about ten feet away staring dumbly at our intoxication. The Mayor was giving Jake a hard look, who was looking down guiltily.

“What you boys been doing?” said Cody. It was patronizing, but not without a certain envy attached to it also.

“Oh, just passing some time with some pitchers,” said Jake.

“Let’s all sit down,” said the Mayor. We could tell he wanted to dismiss our debauching in short order, but the Sheriff would not let him.

“You boys are skunked,” he said, pulling a table up next to ours.

“Aw, come on, everyone is just getting settled,” said Broderick. To him it must have seemed like we were at an innocent wedding reception, so what right did the sternly sober have to disrupt the festivities?

“You’re plastered,” Kyle said with some admiration.

“Hold it there,” the Mayor said, “this is a meeting to pass a judgment, not another bottle.”

The inference was too much for most of us. We laughed until we realized our own absurdity, which took some time. It struck me that when I gauged everyone’s attitude that Cody seemed the most comfortable. He was neither livid, like the bottled-up Sheriff, nor happy-go-lucky like the extroverted Broderick. I

realized then what I had long suspected: Redding was the Mayor in name only.

The Andersons were snickering. I noticed that their suits were freshly pressed, and their tie pendants newly shined. Their hats were pushed back jauntily.

“Quiet,” hissed the Sheriff, “or I’ll have to break your ribs.”

“They’re all right, Sheriff,” said Cody. “They think they’re above it all but, frankly, who cares what they think?”

“I do.”

“Well, we’re here to figure out punishment for what they did, maybe a little for what they thought about it, but definitely not for what they’re thinking now.”

“If we were all punished for our thinking, we’d be dead already,” said Sioux River, suppressing a giggle.

“You’ve got a good point,” said Broderick, “but no one ever knows what someone else is thinking anyway. Right?”

“That’s enough of that,” said the Mayor. “It’s time for some business. Anyone got any suggestions. Cody?”

“Thank you, Mayor. I say, why don’t everyone act like a witness, give an account, and then pass a sentence?”

“A sentence?” said Kyle, smiling. “I’m too tongue tied with tequila to say a whole sentence.

“You keep your mouth shut,” said the Sheriff. “The Mayor was about to speak.” He gestured toward his superior with an open palm.

“Well, what are you going to do after everyone gives his own opinion, Cody? We’ll have a real mess on our hands.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. All we’ve got to do is pick a jury.”

“A jury?” Andersons scoffed. “I hope you’re not thinking what we’re thinking. No proper jury could be formed out of these men.”

“Why not?” said Kyle. “We’re the people who always maintain law-and-order, so what’s the problem, Andersons?”

“It’s unfair because all of you are posse men, and the jury is supposed to be picked from normal citizens, who are also supposed to be unprejudiced.”

“Prejudiced? Hell, I’m sure as hell not prejudiced. Yvette and I just adopted a black baby boy.”

They were red in the face. “You know what we’re talking about.”

“I’ve never seen you with such a loose tongue, Kyle,” said Broderick. “And such a joker, too. Cody, have you ever seen Kyle so freely speaking?” He asked him as if Cody was his father.

“No, Broderick.” He knew it was not a time to appease; also that it was time for the Mayor to run the show that he had created.

“All right then,” he said. “Everyone get a piece of paper or a napkin. I’m going to pass around a pen, and each of you is to

write down three names, none of which is to be yours, mine, or the Sheriff's, cause we're automatically crossed out because of our authority."

I fumbled in my pocket, but could not find anything, so I picked up my napkin, soggy from the glass that had been resting on it. Around the table Harry ripped off the cover of a matchbook, and Sioux River, Kyle, and Broderick followed. I started thinking about how women had criticized me for not always carrying around a light, especially in the bar district of downtown L.A. "What am I thinking?" I thought. "I'm about to decide the fate of three men and my mind is wandering." Meanwhile the other prospective jurors were writing quickly or scribbling nonchalantly.

"Wait a minute," Andersons said. "This isn't fair. A person who picks a jury can't be on a jury."

By this time I had a pen in hand. I hesitated for a moment. The Mayor was nodding at me vigorously, meanwhile the rest stared at me. I wrote the names down almost involuntarily, the ink running like water, and passed the pen on to Cody.

"Hey, didn't you hear us?" Andersons said. "This is unlawful. You have a responsibility as men of the law."

The tone was accusing and pleading at the same time.

"You hear that, Cody?" said the Mayor. They say this is unlawful. What do you think of that?"

"It may be, but it's still our law," he said, writing patiently.

Twenty-Four

The Mayor nodded his head. He shuffled the paper in his hands and raised his eyebrows. His face had a glint of mischievousness in it. The Andersons looked on insulted by the ceremony.

Redding turned to them. "Well, boys, we've got a jury for you. Cody, Broderick, and Kyle, start thinking, cause you're the ones. Jake, is it all right if they deliberate in your kitchen."

He shrugged. "I don't see why not."

Cody stood first. "Let's go," he said, and Broderick and Kyle followed him through the double doors.

"I tell you again, this is not right," said the Andersons, "and you know it. You are acting like the mafia or something."

"If we were the mafia we would've killed you already," said the Sheriff. "You should feel lucky."

"That's right," said the Mayor. "Now calm down, there's no need to fuss. You're in good hands with Cody and the rest. They're fair and honest men."

They walked out solemnly. Relief was etched on their faces. They sat down carefully, as not to cause any extra disturbance. The whirring of the fans could be heard again. We all anticipated the episode with the Andersons. Much time and energy had been spent on them, and it was time to turn them over to another authority. Images of the rain, and the posse, flashed through my

head. And the picture of the dead girl, hanging in the air like a martyr.

“Have you reached a verdict?” said the Mayor.

“Yes,” said Cody. “We find these men guilty.”

Andersons’ faces turned a pasty white hue.

“And what is the sentence you have passed on them?”

“Abolishment from this county of ours.”

“Abolishment from? What are you talking about?” said the Sheriff. “That’s just a slap on the hands, not any punishment-“

“Quiet now, Sheriff,” said the Mayor. “A judgment has been passed, and it will be followed. Cody, are their guns empty?”

“Yep, made sure of it.”

“Good. Andersons, you can get your bullets somewhere else, but I warn you, if you ever come back to this county you’ll be shot on sight. Understood?”

“Yes.” They had expressions of ultimate, devious triumph.

“Good. Cody, help me take off the cuffs.”

They rubbed the red rings on their wrists, and looked coldly at us. Sheriff Walton was jumpy, and Mayor Redding put a censure hold on his shoulder. Kyle was whistling again, but sporadically, creating dissonance. Sioux River and Broderick were whispering to each other, while I made harsh, clicking noises with my tongue on the top of my mouth. This was the posse’s farewell.

“Well, I’ll show you to your horses,” said Cody.

The Andersons hesitated for a moment, and Cody started to raise his shotgun. They gave us one last look, and walked out with Cody at their heels, adjusting his ten gallon.

“That’s the last of them,” I thought. “It’s got to be.”

Twenty-Five

Mayor Redding had an idea for a public celebration. He had Sheriff Walton post signs to commemorate a dubious landmark: the renovated jail's first fifty years of continuous operation. The posters depicted a red face with horns, screaming behind black bars. Redding had persuaded a young, local artist named Wayne to do a drawing with the promise that Wayne's name would not be ignominiously attached to the artwork. It was to be a type of festival, with a rodeo and beauty contest. He had been able to have Kyle and I agree on being in the rodeo, even though he had a separated sternum and I had never appeared in one, and was thus courting my chance at humiliation. Yvette had begun dieting to be in the swimsuit competition, and Cody accepted the role of master of ceremonies. Broderick and Sioux River, suspicious as ever, wanted to know the "real purpose." Mayor Redding said it was clear as the devil on the poster, but they were unconvinced. "All right, then," he said, "it's to celebrate the Andersons departure," whereupon they nodded their heads and said "Good luck." Cody told us that when they saw the Mayor, Broderick and Sioux River were roundly cursed. "Those damn misfits think they're sages," he said. Sheriff Walton had been ordered to gather as many steer and chickens as possible for the feast, while a rodeo arena was being constructed. All able-bodied men were to help with the building on their own free time, but then the Mayor's extravaganza ran into trouble.

The climate of the town was not favorable. People were still in shock from Karen's death, and were haunted by the vampires. Many blamed the government site for attracting the undead. They had accepted the Andersons ambivalently. On one hand, they had never liked them, then came to despise them after their public exhibition of the dead girl. Yet they had proved indubitably that a vampire could be killed, which gave them some hope. Although later the Mayor heatedly denied it, they read through his duplicitous campaign from the outset. I overheard remarks attesting to another example of the self-serving and evil character of yet another politician. Some went so far as to say he was no better than the devil-prisoners on his poster. Then the posters themselves were torn down. At first the Mayor attributed the atrocity to a select few, and had Sheriff Walton post new ones first thing in the morning. But then they were being torn down in broad daylight, even by elderly people, who came out armed with large kitchen knives. Daily, such incidents were reported by Walton to the Mayor, who still believed in the seditious nature of the acts. When the Mayor pleaded with him to cancel the commemoration, that his work was futile, being torn down all over town, he became indignant, and asked if his Sheriff had turned against him, also. The Sheriff said "No," but pleaded with him to simply look out his window, so that the destruction of the "masterpiece artwork," as the Mayor called them, could be confirmed by sight. The Mayor replied "Of course

not,” claiming that the midday sun played hallucinatory tricks on his eyes.

The days were scorching hot. People said that perhaps the Mayor’s brain had been fried like an egg, that his yolk had been broken and was running freely over the whole town. “The mess has got to be cleaned up,” they said.

Then they began bombarding his house and office with a variety of fruit and vegetables, oranges and tomatoes being the most common. Finally Cody personally went over and advised him to relent, that the people had spoken, and the Mayor, haggard and shaken after the two weeks’ ordeal, gave in.

He invited the posse over, though, for a private barbecue at his ranch on the outskirts near Cody’s. It was one of those huge Victorians with a small white picket fence around the front, more for show than anything else. His wife Martha, cheery and rotund, fixed us stuffing and green beans, to go alongside our beef brisket. We ate outside on benches, watching the sun go down. The Mayor, after a few shots of whiskey, became nostalgic.

“You know,” he said, his eyes watery. “You were the ones who always stood by me. As my posse, you never had a bad word for me, even when I might have been in the wrong. You don’t know how much I appreciate that.”

“Come on,” said Cody. “There’s no need to thank us. It’s been our privilege. Well, at least mine.”

“You’re right,” said Broderick. “All the shootouts are long past, but it’s still invigorating just to have a real purpose, besides surviving.”

Redding spoke again. “I should have listened to Martha. She was the first person to tell me that my idea for a celebration was off kilter. Should’ve listened to her.”

Twenty-Six

After dinner, the whiskey was passed around freely and frequently. Martha went inside and we thanked her profusely, which drunks are prone to do. The sun was finishing burying itself, a deep violet, and a slightly chilled breeze came in.

“You think the town is against me now?” asked the Mayor.

“No,” said Cody. “They have forgiven you by now. I’m pretty sure of that.”

“How sure, Cody?”

“I’m pretty sure I’m sure, put it that way. Part of their motive was to just get some nervous energy off their own backs. They have used it up, so now they’re starting to get back into the swing of things.”

“I hope so. I-“

He heard it first, the sound of hooves approaching. At first they were intermittent in their plodding quality, but as the horizon turned to people, some thin shadows appeared. A few of us took our guns out.

“Who could it be?” I said. “Sounds like some maniac on the loose.”

“I don’t know,” replied Cody. “It’s a little late for an unannounced visit, don’t you think?”

“Yep,” agreed Cody. “And I don’t like being spooked when I’ve been drinking.”

A shadow merged out of the darkness intact, then a white horse, and a dark figure, now lucid, a boy, crouched in the saddle like a jockey. He was slightly slumped, as if he had finished a complete circuit of the country. His face was dusty.

“Don’t shoot!” he yelled. “I’ve got a message! Don’t shoot! I’ve got a message!” He skidded the horse to a halt, and dismounted. He looked about twelve years old, rubbing his dust coated face and eyes, walking toward us.

Cody recognized him. “Johnny, what are you doing out here? Your mom must be worried sick.”

“I’ve got a message for all of you.” He was nearly breathless, but had a great look of determination on his face.

“What kind of message, and from whom?” said the Mayor.

“It’s from the Andersons,” he replied, pulling a large envelope out of his frayed Levi’s jacket pocket.

“How much did they pay you?” asked Cody, patting him on the shoulder.

Johnny lowered his head. “One hundred dollars, but I plan on giving it all to my family. My sister is sick and—“

“Don’t worry. You’re not going to get into trouble for that. There are a lot more important things to worry about now. But how about giving us the note, Johnny?”

He flinched. “Right. I’m sorry.” He handed it over to Cody, as a light came on in the upstairs bedroom.

“Johnny,” said the Mayor. “You go on over and knock on the front door. My wife Martha will run a bath for you, get you some food, and then you go to bed. I don’t know how long you’ve ridden today, but I can tell it was too long.”

“Thanks,” he said, smiling, and walked past us, appreciating being valued. As if on cue, Martha appeared to open the door for him.

“That kid is better than the old Pony Express,” said Kyle.

“Yeah, but what’s this news he brings?” Harry rejoined.

Cody cleared his throat. “This is what it says: ‘You cowards never went to the caves, so we came back. Come out and bury as many vampires as you can tonight. That’s all you’re good for. Burying things. Andersons.’”

“Goddamn,” cursed the Mayor. “They’re telling us what to do, but we really have no choice. Let’s get going.”

Twenty-Seven

Cody led the way. He knew the outlying area, near the federal installation, better than anyone. We could barely see the person riding in front of us, much less the shrouded scenery, since it was a moonless night. There was a stream near the caves. I heard Cody's horse plunge, splashing into it, and patted Danny's head, who was not too fond of water. He did not hesitate, but, once he was partially submerged, strode powerfully toward the shore of the stream. He almost ran up the back of Broderick's horse, despite my best efforts to rein him in. Broderick did not flinch, as if still comforted by the warm cocoon of whiskey.

We felt the branches scratch against our jackets. They were not harsh, just a little meddlesome. I simply followed Broderick's movement as best as I could, and he was very conscientious about clearing branches out of our path.

The silence was broken. "Dismount," said Cody. "Fasten your reins. We're going in on foot from here."

I secured Danny without too much struggle. Cody did not have to tell us to take out our guns. We reached a brief clearing fronting the caves, a little above us, about thirty yards out. From a distance, they did not look too deep or cavernous, probably not linking up anywhere with the government surveilled caves on the other side of the nearby electrified fencing.

Other than a hooting owl, there were no sounds. We were uneasy, as there was still no sign of human or other life. Our

thoughts were decidedly the same: “Where were bodies? Was this a trap of the Andersons’ devising? Or were they victims themselves of an undead host?”

The Mayor cleared his throat and said, “Let’s go.” He proceeded quickly, as if running away from his own second thoughts. Cody and Harry were at his shoulders, guns poised. They walked directly into the first of the caves, came back out, and walked over to the next one. It struck me at the time that they were kind of like three kids on a treasure, although a macabre one. We were slightly relaxed when they reached the final one. We were beginning to guess that we had been fooled.

Then the Mayor, Cody, and Harry were standing frozen, staring down. The rest of us hurried up. Three mutilated bodies, their faces torn off, laid neatly beside each other. It appeared that they had been left to slowly bleed to death. The smell of their blood was still fresh.

They were dressed up like Doc Holliday. There was a small note stuffed into the shirt pocket of one. It read: “Collateral U.S. Government damage. Warning: do not enter these caves again. Note the consequence. U.S. State Department.”

A low humming noise became more intense, but there was no other sign, no telltale lights of an airship. We looked around frantically, wondering if we should prepare ourselves to see an interstellar spaceship. I was near hyperventilation because of

the concentration of different signals. Then a strong whirring sound was upon us almost instantaneously, and drones, with only faint red lights for navigation, appeared overhead. I still am not sure who shouted “Run!” but it was too late. I saw Broderick ahead of me struggling against some type of invisible web and, before I could leap in the small stream in a last chance at escape, I felt innumerable webs around my torso. The last thing I noticed before I became unconscious was that the invisible filaments were radiating some type of force field. The drones overhead became invisible.

I awoke within a capsule, sitting upright and not too uncomfortable, although my legs felt leaden, and my head slightly ached. I was in the cargo hold of a large army transporter plane, shaking violently with turbulence. I moved my head slightly to the side, and an inner ear device was activated. A monotone-like voice said, “Mr. Miles, you are being transported back to L.A. The crash site has been determined to be too sensitive to disruption since the three intruders which were dispatched permanently. We gave you a sleep injection to make the trip a bit easier on your constitution. We are now over Nevada, and should touch down at LAX in about two hours. There are water bottles under your seat. Please keep yourself hydrated.”

Time elapsed quickly, in part because my drowsiness tailed off only gradually. I hoped, and later came to believe, that the others had not been harmed. It bemused me to notice that I was still wearing cowboy boots, although my hat had not been retrieved. My feet were sweaty, but it was very awkward trying to remove the stiff boots. The voice popped in my ear again: “Twenty minutes to touchdown, Mr. Miles.”

Twenty-Eight

While my eyes adjusted to the dark runway, here and there punctuated with air raid warning tracer lights and bulky emergency vehicles, a helicopter touched down. Leonard Williams leapt out of the side, and jogged out to meet me. I initially recoiled, because I did not recognize him due his new salt-and-pepper goatee. He was urging me forward, even as the rotor blades of the copter started spinning.

“Hey, Leonard, what’s the rush?” We hugged each other, and I found myself being urged back.

“Let’s get inside first!” he shouted, because the vibrations became loud and violent.

Before we were strapped into our seats, the pilot and co-pilot lifted off. I momentarily landed awkwardly in Leonard’s lap. We clipped ourselves in and shook our heads at each other.

“Terry, my boy, you do not realize how much work it took to convince the feds to pick you up. Trouble has picked up here, and the area around the airport is dangerous to drive through. Gangs up to more trouble than usual, engaging in every imaginable crime. The Times has moved its headquarters to the Library Tower, because of deteriorating security conditions. That, by the way, is where we are going to touch down. Convenient, huh? Well, the feds have taken over a lot of space throughout the building also. The bastards took over the best coffee machines, too.” He laughed, but it sounded hollow in the

helicopter compartment. Occasionally I looked beyond Leonard to the patch of sky, and saw lights of various government probes scanning the ground.

“Leonard, you can understand I’m a bit overwhelmed-“

“Oh, no, I understand, Terry. You’ve been through a lot. By the way, as Times reporters we have been hired by the feds to report on developments here in L.A. Which actually brings with a salary. Yes, Mr. Miles, you do not have to worry about begging your parents for money, at least for the time being. I have erased their tirades from all of your message machines. Bo did the same at your place, which he kept in perfect condition, by the way, once I convinced him it was in his and your best interests to keep it under watch.”

The co-pilot cursed quickly to himself, and started massaging his hand. I could only guess about the affliction. The pilot himself seemed to curtail his own boredom by putting the airship through some half-turns and such before going back on course. I was able to keep from vomiting only because I had barely eaten since the previous day. Leonard muttered under his breath.

“You’ll have to tell me about your adventure when we arrive at the tower, Terry. From what I gathered on my own, however, you were stuck in place most of the time, anywhere from simply bored to absolutely bored out of your frickin skull. You’d probably be interested to know, however, that, with the help of the Times staff, I have compiled the first comprehensive list of

disints since the outbreak. You know, different ages, and sexes, and such-“

“Great.”

“Hah. Got you, Terry. You haven’t changed, afterall. Still got that morbid sense of humor. Right? Hey, man, things are getting really nitty gritty. But I think positively, at least I try to tell myself that it’s the worsening blows before the shit clears. Do you ever look at it that way?”

“Leonard, you are either the wisest or biggest dumb ass I’ve ever had the privilege to know.”

“All right, Terry, you’re better or worse than ever, depending on how one looks at it. Just tell me that you won’t leave again. All right? You’re the only brother I’ve got left, as far as I’m concerned. If we go down I want us standing shoulder to shoulder. Yeah, I know it’s military-speak, but it’s true.”

I leaned forward. “I will happily fight to the death next to you, Leonard, if it comes to that. I will tear an undead’s throat out with my own teeth if that is what it takes. You can be assured of that. But let’s just try to keep our heads, all right?”

Leonard patted my shoulder. “We’re writers first, that’s for sure. I’m just saying that, if we have to become warriors, I want to die on the front lines, not cowering in some corner. My Marine background will not allow me to do otherwise.”

Some shots rang out in the metropolis. My imagination was forming separate narratives from the separate pieces when we

slowed to a hover over the Library Tower. There was an anti-aircraft battery on top of the building, and various pillboxes, making the landing very tight.

“Fucking yahoos,” said the pilot. “Overkill, here we go again. This is the smallest and lighter copter around, and yet they are paranoid about an unannounced touch-down.”

“No shit,” chimed in the co-pilot. “Put me in charge, I’d have napalm scorching the fucking rotting corpses 24-7. Know what I mean?” He leaned back for affirmation, but I did not have the enthusiasm for a demonstrative reply. Instead, I simply nodded my head. Leonard was already out of his clip harness, signaling security with his hands.

“Cool shit, huh, Terry?” he said, briefly putting his head back in the compartment. “I know it’s juvenile bullshit, but it’s a welcome diversion.”

There was one small, but extremely bright iridescent blue signal light atop a long, thin pole, serving as a warning to passing aircraft. At that moment, it looked like an insanely long extraterrestrial finger, shuddering slightly in the wind.

In the stairwell leading down to the top floor of the building, we were able to speak normally, without shouting. “Leonard, your quick action knows no boundaries. I thought I was quick and crafty, but you make me look sluggish. I’m surprised you haven’t been hired by the President himself.” We had to step

down gingerly, because that particular area of the building was on backup generators to conserve energy.

“Just leave it to me, Terry. I’ve got us locked into a pretty sweet deal. And how? Well, the Times had been on the waiting list to become tenants of the tower, and it just so happened that the feds had already taken over a level below us. I happened to run into an actual outright cool cat type of agent in the elevator. We hit it off right away, and, within two weeks, he was telling me about some positions opening up on his floor, that I might be able to get my foot in the door, so to speak.”

Leonard used a computerized swipe card to get us out of the dark stairwell into the bright office area. “So, basically, I have two employers now, the Times and the U.S. Government. And so do you. So if anyone asks you, tell them you’re a full-blooded, no, even bleeding American patriot. So playing up the cowboy card will only help your cause.”

“Damn, you’re my fucking boss, Leonard. How much do I owe you?”

Our laughter caused heads to turn, and quite a few stood and applauded. “Give me a break, guys! Hey, get back to work! I’ve come back to haunt the Times! Hey, Leonard, these are some pretty digs. I didn’t know the Times had this kind of sway.”

Leonard led me to his far corner office, which contained panoramic desert scene photographs, briefly transporting me back to New Mexico. “Hey, close the door, Leonard. Looks like

a group are considering converging on us. We'll fill them in later."

But Leonard was already closing the window blinds, and turning the lock on the door handle. "No one ever figured out exactly what happened at the crash site, Terry." He sat down behind his desk and started rocking back and forth. "The government is now virtually mum on the subject, also. But the fact that things have deteriorated nation-wide lately since the story can't be entirely coincidental-

"People were already on edge, Leonard, and any sensationalistic news was bound to cause them further manic energy. That's how I see it. You know, the proverbial spark to cause an outright conflagration."

Leonard motioned vigorously for me to sit on the leather couch. "That's something I've also considered. But this level of near hysteria? Even the protection of an armored car is not sufficient to feel safe anymore."

I consciously sat as upright as possible, afraid to be cocooned by a comforting object that might cause instantaneous sleep. "Well, I'm sitting tight in L.A. for now on. It's no use trying to run in any way, shape, or form. Not at this point. I'm just going to try to adjust as quickly as possible. You know, chew out Bo and-

Leonard laughed. "And get chewed out more rudely in return, right? Anyway, I can tell how tired you are. I'm going to let you

take a long, hard nap. I'll have some hot food waiting for you to nuke when you wake up. Then we'll have a longer chat."

I laid out flat on my back, and felt a vertebrae pop in quick adjustment. "Could you put on the fan? The noise will help drown out the outside planes."

Twenty-Nine

Still in a half-sleep mode, I noticed a plate being placed on Leonard's table while I received a nudge on the shoulder. When I was finally embedded once more in an interrupted dream, a voice began to pester me. "Terry, wake up. You've slept enough. Get out of your jet lag, brother." My eyes opened to reveal Leonard striding toward me with the plate of food. "Sit up. This will help you wake up. You're probably getting a little weak from hunger."

It was grilled chicken and Mexican rice, with some cole slaw on the side. "Good choice. Ate entirely too much beef in New Mexico." He retrieved a lemon soda can from the desk, and placed it at my feet. "Drink looks good to me."

Leonard sat down behind his desk once more. "There's some strange shit going down in South Central. As part of a combined Times-U.S. Government investigation, we have been assigned to investigate, with an attached bodyguard. This "strange shit" runs the gamut, from stories of e.t. sightings to giant vampires to competing gangs of gang bangers and vampires. If it wasn't during an already strange time, I wouldn't believe any of them. But now we can't ignore them."

I paused in my quick eating. "But, Leonard, what is the point? I mean, it's a question I've been asking myself lately. What will uncovering more madness do to help out the current situation? I think it's the one definite insight I received while in the high desert. It all seems like a tease of some sort, because, when it

has looked in the past as if there might finally be a permanent fade-out of the disints, they return. That's why I'm more than a little skeptical about this."

Leonard pivoted around a few times in his swivel chair. "You're right, Terry. But I still maintain that we need to stay as active as possible, keep our minds curious. Otherwise, I think we'll go into complete despair, and not take care of ourselves."

I set down the plate and opened the can of soda, some carbonation spilling over the sides onto the floor. "Ah, hell. But I'm sure there's still the business-as-usual janitorial service to clean up. All right, Leonard. I'm definitely in. You know that. I guess I'm just hoping I can spend a day at my loft before I go off on another wild goose chase of a different sort."

"By all means, Terry. You can drive home if you'd like, by the way, but I insist on a security escort. Believe me, you might feel grateful for it after the fact. We've lost a couple of proofreaders since you left. Typical cases. Cars found, but never the bodies. Keep your driving tight and steady. But I don't have to tell you. You have a neighborhood reputation as a race car driver type. Taking unnecessary chances and such."

I chuckled. "It's what keeps me sane, Leonard."

"Right. I see the paradox, acting insane to ward off insanity. You'll a real pro at that act. I'm getting your escort prepared to leave within the hour. They'll be waiting for you in the garage."

Even though there was no reason to doubt its security while I was away, I still checked my Buick for signs of intrusion and abuse. This included a look under the hood and the chassis. I caught one of the parking lot attendants, a particularly pale and thin youngster, watching me. He smiled at me somewhat unkindly, and spit out a cherry pit. The two cars that comprised my security escort, the usual hulking Hummers, were already revving up their engines. I did not have to be told that one would precede me, one follow.

My first experience of the streets of L.A. was a handful of street people trying to block the first Hummer's progress with a host of shopping carts, and their own bodies. The Hummer sped up and ran over everything and everyone, dragging carts and bodies after it for half a block. I had to swerve a few times to avoid the destruction, noticing that some of the bodies easily fell apart, a sure sign of disint status. One head temporarily bounced on top of my hood, and I saw one of its eyes blink.

Apparently the Hummer had some sort of public address technology within it, because a voice called out: "Five dead disints, 200 points. Current year total of 20000. Over and out."

I had to acknowledge that I was only partially revolted, and more deeply satisfied by the carnage. It gave me a slight feeling of guilt but also a heavy dose of exhilaration.

My dashboard vibrated with the heat recognition sensor as I turned to enter my garage. Both Hummers positioned themselves to block any possible intrusion, and honked to me in farewell. When the gate slammed shut, I heard one of their mounted cannons being fired, and a reverberating explosion. When I turned off the engine, I was staring at my long unused mountain hanging from a rack next to a couple of rifles. I could not recall the last time I had been on my bicycle. In essence, it was too painful to acknowledge the particular loss of freedom. One dramatic reason for not utilizing it was that, in a queer symptom of their derangement, many disints favored them as transportation, even more than cars. One became famous for riding the length of Sunset Blvd., being cheered by all types of onlookers on the way, before collapsing fatally upon arriving at the Pacific Ocean.

Even before I reached the living room, I decided that I would not possess the energy to make it beyond the huge couch to my bedroom poster bed. I laid back and stared at my blank ceiling, attempting to put my thoughts in order. In retrospect, my trip to New Mexico seemed like a mission to the moon. I wondered about the fate of Cody and the others, suspecting that not just them, but that the entire town itself, was under some sort of government quarantine.

I awoke in the middle of the night, urinated, and turned on the television monitor for the latest news. The New Mexico crash site was still under official wraps, so the focus had shifted to the increasingly chaotic situations in large cities, such as L.A. and New York. Most social services had shut down under the strain of random attacks by the undead, as well as domestic terrorists, who were urging the “End of Days.”

Before I fell asleep, I heard yells and screeching emanating from the street.

Thirty

Exploding grenades awoke me slightly past dawn. I was not very alarmed, because I was able to conclude from the intensity of the blasts that they were at least one block away. Already, I was computing when, and if, the alarm was sufficient to force me to prepare myself for certain emergencies. My canned food and bottled water supply was as intact as it had been since it had been purchased two years previous. My barred windows were as secure as they had been since the day I had moved in.

But I was attracted to the can of pork and beans slightly removed from the rest of the cans piled in the shape of a pyramid in the corner of my kitchen area. My impulse, hunger, was simplified, without much concern about taste, an indication that my fear was pumping more energy into my body, rather than my brain.

I opened the can and put the contents in a pan to simmer while I showered. The grout between the blue tiles was slightly mossy, a point that went unnoticed, since I did not have a girlfriend. I debated if I should write to my parents, or transfer the energy to a more immediate concern, such as my too long neglected journal.

But, as soon as I toweled off, I decided that my impulse should be expended in working in my garage. I did not feel suitably calm or focused enough to do anything else. So I put on

an old pair of comfortable jeans and a baggy shirt, with oil stains from past encounters with my vehicle.

My first order of business was to change the oil, spark plugs, and air filter, even though they had not yet reached their respective ages of expiration. The mundane and repetitive tasks enabled me to be somewhat active, but without the worry of the potent unknown. Somehow or other I slightly cut my left hand while putting the oil reservoir bolt back in place. This required me to cleanse it in the utility sink, leading me to clean the sink mirror and scrub the sink clean, until the ceramic had a distinct polish.

Of course, I could not help but splash some water on the floor, which, after I had stepped on it, was smeared, leading me to clean the particular area, and then, because it strongly offset the surrounding dirt, led to a mopping of the entire floor. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew that my actions were becoming slightly manic, and I eventually felt the telltale signs of tears streaking the sides of my face.

I exhaled deeply until the spasm of grief passed. I tried to answer the constant question, “How many people I personally knew have died? How many total?” as quickly as possible, without going into prolonged agony about the implications of the queries.

I pulled out a lawn chair and set it next to the sink after I had completed a thorough cleaning of the floor. I thought of past lovers, and tried to keep myself connected to chagrin instead of despair. I considered the women I could have begun a relationship with since the outbreak, and realized that my extreme fear of losing someone had overcome my urge to live fully. The fuzziness of my last sexual moment had almost completely disappeared.

I pulled out a wire brush and an industrial cleaner and began an intense scrubbing of the entire engine, noting that the outdoor explosions had grown more intense, although still not alarming enough to warrant immediate and drastic action on my part.

It was a difficult task to imagine a better future, so naturally my thoughts took me back in time. Yet, even as I recaptured playful moments of childhood on the eastern seaboard, darker reminiscences kept intruding, returning me to contemplation about the nature of the outbreak.

My cleaning action became more intense as I recalled the first disint, and the smoking odor odors it had given off near dusk in a deserted alley off Broadway in downtown. Fortunately, the smoke also reminded of the pan of beans still simmering/burning on the stove. I rushed in to find them partially congealed, but not giving off much smoke, and ate them hurriedly, without enjoyment.

When I returned to the garage, I sprayed the entire engine block with a special protectant, and started detailing the inside. I was starting to feel as if I had finally exhausted most of my nervous energy. Some of that residual stress I then transferred to the question of dinner, which the beans had provoked, as bland as they were. I decided on a simple pasta of olive oil, onions, and garlic, which would provide with a restful sleep before the upcoming uncertainties of Leonard's special assignment.

Thirty-One

When I exited my garage in the morning, Bo was waiting, with a strained look of nonchalance, as if keeping up appearances was proving too much, even for him. He waved at me with eagerness, but there was a slight demoralization in his posture. I dutifully rolled down my window as he approached, holding a knife in his right hand.

“Bo, I want you to get off the street, and-“

He patted my shoulder. “Calm down now, Terry. I’m going to survive no matter what. You know that. So stop fretting. The truth of the matter is that no one is safe any more, not you, not me. By the way, I heard of your little adventure from Leonard. Beats me how you returned to us.”

I revved the engine, as if in affirmation. A couple of crows were squawking and wheeling around amid the telephone poles and wires.

“Listen, Bo. This might be my last offer. I will probably be staying in other places over the next week or so anyway. I guess Leonard didn’t update you on everything, afterall. As Times reporters we’ve been hired by the feds to investigate strange happenings in South Central-“

“Damn, now that’s something I might be interested in.”

“Look, Bo. You know that’s not a possibility. I think you should reconsider your position about my place, though. Get off the street and-“

“I don’t know, Terry. I don’t want to be entombed inside a building when I die. You’ve got to catch my drift. I’m prone to claustrophobia, and you probably aren’t surprised by that, either. If you give me some space, I will definitely survive, one way or the other.”

A streak of light passed overhead, but there was not a following boom of an explosion or another signal of some kind of attack. “What the?”

Bo jumped once. “Damn. Who knows what’s going on. Funny thing, though, is everyone and everything steers clear of me. I guess I don’t look tasty enough-“

“Stop it, Bo. It’s because you carry yourself as if you can’t be hurt. That’s why. But I’m a little worried that your luck might run out in the near future, all the same.”

“I’ll tell you what, Terry. I’ll start sleeping on your roof for the time being. I know you’ve got a cache of weapons up there. You know I occasionally like camping on rooftops. When you return maybe we’ll revisit your more permanent idea. Is that a deal?”
He held out his hand.

I slapped his palm. “Okay, Bo. You know the security combination in case you need to get inside though. Right?”

But he was already nodding his head, as he walked back toward his normal hideout amongst a row of dumpsters at one end of the block, just beyond the old sugar factory.

Inside the Library Tower, Leonard spread a map of South Central across a long conference room table. He had already been briefed earlier in the morning by the feds.

“All right, Terry. This is just a bit of a warm-up. Plans have not been finalized yet. What we do know already, however, is that a large area north and south of Century Blvd. has been where most of the recent action has been concentrated. Unusual spike in violence, even by the recent standards of the city. Insane level of gang activity, black gangs being the most predominant for the area, of course. The red stickies are the most lethal of all. We will investigate those first, then move on through the orange and yellow. What I want you to do right now is just study the street grid. I know you have spent some time in the past down there, so you might be able to make some connections that I might struggle with myself. I am returning to the main briefing area for a couple of hours, which is the final tentative set-up. Then, later this afternoon, we will join the entire crew of feds to receive slightly more detailed instructions.”

My eyes had fastened onto a framed drawing of the Tower, before it was constructed. There was something soothing and unblemished about the simple, finely drawn graphite depiction of the building’s schematics. “I think I’d rather just stare at this for a while.”

Leonard turned at the door. “Oh, that? Yeah, I like it, too. Reminds me of the time it was built. Downtown was just then being reinvigorated by new businesses and tourism. People thought that slaughtered dogs were part of some satanic cult, or a mix of sadistic kids and the homeless. Had no idea, right? But here we are, years later. You know what? Fuck the map for now. Do what you want in here. Take a nap or go into the bar for all I care. Just don’t get too plastered. Because tonight we’ll be off running.”

Thirty-Two

A gigantic, liquid plasma screen had been installed overnight, as well as microphones, since there were approximately fifty people seated around the huge, oval shaped conference table. Light filtered in through the tiny portions at the edges of the huge background window which were not covered by blinds; but the few people in danger of being distracted were feds, who simply pulled out their dark shades to fend off the shards of sun. There was no pretense to a strictly organized meeting, however. Many people were dressed casually, some even in shorts, and every imaginable beverage was displayed on the table, running from shakes to margaritas. And, before the mood settled, there was incessant, playful teasing and berating, even some virtual wrestling-gear-ed rough housing. Leonard and I seated ourselves near the back, and waited for the introductory pleasantries to abate.

“It’s looking wild already, Leonard.” I placed my cola can on the table. Nearby was one of those monstrous 7-11 soda jugs.

Leonard reached into his light jacket pocket and removed his spectacles. As he began to wipe them with a kerchief, he said, “I don’t think we’ll be called on to speak, Terry. I don’t mind saying that I’d appreciate that, in that event, you let me take the lead.”

“Okay, Leonard. I see you’ve already moved into ‘official speak,’ with all the appropriate, business-like phrases. So, yes, in your terms, I will patiently defer to you during the, uh,

proceedings.” I clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’m not planning on trying to steal your thunder in any way.”

A short and trim man in his mid-forties sat down at the head of the table, facing a huge flat screen monitor. He began to fiddle with an illuminated mouse, and smooth the hair above his large ears. When the lights dimmed slightly, he looked up approvingly, and a few of the attendees clapped. He smiled, and cleared his throat. “Good evening to you. For those of you who do not know me, my name is Eric Wolf. I am Deputy Director of the Paranormal Division of the FBI. Since I am not familiar with all of you, either, I will simply welcome you by saying, Thank You, to the L.A. Times staff, the LAPD and Sheriff’s Department and, of course, the State Department and my own FBI. Every one of you has been selected because of your various strengths, uh, your creative capabilities primarily. I have trust that you all have kept abreast of recent developments, at least as well as the average citizen. If you have any detailed questions, please reserve them for after this conference concludes. I say that because I’m sure you will find someone able to answer your question in full. Also, we are definitely pressed for time. I will open with a somewhat general talk on the present circumstances here in L.A. Then, I will ask a few of you to expand.”

A larger version of the map Leonard had given to me appeared on the large screen behind him. “We have been received all sorts of strange signals lately, akin to some of the ones that we

discovered in and around the New Mexico crash site. It has been terribly difficult for our scientists, any one, for that matter, to even make an educated guess about their origins. Calculations have been across the universal spectrum. Literally, I might add. Some connected the signals to Mars, others to Jupiter and Saturn. Our President has reached out to the international community, but they have had wildly varying conclusions drawn from their own data. At this stage, disints have been strangely disappearing from the scene. More of the undead have been surviving, based on detailed analyses from various governmental and private agencies. But here it is confusing, even to the experts. Is this a sign that one level has been somehow self-eradicated, and that we can expect the next in the near future until the whole pestilence burns itself out? Obviously, there is no precedent to work from. We have gone back in time to reassess such disasters as the Black Plague and Cholera outbreaks, to find any sort of clues as to the duration of anything even slightly approaching the virulence we have experienced.”

He paused, and sipped his glass of wine. “After consulting with innumerable experts from many fields, there are no answers, unfortunately. But what is attractive about the local dynamics here in L.A. is that all of the evidence is in a particular area of the city, which enables us to do, under the circumstances, an in-depth kind of study. Until the conclusion of this project, however long it takes, this room will be the

unofficial headquarters. And no, there is not fancy, top-secret name for it. It is simply Interdisciplinary Study. Academic sounding enough, right? At any rate, you will all be formed into a kind of team, as crazy as it might sound, based on your different backgrounds, professional and otherwise. I encourage an open debate. Now, I hope that it will not get too aggressive, but I must stress that, under the strained circumstances that bluntness will be appreciated. I formed a large enough team so that it should be able to survive any inner attrition in its ranks. Of course, there are limits, but, again, the point is that political correctness has no place in this room.”

“I am going to absent myself for an hour or so, and let you all wrangle toward some sort of operative action. In the mean time, I will contact the President and confirm that everyone who was invited appeared. I will also here inject what is probably already obvious to you, the importance of maintaining secrecy. See you all momentarily. He walked out, while the overhead picture quivered.

Thirty-Three

Wolf was surprised to hear that we decided to opt for another building closer to South Central as a more immediate and effective work site. He arranged to have us transported by military choppers to the roof of a defunct Holiday Inn, and immediately started expediting techs toward linking both up via video conference technology. “Just remember, “ he said, “you will be facing more heat down there. So don’t be surprised if you have to come calling here.”

“One last word of caution. Listen carefully to the weapons techs. They have vast experience with the latest in hardware, and have individually tested all of them. So please, do not use anything, even in a rash situation, without at least a brief training session. Use one of the hotel ballrooms for practice, not each other. All right. That’s it.” He set a bottle of champagne on the desk. “It is not difficult, as you can all see, for me to find an excuse to celebrate something. It’s been damn too long.” I could hear his maniacal laughter behind us as we exited.

Leonard and I were the last in line heading up the stairwell to the roof. I noticed that someone had discarded a cosmetics bag on the first landing, and that someone else had placed a large black-and-white sticker on the wall. It read: “Kill The Dead.” As we neared the roof, we had to pass a couple embracing at the

top of the last flight of steps. They were speaking softly to each other: "We'll die together."

We climbed in the last of the three choppers, a bulging faded green airship. Towards the back of the compartment, and on both sides of the tail near the rotor blade, sat two machine gunners, chatting with each other through an isolated link-up. Some acrid smoke was swirling in the air around us, and we heard the screech and thud of a collision one thousand feet below us in the street.

"After you, Leonard." I stood back and gave him the final urge of a shove in the small of his back. I recognized one of the faces as a young State Department staffer, an attractive red head with freckles, but we barely nodded our heads in acknowledgment. The take-off felt sluggish, but in part, it was because the choppers had to stay on low power until they were completely clear of the roof. One of our gunners shot off a few rounds, I suppose to make sure there was not a problematic jam.

Leonard and I could not see much from our seats, and had to interpret the animated gestures of our fellow travelers seated in front of us. As we neared South Central, I saw more fear written on the mostly young faces, jaws clenched and smiles tightened. I noticed that some took note of the safety harnesses and emergency chutes attached to the metal rails of the chopper's inner walls.

“See that disint?” one of the gunners shouted to his counterpart on the other side, while the chopper began its slow descent toward the hotel roof. He adjusted his gun to an acute level.

“You sure? I don’t know if-“

The other gunner fired off one long salvo. “Hah! Got it. We’re sending them a message.”

“What? That we kill everyone?” the other added drolly. “Tamp it down a little, all right? These people don’t have to see how lethal you are. Right?”

The landing was smooth, because the rooftop was wide and flat, unencumbered by the elaborate security network of the Library Tower. The fed Wolf had told us before we left that a special commando unit would arrive an hour or two later, and take command of the hotel tower safety apparatus.

Surprisingly, after the harsh warning tones of our briefing with Wolf, the area was fairly quiet, only periodically erupting in short bursts of gunfire. We were escorted into the elevators, which ran with quiet smoothness as they transported us down to the lobby area.

A worker was busy erasing the last blood stain from the front window, and we could see a barbwire fence and other barricades being quickly erected. “Wolf’s army,” I thought.

Leonard and I were assigned to the same room, on the eighth of the fifteen floors. We had to continue to lug our own luggage,

but only because a complete hotel staff was still being created. Before the elevator doors closed, there was a deep report from the front, and I saw a raggedy figure fall in the near distance. We heard a few subdued cheers, and saw a specialized drone swoop in and gather the body in its mechanical arms, retract, and lift off.

The elevator operator said, “Cheap entertainment, right?” and snickered while he pushed the buttons.

Thirty-Four

Continental breakfast was delivered to our rooms, even as the choppers returned to the roof. Leonard and I had barely spoken, in part because our thoughts must have been the same, with minor exceptions. I busied myself with eating the carved slices of melon and banana, and sat on the bed, scribbling some grotesque drawings on my writing pad. The most recurring image was the dead and living alike wrestling each other while entangled in barbed wire.

The rooftop became a last minute sunning and conference area. The thirty of us sat in a large circle at one corner, behind a large generator, which kept the prying eyes of the chopper pilots and security staff from intruding. Before we could begin we had to wait for a few supersonic jets to pass overhead, which looked like giant, horizontally flying white stars.

Wolf's understudy, Janet Pendergast, the young redhead I had admired the previous day while seated across from her in a chopper, spoke. "Okay, here we are. Just to reiterate our general idea. We will drop down in the general perimeter area of South Central, and start doing investigative work. I realize we're all not sure what that means. Well, here's a go: We will stay in one large team. We had a split vote about whether to split up or remain together. Wolf has rendered the deciding vote in favor of the large team concept. Everyone will carry a firearm of some sort, although half will guard with rifles and shotguns. Two of

you, Riggs and Pendleton,” (here she gestured toward the crewcut men with tattoos draped down their arms) “are the designated sharpshooters. So what is our directive? Well, that has not changed to something specific. If we feel we can, we will retrieve anyone who exhibits characteristics that seem foreign to us-“

Leonard surprised me. “Sounds beyond dangerous. We do not know what we are dealing with, and now we are supposed to just saunter into a war zone area and have our way-“

“No. But this is not a field trip, either. Our surveillance has shown us the past day that lethal activity is down, after extremely high rates the past month. This might be the first, and last chance for an investigation. And, at least at the outset, we will retreat at the end of the day. A more sustained mission is something that Wolf will consider after the initial entry.”

“So this is not a total war mission?” asked a camouflaged former Marine near the center. He had a pulpy right ear.

“No, sir. But I anticipate at least some action during the first phase. The main point of this is to gather facts, and, yes, theories for the outbreak itself, toward some sort of solution, if that is feasible.”

“All right, let’s jump in the choppers. We will be landing on the roof of a former mall, off Imperial Highway. Then we will hop into vehicles. Let’s go.” She strode toward the other side of the

roof with a brisk pace, her athletic body drawing admiring glances.

After a thirty minute flight, our choppers dropped down to the mall roof, where some soldiers were rappelling down the sides, and checking the scopes of rifles. We stepped across the gravel strewn surface, which also had the telltale signs of a recent refurbishing, still drying pools of tar and discarded trowel tools. We did not pause once we had finished descending the steps to the garage, clambering into six Hummers with the requisite mounted machine guns and mortar emplacements.

Some of the soldiers were busy loading different types of fire extinguishers off the commercial loading dock, into the small cargo areas of the huge trucks. I noticed a towering steel crate back in the shadows. “Some type of nuclear bomb?” I thought, making a mental note for the future.

I inwardly cursed, because I was seated in a section of the Hummer that did not provide me with much of a viewing radius, even though I was near the middle. But it happened to be where there was a huge metal panel, protecting the unusually situated gas tank, to guard against rocket attacks. I shook my head at Leonard.

“I can’t see much anyway, Terry. You know, it really doesn’t look too bad. A little more graffiti and trash than normal, and some street urchins, not paying us much mind. That’s really

about it. So don't be disappointed. Not nearly as bad as you or I anticipated. At least for now."

I shook my head. "Something's not right. How can it be this subdued. It's like everyone has, I don't know--"

Leonard leaned forward. "Really lost their minds? Is that what you want to say, Terry? Hey, that is not such a strange idea. An extreme form of mind numbness/mind loss? Everyone's brains fried? Well, if that's the case, I think we'll be in real trouble. Where will the Times readership come from then?"

I struggled to contain my mirth. "You have one twisted sense of humor, Leonard. Why don't you start your own column. Let's call it, well, how about 'Devil's Gallows'? Nice ring to it, right?"

"Not a bad idea, if we get out of this alive. I promise you, if we survive, I'll become your first and last literary agent. You know, have all your old manuscripts undusted for public consumption. I'll never contradict you and--"

The shock of the concussive blast made my vision jagged and blurry at the same time, as the Hummer rolled over. I heard the crash of glass imploding, screams and yells, then complete silence.

Thirty-Five

I heard the sputtering of machine gun fire, but at first could not determine its source. Upside down, people were moaning, shouting, and cursing, and I heard Pendergast's voice over the speaker: "Under fire! I repeat, under fire! One vehicle disabled. We are trying to fight our way back to it, but there seems to be some kind of force field blocking us." I turned my head, and saw one of our machine gunners firing from his upside down position. "Die, motherfuckers! Die!"

We heard another voice: "This is chopper one. All wings en route, Pendergast. Hold tight. We will pick up those that we can. Try to conserve your ammo. That is a directive from Wolf. All will be returned immediately to the Library Tower. Over and out."

"What about us?" someone moaned. "Hey, I know it's tight, but could you pull your finger out of my butt crack? Thanks. It's uncomfortable. But let's not get carried away."

Someone laughed crazily in response. "This is fucking insane. We're being left behind!"

"Hey, not for sure."

"Fuck you! If Hummers cannot get through some freaky force field, how are choppers supposed to do any better?"

"They're going down!" the gunner shouted. "Must be regular hungry disints or something. We might get out of this shit yet!"

There were flecks of white spittle at the corner of his mouth.

“Johnny!” he yelled out to his fellow gunner. “Johnny!”

“Hey, buddy, I think Johnny’s dead. He isn’t moving. I think the spill broke his neck or something.”

Someone was able to find a lighter, and we saw the proportions of our predicament. We were packed in so tightly that, even if we unclipped ourselves from our safety belts, it would be extremely difficult to adjust ourselves to normal, upright positions. Our drivers had been able, however, to find firing positions from their bellies. They fired carefully and only occasionally. “Sit tight back there, everyone,” they said in calming tones. “They seem to be pausing, because we’re kicking their asses! Good shooting back there!”

“You okay, Leonard?”

“I guess. One of my shoulders is sore as hell, might be separated but, otherwise, I should be fine.” I heard him unclip himself. “Terry, I’m going to do a back roll over you, so you lean a bit forward as I do it, and we might be able to get at least one of us free.”

We heard Pendergast’s voice again. “Hummer’s occupants still alive, I repeat, Hummer’s occupants still alive. Choppers must make effort for pick-up. I repeat. This is Janet Pendergast, deputy of Eric Wolf. Attempt pick-up.”

“Hear you loud and clear, Pendergast, but force field will not allow, I repeat, force field too strong to enter their air space. Will

have to pick up others only. Out.” We heard the rotors approaching, but not close enough to give us hope.

“Pendergast, and others. Out of your vehicles quickly and run to choppers. Now! Quick extraction key!”

We heard the rotors of the choppers become faint, cursing our collective fate, and each other, as by the minute more were able to free themselves from their safety belt’s clutches. Our machine gunner was still active, but a little more subdued, counting off his victims as if doing a simple warehouse inventory.

Someone said, “I feel like I’m in a fucking alien spaceship. I want to die outside if it comes to that, not in this fucking steel can.”

“Cut it, all right? We’re all pissed off. Okay? As soon as I’m out of this thing I’m going to shoot the first fucking rotting corpse I see. Don’t think you’re the only one with a deep-seated hatred that can only be relieved one way.”

“All right, enough of the testosterone talk. Let’s focus on getting out of here. It looks like the door will grant us an exit. I don’t see any twisting of the metal. Boost each other toward it if that is what it takes.”

“But, damn, they just left us behind. Just like that-“

“What do you expect, an apology? You heard the transmissions, there is some type of freaky force outside that

they can't get around. You expect them to stubbornly wait until they get blown up, also?

"No, but I still think it was a bit hasty."

Their voices were becoming overwhelmed by the encouraging tones of the people busy freeing the door handle and generally propping each other up. The first shard of sun poked through the opening in the side of the metal, and spontaneous cheers echoed in the small space.

"I'm cover fire until the rest of you are out," said the machine gunner, who was still upside down, as if he found it a more comfortable firing position than the traditional upright one.

Besides the collapsed bodies bleeding on the asphalt, there was no one else present. The light posts hovered overhead, slightly swaying in the strong Santa Anna winds, and there were isolated clumps of confetti on the ground, as if there had been a recent parade. There were three cars parked on the business block, two of them burned out husks.

We gingerly climbed out of the damaged and upturned Hummer, with only fatality within it. No one spoke in the eerie silence.

Thirty-Six

Within an hour everyone had separated. No none had approached us, thus we remained fairly calm. Still, in retrospect, it seemed very strange to Leonard and myself how it happened without people making verbal indications of their plans. It was unnerving to witness pairs shuffling off in separate directions. We noticed some crude drawings of what appeared to be some unique kind of vampire, a towering figure with a blackened face.

I focused most of my attention on finding a car. Since I did not have any tools, I looked into the windows for one that still had the keys in the ignition. This requisite detail made the task much more laborious than it should have been. Yet, finally, I discovered a blue Thunderbird, thick-coated with dust and dirt, but serviceable. I took the wheel before Leonard could argue with me. The engine turned over almost immediately. "Very strange," I thought. It sounded as if I had personally given it a fine tuning.

Our nervous exhaustion had turned into ravenous hunger, so we patronized a burger drive thru, about two blocks north of Century Blvd. A crackly voice came over the speaker.

"Good afternoon, may I take your order?"

It was eerie, as if the vocals had been transported with forced acumen from some unknown place.

"Two giant royals, a large Sprite and a large Coke." I struggled to keep my voice steady, because I was disconcerted.

“That will be \$6.92 at the window.”

The sun was shining brightly in our eyes when we pulled up. A hand was outstretched but the back was turned. Apparently he was speaking temporarily to a co-worker. I was ready to place the money in the large hand, when I noticed the black plastic garbage bags covering the outer windows, and the fingernails, which were black, red, and raggedy, as if some bloody mouth had chewed on them.

I pulled my hand away and the vampire turned sharply around. The face was gray, and had splotched of black nothingness, from which yellow mucus oozed out. His afro was matted with small pieces of flesh.

“Motherfucker,” Leonard exhaled. “Lean back, Terry.” He had pulled out his Glock automatic, while the vampire began to sway from side to side, the neck making small, cracking sounds. Leonard aimed, and unlocked the trigger safety, but the vampire had already fallen.

I ran through red lights, but not to make a point. I was nauseated and terrified at the same time. Periodically, I stopped the car, and dry-heaved out of my window. I breathed the stale air, which only increased the severity of my chest heavings.

Leonard muttered, “Fuck, should torch the whole motherfucking place like that young gun suggested. Drive thru

from Hell, Taco Hell.” He laughed maniacally, “This is L.A., the place that can turn the best people into animals.”

“Hey, Leonard,” I said loudly.

He continued to mutter. “The point of execrable death turned into nothing is, in fact, nothing. The purpose of nothing is nonentical. Shit is coming down at a rapid rate, indeed, brother. Smell the rotting roses.”

“Leonard!”

“What?” His face was quivering a bit, but he had regained his hold.

“You didn’t throw away the cash, did you? I don’t know if we’ll be able to find a working ATM around here?”

“Oh, yeah, Terry. I’ve got it. Sorry for, you know—“

“No need to. My heart is still in my throat. I think I’ll have nightmares the rest of my life from that. I just keep wondering about the giant figure we keep seeing. I wonder if it’s some sort of mythical gang member or something. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“Well, the world has turned upside down, especially since you returned. No, I’m not blaming you, brother, I’m just stating the obvious. Things are speeding up, and there seems no way to slow them down.

The smell of rotting flesh had begun to subside in my nostrils, but my mouth was still acidic. “Hey, Leonard, how about at least something to drink? How about a few sodas at a drive thru?”

Leonard laughed. “You’re a crazy bastard, all right.

Century came back into focus. We passed Normandie, where a woman was giving birth on the sidewalk. Two women were holding her down, and propping her legs open. They were nuns, or, at least dressed as nuns. Within a few minutes a blue van appeared, and two more nuns jumped out, and quickly helped the pregnant woman into the back.

The van made a U-turn, and tore off. I turned and followed without thinking. I was too intrigued to miss a chance to do some investigative work.

‘Are you sure you know what you’re doing?’

“No, but this is the kind of mystery that we are supposed to be tracking?”

“All right, but I think we’re expected to save ourselves first, man, especially considering everyone took off on their own. Do you think they’re interested in anything other than making it back to the Tower? No, that’s what your eyes are saying even though your mouth is staying closed.”

“Look, Leonard, it’s just a hunch, but there is something pulling us forward. It’s worth a look.”

We followed the blue van onto the 405 Freeway. The splintered remains of a DO NOT ENTER FREEWAY CLOSED sign was spread across the on-ramp.

Ahead, the van swerved, but I adjusted easily, making it around the road obstruction easily. A naked man was laying, spread-eagle, on the freeway, his spine on a painted lane divider. As we passed he casually turned on his side, smiled, and gave us the thumbs-up.

Leonard laughed. “S.o.b, indeed. Crazyer than you, too, I might add.”

“Yep, stuntman of the 405.”

When we reached the 10-405 interchange, we had to slow, because there were about ten cars blocking various portions of lanes, their dead occupants either on the hoods, windshields, or pavement itself. It looked like a freeway demolition derby. The thick freeway supports looked to have rammed at least one hundred times. It reminded me of cocaine experiments on animals, where they kept returning to the mind control of pleasurable misery. Here, it was as if one person had taken the initiative, and the others could not help but follow. But this thought also piqued interest in my own attraction to the blue van, and an eventual outcome.

“Shit!” Leonard shouted.

“What?”

“Look in your mirrors.” There was a highway patrol cruiser approaching us quickly. With its lights flashing, it was quickly alongside us.

“Damn, Terry, it’s Texan. How the hell did they make it all the way here?”

The driver was motioning to me to pull over, but I was not willing. The navigator raised a shotgun, as I swerved away. They came from behind, and came in on my side. When they maneuvered again to the other side after I swerved once more, Leonard was prepared to use his gun. He unloaded, and they ducked. Their car screeched toward the left retainer wall, but pulled out in time, and used its larger engine to close the gap once more. The jostling began again. I noticed they both had red beards, “twins of a sort, I thought, or twins, period.”

A loud blast and a smaller one followed, and the back end of our car started to slide out. I tried to recover control, but we slid into a group of bushes off the side of the road.

We were in shock. Then there were two shotguns pointed at us, and a Texan drawl.

“Get the hell out.”

We walked onto the shoulder. Leonard looked more frustrated than scared. He had told me that he could not think of a worse way of dying than being shot by a crazed white man. “Just like Martin,” he had said.

“You two had better keep steady, or you’ll be off your feet in no time.”

Both laughed. Their teeth were rotted out, black-and-yellow. “They are just as evil as the Andersons twins,” I thought, “but in

a more crude way. Why twins again? Is this my everlasting karma? All the twins I knew up until the Andersons were good, so is this simply some type of fatal counterbalance?" There was, however, a peculiar relief that they were not wearing cowboy hats.

Thirty-Seven

Their uniforms were stained, and too short for their gangly bodies. I made this observation as slyly as I could. Leonard, meanwhile, looked at them from top to bottom with undisguised disgust. I might have had the idea to warn him about disrespect, tutoring him on the cowboy's code, but he was of an entirely different mind and, besides, there was no time. They had him, and he did not believe that they were debating whether to kill him or not; on the first premise that their minds did not have the ability to properly debate. Their minds were made up about him. He was black, therefore he would not be spared. I was white, therefore I might survive, if they saw fit. I would simply try to bide us some time.

“That was a nice recovery you made back there.”

“What do you mean, fool?”

“I mean, how you got away from the wall and got right back on our tail.”

“No, I disagree. It was a great recovery, not just a good one. We've been in tougher spots since we got out of the slammer, right, Baby Brother?”

“Don't call me Baby Brother. Afterall, I'm bigger than you are.”

These were a dangerous clan of people, those who forget their violence. Because when they remembered their roots, there was bound to be no exercise of control.

“Well, I’ve always been the one to get us out of jams, just like the one with the Deputy, where he was ready to cut your little throat.”

It was a slap in the face. “You two ever seen a man with his throat slit? Baby Brother, maybe you’d like to describe it to them.”

“Well, it’s kind of hard to, even boring as I see it, but then I’ve never seen a black man with his throat slit.” He smiled.

Leonard shook for just a minute, then wound himself tight. His muscles bulged. I was sure that if a knife was brought against him, it would be turned against the assailant.

“Do it then, Baby Brother.” It was a challenge. This was surely uncharted territory for Baby Brother. He fidgeted, and licked his lips. He reached for the knife, staring at Leonard, then thought better.

“Do it, damn, you know better than to talk about something without doing it. I’ll make you a laughing stock from one corner of Texas to the other. You don’t fool with business, and this is definitely business.”

It was an ultimatum. Baby Brother brought out the knife once more, pushing away his doubts.

Big Brother pointed his shotgun squarely at me. “Now don’t interfere, or you’ll be dead, too.”

Baby Brother hesitated for one moment, then slashed wildly at Leonard, who ducked, grabbed, spun him, wrenched his hand, and forced the knife into Baby Brother's sternum.

A blast blew out the back of Big Brother then, and he fell dead to his face. A black man wearing a red suit and dark shades motioned back up the freeway with his .44 Magnum, where the blue van rested.

Thirty-Eight

There was no sign of the nuns, or the baby. Leonard and I looked at each other in mounting shock, while the van headed toward the Hollywood Hills.

Our black rescuer sat beside two other nattily dressed enforcer types. “You two don’t know what just happened, do you? Well, let me fill you in. Our boss knew of your whereabouts, and planted magnets, such as the other blue van, to draw you in. And don’t worry about the rest of your team. They are safely back at the Library Tower.”

Leonard spoke first. “And who is this boss of yours?”

“The same one you saw pasted on signs all over South Central. His name is simply Blood. No one knows where he came from. He just appeared on our streets. He doesn’t tell of us of his plans. Things just seem to happen around him. He is somewhere around eight feet tall, although his head seems too small for his body.” One of the two enforcers beside him chuckled. “Don’t laugh. By the way, in case you’re wondering, sunlight doesn’t affect him. He’s an enigma to everyone, but the black gangs, the Bloods and Crips, especially mistrust him.”

I spoke. “What about earlier? The announcement of some type of force field?”

“Really? Well, I wouldn’t be surprised if that was Blood’s trick, also. But, again, we do not know much about him ourselves. He is kind to us under him in a cold kind of way,

keeps us from going hungry and having to fight off walking corpses. Hey, you won't learn things about him tonight that even we still don't know. I guess he thinks that since you are writers for the Times, he might want to tell his story to you. But don't hold me to that."

Sunset Blvd. was overgrown, because of a lack of gardeners. Aesthetic grounds had turned into lush jungles. Vines, shrubbery, and tree limbs jutted out into the street, making the driver hold to the center.

Somehow the surest proof of some calamity was when the wealthy abandoned their palatial homes. The huge rumor was that they had made a mass exit to the airport, where outbound flights had already been suspended. So they had sought to make the airport their own personal castle, replete with gambling, aerobics, and sexual fantasy. TV crews had recently tried to politic their way in, but were turned away at gunpoint. The next rumor was that a large group of the Crips had broken in with grenades, shot all the men, taken all the children to a mountain retreat, and the women to a love nest somewhere in Compton.

We took a left on Beverly Glen, and a right on Greendale, which became Brooklawn. We parked in the driveway of modest two story ranch house. A huge pack of friendly dogs came out to greet us, accompanied by the plaintive crying of hundreds of cats.

Thirty-Nine

Blood sat in the study, mummified by whimsical trails of incense smoke. He was a sculpture. I did not notice the slightest glitch of movement in his pose. He was wearing a black tuxedo with the collar turned up, and dark shades. His black pallor was also slightly gray. Even sitting down his knees were up near his chest.

Leonard and I eyed each other apprehensively. Blood nodded his head slowly, and the group of bodyguards left his side.

“Welcome.” His voice was soft but sharp. I had an inkling that when he shouted, eardrums were punctured. He was appeared to be ten feet away, but his arm extended to such a ridiculous length that he had no difficulty in shaking our hands. His own hands were gigantic, smothering my own.

He stood slowly, and his gigantic length made it appear that he was growing, literally, in front of us. He stood, with a small head in comparison to the rest of his body. He looked like half praying mantis, half man. It was daytime, and he looked a little weak.

“Take a seat.” He motioned to us. We looked at each other, our feet, then behind us. We had been so mesmerized that we had not noticed the huge leather couch.

“Thank you.” We smiled sheepishly and sat down.

“You’re welcome.” He lowered himself easily, without using his arms. Now we were finally approaching the same eye level.

“Welcome to my abode, gentlemen. And excuse the way I talk. I have learned at an alarming rate, and some of my phrases might be a little out of date for earthlings. By the way, my skin color has made your, uh, black people call me things like brother. But now it has changed to Blood, maybe because one of their gangs call their members Bloods.”

“I’ll try to be informative. I was ordered down from another galaxy to try to restore order. Because, otherwise, your virus would eventually wipe out humanity. I visited your own Eric Wolf earlier today, to make sure your fellow people arrived safe there. I have already spread a serum, which will eradicate your virus in a matter of weeks. But, frankly, is that how you say it? Anyway, you have probably gathered that I entered your planet in what you call New Mexico. I will expire here, because my immune system is already weakened. I could not survive transport back to my home. But that is fine. I will have been of some positive service to the universe.”

“I have grown to appreciate what you call cats especially during my short time here on your planet. That is why I have them around. Sorry to keep this short, but I have to prepare myself for the dinner guests. Perhaps you would like to spend some time resting in the yard in hammocks with felines?”

It was then that I noticed how drained I felt. Standing up, my legs felt rubbery, barely responding.

Dark. Black. I awoke suspended in the air under a fool moon. Hordes of dogs and cats chased each other around the yard. Many cats gathered in an oak tree, and a towering figure stood over a pond feeding the reverential koi fish.

He must have known that I was intently watching him, but did not seem to mind. He seemed to be in a slightly casual mood, although his posture was still perfect. It made it seem like his arm had become unhinged, and now, as a separate entity, waved sustenance into water. The heads of the fish came up red circles breaking the surface.

Blood turned around and walked over to Leonard and myself, petting God's creatures along the way. His effortless glide must have only been five steps.

Leonard stirred out of his sleep, rubbing his eyes.

"So now you know," said Blood, and I could see his glass eye. "As a writer you'll have a good story." He patted me on the back, and went inside.

"What was that about, Terry?"

"He knows I know."

Leonard shrugged. "Know what, Terry?"

"That his end is near, as he told us earlier."

Dinner was served. Everyone but Blood had a plate full of ravioli and chicken parmigiana, with a Caesar salad on the side. From time to time he drank from a tall goblet, and in respect to

the company wiped his mouth with a napkin after each sip. And, in deference to him, and perhaps their stomachs, everyone put their heads down when he imbibed some strange and clear, gelatinous mixture.

We sat at a long, clear glass table, underneath a chandelier with crystal bats clinging onto the delicate strands. I was fascinated by it, but tried to be sly in my observation. I had never seen one anything like it. Were they(the bats) adornments that had been attached, or had they been part of it since the beginning? Where was it from? When was it made? Perhaps Blood had sculpted the crystal with his own hands?

Even the table was odd. Its legs were so thin that it appeared it was precariously balanced, and could quickly fall if they began to crack. Or was Blood literally suspending it with his eye which was, afterall, made of some type of glass also?

I chanced to look at him, and he did not respond. He was clearly occupied with the many minds at once. Sometimes his eyes would blink spasmodically while he took a large sip from his goblet.

His guests were underground leaders from across the country. They were dressed in red-and-white tuxedos. Only Blood, Leonard, myself, and John, who was clearly Blood's deputy, wore black-and-white.

A tray full of liquor and glasses was brought out, and everyone reached for his preferred label as Blood looked on paternally.

The old servant returned whistling, and casually retrieved the tray.

John spread a large map of the U.S. out on the table. It was covered with green, yellow, and red dots. Most of the guests' faces scowled in response.

“What is this, Blood?” one said.

“You should know what it is unless you are blind.”

“Yes, but what do the dots mean?”

“They're just like a stoplight, green is go, red is stop, and yellow is a guess. I want to make sure that, once the serum takes effect, and things start to return to a normal state, that you are all responsible to this agreement.”

There were a few chuckles, but they were quickly stared down. The majority of the people at the table were far from amused by the display. Blood just kept drinking his noxious mixture.

“You come out of nowhere, and help us. Okay, we appreciate it. But now you want assurance about what we'll do after you're gone? How are supposed to-“

“If you don't agree, a replacement will be sent down, and his enforcement will be harsher than mine.”

“Blood, you're from somewhere else, but look at yourself in the mirror. You look a lot more like us. Not like the white people you decided to protect against us. And those people never gave a damn about us to begin with.”

“You’re like Malcolm X on the wrong side. You seem to know everything about us even though you just arrived.”

“He’s right, and you know, even the Bible says things have to get real bad before they can get good again.”

Blood smiled, but it was not affectionate. Even my blood ran cold. “Have you ever read the Bible?”

“Well, no, in fact, but my Mama has told me all about it, the apocalypse and such.”

“Well, then how do you expect to interpret its message? You want to excuse yourself for your evil?”

He was making some fun at their expense, and they were unsure about how to craft an appropriate response. Finally their unofficial spokesman, an older criminal entrepreneur from Detroit, came to their aid. “Look, Blood, you’re a complete mystery to us. That’s what makes us so nervous around you. Now, most of us did not get ourselves to college, but we have more street smarts than any black preppy. We might not be good at philosophy, we are Bloods and Crips, but we proved our wisdom by taking over when the vampires started to vanish. You’ve got your white people now, Blood, we are not contesting that anymore. All we want from you now is to just let us build up some strong black communities.”

“You actually expect me to believe you on that?”

“Yes. We are committed to stopping the drugs and getting our brothers into school. We are going to put a lot of money into

building new places to live, medical centers, and schools, of course.”

“Okay, but it will happen as laid out on the map. I have to leave you with assurance that that is what will occur. Otherwise, I will have to indicate that a replacement might be needed in the near future.”

The spokesman stood up. “Let’s go, brothers. Blood is being a fool. His black skin hides his whiteness.”

They made a big racket getting out of their chairs. They threw gang signs as they left, and treated the front door rudely. It shuddered on its hinges.

Blood shook his head. “I wish people would not slam doors.”

Blood walked up to Leonard, who was checking his gun. “There will be no need for that. You’ll see.”

“Blood, why tonight?” John interrupted. “You think they’re that stupid?”

“Well, let me put it to you this way, John. It’s an expression I learned a few seconds ago. They are like animals. They have a strong scent of something, and they have to return to it.”

John laughed. He turned to us. “The scent of Blood is strong, right? No pun intended.” He turned back to Blood. “Listen, how much help will you need?”

“None, absolutely none, my friend. You are going to live, and I am going to, die, I guess, as you humans call it.”

Death. Blood. Bloods and Crips. Blood was controlled anger. He started taking deep breaths, pressuring steam into death. Death is not evil, only killing is.

John was unconvinced. He had a stockpile of grenades on the table, along with a horde of firearms. There was a note of triumph on his smooth, caramel-colored face. "If they get past you, Blood, only then will I use these," he had reasoned.

Blood breathed deeply. "You're returning to your roots."

"And you?" said John.

"To your earth itself, my brother. My remains cannot make it back to my galaxy.

There was a heavy wind outside. When Blood wiped his brow, the dogs in the back started barking. Blood's sweat was the pungent smell of insects. His oval face was expectant in a strangely calm way. His bony legs carried him outside.

Blood started to whistle, and a dense chorus of finches suddenly appeared in the oak trees overhead. The sound of machines could be heard. Angry men in machines were returning.

Leonard and I stood in the doorway with John, who held a machine gun.

The Bloods and Crips advanced in a single long line. They wore black trench coats. Their shotguns were pointed at Blood, as their legs strode forward inexorably.

Blood just stood whistling, arms folded across his chest, with the birds twittering above him.

They cocked their shotguns in unison, scowling at Blood. Somewhere in back a dog howled.

They fired. Blood fell. He turned blue. They fired again. He turned red. They suddenly disintegrated. Their ashes drove the twittering birds out of the trees.

Blood's remains, a shimmering red light, entered the earth.

END