

TOMES OF THE DEAD

Bad Blood

CHUCK WENDIG

A DOUBLE DEAD NOVELLA

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PART ONE

FREAKS

The Conversation: #1

Did you think it would end like this?

Nah. Not really.

I'm cold.

Me too. But fuck it, I'm always cold.

I'm slipping away. Mouthful by mouthful. Gulp by gulp.

Now we know where you live, I guess. You live in my blood. Not in my head.

Did you doubt? See, I knew you doubted me. I could feel it, JW. All up inside you, squirming like a handful of nightcrawlers.

Doesn't much matter now, does it?

Guess not.

Sweet dreams, little girl.

Oh, but I'm not ready to go to bed just yet. Are you?

CHAPTER ONE

Now You're The Cure, Coburn

COBURN'S GUTS SAT heavy in his hands, spilling out across his forearms like a heap of bloody kielbasa. He jacked his back up against the stairway and kicked both legs out, bracing his boots against the door as a wall of rotten flesh pressed against it. Through the octagonal window at the top of the door he caught glimpses of mouths like wet holes in turned dirt, splintered teeth, eyes the color of diabetic piss. Hands slapped uselessly against the glass—red blisters on gray flesh popped, leaving greasy streaks behind.

Nasty-ass motherfuckers, he thought.

In his head, a voice altogether not his own answered: *Tsk-tsk, such bad language, Coburn. Naughty man.*

Outwardly—and inwardly—he growled, gnashing his teeth so hard he thought they might snap. Turned out that Kayla the ghost girl—having taken up residence inside his skull like it's a fifth-floor walk-up on the Lower East Side of NYC—liked to chat. Chatty in life. Chatty in death (or what passed for it).

He told her to keep quiet.

She listened. For now.

“You don’t look good,” came a voice from behind him on the stairs. Gil. Kayla’s father. “Bad news when your insides are outside.”

“For you, maybe,” Coburn said. “For me, it’s just a stubbed toe. A bloody nose.” Bit of bravado, but it wasn’t entirely untrue. Not like he needed his guts for anything. They were dead as every other organ in his body: might even be better if he could rip them out and leave them behind. He’d travel a lot lighter. Move faster. Hell, stitch in a zipper and he’d have a storage compartment. Could keep Creampuff in there, maybe. As if sensing what Coburn was thinking, the rat terrier wriggled at his side, snarling and snapping at the air in the direction of the zombie horde.

Coburn blinked. Looked around. The window afforded them a little sunlight: a fact he still wasn’t used to, all this *not burning to a blackened nub* when the sun came up. But all that changed when he took in every last drop of Kayla’s blood, didn’t it? He hears her laugh inside his head.

Still. It let him see what he was dealing with. Here in San Francisco, all the houses sat crammed together in a dull array of pastels—that one there the color of Pepto Bismol, the one next to it looking like a sun-bleached robin’s egg, and this one they were in, looking like the petals off a daffodil.

All the colors made him a bit sick. He felt a pang of nostalgia for New York—the grays, the blacks and browns, all the steel, cement, glass.

This house—a crass mash-up of Victorian and Art Deco—had been split into apartments. A bank of four mailboxes hugged the tin-tile wall to Coburn’s right, with an apartment door to the left. The mailboxes were a good size, with lockers big enough to each accommodate packages: Coburn grunted, got his fingertips behind the box and tipped it over with a crash.

He wedged it under the apartment doorknob. Then eased off with his boots.

The rotters surged, but the door *thunked* dully against the fallen mailbox locker. They could not get through. Their frustration came through the door, in gassy hissing and soggy burbling. Rotten fingertips, some worn to the bone, searched around the door margins to no avail.

“Upstairs,” Coburn said to Gil. “Go, go, go.”

Gil turned, bolted up the steps.

The vampire grabbed his guts in one hand and the terrier in the other and marched up after the old man.

THEY KNEW SAN Francisco was going to be trouble. How could it not be? Be foolish to think that a city that once contained a stone's throw from a million living human beings would not now contain a *nearly equal portion* of undead assholes. They had a plan, and it seemed like a good one.

Might've been the bridge that gave them a false sense of confidence.

They crossed the Golden Gate that morning. Bands of fog thick above their heads, like rain-soaked cotton swallowing the brick-red cables and towers. Ahead of them, the way lay packed with abandoned cars. And not a single rotter in sight.

Creampuff the terrier seemed suspicious. Sniffed the air with a muzzle still bloody from a freshly-killed squirrel only an hour before (a little bit of the squirrel's tail hung from the small dog's chin like a tiny dog beard) and growled.

Gil commented on the absence of undead assholes: "I don't see any dead folk stumbling around. That seem right to you?"

"Sure." The vampire shrugged. "Way I see it, the bridge is basically a really long, really fat tightrope. Whatever zombies get herded onto it end up fumbling and stumbling over to the railing and over the edge into the bay below."

"I read that lots of people kill themselves here."

"Beautiful way to die, if dying's your thing."

"Says the man who can't die."

"Says the man who's already dead." Coburn headed over to the ass-end of a Toyota Corolla. He snapped his fingers at Gil. "Map. C'mon."

Gil set his crossbow down, fished a Rand McNally pocket atlas from his pocket. "You snap at me again, I might shoot one of those fingers off."

"Just bring out the fuckin' map, old man."

Kayla, inside his head, admonished him: *Apologize to Daddy*.

As Gil slapped the map down on the filthy car trunk, Coburn told the girl inside his head no, he won't apologize, she didn't get to make demands—

He knew it was a lie and she called him on it fast. Suddenly the noise level in his head cranked up like someone just spun the volume knob, broke it off, and stabbed him in the eardrum with the shattered plastic. Kayla screamed senselessly inside his mind, a shrieking banshee wail, and behind it all a sub rosa thread of thought that said: *I can do this all day, all night*.

Coburn curled his lip and muttered: "Sorry, old man."

The psychic cacophony stopped.

"I'm not old. I'm barely into my fifties." Gil cocked an eyebrow at him. "Was Kayla that made you apologize, wasn't it?"

The girl's father still wasn't comfortable with the fact that Coburn had drunk the lifeblood of his daughter and that she was now taking up real estate inside the vampire's blood, body and mind. He believed it; he just didn't like it.

Coburn said nothing. Just grabbed the map and used his finger to trace their route through the city. "Look. We cross the bridge. We go south. Hug the water's edge. Any dumbfuck zombies come after us, we snag a boat or just dive in the water. They don't seem to do so well with the wet stuff. End to end, it's not even six miles. If the lab's on a ferry, it's gotta be operating out of the wharf. There, or somewhere along the piers off the east side. We should be there by the afternoon."

The wind kicked up. It had fangs. It whistled through the bridge cables. Gil didn't say anything; he just stood there staring at Coburn, scratching at his salt-and-pepper beard with an idle hand.

"Can you see her?" Gil finally asked.

"No. I hear her." Coburn thought about it, and clarified: "But I do feel her. She's like a... well. It's like when a TV is on somewhere in the house, and even if the sound is down you can still feel it. A white noise. An indiscernible buzz."

Inside Coburn's head: *Aww, how sweet. Every girl just wants to be thought of as an indiscernible buzz.*

Gil nodded. Satisfied or not, Coburn wasn't sure.

"Let's keep moving," Gil said.

And they did. They trudged south. Found a few rotters stumbling around at the toll gate at the end of the bridge. One woman with no arms staggering around, a rat's nest of bleach-blonde hair gathering flies the way a tree gathers crows. Two men with dark blood-poison striations up their necks—toll booth attendants, one fat and tall, one thin and small, both easy to fell. Coburn shattered their knees with hard kicks, then stepped on their heads like overripe honeydews. Gil dispatched the blonde with the crossbow, the arrow going clean through her eye and out the back of her head.

As they headed south down the 101, the fog thinned and the sun came out and again Coburn felt that old spike of fear and for a half a second it felt like ants were crawling under his skin trying to bite their way free—but then, once more, he realized it was just the warmth of that unfamiliar ball of fire in the sky washing over him. He didn't much care for it.

They left the 101. Got off on Mason. A stretch of wet grass (and the distant bay) to their left. On the other side, whitewashed warehouses and the trees encroaching behind and overtop them. A rotter flopped around on the ground, his legs tangled in the chain and spokes of a bicycle. Coburn kicked its head off.

Seemed like a cakewalk.

The air grew warm.

The sun was out.

What few rotters they found were dumber than hammerstruck calves, and just as easy to dispatch. Even Coburn—not a naturally optimistic creature—started to feel pretty good about their chances. He could feel Kayla growing excited, too. Her voice in his head like a cool glass of sweet tea:

Remember: you're the cure, Coburn.

Things went off the rails as soon as they entered the city proper. They started seeing the tall needle-like masts of boats bobbing there in the water, and the warehouses and trees gave way to the condos and duplexes and single homes.

And to the zombies.

The street ahead lay crowded with them. Jostling together like sluggish fetid molecules, elbow to elbow, shoulder to shoulder, the stench of death pairing with the stink of brine from the bay.

Gil brought the crossbow to his shoulder.

Creampuff bared his teeth.

Watching a horde of zombies figure out you were there was an exercise in patience: they lift their heads, sniff the air with ruined noses, let their rot-clad skulls teeter on mushy necks until *finally* they turn toward you, their prey.

Coburn didn't think to give them the time.

He grabbed Gil, nudged Creampuff with a boot. The vampire pointed to a side street—Baker—and ducked down it. In the distance he could see that the road tilted up sharply, which was unsurprising given how San Francisco basically sat atop an epic hill. This way wasn't clotted with rotters, though had a dozen or more milling about the street, pawing at one another and gurgling. A few more plodded along the sidewalk, collecting flies.

One zombie—face all but indistinguishable from a plate of raw meat except for the eyes staring out—started jogging toward them. Others caught sight, started coming at them, too.

"Coburn," Gil warned.

"Follow me," he said. The vampire scooped up the terrier and leapt up onto a parked car, helping Gil up after him. Then he hurried along the cars, jumping from one to the next. The zombies were slow, stupid. By the time they lurched forward against the car, Coburn and Gil were already moving onto the next one. The undead were not efficient hunters—they went where the prey was, not where the prey was going. Yet another difference between the bloodsucker and the rotter.

But they come from you, Kayla said. Never forget that.

How could he, with her reminding him like that all the goddamn time.

Of course, it was *true*. They were of his blood. Part of his grim legacy. Flipped the wrong motherfucker the middle finger, which lost him that finger. And that digit went on to spawn the undead menace, the zombipocalypse, the end of the world as they knew it. His *fuck you* to one man became a gigantic *fuck you* to the whole of the human race—and given the fact he needed their blood to survive, kind of a boomerang *fuck you* right back to him.

He was almost proud.

But then, as one zombie stumbled forward like a drunk and cracked its head into the passenger side window of a parked BMW, that pride dissipated like steam.

Coburn called to Gil behind him: "We work our way up to the next street, then we head east. You good?"

"You don't need to worry about me. You just worry about yourself."

"What's that mean?"

"I just mean, you do what you do best: worry about you."

"You saying I'm selfish?"

"What? No." Gil followed Coburn, jumping from a Hyundai to the back of a Dodge pickup and into the truck bed. Coburn was already at the front. "Just go."

"You think I'm a selfish asshole. You think I can't keep your daughter safe."

"Well," Gil growled, "you did a bang-up job back in Los Angeles."

Coburn stopped moving. He spun around on the roof of a Subaru Forester and showed his teeth. "Hey, I did my best. Besides, I wasn't the one who led her into that goddamn deathtrap, now was—" That's the moment everything went pear-shaped.

The vampire had been seeing things on a horizontal playing field. And arguing with Gil, with his backup, made him miss what was coming.

And what was coming fell from above.

Bam!

A zombie tumbled off a roof and landed right on Coburn, knocking the vampire off the Subaru and onto the ground. Creampuff whined and tumbled under the car, claws scrabbling.

The rotter—a dead woman with skin the color and consistency of tar-paper—clambered atop him and put all her weight on his chin. Her rotten tooth-stubs sought out his throat, hankering for a taste of his blood. Coburn couldn't let that happen. Last time he let rotters have a sip of his go-go juice it changed them. Turned ordinary zombies from brain-dead stumblers to smart super-predators. A condition they could spread, and that only ended when Coburn killed himself—or tried to, before Kayla brought him back to existence with that magic blood of hers.

Everything seemed to happen at once. Coburn got his hand under her cheek and pushed upward at the same time Creampuff darted out from under the car, snarling and nipping at her. She reared back, and only then did Coburn see that her left arm had no hand—the arm dead-ended at the elbow, which was just a jagged, shattered spur of broken bone.

The zombie plunged that bone right into his belly.

It wasn't an attack. The dumb cooze was trying to *lean* on a hand that wasn't there. And now she wa-

bone-deep in his guts, writhing like an animal caught in a trap. Which, as it turned out, was not all that great for Coburn's interior.

The zombie struggled, wrenching her arm up—
Slicing a ragged tear across Coburn's stomach.
Cool air blew across his exposed guts.
Well, shit.

The zombie saw his undead bowel and thought to dive in the way a porky kid goes at a pie-eating contest, but as she dove forth with zeal and hunger, he grabbed her head and racked it backward until the spine snapped and her dead eyes went deader. Other zombies were already shuffling forward, crossbow bolts sticking out of a few of their heads as they dropped.

Coburn, laying on the street looking up, saw something else.

More zombies. On the roof. Milling about.

Their attention had been gotten.

Coburn grunted, packed his viscera into the cavern of his body and yelled to Gil: "Up, up, up!"

Gil looked up to see the zombies start spilling over the edge, two stories up. He danced out of the way as one slammed hard into the Subaru, rolling off the back end. Another crashed into the boughs of a small tree growing out of the sidewalk, thrashing as it tangled itself in the branches.

They kept falling. One after the other. None of them landing with grace, but all of them getting up afterwards.

And now the zombies from the bottom of the street—the horde—had been alerted. A seething tide of corrupted unlife. Rotten as a tsunami of dead fish.

Coburn backed up to a house—a house the color of daffodils—and shouldered open the door, waving Gil and whistling for Creampuff.

The zombies were coming.

CHAPTER TWO

Blood Light

AS GIL USED the butt of the crossbow to bust the knob off one of the apartment doors upstairs, Coburn realized he was losing a not insignificant amount of blood. Soaked his jeans. Dribbled over his arms, milked from his exposed intestinal loops. Left a trail of it up the steps.

His hunger was different now that Kayla was nesting in his brain, blood, mind, soul, or wherever it was she *existed*. His need for blood had lost its serrated edge—it was still sharp, just not so jagged, so raw.

But hunger was hunger.

They pushed into the apartment. Nice place. Open concept. Built-in bookshelves, granite countertops, stainless steel appliances, travertine tile in the entryway. And a long-dead man in a leather recliner with a gun in his mouth and a rusty, clumpy peacock tail sprayed on the wall behind him.

A year ago, the sight of even that dried, shitty blood would've had Coburn tearing the pipes out of the walls in the hopes of finding a rat to eat, but now he kept his cool. As Gil orbited the room, Coburn muttered through gritted teeth: "Yeah, I'm going to need to eat something."

"Can't you heal that"—Gil gestured toward the exploded gutty-works—"first?"

"Normally. But turns out, a big hole in your midsection is one way for blood to make the great egress outside your body. And I need the blood to heal up."

"Take my blood."

The reaction inside Coburn was like a tiger with a string of firecrackers shoved up its ass—he damn near leapt across the room to get a taste of the walking blood-bag standing right in front of him. But Kayla's presence—not even her voice, just her *existence*—inside of him cooled his heels.

"I've fed from you... too much already." Pained him to say it, but it was true.

Last time he had a proper non-Gil-flavored meal was three days northeast of the city, where they found a trio of cannibals living out of a dead conversion van outside of Vallejo. They'd been driven mad, could barely speak English—everything was just howls of rage and single syllable words like *hunt, kill, eat*. Almost mistook them for zombies.

They thought to hunt Coburn and Coburn let them.

He ate them up. Drained them dry. They were too skinny. Their blood tasted of ash and madness. And an iron deficiency.

Now, most of their blood was on the ground.

Useless, now. Once again, ash and madness.

"I'll be fine," Gil asserted.

Again Coburn resisted the urge to go hog wild and break open Gil like a fucking Pez dispenser. "I said no. I feed off you now, you'll be weak; too weak. Might give you a stroke or tweak your heart. You may die, but I won't be the one to do it. Your daughter would never forgive me."

You got that right, she said.

Gil slumped against the wall, slid to the floor. The crossbow clattering away as Creampuff sat next to him.

Coburn smelled the salty tears before he saw them.

The girl's father was crying.

"Oh, goddamnit," Coburn said, trying again to hold up his guts. The hunger coiled and uncoiled like a rattlesnake in his mind. "We're gonna do this now?"

"I failed her," Gil said. "You were right. I was her protector, and her death is on my hands. Not

yours." He sniffed up a snot bubble and his mouth formed a mortified line. "Her. Cecelia. Ebbie. All dead because of me."

"All dead because of Benjamin Brickert, who was the one who led you into that death trap." *And Benjamin Brickert, Kayla reminded him, came looking for you, didn't he? Doesn't that make our deaths your fault?* "Shut up!" he barked at her, not meaning to say it out loud, but there it was. He decided to run with it. "I need you to toughen the fuck up, Gil. Your rope's got too much slack in it; your daughter doesn't need a limp snot-slick handkerchief. She needs her father. She's not dead like you think of her being dead. I have her blood. I have the future."

Those words made him sick to say, but there they were anyway.

"I need blood. Can't be yours."

The terrier whined.

"No," Coburn said. "I'd need ten of you."

Creampuff wagged his tail.

"You need to hunt," Gil said, sniffling.

"Assuming anybody's alive in this city may be a fool's errand."

"What happens if you don't get blood?"

Coburn shrugged. "I start to dry up like a dead bug. Though what happens now that I have her up in my noggin remains to be seen."

Remember what you did in New York, Kayla said.

An image flashed in his head—an image he did not put there. Him. On the roof. Scenting for blood. How did she know that?

I have your whole head to wander around. It's all up here. Stuff you remember. Stuff you... don't.

That last part chilled him a little, and he wasn't sure why.

Still. She had it right.

"The roof," he said. "I've got to go to the roof."

HE UNDERSTOOD NOW. Why zombies were up here. People came here to wait out the horror. This house, like many others, was set-up to offer a roof-top patio: chairs, tables, outlets, little BBQ grills. One zombie hadn't realized that all his buddies had bailed on him and was still milling around, a sharp-angled pinstripe suit hanging loose on his desiccated, sun-dried body.

Gil knocked him off the roof. Crashing into the throng of massing zombies below. They accepted him as one of their own.

They were only two stories up, but Coburn could see the rooftops and, in the distance, the city on the hill. The tall buildings, the spired churches, the city of soft-colors and sea-bleached houses. The bay was a grim blue line. Behind them the skeleton of the Golden Gate rose, a crossing of bloody metal bones.

Blood.

Coburn sniffed the air. The perfume of decay rose from below, again mingling with the smell of the sea—salt and fish and sand. Decay, then, from all sides, too, just like in New York. Rotters this way and that way and *all* ways, because that's how the world was, now: home to the decomposing dregs of ex-humanity.

But no life.

No one alive nearby but them.

Weakness sucked the energy from his muscles, the life from his bones.

"Nothing," he said to Gil. "Not a goddamn thing. Maybe we press on. Try to find the ferry. If there are living people there, I can..." *What?* came Kayla's voice. *Make nice with them by making one of*

them a quick snack? I'm sure they won't think that's the least bit rude.

She was right.

Gil said something in response, but Coburn couldn't hear the old man—Kayla spoke again. More truth from the ghost girl.

You're sniffing for the wrong thing. Try again. Something's out there.

No. Nothing. He still couldn't—

Wait. There.

Not blood. But sweat. Body odor. The human musk—a sign of life.

He didn't understand how she'd smelled it and he hadn't.

You did smell it, you just didn't realize it yet. I'm you and you're me, dude.

"I smell someone," Coburn said, interrupting whatever Gil was saying.

Gil stared at him like he didn't believe it.

"I've got to hunt. I've got to hunt now." Before the scent was lost on the bay-born wind.

"How you plan to do that with all those rotters out there?"

"I go roof to roof. Only five feet between them."

Gil shook his head. "It's all short blocks. You'll hit a street before long."

"Then I hit a street. By then I'll be ahead of the throng. They're slow. Stupid. I'll be fine." He didn't necessarily believe it, but this wasn't the time to tell Gil that.

"What about me?"

"Hunker down. The zombies'll come after me; my blood makes them a little crazy." Coburn cringed as he pushed his guts back in his body, then closed his jacket over the wound and zipped it up snug.

"When they're gone? Bug the fuck out of here. Find the lab. And I'll find you."

"I can't do this—"

Coburn didn't let the old man finish.

No time to waste. He bolted forward in a clumsy gallop and leaped from this roof to the next—soon as he hit, the vampire tucked his legs and rolled, barely managing to come back up on his feet.

But he did. Because hunger afforded him little choice.

CHAPTER THREE

The Rat Man

HE HAD HIM, now.

Coburn knew he was on the trail. The man—and it most certainly was a man, that was just a thing that the vampire knew—left his unwashed scent on every street sign and mailbox and curb.

Humans were such dumb apes. They never knew how plainly they were telegraphing their weakness—generally to other stronger humans, apex predators like con-artists, robbers, rapists, but this time to all flavors of the living dead. Broadcasting that signal of frailty and isolation to one lone vampire and a deluge of always-starving zombie motherfuckers.

Hunger was driving Coburn, now. Still not as toothy as it had been, and now with Kayla there he was able to push it longer, harder, faster—but just the same, the edges of his vision were tinged with a rose-red hue. By now he'd normally be feeling like an infinite carpet of insects crawled just beneath his skin, but here the hunger was clear and cleanly sharp like a shard of broken glass.

He moved south through the city. Through the once-hoity-and-also-toity neighborhood of Pacific Heights, now looking like it had been through a riot: sandbags and fallen coils of barbed wire and burned cars stacked together. Then below that, toward gutted restaurants and shattered boutiques (Indian food! Head shop! Turkish coffee! Weird hats! Oaxacan blankets!).

The zombies were thicker, here—an environmental hazard to be dealt with, to be got past, as obtrusive as floodwaters, as empty-headed as a pack of starving dogs. Coburn was singularly-driven. He hurt. He starved. Any zombie that got in his way found its knee popped, neck snapped, head crushed. When the throng got too thick, he clambered up fire escapes, went roof to roof and back down again.

All the while following that trail.

Invisible handprints of sweat.

A gob of spit on the curb.

A swipe of snot across a bent parking meter.

And then, bright as the moon in a dark sky, a dime-sized dollop of blood in the middle of the intersection of that old hippie standby, Haight and Ashbury.

That blood lit up Coburn's brain like a full-tilt pinball machine, bumpers flickering and flippers clicking and lights and klaxons and *an electric surge of raw hunger* coursing through his fingertips and eyeholes—

Wait, Kayla said. Something's wrong.

No time for that. No need. Zero interest.

Move, rove, run, hunt.

Coburn, stop.

He felt her somehow reaching through his dried-up veins and tugging on them like puppet-strings, but he had no time for that—the demon within bucked like a scorned hell-steed and Kayla's ghostly grip slipped.

There.

A shape, a form, darting around an overturned dumpster and into an alley.

Moved fast.

Human. Not zombie.

Coburn!

He screamed inside his own head to shut her up as he rounded the corner, found a small man hiding behind a pile of ruptured sandbags in a dingy puddle-soaked alley—Coburn growled and grabbed him

and hauled him to his feet. Saw wide scared eyes, the eyes of a rabbit, and long greasy black hair with a kinky dread-twist beard to match, and the man mumbled something but it only came out as a froth of spit bubbles and who cares just fucking feed—

Kayla screamed inside his mind.

He bit deep into the dirt-caked neck.

Blood ran hot into Coburn's mouth. Coppery, oily, heavy, sweet—

But then, something else, too. A bitter edge on the back of the tongue. A rising taste of salt; a crass medicinal tang.

Coburn's head suddenly felt like it was doing loops and whorls, a biplane flying barrel rolls inside his skin. Kayla tried to say something, but her voice grew warped, distorted, like he was a little fishie inside an aquarium and she stood on the outside yelling in *whash ish appeming*—

The vampire could not pull away. The blood continued to pump into his mouth. When the rodent-like man pushed Coburn away, Coburn could not resist *that*, either. He felt like a store mannequin, his limbs somehow distant from the rest of him, his brain out there on a tether like a child's birthday balloon.

The rat man whimpered, fumbled clumsily for a square of dirty gauze which he quickly slapped over the neck wound. From behind the sandbag he rescued a roll of black electrical tape and a walkie-talkie.

He wound the tape around the gauze with one hand, and spoke into the walkie with the other.

"He got me. I mean—I got him. I mean, *shit*, ahhh, you know what I mean. Over." The rat man stared at Coburn as the vampire teetered there, trying desperately to will his limbs to respond to his desire to rip out this freak's throat.

The response from the walkie came from with rough voice that sounded like two bricks being rubbed together: "What's he doing? Over."

"He's just standing there. Staring at me. Over."

The rat-man mouthed two words to Coburn: *I'm sorry*.

The gravelly voice: "Good. Bring him to the corner of Page and Masonic. I'll send Flores and Jeepers to help you bring him in. Hurry before the stumblingers find you. Don't fuck this up, Fingerman. Over and out."

The rat-man—Fingerman, apparently—looked at Coburn and then shrugged. That's when his face melted. Leaving behind only a grinning skull.

The sky above turned to an eye.

The blood in the vampire's mouth and throat felt suddenly like a bubbling pile of clipped fingernail-chewed calluses, and battery acid.

Fingerman pushed Coburn over, wound electrical tape around his eyes and mouth, and began dragging him.

CHAPTER FOUR

The K-Hole

COBURN'S WORLD, PLUNGED into darkness.

But in the darkness, light flared like a burst of red phosphorus.

He saw faces in those dark spaces, faces lit by crimson light. A prostitute with her neck torn open. A pair of club kids, tongueless, made to kiss with their bloody mouths as Coburn watched. A meter maid, skin gone ashen, a pair of puncture wounds on her bloodless, mortified wrist.

Ebbie's moon face.

Cecelia, laughing.

Together they all whispered his name, his *true* name:

"John Wesley Coburn."

Then:

Kayla. Sitting on the floor. Watching a television whose round full screen flickered static with a black and white image dancing behind the noise—a voice crackling through the hiss: *Rilly big shoe.*

Kayla became Rebecca. Hair into pigtails. Sweet smile.

Then, back to Kayla.

"It's a strange place in here," she said. "Messy."

"How'd you get in here?" he asked, even though he knew the answer: *You stabbed yourself in the neck and made me drink your blood, and now I'm your keeper, your container, your little Coburn. Cure for what ails the world.*

"Lots of dead people in your head."

"Not like you, though," he said. "You're really here."

"They're *all* really here, JW. Can I call you that now? I think I will."

He wanted to tell her *no, don't call me that*, but couldn't find the words.

She continued: "Everybody you killed, whose blood you drank, lives in here. Part of them does. Maybe it's biology. Maybe it's the soul. Who knows? I'm stuck, too. Not like I have access to the Internet in here."

Kayla laughed. But it wasn't her laugh. It was Rebecca's laugh.

"My daughter," Coburn said. *If everybody I ever killed is in here...*

"Don't worry about her right now. You gotta bring yourself back from this. You've fallen down the rabbit hole, JW. And you're falling still. It's time now to wake up, you hear? Time to see where you are."

"But Rebecca..."

"Isn't going anywhere. But you are, big guy."

"Wait."

"No time to wait."

"Wait!"

His scream echoed.

His eyes opened behind black tape.

HIS HANDS MOVED. They moved when he told them to. Not fast. Barely functional. Felt like they were somebody else's arms and he was willing them to move with telepathy—there came a delay from when his brain issued the command and when his arms flailed upward like the limbs of a doll. He cried out. His numb fingers found the tape around his eyes. Pried the tape off. No pain. Just bright

light that washed out the middle; reality bled in at the edges.

He saw zombies.

Upside-down zombies. Filthy gore-caked faces. Lips ripped away. Dead tongues lolling, tasting the air. About ten, fifteen feet away. Floating. Flying.

Coburn grunted. Sat up. A cry of alarm erupted at his feet—a fist popped him in the face, knocked his head back down as upside-down zombies continued to lurch forth. The sky was on the ground and asphalt was the sky and—

You're upside-down, Kayla said, not them. Silly vampire.

It all began to work itself out.

Coburn dipped his chin to his chest, saw that three humans were dragging him up toward a house on the corner, a house walled away behind sandbags and cars and coils of razor wire. House the color of turned earth, of fresh mulch, of grave dirt.

The three humans looked back at him as they hurriedly dragged him forward by his boots—one of them, the rat-man, Fingerman, yelped. “He’s wakin’ up! Chee-rist, he’s wakin’ up!”

Another one—a wild-eyed Hispanic-looking motherfucker with fat biceps and a corded neck that looked like the trunk of a sequoia—barked at him: “Go back to sleep! Go the fuck to sleep!” To the third man, a wispy old dude with a Gandalf beard and a cheap pink plastic lei around his neck: “Give him the shot! The shot!”

Gandalf let go of the vampire’s boot, coming at Coburn with a syringe full of red. Coburn’s mouth tingled—that’s blood, Kayla told him, but it’s bad blood—but he had to suppress the hunger. He tried to kick his feet but they were slow to respond, tried to bat at the incoming hippie-wizard but his fist felt like it was swaddled in cotton swabs, and before he knew what was happening the dude’s beard was in his eyes and the syringe was squirting blood into his mouth and—

There. The bitter tang. The medicine wrapped in a spoonful of sugar.

Kayla: *They’re drugging you.*

“Muhfuh!” Coburn muttered—it sounded better in his head—and once more the darkness found him again touched by the faces of the dead and tinged by firelight cast through a curtain of blood.

HOURS. DAYS. WEEKS. Years.

Coburn could not say long the parade of the doomed and the dead lasted this time. When he finally awoke, it felt like leaving a too-loud, too-crowded party and walking out onto a balcony or sidewalk where the air is cool and everything is comparatively quiet and the clamor and clatter has been left behind.

That effect did not last.

When Coburn’s eyes adjusted, he found himself nailed to a dining room table. Dark cherrywood. The air smelled of—what was that? Hash. The crispy, pungent tang of hashish.

Gandalf stood at Coburn’s side. Whistling ‘Baby Elephant Walk’ as he worked. In this case, worked meant swaddled Coburn’s guts with a ribbon of duct tape. Gandalf wound the tape over the vampire, then under the table, then over the vampire and back under the table.

Above the vampire’s head, a water-stained ceiling. Cracks in the plaster like cracks in glass. To the right: a hallway. Toward his feet: a beaded curtain in rainbow colors, with no idea what lay beyond—though he saw figures moving. And smoke vented through the beads. Again: hashish.

Coburn tried to move. He felt weak. His body, still partially unmoored from his brain. The effort to move shot ragged cigarette burns of pain up and down each limb—hundreds of them.

I think they used a whole lotta nails, Kayla said. Owie.

“Sonofa...” Coburn growled. “Bitch.”

Gandalf, startled, danced away, dropping the duct tape. It rolled away.

~~"Hey, brother," Gandalf said. Voice throttled by a frequency of fear. "You okay over there?"~~

"Fucking delightful." Coburn noted that his voice sounded like he'd been smoking cigarettes full of ground-up glass for the duration of his long unlife. "I really enjoy it when some whacked-out moon-units kidnap me off the streets of a zombie-infected city and then nail me to their dinner table."

"Cool," Gandalf said, clearly not sure if it was cool.

Coburn helped him with that. "No, it ain't cool, you old goat wizard. Let's make a deal, you and me. You start ripping these nails out and you let me up and I won't kill you. But"—he interrupted Gandalf before the old fool spoke—"if you don't let me out, then here's my promise to you: I'm going to kill you first. And I'll make it hurt. I'll bring pain to you that before now was an impossible nightmare. That's the deal I'm offering. One time. One time *only*."

"I..." Gandalf thought about it. Coburn could see that. The dude stroked his long gray beard with nervous spidery fingers, and then finally he said: "I better go get Minister Masterson."

The willowy old-timer darted through the curtain, the beads clattering against one another. Coburn snarled, yelled after him, but it was too late.

Kayla, of course, had to chime in, *You'd think by now you'd realize: more flies with honey than vinegar, JW.*

The beads whispered against one another once more.

A man came up to the foot of the table. Coburn craned his neck, put his chin to his chest to see.

Tall sonofabitch. Oily crow-black hair pulled back. Scraggly beard. Little teeth behind thin lips. Reached in past a shirtless vest and idly itched a nipple ringed in black hair. The guy had a distinct *Charlie Manson* vibe hanging around him—along with a gauzy haze of hash smoke.

"You must be Coburn," the dude said. He had a familiar voice. Coburn recognized it as the one from the walkie-talkie. Like gravel under a wheelbarrow wheel. "Thanks for stopping by, vampire."

Coburn seethed. "You know me?"

"Seems you're a popular motherfucker, motherfucker."

"Masterson, I presume," Coburn said. Upstairs, he heard sounds: footsteps, people moving around. *How many more are there?*

"Presume away."

From behind the so-called Minister came the rat-man, Fingerman. He came up on Masterson's left, clinging to the Minister's hip like a squirrel. On Masterson's right came a reedy love-bombed sylph with pink puckered lips and a diaphanous gown with one wine-glass breast exposed as if she didn't even realize it. She wasn't looking at Coburn so much as *through* him.

"Nice place you have here," the vampire growled.

"Thanks, man. It's pretty well-defended. We got a cushy thing going."

"I bet. What'd you dose me with?"

A voice to Coburn's right: "Ketamine, bro."

There stood the thick-necked Hispanic. Looking like some cracked out PTSD Marine.

He was eating something.

Chowing down on it like it was a big old turkey leg.

It was a human foot.

Coburn's first thought was: *oh, of course, I've been captured by a nest of drug culture cannibals*, but then something else became clear: the man wasn't eating a healthy human leg. Nor a cooked one. It was rotten. Skin pocked by red sores. Muscles mushy like the flesh of an overripe pear.

"Ketamine's some bad-ass shit," the Hispanic man said around a mouthful of what looked to be undead meat. He chewed noisily, tongue smacking. "It's like a... a dog anesthetic or something. You give someone a good strong dose of it, they fall into the K-Hole. Total dissociation of body and mind."

Great for putting the moves on a girl. Get her all loosey-goosey. Once you get her lubed up with that stuff, she's like putty in your—”

“Flores,” Masterson said. “Enough, man. Enough.”

“Oh. Right, bro. Right.”

“You eat zombies,” Coburn said.

Masterson nodded. “We do. Some of us see it as a transubstantiation of the flesh thing. Some of us just figure we’ve got an easy meat source out there. Free range long pig.”

“It’s *diseased* meat. Which means you have the disease.”

Flores laughed. Masterson shot him a look, then said: “We have ways of keeping ourselves pure. Don’t you sweat it, man.”

“You and I have very different definitions of purity.”

Masterson shrugged. “This is the way. The new way. I’m leading people toward a symbiotic future. Where living man and dead man have a place in each other’s worlds. We can feed off of them as they feed off of us. Can’t you see the beauty in that? In the cycle of life to death to life again?”

“You’re fucking baked.”

“Baked on an idea. Baked by the power of our purity.” Masterson began pacing the room. “You know I used to be a banker? Down in the financial district. Packaging mortgages.”

“Shoulda stuck with it. I hear the foreclosure market is *ripe* for the picking.”

“Funny, man. Funny. I like you. But see, that’s the thing—you’re hitting on a real point. I was one of the guys who helped fuck things up for people. Did some naughty shit. I got rich as everyone got poor. I fiddled while Rome burned. Housing market collapsed like the house of cards that it was but we didn’t have long to nest on that, did we? Because that’s when the real shit hit the fan. And it showed me—and everybody—just what bullshit the system was. The system was a prison made of illusions, like, like endless walls of circus mirrors. It all crashed. The real crash. The crash of the dead against the living.”

“Great story. Can I go now?”

But Masterson ignored him. “But I don’t want it to be us versus them anymore. I want us to co-exist. Even if that relationship of coexistence is one based on food and need and hunger. That’s okay. Because those things are pure. Hunger is pure. I’m sure you understand that. Being who you are. *What* you are.”

Coburn struggled against the hundreds of nails puncturing his flesh and pinning him to the table like a butterfly on a corkboard. His strength still wasn’t there—given his guts hanging out of his body and the traces of what was apparently a veterinary anesthetic lingering in his morbid veins, it didn’t seem like it would be in reach anytime soon.

“Struggle all you want,” Flores said. “We nailed you there pretty good.”

“You’re going to eat me,” the vampire said. That’s what this was. What this *had* to be. If the zombies were Grade-E-but-Edible—and hunger was *pure*, as Masterson put it—then a kidnapped vampire was like a fresh slab of filet-fucking-mignon hot off the grill. Though that still didn’t explain how they knew who Coburn was, or where he’d be...

Masterson laughed. “Nah. We could. But we won’t. The Doc wouldn’t like that. The Doc’s the one with the plans.” He snapped his fingers. “Get Jeepers back in here. Our friend needs another dose.”

“Dose? No. Don’t put me under again.” Those faces. The faces of those he damned—Coburn couldn’t abide another second with them. Hundreds of ghosts. Each trapped in a drop of blood. Hallucinations or specters, he didn’t know, he didn’t care, he just didn’t want to be locked away in the prison of his own diseased mind with them. He said something he never thought he’d say to these people: “Please.”

The wizard Gandalf—or Jeepers, for some reason that remained unclear to Coburn—moved up

alongside Coburn with another syringe. Coburn caught a whiff of sage and lavender. *Goddamn hippie*

"Doped blood," Flores said, looking over Jeepers' slumped shoulder. "We drugged up Fingerman the first time 'cause he loves the ketamine and he's so goofy on it half the time he never falls into the K-Hole anymore. Drugs like that, you're just chasing the dragon. No high is ever as good as the first. Ain't that right, vampire man?"

"Fuck you."

Suddenly Flores' face tightened in a rictus of rage, eyes bugging out of his head in such a way that Coburn thought they might launch out of his head on wobbly springs. "Fuck you, man. Fuck! You! Time to go *tits up*, bitch." Flores walked off in a huff, saying, "Dose him, Jeepers."

The wizard shrugged, came at Coburn with the needle.

Soon as it got near Coburn's mouth, he opened his mouth wide and bit down on the needle. It stuck in his tongue and snapped. Jeepers yelped, struggling to wrench open Coburn's jaw—

Which was the wrong move. The vampire reopened his mouth, clamped down a pair of mean canine on the span of flesh between the old wizard's thumb and forefinger—*crunch*—and began to guzzle. Fresh blood—if not entirely clean, as Coburn caught the trace of hash or marijuana hanging out in there somewhere—flooded his mouth as Jeepers screamed like a middle-aged housewife seeing a mouse run across her kitchen floor.

This was the way out. Fresh blood meant a shock to his system. Purge the drugs. He lurched forward with renewed vigor, the nails popping through his flesh and tearing it like ragged leather. Jeepers tried to back away as the monster rose anew, feasting, drinking, making good on his promise to kill Jeepers first (though at present not as painfully as he'd like). Masterson ducked through the curtain, rattling the beads. Flores disappeared down the hall. Fingerman dropped into a fetal crouch and rocked back and forth.

Flee, freaks, flee.

It didn't matter.

All these assholes were going to die today.

Or so he thought.

But then, out of nowhere, came the reedy sylph girl.

She had a Louisville slugger in her hand and a crazy beaming smile on her face. The girl held the bat like she was swinging for the fences.

The bat connected with Coburn's head.

Starbursts erupted in his vision. Streaks of smeary white.

He tried to get back up—

The bat came down on his chest. Then his chin.

Flores launched himself up atop Coburn's body and took a knee. With hands as muscled as the rest of his 'roid-monkey body, Flores jacked open Coburn's now-broken jaw and—

Squirt.

Into the mouth with another jet of bad blood.

Coburn slipped once more into the dark tide. He couldn't tell if Kayla was laughing, or crying, or both. The faces renewed their assault, drowning him in a bucket of his own bilious guilt.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hunters Hunted

THE VAMPIRE WAS right. Soon as Coburn took off leaping from rooftop to rooftop like the shadow from a cloud moving overhead, the zombie throng slowly began shuffling up the street, leaving only a few stragglers behind.

Gil peered over the roof's edge. Creampuff whined by his side.

He felt suddenly overwhelmed and alone. The city was silent. Same way that all the cities were, now no cars, no helicopters, no constant rumbling murmur of voices and HVAC units and music. Nobody was here to care about him or have him care back. Dead streets, dead city, dead world. Who were they trying to save again, exactly? What was left of humanity? And how many of them were worth a shit?

"I feel alone," he said to Creampuff. "And I miss my daughter."

The dog sat down, stared up.

"Yeah, I hear you. Cut the pity party. Let's hit the bricks, pooch."

WHEN NEXT COBURN opened his eyes, night had fallen and he found himself nailed back to the dining room table. For a half moment he caught a whiff of something sweet and sour hanging in the air—the scent of jasmine mingling with an eerily-familiar odor of death. Familiar because...

Kayla filled it in for him: *It smells like you.*

At the same time the odor was crawling its way up his nose like a worm, a sound reached his ears that chilled his already cold body:

A howling screech. Containing within it a madness beyond life's margins, a desperate ragged hunger that had no end and gave no quarter.

The scream was far away... but close enough to still be heard.

That sound set off a cascade of images in his mind: rotters drinking his blood, turning into monstrous hell-zombies, the *hunters* who stopped at nothing when it came to getting another taste of Coburn.

How could another hunter exist in the world? All the ones he inadvertently made—and then those that made each other—were gone now. Was there just one? Or had their unstoppable army begun to form anew?

Coburn lay there in the darkness for awhile, trying to parse what he'd heard. A figure drifted beyond the beaded curtain; a shadow upon the sea of shadows. Coburn willed his eyes to see better—normally he could see in darkness like it was a cloudy day, but right now it seemed that either the ketamine or his day-long exposure to the bleary fireball known as the 'sun' had done his night-sight no good.

Again he smelled jasmine and death.

Stronger, this time.

The figure emerged from behind the curtain.

Now he could see her. She was Asian. Clad in a white doctor's coat. The woman was tall, long limbed, with the elegance of a cellar spider. Flesh pale like a cave cricket and flawless like porcelain—except for the asterisk-shaped crater on her cheek below her left eye. Like someone had taken a chisel to a beautiful doll.

As she approached with confident step, the jasmine smell washed over him.

And so did the smell of death.

She's one of you, Kayla said.

"I've come to take your blood," she said.

"That's awfully matter-of-fact, Doc."

"I see no reason to obfuscate my intentions." She walked the table at his feet, pacing in slow half-moons. He couldn't hear shoes. Was she barefoot?

"You're pretending to me like me."

She frowned. "To be like you how?"

"You know."

"Enlighten me."

He opened his mouth, hissed, let his tongue play across the tip of two plainly-displayed fangs. "See what I'm getting at, China Doll?"

"I'm Korean, and why do you think I'm pretending?"

"Because I'm the only one out there."

"I'm surprised you think so, though I suppose I see why." She seemed done with the conversation. She waved someone on behind the beaded curtain, and here came itchy, twitchy Fingerman, pushing metal cart with a wooden case atop it.

"Don't you, uhh, need lights?" Fingerman asked.

The woman barely gave him a look. "I can see in the dark even if you cannot. Run along, little rat." Coburn snorted. "I thought he looked like a rat, too."

But she didn't respond. So much for being friendly.

"What's your name?" he asked her.

"Lydia."

"Nice to meet you, Lydia. I'm—"

"Coburn, yes, I know." She popped the latch on the case—a little brass hook—and opened it. Looked to be something out of medical antiquity. One giant metal syringe. A number of glass containers, each about the size of a stick of dynamite. Old surgical tubing. A shiny metal piece that looked like the head of an octopus with all of its tentacles chopped off at the half-way mark. She began hooking it all together efficiently, silently.

"What's all this nonsense?"

"It's a blood transfusion kit. From the era of the Great War. Would've preferred something more updated, but the hospitals remain host to a continuing plague of the undead." She clipped the octopus head to the tubing, then the tubing to the syringe. Then she did the same the other way: connecting one glass jar to the tubing, and back to the octopus head. "Don't worry. I tested it."

"Tested it."

"Mm. I have test subjects."

"Pigs?"

"Humans. Children, actually."

He laughed, though it was without mirth. "I'm a little confused here, honey. You know that if you were a real bloodsucker you don't need all this fancy crap, right? You just... open your mouth. Let your fangs come out to play. Sink them into somebody's skin like pushing your pinky through a stick of warm butter... mmm. Oooooh-ee. Nothing beats it. Not that you'd know, being a—"

He was about to say pretender, but then Lydia leaned forward, extended her jaw and tilted her head back, and let her fangs show.

As he did, she poked at each with a tongue.

"Satisfied?" she asked. "Good."

Then she went back to setting up the kit.

She told you, boy, Kayla said.

He willed her to shut up.

"So why the kit if you could just drink me dry here and now?"

“The blood is not for me.”

She turned her gaze suddenly to the wall. Then to the beaded curtain. Back to Coburn, an unexpected moment of cageyness submerged now beneath that glassy exterior.

Something scratched at his mind like a crow clawing the earth.

“Not for you. Who’s it for?”

She didn’t answer.

“Who the fuck wants my blood, *Lydia*?”

Still silent. Only the click and squeak of her hands adjusting the apparatus.

What’s going on, Coburn?

“I don’t even have that much blood in me. If I did I’d be up off this table. I’d be tearing this place to pieces, commanding these freaks to eat one another alive.”

Lydia stopped. Finally seemed resolved to say something. “It’s not your blood that matters. It’s what’s inside it.”

He went cold. Like someone flushed his system with saline. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Your blood is different now. You have a guest. I’m here to take her.”

Her. Kayla. The cure.

Shitfuck.

Coburn, how does she know that?

No time to think about that now. Panic settled into his supine body like sepsis; that cold feeling of saline turned to a hot rush of acid. “You don’t know what you’re doing. You don’t want to do this.”

“Not used to this, are you? The begging. The pleading and wheedling. Usually it’d be your victim, wouldn’t it? Begging you for her life. Or begging you to take her life, depending on how badly you tweaked her brain. Trust me. I know.” Lydia screwed a massive needle onto the tip of the equally massive syringe. Looked like something used to deliver adrenalin to an elephant’s heart. Her gaze flicked again to the windows. Did Coburn sense a nervousness there? “But now you’re the one on the slab. You’re the one imploring another to save you. Or save the one inside your blood. I wonder what that must be like. To care about another as you do now. The good news for me is, I am not given over to such delicate compunction. It’s sad to see you like this, really. It’s like watching a wolf limp.”

“Are you done talking?” Coburn said. “Because I’m getting tired of hearing your fool mouth flap.”

“I am. A rare moment of gregariousness. I suppose I just savor the irony of your situation.” An icy smile. “Let us begin.”

She gave the needle one last tighten. Moved it toward his neck.

Then: outside, another keening banshee’s wail. The hunter, hunting.

Lydia tensed. Syringe held firm in her grip.

Coburn suddenly understood.

“The hunter,” he said, clucking his tongue as if to chastise a tardy student. “The hunter’s yours, isn’t it? You let your guard down. And when you did, some rot-fuck took a bite out of you—not out of your cheek, no, that’s from before you turned into the carefree killing machine you are now—and something happened that you didn’t figure on. The rot-fuck changed. And now he’s out there. Or *she* out there. Looking like something that kicked its way out of the Devil’s own dickhole. Like something that’s bringing Hell with it.”

“Shut your mouth,” she hissed.

“Oooh. Getting testy, now. It’s my turn to be the smart one and you don’t like that.” She turned the syringe downward and he uttered a quick *tut-tut-tut*. “Slow your roll, sister. That thing’s on the hunt. And it wants one thing: vampire blood. Yours, if it can manage it. But I suspect mine will do fine. You let one drop of my blood hit the air and that thing will be like a shark scenting prey. It’ll come. For

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