

PREDATOR & PREY EXECUTIONER



GHERBOD FLEMING

VAMPIRE
THE MASQUERADE

HUNTER
THE RECKONING

BOOK SIX OF SIX

PREDATOR & PREY

EXECUTIONER

No Turning Back

Douglas Sands wants his old life back. He wants to salvage his crumbling marriage. He wants to walk down the street without knowing that some of the people around him are not human. He wants to ignore the ghost of his dead son that calls to him at night. Is that so much to ask? Apparently so.

Julia and Nathan see the monsters too. They've taken up the lives of hunters—lives that tend to be tragically short. Julia won't stop—*can't* stop—until she finds her own son. Nathan feels the need to give meaning to the sacrificed lives of so many of his friends. But the line between friend and enemy sometimes blurs, and with it the distinction between predator and prey.



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EXECUTIONER

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—G.F.



EXECUTIONER

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Part One: Walls

Chapter One

Nathan James rose at the crack of noon, the mid-January gloom keeping the day gloomy. As he got up, he bumped his elbow against the desk that was wedged against his cot. Even when he was the only person in the house, he slept in this room, lost among the monitors, keyboards, hard drives, dedicated servers stacked against the wall, and the miles of CAT5 cables and wires that snaked throughout the entire affair like the entrails of some metastasizing, electronic beast. He stood, stretched his neglected muscles, and tried to remember the last time he'd been outside. *If I was white*, he thought, *I'd be so pale I'd glow in the dark*. Slowly, stiffly, he made the circuit of the computer equipment, pressing the necessary power buttons.

Jason had once complained about the separate power-ups. "Can't you, you know, like, hook all this stuff up together? One button and, *bing*, you're up and running?"

"Sure. If I wanted to," Nathan had said. "And then the first time the evil computer genius working with the guys in the black helicopters breaches my security network and zaps a power spike through here, the whole system goes up in smoke."

"But you got, like, programs and stuff to keep that from happening."

"Yes, I do. But this is called hardware redundancy. I have everything segregated. It's a backup for the software security. Can't have too many backups. Redundancy is a necessary evil. Maybe so much so that it becomes a positive good."

"Yeah, whatever. So that's why I gotta use three different passwords before I log on to bigmellons.com?"

"That is why."

I just hope that you've gone to a better place, Jason, Nathan thought. A place where you only need one password to log on to bigmellons.com. Nathan pondered that a moment longer and decided that, no, Heaven must be a place without passwords—because a place where every password was secure could only qualify as Hell.

While the system booted, he shuffled to the kitchen and started coffee brewing. Out of habit, he tried to do everything quietly. Normally, there was almost always *someone* asleep in the house. The life that he and his friends had chosen was not one that included neckties and nine-to-five workdays. In fact, they worked a lot of nights. That seemed to be the time when their “clients” were most active. Like cockroaches. Mulling over just how dangerous these particular cockroaches tended to be, Nathan took care of his minimal wake-up routine—coffee, piss—and then planted himself back at the computer. Still rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he cycled through a few of the mundane Web sites that he kept up with on a regular basis. The pages loaded one after another, but he paid only cursory attention to the stream of headlines and stock prices. Having been reminded of Jason so soon after waking up, Nathan was uncomfortably aware of the palpable emptiness of the house. The others, unlike Jason at least, were merely out of town, hiding out until police interest in their recent activities cooled down a bit. He'd spoken with Hetger on the phone, and they would be back before too long, probably no longer than a week or two, but still Nathan couldn't seem to shake the sense of doom, the increasingly smothering pressure, that weighed upon him. His friends were in exile, Jason and Albert were dead, while Nathan sat safe at home.

We each bring different things to this war, he told himself. What I learn online saves lives. Some lives,

not all of them. Some of the people they'd lost, Nathan didn't even like, but he felt the sting all the same. Human lives snuffed out, with cause or needlessly, but maybe they wouldn't have been lost if he had done a better job, if he had *learned more*. Answers were out there if only he could figure out where to look, if he could figure out what were the right questions to ask in the first place. Lord knew that hunter-net was an untidy work in progress. The anonymous forum was full of static, misinformation, bickering and stubborn wrongheadedness, but even so, there were pearls to be found among the swine. He just had to look harder.

No amount of self-flagellation, though, was going to bring back Jason or Albert or any of the others. In fact, in this line of work, the thought of anyone coming back was all too disturbing. Better to picture the former hunters at peace.

Eventually, Nathan worked his way around to his email. His gopher software, programmed to round up messages from a half-dozen anonymous accounts and deposit them into a tidy queue, surprisingly returned with only one new message. He recognized the user ID: "Muckraker."

"What have you got for me today?" Nathan wondered aloud. This might be something suitable to pique his interest, even just having gotten up. Besides whatever actual goodies that Muckraker sent, his messages additionally served to provide clues—sketchy or perplexing as they might be—about something else that pricked Nathan's curiosity: Muckraker's identity. Nathan thought of him as male, but even that convention was nothing more than supposition. In his emails, Muckraker consistently used *he* for a third-person indefinite pronoun, which *might* mean that he was male, but Nathan wasn't willing to bet on such a tenuous guess. Questions

about Muckraker more important than gender remained unanswered, however. Who was he? Who, and what? At present there was no way to know. Nathan knew his electronic correspondent only by user ID, and Muckraker knew Nathan only as "Sugardaddy." Today's note made Nathan wonder that much more. It began:

fyi, sugardaddy. here's the proof!
attached files gleaned from synsol server via
ir coc

Proof. Nathan scoffed. His idea of proof and Muckraker's didn't always jibe. What little Nathan did know about Muckraker was that he was an Internet journalist who ran a little online rag called *The Wake-Up Call*. That was how they had gotten in touch initially. A few weeks earlier, Nathan had noticed a relatively obscure tech company named Synthetic Solutions that was showing an unusual amount of interest in Iron Rapids—an unusual amount being *any*. Iron Rapids, Michigan was not an up-and-coming hotbed of the new techno-economy. Quite the opposite. It was a decaying soon-to-be corpse of the old industrial economy. So when Synthetic Solutions, listed on the Nasdaq as SNSL but known in trade press as SynSol, bought up the long-vacant Hadley plant downtown, Nathan had grown curious. After a little poking around, curiosity had turned to suspicion. Nothing he could quite put his finger on, certainly nothing he could prove, but something didn't smell right. He had compiled what he did know about SynSol and the situation in Iron Rapids and sent the information to two Web sites that would be frequented by potentially interested

parties: hunter-net and *The Wake-Up Call*. Shortly thereafter, Muckraker had contacted him.

There was a thin line that Nathan had long prided himself on not having crossed. On the one side stood the enlightened individual who was aware of the more sinister creatures that stalked the night unbeknownst to the oblivious masses, folks Nathan referred to as "sleepers." On the other side stood the conspiracy nut. Muckraker, it seemed, had crossed that line.

He had come on gradually enough, sussing out Nathan's views through a series of correspondences regarding SynSol and Iron Rapids:

*you may be on to something Sugardaddy.
multinationals CANNOT be trusted to act in
accordance with the public good!*

But his emails gradually shifted from dialog to near-diatribes:

*the public geist is merely another tool of
intellectual and spiritual bondage! if the
masses do not believe it to be true, then it
cannot be (BE—in the basic, existential sense
of the word)!*

And soon, instead of discussing Nathan's suspicions, Muckraker was holding forth on the collective unconscious, the nature of reality, and topics that were similarly esoteric and far-fetched—and *that* from Nathan's perspective as a man who believed undeniably in the existence of vampires and ghosts.

The real problem for Nathan came when he found himself beginning to believe Muckraker.

If vampires and ghosts preyed unnoticed among the masses, why not a shadowy cabal of nefarious techno-villains attempting to short-circuit free will? Which was less believable? But Nathan had *seen* zombies with his own eyes; one friend had been killed by a ghost, another by a vampire. Did Muckraker *know* his accusations were true, or was he blowing smoke? Nathan, tongue-in-cheek and in his best Saturday matinee parlance, had replied at one point to the webzine proprietor's emails:

and these diabolical fiends are bent on nothing short of world domination?!?!

Expecting an angry or caustic retort, Nathan was chilled by the response when it came from Muckraker, seemingly devoid of humor:

exactly

That had given Nathan pause. Another fanatic. Just what he needed. As if the hotheads on hunter-net weren't enough, as if living with Clarence weren't enough! Despite the misgivings, though, Muckraker dangled tantalizing bits of information, usually with the flair of a tabloid headline whether within the pages of *The Wake-Up Call* or in his email:

the Hadley plant was scheduled to go up for public auction as part of a creditor foreclosure but was exempted by special municipal action. coincidence? or government-corporate conspiracy? amicus briefs were filed by coc. who's pulling the strings?!

Some such claims Nathan had been able to confirm independently. Muckraker sprinkled enough fact to string him along, but how much was fiction? And to what end? Was Muckraker trying to sucker Nathan in? There had been a few instances on hunter-net of individuals who were part of the problem—monsters, inhuman creatures—trying to pass themselves off as hunters, disseminating misleading information, getting people killed. Could this be that same sort of case? Or, Nathan wondered, if the mysterious journalist wasn't one of *them*, could he be one of *us*?

Nathan responded with care, dropping the occasional subtle clue as to what he was, what he had become: imbued, a hunter.

*there are so few who see things the way
that we do. really SEE things.*

If Muckraker understood, he didn't let on. Either his responses to Nathan's emails were his version of an online poker face, or he was completely wrapped up in his epistemological quest for truth and freedom. Nathan expressed enough interest to keep the exchange going, but after weeks he still was left with no proof of vast technological conspiracies other than the impassioned treatises of an anonymous online pen pal—which meant no proof at all.

Until today.

*fyi, sugardaddy. here's the proof! attached
files gleaned from synsol server via ir coc*

Nathan scanned the shorthand without a second thought: *ir coc*, Iron Rapids Chamber of Commerce. His eyes raced back and forth as he scrolled down the

screen. This was it. This was where Muckraker took all of his abstract paranoia and Nathan's concerns about Iron Rapids and tied them together. The shadowy cabal—that was who Muckraker claimed was behind everything, and the files he'd sent would prove it. Nathan skimmed over the rest of the message then opened the first file, which his virus scan cleared.

His eyes narrowed. What he was looking at seemed authentic—which didn't mean that it was, he kept reminding himself. Much of the document was a formal business plan by which Synthetic Solutions proposed to establish a corporate presence in Iron Rapids, tame stuff, courting local political leaders and influential industrialists. Interspersed with business plan material, though, were what appeared to be lines of code, access or security encryption of some type. Following the coded insertions came sections of a different sort: instructions and explanations that Nathan didn't completely understand, all about protocols and medical or psychological procedures to be performed on the various business leaders mentioned in the earlier sections. Definitely not part of a normal business lobbying strategy. It didn't even seem like an outright plan of graft. The individuals involved weren't being bribed so much as maybe hypnotized or... As the thought crossed Nathan's mind, he involuntarily envisioned how Muckraker would have conveyed the same idea a bit more sensationally on his web page: **REPROGRAMMED!!!**

Nathan cursed under his breath. "Man, what the hell did you send me?" *If this stuff is on the level... if Muckraker didn't doctor it up to serve his purposes...*

That was as far as he'd gotten when the screen went haywire. The words and images suddenly scrambled, flying through unintelligible sequences like a slot machine gone crazy. Beside the monitor,

the hard drives began whirring and sputtering. Nathan's homegrown security software, *Sector-Rite*, kicked into high gear, attempting to track the relevant IP address.

Surely Muckraker had scanned the files for problems too, but they'd both missed something—something not quite like anything Nathan had seen before. *Or else*, Nathan thought angrily, *he set me up!*

The hard drives' whirring grew faster, faster, now making unhealthy grating sounds as well. No comprehensible text was visible on the screen any longer, only flashing lines of code streaming across by the nanosecond. Error boxes blinked on and off. Nathan caught brief glimpses of unwelcome phrases—*illegal operation... program terminated... not responding*—fleeting warnings, there and gone before he could even attempt to address the problems they proclaimed with such urgency. Then the keyboard and mouse stopped responding.

"Oh, hell."

Nathan spun his roller chair to another terminal and punched in the code to give him access to the afflicted drive. That keyboard froze as well. The mouse still worked for moving the pointer, but clicking did nothing. He rolled to a third terminal, killed the operating system, and hurriedly fed in DOS commands to shut down the entire system. If he could contain whatever rogue code had ridden in on Muckraker's attachments...

No response. He typed commands to check the software firewall. It was gone.

"No. No! No!"

The hard drives' manic whirring had evolved into high-pitched whines. The first monitor reverted to a test pattern then went black. Nathan tried several more code shortcuts to regain control of his systems,

but now the computers were not recognizing his passwords. Cold sweat trickled down the side of his face. The DOS interface vanished, replaced by a scan program Nathan had never seen before.

Reformatting hard drives, it told him matter-of-factly, as the blue bar inched across the screen.

CTRL-ALT-DELETE. CTRL-ALT-DELETE. CTRL-ALT-DELETE. Nothing. The screen went completely blue, then flashed: *General Protection Fault*.

"Damn it! What the hell?"

Smoke began pouring from the hard drive casings, accompanied by loud *pop pop-pop* sounds. Nathan spun and reached to cut the power. Before he reached the surge protector, the primary CPU exploded. Fragments of plastic casing and melted RAM sprayed across the room. The server vibrated, while various printers spewed paper onto the floor. Other pieces of equipment powered up of their own accord, and nothing showed the least interest in responding or even acknowledging Nathan's commands. He started yanking cables out of machines, trying to physically preserve whatever he could from the foreign code that was racing rampant through his system. Twice power cables that he jerked from the wall shocked him. He felt his eyes rolling up into his head but resisted the lure of unconsciousness.

By the time it was over, he stood in the midst of a jumble of electronic slag, video cards and motherboards scattered among blackened plastic and other computer carrion. Acrid smoke assaulted him, coating his nose and throat, burning his eyes. Nathan stared blankly through the haze at the aftermath. "My baby," he muttered, shaking his head weakly in disbelief, a tear finding its way down across his smudged face. "My baby."

Muckraker was going to hear about this. Of that, he could be damn sure.

Chapter Two

"Please, be seated," said Marion Adrock, prince of all Michigan.

Laurence Maxwell did as he was bid. It was that very tendency which explained his long service as sheriff to Adrock. Maxwell's predecessor had labored, briefly, under the misconception that the prince desired a counselor and confidant. Adrock confided in no one and sought no Kindred's counsel. Maxwell sat stiffly, formally, perched upon the edge of the seat rather than settled in to it. Following the manner of his prince, Maxwell wore a tailored suit, though one more contemporary in style and cut than Adrock's, one less likely to attract notice among the mortal population. The sheriff's duties required that he mix with the kine on occasion, a situation to which Adrock seldom subjected himself any more.

The prince sat behind a large wooden desk. Maxwell's desk. The sheriff had taken over this office suite—at Adrock's direction, of course—after the lamentable exile of Calvin Bainbridge, former seneschal to Prince Adrock. Officially, Bainbridge, like his co-conspirators against the prince, were now the vanguard of what some night would be a glorious incursion by those Kindred faithful to the prince into the Sabbat controlled territory of Detroit. Theoretically, Bainbridge was building a network of contacts, laying the groundwork for that triumphant invasion. Unofficially, realistically, he had been banished, sentenced to ignominious destruction at the hands of the barbarous hordes of the Sabbat. Considering all that, Maxwell had no qualm with the prince appropriating the desk, this office. Adrock owned the Gideon Building, after all. The city itself was his, seat of his influence. And an astute sheriff's duty was to serve, not to find fault with those of higher

station—or at least not to comment on those faults. Eventually, Adrock would slip. His grasp of power would fail him. Whether that happened this century or one of the next few, an observant, *loyal* Kindred close at hand might well reap the benefit. Timing was the difficulty. Bainbridge had thought he'd smelled weakness too, after all.

"What have you learned?" Adrock asked. A single desk lamp cast deep shadows upon his hawkish face.

"I have spoken with Theodore at length," Maxwell said. "His clansman, Finian, is indeed destroyed."

"The explosion in the sewers."

"Theodore does not believe that the explosion itself destroyed his clansman, but that it is related."

The prince considered that for several minutes as silence grew heavy. "What do you believe?" he eventually asked.

"I believe," Maxwell said, "that Theodore has sufficient reason to be cooperative in this matter. I informed him, as you allowed, that should he prove able to answer certain questions definitively that I would not feel compelled to probe into others matters—namely whether he had knowledge that a certain clansman of his was hunting in territory reserved exclusively for the prince. Theodore seemed receptive to the suggestion, and has proved quite helpful."

"As well a loyal subject should."

Maxwell nodded. "I explained to him our concern, that the destruction of a Kindred is no trifling matter, and that the public spectacle involved in this particular case creates other difficulties, such as potential threat to the Masquerade itself."

"Which cannot and will not be tolerated," Adrock said gravely.

Again, Maxwell nodded assent. He debated how much more to disclose. Secrets could work to his advantage, but if discovered, the fact of his withholding could cast doubt upon his loyalty. "Apparently," the sheriff said, "Finian had spoken to Theodore of a certain mortal who had been something of an annoyance."

"An annoyance?" The prince's eyebrow raised the slightest bit.

"Yes, my prince. This mortal... as Theodore tells it, somehow perceived Finian despite Finian's desire to the contrary. Finian was no rank neonate and should have been able to conceal himself from any mortal. Theodore believes also that Finian went so far as to confront the mortal, though Finian would not speak directly about that."

"For fear of having killed a mortal in my domain, or from embarrassment at having been bested by a kine, do you think?"

"Something about this mortal unnerved Finian, and now Finian is destroyed." Maxwell shrugged. "But surely that is coincidence."

Adrock considered that for several minutes. Maxwell waited patiently. It was not unusual for the prince to consider matters for hours or nights on end. Yet a potential threat to the Masquerade and to the local Kindred themselves required a response that might seem rushed to the point of haste in other instances. "What else?" the prince asked.

"Once kine interest in the sewers dwindled, Theodore conducted his own investigation at my behest. He discovered several locations that Finian appeared to have frequented, one of which, an apartment building toward the edge of the city, is adjacent to another apartment building in which a violent incident occurred earlier on the same night

as the explosion in the sewers. Theodore found signs that Finian had been interested in the particular apartment to which the police were summoned.”

“Signs?”

“Claw marks on the side of the building. Finian was evidently something of the voyeur.”

“Not surprising. The entire clan...” Adrock waved a hand dismissively and let the subject drop. “And?”

“I have the address of the apartment and the name of the young woman who lives there. I intend to investigate the matter further,” Maxwell said.

The prince nodded, satisfied. “Finian was little better than a trained animal—and a poorly trained one, at that. But this matter of a troublesome kine, as you say, it bears further investigation.” In the shadows, Adrock smoothed nonexistent wrinkles from his tie. “Proceed with all deliberate speed. Enlist whatever aid you require, from Theodore or from others, but do not spread word of this unusual mortal otherwise. Treat the matter with some delicacy.”

“Yes, my prince.”

After a long pause, Adrock added, “We may need to curb the activities of our more flamboyant subjects, but first we must learn more.”

Sitting before his own desk, Maxwell listened impassively, but to do so was a struggle, for the prince’s words struck him to the heart. *Our more flamboyant subjects*. Who could Adrock be implying other than Maxwell’s own child? The prince had spoken the comment as if an afterthought, but Maxwell had served long enough to know that with Adrock there was no such thing.

Yes, of course the Masquerade must be safeguarded above all else, but this veiled threat against Lionel... Was it simply that, a cautionary word

to be passed along, a shot across the bow of a fledgling who was not content to fade away from the mortal world? Lionel maintained a degree of contact with kine that was not altogether unusual among the younger generations of Kindred, but which still made his sire uncomfortable on occasion. And if an exceptional mortal had become aware of the superior element hidden away amidst the mass of humanity, then maintaining the Masquerade became that much more vital. Adrock would not allow a decadent neonate to endanger his own situation.

Lionel must be warned, Maxwell thought. But he was not blind to another possible meaning layered among Adrock's words.

Did the prince intend the warning for Maxwell himself? As if to say, *all that I have allowed you, I can take away as well. Do not imagine yourself my equal.*

"That is all," said the prince.

"It will be done," Maxwell said. "With your leave?" Adrock nodded. Maxwell stood, bowed respectfully, then excused himself.

Chapter Three

The three operatives strode along the sanitary corridor in step, polished wingtips clicking in unison, heel-to-toe, heel-to-toe. Their black suits seemed to swallow the fluorescent light. Dark sunglasses shaded their eyes. Together they stopped before a single door. The third reached for the doorknob, but it turned a moment before he grasped it, and the door opened inward.

"Right on time," said a rather short man in a suit. His glasses were corrective, his hair beginning to recede. "I heard you fellows were punctual. Glad to see it's true. Come on in." They followed him into the office. He sat behind a desk, while they stood, each before one of three chairs arranged before the desk. The man made a quick notation on a pad of paper. The only other items on the desk were three lightweight pairs of headphones. "You've received your orders from your superiors, correct?"

"That is correct," said Three.

"Good," said the man, satisfied. "So, you know that I speak for Control now. Anybody have a problem with that?" They remained silent. "Good. I didn't think so. I've looked forward to working with you fellows for quite a while. Heard a lot about you. Mostly good," he added. His gums showed when he smiled. "So, no more of this showboating in the field. No more loose canons. I've got to tell you, I'm not sure how you messed this one up so badly. The Iteration boys are awfully unhappy. That's why they've called us in, me in particular. I'm here to clean up your mess. Personally, between you and me, I'm not a big fan of these techno-prosthetic-thingamajigs that the Iteration boys are so hot for, but, hey, I'm here to do a job. I take pride in my work. That's what I want to see from you fellows. Any questions so far?"

The three stood attentively, facing forward.

"No? Good. So, first thing, this Adrian Cross fellow that you've been hounding—he's off limits. His immediate family too, the wife and kid. Whatever went wrong out there, your associate, your field commander, former field commander that is, exercised poor judgement. Contingency plans are in place for a reason. Something goes wrong with the original protocol and then with the contingency plan too, you return to base. You don't go grandstanding. It's like stealing third with two outs: great play if you make it, stupid play if you get thrown out. Just don't do it. Am I clear?"

The three nodded.

"Good. So, like I said, your previous associate exercised poor judgement, and you all got dragged along for the ride. He has been reassigned elsewhere. It's just you fellows and me now, and you're strictly security from here on out. Got it? Good. I'm going to utilize our other contact in the area. I think he'll maintain—how should I put it?—a lower profile than you fellows managed. Strictly business. No cutting off people's legs, no pile-ups on the freeway. Everything nice and easy, below the radar. And before you know it," he smiled again, showing more gum, "the Iteration boys have what they want, large-scale manufacture of their devices up and running, and everybody's happy. Myself included, because I've done my job and, like I said, I take pride in my work. And when I'm happy..."

Three looked at Two. Two looked at One, who in turn looked back to Three. "We're happy," said Three studiously.

The man leaned back in his chair with his hands behind his head. "You got it. I knew you fellows were more than just snazzy dressers. And, oh, I almost

forgot." From the desktop, he picked up one of the headsets and handed it to Three. "This is from your superiors."

Three regarded the headset for a moment, then put it on. He stiffened for a second, but then his arms came back down to his side. He looked absolutely relaxed, except for the fact that his lips were moving without making any sound. Like an infant mouthing words while reading. Very slowly, One and Two turned their heads to glance at him briefly before returning their attention straight ahead.

"Your former field commander exercised poor judgment, but this associate's transgression," the man said, gesturing toward Three, "was far more serious. He questioned a superior in the field and compromised the operational integrity of your unit."

Three continued to mouth unseen lessons.

"His reeducation may take some time. In the meantime you two have been reassigned." He reached for the other two headsets on the desk and offered them. "From your superiors."

One and Two hesitated only briefly, then reached out with their right hands, took the headsets, and put them on. Almost at once, an audible buzz filled the office. Two placed a hand to his ear as if he were trying to hear more clearly. He and One exchanged curious glances, then they both flickered and were gone, leaving no sign that they had ever been present.

"Computer security," said the man. "Did I mention it was for computer security that I needed you?" He shifted his attention to Three's inert, seated form. "Any questions? No? Good."

Chapter Four

"Douglas, our appointment is in an hour. You haven't forgotten, have you?" Faye opened the door just enough to stick her head into the room. That was as far as she ever seemed to want to venture in since they had changed the guest bedroom to a weight room.

Douglas, on his back on the bench, slowly lowered the barbell to his chest. "No. I haven't forgotten."

Faye waited, as if expecting him to say more, but when he instead resumed his bench presses, she withdrew from the room and left him alone.

An hour was more than enough time. "No. I haven't forgotten, damn it," Sands said to no one. He finished that set of presses, did another set of ten reps, then sat silently on the bench for a few minutes.

After a quick shower, he poured himself a can of Nutri-Drink. The sickeningly sweet and syrupy beverage left him grimacing, but he'd already lost ten pounds over the couple of months he'd been back in town, since January. Life was all about sacrifice. At least now it was.

Ten minutes later, he and Faye were in the car, neither of them speaking. She turned on National Public Radio so she could pretend to listen to that. As he drove, Douglas watched suspiciously as the world passed by. Were the other drivers what they seemed, normal people out and about, doing whatever it was normal people did with their lives? He studied them. He wanted to learn how they did it. He had lived one of those normal lives before, but now it seemed foreign to him, like someone speaking a language he was supposed to understand, but he could make out only a few words, a phrase here and there, never enough to piece together the meaning of what was being said. The other cars on the highway all carried these foreign-speakers, every house and

storefront concealed them. It was better than the alternative, though. In his observations, Douglas shied away from anyone who even remotely did not fit that mold of ignorant normality. He purposefully did not notice anyone who was the slightest bit out of the ordinary, atypical, abnormal. To notice them would be to risk them noticing him. If he blended in with the crowd, he'd be fine. Faye would be fine.

David Boxer's office was in a staid professional complex. It was one of a series of homey brick buildings meant to appear residential, with a maze-like string of over-filled parking lots, the whole affair landscaped to within an inch of its life. By the time Douglas did manage to find a parking space, and he and Faye had walked half a mile, and then settled into the cramped but thankfully empty waiting room, they were exactly on time. *No, I didn't forget*, Douglas thought. Not that he expected the slightest recognition for having remembered—nothing like the endless abuse that would have been heaped upon him had he, God forbid, happened to have forgotten.

"Faye, Douglas, good to see you," Boxer said cheerfully when he emerged from his office proper and ushered them inside.

He better damn well be cheerful, Sands thought, *for \$150 an hour*. He and Faye both took the same chairs as last time, and Boxer as well, beside his desk, not behind it. Nothing so authoritarian. His office was set up to put clients at ease: a couch and matching chair by a coffee table, if they'd desired something more informal; pictures of his family on the shelves; on the walls, matted paintings of ducks and the matching postage stamp for which each picture had been chosen.

"Well...how are you both today?" Boxer asked.

"Just fine," Faye said, sounding as if she thought she were trying to sell this guy a house. "And you?"

"Fine, thanks. Douglas?"

Douglas forced his lips into a smile. "Fine. I guess we're all just fine." *That's why we're paying you a fortune for counseling. Because we're...* "Fine."

"Okay," Boxer said, reaching for a note pad and pen on his desk. "Now, you two have had some time apart, several weeks, which you said was the longest you'd been separated since you were married. I asked you last time to think about that time apart..." He paused, significantly. Boxer was overflowing with significant pauses. "About how you spent it... how you felt about the separation... whether the time alone left you with any insights about your relationship... or about yourself." He directed his curious, empathetic gaze at Faye, then at Douglas.

Douglas sighed. "I'll go first, I guess."

"Thank you, Douglas," Boxer said with complete sincerity.

Douglas took another deep breath and collected his thoughts. He ran through the details that he had given the police upon his return to the city two months ago. He'd practiced them often enough. This simply needed to be a variation on a theme, a touchy-feely rendition of his time in the wilderness. "I spent most of the time alone. There was another guy there, a friend of a co-worker, but he wasn't much on conversation. I mean, hell, he's deaf, and I didn't feel much like talking anyway. We were in a little shack, an ice-fishing shack, and we were, well, ice fishing. I don't even *like* ice fishing, never understood how people could enjoy it, but I just needed to get away from everything for a while."

Douglas lapsed into silence, but Boxer and Faye were both watching him expectantly, waiting for him to continue. *Good God.* "Um, you know, just get away. For a while. Do some thinking."

"Thinking about what, Douglas?" Boxer prompted gently, significantly.

"About, um, you know, everything." That didn't quite cut it. Boxer was still waiting patiently, but from the corner of his eye Douglas could see Faye's mouth turn thin and tight. "Think about... I think I felt trapped. Trapped. Not by my marriage," he added quickly. "Trapped by my own actions." Boxer nodded knowingly. Faye crossed her arms. "I... I made a real mess of things, and I think I just needed some space from that so that I could admit it to myself." Douglas stared at the floor so he wouldn't have to look at the other two. He didn't think he could look into Faye's eyes and pull off a convincing shamefaced expression. He *was* ashamed, or at least embarrassed—embarrassed to be talking about these things in front of a stranger. Maybe it was helpful in a way to be paying this guy; the interaction became commercial, mercenary rather than personal, like visiting a prostitute. Deposit words instead of bodily fluids, and then move on. No emotional transfer or connection required.

Once the silence had dragged on long enough to make everyone uncomfortable, Boxer turned to Faye. "How about you, Faye?"

She took a deep breath, took a moment to collect her thoughts. "I felt hurt. I felt angry. I tried..." she repressed a snuffle. "I tried to fathom what he was thinking. I wanted to understand what he was feeling, but...but I couldn't see it, couldn't come close to getting a handle on it." Douglas sighed audibly, which drew a sharp glance from both Boxer and Faye. "I guess it just made obvious what had been true for a while now, that he doesn't care."

"Good God," Douglas blurted. "I came back didn't I? Why the hell would I have come back?" *I saved your life!* he couldn't say. *I came back in case you were in danger again. You blind, ungrateful—*

"Douglas, please," Boxer intervened. "Let Faye finish. She listened while you spoke." Faye appeared

vindicated but not comforted. "And Faye," he added. "Let's try not to put words into Douglas's mouth. Remember what we talked about, active listening, 'I feel' statements." Faye nodded, chastened.

She's going to cry, Douglas thought. She's going to cry, and I'm going to feel like a jerk, and he's going to take her side.

"When he left," she said, her lip beginning to quiver, "when all of Christmas day passed and he was nowhere, and the days passed, and then weeks—I probably never would have known where he was, that he wasn't dead in a ditch, if our friend Albert, who he was staying with, hadn't called—when he did that, it made me feel so incredibly *alone*." And now the tears did start. "I felt abandoned." Faye sobbed for a few moments. Boxer offered her a tissue. She dabbed gently beneath her eyes, careful not to smudge her makeup. "But you know," she continued at last, now with a hint of steel in her voice, however, a glint of cruel irony, "it wasn't really that different from how I've felt for years now. It's no different from how things are now."

She turned to face Douglas directly. "You may be back in the house, but you might as well not be. You're always either lifting weights or passed out on the couch."

"I can't sleep!" Douglas said defensively. *The dreams...and his voice...* "So I have a drink."

"A drink. Ha!"

"Oh, and like you don't spend every waking hour at the gym."

"Douglas, Faye, please—"

"You just can't stand the idea of me being in that guest room," Sands went on, building a head of steam. "Do we ever *have* any guests? No. But because ten years ago the damn room was a nursery, you can't tolerate—"

"That has *nothing* to do with *anything*!"

"Faye—" Boxer tried to intercede.

"Maybe we should cut that room off the house," Douglas suggested, "and fill in the pool while we're at it."

"Douglas, Faye..." Boxer seemed slightly shell-shocked, and more than a bit surprised when they both responded to him this time and fell silent. He took a deep breath. "Before you can work through issues of conflict, you have to be willing to listen to one another. If at the first hurtful word the walls go up and the same defenses that have choked off communication come into play, then there's no way to move forward. We churn and churn but go nowhere. Spin our wheels. Each of you comes to this relationship with a different perspective. You might disagree with the other person's perspective—which seems safe to say—but you must be able to listen to it, to hear it, really hear what the other person is saying, so you can understand how he or she sees things. A relationship isn't one person acting upon another. It's a constant series of *interactions*, each upon the other—"

"You actually go to school to learn that crap?" Douglas said. "Do you think we're idiots? Do you think we don't get along because we're stupid? You're not even a doctor, right? Then why the hell are we paying you \$150 an hour? Have you ever woken up one morning and found that the whole world has changed around you? Do you have any *fucking* idea what you're talking about?"

The interior of the car, a luxury sedan, seemed unusually small, cramped. NPR was playing some sort of modern organ music, dissonant, abrasive. Traffic was surprisingly heavy. Every other driver wanted to cut in front of Douglas, or pull out in front of him and then slow to ten miles an hour below the speed limit. At last, he clicked the radio off. Faye glared.

"That stuff makes my teeth hurt," he said.

"You said you'd try," Faye complained, not talking about the music.

"I *did* try."

"Not very hard. You said you'd try the counseling. You said you'd stop drinking. We know how that turned out too. 'I'll try harder. We can make our marriage work.' Sound familiar? Is that what you give up on next? I should never have let you back in the house. I should have packed up your things and—"

"I *know* what I said," Douglas cut her off. "And I meant it. I *mean* it, still."

"Could have fooled me."

"Look, just...just don't."

"Don't what? Don't remind you that you stopped putting any effort into our marriage years ago? Is that not convenient for you, Douglas, to face that fact? That was the best thing about the girls, wasn't it? Screw them, and then walk out the door. No strings attached, no effort required. Very convenient."

If only it had been that simple, Douglas thought. "Just listen for a second," he said, but then realized that he didn't have the slightest idea what to tell her. Faye waited while he said nothing.

"Maybe we should just give up," Faye sighed, defeated.

"No," Douglas said. "I...I care about you, Faye."

"You care about me. You don't love me."

Douglas didn't respond. He didn't know how to. He didn't know if he loved her or not anymore. In a strange way, that had come to be beside the point for him. *I can't let anything happen to you. The things that are out there, I can't let them at you. If something happened, I'd hate myself. I'd hate myself forever.*

"I can't go on like this," she said at last. "I can't. I hate what I'm turning into. I don't want to be some... some demanding bitch. But you won't... you won't give anything. You won't talk to me. The only way I even get a response is by demanding. So it turns me into the villain. I won't go on like that, Douglas. I won't. I need to know that you'll try. And before you answer, think about it. Because maybe you've been trying so far, but it hasn't been good enough."

If I knew you'd be safe, I'd leave, he thought. But there was no way to know that. He might never know. His reason for leaving Julia and Nathan on their own two months ago, after Hetger's and Clarence's deaths, was that he had to protect his wife. He couldn't be running all over the place every night after other monsters, never knowing if Faye was safe at home. If he couldn't keep his marriage together, if he didn't have Faye to hold onto, he might feel compelled to join the hunters' insane crusade. He had to keep trying. He had to try harder. He didn't think he could live with himself otherwise. "I'll try," he said.

Faye regarded him skeptically. He could see her watching him, trying to divine his thoughts, his feelings. But there was no way that she could know, no way that she could understand. Maybe if he made his peace with her, he could then make his peace with Adam. Then Douglas would be able to sleep, and he wouldn't need to drink, and everything would be easier. Life could get back normal. For an instant, he managed to be hopeful. "I'll try. I swear." But even as he spoke the words, he didn't think the effort would do any good.

He could tell that Faye, too, was struggling with hope—but to keep it alive, or to hold it in check lest it cloud her judgment? She sighed, discouraged. His answer was enough, just barely. For now. They rode the rest of the way home in silence.

Chapter Five

March was in no way spring-like in central Michigan, and even less so after dark. Though dressed warmly, Julia was well past freezing. For just over the past two hours she had been standing in line outside this brick building, unadorned as it was except for a small neon sign that read *Lazarus Club*. She'd arrived around 11:00 p.m. and just now advanced to the front of the queue where the doorkeeper, an incredibly huge black man, stood immune to her plight. There wasn't much of a line left by this point, just her and a few other diehards, half of them probably underage but desperate enough to stick around despite the likelihood of being turned away. Julia was clearly the only person over thirty within a mile of the club, maybe the only person over twenty-five. She had trouble telling these days. The twentysomethings all looked the same to her now: too damn young to be out this late at night without a chaperone. The babies in line behind her didn't even have the good sense to wear a winter coat. They were too concerned with looking chic—or hip or cool or rad or whatever the hell it was kids wanted to look like these days. For over two hours she'd listened to their whimpering and whining and complaining, not to mention their chattering teeth. At times she had wanted to take them by the shoulders and shake them, but then a minute later she found herself wishing she could give them blankets and hot chocolate and warn them away from this place—except that when she had ventured so far as to smile, they'd been visibly put off and offended by her notice.

"Freaky old woman," she'd overheard one of them say.

Old! Thirty-six is old? she'd fumed. *All right, you ignorant little brat, you're on your own.*

So now she was huddled in her coat trying to ignore both the disconsolate grumbling behind her and the sphinx of a doorman in front of her. Muffled music, chest-thumping bass, seeped out from within the club. All night long, whenever the door had opened, eardrum-splitting techno sounds had flooded the street. After the first few times, noticing that no one else was, Julia had made a point of not covering her ears. *You'll be deaf by the time you're as "old" as I am*, she thought at the kids behind her with grim satisfaction. But then another thought seized her and left her feeling inconsolably guilty and petty: *If you live that long*. She was here, after all, to make sure that they *did* live long enough to do long-term damage to their hearing. These youngsters should be so lucky as to live to a ripe, old, deaf age.

We all might get that old waiting in this line, she thought. Julia pushed back her coat sleeve enough to look at her watch and sighed. She was tempted to give up and try again another night. But she was so close, and who knew if another night, even one more, might make a crucial difference. So despite the cold and the doorman and the ignorant, ungrateful kids behind her, she stayed. And waited. And waited.

Her eyes lit up when, finally, the door opened and a raucous group staggered and bounced out of the club in various states of inebriation, three girls and two boys all laughing and talking too loudly. The blaring music that accompanied them was almost welcome, carrying with it the suggestion of warmth within, the heat of gyrating bodies. The door slammed shut behind them, and the sidewalk was again quiet, other than the same muffled beat as before and the echoes of the young revelers retreating down the street.

Julia waited expectantly for half a minute, but the doorman made no move to let her in. He didn't

so much as glance her way. At least she didn't think he did. It was difficult to tell with the dark sunglasses he felt the need to wear at night.

"Can I go in now?"

No response. Not even an acknowledgement that she had spoken.

Julia cleared her throat. "Excuse me. *Excuse me.*" He turned to face her at last. She did her best to smile despite the cold and his rudeness. "Can I go in now, please?"

He shook his head. "No." And turned away to stare again at God knew what.

"No? What do you mean no?"

"It's a short word."

Smart-ass. "Why not? I've been waiting out here all night." The youngsters in line behind Julia muttered agreement, until the doorman glared their direction and they quickly fell silent.

"Fire marshal," said the doorman. "No overcrowding."

"But *five* people just left," Julia pointed out. "There has to be room for one more, unless you were already overcrowded."

The doorman sighed, more bored than angry, and looked down at her over his sunglasses. "Lady, why don't you beat it? Take a hike."

"Look, I'm not asking for preferential treatment. I've waited in line. I just want to go in, have a drink, dance a little...."

"Isn't this crowd a little young for you?"

"Okay," Julia said growing angry, even though he was right. "I'm not going to play your little doorman games anymore. This job may be your sole power trip in life, but I don't have time for it. As you pointed out, I'm practically a senior citizen. I could drop dead

any minute. So, either you're going to let me in right now, or my lawyer and I are going to visit the police and the newspapers and make the biggest fuss you've ever seen about how this club practices age discrimination and sells alcohol to minors. Is that the kind of attention that you want? Is that what your boss wants?"

The doorman stared at her for a long moment, his forehead creased with obvious consternation. He half-pursed his lips causing the hairs of his thin mustache to stick out at odd angles. Julia held his gaze. She wouldn't back down. There was too much riding on this.

Finally, with a long vaporous exhale, he stepped back. Maybe he believed her threat, or maybe he just didn't feel like dealing with the hassle tonight. Either way, he opened the door and a swirling cacophony of light and sound assaulted Julia. "Whatever you say, sister." The doorman smiled as he said it. Julia wished he'd remained surly. "Knock yourself out."

Now it was Julia's turn to stare at him, to try to figure out if he was merely glad to be rid of her, or if he suspected what might be in store for her. What was that smile saying? *Knock myself out, or get myself killed?*

"You going in or not?" he asked, the surliness returned, smile gone.

"I'll go!" called one of the kids behind Julia.

"You can go to hell," the doorman said. The lights flashing through the doorway reflected off his sunglasses and colored his dark skin red-blue-brown-green in rapid succession.

Julia stepped past him, wondering for a moment if he had been talking to the impatient patron-wannabe in line or to her. The crash of the heavy door closing behind her was lost in the primal dance

beat that tugged at her bones and threatened to burst her eardrums. Feeling much like a deer in headlights, she slipped farther in, away from the door. Though most of those in the writhing, sweating mass of dancers took no notice of her, she could feel eyes turning her way, checking out the new arrival. Most likely they spared her nothing more than a cursory glance, since she was no pretty young thing, nubile and freshly arrived to fulfill adolescent male fantasies—but still, she felt watched. Moving away from the door and the wan red light of the exit sign did little to relieve her. The shadows tended to be allies of the enemy. Most of the spinning, flashing lights were suspended over the dance floor. The surrounding tables and the bar to her left were largely in darkness, dens of iniquity, black pits for skulking, lecherous demons.

She kept her coat on, despite the stuffy, smoke-filled air. The cold that had seeped into her so deeply had not left yet. She'd tried to dress young, thrift-store chic, yet looking around now at the gyrating bare midriffs, the perky tops, and hip-hugging bottoms, she knew she'd missed the mark. It wasn't that the clothes were wrong, she realized. It was her. She didn't have the figure to do young and sexy anymore, and wherever the figure had gone, the confidence and attitude had gone with it. Trying to buy a few seconds to get used to the flashing lights and the volume of the music, she knelt down to fiddle with her shoes. At least the shoes were right, she decided in an attempt to bolster her rapidly deflating ego. Black and funky with thick four-inch heels. But none of that mattered, she reminded herself. She had a reason for being here that was far more urgent than to see and be seen. So she hadn't successfully transformed herself into a techno-babe teenie bopper. Big deal. She'd keep her coat on. As long as she didn't

stand out, that was good enough. As long as she got what she was after, what she'd come here for—and survived—as long as that happened, she didn't have to blend in perfectly.

Standing again, she tried to scan the interior of the club casually. She peered into the mix of whirling lights and bodies looking for the clues and signs that would show her... whoever it was she was looking for. *Whatever* it was. She wasn't sure herself. She just prayed that she would know when the time came. She had to know. There might be no other way, and time increasingly was working against her. But necessity was a cruel mistress, and no one among the writhing mass of dancers nor among those of the lurkers on the sides who she could see sipping their drinks among the shadows, stood out to her. Nathan and some of the others called this way of spotting the enemy the second sight, and that made Julia uncomfortable. *Am I missing something? Is the sight gone, and I just don't know it yet?* Could that be why they all seemed normal, human?

She headed for the bar, attempting to project more confidence than she possessed and feeling with each step the relentless *thum thum-thum* of the dance beat. "Vodka Collins," she ordered, barely able to hear her own words. The bartender nodded. He was either a lip reader or—

She stepped back from the bar, her fingernails digging into her palms. He was normal she saw, relief dawning slowly and hesitantly as she stared at him. Concentrating, she would have seen if he were... something else, something that could cling to the outside of a building and hear what was going on inside, something inhuman. She would have seen if he was really an it.

But what if I didn't see this time? she thought again, and another spike of fear shot through her. Her heart, just slowing after the previous start, began to race again. The bartender set the drink before her. Julia unfolded a five and very deliberately handed it to him, forced herself to meet his eyes. He was just a normal person. In this place, his shaved head, arm-length tattoos, and half dozen earrings didn't even qualify as unusual, much less on the edge. Julia sipped her drink, then took a bigger swallow. She breathed deeply, trying to damp down the adrenaline that threatened to send her rushing out of the club after her hours of subarctic tedium.

Get hold of yourself. She took another swallow of her drink. *Remember what this is all about.* No amount of discomfort, physical or emotional, was worth turning back. She was beyond compromise—with herself or anyone else. *Remember what this is all about.*

Timothy.

She raised her glass again to slog down the rest of the drink but stopped short. She needed to keep her head, and she'd be more comfortable if she had a drink to hold onto as she looked around. *Just be patient. Don't do anything stupid.* Working her way toward the nearest cluster of tables, Julia checked out the line of patrons leaning against the bar. There were a few pairs of females taking a break from dancing. Small groups of men, congregating like packs of wolves, joked over the music and watched either the dancers or the women at the bar. A few loners sat, oblivious, faces buried in drinks. At the far end stood a disconcertingly androgynous black man with overdone eye makeup, and beside him a thin, bleach-blond young man in bare-ass leather pants. Julia continued past them and found the clientele scattered among the tables much the same as that at the bar. *Definitely not my demographic,* she thought. She found

a table—piled high with coats but otherwise unoccupied—against the back wall near an emergency exit. Sitting, and away from the lights of the dance floor, bar and front door, she felt slightly more at ease, more invisible—but no closer to realizing her goal.

All she had to go on was a name. A name and a hunch. It was maddeningly little, but more than she'd had for months and months. And for what little she did know, she had Nathan to thank. Ever since the police had come up with the first clue to Timothy's whereabouts and Julia had constructed her tenuous theory, Nathan had spent every available hour trying to ferret out more information from online county and municipal realty records—and that despite his ongoing effort to rebuild his computer system after it had gone the way of Chernobyl a few months back.

Hell, Julia thought, scanning the dance floor, the faces and movements of the young bodies: ecstatic, lustful, vital, oblivious. *Most of these kids probably haven't ever heard of Chernobyl, or Three Mile Island. Ancient history.* She shrugged. Whether they knew it or not, the youngsters had dangers closer to hand that they should be worried about. As she continued to survey the crowd, Julia tried to take in every detail. She wanted to absorb everything, every nuance of every gyration and expression, because she didn't know just what she was looking for. She had to notice everything about everyone she saw. She demanded the impossible of herself because it was necessary. She couldn't afford to miss anything. After ten or fifteen minutes, the intense concentration made her head hurt, or maybe it was just the cigarette smoke, or the flashing lights. Her poor over-worked pupils ceaselessly dilated and contracted so she might catch something that a normal person could not. *My not-quite-middle-aged eyes*, she thought, rubbing them.

She could have saved herself the trouble. When she did finally see him—*it*—there was no doubt.

He was leaning against the far wall, arms crossed, looking all too pleased with himself, like the proverbial cat who had caught the canary. Like some of the men at the bar, he watched the dancers with a thinly veiled leer, lustful, hungry, yet not quite openly enough predatory to raise alarm. To unenlightened eyes—unimbued eyes—he appeared human enough, but Julia saw him differently. Blue-purple veins bulged beneath his skin, at his temple, on his neck, along his crossed arms. No blood flowed through the veins. No heartbeat kept rhythm to the mortal passage of time. As if by contrast, Julia suddenly noticed her own heartbeat pounding furiously, to her ears more loudly than the dance music. She was sweating, though a distinct chill ran the length of her spine and she could feel goose bumps rising on her skin. Only slowly did the more mundane details of the creature filter into her awareness: long unkempt hair, thin gold necklace, tight black T-shirt, torn jeans. And always the leer. Not born of sexual desire, she knew, but of something far more basic, deeper—though the hormone-wracked patrons of the club would be hard-pressed to believe that anything could be more elemental than sexual energy.

Julia was on her feet. The table piled with coats and the shadowy recesses of the seating area were behind her as she made her way across the dance floor. Her tongue and lips felt dry and cracked, but her throat was so tight she couldn't swallow. She vaguely remembered the glass in her hand, but her attention was riveted to the creature against the far wall. No one noticed her: not the dancers who swirled all around, all sweat and makeup and death throes; not the thing standing watch, cloaked by the guise of humanity. Julia wiped her brow. So much of her life

had become frustration and failure, the nearness of... of whatever it was, of anything that might lead her to Timothy, was almost too tantalizing to bear. Her legs grew rubbery. The ice in her drink clinked against the glass in her trembling hand. The dancers were little more than a blur of lights and motion, every shimmy, every bump and grind keeping time to Julia's heart. With each step, she expected the beast to be gone. She expected to see a vacant expanse of wall and to feel her hopes wither and die, to feel her heart crumble. Again, like so many times before.

But he was still there. She was very close now, maybe twenty feet. Teeth clenched, she tried to fight back the second sight. She needed to see this monster as it wanted to be seen; she needed to talk to it. With a disconcerting ripple, her vision shifted, and he appeared not at all unusual. But she knew. She could still sense his otherness, his wrongness and the subtle cruelty of his disregard. Others sensed it too, Julia realized, without even knowing that they did. A beautiful young girl, lost in the near-rapture of music and dance, migrated a bit too close to the watcher. She paused, glanced around uncomfortably, then eased away, only gradually losing herself again to the music. Julia saw the monster's gaze, watched him watching the girl.

"Leave her alone," Julia said, traversing the last few feet to where he stood. She faced him, as surprised as he was by her outburst, maybe more so.

"You say something, lady?"

"You heard me." Her accidental rush of bravado fading rapidly away, Julia felt fear coiled in her gut. She forced herself to raise the glass, casually she hoped, to wet her parched lips, never taking her eyes from the beast. He watched her too, head cocked, his eyes narrowed, like a cat both perplexed and

amused by an unusually confrontational mouse. "Are you Lionel Braughton?" she asked.

Now he smiled, a broad toothy grin, and Julia saw something in his eyes that she had not seen from the other men in the bar: lust, hunger. She might not measure up to the Barbie-doll standards of the others, but this one had different tastes—tastes she could satisfy as well as anyone else.

"Me, Lionel?" He chuckled. "Don't I wish. No. I'm Kyle."

Kyle. Julia's mind sifted through the details of the story Jason had told of a high-school friend named Kyle who had introduced him and his sister to Lionel Braughton. Both Jason and his sister were dead now. "I have to talk with Lionel. Is he here?"

"You don't look like his normal kind of girl," Kyle said, still smiling. "You from out of town? I don't remember seeing you before."

"You haven't."

"What do you want to talk to him about?"

Great. Another jerk playing gatekeeper, Julia thought. "Did I say I wanted to talk to you about it?"

Kyle stiffened at that. He stood taller, glared down at her, his smile gone. "Lady, you thought I was Lionel. You got no business with him."

"No?" Julia held her ground. She was scared of this creature. Only determination and anger kept that fear in check. He wasn't the obvious monstrosity that Sands' lurker had been, but looks weren't everything. She might push him too far. He could kill her; she was sure of that. And then who would continue the search for Timothy? But she'd come this far, too far to turn back. "I've got business with him all right, and if I don't talk to him, I'm going to make sure that his name and picture shows up on the front page of every newspaper across the country. You think he'd

like that?" The publicity gambit had worked with the doorman out front. Would it get her past this next hurdle? *These bastards can't stand the light of day*, she thought.

Kyle's determination wavered. Was she bluffing? He was trying to decide. "You don't know what he looks like. You don't have a picture."

"He used to be a musician, right? I've got an old hand bill. It's dark in here. You or any other scruffy long-hair type could have been him." Julia shrugged. "You think I'm lying? You want to make that decision and be wrong. Or do you want to let Lionel make that call?"

He hesitated, then turned away from her at last. "I hope you *are* lying, lady, 'cause I'll be the one to set things right."

She had him. "I'll be over there," Julia called after him, nodding toward the table on the other side of the room. After he passed through a nearby door marked PRIVATE in stick-on letters, a shudder ran through her. She'd managed to suppress her trembling while talking to Kyle, but now that he was out of sight, the ice in her drink began to click against the side of her glass again. She took a large swallow, finished the drink so quickly that her eyes watered. *Easy now*, she told herself. But not even the alcohol could calm her nerves. She had stood face to face with one of those monsters. The image of bloodless veins bulging beneath listless white skin flashed through her mind. *A vampire, for God's sake. As sure as Sands' lurker was.* Maybe someday it would grow easier, less jarring—facing the impossible, the unnatural, evil incarnate—but she didn't think so. The beast's very presence roiled something deep within her, something primal that recoiled from the thing's inhumanity. She tried not to think about it,

tried to stay alert for whatever might happen next. Was Lionel Braughton really here? Kyle had certainly given that impression. She hoped that she hadn't frightened him off—and then she laughed at the thought: her frighten away a vampire. She chuckled. The sound was terse, hollow.

Around her, the dance lights shifted and began a new brilliant pattern. The music paused briefly, then took up a new tune largely indistinguishable from the last. Julia couldn't help wondering if Timothy would one day frequent this type of place—for she had no doubt that she would find him, that he would be alive and well despite whatever he had undergone; she could not believe otherwise.

The hand on her shoulder startled her. When she spun around, the first thing she noticed were the eyes: dark blue, piercing, curious, and privy to a joke she supposedly knew nothing about.

“Do I know you?” he asked with a sly grin. “Because I never forget a face, especially not a beautiful woman's.”

The smile, too, took Julia in, like the eyes. She found herself beginning to smile in return, wanting to like this person, being relieved that he wasn't so bad after all. At the same instant, though, she saw reality more clearly, her second sight breaking through the deceptive façade that would have fooled a normal person. Fangs dripping blood, and more veins, these carrying life that did not rightfully belong to this beast. *Remember*, she told herself. *Remember what he really is. Always.* Fortified, she forced down the second sight. She could still feel the force of his personality pulling at her like an inexorable tide, but she was forewarned. Impervious. Or so she hoped.

“I know what you are.” She said it so quietly and vehemently that she barely heard her own voice beneath the pounding beat of the music.

But he heard. For a split second his smile froze, then it drained away into an expression of boredom. "Yeah, whatever. But, hey, if you're looking for your daughter or something, anything that happened was completely voluntary. You know what I mean? She says anything else, she's lying."

Julia glared at him, confused. *Daughter? What the hell are you talking about, you bastard. I want my Timothy!* "I don't have a daughter," she said.

"Really? Oh, well," he shrugged, "Welcome to the Lazarus Club then." Again he was amicable, the perfect host, handsome, with shoulder-length hair stylishly mussed, blue eyes and the killer smile. His dark shirt and slacks were expensive, tailored, the tie silk. He offered a hand. "We haven't been introduced properly. I'm Lionel Braughton."

She stared at his hand but didn't take it. Maggots crawled under wriggling flesh. She blinked hard, and then there was just smooth, pale skin, gaunt fingers adorned with an expensive ring. "I have a son," Julia said. "A small boy. And I want you to help me find him."

Lionel drew back his hand as if bitten. He raised both hands in a gesture of innocence. "Whoa, lady, you've got the wrong guy. I'll be the first to admit that I've been known to go for the occasional—okay, even frequent—pretty young thing, but I'm not one for little boys. No, you've got the wrong guy," he protested almost cheerfully. "Let me get you another drink," he said, "or better yet, how about a private tour of the facility, such as it is."

Like his eyes and smile, the suggestion pulled at Julia more than it should have. For a moment she considered it, then recognized the insanity of the idea. "I'm not going anywhere alone with you," she said. "And you can save the charm for your pretty young

things." That *would* be how he would go about it, his vanity and bloodlust running hand in hand, luring them into his clutches, unsuspecting girls—because even the tawdriest of them couldn't suspect what he had in mind. But Julia knew.

He regarded her with a bemused sort of half-smile, seemingly more than a bit perplexed that his advances were being rejected.

"You're used to getting what you want," Julia said.

"I am." He thought it was a game.

Bastard. Heartless, merciless bastard. "You're used to a smile and a joke and the girls swoon."

He shrugged again. "If the shoe fits..." He pulled out a chair and sat beside Julia at the table piled high with coats.

"You're *not* used to someone being repulsed by the mere sight of you," she said, "someone who knows exactly *what... you... are.*" His confident manner faltered ever so slightly. "So tell me," Julia went on, "were you ever human?"

There, she thought. He did look a little more human with a bit of uncertainty flickering across his face. "Now, about my son, Timothy."

Lionel seemed distracted, concerned if not worried. He glanced around, paying Julia only half a mind—but he was listening. "This kid of yours—"

"Timothy."

"Right. What makes you think I know anything about him? I mean, take a look around. This isn't exactly the kind of place where little kids hang out." He was looking at her differently now, trying to draw her out, figure her out. For the moment, he was off balance; for the moment, Julia had an advantage.

She couldn't afford to waste it. The fear was still there, still coursing through every inch of her, but

the ache for her son was far more painful. It drove her relentlessly. "Timothy has been missing for nine months. He disappeared out of our house, mine and my husband's... my ex-husband's."

"Okay. Kid disappears," Lionel said. "What does that have to do with me?"

"I'll tell you what. For months, the police weren't able to come up with the first lead. Nothing. They thought Timothy just ran off."

"What about the ex-hubby? You check him out before coming to point fingers at me?"

"My husband, David, is dead. Suicide, supposedly. I don't buy it for a second. David wasn't the guilty conscience type, never depressed a day in his life, definitely not a candidate for suicide."

"Drugs," Lionel said. "I tell you, I've seen some kids—"

Julia shook her head. "Autopsy. Nothing. David didn't commit suicide. And when Timothy didn't show up anywhere after a few days, even the police had to admit that he might have been snatched, except they refused to connect that to David's death. Said the suicide note he left was too convincing. It was his handwriting all right, but..."

"Lady, you're really reaching, you know that? And I'm tired of calling you 'lady.' You seem to know who I am." Julia heard the unspoken accusation beneath his words: *You seem to know what I am.* "What the hell is your name?"

Julia hesitated and instantly wished she hadn't allowed herself a single second to reflect, wished she had blurted out everything at once. The fact that she was sitting here at a table talking with this... this *thing*, it was too unsettling. And now it wanted to know her name. *He can find out if he really wants to*, she thought. *The newspaper articles, obituaries, the notices*

about Timothy... And another disturbing factor entered in: In a way, she was asking this monster for help. Could she do that and begrudge him knowing her name? If that was the price for finding Timothy, so be it.

"Julia Barnes."

The vampire nodded. Perhaps he recognized the significance of her admission, or maybe he just assumed she was lying. "Well, listen, Julia. I promise you this. I never laid eyes on your husband, so if you think somebody killed him and—"

"I'm not finished," Julia said sharply. "For months, the police didn't have a single lead, but then they were called to a house. It wasn't empty, but it did seem to be abandoned. And they found my Timothy's backpack—for school, his green backpack. It was in the house." Her voice caught in her throat. She fought back the tears trying to well in her eyes. The act of speaking the words, of talking about a tangible clue to Timothy's whereabouts, was almost too much for her.

"Not my house, Julia. Not my business," Lionel said, not unkindly.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. Her face suddenly flushed with anger. "How *dare* you deny responsibility? You can sit here and pretend you don't have blood on your hands!"

"Excuse me," said a young woman who had just approached the table. "I need to get my coat." She became sheepish in response to the two grim faces that turned toward her. The girl's boyfriend looked on over her shoulder. "My coat..." she said apologetically, in case they hadn't heard her.

"Go away," Lionel said, his voice edged with steel. He turned back to Julia.

The boyfriend stepped forward, more conciliatory than puffed up in anger. "We just need to get—"

"Go away."

Lionel's eyes flashed red for an instant, and Julia saw the animal fury that lay just beneath the surface. She tensed in her chair and squeezed her glass so tightly that she thought it might shatter. The young couple flinched as well and took a step back.

"Come on," the boyfriend said urgently to his slack-jawed date. He tugged her shoulder and they both backed away quickly, bumping into dancers behind them.

Julia stared at the creature seated before her. *Remember what he really is. Always.*

Lionel's anger washed away. He might as well have swatted a fly. "You were saying?"

She tried to answer. "I..." But she couldn't help wondering what would happen if those eyes flashed red at her. Would she be able to resist them? She had to remember that no matter how congenial and human-looking Lionel seemed, he was a bloodthirsty beast. "I was saying, um, that the police found Timothy's backpack." *Timothy. Think about Timothy. All of this is for his sake!* "Do you know what else they found in that house? In the basement? Bodies. Decomposing bodies. No blood in any of them."

Lionel's expression was completely neutral now, and the lack of response was even more frightening than his flash of anger at the couple. In a flat, dead voice he said, "What does that have to do with me, Julia?"

What will he do if I say it? she thought. What will he do if I say the word "vampire"? Will he kill me? And looking at his cold, blank face, she suddenly realized that he wasn't going to allow her to walk away from

this table, from this club. Not alive. *I have to convince him to help me.*

"With you personally? Maybe nothing. I got your name from a friend, Jason Parker," she said.

"Doesn't ring a bell."

"You knew his sister too. Laura."

"I know lots of people's sisters," Lionel said, the roguish playfulness creeping back into his manner.

"Don't give me your playboy crap. I know better. Considering what was found in that house and what Jason told me about you, I thought you might be able to help me."

"You can tell your friend, Jason—"

"He's dead. His sister too." Julia searched his face for any reaction, any human emotion, remorse or even pleasure. She found nothing.

Lionel shrugged. "People die every day." He started to rise from his seat. "And I think I've heard plenty of anything you have to say."

Julia froze as he stood. He kept the animal fury beneath the surface, but the killer's instinct was plain to see, the predator's gaze. "*Stay away from me!*" she shouted. And the world went crazy.

Fiery sparks shot into the air between her and Lionel. He staggered back, eyes wide. But he came at her again more quickly than she could believe, surging forward before she could even take breath. He was little more than a blur, but sparks filled the air again, keeping him from her, holding him back. For an instant she saw him clearly, eyes burning red, fangs bared like a wild beast—

And then fire flashed through the darkness. Lionel jumped back, eyes even wilder. His banshee wail of terror and pain assaulted Julia's ears. There was nothing human about the screech.

More flames. The black man who had been at the bar flashed a spray can and a lighter. The blond youth also. Seized by raw fear, Lionel slapped at the table, upended it.

"Julia! Watch out!" the black man called.

Coats flew into the air, some catching fire, others melting into stinking masses of nylon. Everything was smoke and flashing lights and pounding music. Julia turned to see a bouncer she didn't recognize rushing toward her. She grabbed one of her shoes and cracked him in the temple with the four-inch heel. He went down hard.

Kyle appeared suddenly out of nowhere, flinging himself over the table with a roar. Another blast of fire sent him sprawling in the other direction, clawing at his smoldering shirt, tearing it to shreds.

Julia tried to spot Lionel. Hysterical patrons were running in every direction and screaming as the chaos spread through the entire club. She did see one face that she recognized: the black man from the bar. He was here for this reason, to protect her. "Abraham?" she shouted.

He grabbed her elbow and raised a defensive hand as she instinctively drew back her shoe. He shook his head. "Braughton's skipped," he said, "And we better do the same."

Julia was numb. *Gone*. Then she had failed. And that might mean Timothy's life.

"Come on," Abraham said, pulling her arm. "Johnny, let's get her out of here." The blond youth took Julia's other arm, and together the two men led her into the frantic crowd. Among the herd, they fled the club, back out into the cold night.

Chapter Six

"Room 307, sir."

"Thank you." Matthew Simonson accepted the keycard from the desk clerk.

"If you would sign here..."

"Of course." He reached for the guest book.

"Um, sir, could you use the pen, please?"

"Hm? Oh." Matthew looked at the blue pencil in his hand and laughed. "Sorry. Wasn't thinking."

"Quite all right, sir."

Tucking the pencil back behind his ear, Matthew took the pen and signed in his cramped script. He reached into the pocket of his trench coat and pulled out a New York driver's license that matched exactly the name he had just that moment invented. Angling the license to avoid glare and inspect the hologram, he frowned and shook his head. "I never take a good picture."

"We had one guest," said the desk clerk, "who told me that she *tried* to have horrible driver's license pictures, because then anyone who saw it told her how much lovelier she was than the picture."

"Sounds like she has too much time on her hands," Matthew said, and then, brandishing the keycard, "Thanks."

The elevator from the stately lobby of the Lester Hotel was an old-fashioned affair with a brass gate that pulled across the opening. As he ascended, Matthew peered through the crisscrossed metal gates at the fountain and fake plants below. Elsewhere the hotel and its elevators had been modernized, but the lobby and its elegant period décor spoke of bygone years, what Matthew imagined must have been a simpler time before the blind rush of technology had taken over life. *I guess people back then had their own*

problems, he thought. Even then, they were dealing with the aftereffects of rapid industrialization and urbanization. *Science and technology have always determined how a large chunk of humanity lives*, he thought glumly, but then his mood brightened. *Thank God for the law of unintended consequences*. Every discovery or innovation opened as many possibilities as it closed; every attempt at canonization spurred a smattering of heretics. Explain it through Taoist philosophy or modern chaos theory, it was what made life bearable for Matthew. That and a good cup of coffee.

The elevator stopped at the third floor, and Matthew found his room not far away. He lay his laptop gently on the table, tossed his single suitcase on the bed with his trench coat, and began to loosen his tie before the mirror on the wall. The reflection stared back with his own bright indigo-violet eyes and sandy hair. While Matthew adjusted his tie, his reflection ran fingers through its hair.

"You're taking a chance by coming back here," the reflection mouthed silently, though in his mind Matthew heard his own voice.

"Things have quieted down," Matthew mouthed back. "From what I've seen, Cross is getting along well enough. They're leaving him alone. Got burned one too many times, I guess. And Jordan kicked up such a fuss in Chicago that I suspect every available convention operative in the Midwest is swarming down there."

"But the same hotel as last time?" the reflection asked.

"So I like a little style. Those cookie-cutter chain hotels bore the hell out of me. One looks like the next like the next... although I suppose some corporation has bought up the Lester by now. Hm.

Remind me to check on that. You can't spit anymore without hitting a multinational. Still, I like the place. Humor me." The reflection did not appear convinced. It frowned and stuffed its hands into its pockets. "And don't sulk," Matthew added.

"Besides," he said, "I still can't raise Sugardaddy online. I might have to track him down in person."

"What a shame," the reflection said. "Then you'll have to rely on your charm and good looks."

"Watch it, buddy. Takes one to know one."

While the reflection combed its hair, Matthew unhooked the phone and jacked in his laptop, more from a sense of nostalgia than necessity. "No word from Sugardaddy since I sent him the Chamber files. Either he's not online, or he's changed all of his accounts."

"He doesn't seem the type to go cold turkey," said the reflection.

"No. If he went offline for an extended period, it wasn't by choice." Matthew spent a few minutes sending brief messages to the several accounts through which he had communicated with Sugardaddy, and even to a couple that Sugardaddy had not been aware that Matthew—a.k.a. Muckraker—had discovered. All the messages bounced back. "Hm. I guess I'll just have to find him. But first, if you're done with your preening..."

The reflection regarded Matthew warily. "What?"

"You're probably not up for a little rummaging about...."

The reflection rolled its eyes. "Don't be coy. Just tell me what we're doing."

"I want to poke around in the Chamber system. It's been a while since I got out with those files that Jordan found."

"However in the world he managed that."

"Right. But they've probably installed different encryption, maybe new countermeasures. What do you think?" Matthew asked.

The reflection tightened its tie, put its trench coat back on and rubbed its hands together. "How do I look."

"Like a million bucks."

"Modest, aren't you?"

Matthew turned back to his keyboard and dove into the Digital Web.

Matthew² breezed along the conduit that led from the laptop portal into the swirling sensory stimuli that formed digital reality. Raw binary data filtered itself through a sieve of human expectations and potential, creating a pseudo-reality of connected sectors and constructs. The Digital Web. Even had he never entered the Iron Rapids Chamber of Commerce sector before, it would have been easy to find. The programmers, after all, wanted to be found. They were helpful and irritatingly cheerful in scattering the electronic landscape with virtual billboards proclaiming civic virtues: *A Certified Business Location, Great Place to Raise a Family*. Matthew² wasted little time with the municipal propaganda, hurrying through the undercarriage of code that no mundane net-surfer would see while visiting any of the numerous community Web sites associated with the sector.

The front door was wide open, so to speak. Arriving in the sector proper, Matthew² found his environs dull and listless, more or less conforming to a regimented pattern of corridors, cubicles and metal doors, the whole affair a maze of earth tones serenaded by anesthetizing Muzak loops. Probably there was no danger here. For the most part, the Chamber of

Commerce was a self-serve buffet of civic information, a smorgasbord of listings of hotels, motels and restaurants—not to mention the ever-popular Museum of Iron Rapids Manufacturing. The code here was intended to be friendly and inviting, if a bit staid. Still, better not to attract too much attention.

The only animate projections inhabiting the cubicles and corridors were in the form of young men and women, neatly dressed, scrubbed and rosy-cheeked without seeming sexy or inordinately fastidious. They were as colorless as the rest of the sector, and they were friendly and accessible to the patron who seemed to have trouble finding what he or she wanted. Probably they had been modeled after overly helpful retail clerks. The kind that Matthew² hated. So far they had taken no notice of their visitor, but why, he decided, take chances?

His slacks, shoes and tie were black, but his shirt, like that of Matthew on the other side of the keyboard, was a vibrant blue, and stood out like a Technicolor icon on a black-and-white DOS-prompt screen. With a quick, furtive glance, he took his notepad from his coat pocket, grabbed the blue pencil from behind his ear, and scribbled a quick line of code on the page. His shirt faded to an unassuming beige. A second thought and another quick scribble later, and the pencil and his eyes were both a lifeless brown. With those precautionary measures taken, he got down to business.

His earlier foraging attempts in the CoC sector had been both uneventful and unfruitful. The vast majority of on-the-level Chamber information was, of course, readily available to anyone. Even supposedly restricted materials, like payroll and personnel files which were relatively secure from most sleeper hackers, were an open book for Matthew². But those weren't what he was looking for. Invisible

strings were controlling the puppets at CoC. After all of the upheaval involving Adrian Cross, Matthew² knew where those strings went, who they led to: a global conspiracy called the Technocracy. What he needed to find out was what they planned to do next. And unlike his earlier visit, this time he had a better idea of what he was looking for, as well as code samples and compromised encryption strings. Even if the security measures had been changed—which was likely after Jordan had liberated certain sensitive files—Matthew² was confident he could break them.

After slipping around a corner to avoid the attention of a nearby helpful clerk, he approached one of the foreboding metal doors, each identical to the next, featureless except for a single keycard slot. The trick was not so much to find the correct door as it was to format the door so that it led to the desired location. Matthew² turned to his notepad again, flipping back several pages to double check entries he'd made regarding the stolen files. Satisfied, he took a blank white keycard from his coat pocket, jotted a few notations on it, and slid it into the slot.

A red light flashed on above the door. Matthew² jiggled the card. The light stayed red. Matthew² quickly consulted his notes again. Pencil in hand, he pulled out the card and modified the code. The red light stayed on even after he removed the card. He tried it again with the modified code. The light stayed red.

"May I help you, sir?"

Matthew² whirled at the tap on his shoulder. The pleasantly smiling young woman standing behind him was bright-eyed and perky in a nondescript way. "Help?" he said. "No. Quite all right. Thanks anyway." He turned back to the door, hoping she would wander on her way.

"Sir?"

He flashed her his winningest smile this time. "Well, hello. Yes?"

Her smile was unfazed as she looked back and forth between Matthew² and the red light above the door. "Sir, is your operator authorized to use this portal?"

"Is my...? Oh, sure. No problem there. If authorization was water, we'd have gills. Know what I mean? Just having a little trouble with the old, uh..." He removed the card and waved it in front of her, then inserted it back into the slot. The red light glared like a silent accusation.

The woman's smile had not shifted in the slightest, but neither did she seem inclined to leave him alone. "We have some fascinating information on the Museum of Iron Rapids Manufacturing," she suggested. "

By now another clerk, a young man in a tan sweater who looked like he was fresh from choir practice, had noticed and taken an interest in Matthew². "Good morning," said the new clerk. "Did you know that natives of Iron Rapids have served as U.S. senator, ambassador to Morocco, and *three* as federal judges?"

"Isn't that fascinating?" said the woman.

"Fascinating," Matthew² agreed, pulling out the keycard and scribbling furiously on it again.

"Sir, is your operator authorized to use this portal?" the male clerk asked.

A third clerk, noticing the commotion, was coming closer. "May I help you, sir?"

"Sir, is your operator authorized to use this portal?" the woman asked.

Card in slot. Red light. "Damn."

"Sir, is your operator..." They were crowding close now, determined to help him, even if it killed him. More clerks were approaching as well, drawn to his helplessness like crabs to a body on a beach.

"May I help you, sir?"

"...your operator authorized to..."

Matthew² wasn't sure how long he had until they realized that he *wasn't* in fact authorized to use that portal, or what action they would take to keep him from tampering with the door. He didn't *think* that he was in great danger. He was still interacting with the mundane Internet layer of the Digital Web and the "clerks" were all probably just normal programs there to help a user navigate the site. Even the Technocracy's paranoid security experts probably wouldn't plant a more robust program here, one capable of dumping or deleting a sophisticated, holistic visitor like himself. But the clerks could probably raise the alarm, which would bring something more serious to the site. And Matthew² had no interest in being deleted.

Another recalculation, a quick tweak to the code, card in the slot...the light turned green, and the door slid open.

The clerks all fell silent at once, smiling helpfully. "Enjoy your visit," said the woman. Those rearmost in the throng began to drift away, returning to their previous routines, while the woman and a few others watched Matthew² expectantly. He smiled, nodded, then straightened his tie and, as he stepped through the door, sighed with relief, at the same time congratulating himself on not really having been worried.

Beyond the door awaited a small room, bare and white except for a keyboard and display mounted on one wall. Matthew² typed in: *Central Planning*.

To which the display responded: *enter construct*.
He paused. *Iron Rapids*.

invalid response...enter construct.

Matthew² glanced around hurriedly but saw no flashing lights, heard no alarms. The door behind him didn't slam shut. No automated defenses materialized out of the seamless walls—only the helpful faces of the first two clerks peering through the open doorway. He turned back to the keyboard and typed: *Ann Arbor*.

Instantly the door slid shut behind him and the display went blank. The room began to shimmy. The entire room was moving, Matthew² realized, not just shaking but taking him somewhere. It was a restricted conduit and he had gained access. So it was hurtling him through cyberspace at incalculable speeds, taking him where he wanted to go. At least that was what he hoped.

Chapter Seven

Night. Douglas couldn't help but dread it. He had lifted weights until fatigue turned his muscles to jelly. Hot shower, glass of Scotch. Now he didn't know if he could get up from the recliner if he tried. Faye was out, at the gym after a daylong realty conference. *Maybe now I understand why she drives herself so hard, he thought, why she's up at dawn, working or volunteering somewhere or exercising every hour of the day.* So she could sleep at night. So she'd be too tired to think. *She's been trying not to think for ten years.* What did she have to think about, after all? That her husband was a philandering jerk? That their only son died before his third birthday?

She's still getting off light, Sands thought. *Her safe little world still exists for her, it's just not quite as tidy. She hasn't had... hell, her whole sense of reality jerked out from under her. She doesn't know what I've been through. She doesn't know what I know.* He wished to God that he didn't know it either.

Most of the snow outside had melted by now. Douglas knew that, beyond the French doors, the tarp over the pool would be sagging with runoff. There were undoubtedly several inches collected in the bottom of the pool itself. That was as close as it would get to being filled. It was as close as it had gotten to being filled for the past ten years. Since Adam's death.

As the wind picked up outside and bushes brushed against the side of the house, Douglas tensed. He waited for the wind to come around the back corner and by the pool just right; he waited for the words to form, to call him. He waited, but nothing happened. The wind died down, and all was quiet again. He wasn't sure which worse: hearing the voice or waiting to hear it, expecting to hear it, condemnation from beyond the grave.

But he's not condemning me, Sands thought. He's not angry. He's lonely, confused, trying to find me. Douglas took a sip of his drink, chewed on an ice cube. *Maybe condemnation would be easier.* Then he reconsidered. *Hell, I get enough of that from Faye, from myself.*

When the front door opened, Douglas sighed. He didn't dread seeing Faye—not like he dreaded spending a night alone, not sleeping—but he was tired. She was tired too, he could tell at once by the way she shuffled into the room. Faye never did anything half-heartedly. She was driven, full of purpose, probably from the day she was born. Tonight, though, she practically collapsed onto the couch and let the leather envelope her. She had showered at the gym, and her hair, which she had recently had cut boyishly short, had dried spiky. Douglas wasn't sure if he liked the new haircut. He'd been unable to form an opinion. Since he had returned home from the traumas of the wild, he'd been unable to form an opinion about much of anything: about Faye, about their marriage, about what was salvageable in this new world he had unwillingly discovered and what was not.

"Long day?" he asked.

Faye nodded. She ran her fingers through her hair and let out a long, slow sigh. Douglas didn't think that *she* liked the new haircut, but that it was important to her because it was a change. Realizing that maybe he knew her better than he had thought, he saw that for her, if the world was changing, it mattered that she have some sort of control—even if only in as small a way as how she wore her hair—in how it changed.

"What are you smiling at?" she asked him, rubbing her eyes.

"You," he said. "Me. Us."

For a moment he thought she might cry—there had been many tears over the past weeks—but she only nodded. She seemed too tired to cry, to take

offense, to argue. Douglas could feel her emotional fatigue. He shared it.

"I am trying," he said, not exactly sure why.

Faye nodded again, almost smiled. "I know you are."

It was early still, but they were both exhausted, so they went to bed. They made love, but the lovemaking, too, was tired. It was over mercifully quickly. It was the first intimate contact, sexual or otherwise, that they had shared in weeks, but afterward, lying beside his wife of twenty-five years, Douglas felt empty, alone. A vague, nebulous sense of dissatisfaction was growing within him, so much so that he wanted to scream, to throw something, if only he weren't so tired. Faye was already asleep. He didn't want to wake her, didn't want to have to talk to her. Her face and her naked shoulders were all he could see above the blankets. Sleeping was the only time she ever looked relaxed anymore.

What am I doing here? he wondered. *Am I doing either of us any good?* The more he thought about it, the less clear it became whether he wanted to protect her because he loved her, or he wanted to love her because he felt compelled to protect her. An hour later, he still wasn't sure which was the case, or if it mattered.

He awoke blinking to clear his eyes, not completely sure that he'd fallen asleep, but the clock by the bed said that he had. Night was full on them. Faye had kicked off the covers and lay naked beside him. She seemed so helpless, so vulnerable. Douglas never would have guessed by looking at her workout-trim body that she'd had a baby—his baby, their baby. Gone. He pulled up the sheet and blanket so she wouldn't get cold. Yet he couldn't summon any affection in the gesture; it was little more than courtesy. Had he killed every trace of tenderness that he had once felt for this woman? Was that the real

price of the tragedy they had both experienced but never really shared?

An unexpected sound, a light rattle of the bedroom doorknob, caught Douglas's attention and made him hold perfectly still. Or *had* he heard anything? He held his breath for a long moment, listening, then let it out slowly. Nothing. He must have imagined it. Probably the heat had cut off and the ceasing flow of air from the vent had made the door—

No. There it was again. The doorknob moving ever so slightly. As quietly as he could, Douglas turned his head, so slowly that he thought the taut muscles of his neck might snap. He peered over Faye's sleeping body and saw the doorknob turning—no more than an inch, and then returning to its original position with the same quiet rattle he'd heard before.

Douglas blinked hard, wished the sleep from his eyes. A trick of the shadows, it had to be—

But he had witnessed too much in the past two months not to believe what he saw now, no matter how unbelievable. Panic swept over him. He shivered with cold sweat as his mind, throwing off the initial shock, grappled frantically with what could be on the other side of the door: the lurker, silent until practically on him... but the lurker was destroyed; the raging beasts from the forest, could they be so quiet? A burglar if he was lucky. But another thought terrified him more than any of those: a small hand barely able to reach the doorknob, a small shimmering body looking for—

"Dad-dy...?"

"No," Douglas whispered. He looked at Faye, hoping that it was she who had called out in her sleep, but she was resting soundly. He wanted to wake her, wanted her to hear and see, to tell him that he wasn't crazy. But what would happen if she did hear, if she

saw? What would the voice say to her? Douglas suddenly felt that he would do anything to spare her that ordeal. He had faced monsters. He would face whatever other than the wind was beyond the door.

Again the knob rattled. Faye didn't stir. Carefully, Douglas climbed from the bed to confront his personal demon. *Maybe Faye didn't shut the front door tight when she came in. The wind blew it open and is rattling the doorknob.* But he couldn't bring himself to believe it. Silently he reached for his pajama pants, forcing himself not to freeze when the doorknob continued to rattle, now more forcefully. *There may be something in the hall—some spirit, some monster, some incarnation, some God knows what—but it's not Adam. Adam is dead.*

Douglas reached under the bed and felt around until he found his baseball bat, a Louisville slugger he'd bought to replace the one he'd lost in the sewers. *It's not Adam out there. It's not him. It's not!* Sands pictured the lurker, the shape-changing beasts in the wilds, those inhuman monstrosities. And Amelia Kilby, insane, dead, unwilling or unable to let go. There were things like that out there, in the world, and now something like that had latched on to the memory of Adam. Some creature was making a mockery of the child's life. Because the thing was *not Adam*.

"He's dead," Douglas muttered, squeezing the grip of the bat with crushing fury.

As if response to his anger, the doorknob began rattling more violently. Then the whole door was shaking, threatening to pull free of its hinges. Finally Faye startled awake, confused, disoriented. "Douglas?"

"Damn you!" he yelled toward the door then ripped it open, bat raised, ready to strike.

Darkness. He charged into the hall. "Damn you!"

"Douglas? Douglas!" Faye was frantic, but he had no time for that. Something was in the house—something that *was not Adam*.

Douglas heard the footfalls of small feet retreating through the darkness. He lumbered down the hallway, swinging the baseball bat before him. "He's dead! Leave us alone!" Glass shattered. The bat tore into plaster.

Faye screamed at the first explosion, but Douglas didn't have time for her—he was doing all of this for her. Couldn't she shut up and stay out of the way?

It was still there, somewhere. Douglas stumbled into the family room, swinging the bat. Movement. He whirled and smashed the shelves out of the bookcase. The TV lurched sideways and smashed to the floor. "God damn you!"

Flickering lights. A hint of motion. Douglas twisted, swung. The familiar twinge caught in his back at the same time that the French doors shattered into hundreds of pieces. He stood transfixed before the broken doors as time stretched out into a single, distorted heartbeat. Slivers of the glass showered to the ground as quietly as snow, and while the crystalline flakes gently settled, a tiny voice, plaintive, searching, called out to Douglas: "*Dad-dy?*"

The sudden rage drained from his body, leaving him trembling in the cold. Sands sank to his knees. The bat slipped from his fingers, clattered to the floor.

"Douglas?" Faye's voice was so weak that he could barely hear her over the wind that whipped around the corner of the house. He looked back over his shoulder. She was standing amidst the wreckage of the family room, watching him. The tears were not unusual, but for the first time he could remember, he saw fear in her eyes, fear of him. Her feet were bleeding from the broken glass. Slowly she bent down, picked up what remained of a picture frame, of the last picture of a two-year-old boy.

Numb, Douglas turned back to the broken doors and to the covered pool that lay beyond.

Chapter Eight

"At least we know for sure what he looks like now," Nathan said.

Julia didn't say anything. She sat hunched on top of a crate of ropes, one of the countless containers, stacks, and piles of equipment crammed into the kitchen and dining room. Nathan had never seen her so despondent and listless. Angry, sarcastic, even downright mean on occasion, yes, but that was because the hunt was what she lived for... the hunt and her little boy. This smothering depression, though, just wasn't like her.

"We might know what he looks like," said Abraham sitting nearby, "but he knows what we look like too." The black man, his eyes puffy from too little sleep, held a photograph in his hand. He handed it to bleach-blond Johnny next to him.

"Naw, he don't know what we look like," Johnny said. "He was too busy pulling his ass outta the fire, right buddy? And I don't think this picture is quite right. He was more like—" He struck a pose of mock terror, hands shielding his face, held it, then laughed until he snorted.

Abraham snatched back the photograph. "I took this picture with my little voyeur-cam before Julia needed help," he said, brandishing a palm-sized camera. "You think he didn't have cameras set up in that place, if that's where he hangs out?"

"Hell, no," Johnny said. "He didn't have nothing to worry about before, damn vampire sucking off high school and college babes. We were in and out of there so fast," Johnny hopped up from his chair and threw a flurry of punches at the air, "Pow-pow pow-pow! He didn't know what the hell hit him."

"Camera or not," Julia said, staring at the floor, "he knows what I look like. He won't let me get close

again. This was my chance to find out something about Timothy, and I blew it."

Nathan cringed at the reproach in her voice—not reproach he realized, but harsher than that, self-loathing. "We'll find him again, Julia." He looked to Abraham to back him up, then Johnny, and the other two hunters perched on sprawling heaps of camping gear: Cleo Wheeler, dark-skinned, small, but hard as nails; and Mike Carson with his long, droopy face and sad eyes.

It was Mike who took up the challenge. "Nathan's right. He found this Braughton character once. There'll be other traces, deeds, public records. Hell, maybe the guy has a credit card."

"He's not a *guy*," Julia said sharply. "He's a monster, a vampire. He drinks people's blood."

"The important thing is that we get Timothy back," Mike said.

Julia was not willing to be comforted. "Do you think I don't know that? Don't patronize me."

"I didn't mean to—"

"The important thing," Cleo said, "is that we make sure that monster doesn't harm anyone else."

Nathan was glad he wasn't on the receiving end of the glare Julia leveled at Cleo. "Probably those things go hand in hand," he said. "Of course we'll find Timothy, and we'll make sure the baddies go down too."

Abraham was shaking his head. "I hope you guys are right, but let's not kid ourselves. It's not going to happen right away. We gave that Lionel guy—thing, whatever—a hell of a scare. Like Johnny said, it didn't have nothing to be afraid of before. Now it does. Truth is we don't know how it's going to react. Go underground, come after us full bore...?"

"Let it come," Johnny said, jumping up from his seat again and working his middle finger in the air like a corkscrew digging into a vampire's heart. "Let it come after us. We'll stuff its head so far up its ass—"

Abraham smacked him on the back of the head. "Pipe down, boy. You talk when I tell you to talk." Johnny resumed his seat in disgruntled silence. "The other question," Abraham continued, "is whether we're going to be able to get anything useful from this Lionel. I mean, it's a long shot from the start. You agree with that don't you, Julia." She nodded. "Now that we pissed him off, you think he's going to help us, even if he can?"

"What are you saying?" Julia asked, voice pitched low, skeptical.

"I'm saying that Johnny and Cleo might be right."

"Damn straight!" Johnny said, vindicated, but he shrank back again as Abraham raised his hand threateningly.

Julia clenched her teeth. "So you want to give up on Timothy, just like that?"

Abraham shook his head. "I didn't say that."

"That's not what he means, Julia," Mike added.

"Then what exactly do you mean?"

"I mean," Abraham said, "we can't expect this vampire to be our corner newsstand. We give him a quarter, he tells us what we want to know. We've got to watch our asses."

"You and Johnny are good enough at that, aren't you?" Julia snapped at him.

Abraham folded his arms, gave her a look that could kill. "I'm here because your boy Nathan sounded like you folks could use some help."

"That's right. *Help*, maybe, but not someone to give us orders!" Julia's face was red. She was practically

shouting now. "What the hell do you know? You've been in town, what, three weeks, four?"

"What's your track record?" Abraham shot back. "How many folks have you lost? I've been around longer and seen a hell of a lot more than you have. If you don't want my help, I'll take my boy Johnny and we'll head out."

"Abraham, Julia." Mike stood up, stepped between them. His steadfast calm seemed to diffuse the argument somewhat. "No one is saying that we should just roll over for this vampire, but we need at least to try to find out if he knows anything that could help us get Timothy back."

"You're asking for someone to get killed," Cleo said. "We should find it, and kill it."

"It didn't seem like it wanted to talk much," Abraham pointed out.

"It *did* talk," Julia said, "until you came charging in with your aerosol-can flame throwers."

"That's bullshit, man!" Johnny couldn't keep quiet. "He's was coming after you. Soon as he knew that you knew what he was, he wasn't gonna let you walk out of there! You said so yourself."

"People... people!" Nathan managed to quiet them down. If he wasn't careful, he'd allow himself to be overwhelmed by the arguing. In the past, Hetger had been the one to channel debate, to let people vent without crossing that tricky line into permanent animosity. Nathan more often tended to slink off and escape online when things got too contentious. But John Hetger wasn't around anymore. "We're not getting anywhere. Our safety has to be a priority. Julia tried to talk to the thing. It went bad. Abraham and Johnny were there to help bail her out. Job well done all around. Assuming that I can manage to track the

thing down again, and Julia still wants to try talking... I think it's worth it. As long as we're damn careful."

Julia nodded vigorously. "If I can just talk to it, convince it that we were defending ourselves. We wouldn't have attacked if it hadn't."

"If it's willing to look at the situation rationally," Abraham said. "If it's able to."

"I am here to destroy these monsters," Cleo said. "I am the hand of God. If you want to—"

"If God doesn't want me to get my son back," Julia said, "then I don't have any use for God, and I don't have any use for you."

"Okaaaay..." said Nathan. "I don't know if there's any new ground there worth covering."

"How are the computer repairs coming?" Mike asked hurriedly.

Nathan was more than willing to change the subject. "Pretty well. I'm still trying to work out bugs with a few of the peripherals, but I'm more or less up and running, back online."

"When the line's secure," Abraham said, "I'd like to jack in, catch up with a few people on hunter-net."

"I saw your laptop. Ethernet?"

"I wish."

"I'll fix you up," Nathan said.

"What about the info you're trying to recover?" Mike asked. "The files that caused all the trouble in the first place."

"You sure you want to touch that stuff again, man?" Abraham asked. "It messed you up, and good. You've been spending forever trying to patch that computer back together."

"I can't just let it go," Nathan said. He had to know, had to find out if the material in those files

was on the up and up—or if Muckraker deserved a world of hurt. “I have the old system completely segregated. There’s absolutely no way whatever happened could happen again.”

Abraham shot him a sideways glance. “Did you think there was any way it could happen before?”

Nathan chose not to answer that.

Chapter Nine

Viewed through the fish-eye distortion of the peephole in the basement door, Kyle was grotesque: oversized nose, one hazel eye thrust close in an attempt to see through the wrong way. Lionel flung a string of obscenities at him, then, "Go the hell away!"

Kyle shrunk back from the door like a puppy that had been kicked and expected to be kicked again, but he didn't turn and scurry back up the stairs like he should have. "Lionel, man, I'm sorry... but it's important."

"Never!" Lionel snapped at him. "I told you *never* to bother me down here." Or else I'll never have a moment's peace. Lionel never would have guessed that Kyle would be such a clinging, needy vampire. He'd possessed so much potential as a mortal: ruthless and ambitious. Little enough of that had survived the change, however, and now Lionel was stuck with him. Kyle wasn't sufficiently savvy or subtle to turn out on his own, especially since Lionel would be held responsible for his childe's conduct. So the fledgling crashed here in what Lionel considered the Saginaw flophouse. *I've half a mind to put you down*, Lionel thought. But he had worked hard to earn permission from the prince to create progeny, and a childe was a symbol of influence and power among the Kindred, so baring the most dire transgression against the Traditions, it was the other half of Lionel's mind that would hold sway. Which meant that he was stuck with Kyle.

"But Lionel," Kyle sputtered from the other side of the door, "Laurence Maxwell is upstairs."

Lionel couldn't get his key into the lock quickly enough. His precise, nimble fingers were suddenly thick and clumsy, so much so that he was afraid he would bend or break the key. "Why the hell didn't

you say so?" Lionel asked angrily as he joined Kyle and fumbled at trying to lock the door behind him. That done, he turned his full wrath on Kyle. "What did you tell him? *What the hell did you tell him?*"

"Nothing!" Kyle shied away, almost whimpered.

Nothing. That was what Lionel wanted to hear. But was it true? *You don't talk to other Kindred. Nobody but me.* How many times had Lionel told him that? *You feel the need to chat, you go find some mortal bimbo, but you don't talk to any other Kindred, and you don't talk to anybody about Kindred. You got that?* Others of their kind were simply too wily. They could ferret out too many secrets from a weak mind. Innocent words could give away far too much. *Somebody higher up asks you questions you can't get out of, you be damn polite—yes sir, no sir, I don't know if you can get away with it—but you don't tell them nothing!*

"If I find out different..."

"I swear I didn't tell him nothing," Kyle said, his anxiety mounting to near hysteria. "He said he wanted to see you. I said I'd get you. That's it. I didn't say nothing!"

Lionel lay a hand on Kyle's shoulder—a hand that could have been reward or punishment, pat on the back or broken arm. After a long moment of Kyle's cringing, Lionel smiled. "Good." He had to hand it to the boy. If not a completely satisfactory child, Kyle could at least learn the most basic lessons after a moderate amount of punishment. Lionel patted him on the cheek and hurried upstairs.

He was less pleased when he found his own sire standing in the doorway to the living room, which was littered with liquor bottles and the inert forms of the two young women he had been enjoying earlier. The liquor had been for their benefit; they had been for Lionel's benefit. They were both half undressed

and sprawled unconscious on his massive, overstuffed leather couch. The hint of a buzz he'd picked up from their alcohol-rich blood was gone the second he saw his elder.

"Laurence, if I'd known you were coming..." Lionel said, shaking his sire's hand a bit too energetically. "Oh, jeez, look at this mess. I'm sorry about... Kyle! Laurence, what a surprise. It's damn good to see you. Let me just take care of... um... Kyle!" Kyle appeared before Lionel had managed to get the first girl's shirt back on. Her limp arms and head seemed always to flop the wrong way and make the task nearly impossible. "Didn't these girls have underwear when they showed up? Hell, don't worry about it. Just get them dressed and out of here. Get them a cab."

"I don't know where they live," Lionel said, trying to help with the girl's shirt but just getting in the way.

Lionel, his back turned to Laurence, glared a threat of future punishment at his child. "Go with them, then. Take them somewhere. To the club if you have to. Just make sure they're okay." *Why didn't you show Laurence into the other room, you dumb-ass?* Lionel was thinking. Technically, nothing going on in the house was a problem, but Laurence was of a stodgier generation, and flaunting a decadent lifestyle in front of him was not the way to earn his respect.

"Laurence, let's go into the other room—Kyle, don't worry about the damn panty hose, just get them out—um, here this way, Laurence. Are you hungry?"

"Not at present, Lionel," Maxwell said. His tone was neutral, but Lionel imagined he could hear the strains of disapproval.

Across the hall, Lionel closed the door, blocking the sight of Kyle struggling with the two unconscious

bodies, if not the sounds of his exertion, including one thud that sounded distinctly like a head banging against the hardwood floor.

I can't believe I asked him if he was hungry! Lionel thought. *What was I going to do, offer him a girl?* Feeding could be such a tricky subject, especially with elders. Some of them were so damned sensitive, liked to pretend that they weren't anything different from the kine on whom they dined. Laurence had never seemed particularly squeamish; he hadn't educated Lionel to view meals that way. Still, some boundaries were better left untested. *Okay, take it easy, Lionel. Regroup. Just a routine visit. Except Laurence doesn't make routine visits, dammit!*

"So," Lionel said, deciding he couldn't do any worse by plowing straight ahead, "to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Laurence Maxwell took his time getting settled. He was a perfidious type, and though he didn't go so far as to brush away the crumbs left from the food Lionel had bought to entertain mortals, he did inspect each seat before deciding on a battered, straight-back armchair that Lionel had salvaged from somewhere. Maxwell's suit was pure 1950s, something only seen on TV in black-and-white reruns or old movies. Only when he was seated did he smile, and that slightly.

"The prince requires your service," Maxwell said.

Lionel waited a moment for elaboration, then realized that Maxwell would give him details in his own good time and not before. *Damn elders,* Lionel thought. *Can't come straight out and say anything. Have to make you sweat and crawl.* But mingled with the irritation at Maxwell's arrogance and his own comparable impotence was a sense of awe, even grudging affection. This, after all, was the Kindred who had imparted upon Lionel the gift of eternal life.

A certain amount of gratitude was in order. Lionel's sire was important in his own right, too; sheriff and second fiddle to Prince Adrock now that Calvin Bainbridge had shot his wad and was out of the picture.

"You know I'm always happy to help the prince any way that I can," Lionel said. "And you, of course."

"Of course," Maxwell said, bowing his head formally. "Very commendable."

Commendable, my ass, Lionel thought. *You'd squash me like a bug if I tried anything else*. From where he sat, Maxwell continued to study the room, though in truth he showed slight interest in what he saw. Meanwhile, Lionel had little choice but to wait patiently. He had experienced this with Maxwell before, the lingering sense of distraction, or if not distraction then a lack of awareness of the passage of time and its significance. Elders could be a pain that way. *Adrock is the worst. The prince calls together all the Kindred in his domain and then keeps us waiting a few hours. Never fails. Maybe*, he pondered, *it was a function of age. What the hell are a few hours to somebody who's been around that long? Then again*, Lionel thought, *maybe they don't give a crap except to hold it over the rest of us who's in charge*.

"It comes to my attention," Maxwell said without preamble, "that there was something of an incident at your Lazarus Club, Lionel."

The change of topic caught Lionel off guard. "Something of an... oh, you must be talking about... I wouldn't exactly call that an *incident*."

"What would you call it?"

"Well, I'd call it..." Lionel sat while he tried to gauge precisely what Laurence might have heard. "I'd call it...hell, I don't know what I'd call it Laurence. But not an *incident*. You know how it is. Somebody's

mother showed up, thought I might know where her kid was.”

“And did you?”

“Did I?” *Does he care?* Lionel wondered. *Or is he just trying to rattle me.* Despite that suspicion and his best effort to remain calm, Lionel was rattled. He forced himself to sit still, not to fidget. He shrugged off the question. “A lot of kids hang around my place, Laurence. It’s a music scene. Groupies looking for a good time, a little blow. Some of them I booze up a little. They get what they want. I get what I want. I send them home. No questions, no problem.”

“But this time there were questions.”

“This lady was crazy, I tell you. Paranoid, schitzo, whatever. I wouldn’t be surprised if she didn’t even *have* a kid. This kind of thing happens once in a while. Sort of an occupational hazard. It’s really not a big deal. Nothing to worry about.”

“Once in a while,” Maxwell said. “Are the police normally called to your club?” he asked. “And the fire marshal?”

Lionel’s voice caught in his throat. *What the hell is he after?* he wondered. “Laurence, you know me. I live large. But I never cross the line, and I’m always there when you need me. Always.” The sheriff sat impassively. “Okay, this lady, she was a little over the top, right? She made a scene. It got a little out of hand. Somebody called the cops. A fire got started...”

“A fire, Lionel?”

Lionel suppressed a shudder. The mere thought angered him, embarrassed him—the memory of flame so close that it singed his hair and collar, and the memory of him fleeing in uncontrollable terror, *running away*, from a mortal. “Not a big deal, I tell you.” But he had to hold those thoughts at bay, lest he lose control again. He got up from his seat, began

pacing. "We took care of it. All it took was a fire extinguisher. Didn't even make the papers. I made sure of that." Made sure of that once he'd come back to his senses.

"If this type of incident—or whatever you would prefer to call it—is an occupational hazard, as you put it, perhaps this is not a wise occupation," Maxwell suggested.

Lionel didn't like the sound of that. He stopped pacing. "What do you mean? You know I run a tight ship, Laurence. I mean, Jesus Christ, so the fire marshal shows up. Did he find any violations? Hell no. Because I make sure there's no reason for the cops or fire marshal or the health inspector or anybody else to take an interest in my clubs. I don't need that kind of headache. I'm not in business to draw that kind of attention to myself."

"But other kinds of attention, Lionel?"

"It was an isolated incident. Incident. Hell, now you got me saying it. That lady was off her rocker. She wasn't playing with a full deck. I took care of it. No harm done." Lionel was pacing again. He literally couldn't stand still for what Maxwell was implying—especially not since, for Lionel, Maxwell's word was practically law. If he said close down the clubs, Lionel would have little recourse but to obey.

"We need my clubs, Laurence." He tried to come across as reasonable, but to his own ears, the edge to his voice sounded uncomfortably like pleading. "I mean, I know you and Adrock call the shots, but I'm the one with my ear to the ground here. I mean—and no offense here—but not everything we need to know comes straight from those stuffed-suit mortals who you guys keep in your hip pocket. Sometimes we have to get down and dirty, or we need to dredge up some lowlife shmuck to take a fall."

"It is true," Maxwell said thoughtfully, "that you do maintain certain contacts among the baser element."

"Thanks, I think." For a moment, Lionel thought that the momentum of the conversation had shifted and the greatest danger had passed, but it was so hard to tell with Maxwell. "Aside from any personal stake I have—which is, of course, secondary in importance—we close me down, and your leaving all your legwork to the Sewer Rats. Is that a good idea?"

"Interesting that you should mention the Nosferatu," Maxwell said. Lionel stopped pacing. He could almost hear the jaws of some trap snapping shut, but he couldn't yet see what it was. "You are aware that one of Theodore's lessers met an untimely demise."

Considering any demise for us is untimely, Lionel thought. "Yeah," he said. "Finian, right? Yeah, I heard he was Melba Toast. Good riddance, I say."

"His passing," Maxwell said, "is less unfortunate than the public spectacle surrounding it."

Lionel had heard about it. Who hadn't? "In Iron Rapids. He blew himself up or something. Stupid bastard. Now *that's* what I call an *incident*. Police, fire trucks, newspapers..." Lionel trailed off as he noticed his sire's expression of displeasure. The younger Kindred cleared his throat. "Yeah, I heard."

"The explosion likely did have something to do with his passing—but there was a kine involved as well, we believe."

"A kine?" Lionel said. "Tracking down a Nossie? No way. I couldn't track down a Nossie." But behind his instinctive skepticism, he was thinking of the woman at the club, of the way she had looked at him, unflinching when she should have been eating out

of his hand, and of what she had said: *I know what you are.*

Maxwell reached into his jacket pocket and took out a folded piece of paper, which he held out for Lionel. "This is the name and address of a young woman on whom Finian had apparently fixated," the sheriff said.

Lionel hesitated. Maxwell wasn't telling him all this for his peace of mind. Obvious strings were attached, but there was no getting around it. He took the paper, unfolded it. "So this bitch did him in, huh?"

"I would not jump to that conclusion," Maxwell said.

"You want me to find out."

"Do you know Iron Rapids well, Lionel?"

"Know it? I know it a bit. I don't have a club there, if that's what you mean," he said. *But you already know that. What do you mean?* "I've got a few contacts, a safe house. I can get around."

"Then I suggest you do just that," Maxwell said. "I want to know what happened. *The prince* wants to know what happened. Succeed, and you might well find yourself possessing certain rights within Iron Rapids."

I bet there's some property to go around since Bainbridge got canned, Lionel thought. So that was the carrot: hunting rights within the prince's own seat of power. *I don't want to think about the stick.*

"I trust there will be no more incidents, Lionel."

"Huh? Oh, no. Of course not. You know me."

"I assure you, the prince does not consider this situation to be insignificant," Maxwell said.

"I guess not, if this mortal iced one of us." *Which also means it's damn dangerous, which is why you're tossing this to me instead of taking care of it yourself.*

"There is the additional factor," Maxwell continued, "that the kine involved may not be...typical."

Lionel cocked his head. "Come again."

"Let me tell you what I know, Lionel."

Damn good idea, Lionel thought. *It's about time.*

"Yeah," he said. "That's probably a good idea."

The metallic friction of the bolt sliding home rattled in Lionel's mind like an alarm bell. He leaned against the basement door, pressed his back against it, but no door could shield him from the dark thoughts that clouded his mind. *Is he setting me up to take the fall? My own sire? Surely not.* Now that Maxwell was gone, Lionel could at least entertain the idea—barely. Wariness he could manage in the face of his sire, even skepticism, but outright suspicion.... The ties of blood ran deep, and the thought that Maxwell could betray him engendered an inassuageable ache, an emptiness that left Lionel weak. *I'm too important to him*, he told himself. *I'm of his blood.* But then Lionel thought of his displeasure with Kyle and the remedies he had considered.

This is different. I'm not Kyle. Lionel began beating the heels of his palms against his head, harder and harder. *I haven't displeased Laurence. I haven't!* He dug his fingernails into his scalp, dragged them, digging deeply. The troughs of flesh yielded no blood. *Incident, my ass! It wasn't an incident!* Lionel balled his hands into fists, shook them at the air, bared his fangs and stifled a scream of anguish, denial—

And then he was calm. The churning emotions drained away to somewhere deep within him, to a place that was buried more completely with every night that passed. *He's giving me an opportunity*, Lionel decided. *Laurence is giving me an opportunity to prove*

myself. Just like he said. There's room to move up now that Bainbridge is out of the picture. Hell, I bet Laurence is bucking to be the next seneschal.... A great vista of potential opened before Lionel as he realized what else that could mean. And he wants me to take his place as sheriff! It could be true. Maxwell had practically said as much. Yet the darker thoughts intruded once again. But the prince would never allow it. He'd never allow so consolidated a power base for another Kindred. There had to be something different. But, still, the possibilities...

Lionel pushed away from the door, smoothed the wrinkles from his silk shirt. Again master of his domain, he faced the next door, this one secured with a large bolt on this side, the outside. He pulled open the door and flicked on the light within.

A small boy, huddled on a soiled mattress in the corner, blinked against the sudden illumination from the naked bulb suspended by a wire.

Lionel regarded him harshly. "You pissed on your mattress again." The boy flinched at the edge in Lionel's voice and averted his eyes, still blinking. Lionel wrinkled his nose. "Well, you can just sleep in it. That'll teach you." But it hadn't taught him yet, not in the weeks that Lionel had had the boy.

Timothy. So your name is Timothy. That's what the woman had said, not that the boy seemed to know. He didn't talk much at all, didn't seem to know much of anything, and though he was at least eight or nine years old, he consistently peed in his bed or on the floor. Lionel glanced at the three buckets in the far corner and saw that the third, like the first two, was now full with urine and feces. He wrinkled his nose again. This was the smell of humans: piss and shit. And blood, he thought. For an instant, his pupils

dilated, his fangs began to slide down—but he quickly regained his composure.

He watched the cowering boy. *So you're Timothy. Jeremy and Clare sure did a number on you.*

That was where Lionel had found the boy—at a house in Ann Arbor that belonged to Jeremy and Clare, the house that woman at the club, Julia, had been talking about. Lionel shook his head. The Bainbridge affair had thoroughly muddied the waters of Kindred society throughout Michigan: Bainbridge himself exiled along with several others; Jeremy Talbot punished as a traitor; others missing, such as Bainbridge's child Michael and Jeremy's confidante Clare. Then, too, it had fallen to Lionel—again at the request of his sire—to help sort out the mess. There was nothing unusual about a Kindred maintaining multiple havens sprinkled across his or her territory. Quite the contrary, such prudence was common, and so after Jeremy was condemned and Clare apparently vanished, Maxwell had sent Lionel to investigate locations those Kindred had frequented. The length of the list of addresses the sheriff had provided had been profoundly disturbing to Lionel. Did Prince Adrock know so much about all of his subjects? Did he have a list, equally as complete, of Lionel's havens and haunts? Even now, Lionel shuddered at the thought.

I need to establish more havens, he decided. Secret havens—secret even from Laurence and the prince. A reasonable idea, but also a dangerous one, for such secrecy, if found out, could be interpreted as treason. A minefield. That's what Laurence has dropped me in the middle of—a fucking minefield. Every secret was potentially a double-edged sword, and one secret in particular sat in the corner, shivering, staring at the cold concrete floor.

The boy looked worse than when Lionel had found him in the house. Whatever Jeremy and Clare had had in mind for the boy, intentionally or otherwise, they had abandoned him. Lionel had discovered him locked in a room, hungry, dirty, nearly catatonic. Those conditions had worsened in the past weeks. The boy was emaciated despite the food Lionel provided. The little urchin was awash in his own bodily wastes. Sure, Lionel should have gotten another bucket, or perhaps even emptied the full ones, but why should it be his place to undertake such disgusting tasks? And he didn't trust Kyle or anyone else enough to reveal the boy's presence. *The kid should still know enough not to pee on his bed*, Lionel thought. *Jeremy and Clare have messed up his mind, and good.* Equally as irritating, the boy had barely spoken a word since Lionel had found him. Even beating had elicited nothing more than pitiful whimpering, which nothing short of more beating had proved able to silence.

"You're damn lucky, kid," Lionel said. Because who knew what Jeremy and Clare would have had in mind for the boy? Yet watching him continue to deteriorate, Lionel couldn't shake the perturbing thought that he couldn't keep a boy as well as the lunatics had. *They're the ones who broke him*, he thought defiantly. *He'd be fine if he'd been with me all along.*

"You need to shape up, kid," Lionel said. "I've gone to a lot of trouble for you." He'd put himself at risk. Even now, weeks after bringing the boy back here, Lionel wasn't completely sure why he'd done it—and why he'd kept the boy secret from everyone, including his sire.

There had been little enough chance to think about it at the time. He had found the boy, and before he could search the rest of the house, he'd noticed

the police lights outside. Some jittery neighbor had apparently seen Lionel breaking into the house and called the cops. No time for anything but grabbing the kid and hightailing it out of there, and so it was the police who had found the bodies in the basement—bodies drained of blood.

"That is crazy," Lionel muttered to himself and the boy who was vacantly sitting, staring, blinking. "Leaving bodies in your haven." Unbelievable. It was worse than the boy pissing his bed. Jeremy had never seemed that crazy—at least not in that way. It must have been Clare's doing.

Maxwell and Adrock had been furious, of course. They'd found out through their police contacts, and Lionel had let them concentrate on Jeremy and Clare's indiscretions. He'd seen no reason to mention the boy. It had been almost an oversight at first. Why further burden the sheriff and the prince with news of a boy snatched from God knew where? Then, after a few nights, the omission began to take on more significance in Lionel's mind. How would his silence be perceived by a prince who had already rooted out conspiracies against him? What justification existed? Lionel had decided not to risk it, simply to keep the boy. Every Kindred, after all, needed a hobby, a pet, and not even music and women could occupy all of Lionel's nights.

Standing there now, though, watching the emaciated boy, Lionel felt twinges of something else, something not completely revealed even to himself. He remembered part of what the woman in the club had asked him: *So tell me, were you ever human?* The words had stuck with him, had rung in his ears as he lay down each morning. *Were you ever human?*

Lionel looked at the boy again: shivering, snot running down his face, his stink filling the room.

Lionel yelled, suddenly incensed: "What the hell's so human about you?!"

The boy started, pressed himself farther back into the corner. Lionel stormed toward him, grabbed the corner of the mattress, and yanked it out from under the boy as if it were weightless. The boy tumbled in a heap onto the concrete floor.

"What?" Lionel screamed. "What's so Goddamned human about you?"

The boy stared up, his wide eyes reflecting the glare of the naked light bulb. Blood pulsed through Lionel's body, a ghost pulse, a mockery of what once he had been, of what the boy still was. Lionel reached for the boy—

Then stopped. He fought down the hunger, the fury. The red haze that had clouded his vision receded. He stepped away, sought another direction, another purpose. Lionel stomped toward the cases of food he had stacked against one wall, reached into the top case, pulled out a single box like all the others: red with false wheels, pictures of animals, and a string. Something a boy should like.

"You damn well better eat!" he yelled. He crumpled the box in his fists until it broke upon then threw it at the boy. "Kids are supposed to like this! So eat it!"

The boy lay sobbing on the floor amidst the crumbs of animal crackers. Lionel raised a fist. The boy sucked in his breath, and the sobbing became a combination of whimpers and hiccups.

Lionel lowered his fist. *Were you ever human?* He turned away from the boy and toward the door, but something else the woman at the club had said intruded upon his thoughts: *I know what you are.* Lionel shoved a hand into his pocket and pulled out the piece of paper Maxwell had handed him an hour

ago—a name and address. The woman at the club had said her name was Julia, but she could easily have been lying. The name Laurence had written down was different: *Melanie Vinn*. Could they be one and the same? Lionel would find out, and if they were the same woman, he'd see to it that she never bothered him again.

I could ask the boy, Lionel thought. *I could ask him if his mommy's name is Julia*. He looked back over his shoulder at the boy who had not moved and still whimpered quietly. *Timothy*. *I could see if he responds to the name*. But then another flash of anger shot through Lionel. *There's no "Timothy" left in there*, he thought. *Jeremy and Clare took care of that*.

"What's so great about being human?" Lionel asked himself, still without an answer, as he turned off the light and left the boy in darkness.

Chapter Ten

"You're sure you understand?"

"Yeah. Sure. No problem," Abraham said.

Nathan still hesitated. Not that the instructions he'd given were that complicated, because they weren't, but having suffered computer calamity once, he was more than a bit gun shy.

But Abraham clearly assumed that his own competence was in question. He sighed and held up his hands for viewing. "I've got the gloves on." He had double rubber gloves on each hand, in fact, to insulate him from capricious and potentially lethal bursts of electricity. "And if you give the signal, I pull the plug—that one, and the surge protector over here."

"Right away," Nathan added.

"Right away." Abraham gave three slow, exaggerated nods.

Nathan mirrored the gestures but still hesitated. He recognized Abraham's growing impatience. "It's not you I'm worried about," Nathan assured him.

"I know. I know." Abraham let his head droop for a moment, then he stood and began pacing—or tried to. The kitchen was cramped enough on normal occasions, but now that Nathan had set up a computer drive, monitor, and printer, there was that much less room. "You've taken all the precautions you can, right? I mean, I can understand not wanting to have this computer hooked up to the rest of your equipment while you try to retrieve these files, but setting it up in a different room? I don't know. Maybe we should consult the witch doctor, and then go find your lucky socks while we're at it."

Nathan felt a quick flash of anger—despite the fact that he *was* wearing his lucky socks. "You didn't

see it last time," he said. "You weren't here. The systems shutdown, the overload... It never should've happened. Shouldn't have *been able* to happen. But it did. Despite all my precautions."

"You've taken more precautions this time, right?"

"Right."

"Then, at the very least, something freaky like that is less likely to happen. Right?"

Nathan wasn't going to be ameliorated that easily. "Less likely' may not be good enough."

Abraham ran his tongue across the front of his upper teeth. "Then leave the damn files."

"Don't you think I've thought of that?"

"That's all you can do. If you can't handle the possible consequences of what you want to attempt, then leave it. Walk away. You have to be willing to take what you get." Abraham gestured naturally as he spoke. His words fell into easy cadences and reminded Nathan of footage he'd seen and heard of Malcolm X. "Leave the files. Trash 'em. They can't be that important, or you wouldn't be so hesitant."

But it could turn out to be important, Nathan thought. *How will I know if I don't look at it? I'll just wonder and wonder.* Yet he knew that Abraham was right—not about trashing the files. Nathan knew he could never live with himself, if he did that. For the rest of his life, every time that he or another hunter suffered a setback, he'd wonder if the files he'd abandoned might have held the key: how to have untangled a problem, defeated a monster, saved a life. All the same, knowing what road he *had* to take didn't make the first step any easier.

I wish John were here, Nathan thought, not for the first time since his friend and mentor had walked out of the door of the house for the last time. Hetger had always been one to bounce ideas off, to lend

support, confidence, to examine options and alternatives. It seemed unlikely that anyone would ever take his place. Julia, always driven, was twice as much so now that they had finally found a clue about her son. Since the Lazarus Club fiasco, she spent most of her time club hopping somewhere in the area, hoping she would run across that Lionel guy again.

Albert could have been that trusted friend perhaps, but he, like John, was dead. Neither Clarence or Jason would have fit the bill, even if they too hadn't died.

Of the newcomers, Mike was generally reasonable, and he was a good listener, but he was, after all, so *new*. Who knew if he'd survive another week, month, year? Cleo was just a bit scary—with a fanaticism that perhaps exceeded what Clarence had brought to the table. Nathan hadn't thought that possible. He should have, he knew. He'd seen enough postings on hunter-net to have an idea about the sorts of extremists that were out there. Tonight Cleo and Mike were out tracking a shambler on the other side of town anyway, so as far as the present activities were concerned, that much of the question was moot.

That left Abraham Jones and his boy Johnny. That's what Abraham called Johnny—his boy—and Johnny didn't seem to mind. He seemed to like it, in fact, to take a sense of pride in his intimate relationship with such a rugged, take-no-prisoners survivor. *Yeah, well, I thought Clarence was a survivor too, and John...* Maybe it had something to do with the fact that Johnny wasn't one of them, not really, and sharing the danger that Abraham faced was a sort of redemption. *How can I think he's not one of us? He shares that danger. Sees more of it than I do, if it comes down to that! Just because he doesn't have the sight or the other little edges... none of us knows why we got them, not for sure. Johnny has been loyal and brave*

whenever and wherever it's mattered. If that doesn't make him one of us, I don't what does.

"Let me know when you make up your mind," Abraham said, peeling off the rubber gloves and throwing them onto the table. "If you make up your mind."

Nathan blinked, drawn back from his deliberations by Abraham's unyielding forward movement. "Don't go," Nathan said. "Let's do it. Now. I've done what I can to take precautions. I want to know exactly what's in those files."

Abraham paused at the door, skeptical. "You're sure."

"I'm sure."

Abraham nodded, came back into the room, started pulling the gloves back on. "Good. Let's do it."

Nathan pushed himself forward. He didn't give himself time to hesitate further, to think, to breathe. He turned on his retrieval software. It was something he'd gotten from a fellow hunter, who had in turn pirated it from Europe, a program called *Salvage*. The few occasions that Nathan had used it so far, to recapture content from corrupted files, had been akin to shooting fish in a barrel—a very small barrel and very large fish and gun. This, he suspected, would be more of a test for *Salvage*, hopefully not an insurmountable one. The software was ready. He took the blackened lump of a hard drive, which until a few weeks ago had been entirely dedicated to backing up incoming emails and downloads, and paused, ready to plug into the port. The port itself had required numerous days of reconstruction after the catastrophe. The damage to the drive was more superficial, thank goodness—but the damage should have been *impossible*. "Damn it all," Nathan muttered.

"Problem?" Abraham asked.

"No problem." It was a blatant lie, but Abraham would never understand the sinking feeling that had gripped Nathan as his beloved computer had begun to sizzle and melt and explode. He took a deep breath. *Everyone has to face his worst fear sooner or later.*

He connected the drive. Nathan almost forgot Abraham now, turning instead to the monitor. A few clicks of the mouse, and *Salvage* was at work, accessing the damaged drive. A patchwork graphic appeared on the screen: multicolored rows of cells, some black, inaccessible; others blinking as *Salvage* snaked its way around the damaged and inoperable sectors. Another window displayed file names, the list growing longer by the second. Nathan scrolled through the list. Some of the names he recognized. Some, though, had been reduced to gobbledygook, Wingdings or were simply grayed out.

Salvage seemed to be having no problem with the drive. *But what about the infected files?* Nathan wondered. *If I find them at all.*

A minute later, he did. The Muckraker files were among those grayed out, which meant he couldn't get at them at present. *Let's see what Salvage has to say about that.*

"You find what you're looking for?"

"What?"

"That noise you made," Abraham said, "sounded like an 'I-found-what-I-want' grunt."

Nathan heard Abraham with half a mind. "Oh, yes. I found them. So the drive is operable to some extent. But finding the files and accessing them aren't the same thing."

"But you looked at them before, right?"

"Briefly. Only very briefly." Nathan held up a finger to forestall more questions. Meanwhile, he had

Salvage create a content copy of the files—a sort of snapshot reproduction, very basic, but that didn't require actually opening the files. It wouldn't include any active code from within the original files, but, then again, whatever active code had been embedded within those documents was the last thing that Nathan wanted to touch right now.

"There." The reproductions were safely stored on a floppy. He clicked open the sterile versions and frowned. While some of the text was indeed as he remembered it from his brief viewing before, much of it was garbled, incomprehensible, with lines superimposed over one another, blacked out or totally scrambled. Nathan closed the files, ejected the floppy and tucked it into his shirt pocket.

"All done?" Abraham asked somewhat incredulously. After all the fuss, he'd obviously expected something more dramatic.

"I have a crude copy of the files," Nathan explained, "but it's pretty incomplete. I need to see what else I can do with the files themselves." He cracked his knuckles and turned back to *Salvage*.

A quick properties check revealed significant discrepancies between the sizes of the sterile files and the originals. *Something didn't make the transition, all right. And maybe it was the something that was busting my balls.* But there was more information to be mined from these files. The trick was to extract the nuggets without collapsing the shaft. Nathan scanned the files for active code. *Salvage* found none.

"I don't believe that for a second."

"What?"

"Shh."

The garbled text within the sterile files might account for a difference in size of a few hundred kilobytes, but the discrepancies were far more than

that. The original files wouldn't even fit on a floppy. "There's still active code in there." But not according to *Salvage*. Pictures? Graphics? Interactive media? Not that Nathan had seen during his original, cursory inspection.

He ran several more scans on the files.

"Strange." *Salvage* wasn't reporting data of any sort within the files. *But that can't be right. I've already seen the content copies. There is data in there. More than what I've been able to get at remotely. Is Salvage malfunctioning, corrupted, or just overmatched?* There was only one way to find out.

"I'm going in."

Nathan couldn't imagine computer code so advanced and insidious that it could so easily stymie his software, which was itself on the cutting edge of technology—*ahead* of the cutting edge. As he went through *Salvage* to open the first of the two files, he no longer needed merely imagine anything of the sort.

For a brief and shining moment, the business file that he had perused before was laid out before him in all its splendor.

Then the computer went berserk.

Salvage scan windows popped up, one after another, all over the screen, performing operations in fractions of seconds that should have taken minutes or even hours. The telltale whirrings and pops filled Nathan's ears. He smelled the acrid fumes of computer circuits and plastic fusing. Waiting only a split second to try the inoperative mouse, he gave Abraham the signal.

Abraham yanked the connecting cables and power sources as he'd been instructed. With the final plug he shielded his face from the resultant shower of sparks. The overhead light in the kitchen dimmed, then a second time, and then went out altogether.

Nathan and Abraham waited in darkness, listening to the residual pops and pings emanating from within the computer. Gradually the sounds sputtered, then stopped, and there was silence.

"We must have blown a fuse," Nathan said.

"That's not all," Abraham said, gesturing toward the tabletop. "I hope you got all you wanted off that thing."

Nathan saw what he was talking about: the grapefruit-sized heap of solidifying slag that a minute before had been the backup hard drive. "I didn't get all that I wanted," Nathan said, "but I got all that I'm going to get."

Chapter Eleven

His arms burned, but Sands forced himself to do one final set of bench presses. He'd opted toward lower weights and more reps. He didn't need to bulk up, after all, just get in shape. Besides, he didn't have anyone to spot for him, so more weight would not only be counterproductive but it wouldn't be particularly safe either.

Safe, he thought, scoffing. *What the hell is safe anymore?* He lowered the bar until it touched his chest lightly, then he pushed up... exhaling... pushing.... One. And again.

If all I had to worry about was decapitating myself with a barbell, I'd be in great shape. Down... up... exhaling... pushing.... Two.

But he had plenty else to worry about—not the least of which was Faye *worrying about him*. If she could just leave him alone... just go ahead and lead her own life and allow him to protect her. But she didn't seem able to do that. She couldn't let go of old notions that, in Douglas' new world, were obsolete, notions like job and money and relationship. And he couldn't tell her why none of those things mattered anymore. She wouldn't understand. She certainly had no concept of all that he had given up so that he could see her safely through this new world, nor could she. She couldn't see.

Exhaling... pushing.... Five.

His arms were quivering as he continued the presses. Sands tried to banish all the other thoughts, everything except lowering and raising the weights, drawing breath in, letting breath out.... Seven. But such intense focus held its own dangers. Sometimes when his mind was completely devoid of distractions, he heard the voice. Even without the wind. As if it

were echoing within the caverns of his own conscience.

Lonely place, my conscience, Sands thought.

...Nine.

There was no reason it *should* be a lonely place. He had plenty to feel guilty about. That was what Faye and Dr. Boxer—*no; David “not-a-doctor” Boxer*—wanted him to feel, at least. *He’s supposed to be impartial, but she’s got him wrapped around her finger.* They’d gone to the counselor again that morning. Like Faye, there was no way that Boxer could ever begin to understand what Douglas had been going through. *Not unless he could see,* Sands thought. With his aggravation fueling his increasingly rubbery muscles, he forced the bar upward. *What’s that—twelve, thirteen? Hell, I was only doing ten.*

He let the barbell clatter down onto the stand. For a long while, he lay there, trying to let the exhaustion of his arms and shoulders spread. He wanted to be tired, numb, all over.

It wasn’t working. *Nothing is working,* Sands thought.

The counseling wasn’t working; that was certain. Today they had focused almost entirely on Douglas’ job—former job, rather. *If Faye thought that Marcus Jubal was going to let that leave of absence turn into anything other than a pink slip and severance package, she was kidding herself.* Yet she’d seemed so shocked. *I guess I could have told her about that before today,* Sands conceded grudgingly. He had know about his firing for more than a week, after all. But it had seemed so blatantly obvious that nothing else could happen. *Too much liability after all that happened. Too much possibility of Melanie or somebody coming back with a lawsuit. And with the police still nosing about...* Sands didn’t think there was much chance that the cops would ever

charge him with anything—in Gerry Stafford's murder, Albert Tinsley's disappearance, the explosions in the sewers—but while this Detective Havelin kept poking around at Iron Rapids Manufacturing and asking questions about Sands, well, job security, much less career advancement, didn't seem to be in the cards.

But Faye couldn't see that, and she couldn't give Douglas the benefit of the doubt.

I guess I haven't given her much reason to give me the benefit of the doubt. But that was before, damn it all.

And if counseling wasn't working, where did that leave their marriage?

"What marriage?" Sands snorted. Their marriage was holding up about as well as the French doors when he'd taken the baseball bat to them. The arrangement, now, was one not of love nor affection nor even convenience, but of desperation. For very different reasons, both Douglas and Faye were unable or unwilling to let go of the final vestiges of their old world—never mind that anything of true emotion between them had atrophied years ago. They clung to the familiar with all their might. *For whatever good it does us.*

So for now they lived more or less parallel lives—he worked out at home, Faye at the gym—intersecting for the occasional meal or while shuffling around the house. *Or for a counseling session, God help me.*

Sands lifted himself from the bench and lethargically made his way toward the shower. He glanced in the living room to see if Faye was home yet. She wasn't. Douglas scowled—not that 9:00 PM was that late for her to be working out. He just didn't like her being away for so many hours at a time. She'd been showing houses all afternoon, and then earlier in the evening she'd had a meeting of the board of

directors for the homeless shelter where she volunteered. All was quiet in the house.

The living room, he noticed, was clean but not completely put back together after his escapade the other night. Thick plastic was stapled over the doorway where the French doors no longer stood. Douglas had taken care of that much but had refused to do anything else. He'd refused so much as to think about what he had seen and heard, and the consequences in the form of shattered glass and broken furniture he'd left to Faye. The glass was all swept up and the various items from shelves were tidied into cardboard boxes—Faye was adept at soldiering on as if nothing were wrong, after all—but the smashed bookshelf still leaned precariously against the wall, and the lamp from the hallway hadn't been replaced. Faye had tried once or twice to bring up that night—what she called his *rampage*—but Douglas had put her off, turning to booze and painkillers to ease his aching back.

But she couldn't let it go, couldn't leave well enough alone. She'd taken the picture of Adam to Boxer's office that morning, snuck it in under her coat, had tried to make something of the fact that Douglas had broken the frame during his *rampage*. She and the asshole *not-a-doctor* had both tried to make something of it. Douglas had refused to say so much as a word. He wasn't about to buy into their little head shrinking game when neither one of them could *know*. Eventually they'd lost interest and gone on to harp about him losing his job, how he hadn't told Faye right away... confided in her, trusted her... *blah blah blah blah blah*.

Sands slumped into the recliner, shaking his head. *Good God*. Just thinking about it made him angry all over again. *I am not going back to that jerk. I'm not giving him another penny.*

The sudden sound of the phone ringing startled Sands more than it should have. *Maybe it's Faye*, he thought, *calling to let me know she's going to be late*. It was the kind of thing that she would do: be conscientious about something she'd long complained about him not being conscientious about. *Hell, maybe she's having an affair, and she's calling to let me know she's going to be home late*. That would be the ultimate poke in the eye. *Maybe she's found some hot young personal trainer to keep her happy*, the thought, which had been at least half joking at first, taking hold in his mind. *Maybe it's Boxer! That wouldn't surprise me*. It wouldn't surprise him, and, he realized, it wouldn't evoke any other emotional response. He couldn't blame her if she looked elsewhere for a bit of conjugal fireworks or emotional support. He didn't have any right to get angry. Even so, even if he had felt he had a right to get angry, there was something missing within him, some familial attachment that should exist between a husband and wife. It was gone. Frayed and weathered over the years, fallen slack and rotted away.

So the phone rang, and he didn't answer it. Faye could leave a message if it was her. Or maybe it was some man calling for her. Douglas would be damned if he was going to play secretary. He wouldn't stand in her way, but he wasn't going to help things along. He was an observer, now, to whatever personal decisions Faye made. After all, the one reward that their marriage still provided him was proximity—so that he could protect Faye. He owed her that. *That* was the reason he was annoyed that she had been gone so long today. He realized that he couldn't be with her every minute of every day. To compensate, he'd begun making random stops by the places where she spent the most time: her office, the shelter, the gym. Just to check them out, to check out the people.

To make sure they really were *people*, and not some creature masquerading as human. It seemed the best he could do for the time being. *But why does she have to stay away so long? Is she trying to make it hard on me?*

The phone rang again, for maybe the fifth or sixth time. *What the hell does she have the machine set on?* Douglas wondered angrily. He started to get up, but then the machine finally did click into action. Faye's polite, professional recorded voice played out. Douglas waited for the caller, waited to see which of his worst-case prognostications hit closest to the truth.

The beep, then:

"Douglas...?"

He gripped the arms of the recliner, trying to steady himself though he was already sitting down. It was a woman on the other end of the line, but not Faye.

"Douglas, I don't know what to... Something strange has..."

Melanie. After everything that had happened, Melanie was calling him. It was her, all right, but she didn't sound like herself. Instead of her normal, decisive manner, she sounded confused, unsure, almost dazed. *Something isn't right*, Sands thought.

"Douglas, I... I need your help."

Sands stopped breathing. For an instant, the world froze, suspended, until his next heartbeat struck like hammer on anvil. He lunged for the phone. "*Melanie. Melanie, are you all right?*" He could hear her breathing, sluggishly, as if she had just woken up, and for a moment the sound tricked him: He was lying beside her in the dark. The sweat drying on his body was from the exertions of sex. He wanted to reach out and touch her, just to make sure she was all right. But she was beyond his reach. "*Are you all right?*"

"I don't know. Douglas, I... I need your help."

"Hold on! I'll be right there!"

He didn't remember hanging up the phone. Coat, wallet, keys, and he was out the door, driving, speeding across town. Each set of oncoming headlights was a pair of eyes, fiendish, hungry. *The lurker is dead!* Sands kept telling himself. *Burned, destroyed, dead.* But the image in his mind was of a monstrous creature clinging to the side of a building, peering in, waiting. *IT WAITS – TO KILL.* Eyes and claws and fangs in a body that could almost be mistaken for human—except by someone with the eyes to see.

"Hold on, Melanie. Hold on."

Sands reluctantly stopped at a red light. He glanced around. No traffic, no cops. He sped through the intersection without waiting for the light to turn green. "Damn it, I left the bat," he realized. He'd have to face whatever the problem was without his Louisville Slugger. He would have felt better with it on the seat beside him. Sure, he'd been lifting weights for a while now, but though he'd slimmed down a bit, he wasn't fooling himself about his chances of taking on something like the lurker bare handed. *Not like that. Not like you'd face a common thug.* Sands knew he would have to reach deep within himself. He'd have to find the wellspring of strength that had saved him and others before. He'd have to rely on the mysterious fog that erupted from a soul sickened by the inhumanity that he perceived. Those thoughts chilled him more than any fear of what he might encounter. The sensation of his insides being torn apart, a manifestation of revulsion vomiting forth from his mouth.

He shook his head, pressed the accelerator closer to the floor.

By the time the car finally slid screeching into the parking lot of the apartment complex, Sands was nearly frantic. Adrenaline was pumping through his body. He was playing Melanie's call over and over again in his mind:

Douglas, I...I need your help.

Are you all right?

I don't know. Douglas, I...I need your help.

Hold on! I'll be right there!

There was something besides confusion in her voice. Pain? Could she be in shock? Was she being tortured? Why call him? Why not the police? What was wrong? She didn't sound...right.

Isn't that always the way of it? he realized. *Something is just not right. No good or normal explanation, nothing that would tip off a normal person.*

Sands screeched to a stop in front of the staircase leading up to Melanie's apartment. He didn't bother looking for a parking spot. He tried to take a few deep breaths, but it was a struggle. His eyes fixed on his knuckles, white on the steering wheel. Something was wrong. He shouldn't rush blindly in. His grasping thoughts turned to Julia, Hetger—but John was dead, had to be, like Clarence, like Jason, like Albert. *Like me, if I don't get my act together.* He should have called someone else, shouldn't have rushed over here all alone. *Something's not right.* He could sense that. He was sure now, thinking back over the phone call, hearing Melanie's strained voice echoing in his ears. *I should have called someone else.* But it was too late now.

Out of the car, he wanted to bound up the steps, wanted to knock down the door, but held himself back. He tried to climb the stairs quietly, listening for any sign of what lay ahead. Nothing except the normal sounds here: the droning hum of the highway

in the distance, loud music from an apartment nearby, a couple fighting, baby screaming....

There was no walking quietly along the breezeway. Each footstep reverberated in the cold night. Sands was sweating again despite the damp shirt beneath his coat. He pressed his back against the building and inched closer to apartment 3031, to Melanie's door, to the lion's-head knocker. The breezeway seemed to stretch on forever. Each careful step, impossibly loud, brought him no closer. Only by glancing back could he tell that he had covered any ground.

Hold on, Melanie. Good God, just hold on.

At last the door was within reach. *What am I going to do?* The thought flashed through his mind for a second, but he couldn't think about himself. He had to reach Melanie. *What? So I can get us both killed?* He wavered, then caution took a backseat to necessity, and he reached for the doorknob.

The door wasn't locked. He flung it open wide—enough to make sure that no one or no thing was hiding behind it. Melanie was on the couch, sitting, looking at him. She cocked her head as if puzzled to see him. Something was wrong in her gaze, though—some critical synapses weren't firing, cause and effect had ceased to have meaning for her.

You called me, damn it, Sands thought, suddenly angry, his adrenaline turning in upon itself. He fought to stay calm, scanned the room for signs of danger—for something hiding, something that might not expect him to see it. "Are you all right?" he asked her quietly.

She blinked, cocked her head to the other side.

"Stay right there." He shut and locked the door and quickly moved through the apartment, checked the kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, closets, balcony. He

peered around the outside corner of the building to make sure that nothing was watching from there, perched with deadly claws. It was almost second nature now, this paranoid desire for security. Hadn't he been here before, already done this, searched for a monster that couldn't possibly exist? Somehow the person who had done that, who had flung himself through a window armed only with a lamp, that person seemed to be from a time and world long since gone.

Sands hurried back to Melanie. She had done what he said and stayed right there on the couch. Without argument. Something had to be wrong. "Are you all right?"

She stared at him intently as if trying to decipher the question. The fog was beginning to clear from her eyes, but confusion lingered.

"You called me," Sands said. "You said you needed help. Do you remember?"

She stared harder at him, not understanding, not connecting what he said with what she had done.

"What happened?" He took her by the shoulders, tried to hold her gaze, tried to make her remember. "What happened?"

She jerked back from him, alarmed by his vehemence and his attempt to constrain her. "Don't touch me."

Sands recoiled as if struck. The last thing he wanted was to hurt her. God knew he'd done enough of that in the past. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It's okay. It's all right. Calm down." And as she began to tremble uncontrollably, he saw her, really saw her, for the first time that evening. She was pale, frightened—this woman, this girl who he used to come to for a taste of vitality, of vigor, of life. She was so frail.

She's as blind as the rest of them, he thought. *Poor girl*. She seemed little more than that to him now, a girl. Twenty-something years old. If Adam had lived, he'd be twelve now. She was twice as close to his age as to Douglas' own. *And I slept with her*. She seemed so fragile. When he looked at her tonight, there was nothing of lust in his eyes. He wanted to protect her, to interpose himself between her and anything that might harm her. Was she so different from before, or was he?

That was when she shifted on the couch, and he saw the blemishes on her neck. Tiny red marks, little more than irritated skin—but the spacing between them, and their placement. Sands leaned closer; the marks were already fading. He raised his hand, touched his fingers to the spots before they vanished altogether. Melanie watched him apprehensively but didn't pull away as he felt the pulse of her carotid artery beneath his fingertips.

"Vampire," he whispered.

The lurker. When all was said and done, it was a vampire. *Is it back? Good God. It can't be*. Vertigo took hold of Sands, undercut the stability of the room. He latched onto the couch, couldn't tell for sure that it was moving along with everything else. White lights danced before his eyes, obscuring all except the distant outline of a rigid face, watching him. Slowly, his vision, if not his world, righted.

What kind of crazy, stupid, insane, Goddamned world is this if vampires are real? How insane was he if the thought came so easily to his mind?

He forced those ideas back down. He couldn't touch them, not right now. He was here for Melanie. "Do you know why you called me?" he asked her calmly, trying to sooth her.

"I..." She started to say something, tried to wrap her mind around the answer, but words failed her. She shook her head, frustrated, worried. "I don't know, Douglas."

"But you remember calling."

She nodded. "I do. I remember, but...but it was like...like watching somebody else do it. I can see myself pressing the buttons, and I can hear myself saying the words, but...I can't explain it." She'd been staring into the middle distance as she spoke, trying to see and remember what she was telling him, trying to understand, but now she looked back to him. "I can't explain it." Sands had seen many things in Melanie's eyes in the past: hope, jealousy, lust, anger, frustration, scorn. But he didn't think he'd ever seen fear. Not before. "Am I going crazy, Douglas?"

"You're not going crazy," he said, and then he was hugging her, and she was holding him tightly, sobbing against his chest. "You're not going crazy." *It's me*, he thought. *It's the world*. "Not you."

He felt ashamed, holding her, this frightened girl, unsure even of what she was afraid of, but knowing that some part of her life had stopped making sense. Of all the embraces they had shared, of all the hours spent in each other's arms, this was the first time he had offered her comfort. Everything else had been indulgence, nothing more. Hadn't Julia said something to that effect? Damn her for being right.

He stroked Melanie's hair until she stopped crying, then got her a wine cooler from the refrigerator. "Everything is going to be all right," he told her, hoping that he wasn't lying. He didn't want to add that to his considerable list of sins. *I have to find out what's going on. I have to protect her*. But how? He had a hard enough time keeping tabs on his own wife. Maybe if Melanie moved in with them...

No. That wouldn't work for obvious reasons. Faye couldn't understand what seemed perfectly reasonable to him. And Melanie, once the shock wore off and the sun came up again, she wouldn't understand. He could see that coming. She would go back to work like nothing had changed, like the whole damned world hadn't changed.

I'm right back where I started, Sands thought. *I can't protect both of them. Hell, I might not be able to protect one of them.* And from what? A monster that shouldn't exist in the first place, a monster he had already destroyed?

"Are you going to be all right, Melanie?"

She nodded, and Sands was struck by her resilience. Already she was bouncing back. Was that good, he wondered, or would it merely lead her not to take the necessary precautions? Maybe being scarred and paranoid was the best way.

"I have to go," he said. "I want you to lock the door, and don't open it for anybody. You got that? Good. If anything unusual happens, *anything*, anything at all, you call me. No. Call the cops. Call the police. They'll take care of you." *If they can.* He was wracked by a sudden wave of guilt that he would abandon her to police who were as oblivious to the real danger as she was. *But I can't be everywhere. I can't do everything. I'll be lucky if I'm able to do anything.*

And wouldn't Detective Havelin just love it if Melanie called the police and then told them that Sands had been here. He started to tell her not to mention him, but they might find out some other way—phone records, or witnesses, whatever—and the whole thing would look that much more suspicious. He let it drop. *They can think whatever they want.* He hadn't done anything wrong coming here tonight. *She had called him, after all.*

"I have to go," Sands said. He wasn't sure *where* he had to go, or what he had to do, but he knew that staying holed up in this apartment wouldn't solve anything. He kissed her lightly on the forehead and let himself out.

He waited by the door until he heard the bolt slide locked behind him, but still with each retraced step along the breezeway, Sands felt he was abandoning her. *I'll never forgive myself if anything happens to her.* But something already had. He couldn't erase from his mind the images of the two red blemishes on her neck. Had something gotten to her? In the stories and movies, vampires always went for the neck. Where did fiction end and deadly reality begin? Why didn't it kill her? *I guess a vampire could drink blood without taking enough to kill someone, like a parasite not wanting to kill its host.* Everything else was crazy enough, that seemed like a small leap.

If the man sitting sideways on the hood of Sands' car hadn't moved, Douglas might not have seen him, so completely did the stranger blend in with the night. But he did move, a flippant if not particularly friendly little wave. "Nice girl."

Sands was half way down the steps. He froze. "What did you say?"

"Nice girl." The stranger gestured toward the breezeway, toward Melanie's apartment.

And Sands saw that the man was not a man—not human, at least. "You stay away from her." Sands continued down the stairs, each step measured, deliberate, indignation and frustration threatening to explode from where he'd managed to keep them bottled up.

The stranger raised an eyebrow, mocking. At first glance, he'd looked to Sands like a drug dealer: expensive clothes, casual sports jacket, slacks,

matched with stubble of a beard and longish hair. What caught Sands' attention, though, was the man's skin, white and perfect, like it was carved from marble. Lifeless. The eyes, too. Dark blue, but bright somehow, like glass eyes or something from a taxidermist's shop. Lifeless, despite the mocking expression.

"You stay the hell away from her."

The stranger held up his hands, palms out, in his own defense. "Everybody's always assuming the worst. Calm yourself, Douglas."

Sands stopped at the bottom step. Less than twenty feet separated him from the creature. "You know my name."

The stranger looked disappointed. He shook his head and *tsked*. "Not much on bluffing, are you, Douglas? You know, try to make me think that might not really be your name, even though we both know it is. Oh well. A direct man. I like that."

"Stay away from her."

"Melanie? Oh, I will. Probably." The stranger flashed a smile that might have been charismatic had Sands not been seething with fury and rising revulsion. "Got to look out for what's yours? I understand. Can't have anybody else moving in on your little piece of ass on the side, can you?"

"It's not like that." Sands gripped the handrail with increasing pressure. He wondered if he could rip it from the wall and crush this bastard's skull. In his gut, the churning was growing more violent. He could destroy this thing now. He *should* destroy it. End this now. All of it. "You drank her blood."

That caught the thing off guard. For a second it couldn't manage irony, only surprise. And anger. Then it recovered. "From what I heard," the stranger said, "you weren't exactly playing Monopoly. That's right. She had lots of interesting things to say about

you. Cute kid. She thinks you've been under a lot of strain, what with you and her being found out, and you having to keep your wife happy."

Sands flinched. He could feel the bolts securing the handrail beginning to give way. His pulse pounded in his ears. Strength coursed through his body.

"Tell me about Faye, Douglas. Is she as good a ride as Melanie up there? You ever have them both together, at the same time?" He laughed. "Maybe that's what I'll do. You could watch if you want."

Watching. Waiting. *IT WAITS - TO KILL.*

"Would you like that, Douglas? Would you?"

The handrail bolts nearest Sands' hands popped free of the vinyl siding. With supernal might he wrenched the section of bar. Another grouping of bolts popped out, and a five-foot length of metal pipe was loose in his hands. He shouldn't have been able to do that, shouldn't have had the strength—but *should* no longer held meaning for Sands. He charged forward, shifting his grip, swinging the bar over his head like an ax.

For a second time, he saw a split second of surprise on the stranger's face. Shock, really. But then the impossible, loosed from its bonds, ran wild. The stranger, sitting casually on the hood of the car a moment before, was suddenly not there. He was a blur of motion, leaping out of the way so quickly that Sands could see the wind of his passing more than his actual body.

The handrail that should have split the monster's skull crashed down on the hood of the car instead. Sands didn't care about the car. He would have torn it apart piece by piece if, like some automotive voodoo doll, that meant he could have dismembered the stranger.

But the stranger was gone. Vanished.

Panting, Sands scanned the darkness, but it was no use. The pipe clattered from his hands and, as the spasms began to take hold deep down in his back, his knees buckled. He fought to stay upright, couldn't, dropped to the ground. For a moment he thought he saw dead white flesh and bright lifeless eyes. The image was seared into his memory, into his consciousness, but was no longer before him. *Thank God.*

In the aftermath, he felt helpless. What if it came back now? Would his body relent, allow him to stand and fight again, for Melanie's sake if not his own? But he knew somehow that the thing was gone. Maybe he knew because the churning in his stomach was ebbing. He tasted bile, spat on the pavement. Blood. He'd bitten his own lip.

But that *thing* had drunk Melanie's blood.

I've got to kill it, he knew. Kill something that was already dead. Destroy it. Kill it. He touched his finger to his lip. Blood. He couldn't get the picture of those eyes out of his mind. The monster. *Kill it.*

And how many others?

Part Two: Shock Waves

Chapter Twelve

Sands pressed the doorbell and waited, contemplating the commotion his simple action must have been engendering inside. Anyone who belonged here came and went as he or she pleased, generally through the door from the garage. As for visitors, he was fairly certain that there never were any, no casual callers at least, and no door-to-door salesmen at this time of night. He thought, maybe imagined, that he could hear people moving about on the other side of the door. Muffled voice, perhaps. Or just a trick of his mind. The rustling of the curtains at the window was real enough, and then finally the door opened.

"Douglas." Nathan looked at him quizzically, didn't turn on the porch light.

"Can we come in."

"Of course. Come in. Come in."

Sands took Melanie by the elbow and led her inside. She might be resilient, but she'd lost blood. How much, he wasn't sure, but he suspected more than the Red Cross would have taken. Others waited in the house, Julia, and two people Sands didn't know, a man and a woman. No one turned lights on. Scant illumination made it into the front room from the back hallway and kitchen. Even in the darkness, Julia seemed to realize how unsteady Melanie was on her feet. The older woman led her to a seat.

"Douglas," said Nathan, trying to sound casual. "What brings you by?"

Julia was asking Melanie if she were okay, if she wanted anything to drink. The other two were watching Sands closely, especially the woman. She was small and dark-skinned and seemed a part of

the shadows. But her eyes glistened—with suspicion, not welcome.

“I didn’t know where else to go,” Sands said and gestured toward Melanie. “There was some trouble.” He glanced at the strangers, wondering what he should say in front of them. They were *here*, which suggested they were part of the insanity, but how much did they know?

Nathan recognized his hesitancy. “Douglas Sands, this is Cleo Wheeler, and this is Mike Carson. They’re with us now.” The man nodded. No response from the woman.

“Okay,” said Sands. He started to say more then remembered that Melanie was still with them. “She probably needs to lie down,” he told Julia. “In one of the back rooms?”

Julia nodded, helped Melanie to her feet. Sands was struck again by how feeble the girl seemed. What a crime, that a monster could quite literally drain the life from her. But no more. Never again. Not if he could help it. Julia led Melanie out of the room.

“A vampire,” Sands said. “We have to kill it.”

The effect of his words spread like ripples on a pond. Nathan swallowed. The other man, Mike, sat down. The woman held her ground, braced as if she could single-handedly hold back the weight of the world. “Tell us what you can, then get out,” she said.

Sands blinked. He thought at first that he must have heard her wrong. “*Excuse me?*” He matched her venom.

“You made your choice,” she said, brimming over with contempt. “You walked away. So tell us what you can, and then walk away again.”

“Easy now, Cleo,” Mike said.

"Douglas is a friend," Nathan added, finding his voice.

"So," said Julia, coming back into the room, "what happened?"

"What happened," Sands said, "is that I have a talent for making women who don't know me hate me."

Julia shrugged. "Don't worry. Cleo hates everybody."

"That's what John said about you the first time I met him," Sands said. "More or less."

"There is no room for shirkers among the chosen of God," Cleo said.

Sands blinked again, stared at her. "We've got a live one here, don't we?"

"If you have seen one of the devils," Cleo continued, ignoring him, "tell us what you know. We will destroy it."

"I've got a better idea. Why don't you go somewhere and talk to God or do whatever the hell it is you do, and the rest of us will have a rational conversation?"

"That was Melanie, right?" Nathan asked. "She okay?"

"All things considered." Sands answered the question but didn't look away from Cleo. He didn't trust her, didn't like her, didn't want to. She had the same do-what-I-say-or-screw-you attitude that Clarence had had, except where Clarence had been a walking mass of lethal muscle, she was a stick-thin five-foot-two. How could someone that small be that mean and unlikable?

"Cleo, we need to get going so we can relieve Abraham and Johnny," Mike said.

She held her glare on Sands a few more seconds then followed Mike to the door. "There is no room for shirkers and cowards in this war," she said.

"Seems to be plenty of room for bitches and assholes," Sands shot back. The door closed and to his relief he was alone with Julia and Nathan. "Where the hell did you dig up—?"

"Tell us about the girl," Julia said.

"Did you give her something to help her sleep?"

"She didn't need anything. She was exhausted."

"She's lost some blood." Sands couldn't believe his own ears. His words sounded so casual. *She was attacked by a Goddamned vampire!* he wanted to shout.

"You said it was a vampire," Nathan said. "Are you sure."

Sands nodded. "I'm sure. A different one. Not the one that... that got Jason."

"Couldn't you just stay the hell away from her?" Julia said, tossing her hands up in exasperation. She sat heavily, and Sands could begin to see how tired she was too. Dark circles sagged beneath her eyes. She looked like she'd lost weight, but not in a healthy way. Her skin seemed to hang from the bones of her face. Coffee instead of sleep, anxiety instead of exercise.

"It wasn't like that," Sands explained, "but I guess I deserve that. I hadn't seen her since back before we left town. She called me tonight. She sounded confused, disoriented. She said she needed my help. What was I supposed to do?"

"I'm sorry," Julia said, closing her eyes, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "I'm sorry. You *didn't* deserve that. What happened?"

"I went to her apartment, found her. She was okay, mostly. Stunned, confused. She had two marks." He touched the place on his own neck. "I think they're wounds. I think the damn thing bit her, drank her blood." Saying the words brought the churning back, the revulsion at something so inhuman that it would live on a person's blood.

"You *think*," Julia said, sounding unconvinced. "I can understand you being a little jumpy—"

"I saw him. It. I ran into it when I was leaving." The twang of pain not far removed stirred in his lower back. "We had a little chat. I tried to bash its head in. It took off. I couldn't leave her alone after that, so I went back in."

"Are you okay?" Julia asked, concerned now. She had seen him use his gifts before; she knew the toll they took on him.

"Pretty much. Mostly I just had to get her out of there. We only stayed until I could walk again. I figured somebody might call the cops anyway—I made some noise—and I didn't want to be there to greet them. She was too weak and scared to make a fuss, so I took her and we drove around for a while."

"You didn't *want* to come here," Julia said.

"No."

Nathan found that hard to believe. "You didn't think we'd turn you out?"

"Not that," Julia said seeing more clearly. "He already told us that he didn't want anything to do with us, didn't need us."

"Something like that," Sands conceded. A deep silence took hold and stretched out among the three. "Look," he said at last, "all I know is that it's a vampire, and we have to kill it. If you

folks don't want any part of this, then I'll go it alone."

"Don't be stupid." Julia leaned forward in her chair, hands supporting what seemed to be the immense weight of her head.

Sands settled into a seat, realized how good it felt to take the pressure from his feet and back.

"Can I get you some coffee?" Nathan asked. Sands and Julia both shook their heads no, so Nathan sat with them.

"I know that's what he was," Sands said. "A vampire. I could see it. Funny. If I hadn't known... I mean, he was a good enough looking guy. I can see how he could blend in... you know, among the masses, the blind ones. Not like the last one. That thing, it was good at hiding. It had to be. No mistaking it for human. This one could've been you or me or..." He shook his head, trying to think what a normal person might have seen, someone who wouldn't notice the flawless white skin, the lifeless eyes. "His eyes. They were dark, but the brightest—"

"Blue," Julia said, tensed suddenly. Sands nodded, suspicious. "Dark blue, but bright somehow. And empty."

"Yes."

"Cocky bastard."

"Yes." Sands didn't know what else to say. Julia wasn't asking questions; she was describing the thing.

"You saw him where?" She was leaning forward from the edge of her chair, her hand clamped onto Sands' forearm, pressing. "Here. In Iron Rapids?"

He nodded. "Yes. At Melanie's apartment."

"Show me. Take me there."

Sands stood, looked to Nathan. "Do you want to come?"

"I can if you need me."

"He has something else he's working on," Julia said.

The three of them stood there for a moment. Sands could tell that they were doing the same thing he was: contemplating, calculating risks. *This is what I should've done before I rushed over to Melanie's. Stop. Take a deep breath. Think about it.* "I don't think it's likely to be around there anymore," he said, breaking the silence.

"Fair enough," Julia said. "Let's go."

"Can you keep an eye on Melanie?" Sands asked Nathan. "I think it would be better if she stayed here."

"Definitely."

"What about Faye?" Julia asked.

Sands felt the sudden, familiar pang of inadequacy. He couldn't be two places at once, couldn't watch over both her and Melanie. He'd made sure the girl was safe, at least for the time being, but he'd left his own wife unguarded—and after that monster had threatened her. "I need to check on her. Can I use the phone?"

"Call from the car," Julia said. "I have a cell phone. If we need to, we can go to your house instead of Melanie's."

Sands agreed. He was caught off guard momentarily by the wave of gratitude that swept over him. These people understood. They knew what he knew, saw what he saw. And they were willing to help. So many weeks of isolation, of trying to make a go of it on his own while pretending to Faye and everyone else that life was normal, that the world hadn't grown claws and

fangs—it had taken its toll. Just like his attack on the vampire had taken a toll on his own body. *There's always a price to pay*, he realized. But that was his lot, his burden, and no one else could lift it from his shoulders.

Chapter Thirteen

He was a bit ragged around the edges, there was no denying. Color had found its way back into Matthew²'s programming, bleeding slowly from the wound at his shoulder. Whatever they had shot him with, he was having trouble concentrating, focusing. And so he was wandering through some unformatted sector, as he had been for however long. Time-marks, like landmarks, were elusive here. Flotsam of the Digital Web blew through without rhyme or reason: the front half of a grand old ocean liner; a rodeo; kimono-clad women, heads bowed at a tea ceremony; dinosaurs, but poorly defined, incomplete bit map; and hundreds of thousands of millions of other fragmentary data. Maybe Matthew² was lucky; it was unlikely that the Technocracy could successfully pursue him here.

The red light. He should have gotten out the first second the red light had flashed above the lock. He didn't think that they had been waiting for him. But once the code extrapolation had functioned improperly, they had been alerted. He'd been fooled into complacency when the adjustments he'd made to the card key's code had changed the light from red to green, and the door had opened. But it was already too late. Just because he was entering through a Chamber of Commerce portal, he'd assumed he had little to fear. But the Technocracy didn't work that way.

He put a hand to his shoulder, winced. Where the blood touched his fingers, though, flesh tones took hold and began to spread, replacing the toneless white that he'd needed to enter the restricted sector.

Maybe it wasn't the red light. Maybe it was that first instant when the door had opened from the conduit. It was all so fuzzy. His memory was still frazzled. Processing wasn't up to speed either.

He had gained access to the conduit after correcting the card key. The CoC clerk programs had promptly lost interest. The conduit itself had been a sort of elevator transporting him through cyberspace. Black and white. That's what should have tipped him off. The tiny room was devoid of color, more completely even than the neutral earth tones of the CoC sector.

Central Planning. Ann Arbor Construct. The doors opened, and it took him a few seconds to match his code to the security parameters. Again, the extrapolation from the intelligence he'd started with was a tad off. Maybe the Technocracy had tweaked the programs—not blatantly, not enough to alert an intruder who thought he had a bead on security and could slip in under the wire. But enough.

There wasn't *active* security in the sector. That, too, was misleading. It seemed reasonable that the Technocrats wouldn't have sufficient manpower to maintain a live watch—and why bother, when electronic monitoring would detect 99.9% of irregularities? Maybe it was those first few seconds. Matthew² matched the parameters: white lab coat, goggles, monochromatic from head to toe. Those were the manifestations of the code shifts. Did he make them quickly enough? No way to tell, and maybe it didn't matter. He doubted he'd be going back. Matthew¹ couldn't be that crazy.

There were helper programs in the construct sector too, of course. They were slightly more sophisticated than at CoC, more variable in

manner, a definite advance in programming. The first one he saw, whitewashed, androgynous, approached with a tight-lipped smile. "May I help you?"

"Retrieval," Matthew² said. "Iron Rapids Chamber of Commerce." He'd already gained access to the sector, after all. Why would there be additional passwords for information that no unauthorized personnel could access anyway? Still, he watched the program drone carefully, ready to whip out his notepad and improvise code if necessary.

"This way, please," said the drone, still tight-lipped. It led Matthew² to a door and was polite enough to swipe the slot, show him in, and leave. The room was full of data. Not that the format was the most useful for Matthew²'s purposes: stacks and stacks of cardboard boxes, each in turn stuffed with bundles of pamphlets. Thousands of them, each different, each containing a tiny portion of information, some or none of which might be what he was looking for. The pictures on the pamphlets, he couldn't help noticing, were in color. They were meant for the CoC, not purely internal Technocracy use. Any single pamphlet would be fairly useless, but if he could assimilate the bulk of the data, he was certain that business plans and strategies would emerge. They were there, just submerged beneath and scattered throughout thousands and thousands of megs of information.

What was the best plan? he wondered. Sorting and assimilating the data here would take too long. He needed to copy it and get it out for perusal later at his leisure. But the current formatting was too awkward, unwieldy. Intentionally so, he assumed. Was there time to reformat?

There would have to be.

Matthew² reached for his trusty notepad. He quickly sketched out a three-by-four grid on a page and jotted one through nine in the top three rows of boxes, star-zero-pound in the bottom row. That done, he tore off the page, licked the back, and pressed it against the closest cardboard box. The image flickered, and where he had pressed the paper, an electronic keypad was attached to the box. He punched in a reformatting code—more flickering—and a single CD rested where before the box had been.

Glancing around the room, Matthew² was not encouraged. Even a partial count of the boxes revealed over a hundred. How long would it take to reformat all of the files? Could he search them and differentiate more efficiently what material he needed? How long would *that* take, and how long was too long? As it turned out, that question was much easier to answer than he had suspected.

From nowhere, the shooting started.

Not from nowhere, really—the door opened and they came in, guns blazing. Men in Black, a pair of them. The first blasts scattered boxes and pamphlets everywhere. Matthew²'s initial quixotic thought was that some IT peon was going to have to clean up this mess, but one of the next blasts caught him in the shoulder and sent him flying. The rain of data gave him cover for a few seconds as rapid-fire explosions rocked the room.

Frantic, he tried to find his notepad. Confetti-like detritus was everywhere, blinding him and the Men in Black as well. If he couldn't find the notepad, if he'd dropped it when he'd fallen, no, there it was. Clutched in his left hand, which he couldn't feel, which wouldn't respond to his

wishes. He fought off the pain of his shoulder wound, of data routes disrupted, and grasped at the notepad with his other hand. The pencil was slippery with his glaringly bright red blood. He struggled to scribble an emergency protocol that he'd learned for just such an occasion but never used before.

The box beside his left ear erupted in a geyser of singed pamphlets and tattered cardboard. Matthew² finished his last notation. Now he just needed to tear the sheet to launch the protocol. Steadying the pad with his one good hand, he got a corner of the sheet between his teeth, and ripped—

The Men in Black hadn't spoken to this point, going about their destructive business in grim silence, blasting away. Now suddenly the firing slackened. The two enforcers groaned, a horrible wheezing electronic sound, as if someone were pulling the limbs from their bodies. Matthew² felt something of the same sensation, a grating and tearing deep within him. He pretty much forgot about his wounded shoulder and inoperable arm when his emergency rote tore a hole through the reality of the sector. A glaring fissure ripped open—not in floor, ceiling, wall, but in cyberspace itself. The oppressive wail of static reality torn asunder drowned out the groans of the Men in Black. Matthew couldn't see them anymore, couldn't see anything. The nova-bright fissure was growing, spreading, or maybe it was pulling him in. Raging, unformatted chaos flooded through the compromised parameters of the sector. The tide took hold of Matthew², possessed him, and bore him away kicking and screaming into oblivion.

That was... how long ago? He didn't know. All he knew was that he'd been wandering, floating,

crawling, sliding through unformatted space since what seemed like the beginning of time. The beginning and the end.

Men in Black. Implanted within the computer security. The concept still seemed fairly blasphemous to Matthew². He had heard of such measures, to be sure, but he'd never encountered them directly before, had never thought or hoped to do so. They had just come in firing, totally unconcerned with what data they might destroy or what systems they might crash. They only cared about him, a virus, a cancer that had to be rooted out at any cost, destroyed. What kind of systems operator would go to such lengths? A desperate one. Or a supremely confident one, one who had nothing to lose, who knew that none of the data or systems in that sector were unique. They were backed up elsewhere, duplicated or could be easily replicated. Matthew² preferred to think that the former possibility was the case, that the Technocracy was off balance and that his activities, at least to some extent, had contributed to that state. The truth, he knew with a bit more reflection and a quick statistical analysis, probably lay somewhere between those two extremes.

When finally he heard the hum of familiar code approaching through the unrelenting din of unformatted space, Matthew² thought he was imagining it. It was possible to believe one heard any sound mixed in among the white noise. Visibility was less reliable still, horizons nonexistent and the field of vision cluttered with capricious electrons of all shapes and colors. Slowly he came to believe, though, that salvation might be at hand. Beyond the latest parade of nonsensical images—this time a huge statue of Vladimir Lenin adorned in Scottish tartan—a helicopter was

making its way closer, closer. A rope ladder dangled from the cargo door.

“Still fighting it out with Charlie, eh?”

The ladder came closer, tantalizingly slowly, but closer. Matthew² took hold with his one good hand, began to climb the rungs slowly. The tingle of familiar code beneath his fingers invigorated him. With each awkward advance, his shoulder pained him a bit less. The goggles, still hanging around his neck, dissolved into a wisp of obsolete data. The frayed and torn edges of the white lab coat reknitted themselves. The coat grew longer, took on the appearance of his normal trench coat. By the time he crawled through the cargo door, the helicopter itself was no longer apparent. Matthew² climbed to his feet, stood to his full height. He straightened his tie and peered through the glass out into the hotel room.

Matthew Simonson pressed ENTER, then swiveled in his chair to look at the mirror. He smiled, so relieved was he to see his discordantly disgruntled reflection. How tired he had grown of a reflection that merely aped his every movement and expression. “Took your time getting back,” he mouthed silently to the reflection. “Been out joyriding?”

The reflection was not amused. Nor was it in tip-top shape. A gaping shoulder wound oozed blood—the red of which was the only vivid color. Otherwise the reflection’s appearance was muted, as if the mirror were coated with a dusty film, except that the reflection of the room *behind* the figure was normal.

“Let me run a quick diagnostic,” Matthew said. He clattered away on his laptop keyboard. A

horizontal line appeared on the surface of the mirror and descended the length of the glass, restoring, with its passing, color and vitality to the reflection. The wound was gone. The reflection, though still independent of Matthew, now matched the pallet of the rest of the room.

"How long?" Matthew heard in his mind his own voice ask in synchronicity with the reflection's lips.

"Over a week. I was getting tired of looking at myself."

"I didn't make it out with anything useful."

"*Au contraire*," Matthew said, wagging his finger. "We now know not to take their security lightly, even approaching from the CoC portal."

"Remind me to send the canary in first next time."

"Will do. Look, I'd love to catch up on idle chitchat all day, but we've lost a good deal of time. How do you feel?"

"Like I just had my hundred-thousand-mile defrag."

"Good. I want to go after this Sugardaddy character. I've had enough messing around. He needs to get off the fence before it takes root."

"Exhausted all your lesser means?" the reflection asked, cracking its knuckles.

"Just get to it. And try not to take a week about it." A quick tap of ENTER and Matthew² was on his way.<chapter>Chapter Fourteen

Nothing seemed to have changed at Melanie's apartment. In front of the building, the handrail still lay on the ground where Sands had left it. If anyone had actually called the police, there was no sign that he could see. *Not surprising*, he

thought. *If anybody heard the racket over their damn music, they probably just thought it was the normal fight in the parking lot, gang- or drug-related or whatever.* The scene left a bad taste in his mouth. *Are these the kind of people who I risk my neck for?* No, he decided. He risked his neck for decent people like Faye and Melanie. *For Julia, and hopefully her boy,* he thought, glancing at the woman in the car beside him.

Julia was surveying the scene as well. "What's that bar?"

"Handrail. I tried to part his hair with it."

She regarded him with... with he wasn't sure what: disdain at his perceived macho response to the situation, grudging admiration, relief that he was all right, frustration that the monster had escaped? Maybe all of those things.

"I think he can help me find Timothy," she said. "If it's the same one that I talked to." On the way over, she had told him about the encounter at the club, about the backpack and the bodies that the police had found, and about her tenuous hope that one vampire could lead her to another to another until she found her son.

Sands wasn't so sure. "You really think they have a vampire fraternity or something, that they hang out and steal kids instead of ordering pizza?" He wished he hadn't said it as soon as the words were out of his mouth. Julia tensed. She looked away from him as if she were suddenly very interested in the detached section of handrail, but from the glare of a streetlight he thought he could see tears in her eyes. "Good God, I'm sorry Julia. I didn't mean it that way. This thing, it's already attacked Melanie. It threatened Faye. Sooner or later we're going to have to kill it, but if we can find out anything first..."

"That's what everyone keeps saying." Her voice was suddenly sharp. "We have to kill it. And maybe, maybe, if we're lucky, we'll find out something about Timothy in the process. I'm sorry, but I don't see it that way. I want my Timothy back."

Sands just nodded. What was there to say? He felt Julia's determination, her pain, but in a strange way listening to her provided him a sense of relief, as had their conversation at the house. Here was a woman who, compared to most of the people in the world, saw things the way he did. She didn't live in a safe little world. Her illusions of security and contentment had been shattered. Like his. Even if he didn't get along with the hunters, even if he didn't like them, they knew where he was coming from. They shared a common frame of reference. They all knew the real dangers that lurked among the shadows.

"I want you to make me a promise," Julia said. She had hold of Sands' wrist. His attention was drawn back to her. He couldn't mistake her sense of urgency. "I understand that you have an obligation to make sure that Faye and Melanie stay safe, and I'm committed to helping. I told you that when we were coming back to the city. You remember what you asked... if anything happened to you..."

"I remember." He could barely speak the words. He hadn't asked that favor of her lightly, and now he was scared to death of what she was going to ask in return.

"Aside from doing anything that would endanger the two of them," she continued, "I want you to promise that you'll do whatever you can to help me find Timothy."

Sands hesitated. On one level, the question was so simple. *Of course* he would help, but nothing was simple anymore. No question allowed a blithe yes or no in response, because the world had ceased to function in a simple manner. How could he know what tomorrow would hold, or the next day or the next? What unforeseen Faustian bargain might he be agreeing to?

"*Promise me, Douglas.*" Her fingers dug into his wrist. "Is that too much to ask?"

"Julia, I... of course I'll help—"

She shook her head, dug her fingers more fiercely without even knowing that she did. "Not good enough, Douglas. *Promise me.* This is my son, my Timothy."

How could she ask this of him? How could he refuse? "I promise." The words came thick off his tongue. This was her little boy, and Sands had already failed his own son. "I promise."

She held his gaze for several seconds, as if she were memorizing every line of his face so that if he ever turned his back on her she could hunt him down until the end of days—and then her expression softened, and the tension that had made even breathing difficult dissipated. Julia let go of his wrist, took a deep breath.

"We should check inside," she said.

"Let me use your phone again first." Sands had called home twice already, but Faye hadn't answered. She should have been home from the gym by now, and he was starting to worry. If there was no answer this time, he was going to insist on only the briefest inspection of Melanie's apartment. He wasn't expecting to find anything anyway.

Faye picked up after the third ring.

"Faye!"

"Yes, Douglas." Her voice tinny through the cell phone.

"You're okay."

"Yes, I'm fine." She paused, then, "Where are you?"

"I... well, I... look, I can't talk just now, but I wanted to make sure you were okay."

Another pause. He could almost feel the muscles in his wife's jaw tightening and see the wrinkles creasing her forehead. "Well, I'm okay," she said at last

"Good. Listen, I... uh... I'm not sure exactly when I'll be back." No response. "You're sure you're okay."

A long, slow exhale crackled through the phone. "Goodnight, Douglas."

"Goodnight—" But she had already hung up.

Julia was pointedly not looking at Sands. She had allowed him to witness a portion of her inner tragedy and the chaos her life had become, but she apparently wasn't assuming that he wanted to permit the same familiarity. *Yeah, well, she doesn't have anything left except the hunt for her son*, he thought. *I still have a normal life.* He quickly shied away from that line of thought. It was too raw, and he didn't want to notice any of the crumbling corners on the façade he maintained.

"Let's go in," he said.

He still had Melanie's key from earlier in the evening. Her hands had been shaking too much to use it. Walking along the breezeway again, this time with Julia, he felt... nothing. None of the various emotions that had swayed him walking this same ground over the past year: lascivious abandon

the first times he'd come to meet Melanie; disgust at the type of people she chose to live among; terror and revulsion at the beasts that stalked the night. Nothing. Even the ever-present guilt was a shade of its former intensity, muted. Sands was tired, sore, and the spectacle of Julia's consuming grief was an uncomfortable beacon of where he could be headed if he wasn't careful.

Inside, there wasn't much to see. No signs of struggle. Sands was nearly positive that the vampire had been there, but it hadn't dropped its wallet, hadn't left a calling card—except for the tiny red marks on Melanie's neck. Had that been on purpose? Sands looked around half-heartedly, haunted more by the ghosts of all the time he had spent in the apartment than by the specter of a vampire that had already fled. He could imagine what Julia was thinking: *So this is where you did it, slept with her, corrupted that poor young girl.* But when he glanced at Julia, she was searching intently for any clue.

"There's nothing here," he said. "Let's go. I need to get home."

"You should bring Faye to the house. It'd be safer."

Sands laughed, a tired, ragged sound. "Oh, sure. Faye and you and me and Melanie and what's her name, that bitch Cleo. One big happy family? I don't think so. I saw enough of communes in the Sixties."

"Then why did you bring her tonight?" Julia challenged him. "Why did you come at all?"

"I... she needed a safe place. Where else was I supposed to... ? I couldn't take her home to Faye, for God's sake."

"We're not a halfway house, Douglas. It's good that we could help tonight, but if you bring in outsiders, the defenseless... especially if you're not one of us... it endangers us all."

All of the kinder feelings that Sands had been experiencing toward Julia and the other hunters faded away. *What's her problem? Why does she always have to push me in a direction I don't want to go?* "Fine," he said. "Let's go back. I'll take Melanie somewhere else—"

"Don't be stupid, Douglas. She's there now. She's resting. It was too late to turn back once you rang the doorbell. But she can't stay there forever. She doesn't understand. She has a life to go back to. What if she's involved with the police again? What if she mentions us, the house? Did you think of that?"

He hadn't. He'd thought only that he needed to get her to a safe place, and that he couldn't take her to his house. "I'm sorry," he said, embarrassed. "I didn't think... you're right. *About that.* But, look, I've got a life to go back to too. I'm not going to—"

"Do you? Do you *really*, Douglas? What do you have left to go back to?"

Her words struck him to the heart, frightened him more than did the churning revulsion in his gut that was proof that the world was not as he'd always thought it was.

"Did you *find* anything here?" he demanded. Their eyes locked. Sands refused to let her take him down that road.

"No."

"Me neither. Let's go."

"Fine."

"Fine."

Chapter Fifteen

Nathan peeked around the corner into the bedroom that was, ostensibly, his own. He preferred to sleep on the cot in his makeshift computer lab, though, so there was no reason that the woman Sands had brought shouldn't take his bed. She was sleeping, if restlessly. In the darkness, Nathan couldn't see any marks on her neck. Sands said she'd been attacked by a vampire. The thought gave Nathan the creeps. He'd never seen a vampire himself. When the crew had fought what had been their first one that night in the sewers, he had coordinated their movements from here over the headsets. *For all the good that did Jason*, he thought.

And now both Julia and Sands had had additional run-ins with a vampire. It was just another case, Nathan reflected morosely, of others putting their lives on the line while he sat safe at home. *It's been like that from the start, damn it!* Even his imbuing had been anticlimactic.

So many hunters had truly heroic starts. Jason, for all his problems and shortcomings, had faced down a vampire, this Braughton fellow. The thing had come after Jason's sister, Jason had heard the herald's call and fought the thing off. *Nothing so impressive for me.*

He'd faced a walking dead man. Doing just that. Walking. Down the street. And the old lady had just happened to be in the way. Not some beautiful babe who needed rescuing, not innocent children, just some old woman, shriveled and stooped and practically done living anyway. Nathan had seen the walker for what it was. The heralds had opened his eyes. He had seen too, somehow, that the walker was just passing through—even if it was damn irritable. The old

woman happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was the bus stop, something about the bus stop she was waiting at, that had pissed off the walker. It wasn't after her in particular. She was a target of convenience. So instead of trying to lay open the walker's head—like Clarence would have done in the same situation—Nathan had simply gotten her out of the way. She hadn't been happy about it. He picked her up and slung her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and took off. The walker had started to follow, but Nathan yelled at it, told it to stay away. He felt the righteous power of the heralds flowing through him, and though the walker's eyes had shone with murder, it stopped, turned away.

Nathan didn't put down that old woman for two blocks, and while she'd been hollering for the cops, he'd turned to see the walker step out in front of a bus that wasn't stopping at that stop. Not pretty. But hardly fighting off a vampire.

He supposed that he should be proud of what happened after that. The walker had already cheated death once. What was to keep it from doing it again? Nathan hadn't waited for the ambulance, no lights flashing, to cart away the body away. Even had he been so inclined, it wouldn't have been a good idea—not with the old woman still screaming bloody murder. He'd rushed home, gotten online and found an archived newspaper article about a man, a John Doe, run over by a bus at that very corner a few weeks before—and another article a few days later about the body disappearing from the morgue.

It was simple enough from there, really. Doctoring a birth certificate, identifying the body at the morgue and seeing that it was quickly cremated. Maybe that last part was important, but

maybe not. Nathan had sensed that the walker merely desired acknowledgement of its passing, that it needed that, required it. Even if by a false name. Somebody had cared enough to show up. Nathan couldn't know for sure, and it had been so soon after his imbuing, early still to trust his hunches, his newfound intuition, and the strange gifts that came from somewhere beyond him. But it was done.

Still doesn't make for the best story, he thought, closing the door and letting Melanie sleep in relative peace. Even *she* had been through more danger than he had. Her, blind as a bat.

The others were all so much better at this. Abraham and Johnny had a flair for the dramatic, to say the least. And Cleo and Mike kept on the go, as did Julia. Even Sands had survived vampires and the beasts up north that had claimed Clarence and John. *I had my computer blow up. Big whoop.* It had been traumatic—in a different way from staring down certain death, no doubt—but the others didn't seem to understand. They tried to sympathize all right, but they couldn't see that Nathan's online troubles were a special kind of problem, a danger—maybe not in the direct, physical sense that other monsters were, but *something* unnatural was going on. Nathan could feel it. The economic life of Iron Rapids was a living, dynamic entity unto itself, ailing as it was, and somebody was trying to warp it to their own advantage. Before, even considering Muckraker's far-out theories, Nathan had suspected something to do with organized crime, or insider trading. But now, after the impossible attack on his system—and it was, he had decided, both of those: an attack, and one that should have been impossible—a vast, secret organization with access

to unimaginable technology didn't seem so absurd. No more so than other dangers that went bump in the night, and which he *knew* to exist. *Seems a bit more ominous than a few random vampires running around the streets at night*, he thought.

Intuition. It had been good to him so far, and now it drew him back to his computer. *Time to share what I know*. Time to take Muckraker's rants, extrapolate from there in light of his own suspicions and plunk it all down on hunter-net. It could be that someone else was having similar experiences. It was just as likely—*more* likely, in fact—that someone would think he was a crackpot. Hunter-net was nothing if not a rough and tumble free-for-all of ideas, and the flammers were not shy. It took patience and thick skin to find any wheat among the forum's chaff. But there was always a chance.

More than any other place, Nathan felt at home at his computer. The flat screen was more familiar to him than the image in a mirror. It hadn't been cheap, but he'd cobbled together a working system after the disastrous attack, a better system, in fact. It wasn't how he would have chosen to go about it, but there was nothing better than a catastrophe to justify upgrading all around: top of the line Dynapen processor, enough gigabytes of RAM to choke a horse, high-capacity ultra-SCSI hard drives, and on and on. So he had to live on a tighter margin since the tech industry had gone bust. His investments were diversified enough that he hadn't taken too large a hit, and what better reason, what more urgent necessity, to obliterate the budget? Worst came to worst, he'd eat nothing but pasta, plain, for the next few years and die of scurvy. There were worse ways.

He pulled up the sterilized versions of the files Muckraker had sent and printed out a copy for easy reference. Garbled text and strings of code interrupted the text of the business plan—the plan for Synthetic Solutions to establish a firm presence in the area. How much of this should he include in his posting to hunter-net? Especially considering that because of the damage to the files he was having to reconstruct some of the scenario from memory, and memory of a brief perusal at that. No need to pass along the names of individuals, he decided. With the incomplete records, he couldn't be sure of the roles many of them played, and there was the possibility that some hunter hothead might go after an innocent bystander. Guilt by association. Nathan didn't want to set that in motion. Most of the names meant nothing to him: Cross, Sutton, Dunkirk, Mahoney. Gordon—that one rang a bell, but Nathan couldn't place it off the top of his head. Maybe the outline would be enough to post at first, and he could go into more detail with anyone who seemed to know something.

He was about to log onto hunter-net when the instant message box popped up on the screen.

MR: long time no see. should I say bad mofo or sugardaddy?

MR. Muckraker. Nathan's fingers, which had been dancing across the keyboard, froze above the letters. He had changed his user IDs to half a dozen different handles, one of which was *Bad Mofo*. Only on hunter-net, to which Muckraker shouldn't have access, was he still *Sugardaddy*. Nathan

considered getting offline, shutting down the system altogether.

MR: *mofo—is that anything like mojo?*

Nathan ignored the attempt at witty banter. He was torn between anxiety that Muckraker could send something else damaging his way, something that would trash his new system, and anger at what had gone before. Muckraker, for his part, had the gall to be chatty.

MR: *i know you're there. i can hear you breathing.*

That was more than Nathan could take. *Don't you pretend like nothing's wrong, you asshole.* His fingers went back to work with a vengeance.

BM: *i don't need any more of the kind of help that you give.*

MR: ???

BM: *how did you find me?*

That was what Nathan needed to find out—not that he expected Muckraker to tell him, no more than the saboteur would divulge what electronic pestilence had sprung from the files he'd sent.

MR: *had a little help from a friend... did something go wrong with the files?*

"Did something go wrong? Did something go wrong?" Nathan was beside himself. He balled his hands into fists, shook them at the heavens, tore at his hair.

BM: if i ever see you in person i will kick your ass.

As soon as he'd hit ENTER, Nathan had second thoughts. He couldn't remember ever having threatened someone with physical violence before. But if ever anything had justified a good pummeling about the head and shoulders... He just hoped that Muckraker wasn't a big guy.

There was a long pause. Nathan wondered if he had scared away his false benefactor, but he wasn't to be rid of Muckraker that easily.

MR: i scanned the files. did something get through?

"Did something... ? You son of a..."

BM: you could say that. you could also say that the titanic and the iceberg had a difference of opinion.

MR: ... or that bill gates doesn't have to worry much about his retirement. i get the picture. but I DID scan the files. honest. must have been something that my system had no trouble with to the point that it picked nothing up, something geared toward a less sophisticated system.

Nathan bristled, clenched his teeth. "Less sophisticated system! *You son of a...!*" He typed furiously, letting Muckraker know exactly what he thought of him and his more sophisticated system. The reply was quick in coming.

MR: didn't know you were a sailor ;) seriously, i didn't mean it like it sounded. you wouldn't understand.

And then very quickly another message:

MR: didn't mean that how it sounded either! really. don't be so sensitive. we need to talk.

Nathan snorted. "I need to talk to you like I need a hole in my—"

"A-hem."

Nathan swirled in his chair. For an instant he couldn't absorb what his mind was telling him he saw: a vampire—the one Julia and Sands had described, by all accounts. Shoulder-length hair, snappy dresser, and dark blue eyes with a spark of... something: Malevolence, hunger, cruel glee. Nothing human.

That instant was all that the thing needed. The back of its hand carried the force of a pile driver. Nathan slammed into the desk. As he fell from the chair and darkness closed in, he noticed the keyboard clattering to the floor and thought distractedly that he hoped it didn't break, because it was new and he liked it....

Chapter Sixteen

He had done this hundreds of times before, come home late at night—from work, from Melanie's apartment—yet nothing felt familiar to Sands tonight. Parked by the curb, his front yard seemed an alien expanse. He looked at the house, his house, as he might a picture of one in a magazine. It appeared comfortable and pleasant enough but evoked no particular attachment, no more so than dozens of other houses on dozens of other streets. He eased the car forward into the driveway. It was almost a surprise when the button he pushed actually began the garage door rattling open. He vaguely remembered years of pulling easily into the space, so effortlessly that Faye complained how fast he did it. Tonight, though, the garage seemed cramped, barely enough room for two cars. As the door sealed him in, closing out the illumination from the streetlights beyond, Sands stared at the cluttered shelves, his possessions: tools, bags of fertilizer for the lawn, a flat basketball untouched for years. They were his, but from another life.

The kitchen was eerily quiet, though it was always quiet when he came in at night. Dark except for the light from the microwave clock. The darkness was heavier tonight, the clock garish, glaring, only making the shadows that much more impenetrable. Each step cast echoes in his mind, like pebbles spreading ripples across the face of a pond, and the reflection of everything he had known for more than twenty years wavered, blurred.

He found himself somehow in the dining room, pouring a drink. The liquid fire on the back of his throat was something he could hold onto, at least. Nothing else was real.

Only Faye. She was the reason he was here. What was it that Julia had asked him: *What do you have left to go back to?* Faye. His wife. If he could keep her safe from the untold horrors of the world, his life would be well spent. *Julia has her son. I have—*

A sound, from the living room. Sands couldn't place it. He halted, glass touching his lips, whiskey poised to pass. He took the sip, a final swallow that left his eyes watering. Shuffling through the foreign landscape, he saw what was causing the noise: the wind outside buffeting the plastic over the French doors. Just the wind. *Just the wind.* Or...

He turned away, made his way unsteadily down the hall to the bedroom. He hadn't had that much to drink, but the floor seemed to shift beneath his feet. Maybe he bumped against the wall, made noise. Maybe it was the sound of the plastic billowing violently. But Faye was awake. Lying awake. In wait. Sands found his neatly folded pajamas, put them on and crawled under the covers. He closed his eyes, willing everything different and strange away. He was lying beside his wife. Faye. If he could keep her safe...

"I heard the message."

The message? What was she talking about?

"I heard the message." She waited, but he didn't respond. "How dare she call here. As if visiting you in the hospital wasn't bad enough."

The message. Melanie. He had picked up after the answering machine, hadn't erased the message, hadn't even considered doing so. *There's nothing to hide! I haven't done anything!*

"If this is how you try..." She had to stop, swallow, clear her throat. She was on the verge of

tears, angry and hurt tears. "Well, I don't want any part of it."

She didn't understand. How could she? He had to try to explain. "Faye, I'm trying to protect you."

"Protect me? You think what I don't know won't hurt me?" she scoffed at him. He closed his eyes more tightly, but he could feel her quivering with rage, fighting to hold back the tears.

"No. It'll hurt you."

She struggled for what to say, wanting him, no doubt, to lie, to offer some laughable attempt at justification so she could lash out. "How could you?" she said at last, unable to contain her anger. And again, and again. "How could you? How could you?" Her voice trailed away to an anguished whisper. "*How could you?*"

He couldn't open his eyes, couldn't look at her. The last vestiges of her world were crumbling. Sands could feel that. It was a world that they had shared, but it was already out of reach to him. "I'm sorry, Faye." It was all that he could manage. She wouldn't understand. She never would be able to, and so his reasons for slogging along with this charade proved as untenable as the precepts of her life. "I'm sorry. I've been trying to protect you."

"I want you out of here."

He nodded in the darkness, still not facing her. He was so tired. The anger and resentment would flare later, he knew. He *hadn't* done anything wrong this time. Melanie had called *him*. She *had* been in trouble, serious, deadly trouble. And the thing, the vampire, had threatened Faye as well. *I can't watch over you enough anyway*, Douglas decided. *All I can do is kill it. It's the only way. Kill it.*

"I want you out of here," Faye said again. The tears weren't so close now. She had fought them

back. Her resolve had triumphed for now. She wouldn't cry in front of him. Later, when she was by herself...

"All right," Douglas said. "I'll go." He didn't move, didn't get up. He couldn't do anything right now—nothing but lie with his eyes closed and listen to the wind whipping at the plastic in the other room. And maybe just beneath the sound of the plastic there was a tiny voice he tried to ignore.

Faye didn't insist that he leave that instant. Like him, she lay silently, not sleeping, listening to the wind.

Chapter Seventeen

MR: didn't mean that how it sounded either! really. don't be so sensitive. we need to talk.

And then nothing. No response at all. Simonson tried to wait patiently. He reminded himself that not everyone could type as quickly as he could—so fast, in fact, that on occasion his own thoughts bypassed his fingers and the keyboard, springing fully formed onto the screen.

So he waited.

But no reply came from Bad Mofo, a.k.a. Sugardaddy, a.k.a. Nathan James.

He'd crap in his pants if he knew I'd found out who he is, Matthew thought. Hackers were sensitive about that kind of thing—some for reasons of security, others because of pride. Almost as touchy as he is about anyone bad-mouthing his hardware. The slight truly had been inadvertent, a mere statement of fact. Any normal user dealing with Simonson was going to be severely overmatched, no two ways about it. But that was no reason to cut and run. Come on. Stick with me. Be a man.

“Can you go find out if he’s still online?” Matthew asked the reflection in the mirror.

The reflection nodded curtly. The image flickered, for several moments resuming its more mundane aspect, then flickered again, and the willful icon-image was back. “He’s not there. Whether he logged off or was timed out, I don’t know.”

“But he’s gone.”

“Correct.”

Matthew sighed. "I think it's time to take off the kid gloves. This guy stumbled onto SynSol without my help. He's ready to take the next step, he just doesn't know it. Yet."

"If he wants to opt out," the reflection said, "who are you to—"

"This isn't like that. Cross opted out. He went back to nine-to-five and movies on the weekend. *This* guy, he's searching, he's *found* what he was searching for. He just doesn't know all the details yet."

"And you're just the man to educate him?"

"Exactly. Tell me this: You sniffed out his accounts, the alias IDs. You sure you found them all?"

The reflection crossed its arms, looked offended.

"Of course you found them all," Simonson said with mock solemnity. "Pardon me for suggesting otherwise. Okay. You sit on those accounts. Keep tabs on them. All of them. Can you do that? Okay, okay! Just asking. Keep an eye on them, and whenever and wherever he logs back on—and he will—we've got him."

Part Three: Rubble

Chapter Eighteen

Faye got up early, before dawn. She dressed, left. Douglas didn't ask where she was going, and she didn't tell him. Alone, he lay in the bed where, years ago, they had conceived a son.

Sands was ready to leave that place. Julia had proven damnably prescient. There was nothing here for him any longer. Nothing to come back for. Only things to run from. Though he was ready, he couldn't summon the will to rise from the bed. His arms and legs weighed him down. Turning his head to look at the clock was impossible, and what did it matter anyway? Ever so slowly, the dawn came, grudgingly displacing the darkness. At some point he actually dozed off for a while, an hour, maybe more, but when he woke he couldn't shake the thickness of sleep. No matter how hard he rubbed his eyes, his vision didn't quite clear. Getting dressed, he couldn't make his feet go where he wanted. He nearly toppled over. The shock of plunging his face into a sink full of cold water helped a bit, got his heart beating. Instead of brushing his teeth, he poured himself another scotch, and while he sipped it, he tried to decide what belongings he should take with him. He couldn't think of anything. Not a single picture or keepsake.

Eventually he settled on a couple changes of clothes, underwear, socks, toiletries and the baseball bat he had tucked back under the bed after the last time.

The last time. He wouldn't let himself think about it: the wind, the voice, footsteps. The last time. He was leaving all of that here. On the way out the door, he stopped and came back for his decanter of scotch. *She'll just pour it out*, he thought.

The world didn't seem quite so alien as it had the night before. That would have been easier, in a way. Sands would have preferred the numb strangeness of emotional disconnect over the distinct knowledge that his home of decades had ceased to be his. *I'll make her sell it. If I can't stay here...* But Faye hadn't done anything awful. She was simply blind and ignorant, and he had given her more than enough reason to fuel her worst doubts and fears. *Damn her. Damn her and Julia and Melanie and all the blind, ignorant bastards.*

Another swig of scotch straight from the decanter, and the world seemed to jump into sharper focus.

No, thought Douglas, reflecting for a moment on his litany of damnation. *Damn me. I made a mess of my life before the world changed. That just brought everything to a head. And what good does it do when I try to change?* But that was more than a bit disingenuous, he realized. He had never *tried* to change. Rather he'd been dragged into this new impossible world kicking and screaming all the way. He'd quit sleeping with Melanie not for moralistic or philanthropic reasons but because he'd been *found out*. Circumstances, not virtue, had put an end to his infidelity. *That, and I lost interest.* Seeing Melanie last night had driven that fact home. Knowing what he did about the world, how could he care about her body, about sex? And with that titillating element removed, what was she to him. *Nothing.* Nothing but another innocent person whom he had endangered, someone whom guilt compelled him to protect. *She never did mean anything to me. Nothing real. She was an escape.*

And now there was no escape.

The emptiness of it all, the meaninglessness of his old life in the face of what the world had become—it struck him to the core and left his chest aching. The majority of humanity might be blind to the true nature of the world, but he had been blind to himself, and like with the monsters that lurked in once familiar places, the sight was not comforting. More scotch. He was thankful for it searing his throat, hoped it would do the same for his memory in time.

Sands drove without thinking, as unconsciously as he breathed. He was several blocks from his house—from what had been his house—and thankful for having made that transition without actually noticing. He didn't want to see his life receding in the rearview mirror. He just wanted to be away. Extricating himself from the neighborhood, from the surrounding blocks, was unpleasant enough. Every corner was familiar, had once been a comforting sight. No more. Away.

Which raised another question. He knew what he was leaving, but what was he going to? He'd done this before. Christmas morning. Fleeing the wind, the voice, his marriage. There was no snow left now. That morning he'd wound up at Zahn's Bakery of all places, and Albert Tinsley had found him there. That path had led eventually to Nathan's house, where the hunters congregated. Last night had found him there again, because he'd had nowhere else to go. This morning...? He hadn't made the actual decision, but the car seemed to know the way, turning and choosing a route of its own accord. Again, where else did he have to go?

He might have abandoned Faye, and Melanie, but he hadn't abandoned his responsibility to them, for their safety. If watching over them had proved

impracticable, then he would have to remove the danger at the source. For that, he needed help.

They didn't like to have too many cars at the house, didn't want to attract the neighbors' attention. Hetger had explained all that... seemed so long ago. *I'll have to figure out somewhere else to keep my car.* But that would have to wait. At the moment, he just needed to find some source of stability, even if it was a house full of fanatics and self-righteous crusaders. He lifted the decanter of scotch, paused. *If I'm looking forward to seeing that Cleo person, I've already had too much to drink,* he mused. In the end, though, it didn't keep him from another swig.

He pulled alongside the curb in front of the house, and only slowly did it dawn on him that something was very wrong. The garage was open, and empty of cars. No van, no nothing. The shelves were in disarray—more so than usual. Some were empty, while the contents of others had cascaded onto the floor. The front door, too, was ajar.

In a daze, Sands climbed out of his car and crossed the front lawn. *Melanie.* He had brought her here for safekeeping, and now...

Drawing closer, he saw that the knob was broken off the front door. He pushed the door gingerly, his mind flashing back to the carnage at Kaitlin's house, the snarling, murderous beasts, and to the lurker tearing at Jason's broken body, and to Albert, the ax....

But there was nothing inside. Almost literally. Some of the larger furniture remained, and random pieces of trash blowing around on the floor. But everything else was gone: the cots, the crates of equipment that had been stacked in the kitchen, anything at all that was remotely personal. Sands

staggered through the house. In the room that had been packed full of computer equipment, a few charred, plastic shells were scattered across the floor. Various lengths of cable as well, some of which looked as if they had been burned or melted.

“Nathan? Julia?”

Nothing.

The ache in Sands' chest grew heavier. He suddenly realized *how much* he'd been depending on taking up with the other hunters. He had nothing to go back to—and now nowhere to go.

He began to search more frantically. “Melanie?” What miscellaneous gear was left looked as if had been ransacked, discarded. *Good God! Where are they? What happened?* There was no one to be found, and nothing that might identify who had been here.

The bomb shelter...

Sands' heart was pounding. He raced out the back door and across the yard, screened from neighbors' eyes by a privacy fence, to the shelter. The door was open. He'd thought it a mere curiosity at first that the hunters would live in a house with a bomb shelter in the back yard—a bad joke, a coincidence. There was nothing coincidental about it, he'd come to realize. Beneath the veneer of resolve, they all lived with fear, to a varying degree from hunter to hunter, but they all had it. Maybe not all. Clarence may not have—but Clarence was dead. Could be that a certain amount of fear was a healthy thing.

Inside the tiny aboveground enclosure, the hatch was wide open like a gaping maw into the earth itself. Sands started to call down, but then decided it might be safer to look quietly. Just in case.

The same reason that Nathan bought a house with a damn bomb shelter. Just in case....

He tried to climb down the ladder quietly. At the bottom he quickly saw that there was no one there, and like the house, the stored goods had been looted. The canned food and MREs were all gone, but not the jugs of water. In the small back room, Clarence's weight set remained, but his duffel bag and personal gear were absent from under the cot. *They probably divvied up his stuff weeks ago*, Sands thought. It seemed callous, but he could understand the necessity of utilizing whatever resources were at hand. He couldn't have said that a few months ago—another milepost of how he had changed, how the world had changed him.

But none of that changed the fact that the house and shelter were empty. The hunters weren't there, and from the looks of it, they weren't coming back.

Good God. He didn't even know if they were dead or alive—and Melanie with them. If only there were bodies...

Don't think like that. He couldn't go down that road. He couldn't be completely alone in the world. *If someone attacked them, if something attacked them...* He tried to calm himself, to think it through rationally, logically. He had seen first hand what bloodthirsty monsters could do, what they were capable of. *But why would they take all the stuff? That doesn't make any sense.* His hopes lifted, but only slightly, and only for a moment. *But if it wasn't an attack, if Julia and Nathan and the others just left, why is the front door broken?* He didn't have any answers, and didn't know how to find any... *Unless someone saw...*

He almost fell over himself scrambling up the ladder. He had to find out. He couldn't stand the lonely terror of thinking that they were dead, all dead. Gone without a trace. The gate in the privacy fence wouldn't open quickly enough. Sands kicked at it, threw it open. He raced to the back of the house next door and began pounding on the sliding glass doors there. The old couple inside sitting down to breakfast jumped out of their seats.

"What happened next door?" Sands called to them frantically. "Did you see anything? What happened?" The couple clambered away from the table. They hurried away from the door. *Away*. "What are you... ? Come back! Come back here! What the hell happened next door? Come back here, damn you!"

They were gone, and Sands turned away from the house in disgust. He ran to the neighbors' house on the other side, where he rang the bell and pounded on the door. No one was home, or at least no one answered the door.

"Damn you all!" Sands shouted.

He ran back to his car. There was nothing else to find here, and adrenaline was pumping through his body. He couldn't stand still. He had to go... *somewhere*, do something. He had to find out what had happened. His hubcap scraped against the curb as he pulled away. Glancing back over his shoulder, he didn't see the neighbors' trashcans until he'd plowed over them.

"Damn you all!" he yelled at them again as he floored the accelerator. His hands were trembling, and despite his best efforts he couldn't still them. *What's happening to me?* Trepidation sapped his manic energy and the trembling took hold of his whole body. *I have to stop, have to get something to eat, get some rest.*

That was when he saw the blue lights flashing in the rearview mirror.

Chapter Nineteen

The streetlights outside the Gideon Building illuminated deserted downtown Iron Rapids. *This place is freaking dead*, Lionel thought without the first hint of irony. He looked out the window, unable to sit still any longer while Maxwell looked over the documents his child had appropriated. *Give me a college town. Hell, give me any town but this one.* There was no club scene in Iron Rapids. There were no young people. The ones who could get out. The others who couldn't had little choice but to take dead-end factory jobs, like their parents and their parents' parents before them. Those jobs made them old before their time—and those were the losers who were well off. The losers *par excellence* couldn't even get dead-end jobs. The plants that hadn't closed had laid off thousands, to the point that Welfare was as big an "employer" in town as any of the auto manufacturers or steel mills.

Lionel turned away from the window and the quiet streets. His sire was reading carefully, methodically, through the pages from the mortal's house. "I know some of it's messed up, printed out weird or whatever," Lionel said, "and for all I know, maybe Adrock or Ellsworth already owns this Synthetic Solutions thing...." He trailed off as Maxwell, without looking up, raised a finger. "Just thought you might want to see it," Lionel muttered. "Thought it might be worth looking at...." He fell silent as Maxwell continued to read.

It was kind of creepy, Lionel decided, Maxwell sitting at the desk that, not so long ago, was used by Bainbridge. Like some stuffy old company switching executive vice presidents—except that Calvin Bainbridge had lost a hell of a lot more than a corner office and his posh expense account. *He looks too*

comfortable at that desk, Lionel thought, looking at Maxwell. Was the sheriff turning into too much of the prince's man? Had Laurence forgotten his roots? Not that Lionel was one of those morons spouting ideological drivel who wanted to excavate Carthage and turn it into a nice golf course or whatever the hell it was they wanted, but there was such a thing as selling out to the Man.

I just hope you know what you're doing, Laurence. Because, in the end, Lionel's blood was Maxwell's blood, and wither went the sire, there too went the childe.

"You found this," Maxwell said at last, still looking at the last page.

"Yeah, that's right. The chick you put me on to, Vinn, Melody or Melanie or whatever... I had a little talk with her. Found out she's been seeing this Sands guy, and I'll bet you my ass that he's the bastard took down the Nossie."

"I see."

"Yeah. She said he'd been acting real strange for a while before that night, chasing stuff when there wasn't anything there, being all paranoid. He threw himself out of a third floor window, for Christ's sake... and not just out of it, *through* it, like it wasn't open at the time."

"And this document?" Maxwell asked with the slightest change of tone in his voice, but which Lionel recognized as a sign of impatience.

"Right. Well, I had the chick call him up sounding like she's in trouble. I tell you, he's over there in a heartbeat, and he's all 'what's wrong?' and 'what's going on?' and all. I didn't really *do* anything to the girl, nothing permanent, so when he's leaving, I figure I'll have a little chat with him."

Lionel was speaking very quickly now. He didn't like to keep Maxwell waiting, and the words tumbled out. It was all relevant. This was what he'd been asked to check out in the first place, after all. But there were also areas he needed to skirt—things he'd neglected to mention before and therefore had better not bring up now. *Don't say nothing about the other chick, the kid's mother. Nothing about the kid either.*

"You were right on the money, Laurence. There's something not right about this guy. Like you said about the Nossie... that somebody could see him, which we both know damn well shouldn't happen... this guy, he could..." Lionel hesitated, unsure how exactly to word what had happened. He didn't want it to sound like he'd done something to breach the Masquerade. He *hadn't*. Hadn't done anything. But this bastard had seemed to know....

"The document, Lionel."

"Uh... right. Well, so I let this guy go. He takes the girl, and I follow him in my car. He goes to this house, takes the girl in. I wait a while. A couple people leave. A little bit later, Sands comes back out with... um..." *With the kid's mother*, "with another woman. A different one, not the Vinn chick. I think about keeping on following him, but I'm curious about this house now." *Because there's been two of them now—the kid's mother and Sands. Both of them seemed to know what I am. Both of them did stuff a mortal shouldn't be able to do.* "Besides, I figure I know where he lives, from the chick, and like I said, I'm curious about this house. So I go in. The chick's sleeping, and there's this black guy. They're the only ones there. I take care of the black guy, and I find that," Lionel pointed to the pages in Maxwell's hand, "by his computer."

"And you thought I would like to see it."

"Exactly."

Maxwell returned his attention to the papers, which he flipped through again very slowly, back to front, front to back. Lionel suppressed a sigh. Expressing impatience with one's sire was not a good idea. Not a good idea at all. And though Maxwell seemed absorbed by the material he was reading, Lionel had the sneaking feeling that the sheriff knew he was holding something back. Of course, Lionel *always* thought that his sire thought he was hiding something—even when he *wasn't* hiding anything. But there was the kid, and the run-in with the mother, and now this second mortal who was more than just a blind, ignorant mortal. *That's what Laurence needs to understand*, Lionel thought. *He needs to know that something's not right with these people—because I didn't do anything to let on.... I didn't do anything to endanger the Masquerade.*

"I think you were right to be concerned about this guy, Laurence. The one that did the Nossie. Something's not right. And I think he's not the only one." *Because I ran into the kid's mother already, and the two of them together... that proves it.* There was another benefit to this line of argument, Lionel realized. Having followed Sands and seeing him and this Julia woman together, Lionel could justify his suspicions about her without having to explain his failure to mention his concerns after the non-incident at the club before. That would be one less inconvenient non-disclosure to keep from his sire, one less thing to weigh on his mind. There was still the kid, of course.

"Have you mentioned this to anyone?" Maxwell asked.

Lionel thought at first that he was talking about the Sands thing, these screwy mortals, but Maxwell was indicating the borrowed report. *Isn't that just like him to ignore what I'm saying. He's more interested in*

this bigwig financial stuff. *That's what'll get the prince all hot and bothered, I guess.* "Nobody but you, Laurence."

"Not your childe?"

"Kyle?" Lionel snorted. "He wouldn't know a corporate tax incentive or a zoning ordinance from his..." Lionel caught himself. Letting on how disappointed he was with Kyle probably wasn't a good idea—not that the neonate's shortcomings were Lionel's fault. Because they weren't. Kyle had changed, lost his drive, his reliability. That wasn't Lionel's fault. But Maxwell might not see it that way. It was the kind of thing that the old timers might say reflected poorly on Lionel. Poor choice of progeny, and all that crap. "No," Lionel said. "I left Kyle in Saginaw. He doesn't know anything about this. Nobody does, except you and me."

Maxwell nodded thoughtfully. "You were right to bring this to me."

Lionel felt a surge of relief, and hot on its heels resentment that he should be so relieved, that he should regard this Kindred, to whom he was completely loyal, with trepidation. *Of course I was right. That's what I've been trying to tell you.*

"The prince will indeed view these developments with interest," Maxwell said.

"Damn straight. I mean, you know better than I do, but it looks like somebody's trying to muscle in on his territory. Not only is he going to be interested—he's going to be pissed. And using the Chamber of Commerce, for God's sake. I mean, I guess we've got to watch out for the Girl Scouts now too."

"The kine who you took this from," Maxwell said, "there were at least five of them frequenting that particular residence, as well as the Vinn girl?"

"Right. And I say we kill them all. I think they're a threat. They're... they're too unpredictable," Lionel

said. *Kine ought to be eating out of my hand, and that's two that resisted my control—enough to try to bust my skull.* And something had happened with the woman. She'd done... *something*, something that had kept him from getting at her, kept him away. Not to mention that her two buddies had attacked him with *fire*. If they didn't deserve to have their hearts ripped out, Lionel didn't know who did. His entire body tensed with rage at the memory of the flames dancing so close to him. "I say we kill them all."

"But then how would we find out how they are involved with this Synthetic Solutions company?" Maxwell asked.

Lionel considered that for a moment. "Okay. I see what you mean. I can be reasonable. We torture them, find out what they know, then we kill them all."

"They worry you, don't they, Lionel."

"I already *told* you they worry me. Don't they worry you? You're the one who asked me to check them out."

"Killing is such a permanent solution."

"That's how I like it. Of course," Lionel added, "it doesn't have to be. Permanent, that is."

The sheriff raised an eyebrow. "Are you suggesting that I petition the prince for permission to Embrace one or more of them—these *kine* who have proven so dangerous."

"I didn't say *dangerous*," Lionel said, suddenly defensive. He could see Maxwell pushing his buttons, one after another, but was helpless to avoid falling into the old, programmed behaviors. "I said unpredictable. And now that you put it that way, no, that probably wouldn't be a good idea. They could end up being too hard to control. I say we kill them."

Maxwell smiled in that fake, infuriating way that he did sometimes, like he was humoring a retard. The expression affected Lionel like splinters of bamboo shoved beneath his fingernails, but he held his peace.

"Patience, Lionel." Maxwell held up the papers. "I will see to this. You, meanwhile, will cultivate our relationship with these kine."

"Cultivate? What the hell does that mean?"

"We must determine if they might be useful in the future. If so, if they may be a tool for us, then they are not to be discarded lightly. If not..." He shrugged, waved a hand noncommittally.

Lionel recognized the nonchalance, knew what his sire meant. *Kill them all.*

Chapter Twenty

"Cigarette?"

"No."

"What? That the one self-destructive behavior you don't engage in?" Detective Havelin laughed at his little joke. Sands did not. He didn't answer, either. Aside from two cold metal chairs in which the men were sitting and the table separating them, the only other furnishing in the questioning room was a plastic ashtray. Havelin took a cigarette from a pack in his shirt pocket and lit up.

"So, tell me, Douglas, what's the problem? Is it drugs? Mid-life crisis?"

"Nothing a little driving school won't fix."

Havelin laughed. "You're right about that. Driving under the influence, first offense. Easy rehab program. Probably won't even get your license suspended. But you didn't answer my question. I've seen my share of hard-case alcoholics," he said matter-of-factly. "You might be starting down that road, but you're not that far, not yet. Not so far that your whole life should be falling apart. Something else is eating at you."

"I wouldn't say that—"

"How's your job?" Havelin interrupted. "How are things at IRM?"

"I don't work there anymore," Sands said evenly.

"Career change, huh? Happens to a lot of people. I've thought about changing my line of work too." Havelin laughed. "But it'll never happen. Police work is too much in my blood."

"Like a disease," Sands said.

Havelin smiled. "Yeah. You could say that. I like that. Like a disease. Ha! I read something that said most people entering the work force today will change

careers—not just jobs, but careers—three to five times over the course of their lives. It wasn't like that for us, was it? We came out of college, settled into a job. Stick with it for twenty-five, thirty, forty years. Retire, play bingo on Wednesday nights. That's what I'm looking forward to. But you, you're more up with the times than I am, I guess. Right? Changing careers at your age. How old are you, forty-five?"

"Forty-six."

"Forty-six. I knew that, saw it in your file."

"Spend a lot of time looking through my file, do you?"

"I do, now that you mention it." Havelin gave a toothy grin, then took a concentrated drag on his cigarette, let the smoke billow out through his nostrils. He licked his lips with the tip of his tongue, as if he were trying to keep any nicotine from getting away. "Why do you think that would be, that I would spend a lot of time looking at your file? You don't seem surprised."

"I'm no detective," Sands said, "but my guess would be that you think I'm a mass murderer."

"Mass murderer?" Havelin looked impressed. "Are there some I don't know about? Mass murderer. Why in the world would you say that? There was poor Gerald Stafford, but of course you had an alibi for the time of his death. Christmas party, lots of people saw you. Then there's Albert Tinsley. Except we don't even know if Tinsley's dead do we? No body. Just disappeared one day. And you were staying with him right? Yeah, I thought so. That's in your file too. Not only were you staying with him, but you disappear at about the same time he does. Only you come back. Tinsley doesn't. Where'd you go? You've got an alibi again. Of course you do. You went ice fishing—with some old fellow, friend of Tinsley's from way back. You, who as far as I can tell has never been ice fishing

in his life, you go for a couple of *weeks*. Not a weekend, not a week. *Two weeks*. Catch anything?"

"Nothing I kept."

"Nothing you kept. That works too. And I checked out your alibi. Took me a hell of a long time to track down this old guy. Doesn't have a phone. Deaf, too. But he says, yeah, you went up there. Says you weren't much of a talker. He's not either. You didn't really talk about anything for two weeks. Seems to hold up, your story. Whether I believe it or not. But mass murder. Tell me where you come up with that?"

Sands shrugged. "I just didn't want you to feel that all your time investigating me was wasted. Mass murder sounds more important."

"Oh, so you're worried about my sense of well-being, my self-esteem."

"Job satisfaction."

"Job satisfaction, right. You know all about job satisfaction, don't you? So why was it they let you go from IRM? You've been there what, twenty-five years?"

"Look, Detective," said Sands, laying his hands flat on the table, "would I be here talking to you without a lawyer if I had killed people—even one person?"

"That's a good question," Havelin said, looking interested. "Sounds to me like you think you've got a good answer, so why don't you tell me?"

"My good answer is this: no," Sands said slowly, emphatically. "I wouldn't be talking to you without a lawyer if I'd killed anyone. I'd be hiding behind every legal maneuver and technicality that I could. I haven't even *retained* a lawyer, not from the start of this mess."

"And I appreciate that fact," Havelin assured him. "They do tend to get in the way more than help things

along. If I didn't ever have to worry about lawyers... but that's in the Constitution, Bill of Rights, Miranda, all that. So I guess it can't be all bad. Still," he lit another cigarette, "maybe that's how you want it to look. You've got all your ducks in a row, so you keep away the lawyers so it makes you look like you've got nothing to hide. Or," he pointed the cigarette at Sands, "maybe you want to get caught."

"Oh, good God. Please. Because every serial killer really wants to get caught."

"You're the one who brought up mass murder," Havelin pointed out. "I'm just saying maybe. That's what I get paid for, thinking about the maybes."

"Here's a maybe for you," Sands said, leaning forward, a harsher edge creeping into his voice. "Maybe I was bored off my ass sitting down there in lockup. I've been here for twelve hours. I arranged for bail. I should be out of here."

"Judge ordered you held for observation," Havelin said with exaggerated innocence. "You can go if a responsible adult signs for you. Your wife says she'll come in the morning. Actually, she said she *might* come in the morning. You mind telling me about that? How's the marriage, Douglas?"

"I do mind. Maybe that should be your next career: marriage counselor. You know, come to think of it, maybe being bored off my ass in lockup is better than talking with you. It's better than talking with your psychologist. That's for sure. If he were any good, he'd be in private practice making two hundred bucks an hour. I guess living off the taxpayers is an easy way out for the incompetent."

"Why, thank you so much, Douglas. On behalf of public servants everywhere, I thank you. Care to talk about your job situation?"

A knock at the door pre-empted Sands' retort. A uniformed officer stepped into the room. "There's somebody here to sign for him," he said to Havelin.

"His wife?"

"No. Somebody else. Another woman."

Havelin looked curious. "Another woman." He gave Sands a sidelong glance. "That could explain why the missus is in no hurry to come pick you up. Is it Ms. Vinn?" Havelin asked the officer.

"No. Barns. Julia Barns."

Havelin scratched his head. He watched as Sands got up from the table.

"Take care of yourself, Detective," Sands said. "If I decide that I want or need to get caught, you'll be the first to know."

"That's very considerate of you. My regards to the missus... if you see her."

"You know they're going to be interested in you now," Sands said, angry. "The police." He'd said nothing, absolutely nothing, until they had made their way through the police station's cavernous parking garage to Julia's car.

"You're welcome very much. And, yes, I do know that."

"You shouldn't have come, damn it. How'd you know I was here, anyway? Never mind. You shouldn't have come."

She started the engine, pulled jerkily from the parking space. "There didn't seem to be much choice."

"No choice? What the hell do you mean, no choice? They would have released me in the morning. The worst thing that was going to happen was if Havelin talked me to death before then."

"Abraham said we needed to get you out of there."

"Abraham? Who the hell is—?"

"You haven't met him. He's one of us. Been around a good deal. Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland. He said there's a chance they could have gotten to you, even in jail. More easily in jail. He said it's not unheard of for them to have plants within the police department." Julia didn't look at him as she spoke. Her eyes were scanning every shadow as the car wound through the rows of parked vehicles.

Sands got the impression that she wanted to floor it, to be out of there as soon as possible, and that only the fact that there were likely two hundred cops within a mile radius kept her from doing so. "Plants in the department? What the hell are you talking about?"

"The *monsters*, you idiot. Maybe vampires. Maybe God knows what. Nathan said it's possible, too. He's heard the stories, read them on hunter-net."

Nathan. Monsters. Vampires. Suddenly Sands' aggravation with Julia gave way to the memory of his panic that morning, the reason he'd landed in jail in the first place. "The house! What the hell happened at the house? I went back this morning and everyone, everything, was gone."

"Last night after you and I left," Julia said, and he could hear the strain in her voice now that he was listening instead of being angry. "Nathan and Melanie were the only ones there. Something attacked him. He only saw it for a second, but he thinks it's the same vampire. Braughton. The one I saw. The one you saw."

"Melanie! Is she...?" Sands couldn't force out the words. If he had taken her there to keep her safe and something had happened...

"She's fine. It knocked Nathan unconscious and left, it seems. Like it just wanted us to know that it could get to us."

"Good God. Is Nathan okay?"

"He will be. He took a shot to the head. He thinks the thing was unarmed, just hit him with his hand, but he's not sure. We don't *think* it—"

"Drank his blood." Sands covered his face. He could see the tiny red marks on Melanie's throat—mocking accusations of his failure to protect her. "I don't believe this is happening. Where is she now? Melanie. Where is she? Where's everyone else? The house had been ransacked."

Julia drove up the ramp exiting the parking garage. She pulled away from the police station as quickly as she could without drawing attention. At the first side street, she turned, leaving the ominous, sprawling station behind, and gunned the engine. "It *was* ransacked, sort of. We got everything we could as quickly as we could and got the hell out. After I left you, I went back and found Nathan. The front door was broken open—the knob ripped off."

"I saw."

"Nathan said he didn't hear a thing. Not until he turned around from the computer and... God, Douglas, I thought he was dead at first. He was lying on the floor, bloody. His face was swollen. God, I thought he was dead."

"But he's okay, you said. He's alive. He's okay." Sands was trying to calm himself as much as her.

Julia nodded. "He came to. Smelling salts. He was groggy, but I started to piece together what had happened from what he was able to say. I called the others. Abraham had a friend who was able to get him a U-Haul on short notice—no notice, really—and we piled it full of whatever we felt we couldn't leave behind."

Sands remembered the house, the gut-wrenching anxiety that had taken hold of him. "I thought... hell,

I didn't know what to think. I knew everyone was dead. It was like... it was like a war zone, except no bodies."

"No bodies. Thank God. It could have killed Nathan. It could have killed him. Very easily."

"But it didn't."

"Thank God." They were comfortably away from the police station now, but Julia's fingers were locked around the steering wheel like vices. "There's more."

A chill ran down Sands' spine. "I don't like the way you said that."

"You asked how I knew you were in jail. I called your house tonight."

"You called my—"

"Yes. It's a long story. Cleo was trying to say that you set us up. I told her she was nuts."

"Set you up? What? She thinks that I'm in league with the... that's the stupidest thing I've ever—"

"I told her. I told her," Julia said. "I vouched for you."

"Vouched for me. I don't need anybody to—"

"Will you just *shut up*? I told her. But I wanted to call and make sure you were okay. You'd seen Braughton right before you came over. It *might* have followed you. It must have. It might have gone after you too. I wanted to warn you."

"No matter what Cleo said."

"She doesn't know you."

"And you do?"

"You might be a lot of things," Julia said, "but you're not going to help a vampire. Not on purpose."

"Thank you. I think."

"I called your house and spoke with Faye. She didn't sound real happy when I asked for you, but I

told her I was an old friend of Albert's. She said that I'd picked a bad time to call, because you were in jail, and she wasn't picking you up until tomorrow morning, if at all."

"She said that?" Sands couldn't believe it. Here was Faye talking to somebody she'd never met. He could almost understand her saying something like that to Havelin, but to a complete stranger?

"That and more," Julia said. "I told her that I'd take care of picking you up. Then, when I was about to hang up, she said something about this must be the evening for friends of friends to call. I asked her what she meant. She said that not long before I called, someone else called, and maybe she should give me that message to pass along, because she didn't want to see you."

Sands winced. He'd done enough over the years to earn that type of treatment from Faye, but the infuriating thing was that he hadn't betrayed her *this time*. He hadn't done anything—except try to keep her safe. "So what's the message?" he asked. It was bad enough facing these marital problems himself, but having them laid out before other people like Havelin and Julia embarrassed and pissed him off to no end.

Julia pulled the car over to the curb. They were on the edge of downtown, a maze of one-way streets and boarded up storefronts. She shifted the car into park, turned in her seat to face Sands. "She said it was from a man named Lionel."

The name didn't sink in for a few seconds. Of all the names Sands might have guessed, that was not one. Lionel Braughton. Vampire. "Good God."

"Said he was a friend of Melanie's."

Sands' mouth dropped open. "Oh, I'm sure that went over like gangbusters."

"He said he needed to talk to you, that it was very important. He left a number." Julia took a folded piece of notepaper from her pocket and handed it to Sands.

He unfolded the paper, looked at the number. It meant nothing to him. "Did you call?"

"No. I thought it would be better if you did."

"So this is why you were so hot and heavy to get me out of jail. It wasn't just the goodness of your heart."

Julia sighed. "Douglas, I said I'd get you out before I knew about this. You know why I'm interested in this guy... this vampire. I'm not keeping secrets from you, so can we just cut the crap with the ulterior motives and the self-pity?"

Sands started to say something back but stopped himself. "I'm sorry. You're right," he nodded. There was too much going on for him to waste time and energy with petty insults, giving or receiving, real or imagined. "He said he was a friend of Melanie's. Bastard. You didn't tell me where she is now."

"She's inside," Julia said.

"What?"

"Inside," she said, pointing to the boarded up storefront behind them. "Downtown real estate is dirt cheap these days. Nathan set this place up while we were up north. Just in case."

Sands scrutinized the storefront. It looked no different from the several others on the block.

"This one and the adjacent one," Julia said. She shifted into drive and whipped into an alley and then turned into another that paralleled the main street and ran behind the building. "Front windows are painted black behind the plywood so no light shows from inside. Nathan's going to install miniature security cameras out front when he's up to it."

Sands tried to take it all in. Even in this bizarre new world, nothing stayed the same. Just when he'd gotten used to the idea of the headquarters house in the suburbs, the hunters up and move. *And me thinking they were all dead.* But some things, unfortunately, did stay the same: Faye and Melanie in danger because of him.

"And Melanie agreed to come here with you?" he asked.

"Sort of."

"Sort of. What do you mean, sort of?"

"She didn't protest," Julia said.

"She didn't...?"

"I sedated her. It seemed the easiest thing to do. We had to concentrate on getting out of there. What was I going to tell her otherwise? It seemed the only way we could be sure of keeping her safe under the circumstances."

"Good God. We kidnapped her," Sands said. "Havelin would love that."

Julia stopped the car. She got out and opened a set of double doors on the back of one building. The doorway was not meant for cars, but was large enough. She got back in and pulled through with room to spare. The darkened interior already housed the van that Sands had ridden in before and another car, an older model Mustang. Every other square foot of space was piled high with the boxes and crates that had been salvaged from the ranch house. Julia closed and locked the double doors, then led Sands through a makeshift doorway that had been knocked through the wall separating the retail units.

"Douglas, good to see you." Nathan said. Whether he spoke softly because Melanie was asleep on a cot next to his or because his head was still bandaged and hurting him, Sands didn't know. The

right side of Nathan's face was dark and swollen, his eye barely open.

"From what I hear, it's good for you to see *anybody*," Sands said.

Two other men were in the converted shop: a second black man, larger than Nathan, with the beginnings of a rough beard; and younger white man, maybe still a teenager, with bleached blond hair. They were busy hooking up computer equipment and paused only briefly when Julia introduced them.

"Douglas Sands, Abraham Jones and Johnny."

They shook hands.

"Johnny," Sands said. "Just Johnny?"

"Yeah, like Madonna. You know?"

"Uh-huh. I see you borrowed her hair too." No one laughed. Abraham and Johnny returned to their work.

"I think you've met everybody now," Julia said. "Mike and Cleo are keeping an eye on your house."

On Faye. "Thanks for that," Sands said.

"It seemed like the best thing to do. You ready to make that call?"

Sands looked at the piece of paper, which he was still holding in his hand. "Why in hell would he want to talk to me?"

Julia shrugged, as Hetger might have. "Won't know until we call." She tried to sound nonchalant, but Sands could tell that she was anxious for him to call, that she would have liked to have called hours ago. This vampire might be able to help her find her son. Anything was worth a try. Julia handed him her cell phone.

"Okay." He dialed the number. Abraham and Johnny both turned from their tasks and moved closer.

Sands dialed. The other end rang three times, then: "Hello."

"I need to talk to Lionel," Sands said.

"Who are you?"

"Douglas Sands."

"Hold on."

He heard muffled voices, a hand covering the phone and men talking briefly, then a different voice, but one that Sands recognized: "Douglas. Glad you got my message."

"What do you want?"

"Douglas, I think we got off on the wrong foot. I'm glad we have a chance to have this little talk." What a smug bastard.

"Talk then. I've got nothing to say to you."

"No? What about your friend, Julia? Do you think she has anything to say? How are your friends, Douglas?"

Sands wanted to hang up. He wanted to smash the phone into a thousand pieces. Merely talking with this creature sickened him. It was unnatural, evil—and yet he was *talking* with it. But the thing was *right*, damn it all. Sands had promised Julia that he would do what he could, and if there was any chance...

"You still there, Douglas? You sound angry, but, hey, we've got to let bygones be bygones. Right? I mean, you're the one who tried to bust my head open, right? Do I sound like I'm holding a grudge?"

"You hurt Melanie. You threatened my wife."

"Douglas, Douglas. I didn't hurt the girl. She's fine. We had a good talk. I'm not the one who left her high and dry. I didn't lead her on, let her think that I'd leave my wife."

"I never—" Sands clenched his teeth, stopped himself. He wasn't going to be drawn into this, wasn't going to debate ethics with a monster. "I'm going to

say this as simply as I know how: What. Do. You. Want?"

"We don't have to be enemies, Douglas." The words sounded so reasonable.

Words, Sands thought. Nothing but words.

"I really believe that," the monster said, "and I'm going to prove it. I'm going to help your friend, Julia."

Sands glanced at Julia. She was watching him intently, almost as if she were in pain; so badly did she want to know—*need* to know—what was being said. Could this monster actually help, or was it just setting her up for a fall?

"I know somebody who might know something about her kid," it said.

"You know somebody who *might* know something.... Doesn't sound like a lot of help, if you ask me."

"It's a hell of a lot more than you got now, Doug."

Right again. Bastard. "What do you want in return?"

"That's the beauty of this for you, Doug. This is a gift. A free gift."

"Why the hell should you—?"

"Think of it as an investment in the future. A show of good faith on my part. I want you to trust me."

"I bet you do."

"Douglas, you wound me. I'm trying to help your friend. What's she going to say if you turn me down without even asking her? You want the name or not?"

Sands hesitated. The thing knew how desperate Julia was, damn it. It knew Sands couldn't turn down this offer—but no matter what he'd promised Julia, he had to do something for himself as well, something

to ease his mind. "I'll take the name on one condition."

"You're making demands before you'll accept my gift? You ever negotiate before, Doug?"

"Take it or leave it."

A pause, then: "What have you got in mind?"

"Melanie, and my wife. I want them to be safe."

"What? You want me to baby-sit? Doug, I don't have time to—"

"I want you to leave them alone. I want anybody that works for you, anybody you know, to leave them alone. Period."

"They're small fish, Doug. You've got to keep your eye on the ball. They're small fish."

"Not to me, they're not. If they are to you, then leave them the hell alone, you bastard."

The creature on the other end of the line paused again. "Fine. If that's how you want it. I got nothing to do with them. I got plenty without—"

"Not you. Not anybody you know."

"Fine. Fine, Doug. They're off limits. You want this name or not? You in this for yourself? You going to leave Julia high and dry?"

"Tell me." Sands motioned for a pen and paper. Julia handed them to him. He wrote down the name that Lionel told him, *Lisa Noble*, and the street address.

"It's in Saginaw."

Under the address, Sands wrote: *May have info about Timothy*. He underlined *may* twice and handed the paper to Julia. A change came over her at once. Her barely contained anticipation of a few minutes before was replaced by an intense, uncanny focus on that piece of paper. Sands thought that if it were

possible, her gaze would have burned a hole through the note.

"What does this Lisa Noble know?" Sands asked into the phone.

"You'll have to find that out for yourself, won't you?"

"This is bullshit. If you want to help, then help. Don't play games."

"You've got the name and the address. I'd make it a day trip, if you know what I mean." And the connection went dead.

Chapter Twenty-One

Shortly after dawn, Mike and Cleo returned from their sentry duty at Sands' house. By that time, Abraham and Johnny had finished reconnecting most of the computer system. Nathan staggered over from his cot, saw to the last details, and then practically collapsed into the chair at the console, where he began digging up whatever information he could about the address that the vampire had given Sands.

Douglas woke from a short and restless but sorely needed nap. He felt ill. He felt dirty and angry that he had bargained with a soulless, inhuman creature. He felt guilty, more so than during or after any of the illicit encounters he'd had with Melanie over the past year.

Everyone else was making preparations. No formal plans had been made, but they all seemed to sense that a heretofore impregnable threshold had been crossed. Grim determination clung to the hunters. Among the six others, Sands had met four of them in the past two days. While Mike was ostensibly friendly, Abraham kept busy sorting through the equipment removed from the house and barely acknowledged Sands' presence. Johnny was equally busy, but managed to spare an occasional glance in Douglas' direction that was, if anything, slightly disdainful. Cleo was all but openly hostile, alternately glaring at or studiously avoiding Sands. Nathan was hard at work at his reconstituted computer, and Sands had spent relatively little time with him regardless.

Amidst all the quiet and industrious bustle, Sands' attention kept drifting back to Julia. She was sitting in a corner atop a stack of crates, organizing her gear in a small backpack. Douglas saw wooden stakes, a mallet, and a familiar silver flask, which

jarred him with a fresh surge of guilt. He couldn't help thinking of Jason—of Jason's grisly death.

He was already dead before Julia tried to use the holy water—what she thought was holy water, Sands reminded himself. He'd never confessed to Julia that he'd borrowed the flask, that he'd dumped what he'd thought was normal water so that he could carry around whiskey—and this didn't seem like the time for that kind of heart-to-heart. That was old news anyway. As always, it seemed, Sands had fresher transgressions on his mind, more recent causes for guilt. He walked over to Julia.

"Got the kitchen sink in there?" he asked.

She remained intent on the task at hand. "Everything but."

"I wanted to tell you—"

Sands was shocked to silence when Julia uncovered a sawed-off shotgun and began loading it. He waited until she finished and stuffed it, too, into her backpack. Somehow undertaking this conversation while she was handling a loaded gun didn't seem prudent. "You heard the demands I made," he said. "I hope you understand—"

"I do." Julia zipped up the backpack, tested the weight of it, seemed satisfied. "I understand. We're not sure he's on the level about Timothy—won't know until we check it out. But you know that Faye and Melanie are in danger and have been. Smart tactically, too," she added. "We couldn't keep on posting watch, especially not on two places. We were going to have to make that decision soon anyway. To leave them uncovered and go after the root of the problem. This might help. At worst, it just forced our hand a bit."

"I'm glad you see it that way," Sands said. "I was afraid..." He wasn't sure of what he was afraid, he

realized. That Julia would disapprove of him? This woman who had seemingly disapproved of him from the moment she'd met him, if not before? Had she changed so much over the course of a few months that now he could sympathize with her and even care about her approval? *Or have I changed that much? Maybe it's just that I see the world a lot more like she does now. Now that I know I'm not going back, and all of the niceties have been stripped away.* Or maybe it was just that they had both survived so far, and so many others hadn't.

"Come on," Julia said, not waiting for an explanation, not needing one.

Gradually, the hunters were congregating near the center of the room. No one had called the group together, but the feeling was palpable that the time for a decision was at hand. Nathan even paused in his work on the computer and pulled a chair closer, since he was still unsteady on his feet.

Cleo was the last one to join the group. "Should he be here?" she asked, pointing at Sands.

Julia began to speak, but Sands forestalled her with a hand on her shoulder. "Julia and I were talking, and I think she's right that that thing probably followed me from Melanie's apartment to the house. I'm sorry." That he directed toward Nathan in particular. "God knows I should have been aware of that possibility, but I wasn't. I was upset, I was rattled, I was stupid. All I can say is that I won't let it happen again. Not ever. No matter what, if I can help it."

He paused, turned to face Cleo, jabbed a finger at her. "But if you think I set up you people on purpose, if you think I tried to get Nathan killed..." He struggled for something to say, but no words were strong enough. What would a string of obscenities prove? And nothing else seemed adequate to express the obscenity of Cleo's insinuation.

"I think he's okay," Abraham said, surprising Sands. "You weren't here when he was talking to that thing on the phone. Maybe he's that good of an actor, but I doubt it. And it sounded to me like Douglas would hook that thing's guts on a spit and roast them an inch at a time if he could. He wasn't selling us out. Now that deal about his wife and the girl... if he'd had to sell us out over that... maybe, I don't know. But that's not what happened."

Sands started to protest, but he realized that Abraham wasn't questioning his loyalty but rather commending the fervor of his desire to protect Faye and Melanie. It was a compliment... he thought. Hard to tell with this one.

"Easy enough to set up that whole conversation so you hear it," Cleo said, not convinced.

"Maybe," Abraham said, "but I believe my eyes and my ears—else I wouldn't be spending my life doing what I'm doing."

"The angels have opened our eyes so that we can see, but you see what you want to see," Cleo insisted.

Abraham faced her down without hesitation. He seemed to feel none of the discomfort that Sands did at her fanaticism. "Angels, heralds, whatever you want to call them," Abraham said. "I saw what I saw. I know what I know. Anything *could* be a set up, but Julia vouches for this guy, and that's good enough for me."

"He might be a screw-up, but we got to trust each other," Johnny added.

"You know, I *am* standing right here," Sands said.

Abraham ignored him, continued. "Julia's seen him take on a vampire. She's seen him take on a shape changer, werewolf, whatever you want to call it. *You* ever fight a shape changer?" Cleo looked away. "Me neither. I've picked Julia's brain. I want to pick

Douglas' as soon as we have a chance. At the moment, though, we've got a vampire on the loose, and if you're not willing to associate with other hunters, sister, then there's the damn door."

"Don't let it smack you on the ass on your way out," Johnny chirped in, then clammed up immediately after a hard stare from Abraham.

Silence settled over the argument. Cleo wasn't happy, perhaps not even resigned, but she didn't leave.

"So we have this name," said Julia after several seconds of quiet, "and this address in Saginaw. Best case, this person does know something about Timothy. Worst case, it's a trap."

"Only one way to find out," Johnny said. His eyes sparkled too much for Sands' liking. Not even Clarence had seemed so... *gleeful* to go after monsters.

"And this *person* may be more than that," Abraham reminded them. "What'd he say—go during the day?"

"Better make it a day trip," Sands said. "That's what he said, smug bastard."

"This chick's a vampire," Johnny said. "He's telling us that this chick's a vampire."

Mike had been quiet through all this, listening, thoughtful. "Or by day trip, did he mean not to be away from Iron Rapids for too long... maybe a veiled threat... against Melanie, or Douglas' wife."

"He said he'd—"

"We know what he *said*, Douglas," Abraham said. "It don't necessarily mean crap."

"There's no way that we can know we can trust it," Julia said, cutting off Sands' objection. "No way."

"The damn thing drinks *blood*," Abraham said. "Why should it worry about lying?"

Sands could see that they were right. He recognized the distrust that he felt toward such an inhuman creature, that he'd been trying to deny. Everything had happened so quickly: getting out of jail, the phone call, thinking on his feet to strike a deal with the devil. He wanted so badly to believe that he'd assured the safety of Faye and Melanie. Maybe then he could proceed without being driven by guilt over what he had unwittingly set in motion. But they were right. There was no way to know how far he could trust... *A vampire, for God's sake. A damn, blood-sucking, inhuman, evil vampire.*

"In a way, though," Julia continued, trying to sound very reasonable and soothing in her own practical way, "we have to proceed as if we believe it. We don't have the manpower to watch over even just two people, even just at night. We have to hope that this Lionel thing is willing to hold up his end of the bargain... that he's not just luring us out with this talk about Timothy." She paused. Sands suspected she was struggling to maintain her composure, but she did a good job.

"I understand if you don't want to go, Douglas," she went on. "And anyone else. Either way, we can't leave Melanie here. I sedated her again a few hours ago, so this whole past day and night should be a strange dream to her. But she doesn't really know anything about us, or this place, and we have to keep it that way. We have to take her back to her apartment and hope that Braughton is willing to hold up his end of the bargain. Douglas, if you want to stay there with her, or take her to your house to watch over her and Faye together..."

Sands shook his head. He laughed humorlessly at the thought that had crossed his mind so many times. He had known this step was coming, had thought that he'd already taken it—but this was the

decision that counted. What he decided now might lead to circumstances that could never be undone, to tragedy. He had already destroyed his old life, but he could choose to cling to it like he had for the past months, or he could make the break. He could move forward, praying to God or the angels or the heralds or whomever that nothing happened to Faye or Melanie, knowing that if it did, he'd never be able to forgive himself.

"I'm with you," he said. Julia lay a hand on his shoulder and squeezed slightly.

"We will destroy the evil, root and branch," Cleo said in a low, almost reverent tone. "And the earth will be cleansed by fire."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The others got on the road just before noon, and Nathan's head was already swimming. The drive to Saginaw shouldn't take much more than an hour—even for Julia and Douglas, who were taking Melanie back to her apartment before heading north—and then they would be ready to begin. Nathan had that long to find out anything else that he could about the address that Braughton had given Sands. Despite the throbbing that seemed to originate from everywhere in his skull at once, Nathan had managed to arm the hunters with a significant amount of information already.

The address was residential, a house, one of the older buildings in Saginaw, located on the edge of a commercial district. The neighborhood was not the best, well past its prime—low, stagnant real estate prices; high levels of crime, including violent, drug- and gang-related—and unless the manufacturing industry hit a pronounced upturn, gentrification did not appear to be in the area's future. Nathan had found a street map and a relatively recent aerial photograph, the two of which together had allowed the hunters to begin formulating a mental picture of where they would be operating. At least they wouldn't be going in blind. They each had headsets, so if he did find something else useful, he could let them know en route.

A floor plan would be great, he thought as he downed a handful of aspirin. *Great, but not likely*. The house was old, so no architectural firm or city records department was likely to have blueprints accessible online, if they possessed such documents at all.

There's got to be something. Nathan was determined to find whatever he could. Here he was again, left behind—although, as he had discovered last night,

left behind was not always as safe as it seemed. And he would not have been much help in the field tonight, regardless. Every few seconds his vision blurred, the images on the screen doubled and jumped around until he closed his eyes as tightly as he could.

He tried to keep track of the clock at the bottom right-hand corner of the screen, but every time he glanced down it seemed that either too many minutes had gone by too quickly or, conversely, that time was standing completely still. A few times he fought down brief bouts of nausea, going so far as to find an empty box to leave on the floor by his chair in case he wasn't so fortunate the next time his stomach started doing somersaults.

Maybe a trip to the hospital wouldn't be such a bad idea, he started to think. Maybe after this Lisa Noble question was taken care of. Surely he could come up with hundreds of plausible reasons for someone to have beat the hell out of him. At the very least, a doctor could get him some prescription painkillers. Julia had tended to him as best she could, but she was strung out and exhausted, and using the edges the imbuing had given her took a lot out of her. Besides, there had been so much to do, all of it seeming incredibly urgent. Nathan hadn't wanted to burden or inconvenience anyone.

Now, however, his condition was turning into a major burden of its own. He simply couldn't concentrate, couldn't reason through the searches that he needed to undertake if he were going to help his friends in the next... *How long? How long do I have to find something?*

He glanced at the clock, but the screen was dark. *Damn screen saver. I need to set it for a longer time to kick in.* He jiggled the mouse. Nothing happened. He jiggled it again, checked the connection when the

screen remained blank. Keys on the keyboard... no effect. But that connection was tight also.

Great. I knew I shouldn't let Abraham and Johnny—

Small white letters appeared on the screen, one after another, left to right, forming words. Nathan tried to read them, but his eyes or the screen were playing tricks on him. The letters grew blurry-bright, then darkened and were gone. He squeezed his eyes shut, rubbed them with the heels of his hands, looked again and saw the brief message:

I said that we needed to talk.

Suddenly the world stopped making sense. Even with his second sight alerted, Nathan didn't understand. A bright flash from the monitor blinded him. At the same instant he was overcome by a strange sensation—that he was not the same as he had been a moment before. He couldn't feel the hard plastic surface of the mouse at his fingertips, or the chair beneath him. His last impression was of the monitor transformed into some sort of ravenous maw, sucking in the collection of molecules and electrical impulses that had been his body and his mind.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The clock on the dash of Julia's car read 2:49 by the time they were ready to begin. Sands, in the passenger's seat, looked outside past Julia. They were parked across the street from the house, a two-story frame building that, as Nathan had guessed, had seen better days. A simple fresh coat of paint would have done wonders. The once elaborate gingerbread woodwork had fallen into sorry disrepair, and the porch railings were broken in several spots. Sheets of plastic were stapled over the windows. The rest of the neighborhood was little better.

I guess vampires don't hang out in the good part of town, Sands thought. Sewers, this place—he'd seen nothing to disabuse him of the notion.

He and Julia both listened over headsets. Mike and Cleo had identical sets tucked in their pockets as they approached the house, as did Abraham and Johnny, who were covering the back. Sands' grasp of the plan had been complicated initially by his ignorance of what the other hunters were capable of. He was often unsure of what exactly *he* was capable of, after all, and he had never seen any of the others except Julia in action.

"So Abraham and Johnny are going to sneak up to the back door. What if somebody sees them and calls the cops?" he had asked.

"They can handle it," Julia had assured him. "They've done this kind of thing before."

Sands wanted to complain, but he trusted Julia. She had vouched for him—as much as that necessity still galled him—so if she said that Abraham could handle it, he believed her until he saw otherwise.

They had driven to Saginaw in three vehicles: he and Julia in her car; Abraham and Johnny in the Mustang; and Mike and Cleo in the van, Nathan's

van or maybe it used to be Clarence's or Hetger's. Each pair had cased the house, driving by the front as well as along the alley that ran behind. They were taking Lionel's vague warning seriously and going in during the day, which led to other difficulties, such as the handful of neighbors going in and out of their houses or in some cases, since this was a Welfare-dependent part of town, loitering on the corner. The hunters had to take the utmost care not to attract undue attention. A certain amount of haste would aid in that pursuit, they had decided. The later the afternoon progressed, the more likely that children would be coming home from school, as well as anyone who did have a day job coming home from work. With so much uncertainty about what the hunters might find inside, minimizing the number of potential bystanders had become a priority. Everyone had been in agreement about that, and the plan had fallen together quickly with a minimum of debate.

The other major obstacle, at least initially, was the fellow sitting on the front porch of the house that the hunters were about to enter. *Or assault*, Sands thought. The wasn't doing anything in particular. Just sitting. And watching.

"Keeping guard," Abraham had said after they'd all finished their separate drive-bys. "And he's one of them, sort of. A newbie."

"He's out in the day," Sands pointed out. "I didn't think they could do that." It didn't seem fair. Odds were stacked against the hunters enough as it was without having vampires that could prance around during the day.

"He's not one of them yet," Mike explained. "But he has some of the advantages. Maybe he's stronger than a normal person, or faster. We think it's a progression.

He's kind of a larval stage. He could become a vampire eventually. He's still human, at least partially."

Partially, but not completely. They could all see the inhumanity that marred his features like grotesque burns, as if something corrosive had bubbled its way to the surface from deep within him.

"Guess we found the right house," said Johnny.

"Partially human." Sands was trying to follow that thought to its logical conclusion. "So what does that mean if we have to... I mean, if he resists...?"

"Oh, he'll resist." Abraham seemed to relish the idea. "That's his job. That's what he's created to do. To protect her at all costs."

"He is spawn of the devil, but he might yet be salvaged," Cleo said.

All the talk of fire and brimstone didn't sit well with Julia. "We're here to get information, remember. Get inside, secure the place, find this Lisa Noble if we can. Talk to her."

"There might be more of them inside," Abraham said. "More newbies, or more of the real thing."

They had kept that in mind while devising the plan. While they were suiting up, they tried to reach Nathan in case he'd been able to find out anything new. No answer over the headset, nor via cell phone, which they tried, thinking the range might have been too far for the headset.

"He's probably exhausted," Julia said, and they all agreed. "He gave us plenty to go on before we left, anyway."

And so they proceeded, were proceeding now, Mike approaching the house, Cleo hanging back. Abraham and Johnny, unobserved, were already at the back door, if everything was going according to plan. Sands watched Mike from the car. Apparently Mike could conceal himself from monsters, hide in

plain sight, no cover necessary except the protection of his special edge—from monsters, but not from humans. So this pseudo-vampire presented something of a dilemma. That was why Mike was approaching alone: because he didn't know if the guy would see him or not. If not, he was in the house. If so, then—

"It sees him," Julia said quietly into her headset to keep Abraham and Johnny informed. "Mike's giving the signal to Cleo."

"Copy," came Abraham's voice over the air.

Mike being seen was not necessarily a problem. In fact, it could be a blessing. *Maybe this guy is more human than not*, Sands thought. *Maybe he'll be easier to deal with*. There was no emergency yet. All the lookout saw was Mike ambling toward the house, admiring the architecture and then gesturing for a woman back closer to the street to join him. Mike, Sands thought, was not an alarming person to see, with his haggard eyes and fleshy jowls. When Cleo caught up, the two moved up the sidewalk together, muttering to one another and looking at the house, taking no notice whatsoever of the man on the porch. Cleo could easily have been a wife or girlfriend. Sands was surprised to see her in that light—non-threatening, as if she could ever be mistaken for someone leading a normal life. She was so small, also—not a conceivable threat. As the two hunters got closer, the lookout, seeming perplexed, stood up and waited at the top of the steps with his arms crossed. Mike and Cleo drew closer, still talking to one another and nodding.

"No trespassing," the lookout said. He was youngish, maybe in his twenties, with a goatee, receding hair in the front, and a ponytail down to his butt.

Mike and Cleo both looked up as if they had just that instant noticed there was anyone on the porch at all. "Excuse me?" Mike said. His and Cleo's hidden headsets were set to transmit only. Sands and Julia heard every word in the car.

"No trespassing."

"Of course not. I completely understand," Mike said, completely cheerful. "We were just admiring your pediment."

"My what?"

Cleo kept moving right up the stairs onto the porch, not toward the door, studying intently the railing between the posts. She spoke with a thick accent that, Sands thought, was not obviously fake. "Do you know when this house was built? 1920s? Earlier, perhaps?"

"Your pediment," Mike said, moving closer as well, pointing the roof of the porch. "The gingerbreading, the woodwork. Marvelous craftsmanship, if a bit run down at the present."

"I think earlier than the 1920s," Cleo was saying. "Perhaps before the First World War. 1913, 1912 even."

The sentry was looking back and forth between the two. "I don't know nothing about any pedi... whatever. And you need to—"

"Is Lisa Noble here?" Mike asked out of the blue.

The lookout paused for a second. His eyes narrowed—

Cleo's blackjack caught him right at the base of the skull. Maybe he was stronger than a normal human, but he crumpled like a paper flower.

"Go!" Julia called into the headset. "We're in the front."

"Copy," Abraham responded. The crash of him breaking through the back door crackled over the air.

Almost simultaneously, Julia was concealing the headset, hopping out of the car, and making her way purposefully across the street without running. Sands followed suit. Mike and Cleo had timed their approach so that the fewest neighbors or loiterers were about, and Sands couldn't see that anybody was taking notice of the forced entry. In one coat pocket was his headset; in the other, he felt the intimidating weight of a 9 mm. Glock—maybe the same one that Clarence had taught him to shoot so many weeks ago.

He and Julia followed the front walk. There was little time to think now. Sands tried to concentrate on the details of the plan, tried to ignore his pounding heart and quick, shallow breathing. Stepping inside the house and putting his headset back on, Sands saw that the others had already hog-tied and gagged the sentry with duct tape. His eyes were open but unfocused. How hard had Cleo hit him? Her little body seemed to have generated enough force to knock him senseless.

"*This floor secure,*" Abraham said. Sands caught a glance of him through a doorway, but the words were spoken softly and heard only over the headset. The hunters hadn't announced their presence to their prey yet—they hoped.

Julia slipped the sawed-off shotgun from her backpack. Sands followed her cue and drew the Glock from his pocket. They started up the stairs. *Just stick to the plan, stick to the plan,* he kept telling himself. His hands were sweating and he had a sudden fear that he would drop the pistol. *Stick to the plan. Make*

sure upstairs is clear. If we run into anything, don't be a hero. Call for help.

In the car, he'd tried to remember all the cop shows and movies that he'd seen. He'd had pictures of sneaking up the stairs, covering all the angles. But the actual event took on a momentum of its own. He and Julia climbed rapidly, creaking wooden stairs be damned. Sands tried to watch every corner ahead and above, but he had to watch where he was going. *Is the safety on?* he suddenly wondered. Which position was it that was on, and which off? But he didn't have time to check. *God, I just hope I don't shoot Julia by accident.* Not so long ago, he'd thought that she or Clarence might shoot him—on purpose.

At the top of the stairs, Julia pointed to the rooms in the order they would check them. She took a deep breath. Sands did the same. His heart was beating so hard that he thought Julia might think he had the hiccups. And then they were going.

Through the first doorway. The room was a collection of dilapidated furniture and random trash. Sands was relieved—then realized how many places someone or something could hide. He tried not to get ahead of Julia as they quickly checked behind chairs, in the closet. He didn't want her trying to fire that shotgun over his shoulder.

The other rooms were much the same. They found no one. There was, however, a chain dangling from the ceiling—pull down stairs.

"Second floor clear," Julia said into the headset. "There's an attic."

"I'm coming to back you up," Abraham said. "Go ahead."

Almost immediately, Sands heard Abraham's footsteps coming up the stairs. The others would keep watch on the first floor and be ready to rush up if

needed. *If we find something*, Sands thought. *A vampire.* His mouth went dry.

Julia was gesturing at him. She wanted him to pull the chain while she covered the opening stairs with the shotgun. He pulled. The stairs came down and extended. Nothing flew out at the hunters except dust. Julia took a flashlight from her backpack and started up the steps that were only wide enough for one person at a time. By the time Sands started up, Abraham was at his side with a comforting hand on his shoulder and a thumbs up. Abraham, Sands saw, was carrying a tire iron. *I'm glad I have a gun*, Sands thought, but then he remembered how effective—how ineffective—the guns had been against the lurker, against the werewolves. He continued up the stairs close behind Julia but even less sure of himself than he'd been.

The attic was mostly bare. A quick look around, and he and Julia were back down. They and Abraham moved back downstairs. Mike, Cleo, and Johnny were watching the possible exits: front door, back door, basement door. Johnny, to Sands' shock, had what looked to be a blowtorch, and some sort of propane tank strapped on his back. The sentry was lying on the floor, straining unsuccessfully against the thick wraps of duct tape. His expression was lucid now, a combination of fury and fear.

The hunters gathered around the basement door. *This will be it*, Sands thought. *Unless the whole thing was a setup.*

Cleo was the first down the stairs. Mike was close behind her. Julia moved ahead and signaled for Sands to stay close. Someone had flicked on the light switch at the top of the stairs, so the hunters emerged into the dim light of a dank smelling basement, its walls and floor coated with years' worth of dust and mold.

Against the far wall was what could pass for a homemade coffin: a low worktable with plywood sides and a door for a lid.

Johnny stepped past Sands, blowtorch flaming to six-inch blue life. "Let's fry it."

Julia grabbed him roughly by the shoulder, and the force of her glare brought him up short. Keeping her shotgun leveled at the coffin, she took the silver flask from her backpack. Then she nodded to Mike and Cleo.

They edged forward to either end of the coffin. Sands tried to make sure he had a good grip on the Glock without accidentally firing it. He wondered again about the safety but couldn't pry his eyes from what was unfolding before him. On a silent count of three, Mike and Cleo flung the door-lid upward, back against the wall. Everyone flinched at the sudden clatter, took half a step back...

Nothing happened at first. Mike and Cleo took up positions next to each other, to Julia and Sands' left. Johnny was to the right. As one, the group leaned closer to the coffin.

A hand reached out from within, took hold of the side. The skin was so pale as almost to be blue. Several rings adorned the fingers, cheap rings, some greened with age. Then she sat up.

"Sweet Jesus," Johnny muttered.

Julia turned to make sure he didn't do anything drastic, while Lisa Noble gazed over the collection of hunters standing at her bedside.

She might have been beautiful in life, but all Sands could appreciate was the aura of unnaturalness, of inhumanity that radiated from her like a demonic nimbus. Her face was gaunt, the blue-white skin drawn tight, well past cover-girl thin. Purple veins stood out at her temples, on her neck and forearms.

She wore a sheer, threadbare shirt that hung against her slight body, narrow shoulders, small breasts, nipples as dark as her unhealthy lips. Her eyes were not fully alert. A fog of sleep lay over them but was clearing. Quickly.

Sands, having to force himself to look away, glanced around the room in search of boarded up windows that might let in sunlight—*Sun is supposed to be bad for these things, right?*—but he saw none.

“Lisa Noble,” Julia said. “We need to talk to you.”

The creature reacted to Julia’s voice, glared at her like any person might whose home had been invaded—but there was something different in those eyes, something bestial. There was death in those eyes. Sands had seen the lurker, and Braughton, and now this creature. To varying degrees, they could pass for human, but the eyes gave them away. He wondered how anyone could not see it.

Noble was watching the hunters closely, her eyes darting about, keeping tabs on all of them at once. Sands felt that he could almost read her thoughts—and they were instinctive, primal: What were her chances? How many of them could she kill?

“We just want to talk to you,” Julia said.

Noble cast a hateful glance at Johnny, at the hissing blue flame he held.

I wouldn’t believe Julia, Sands thought, feeling the weight of the gun in his hand. He had his own doubts. Even if this monster helped them, could they allow such a creature to exist, to kill innocent people?

“I’m trying to find an eight-and-a-half-year-old boy. His name is Timothy.”

The name elicited no response from Noble. She kept her eyes on Johnny’s blue flame, glancing away only briefly to make sure that none of the other hunters was moving closer.

"His name is Timothy," Julia said. "Do you know where he is?"

"Get out!" it said. The creature spoke with the underpinnings of what might have once been human speech, but now was as much growl. Sands could feel the tension of the predator in it, the animal, muscles straining, ready to lunge.

A sudden series of thudding sounds erupted behind the hunters.

"Just me," crackled Abraham's voice over the headset. "Keep your eye on the ball."

Despite the warning, Sands couldn't help looking back to see Abraham making his way down the stairs, dragging the sentry, still hog-tied, behind him. That was the thudding sound—the bound man's body banging each step along the way, and none too gently.

Noble saw this too, and a fiercer sense of desperation entered her bearing. She drew up taller and hissed, baring two slender, gleaming fangs for all to see.

"Lisa!" Julia cried with her own desperation. "Do you know where Timothy is? *Do you know where he is?*"

Abraham pushed through the hunters and jerked the lookout upright on his knees. "Not too talkative, huh? Maybe this will help." He ripped the tape from the lookout's mouth, then took the shotgun from Julia and forced it into the man's mouth.

The hunters were all talking at once: "Good God, Abraham!" "What are you—?" "Hold on! Don't—!"

Abraham pulled the trigger. The sentry's head exploded in a spray of blood and skull and hair. The completeness of the shocked silence that followed left the blast of the shotgun ringing in Sands' ears.

If there had been anything of humanity left in the vampire's manner, now it was gone. With a banshee scream, she lunged.

Just as suddenly, the basement was bathed in shifting light. Cleo grasped the thing and a sickening sizzle came from her palm. A radiant aura appeared around Mike and Cleo. The vampire, knocked off stride, lashed out at them but seemed unable to strike true. Sands raised his pistol. Deep in his gut, the churning of revulsion was tying him in knots, but he held it down, tried to control it. Angry at what he knew his own gift would do to him, he began firing, almost point blank. Shot after shot slammed into the delicate chest of the raging, ghostly pale woman. Shot after shot tore flesh, shattered bone. Shot after shot had no discernible effect—except to draw the beast's attention.

"No!" Julia yelled as the creature sprang toward her and Sands. Sparks exploded in the air. Noble staggered backward, stumbled. They were on her in an instant: Cleo, the fiery fist, not her own, striking again and again; Abraham, now wielding the tire iron, it too subsumed in a blazing sheath; Johnny closing with the blow torch.

Screams. Flashing light. The stench of burning flesh.

Sands stepped back, realized that step was not his first. His back pressed against the wall opposite the makeshift coffin and the sickening carnage. Hands trembling beyond control, he dropped the weapon he held. Sulfurous smoke drifted from the barrel, snaked around him, not allowing him to distance himself from the slaughter at hand.

As quickly as it had begun, it was over. Julia, tears streaming down her face, was screaming at them to stop, but they had already stopped. Mike looked like Sands felt, stunned, standing purely out of habit.

"We've got to get out of here," Abraham said. "Somebody could've heard, or this could still be a trap, so sharp eyes on the way back to the cars. Johnny, you've got ours solo."

Johnny gave him a thumbs up. The boy was beaming, the light from the blowtorch casting flickering shadows on him like a jack-o'-lantern. Mike seemed to snap out of his stupor. He and Cleo headed up the steps.

"Let's go." Abraham took Julia by the elbow, pulled her toward the steps. He snapped his fingers at Sands. "Pick up your gun. Let's go."

Sands obeyed on autopilot. He kneeled, picked up the Glock. He remembered all about the safety now, flicked it on. How strange that he couldn't remember before. Now he was on the stairs, Abraham pulling him along. The gun was gone, in his pocket.

Abraham stopped him and Julia just inside the front door. "Okay. Walk normal to the car. Don't look around. Just look at the car. I'm going to drive." He yanked off their headsets.

Out the door, along the front walk. Sands latched onto the sight of the car. They would be away from that hellish place in a few seconds. There wasn't a crowd gathering, but the street wasn't empty either.

"Keep walking," somebody said. Abraham. The car was very close now, but something was wrong... one of the front windows was broken. "What the hell?" Abraham muttered, but he didn't slow down.

"Hey, that guy!" Julia said, pointing. Sands saw a young man in a stocking cap with a multitude of face piercings scurrying off the other way. "I've seen him before," Julia said.

"Get in." Abraham didn't care. He wasn't waiting. He ignored the glass in the driver's seat,

started the engine. Sands and Julia jumped in, she in the front, he in the back.

"The bartender at the Lazarus Club," she said. "That's one of Braughton's guys."

"Then this would be for you." Abraham handed her a sealed envelope. "He could have just left it on the windshield."

Sands couldn't take it all in. He had concentrated so intently on getting to the car that the outside world now seemed a vast and ominous place. He looked back at the house and noticed what an increasing number of bystanders were now beginning to see. Smoke. Then an explosion blew out the windows, and quickly the old frame structure was engulfed in flames.

Abraham pulled away from the curb—rapidly, but not screeching tires or mowing down pedestrians. A moment later, all Sands could see of the scene was the smoke rising above the roofs of neighboring houses.

"It's from Braughton," Julia said, reading the note she'd taken from the envelope. "Says he thinks we did a good job, and he can find the kid for us." She lowered the letter to her lap. "Timothy." From her lips, the name was a ardent prayer.

"What else?" Sands asked.

Julia barely managed to raise the note again, to keep reading. "He wants us to meet." She paused, looked back over her shoulder at Sands. "He wants us to meet at midnight... at your house," she said. "Or we never see Timothy again."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Nathan felt a cool breeze on his face. Other than that, he just felt sick. He retched. Little more than stringy bile came up.

“Jeez, and I tried to fix up a nice place for you.” An unfamiliar voice.

Looking up through his swollen eye, Nathan saw a thin white man, maybe about his own age. Much of the stranger was covered by a trench coat, but not his face, not his eyes—bright blue, in the sparkle of bright sunshine almost violet.

“Nice shiner,” said the stranger.

Pulling himself to a sitting position, Nathan ignored the other man, concentrating instead on their surroundings: a rough wooden dock beneath him that reached out from a wooded shoreline, and a clear windswept lake that stretched as far as he could see. *Lake Michigan?* Nathan wondered. No. The color was wrong, the water too transparent. The sky, too, was... odd. It was painted with a beautiful sunset—but from one horizon to the other, not just in the west, whichever way that was. Wispy clouds floated across a red and purple expanse.

“Where am I?” Nathan asked. He wasn’t sure if he would be able to stand. He was weak, groggy.

“That’s a tricky question, Nathan.”

“So you know my name.”

The stranger chuckled. “Oh, I know a lot more than that. Sugardaddy, Bad Mofo. One thing to keep in mind,” the stranger said, “when choosing a password, never use something as obvious as the maiden name of your maternal cousin, twice removed.” He seemed very pleased with himself.

Nathan looked up with dawning realization. “Muckraker.”

"You can call me Matthew. That's fairly accurate for our purposes."

"What are you talking about?"

"You asked where you are," Matthew said. "Let's tackle that one first. Have you ever tried out a virtual reality system? Goggles, gloves, the whole bit?" Nathan shook his head. Matthew seemed disappointed. "No? Hm. I thought everybody had done that. Well, you understand the concept, yes? Good. Well, what you are experiencing right now is similar to that, except instead of your brain receiving that doctored stimuli, you are actually within the experience itself."

Nathan stared at him blankly.

"You're in the system," Matthew tried again enthusiastically. He appeared concerned by Nathan's lack of similar enthusiasm.

"What system?"

"The system. The Digital Web. You've skirted it for years without knowing it was here. This is a nice little sector that I set up just for you. You see, we need to talk, and it just wasn't happening, so I thought I'd have you all to myself for a little while."

"The Digital Web. The Internet?"

Matthew hemmed and hawed for a moment. "Well, sort of."

"You're saying that I'm in my computer."

"Not just *your* computer. Computers. We could go practically anywhere we want. Alice had her little pills. We've got control-alt-delete. You've got mail? You *are* mail!"

"You are crazy."

The wide grin faded from Matthew's face. "Look, I didn't bring you here to argue, okay? Believe what

you like. I'll send you back when we're done. We need to talk about SynSol."

"Synthetic Solutions."

"Bingo."

I'm hallucinating, Nathan thought. The blow to my head. I passed out. I'm probably drooling on my keyboard right now, or maybe I made it back to my cot.

"You got the files I sent you," Matthew said. "It sounded like you had some trouble with them. Hey, I'm sorry about that. Occupational hazard. But you got it worked out, right?"

"Sort of." Even a hallucination could make Nathan angry, especially if it claimed, yet disclaimed, responsibility for his cataclysmic computer crash. "It was connected to the Iron Rapids Chamber of Commerce."

"That's right. SynSol isn't what it seems. It's not some philanthropic, prosthetics manufacturer." Matthew was speaking very quickly now, his excitement growing with each word. "It's a front for something far more devious, sinister. And it has its hooks into the CoC, so it can help get what it wants."

Nathan remembered the fragments of the files he'd recovered. "Zoning changes, tax breaks, that kind of thing. But why bother with the chamber. Why not buy off the city council?"

"Too direct," Matthew said, shaking his head. "Not their style. CoC was going to help convince prominent citizens and industrialists who, in turn, were going to put pressure on the city council. If it got that far, it would be a done deal for SynSol. Then they'd start churning out... well, let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"What the hell do you want *me* to do about it?" Nathan asked.

Matthew was incredibly heartened that Nathan seemed to be taking this seriously, that he might have moved beyond his skepticism. "Spread the word. You started poking around. I got you the proof. It's important to the Tech—to SynSol that they do this all quietly, under the table."

"You could do it just as well as I could."

"You're local. Grass roots. That's what we need," Matthew insisted. "Newspaper articles, exposés on the local news, rallies in the city square."

"I'm no politician."

"But you can find people who can create that kind of stir, just like I found you. You can feed them that information, the truth, just like I fed it to you. Now that you know what's going on here, you can't turn your back on it. That's not you. I can tell."

"You don't know anything about me, man."

"I know a lot more than you think I—" Matthew stopped mid-sentence. He whipped around and stared intently out over the endless lake.

"What is it?" Nathan asked.

"Time to go, that's what. They tracked me. I didn't think they'd be able to do that."

"They who?"

Matthew didn't answer, but Nathan could hear, in the distance at first but growing steadily closer, the sound of an engine—an outboard motor. He looked in the direction that Matthew was staring and saw a speedboat where before there had been only the expanse of water.

"They them," Matthew said.

As Nathan watched and the boat drew closer, he could make out two figures on the boat. Each wore

black sunglasses, black jacket and white shirt, and a black tie that flapped behind him over his shoulder. Sensing Matthew's apprehension, Nathan slipped into his second sight and this strange world around him became suddenly... even stranger: insubstantial, unstable. *It's just thousand of pixels*, he realized. Everything. Water, sky, boat, dock, the two antagonists. He looked to Matthew and saw with shock that he too was two-dimensional!

Matthew grinned, but his smile was uneven now, a collection of hundreds upon hundreds of colored squares. "Just one second," he said. He pulled a small notepad from his pocket and a blue pencil from behind his ear. Hurriedly he jotted a few notes.

The water, calm and inviting until then, grew instantly choppy. Though he couldn't have with his normal vision, Nathan sensed immediately the ordering properties of the pen and paper. They had not so much transformed the lake into a churning cauldron as they had *redefined* the lake. The distinction was obvious to Nathan. *Like computer code!* With his second sight, he was seeing the underlying definitions of reality. *Of this reality.* The thought struck him cold. Could Matthew have been telling the truth about where they were?

"This would be a good time for you to leave," Matthew said, his blocky smile no longer so confident, his indigo pixels trained on the rapidly approaching boat. "Follow the path at the end of the dock. On the other side of the trees is a door."

Nathan glanced at the path, suddenly visible on the shore, and then back at the boat, which seemed to have slowed—perhaps because of the enormous turret that was rising from the engine casing toward the rear.

"Oh, hell," Matthew muttered. He began scribbling furiously on his notepad.

Nathan looked down at his hand. He was the only thing he could see that was not pixilated in this strange place. He was still solid. *I'm really here*, he realized. Nothing else was three-dimensional, but he was. He remembered what he'd thought was a horrible dream: his monitor opening, swallowing the transformed data that had been his body. *It happened*, he thought. *Or else this is all part of the same, sick dream.*

Beyond the dock, a great whirlpool had opened beneath the speedboat, and none too soon. The cannon newly extended from the raised turret opened fire. The sudden motion of the current threw off its aim, and a considerable chunk of shoreline exploded. Nathan threw himself against the worn hardwood of the dock. Was it not quite so hard now, not as solid? Or was that his mind, his perception, playing tricks on him?

"You still here?" Matthew asked, noticing Nathan. "I thought I told you to get out of here!"

More blasts fired from the canon as the whirlpool spun the boat round and round with increasing momentum.

"But these are all just pixels!" Nathan cried, though he continued to flinch and cower from the flak exploding all about. "*You're just pixels!*"

"Those pixels out there," Matthew shouted, "*will—kick—your—ass!*"

At that very instant, a screeching blast from the canon ripped Matthew's head off. Nathan watched in horror as pixels tinkled to the dock, leaving little more than a trench-coat-colored haze where his host had been standing.

"I'll-never-talk-back-to-pixels, I'll-never-talk-back-to-pixels," Nathan said over and over as he clambered to his feet and ran in earnest. But the world was breaking down all around him. The dock,

shoreline, lake—now they lost not only resolution but form as well. It was as if the whirlpool had spread from the lake to encompass everything, including Nathan. He couldn't see his hand before his face. His body was not so definite as it had been. Maybe he wasn't more than pixels after all, he thought, as he spun and spun and spun....

Nathan stumbled onto the hotel room floor.

Hotel room. He glanced around, panicked, not understanding anything. Matthew was slouched in a chair by a laptop, his head lolled back, eyes staring vacantly.

"Matthew!" Nathan crawled toward him, tugged on his foot. He was solid, three-dimensional. They both were. Matthew's head fell to the side. His eyes focused on Nathan, but with difficulty. "Matthew, are you all right?"

Muckraker was pale and drenched with sweat. "You've got to get out of here. If they traced us as far as that sector..."

"You need a doctor," Nathan said, wondering if the same wasn't true for him. Slowly, the room stopped spinning. Gravity began to reassert itself. Though Matthew was flesh and blood now, brief bursts of electricity, like sparks of static, flashed around him and his computer.

Matthew checked a graphic on his monitor. His voice was weak. He could barely raise it above a whisper. "They're tracking us. They've zeroed in. I've set up a program... but you've got to go."

"Come with me," Nathan urged him.

Matthew shook his head. "No time. Listen. They're based out of the CoC computer system. Trash that and..." he shrugged, "well, we'll see. Can you do that?"

Nathan nodded. He felt like he was making a promise to a dying man.

"Go," Matthew said. "Go."

Nathan had made it to the door when the mirror shattered, exploding into the room—and the two black-clad men burst into the room *through* it, along with the countless fragments of glass.

One of them went straight for Matthew. The other turned to Nathan....

With a smile on his face, Matthew clicked his mouse. A deafening buzz sprang up in the room. At the same time, a crackling blue haze enveloped Matthew and both of the assailants. All three men went stiff, agonized expressions contorting their faces. Nathan turned the doorknob, pulled at the door, but whatever the haze was, it was producing resistance, filling the room with what felt like a magnetic force, and the door wouldn't budge.

The buzz rapidly rose to a high-pitched hum. Matthew slumped over his computer. The two men in black, backs arched, mouths open in silent screams, dropped to their knees. Suddenly the haze flashed, blinding Nathan.

When he opened his eyes, the last of the haze was disappearing through the laptop's monitor. A moment later Nathan realized that the hum was silent—and he was alone. With a final electrical pop, the screen of the laptop went dark.

Nathan stood there by the door for a long time, staring across the room. Finally he summoned the will to try the door again. This time it opened. He took a last, lingering look at the darkened laptop, at the chair where Matthew had been sitting, at the shattered mirror that had become a portal from some bizarre pixilated world—and then he turned and ran.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The more things changed...

Evan Dunkirk checked the clock. He didn't need to leave his office at the Chamber of Commerce for another ten or fifteen minutes. Double-checking his presentation notes and materials took only two or three minutes, which left him several more to attend to his ever-growing paperclip chain. It was nearly three yards long now, a veritable python of a paperclip chain. Evan didn't normally have to work this late into the evening, but when Isaac Gordon's personal assistant called and said the old man of Iron Rapids was willing to hear Dunkirk's pitch but the meeting would have to be late... well, one simply didn't quibble with Isaac Gordon. Especially if that one had been trying to arrange a meeting for months.

Everything had been moving along so smoothly a few short months ago. Gordon had seemed increasingly receptive to the SynSol proposals. It was when that deadwood Adrian Cross had been fired from the chamber that events had gotten out of hand. He'd thrown a fit in the office—no recommendation letter for that fellow—and then his replacement had turned up *dead* a few days later. The police were interested, of course. They had asked a lot of questions, interrogated Cross, from what Evan had heard. But it seemed that nothing had come of all the fuss. The replacement, it turned out, had slipped and hit his head on his desk, broke his neck. Bad bit of luck, that. Cross had moved on, gotten a job at IRM, if Evan remembered correctly. *If Old Man Gordon hadn't been Cross's father-in-law, Adrian never would have gotten a job here in the first place*, Evan thought. It was true, and fairly grating, that since Cross's departure, Gordon, an influential business leader and former president of the CoC—not to

mention chairman of the board of Iron Rapids Manufacturing—had turned a cold shoulder to the chamber and to suggestions that Synthetic Solutions would greatly benefit the city by establishing a major laboratory and factory.

Evan had persevered, however. For months. He'd called and written and passed along to the public in general and Gordon in particular every piece of propoganda—public relations material, rather—that SynSol had made available to him.

Today was his reward. Gordon's secretary had called that morning. Gordon was willing to see Evan. *Of course he is*, Dunkirk thought, as he attached another paper clip to the chain. *I've worked hard and built my case*. In addition to that, he had emailed his contact at SynSol with the news about the meeting, and had been gratified with the prompt deposit of \$25,000 in his bank account. *Nice doing business with you*. If and when he convinced Gordon to throw his weight behind the SynSol proposals, the payoff would be considerably larger.

Checking the clock again, Evan decided it was time. Adding one final paper clip, he collected his briefcase along with the video presentation that SynSol had provided.

"This is my lucky day," Evan said. He was whistling as he walked out of the office.

After the first half hour of his presentation, Dunkirk decided to ditch the last half of his notes. Isaac Gordon had been patient enough, and always polite, but hardly enthusiastic. The old man was frail, and despite the fact that he had scheduled the meeting, the hour seemed too late for him to concentrate fully. Evan had already showed him the revised economic impact estimates, as well as the

community outreach initiatives that would make SynSol an integral part of the city. The research teasers could wait for another time.

The drawing room in which the two men were meeting was the epitome of luxurious elegance, all mahogany and velvet, shelves of leather-bound books, and actual crystal chandelier and fixtures. At Evan's request, Gordon's secretary had provided a television with an integrated VCR, and so it was that he moved to the finale of his presentation.

"You have been incredibly patient, Mr. Gordon. With your permission, I would like to conclude with a brief video presentation detailing the revolutionary new health incentives that SynSol provides for its employees."

"Please proceed," Gordon said in his thick, gravelly voice, the product, no doubt, of years of bourbon and cigars.

Evan slipped in the videocassette and pressed PLAY. He stepped back and settled again into the plush chair that probably cost as much as a whole year's payments on his car. Pleasant music began to play and was soon joined by a scene of a cheerful family strolling in a public park. "*At Synthetic Solutions, we know that healthy families and happy employees go hand in hand,*" began the voice-over by someone sounding very much like James Earl Jones. Evan kept an eye on the old man to make sure he wasn't nodding off. The lights were still on for that very reason.

At first when the scene on the screen caught, and then disappeared altogether, Evan was worried. What was going wrong now? Some technical glitch was going to ruin all of his chances. He was sure that he had previewed the entire video, and he didn't remember any problems. He started to get up, but then he noticed the strange patterns that began to flash across the

screen, gone almost as quickly as they appeared: numbers, words, pictures; there and gone in rapid, quick-fire succession. They were unusually... calming. Evan settled back into his seat. Nor did Isaac Gordon seem to mind this shift in the video presentation. In fact, the old man was more intent than he had been upon anything that Evan had said all night, staring at the screen with rapt, wide-eyed attention.

A moment more and Evan failed to notice the aging industrialist, forgot about him completely. The images on the screen and soothing words emanating from the speakers expanded to fill his consciousness. He felt totally at ease. Of course SynSol would be an unmitigated boon to the failing economy of Iron Rapids. Of course it would improve the quality of life for thousands of employees as well as the countless numbers of individuals all over the world who would benefit from its products and scientific advances. Of course no responsible citizen would stand in the way of such unadulterated progress. How could Evan have ever doubted that Isaac Gordon would do the right thing and bring the full weight of his influence to bear in support of the company? Secure in the absolute knowledge of his impending success, Evan settled into the numbing bliss of contentment. *This is my lucky day*, he thought.

Only vaguely did he notice one of the doors to the drawing room opening. Even when the two figures entered, the comforting images on the screen held his attention. Not until a long, thin finger turned off the television did Evan stir, and then he was mostly perplexed. A different image, jarring, like a steel trap, took hold of his mind. Two eyes, their gaze seizing him, probing, illuminating for him a different course—one that was, of course, completely and totally reasonable, desirable. How could he have ever thought differently? *This is my lucky day*.

Laurence Maxwell finished with the weak-willed kine and sent him on his way. "This is my lucky day," the man muttered as he excused himself from the drawing room and shuffled toward the exit of the grand estate.

"This will be easy enough to undo, I believe," said the second Kindred.

If Isaac Gordon was frail, then David Ellsworth was skeletal. His hunched, gnarled figure was a stark contrast to his finely woven suit and the plush surroundings of this home. Ellsworth did not travel often. Only a direct request from Prince Adrock's sheriff had proven sufficient to stir him. Perhaps Maxwell could have handled the situation by himself, but Ellsworth had a longstanding connection with the octogenarian Gordon—had maintained a personal interest in several generations of the Gordons, for that matter.

Ellsworth held Gordon's gaze, spoke quietly to the kine of how the industrialist would decide against support for Synthetic Solutions. In fact, perhaps the best alternative for Iron Rapids would be for Gordon to underwrite a competing firm, perhaps establish a scientific research house himself....

In the end, they left Gordon asleep in his chair. The secretary would check in on him shortly and see that he got to bed. Maxwell thanked the ever-gracious elder Kindred. Their work here was done. All that remained, Maxwell thought, was for Lionel to complete his business.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"She wasn't going to tell you *nothing*," Johnny insisted, snarling and sputtering. "So why don't you get the hell off his back?"

Julia didn't back down. She planted her hands on her hips, pressed her face to within inches of his. "You don't know what she might have told us! I don't think I'd have been inclined to talk *after* somebody splattered my boyfriend's brains all over the wall!"

The office space that they had taken up as their headquarters was not that large, but Sands felt that he was miles away. He heard the argument raging as it had been ever since they'd gotten back from Saginaw. He couldn't get out of his mind, though, the note from Braughton, the fact that the vampire wanted to meet them at Sands' home—what *had been* his home. Promise or no promise, Braughton seemed determined to rub Sands' nose in his inability to protect his own wife. *He doesn't have to keep the promise*, Sands thought. *For us to kill Lisa Noble—that might have been all he wanted. He could kill Faye now. Melanie. All of us.*

Sands had wanted to rush right over to the house, but he hadn't. He'd contented himself with calling. Faye had answered, had sounded all right. He'd called Melanie too. Same there. Deciding what to do next was the immediate problem. That was part of the ongoing argument.

"It was a trap," Abraham said. "A trap. Maybe not designed to get us, and maybe not to lure us away from here so he could get the women, 'cause, hell, he can get them whenever he wants, but he had a reason for wanting us to take down that chick, and it wasn't just for our best interests. Where the hell is Nathan? Anybody? Maybe that thing came here and dragged him away."

Nathan was gone. He hadn't left a note. He hadn't taken his keys, yet the door had been locked when they returned.

"Maybe Braughton thought we'd actually *talk* to her," Julia said. "Imagine that. Not decapitate her partner and then hack her to mincemeat."

"She wasn't going to tell you nothing!" Johnny yelled.

Julia was flabbergasted. "So you kill everyone and burn down the house?"

"Best way to cover up evidence," Johnny said.

"If you don't kill everything that walks, you don't need to cover up evidence!"

Mike and Cleo were sitting nearby. They both seemed shell-shocked, glassy-eyed. "The vampire had to die," Cleo said, nodding slowly. She stopped. "But the man..."

"He might have been fine once we destroyed the vampire," Mike suggested. "Did you ever stop to think of that?"

Abraham wasn't buying. "He was a thug. Trash. If he wasn't hanging out with a bloodsucker, he'd be running a gang, selling drugs. Vampires don't hire your Mother Teresa crowd for muscle."

"So now you're judging every human you come across?" Mike was horrified. "Who lives and who dies? That's what you do? That's what *we* do?"

"He was *trash*, man." Johnny was agitated, stalking around the room until he could no longer contain himself and then blurting something out. "Trash. We did the world a favor busting his head."

"He was *human*," Mike said. "We might have been able to help him. Maybe not. But just to kill him out of hand..."

"Yeah, yeah. Makes us just like them. Right. Whatever. Heard it all before." Abraham seemed the least shaken of the whole bunch, the least angry. The others might have been attempting to work out their

boundaries, but he knew where he stood. He had no problem with dispassionately dispensing his particular brand of justice.

Sands heard all of the words, the ebb and flow of the debate, the tempers flaring. In a way, he was surprised by his own lack of revulsion at what had happened. Maybe he was still in shock: seeing a shotgun stuffed into a man's mouth and fired; seeing what once had been a young woman, now dead, a walking, animate, bloodsucking corpse. Even *that* hacked to pieces was gruesome. The very first thing that each hunter, even Johnny, had done upon returning was wash the blood and tiny bits of fleshy matter from their hands, their faces.

Maybe in an hour Sands would fall into a quivering heap. Maybe in a day or a week. Post traumatic stress syndrome, or something like that. He didn't know. All he knew was that a vampire was going to be at his home in a few hours. He had to get Faye away from there, had to make sure that she was never in danger again.

"I can't see it," Mike was saying. "I can't be a part of things. If that's how we're going to operate—"

"You can operate however the hell you want to operate," Abraham said. "I'm out of here. It's an ugly business. If you can't handle it..." He started collecting his gear, stuffing things into sacks. Johnny took the cue and did likewise, muttering and cursing all the while.

Julia stood right behind Abraham. "I can see why you move around pretty often. How many states are you wanted in? How many hunters have told you this same thing? That you're out of control. That you've lost sight of what it is we're supposed to do."

Abraham whirled to face her, opened his mouth, but a banging at the back door cut him off. Everyone froze. For practically the first time since they'd gotten

back, the arguing stopped. As Cleo moved toward the door, a voice called from the other side: "It's me. Nathan."

She opened the door and Nathan staggered in. Like the others, Sands hurried over to help him, to ease him to a seat before he collapsed. Nathan looked from one of them to another—looked hard at each of their faces. Finally he smiled with obvious relief. He sighed, and all the air seemed to drain out of him. "Thank God you're real."

Next he struggled to his feet and pushed his way past them, moved on unsteady legs to his computer. He fiddled with the mouse and the keyboard for a few seconds and seemed satisfied. "Thank God."

"Are you okay?" Julia asked. "Where have you been? We were afraid..."

"I was..." Nathan shook his head, tried again but stopped before the first word was out. "I don't think I can explain. Not right now." He swooned, and they barely caught him before his face smashed into the desk.

Julia gave him a quick once over. "Get him to the cot. I can't see that he's hurt, but he's exhausted."

"I met him finally," Nathan was saying to no one and everyone. "My Internet contact. I met him. They've got him. We have to help."

"What are you talking about?"

"Muckraker. I met Muckraker. Matthew."

"The guy who sent you the corrupted files?" Abraham asked.

Nathan nodded. "It's a set-up, a front. The whole thing is run through the Chamber of Commerce."

Johnny snickered. "Chamber of Commerce, huh? You sure it's not the Ruritans, or maybe the Lions Club?" Abraham smacked him on the back of the head.

"We've got to take out the chamber computer system," Nathan said. "Destroy their computers. That

might do the trick, might help....” He quickly became incoherent, the exhaustion taking over. The hunters gently moved him to a cot and laid him out so that he could rest.

For a long moment they stood in silence, watching him. Then the group broke apart. Abraham resumed his packing. Johnny helped, still grumbling, if not as vociferously. Mike seemed resigned to the pair leaving, but Cleo tried to smooth things over. Abraham was having none of it, however. He answered her curtly if at all.

Sands watched it all with a growing detachment, unable to get worked up about anything. He was relieved that Nathan seemed to be all right. As for Abraham and Johnny leaving, he had mixed feelings: anxious about the utility and knowledge that would be lost, but also agreeing with Mike that Abraham had stepped over some barely discernible, shifting line. Sands felt all this in an abstract, almost intellectual way, but it held no immediacy for him. *Is this what it feels like to be dead?* he wondered. *Separate from everything. Apart.* Or were all of the dead consumed by bloodlust, hatred, a need for vengeance?

His thoughts turned to Faye, to the approaching confrontation with Braughton. He didn't realize that Julia was beside him until she put her hand on his shoulder.

“We should go soon,” she said.

Sands nodded. “I need to talk to Faye.” It might be the last time that he did.

Nathan wasn't sure how long he'd been unconscious. It didn't feel like that long. *Yeah, and before I didn't feel like I was inside a computer,* he thought. Sitting up on the cot was a struggle. He hadn't been sure that he would make it from the Lester Hotel to here.

And then suddenly the memory of what had happened inside that hotel room made his head spin. "Trash the CoC computers."

"Say again?" The room slowly took on clearer focus. Abraham was standing not far away, watching Nathan and appearing concerned.

"He said to destroy the chamber of commerce computer network." Nathan tried to remember exactly what Matthew had said—but it had all happened so fast, and Matthew had seemed hurt. *But those were pixels that got their head blown off*, Nathan thought. He left that alone. No way was he going to figure out all of that right now. He glanced at his watch. Good. He hadn't been unconscious for that long after all. A sense of urgency gripped him. Muckraker hadn't said that much. He hadn't had time to say much, but Nathan still felt the underlying urgency. "Trash the computers. I think it might be the only way to save him."

"The Chamber of Commerce computers?" Abraham asked.

Nathan nodded. He didn't try to explain. How could he, when he didn't understand himself what was going on? *Go with instinct*, he told himself. *The heralds didn't pick no dummy*. Looking back to Abraham, Nathan realized that he and Johnny were the only other hunters here. "Where'd everybody go?"

Abraham shrugged, then shook his head. "They think they can sleep with the devil without getting fucked." He paused, then: "You need to take care of those computers right away?"

Nathan wasn't sure about the devil business, but he nodded. Muckraker seemed to know what he was talking about. If taking out the computers could somehow help...

"You're in luck," Abraham said. "Johnny and I were just going for a ride, and we got time for a quick detour."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

They took up positions in the shadows around the house: Sands and Julia at the front corners, Mike and Cleo in the back. *Let the bastard come to me*, Sands thought, feeling in his pocket the note the vampire had sent. He had struggled with the decision of whether he should hustle Faye out of the house or let her sleep undisturbed—hopefully. In the end, he'd decided that the vampire had chosen this place to meet in order to rattle him, to rattle all of the hunters, to point out in no uncertain terms how vulnerable they and their loved ones were. *As if threatening them before hadn't proved that point*, Sands thought. *As if attacking Nathan hadn't proved it.*

If he was going to be faithful to this new calling, Sands decided, to this life that he had not chosen but that had chosen him, he couldn't allow himself to be intimidated, distracted. He had indulged himself for too many years. That had to come to an end. And so Faye slept, oblivious, like so many people, to the life and death decisions made just beyond her window.

The other hunters had deferred to him, Sands realized. They'd not tried to convince him to spirit Faye off to safety. Did they think that he'd made the right call, or were they simply unwilling to undertake responsibility for decisions regarding her welfare? He wasn't sure. Julia had said before that at some point they would have to move beyond playing bodyguard. Abraham had said it too, that they would have to go after the evil at its source. But Abraham was gone now, and Johnny with him. Theirs was a harsher world, a world of contrast, of black and white. Sands had lived too long in the gray areas, had used them for cover. That would have to change, but for now, the other hunters humored him. He checked in with them briefly over the headset then glanced at his watch: 12:15 AM.

"Our friend isn't very punctual," came Mike's voice over the air.

Sands started to reply but stopped when he saw headlights approaching from the other end of the block. "Car coming," he said quietly. The headlights went dark two houses away, but the car kept coming. It eased to a stop before Sands' house. The door opened, and Lionel Braughton climbed out. Sands wasn't sure what he had been expecting—the vampire to materialize out of thin air? fly as a bat onto the front sidewalk and then take human form?—but he wasn't expecting Braughton to drive casually and calmly into the picture. The roguish, dark-haired creature took a long moment to stare at Sands, *directly at him* in his hiding place, and then at Julia. Then Braughton smiled.

"Nice place," the creature said. "You going to invite me in, or do you plan to hide in the shrubbery all night?"

Sands and Julia each stepped forward carefully. They had been watching from unobtrusive locations, *not* crouched in the shrubbery, but Braughton's snide comment was like a pinprick to the center of Sands' palm nonetheless.

"*Holding position,*" Mike's voice said into Sands' ear. They couldn't assume that Braughton didn't have friends or flunkies. He could be a diversion, so that others could get to Faye.

Hell, he could have kidnapped her already, Sands thought suddenly. *I should have checked on her first, should have gone in, even if it meant telling her everything.*

Struggling with self-doubt, Sands moved forward, as Julia was doing, driven by a determination that would allow no less. Braughton, too, was walking away from his car, closer to the house. All three stopped on the sidewalk, Sands and Julia side by side about

five yards from the vampire. She was unarmed, but Sands had the Glock in his coat pocket and his baseball bat at his side.

"How was the trip to Saginaw?" Braughton asked. "I heard there was a little house fire."

"Why did you want to meet here?" Sands asked.

"I wanted a place we both knew. You know. So nobody got lost."

He just can't resist, Sands thought. *He thinks he's got all the cards*. What else, Sands wondered, might the monster be unable to resist? No matter what it might have promised. "You said you'd stay away from her."

Braughton feigned confusion. "But I'm not near her, Douglas." He directed a lascivious glance at Julia. "So, is this the new one? She's not as young as most of yours, is she, Doug? I guess it's more convenient if your squeeze is old enough to drive."

Sands wasn't going to be baited. "Let's get one thing straight," he said. "If you ever so much as touch Faye—or Melanie—again, I will hunt you down and kill you." The words rang in his mind. Threatening someone's life, even this thing that was already dead, struck a discordant note. But what choice did he have? What choice had this thing left him?

Braughton seemed vaguely amused by the whole conversation, and that made Sands angrier still.

"One other thing," Sands said. "We're not the only ones who know what you are, who can see you for what you are."

"Oh, I know," Braughton said. "You've got your friends from Saginaw. I've got pictures. Would you like to see them? And there's that nice fellow I interrupted at his email the other night. How's he doing, by the way?" Lionel seemed very pleased with himself.

"That's not what I'm talking about," Sands said. "You probably think you can kill the handful of us

and be done with it, but there are more. And we're ready to spread your name and face all over the country, all over the world if it comes to that. Anything happens to us, you won't have a moment of peace from now till doomsday."

That did the trick, Sands was pleased to see. Even if just for a moment, a hint of doubt crossed Braughton's face. *He wonders if I'm bluffing*, Sands thought. He didn't *think* that he was. Nathan and the others had talked about the Internet, about a loose-knit community of hunters. Surely some of them would carry on the crusade if the worst happened to Sands, Julia, the others.

"What do you want?" Julia demanded of Braughton. She was impatient with the male rite of intimidation that was playing out before her. She had other, more urgent business. "You know something about Timothy."

Braughton shook his head, made a sad face, tsked at them. "First Dougie threatens me, now you want me to do you favors. Which is it going to be?" He looked back and forth from Sands to Julia. "Now, I don't *want* to hurt anybody. I want us all to be friends. You know, you scratch my back, and so on."

"Do you know anything about Timothy?" Julia demanded again.

"You see? That's what I'm talking about. I might be able—"

"No *mights*," Sands broke in. "No *maybes* and *ifs*. If you don't know something, something real, then we've got nothing else to say to you."

Braughton looked disappointed. He cast a sidelong glance at Julia. "Are you going to let him talk like that to me? He's going to get your little boy killed."

Julia tensed at the mention of her son, at the suggestion that he was still alive, but she saw the

obvious wedge the monster was trying to drive between herself and Sands. "Tell us what you know, or go away," she said with a vehemence that practically sizzled in the air.

The vampire sighed. "I do know where your kid is," he said, quickly raising a finger to forestall any questions. "But I do need some assurances of my own."

"What?" Julia's teeth were clenched.

"Well, I've already agreed to leave your friends alone. Hell, I'll promise to leave you guys alone too. Like you said, not worth my time killing you if you've got buddies all over the world, right? So there. I'd like the same consideration—from you, your friends. I mean, Douglas here tries to bust my skull for no reason, and you, *you* and your friends wanted to roast me in my own establishment. You'll notice that I'm none worse for wear, but I don't need the aggravation. Ixnay on doing me in. Got it?"

Sands and Julia both hesitated. He knew it had to be harder for her. The prospect of finding out something that might lead to Timothy... even if it meant dealing with the devil. *Dealing is one thing*, Sand thought. After all, he'd made his own deal to try to protect Faye and Melanie. *But a permanent truce, a cease-fire?*

"Even after I help you find your kid," Lionel prompted, "even beyond guaranteeing the safety of your family, there's stuff I can do for you. I find out about these bad folks every now and then. Like the chick you fried in Saginaw. Bad character. Think of all the people, innocent people, you saved from her."

"If you gave us her," Sands said, "it was because you wanted to, for whatever twisted reason you had."

"Twisted?" Braughton clasped a hand over his heart. "Julia, he wounds me, and here all I want is to help you."

"Save it," Julia said.

The glint in the vampire's eye told Sands what he needed to know: None of the three were operating under false pretenses, however much Braughton might ape sincerity. The monster wasn't delusional, he was merely toying with them, making light with his mockery of the momentous decision forced upon them. Sands felt the painful churning beginning in his stomach, the revulsion that had saved his life, that now he was prepared to defy by again bargaining with this beast. And what else could he expect of Julia, who lived so that she might save her Timothy? Even so, she hesitated. She, too, had no illusions about this creature standing before them and appearing so human. She looked to Sands. He nodded, almost imperceptibly—but the vampire saw. Braughton smiled a sly grin that would put any used car salesman to shame.

"If you can help us find Timothy," Julia said.

"If?" Braughton said. "You mean *when*. And *when* is *now*."

Sands and Julia both stared, uncomprehending, for a moment.

"What? Are you deaf?" Braughton said. "The kid's in the car."

Sands and Julia stood frozen. He was unwilling to let his guard down while the monster was nearby. Julia was caught upon a precipice between hope and cruelty, truth and inhuman joke, actualization of her most ardent dream and trap.

"Come to think of it, I don't like the car that much," Braughton said. "You can have it too."

Julia fixed him with a stare that promised all the pain of the world if he was lying. Then she took the first step. And another. The parked car drew her closer, slowly, steadily, as if by the force of gravity.

Sands watched her. He didn't realize at first that his attention had wandered from Braughton—

But Braughton was gone.

Sands' heart skipped a beat. He spun, trying to look every direction at once. "He's gone!" he said into the mouthpiece of the headset. "Keep your eyes open."

Julia didn't seem to hear him. She kept moving toward the car.

"Julia, wait!" He was looking all around, trying to catch any sign of Braughton. "It might be a trap." *But he could have killed me just then*, Sands realized. Julia had told them how fast the monster was. Sands had seen it firsthand—and now his mind filled with images from the past of what the lurker had done to Jason, what Braughton could have done to them.

Julia's half-strangled cry horrified Sands, perhaps more than his memories of Jason's death. She was throwing open the car door, pulling something from the back seat—a body, a small boy.

"Dear God, Timothy," she was crying. "Dear God. Dear God."

As Sands rushed to her side, she was alternately checking for any sign of response—pulse, opening one eye and then the other—and cradling her boy to her body. All the while sobbing, trembling with joy, relief, anger. "Timothy. Timothy." She whispered words of love and encouragement in his ear, smoothed his hair with her fingers, kissed his forehead, his cheeks, clutched him tightly against her.

The child was alive, Sands could see, but staring blankly, in no way acknowledging the people around him or showing that he recognized his mother.

From across the street, Lionel observed the tearful reunion and felt nothing. *That kid was more trouble*

than he was worth, he thought. *I don't know what I was thinking to hold on to him.* But maybe something productive would come from it after all. Sure these mortal yahoos would be pissed for a while that the kid wasn't as good as knew, but he was damaged goods before Lionel had gotten his hands on him. God, *it'll take weeks of explaining before that sinks into their thick heads.* In the long run, though, they would remember that he'd gotten the kid back for them. That would be worth something.

Laurence will be happy, Lionel thought. Maxwell wanted his claws in these kine. They could be used. *Hell, Lisa Noble was small fish.* A nobody that nobody would miss or mourn. Chances were that eventually Maxwell and Lionel would need somebody else taken down. *And maybe I won't always get stuck with the dirty work now.* Maybe it would be worth it, keeping his promises to the kine. For a while. At least until he found out more about them.

Lionel took one last look at the car across the street. *She can have the kid,* he thought, but he was uncomfortable watching how desperately the mother clung to child. Even from a distance, he could feel the attachment, the affection that maybe one day the kid would be able to return. Lionel felt an emptiness within himself. After a few more minutes, he decided that it must be hunger, and he slipped away into the night to feed his discomfort.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

This is my lucky day, Evan Dunkirk thought. He added another paper clip to the chain, which now stretched out his office door and down the hallway to the water fountain. *This is my lucky day*. No more pandering to Old Man Gordon, no more licking the boots of SynSol. Why should he bother? Clearly Synthetic Solutions would be a scourge upon the city, exploiting labor and catering to out-of-town fat-cat investors. He believed this so strongly that he had emailed his SynSol contact and said as much. *I'm my own man*, he thought.

There were still those eyes.... He couldn't seem to get the image out of his mind, but that was such a tiny, niggling detail when weighed against his newfound freedom.

This, Evan Dunkirk thought, *is my lucky day*.

The Mustang pulled into the parking spot farthest from the Chamber of Commerce building. There was only one other car in the lot.

"So you think your friend is in trouble," Abraham was saying, "and the way to help him is taking down these computers."

Nathan nodded.

"What, like the proof against him is stored there?" Johnny asked.

Nathan hesitated. "I... I don't really know how to answer that. It's kind of... complicated. Not that you wouldn't understand it," he added quickly, seeing that Johnny was primed to take offense. "I just don't know how to explain it." He had tried to give them the very basics—friend in trouble, destroying the CoC computers should help him—but more than that was harder. He'd religiously avoided mentioning that he'd

been inside, literally *inside*, a computer system, or that he thought that was where Muckraker was right now. Even fellow hunters, Nathan had to believe, would think that he was crazy. He would have thought that he was crazy if he hadn't experienced it directly. In fact, he still wasn't completely sure that he wasn't crazy.

And there was another niggling detail that kept bothering him. Muckraker had said to take down the computers. He had not said that doing so would save him. *We'll see*. That was about as optimistic as he had gotten.

Maybe he wants somebody to put him out of his misery, Nathan thought. Was he willing to do that, if that was the case? What the hell was going on inside those computers? What were those men dressed in black capable of?

"Let me ask you one question," Abraham said. "Based on what this guy showed you, is this something you're willing to bet your life on?"

The weight of the question caught Nathan off guard. He realized that, in a roundabout way, he'd been heading for the same question himself. How important was this to him, this request from someone he didn't really know at all, someone who had wrecked his computer? But then Nathan pictured those last frantic seconds in the hotel room: the attackers bursting through the mirror, static electricity popping in the air, Matthew's weary grin just before he and the two intruders were sucked in through the screen of his laptop.

"It is," Nathan said. "I have to do this."

Abraham accepted that in silence, satisfied. Johnny was fidgeting in the back seat, waiting anxiously to get down to business.

"All right, then," Abraham said after a few more seconds. "Let's do it." He popped the trunk. The three men got out of the car and moved around to the back of it, where Nathan was greeted by a veritable arsenal of handguns, shotguns and submachine guns. "Here." Abraham handed him a sleek, black pistol.

"Will I need this?"

"Never know." Abraham took a shotgun, and Johnny one of the submachine guns.

Could I have taken this in the computer with me? Nathan wondered, testing the gun's heft. *Would it have gone with me, like my clothes did? Would it have done any good?* Lots of questions, no answers. And he was fairly certain that he didn't want to find the answers—at least not through trial and error.

"What exactly do we need to hit?" Abraham asked, focused as always on the task at hand.

"Good question." Muckraker hadn't been very specific. "They might have Internet or offsite backup—but, no, Muckraker seemed to think everything was run out of here. That's all we have to go on. We should be able to find a server... maybe CD-R backups... probably we should destroy the individual terminal hard drives to be sure."

Abraham nodded. "Fair enough. It's not that big of a place. Can't be more than ten or fifteen offices. You find the server. Johnny and I got the terminals."

Just like that, it was settled, and they were walking across the parking lot, firearms tucked beneath winter coats. *This is more like it*, Nathan thought. He was finally *doing* something, not just sitting behind a keyboard and monitor.

The one other car in the parking lot, and then the unlocked front door of the building, made Nathan think that someone must already be inside. Cleaning crew? He wished that he had a mask, but Abraham

and Johnny weren't hesitating, and they knew a lot more about this kind of thing than he did. He'd follow their lead.

Inside, the three spread out. Nathan glanced inside cubicles but didn't pay them too much attention. Probably the server or servers would have a room more or less to themselves, or they might be crammed in the IT center with a lot of other hardware. He paused at the first locked door, and wondered if he might find a key in the receptionist's desk—

At the first sound of gunfire, he dropped to the floor.

Several shots in rapid-fire succession. Then a louder blast, the shotgun. The first shots must have been from Johnny's gun, Nathan thought, climbing back to his feet. *Hell with a key*, he realized, looking at the door again. Why bother being quiet if they were shooting up computers? He smashed the bottom of his foot into the door. The frame cracked but didn't give way. A second kick took care of it. A supply closet. *Hell*. Nathan kept moving.

The gunfire continued as Abraham and Johnny worked their way through offices and cubicles. Beyond the cubicles, Nathan saw a closed door that seemed a likely candidate for an IT office. He headed that way at a jog. All this shooting was sure as hell going to attract *somebody's* attention. He noticed something odd on the floor by the water fountain, though. A glint of light reflecting off something metallic. A trail of paper clips, of all things. Not a trail, he realized, stopping; a chain. They were all hooked together. He followed the chain around a corner and into an office—and found himself face-to-face with a white guy in a rumbled suit and tie. He was almost as surprised as Nathan was.

Oh, hell! Nathan wished again that he had a mask. He fumbled with his pistol, raised it and pointed it at the jacket-and-tie type in front of him. No matter how tightly Nathan held the gun, the barrel had an unnerving tremble to it. "Hold it right there," Nathan said. But the guy wasn't going anywhere. What next? Tell him to get down on the floor? *Why the hell didn't you get out of here when they started shooting?* he wanted to ask. The suit seemed more confused than scared, in fact—even with an obviously panicky gunman waving a pistol in his face.

"What's the hold up?" Johnny was suddenly at Nathan's shoulder. Johnny quickly took in the situation and snickered. "Cool. It is like a hold up. Get it?"

Nathan stared at him blankly, much like the suit was staring at them. "I guess we've got a hostage," Nathan muttered.

"Naw," Johnny said with a shake of his head. Then he opened fire.

Nathan flung himself backward, his back slamming into the wall, as bullets ripped through the dumbfounded suit, who jerked and gyrated, finally tumbling to the floor in a bloody heap. Johnny kept firing until his clip was empty. He reloaded and then filled the computer under the desk full of lead. That taken care of, he headed for the next office. "Let's go."

Nathan stood there with his back plastered against the wall. His jaw moved several times before he managed feeble speech. "Oh shit." He couldn't take his eyes off the employee—the *dead body*—lying on the floor. Blood was pooling on the carpet, spreading closer to him. "Oh shit." Finally Nathan managed to look away, but now his gaze was captured by the personal items on the desk and walls that made

this bullet-riddled body something more: photographs of a wife and child; a diploma; clipped cartoons; a name plate, EVAN DUNKIRK, speckled red.

"Come on." Johnny was back, pulling Nathan by the elbow. "We found the server."

Nathan stumbled after him, unable to do anything else. A few seconds later, Nathan remembered the gun in his hand, let it drop. Johnny stopped and picked it up and, when Nathan wouldn't take it back, tucked it in his own pocket.

The door Nathan had spied did in fact house the servers. "This is what needs to go?" Abraham double-checked with him.

Nathan managed a weak nod, and Abraham and Johnny both unloaded on the equipment. The gunfire and explosions were too much for Nathan at close range. He stumbled out of the room, dropped to his knees. A second later he was vomiting. What seemed like another second later, Abraham and Johnny were lifting him by the arms and leading him toward the front door.

"Good Lord, these weren't even your computers," Abraham said, misreading Nathan's distress.

"He killed him," Nathan said. "He fucking killed him."

Abraham glanced at Johnny, who seemed unconcerned. "It happens," Abraham said.

Johnny nodded agreement. "If you ain't part of the solution..."

By the time they were through the front door and across the parking lot, Nathan was moving under his own power. Abraham and Johnny returned their weapons to the trunk of the Mustang. Nathan watched them and wondered how they could simply walk away from this like nothing had happened—he wondered how *he* could walk away from it.

He couldn't.

Abraham was behind the wheel and Johnny in the back seat, but Nathan refused to get in the car. He stood by the open passenger's side door. Abraham leaned across and looked up at him. "Nathan, grow up for Christ's sake. This is a war we're fighting. There are casualties in a war."

Nathan didn't know what to say, couldn't say anything.

"Don't bother to thank us for taking care of your dirty work," Johnny said. "You too clean to get your hands messy?"

"It's not pretty," Abraham said, "but it's got to be this way. You want to come with us and see some real action, or stay here for the cops?"

Nathan just shook his head. "Neither one."

Johnny climbed into the front seat, pulled the door shut, obvious disgust on his face.

"Your choice," Abraham said. "Best of luck." Then he screeched out of the parking lot, leaving only tire marks on pavement and the smell of burning rubber.

And a dead body inside, Nathan thought. They were right about the cops, though. He knew that much, and that knowledge was all that gave him strength to move, to run as fast as he could and not look back.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Sands entered his former home weighed down by a millstone of fatalism around his neck. He had only been away for a few days, but already the place was no longer a part of him and he no longer a part of it. Some of the hunters spoke of supernal heralds that had imbued them with extraordinary powers. Cleo spoke reverently and fanatically of angels. Sands didn't know where he came down on the question. He'd spent too long denying what he saw—and then reacting against it when he could no longer deny—to concern himself with how it had all come about. All he knew was that he had been bound and then dragged through a crucible of fire, which had burned away the trappings of his old life and the world as he had once known it.

He had found surety—that monsters exist in the world—but no matter how much destruction that knowledge had wrought upon his way of life, he had laid the seeds for that years ago. He leaned the baseball bat in the corner by the front door. His footsteps echoed as he passed through the house, in it but not of it. He didn't pour himself a scotch. He didn't settle into the recliner in which he had spent so many hours. Instead, he opened the bedroom door. He felt the heft of the pistol in his coat pocket as he did so.

Faye *was* sleeping there. The monster on the front sidewalk hadn't kidnapped her. The beast didn't need to destroy Sands' life. He had taken care of that himself.

She didn't wake until he sat on the edge of the bed with his back to her. She bolted upright, panicked at the intruder in her room, her bed—no longer *their* room, *their* bed. But then she instinctively recognized him. She could tell it was him after years of growing

familiar with the silhouette of his face in the darkness, the set of his shoulders, the sound of his breathing.

"Douglas?" she said quietly, questioning not who he was but why he was there. "Are you all right?"

I am, he thought, not that she could or would ever understand, this woman, this intimate stranger.

"Do you hear the wind, Faye?" he asked. "Do you hear it whipping around the back corner of the house?" He didn't turn to look at her, but he could feel the movement of her silent nod. "It won't be long," he said.

And it wasn't.

The night, which had been quiet to that point, came alive with the sounds of wind: trees swaying, shrubs brushing against shutters and the faintest beginnings of a small boy's voice....

The room darkened as clouds racing helter-skelter across what had been a clear sky snuffed the moonlight.

"Do you hear him?" Douglas asked. Behind him, Faye drew up, rigid. The tension of her body touched him through the mattress. "Does he call to you?" But why would he? Why would he call anyone but...

"Dad-dy?"

Adam stood in the open doorway through which Sands had passed minutes before. Faye sucked in a sharp breath, held it.

"Dad-dy."

The boy was only a couple of feet tall, picture perfect as he had been ten years ago.

"Douglas... ?" Faye's breathless whisper cut through the darkness.

Sands stood, took her by the elbow, dragged her against her will to her feet.

"Dad-dy."

"We're coming, son."

"Douglas... ? Dear God, no."

Adam, pleased that they were coming, toddled off happily down the hallway. Faye could barely keep her feet. Douglas held her firmly by the arm, kept her upright and moving forward. She jostled against the heavy weight of the gun in his coat pocket.

The boy was out of sight, but Douglas knew where to go. He half-led half-dragged Faye to the living room. With his free hand, he tore away the plastic sheets that were still in the place of the broken French doors. Suddenly his strength failed him. His legs couldn't hold him, and now it was he and Faye supporting one another—facing the terrible day from their past.

Late-afternoon sun shone beyond the doors yet did not penetrate the living room. Blue sky and trees fully laden with leaves framed the swimming pool—not covered by a torn canvas tarp, but full of clear, chlorinated water, shimmering over aqua-painted concrete.

And a tiny body, bobbing, struggling.

Faye cried out, a pained groan from deep in her chest that died in her throat. She started forward, but Douglas stopped her. There was no way to go back, no way to help the thrashing child whose frantic gyrations were growing more sluggish with each passing second.

"Dear God, no," Faye breathed. She had never seen this, never so much as seen the body in the pool. She'd been out of the house, and the paramedics had cleaned up the child before she'd gotten home.

Sands hadn't seen the boy alive in the water that day, either. Flailing. Sinking. Drowning.

Before the bubbles had stopped rising to the surface, Douglas turned away. The sight was an open wound, too painful—and there was worse yet to face.

He took Faye by the arm, pulled until she turned away from the eerie sunlight to face again the darkness of their lives. Down the hallway. She followed him now, but it was he who walked blindly, like a man led to his own execution. The room to their left had regressed. The weights were gone. Neither was it a guest bedroom, but rather a nursery. Adam's room. Douglas and Faye didn't stop. They kept moving down the hall, drawn now by the sounds emanating from the bedroom. Side by side, they stood at the threshold.

Douglas was there—Douglas of a decade ago, naked, hovering like a vulture above a young woman, her bare legs wrapped around his waist. Donna. He'd tried so damned hard to forget her name, her face, the fact that he'd ever met her. One expensive lunch had been enough to coax her into his bed. Faye was gone, Adam asleep, so Douglas had called. The sheets were thrown back, his ass thrusting him downward, into her, violently, like the bobbing of a helpless child in water. She was perfect. He couldn't help himself, couldn't deny the press of her breast, slick with saliva, beneath his fingers.

He couldn't face the obscenity he had committed. Tears streaming down his face, he looked away—but there was Faye. He had torn her life apart more than once.

"It's all my fault," he said, barely able to speak. "All my fault."

Faye was crying too, sobbing uncontrollably. Then she was hitting him, fists pounding against his chest, his face. He didn't resist. Her fury rose, but still he didn't turn away as she split his lip, broke his nose.

"All my fault," he muttered, as blood ran down his face onto his clothes, the floor.

"How could you?!" she was screaming. "Dear God. How could you?!" Insane with rage and grief, she

lashed out at him, landing blows that he had deserved for years. "You bastard! You fucking bastard!"

He fell to his knees, but the Douglas of ten years ago labored still, exertion and rapture contorting his face. Donna's hips rose to greet him, press against him, take him in.

"All my fault."

He slouched forward against Faye. She took tufts of his hair in her hands, trying to pull his head apart. The pistol was in his hands. He gave it to her, gazed at her through blood and tears.

She swayed, gasped for breath as all the air seemed to be sucked from the world. They were suffocating, drowning. The bedroom grew quiet and still. Outside the wind unleashed a final gust, then trickled away along with a mournful, questioning voice. "Dad... dy...?"

Faye stood over him, stared down at the weapon in her hands. Shaking her head, she stepped back, staggered away from him. "No. You don't get off that easy." The pistol slipped from her fingers and clattered to the floor. "No," she said.

With her words, Douglas felt strings snapping, bonds of affection and frustration, love and hatred. Gone. Destroyed.

"*You monster,*" she whispered as she left him.

Sands collapsed into a heap. He wished that the churning revulsion in his gut would take form, would consume him. But as he lay quivering, sobbing, bleeding, he heard a voice. Not Adam's voice, because the child's tragedy had been brought to light. Not Faye's voice, because Faye was gone. Irretrievably gone. Maybe the voice was in Sands' own mind. Maybe it was the voice of an angel.

"*No. You don't get off so easy.*"

Epilogue

The storefront surveillance cameras worked fine. Nathan had tweaked the contrast setting, and now he was pleased with the resolution. Three cameras out front and two out back, all hidden from view, linked by fiber optic cables to his computer. Nobody was going to sneak up on them now that they were settled in here. One instance of having the crap beat out of him by a vampire was more than enough for Nathan. The swelling on his face was gone, and what must have been at least a mild concussion was giving him no more trouble. Julia had seen to that. Her fingers had grown warm to the touch when she spread them over his face and head, and damn if he hadn't fallen right asleep. When he woke up, no more bruises, no lingering headache, no blurred vision. He had seen her use her edges on others before, but experiencing it firsthand was simply amazing.

Well, I wanted to get my hands dirty, he thought. If Braughton hadn't cured him of that, Abraham and Johnny sure as hell had. Nathan shook his head. He wondered where those two had gone. He'd kept an eye peeled on hunter-net for any hints as to their whereabouts. No clues yet. But they had only been gone for a few days, and they weren't the type to keep a low profile for long. He was in the middle of logging on to hunter-net to check the latest posts when the IM box popped up on his screen

MR: *i believe that thanks and congratulations are in order.*

Nathan's heart caught in his throat. Muckraker. He *was* alive, then. Nathan had hoped—he'd hoped that the ordeal, the senseless death, hadn't been in vain.

MR: *don't be shy. this is where you say you're welcome.*

BM: *you're welcome.*

MR: *and now you ask me what happened.*

BM: *you got away from them i guess.*

MR: *good guess. they had me hooked up to a... well, you don't want to know. the server going down caught them off guard. gave me a chance to make a break for it.*

BM: *i didn't get the backups.*

MR: *no sweat, the live server was what counted.*

BM: *they still chasing you?*

Nathan wondered, too, if they were after him. He'd been having dreams about those men in black. Not pleasant dreams.

MR: *as far as I can tell they've pulled out of iron rapids altogether. synsol seems to be packing as well. too much heat in the kitchen. they're like cockroaches, can't stand the light.*

BM: *mixing your metaphors.*

MR: *sue me.*

Nathan started typing a witty retort, but Muckraker's next message came across first:

MR: *i read about dunkirk in the paper:*

Nathan stiffened. Evan Dunkirk. Everyone had read about it, seen it on the news: Chamber of

Commerce employee gunned down in a brutal attack that could be described only as domestic terrorism. Nathan stared at the message on the screen. There was no way to tell how Muckraker meant the words. Was he probing, trying to find out if Nathan was guilty? Was the message a curt accusation, condemnation? Or was Muckraker awash in his typical sarcasm? Email was bad that way. Nathan decided to cut to the chase.

BM: not on my hands.

The next message shocked Nathan just as profoundly:

MR: he was part of it. synsol plant.

A sudden weight lifted from Nathan's shoulders. That was why he recognized Dunkirk's name! Not just from the evacuation in World War II, but from a mention in the files that Muckraker had sent. Evan Dunkirk hadn't been an innocent bystander. Nathan was no less repulsed by Abraham and Johnny's indiscriminate violence, but his own conscious was soothed somewhat. In a strange way, it seemed too good to be true.

Of course it was too good to be true.

MR: probably harmless though. not a threat. just in it for the \$\$.

Nathan sank back down in his seat. He had the feeling that Muckraker was laughing at him, sticking the knife in and twisting it, enjoying it all the while. From the start, Nathan had had trouble reading

Muckraker. Matthew. The man was like no one Nathan had ever met before.

A tap on the shoulder. Nathan spun in his chair—Sands. Just Douglas. Not a vampire, not a man dressed in black sprung from the computer.

"Everybody's here," Sands said. "You got a few minutes?"

Nathan took a deep breath. "Sure."

"If you're in the middle of something..."

"No, no, no, no. Nothing important." Nathan turned back to the computer and the message about Dunkirk on the screen.

BM: i hate to see anybody go like he did. speaking of going...

MR: i can take a hint. hang in there. you'll be hearing from me.

BM: promise or threat?

Nathan logged off, determined this time, at least, to have the last word.

"Then it's decided." Sands tried to infuse the statement with a certain amount of finality and met with mixed results.

"But there will of course be exceptions," Cleo insisted.

Julia groaned. Sands sighed and ran his fingers through his grayer-by-the-second hair. This discussion that was supposed to last *a few minutes* had gone on for just over two hours now.

"Yes, there will probably be exceptions," he said.

"Then what good are the rules?" Cleo asked.

Julia tossed up her hands in frustration. "I've had all of this I can take. Can you all handle this? Good. I'll be next door." She signed the paper on the table and then left through the hole in the wall that led to the adjacent storefront, which doubled as garage and dormitory.

"Not rules, guidelines," Sands explained for what felt like the hundredth time. "Things that, except in extreme emergencies, we agree not to do without consulting with the group as a whole."

Mike ticked off the provisions they'd drawn up: "No bringing outsiders here to the store, or to the safe house." They'd just bought one on the edge of the city. "No making deals with unnatural creatures, and no taking them on solo."

"I understand the rules," Cleo said.

"Guidelines," Sands corrected her.

"But these exceptions..." She shook her head, disgruntled. "These things we are not to do, they are things that you have done," she said, pointing at Sands. "All of them. In the past week. These were all exceptions? Then why have the rules?"

"What I'm saying by agreeing to this," Sands said, "is that I won't do any of those things again—not without checking with everyone else. I wasn't acting with the rest of you in mind like I am now—like I should have been."

"Why make rules after you've already broken them?" Cleo challenged him.

"Um... I've got something I need to check on," Nathan said quietly. He signed the paper and then slipped away toward his computer.

Sands took a deep breath. "I don't know about you, being the hand of God and all, but I can't change the past. All I can do is try to do better in the future, and I think most of us agree that it's a good idea for

us all to be working from the same page, for all of us to have certain basic expectations in common. The important thing isn't that these are hard and fast rules—which they're not. The important thing is... Look. What Abraham and Johnny did—it was wrong. Plain wrong. We can't run around killing people for the hell of it. Even killing monsters for the hell of it. Only if we're sure they're a threat to someone. Clarence was wrong about that, but you didn't know Clarence. And... oh, hell. Some of the things I did, they were plain wrong. Stupid. I endangered the rest of you. Not intentionally, but it happened. I'm promising to do everything I can to keep that from happening again. If it means—"

Cleo raised a hand for him to stop. "Fine," she said, "where do I sign?" She didn't reveal what Sands had said that convinced her. He didn't ask.

"Um... I guess this'll be a verbal contract." He was pretty sure that sounded lame as shit after two hours of speeches, but it was the best he had. "Shake?"

They did and Cleo walked away from the table with out a word. Mike shook his hand as well.

"You think she just liked the fact that I said I was stupid?" Sands asked him.

"Could be. I don't pretend to understand her," he said. "I just try to keep her pointed in the right direction. I think you're seeing that too."

Sands wasn't so sure. This whole operation could fall apart tomorrow, as far as he knew. Without someone like Hetger to take the lead, someone with a steady hand and even temper... *Good God. Who knows?* he thought.

Shaking off the questions, Sands went to find Julia in the adjacent storefront. She had set up a bed and a few partitions in the far corner so that Timothy could have some privacy. Strangely enough, the

comings and goings of the cars at all hours of the day and night didn't seem to bother him. Actually, *nothing* seemed to bother him.

"He sleeping?" Sands asked, peeking around the partitions. Thankfully, the boy was. Douglas couldn't always stomach the blank stares, the unresponsive face.

Julia had healed the bruises and scrapes the boy had suffered during his kidnapping. He'd even had a broken finger. But there was something deeper—something broken or missing—that not even Julia had been able to get at.

Douglas took a seat. Julia had added an extra chair to the makeshift room after Sands had started coming to sit with her and the boy. While he was asleep, there was a certain peacefulness about Timothy—about mother and son. Sands could feel it. Sometimes it comforted him. Other times it was almost painful. In his darker moments, he wondered whether Adam or Timothy was more fortunate. The other times, though, like tonight, Sands could appreciate that Timothy had a future, however difficult it might prove to be. And after all, that's all that any of them could hope for.

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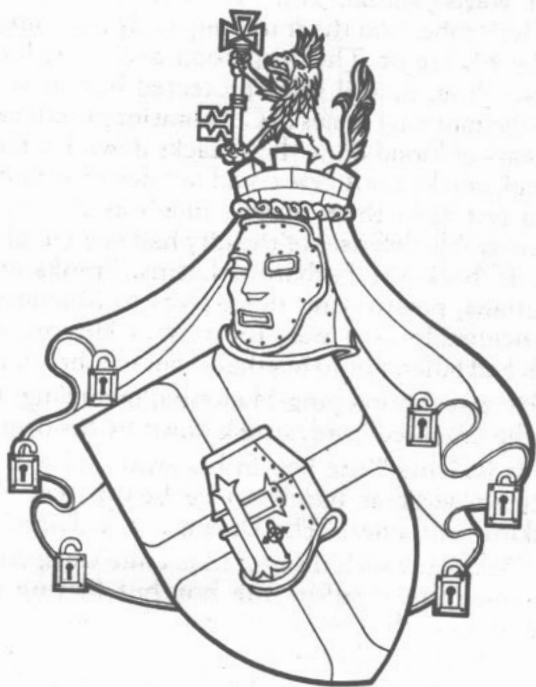
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Dark Ages: NOSFERATU



CONSTANTINOPLE, APRIL 1204

The cries of the dying beckoned to him like a promise of immortality—a lie, just as the gilded domes of the city, now collapsed and burning, were lies, broken promises, fleeting visions of eternity unattainable. Though he was not yet within the outer walls, smoke and fine ash covered his traveler's robes and the frail, limp body he cradled against his breast. The deep hood which shielded his face from mortal sight protected him as well from the mocking fumes of Constantinople aflame. Yet tears of blood drew their tracks down his face of dead, cracked skin. He could not deny the tears, could not hold them at bay, much as the once impenetrable defenses of the city had been unable to hold back the barbarous Latins: Franks and Venetians, prostituting themselves to Mammon. Inconceivable as it was, the city of Heaven on Earth had fallen not to heathens, but to Christians.

He was the weeping Madonna, mourning; he was the crucified Lord, struck down by his own.

"It is dying," the boy in his arms said with a voice so weak as barely to be heard over the crackling of flames. "The Dream... it is dying."

"Do not say such things," Malachite whispered, attempting to comfort the boy but feeling no comfort himself. *It is already dead*, he thought, at once recoiling at the sacrilege, pushing it down—deep into the darkness where he kept imprisoned his fears, his weakness, his hunger.

"I feel nothing," said the boy. "I see nothing."

If only I could be so afflicted, Malachite thought.

Battlements loomed to the fore atop the walls of Theodosius around the city. Fires licked heavenward from several of the towers, lending thick billows of smoke and a hellish red haze to

the night. In puddles along the flagstone road, moonlight created shimmering pools of supernal illusion—streets paved with silver and gold—but the image was vanquished by Malachite's sandal, leaving only rippling confusion, cracked and decaying stone submerged beneath dank water. Pungent odors clung to this part of the city beyond the walls—tanneries, butchers' pens—but Malachite barely noticed them. They hardly compared to the pent-up stench of enclosed sewers, which circumstance had forced him, on occasion, to traverse. The bodies scattered along the road and ditches had not yet begun to rot, so their odor was not yet added to the melange. Some of the dead displayed obvious signs of violence; others appeared almost peaceful, as if they had simply grown weary and lain down to rest.

The living were not unaccounted for among the destruction. Glassy-eyed mortals staggered from the city, forming a swelling and ebbing tide against which Malachite made his way. They were all the same now: merchants and peasants and nobles, stripped of all but what they could carry, and even that might be seized by the roving bands of crusaders, men who had taken the cross so that they might pillage with God's blessing. Wives and daughters were subject to seizure as well. Except for the oldest and most wrinkled of crones, the fleeing women wore veils or concealing hoods, lest they attract unwanted attention. Most of the Latins were within the city proper, though. The riches of palaces and basilicas held greater allure than the smuggled possessions of refugees. Still the refugees of Constantinople cast their curses in low voice, fear and dismay muting hatred and resentment. Then the clatter of horses' hooves

spread waves of silence along the length of the throng—and suddenly the road was empty.

Until the armored knights passed by. Clipped echoes of hoofbeats filled the silence. Towering like steel giants, the crusader knights gleamed red in the night, swords drawn. Malachite allowed the horses a wide berth, lest their keen senses give him away. The urge was strong to chase down the warriors, pull them from their mounts and open their veins, these despoilers of his city and home, of the dream it embodied. He held himself back. His purpose was best served by remaining concealed from the eyes of mortals. There was the boy in his arms to consider as well, and beleaguered citizens who would undoubtedly be caught up in open combat. Why should they suffer further merely to sate his thirst for vengeance? Gradually the sharp *clop-clop* of horses receded into the distance.

Hesitantly, a few at a time, the people emerged from their hiding places, returned to the road and their journeys west, north, away. They shuffled along like ghosts, eyes downcast, and Malachite moved unseen among them. He shared their disbelief and their shock, but unlike them, he could not turn from the walls and the burning city.

Which of our sins could be so great that God would punish us so? he wondered. With each step, he scoured his own soul for unworthy deeds left unconfessed, for thoughts tainted by pride or avarice. For centuries he had been diligent in admitting his trespasses so that God might afford him redemption—and his confessor had been none other than the Patriarch himself, Michael, namesake of the foremost archangel of heaven, first among Cainites, architect and creator of the

vampiric society of Constantinople. Of the promise of utopia he called the Dream.

How could they have allowed this to happen? Malachite thought, casting his net wide to discern who was at fault. Michael, perhaps, or Caius, or Gesu. And then despair reached out a black hand and took hold of Malachite's heart. Where was Michael now? God was surely in His Heaven, but what of the Patriarch? Could his weariness with the world have grown so great that he slumbered in his haven beneath the Church of Hagia Sophia even now? Surely not even the creeping madness in his soul could stay his hand were he to witness the plight of his city. *He does not know*, Malachite decided. *I must find him.*

No Crusader would dare stand before the gleaming brilliance of the Patriarch, the light of a thousand suns divinely reflected through the stained hues of living glass. His wrath brought down upon the enemies of Constantinople would prove as overpowering as his benevolence toward the faithful.

I must find Michael. He will set things right. Malachite's conviction was less real than the wasted body he held in his arms, however. And his rage at the invaders was tempered by guilt that he had not been here to face them, to die in the fires if need be, when there had remained something of worth that his sacrifice might have saved.

"I feel nothing," the boy said. "I see nothing."

"Quiet, then," Malachite scolded gently. "When your strength has returned, you will see." *Or perhaps you will be spared seeing this*, he thought, again denying the darker notions as soon as they took shape.

He continued weaving his way against the mortal tide, returning to that which they fled. They made way for him, not realizing that they did so. He was hidden from their eyes by the power of his blood, but their suffering filled his vision, person after person, hundreds of them, perhaps thousands. Where would they go now that their homes were destroyed, their city sacked? Perhaps east, for those able to secure passage over the water, toward Nicaea, as had two of their recent emperors preceding them in flight, Alexius III and Alexius V Murzuphlus. Perhaps west, like Alexius IV, who had ruled, albeit briefly, between the other two. How was it that the deadly game of thrones among the mortal rulers of the empire had grown so twisted and vile, and yet as always, it was the people who suffered?

Is it we who are to blame? Malachite wondered. *Are mortals and Cainites merely two faces of the same coin, peering at the world from opposite sides of death, inseparable until God tires of His Creation and forges it anew?* Every general, every royal cousin born to the purple, whether he knew so or not, courted the favor of undead patrons, each vying for prominence and influence, each twisting, corrupting. *And what part of the Dream is this?* A diseased part, eating away at the heart, spawning cruelty among those mortals who should be most noble.

And we who have the opportunity to gather the wisdom of eternity, Malachite thought, *we are no better than they are, setting one against another.* He felt shame for his race, though he had not taken part in most of the bickering, posturing and plotting. Surely the blame lay with the leading Cainites of the city: Michael, his glory matched only by his madness and his increasing detachment

from his city; Caius, playing his games of generals and emperors as if they were toys carved from ivory; Gesu, obsessed by the internal life of the divine, blind to any external threats.

But they will unite now that the greatest danger is obvious. Michael will rise up and lead them, Malachite decided, much as he had decided months ago when the Latins had first arrived as allies to the *Romaioi*, the citizenry of the New Rome. His expectation had not proven true then, but now... now that the flames were burning, now that the stately buildings of the city were crumbling to rubble...

"The Dream is dying," whispered the boy.

"Quiet, boy." Malachite shuddered. The boy was gadfly to his conscience. *But I have done all that I might,* he thought. It was those like himself of the lesser families who had recognized the threats facing the Dream, who had entered into secret covenants so that they might preserve it.

We were too late. The crackling flames exclaimed as much. Too late.

The cries of anguish that drew Malachite were closer now, though in truth they had never been far, riding the wind, penetrating his heart. He had followed the sound while watching the looming walls of the city and the tattered procession of humanity spilling forth like blood from an open wound. Sight and sound were one, the wails those of the city itself, crying out against its violation.

He turned from the main road, the Egnatian Way, and darted more quickly among what structures still stood. The fires here had by now mostly burned themselves out. He was thankful enough for that. Screams and moans were the only inhabitants remaining to this desolate quarter, formerly a bustling maze of industry and labor, now

a haphazard collection of ruined stone walls, smoldering beams and deserted workshops. When the boy groaned at being jostled, Malachite slowed his pace. There was no hurry. The sun would not rise for several hours still, and death and suffering had settled in for a long stay.

The cries were coming from a compound of buildings, a lumberyard emptied of wood by the crusaders, who had commandeered it and used it to construct their siege engines. A different harvest now filled the buildings and the yard: the bodies of the injured and the dying. The strongest of them, Malachite presumed, those with less serious injuries or who were simply too exhausted to continue onward, crowded in the open with only a wall to their backs or canvas sheets tied to poles as shelter from the early spring chill. Mothers held crying babes to breast. Old men and women slept, and children also, their grimy faces angelic in repose. Malachite skirted the yard. Too many mortals in one place. It was unlikely they would take note of him at all, another dispossessed soul carrying a stricken loved one. Yet if someone did take notice, mistook him for a leper, perhaps... Mortals were unpredictable in their passions, and not to be trifled with in large numbers. At times like these, the world was little more than a tangle of parched kindling, and the tiniest spark of panic could ignite a conflagration that would consume the dead flesh of a Cainite.

So he slipped through a side door into the main building—and found himself among the tortured penitents of Hell. The cries, the echoes of which he had heard from without, reverberated from every wall and every rafter. They soaked into the grain of wood, seeped through skin. Mangled and broken bodies were stretched across every available

surface: the floor, work tables, benches. And the stark aroma of blood—

Malachite stepped back, pressed his shoulder against the door frame as he ground his own desiccated flesh between his teeth. Before him, a physician leaned heavily into the stroke of a fine-toothed saw beneath the constricting band of a tourniquet, grating into bone. Two men held the patient down. His cough-wracked screams wrenched the soul, yet the doctor drew back the saw through the cut, leaned into the next stroke. A woman. The doctor was a woman, Malachite realized as he tried to concentrate on the bend of her back, her dark hair—not on the droplets of blood splattered on her face, the patches splashed across her hands and wrists and smock, dried beneath her fingernails....

Father have mercy!

Urgently he brushed past the surgery, out of the room. The next room was little better. The wounded lay or were propped upright in tight confines. The smell and taste of blood permeated everything. The cries, now that he had found them, carried an unbearable immediacy—not the collective entreaty of the city, but the voices of individual mortals raised in pain, each with a life and a story, each suffering, each bleeding, each spilling life-giving blood.

Malachite staggered onward. *The boy... look to the welfare of the boy!* Steps, a narrow stairwell to his left. He clambered up. The infirm and injured filled the second floor as well, but Malachite sensed no fresh, flowing blood like below. Most of these people likely had climbed the stairs of their own power. The staff of this makeshift hospital were few enough that they

would not have carried the worst cases any farther than necessary. Most of the patients were asleep, senses numbed, oblivious to the continual cries of suffering. Seeing the shocked stare of a caregiver, however, Malachite realized his own mortal mask had dissolved with his lapsing concentration, so great had been his agitation. He stood revealed. Quickly but awkwardly, with the boy still in his arms, he shifted his hood to better hide his skeletal head, jagged fangs, knife-sharp nose, the deeply sunken eyes and tight, brittle skin, which cracked and sloughed away with his every movement. His hands were little better: a collection of bulging veins and paper-thin skin barely concealing bone. He shielded, too, the boy's gruesome features with a turn of shoulder.

"Malachite?" whispered the caregiver, his shock underscored by something approaching awe.

Malachite recognized the man now, a monk, newly of the family, not Cainite but nourished by the blood. Curtly, Malachite whispered to the man: "Bring blood. Now."

With a quick glance to make sure that no one else had recognized him—for what, if not who, he was—he stalked out of the room. His mortal façade restored, he found another, smaller room, this one with a ladder to the roof. A woman and an old man, along with three small children, were sprawled asleep on the floor. Malachite calmed himself and woke the woman gently.

"Forgive me, sister," he said when she opened groggy eyes. "The physician told me we should use this room. The boy is ill and should not be near others. Keep your children at a distance." Even in shadow, the boy in his arms did look ill, emaciated and deathly pale. The woman drew back. "There

is room across the hall, if you wish," Malachite added kindly.

She took heed of his advice, gathering her children to her skirt and herding them as well as her ailing father out of the room. Malachite laid the boy on the floor, propping a sack under his head for a pillow. A moment later, the monk joined them and closed the door. He carried in his arms a different withered, old man, whom he handed to Malachite.

"He will not be missed?" Malachite asked.

The monk shook his head. "This one grows weaker with every hour. He will not live to see the morning light. May God have mercy on his soul."

"May He have mercy on ours," Malachite said. He laid the old man on the floor beside the boy, hopeful that the blood, even weak, would call to him.

But the boy did not stir. He did not take hold of the failing body, did not feed.

Malachite felt the eyes of the monk, watching. "I do not know what is wrong with him," Malachite admitted, answering the unvoiced question, which would have remained unvoiced, for the monk would not have spoken until spoken to—not in the presence of Malachite, patron of the city's Nosferatu and favored by Michael. "We were returning to the city," Malachite said. "I had... left." *I had been sent away*, he thought, pained by the fact. "We knew that the Latins had breached the walls and entered the city during the day. He and I were discussing whether Emperor Murzuphlus would continue the resistance in the streets, house to house, when the boy swooned. It was as if all his strength deserted him." *And his vision,*

Malachite thought. *He who has been my distant eyes. I've grown dependent upon him.*

"I have seen others like him over the past days," the monk said, his voice weary and burdened by the horrors he had witnessed. "Mortals, I mean... but who have given up hope."

"There is still hope, hospitaler!" Malachite snarled, suddenly enraged, striking with the speed of lightning, pinning the monk to the wall by the neck. The Cainite's fangs began to extend farther, sliding through flesh as fissured as a sun-baked desert. After a moment, the monk's futile gasping brought Malachite back to himself. He pushed the Beast back down, retreated to the other side of the room, kept his face to the wall. "Forgive me," he said, shaking. "The blood... downstairs. It..."

The monk continued gasping. He struggled to speak through spasms of coughing. "Do you require more?"

"No." Malachite said. He had no true need to feed. He was accustomed to denying the call—not as much as the Obertus monks who followed the ascetic teachings of Gesu, but neither was he a Latin vampire, used to the blood feasts of Bishop Alfonzo.

"Murzuphlus has fled the city," the monk offered, still hesitant.

"Has he, now?" Malachite said, anxious to turn his thoughts to other matters. So Alexius V Murzuphlus was gone, usurper of a usurper of a usurper, chased from his golden throne. And whose plaything had that one been? Alfonzo's, perhaps, so that the city was sure to fall to his Venetian brethren; or maybe Caius's, or one of his multitude of warring underlings? Malachite preferred the sewers to the stink of politics and king-making. If

more Cainites had felt the same, perhaps the golden city would not lie prostrate to the ravages of false Christians.

"The boy will not feed," he said, disgusted, wanting to distract himself from the fate of the city but unable even in this small thing to be of any use. "Watch him," he told the monk, and then turned to climb the ladder to the roof. At the trap door he paused and looked back to the monk, this servant weaned on Cainite blood. "You are one of Raymond's people." The monk nodded. "Is he...?"

"He survived the initial attack," the monk said deferentially. "Many did not. He sent us out with the instructions to help the suffering where we could."

For the first time this night, Malachite knew the faintest trace of hope. His friend and protégé, Fra' Raymond, was not destroyed. He remained at the head of the Order of St. Ladre. Still the leper knights strove to aid the victims of circumstance, though in this time of cataclysm surely the victims outnumbered the victors a hundredfold. *It is a duty I should have been fulfilling*, Malachite chastised himself. But he'd had no choice. Michael had commanded him away from the city. How could he have found the strength to refuse the wishes of the Patriarch? Malachite's thoughts as he perched on the ladder seized again upon Michael's possible whereabouts. *I must find him, and quickly*. Much time had passed since Malachite had been forced to think in terms of nights and weeks rather than years, but mortals had seized the initiative now, and they could be such hasty creatures.

He turned away from the monk, pushed open the trap door, and climbed onto the flat roof. Doing so, he traded the scent of blood, such a temptation

to his body, for the sight of smoke rising from beyond the city walls, a considerable trial to his soul. He tried to plan his strategy for the nights to come, but the shrouded vista before him was a damning condemnation of his past failures. He had failed to penetrate Michael's deepening malaise and to warn him how many Cainites had lost sight of the Dream. They cared nothing about a city of infinite beauty, a reflection of divine pleasure, a tribute to God destined to last throughout the ages.

Even among the most favored families of the city, recklessness and disregard had become the rule. Of Michael's own Toreador, only dutiful Petronius had refused to bury his head in the sand and to ignore the raging factionalism within the city, the Turks pressing from the east, the Slavs and Franks from the north and west. But Petronius was overburdened by the mantle of leadership in Michael's stead and had turned to the slippery Magnus for aid and comfort—as if ever a trustworthy soul had stirred among Clan Lasombra. Malachite well knew there had not.

Gesu and his Obertus Tzimisce, meanwhile, could not be bothered to step beyond the walls of the Monastery of St. John Studius. In fact, Gesu had closed the gates to all outsiders, turning his back on the city as well as his responsibilities as leader of a leading vampiric family. His broodmates Symeon and Myca Vykos, while less obsessed with his monastic mysteries and more accessible, had been unable to sway Gesu from his isolation.

The Antonian Ventrue were worse yet. Caius pretended—or perhaps actually thought—that he ruled the family with an iron hand, yet squabbling and petty maneuvering among the prefects was rampant. And as for matters imperial and military, ostensibly the purview of the family, the proof was

damning: Four emperors had sat atop the throne over the course of the past year alone, and invaders had breached the walls and even now looted the city.

None of this had to happen, Malachite thought. Yet he had seen it coming for decades: the political disarray among the mortals, barbarians claiming more and more of the empire's distant and then not-so-distant holdings each year, the local economy suffering under the privileges granted to the damnable Venetians, the imperial coffers ringing hollow. Malachite and a very few others had recognized the peril. They had formed their own secret compact, hoping to ward off disaster, but disaster had come so soon.

And now the city burns.

He gazed eastward at the massive defensive works, at the smoke rising from atop and behind them. Never in more than three and a half centuries had he been forced to see those walls and wonder what yet remained on the other side, what remained of his city, of the Dream.

From below, voices drew his attention back to the improvised hospital. Voices. *The boy and the monk?* Had the boy then fed and recovered some of his strength? No. Malachite did recognize the voice of the soft-spoken monk, but the other words were not spoken by the boy.

"Of course I won't stay away from them," came a woman's gruff and impatient tones. "Step aside then, if you can't be of any help."

Malachite at once was at the ladder, descending into the room with the extraordinary speed and stealth of the blood—neither the monk nor the woman kneeling beside the boy and old man saw him.

"They're both dead," she said, but she was staring at the boy, her brow furrowed. She held his hand in hers, feeling for a nonexistent pulse. "Except this one doesn't seem to know it yet." The boy's eyes were open, moving slightly as he watched her.

"Away from him!" Malachite barked, stepping forward to the defense of his child.

The monk jumped back, obeying without question. The woman, too, was startled, but she gave no ground—nor did she express but the briefest shock at Malachite's inhuman visage.

"I doubt there is any harm I could do him," she said, rising to her feet. She was not young for a mortal. She had lived perhaps a decade for each of Malachite's centuries. Her features were Jewish, and Malachite recognized her as the physician he had seen downstairs. Wisps of gray streaked her dark hair, pulled back severely. Wrinkles were etched deep in her face, at the corners of her eyes and mouth, on her forehead. She had washed her hands, but blood still speckled her sleeves.

"This cannot be a safe place for a woman," Malachite said, "especially a daughter of Sarah." He stepped between her and the boy, knelt beside the two bodies on the floor. The old man was indeed dead, but the boy had not fed, was just as weak as before.

"Where would you rather I be?" she asked. "I was in Acre when Coeur de Lion took that city," she said with a shrug. "When the Christians claim what they believe is their rightful prize, the Jewish Quarter is hardly the safest refuge."

Malachite regarded her intently, impressed both by the steel of her voice and the manner with which she met unflinching his gaze. He didn't spare

her the skeletal features, the mouth cramped with misaligned fangs. "Close the door," he said to the monk, and it was done.

"No true Christians," Malachite said, "would pillage the greatest place of worship to God there is on Earth." His tone dared her to contradict him.

The woman was noncommittal in return. "The masters of the city may change their robes, but the life of my people will continue much the same."

Malachite heard the truth in her words. Though the Jews might be misguided in refusing to recognize the Christ as their Messiah, Malachite afforded them the respect due the branch from which the shoot of David had sprung. Many Cainites were less generous; many mortals as well.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"I am Miriam of Damascus."

"A physician."

"Yes."

Malachite noticed the blood again. The drying, tacky stains on her smock were more than enough to attract his attention if not, now that he had collected himself, to cause him undue discomfort. "You do not fear me," he said.

"Death wears many faces," Miriam said.

"Some easier to behold than others."

"The result, in the end, is the same. I have seen death closely enough, cheated it enough times on behalf of others, that when it comes for me..." She shrugged again, not flippant but resigned.

"So you embrace it," Malachite probed.

"No. That is not the same thing at all." She glanced at the monk, wondering perhaps what connection he had to this creature of death before her.

"There is more," Malachite said. A mortal was not so difficult for him to read.

Miriam nodded, resigned to the telling as seemingly she was to eventual death. "I know of your kind," she said. "I have met one of you. I have learned much of death, and of life, at her side."

"What is her name?"

The woman hesitated, weighed her options. "That I will not say."

Malachite smiled, though truly the woman might not have recognized the twisted expression for what it was. *Such fidelity...and from a mortal, no less. Many a Cainite could learn from this Miriam of Damascus.* He did not push for more of an answer. In truth, he already suspected who her patron likely was. Lady Alexia Theusa, the solitary member of the Cappadocian clan in Constantinople, had served as physician to emperors, directly or indirectly, for many years. Such an elder Cainite—far older than Malachite—when she did seek the company of mortals, often tended to seek out those who shared qualities or skills similar to those she possessed. Miriam was a healer, headstrong, perhaps a loner, as far as Malachite could tell. All of these things might bring her to the notice of the Lady Alexia.

Before he could comment on any of this, however, he cocked his head, suddenly aware of something besides smoke and the sounds of human suffering carried on the breeze. For a second time, he climbed the ladder to the roof and paused to listen to the night....

There. Horses hooves clattering against the cobbles, drawing closer.

Miriam and the ghoulish monk were close behind Malachite. After a moment, they too heard the

noise. Not long after, the armored knights rode into view.

"There are no riches for them to plunder here," said the monk.

"Better if there were." Miriam's concern was obvious upon her face. "They could take what they like and then leave."

Malachite did not wish to meet any crusader, whether brigand fortuitously bearing the mantle of the cross or pious warrior fueled by holy zeal.

"They are of the blood," said a voice from behind. The three rooftop observers whirled to see the boy. Somehow he had climbed the ladder and crawled onto the roof. His eyes fluttered with the fading vestiges of consciousness. "They are of the blood, and they wish to destroy us."

For a thousand years,
the vampire Lucita has
lived under the shadow
of her tyrannical sire, Moncada.

Now, the monster who defined her
existence is gone, destroyed
in no small part thanks to her efforts.

All she wishes is to
at last find a place for herself
in these Final Nights.

But to the rest of
Clan Lasombra,
she is a rogue and a killer,
a rebel who has assassinated
one of their greatest elders.

The hunt is on.

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