

NIGHT SONGS

By

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ISBN: 0-9701009-2-2

Prologue

Old George was a loner, a hermit, and even though he looked ancient—his face craggy, beard gray and grizzled, and gray hair tangled in knots and piled high on top his head—he was only fifty-two years old. Even so, everyone around Big Sur knew him as and called him Old George.

"There goes Old George," people would whisper and point. *"You know...Old George is crazy."*

But he paid them no mind. He'd smile his toothless smile and go about his business. In truth, he liked being the oddest character in a place full of odd characters. He liked

being alone.

Today, as always, he was alone. But seconds ago a dark shadow had passed over him like the earth during a solar eclipse. This shadow, however, hadn't been the result of an external force, as the moon blocking the rays of the sun. This shadow originated from deep within him—a dark and obscured sense of dread. There was no one around, but he inexplicably didn't feel alone. He felt as if someone or *something* watched his every move.

With that thought, a chill stepped onto the staircase of his spine. Its cold feet rocked him with an uncontrollable shiver.

He stood on his porch and stared out across *his* valley, searching. Something gave him the willies. As expected, he didn't see anyone or anything. He never had visitors, and a bobcat or mountain lion would keep its distance and stay hidden.

He lived two thousand feet above sea level, in the Santa Lucia Mountains—a rugged mountain range that exploded abruptly out of the cold waters of the Pacific Ocean, trending northwest to southeast, parallel with the California coastline. More years ago than he cared to remember, he discovered this small, quiet valley tucked between two steep ridges. The ridges and valley ran perpendicular to the main ridge—the Coast Ridge—that

fronted much of the immediate coastline. The only access to the valley was a narrow road winding its way along the edge of steep ridges and dipping down into deep canyons like a roller coaster constructed of dirt and rock. This roller coaster continually climbed for over nine miles from Highway 1. It was here, on a small patch of flat land nestled between the ridges and hidden by the main ridge to the west, that he had built this ranch.

The one-story ranch house faced northwest, looking out across the valley, toward the east-facing slope of the Coast Ridge. He had used split redwood logs for the walls, asphalt slates for the roof, bricks for the chimney and fireplace, and wooden planks for the large porch out front. The barn faced southeast, opposite the ranch house, and opened into a corral situated between the two. For the barn and the corral, having run out of money, he had used whatever lumber he could cut or scrape together.

The ranch had looked brand spanking new and prosperous back then though, probably more than thirty years ago. Now it looked as old and rundown as he himself. The redwood logs and planks of wood were diseased with dry rot. Bricks were chipped or missing from the chimney like rotting teeth in a decay-riddled mouth. The roof had bald patches where slates used to be. The barn and corral looked arthritic.

The inside of the ranch house was no better off. There were only two rooms, furnished with nothing more than a Civil War army cot, a wooden table with an amputated leg, an upholstered chair that looked as if it had been attacked by Jack the Ripper, and a rust-infected wood-burning stove. The artwork of spiders, an arrangement of cardboard boxes that contained supplies or garbage, woodpile sculptures, and a menagerie of empty beer and whiskey bottles decorated both rooms. The door between the two rooms had broken off its hinges long ago and now rested in a dead state against one wall. Bricks had mysteriously vanished from the fireplace. The ceiling, shot full of holes by a *drunken madman*, leaked when it rained. Years of dripping rainwater warped and stained the wood-planked floor below. Electricity hadn't yet been invented that far up in the mountains. Plumbing didn't exist either; he used the great outdoors as his bathroom, and the closest water supply was a stream that ran through a deep gorge beyond the next ridge to the south.

However, the land surrounding the ranch was still as beautiful as the day he had picked this spot to build on. From the first day he saw it, he believed it was truly God's country. He also believed that God couldn't make up His mind, so He created a collage of terrain, microclimates, animals, plants, trees, and colors where mountain met ocean.

The dense forest that covered the north-facing slope behind the ranch house was a flamboyant mixture of colors and smells. There were madrone with red-orange bark and glossy green leaves, tanoak with spiraling branches and the silvery sheen of its wind-rustled leaves, live oak with its sturdy branches and bowl shaped leaves, California bay with long, narrow leaves that emitted an intense, almost nauseating, fragrance, and the Santa Lucia fir with drooping branches and sharply pointed needles, all mixing with, and eventually giving way to, a lush evergreen forest of Coulter and ponderosa pines at the top of the ridge. In contrast, the south-facing slope behind the barn looked more like a desert, with the low-growing cover of sagebrush and deerweed, the stiff, stubby branches of chaparral, and the candlelike stalks of yucca plants growing in the dry, rocky soil. Three live oak trees poked up out of the side of the slope but resembled large bushes more than trees and were barely taller than a person. At the top of the ridge, brown grass waved in the breeze. The valley floor around the ranch house, corral, and barn was dry and arid like the south-facing slope. The land consisted mostly of dirt, rock, sagebrush, and chaparral. Farther west, grass gradually took over, with large blue and valley oaks dotting the landscape. The oak trees were old, with elaborate labyrinths of thick, gnarly branches. The bluish-green leaves of the blue oaks

and the dark green leaves of the valley oaks contrasted sharply with the sea of brown summer grass all around them. Eventually the oak trees and grass disappeared into the dense stand of hardwood trees that covered the east-facing slope of the Coast Ridge. The west-facing slope of the Coast Ridge was a continuous series of smaller ridges, canyons, and rolling hills. The ridge stooped forward, diving down three thousand feet until finally giving way to blue-green ocean. From the top of the Coast Ridge, he could see Highway 1—a narrow ribbon of road zigzagging along the edge of the mountain—and the rugged coastline beyond. On clear days the sun set on a beautiful horizon of sparkling salt water. Other days thick fog banks rolled in like giant, white blankets and completely covered the world below.

Now, standing on his porch, looking for anything out of the ordinary, searching for signs of an intruder but seeing none, he was unable to determine the reason for the bone-chilling eclipse within him. The air was dry. The day was hot. Everything looked the same.

Old George stepped off the porch. But after only two steps toward the corral, he stopped abruptly. He stood very still and alert, like a black-tailed jackrabbit sensing the danger of a stalking coyote. Suddenly, he understood what was wrong. Everything wasn't the same, after all. It was too quiet. The usual sounds of animals and birds were

mysteriously missing: The woodpecker that nested in the woodlands on the north-facing slope wasn't busy drilling holes; the steady *tap tap tap* didn't echo through the valley. Gone was the scurrying sound of rodents, lizards, or snakes in the sagebrush and chaparral. Hawks, usually perching in nearby trees or soaring overhead like kites without string, weren't in sight and didn't call out with their familiar *kkeeeer*. The single note *toot* of the mountain quail was silent, as were the cheery songs of the wrens, thrashers, and meadowlarks.

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Someone—or something—was in his valley that shouldn't be there. Watching him.

He had had this feeling before, recently, only a couple of days ago. But it came to nothing. He had started to think that his life as a hermit, the life he had always cherished so much, was beginning to make him paranoid.

Screwing up his courage, he walked toward the corral with slow, deliberate steps. His mule, Maybelle, met him at the railing. She nuzzled his arm with her nose. Old George nervously patted her, then pulled a sugar cube from the pocket of his dirty overalls.

"That's my girl," he said as Maybelle took the cube from his hand. He watched her greedily eat. "Good girl." He patted her again. Maybelle seemed herself, not skittish or

scared.

But still the dark shadow cast itself across his soul, and his bones ached as if intensely cold. He couldn't shake the eerie feeling of being watched.

He turned away from Maybelle and leaned back against the corral. Shielding his eyes against the bright sun, he looked westward, searching for some sign of life. But all he could see were a few cows far off in the distance, slowly making their way across the valley. He shook his head, feeling sorry for the cows. He knew the only grass the cows could find this time of year would be brown, dry, and dead. His property wasn't much as ranches go, and he wasn't much of a rancher. He only kept cows on his property for appearances, so no one would question where he got his money to live on.

Old George turned around. Maybelle had gone back inside the barn. He could see her rump and swishing tail just inside the large doorway. The rest of her was hidden in shadows.

He scratched at his beard with a nervous hand. He looked out to the east, carefully scanning the southeast ridge and the narrow canyon that led into his small valley. There was no sign of life—human or animal. There were no watching eyes.

As he stared eastward, the dark shadow lifted. The sun

on his back thawed his bones, and he began to relax. His mind drifted from paranoid thoughts to memories of excursions into the interior of the mountain range. Beyond his valley, the mountain rose in a chaotic series of steep ridges, jagged mountain tops, deep canyons, and swift flowing rivers and streams until finally reaching almost six thousand feet within the Los Padres National Forest. It was there, deep within the backcountry of the Ventana Wilderness, that he and Maybelle had found the lost Indian gold.

Old George jumped. He heard Maybelle snort and kick inside the barn as if suddenly afraid. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck and although it had to be at least ninety degrees, he shivered. The dark shadow was upon him again. His bones instantly froze.

Again, he sensed watching eyes.

He felt sick to his stomach, like a landlubber on the open sea, ready to vomit with every movement of the ship. He turned slowly around, all the while praying to God that he was wrong, that he was alone.

Old George's breath caught in his throat. He shivered again and choked back burning bile. Maybelle continued to snort and kick but stayed in the barn. He wasn't alone, after all. A lynx sat not more than twenty feet away. Its yellow-red eyes stared intently at him, and its long, tufted ears

twitched as it listened to Maybelle's commotion. But, otherwise, it didn't move.

He couldn't believe his eyes. He had seen many bobcats, although not so close up, through the years. This, however, was not a bobcat. This wild cat was larger than any bobcat, and even larger than most lynx. It had long, gangly legs, big feet, and a broad ruffed face.

What the hell was a lynx doing here, though? He was sure they usually didn't range this far south. He thought they usually stayed up north, around Montana and up into Canada, where their favorite meal, the snowshoe hare, was plentiful.

At that moment, however, whether it was a lynx or not didn't matter. What mattered was that his Browning Rifle was inside the ranch house, a good thirty feet away.

Old George choked back more bile as he took two hesitant side steps away from the corral. The lynx shifted its position slightly, keeping its strange eyes fixed on him but made no attempt to pounce. Old George took two more side steps before turning his back on the wild cat and walking as slowly and deliberately as possible back to the ranch house. He knew enough not to run. If he ran or showed fear, the lynx would immediately attack.

Hiding fear, however, and not giving off the odor of fear were two different things. He kept his pace slow and

easy, just like taking a leisurely stroll through a field of wildflowers, but he couldn't stop sweating. Sweat exuded from every pore and with it, he was sure, the odor of fear.

Although he couldn't hear the lynx, in his mind's eye he could see it padding silently behind him, ready to pounce, eager to kill with a precisely placed bite to the neck. *His neck*. He could almost feel the fangs stabbing into his flesh. Within three steps of the porch, he decided his only chance was to run, after all. But now that he made that decision, he wasn't sure he could. His old hiking boots seemed to turn into cement blocks, and he could hardly keep his legs moving.

Old George swallowed hard. He dared not turn around. He dared not look. The lynx might almost be on top of him.

After taking one step up onto the porch, he lunged for the door in a mad rush. He hit the door with his shoulder, forcing it open and crashing to the floor inside. From the floor, he kicked back at the door and slammed it shut.

The lynx hit the door with a thud.

He lay on the floor, breathing hard, trying not to shake. He had been right. The lynx had been behind him, playing a strange game of cat-and-mouse, and he had been the mouse. He could hear it now, outside on the porch, hissing and spitting over losing the game.

Then he remembered the windows. There was no glass

in the windows, just wooden doors that swung shut and bolted from the inside. But they were open.

He hurried to his feet, knowing it wouldn't take long for the lynx to find the open windows. First, he grabbed the Browning from where it leaned against the wall and cocked the lever. Then he cautiously approached the first window, glancing out for just a second before slamming the door and bolting it shut. After doing the same with each of the four remaining windows, he began to relax. Actually, he was proud of himself. After all these years, he still had some fight left in him. He had beaten the lynx, won the game.

Even so, he needed a drink.

Old George searched through every box and cupboard in the ranch house, hoping to find hard liquor but willing to settle for a warm beer. He found nothing at all. Nothing to take the edge off. Nothing to celebrate his victory with. His only chance for a drink was to go in to Sur City or the Big Sur Valley. But the pickup truck, an old '79 Chevy, was parked behind the barn. And the wild cat stood between him and his means to salvation.

Although he no longer heard sounds from the lynx, he waited before venturing outside. But after an hour, the desperate need for a drink finally won out over fear. He slowly opened the door and took two hesitant steps out onto the porch; the Browning Rifle cocked and pointed out in

front of him. He wasn't a great shot, but he figured he could hit that big lynx if it came charging at him—that is, if his nerve held. But he didn't see the lynx. He sidestepped down the porch. His hiking boots sounded like the heavy hoof beats of a Clydesdale against the wooden planks. When he reached the corner of the house, he peered around it.

No lynx.

He looked out toward the corral and barn. Maybelle was back out in the corral, placid, as if never having been disturbed. The only sign the lynx ever existed was its wide, smudged tracks in the dirt between the corral and the porch.

In a bold move, Old George hurried off the porch. He trotted toward the barn. His head and the barrel of the rifle swiveled back and forth in anticipation of the lynx jumping out of some dark corner where it might be hiding, ready to pounce. He safely made it to the Chevy pickup, swung open the door and quickly climbed inside. The keys hung from the ignition, like always. He switched on the engine, threw the truck into gear, and exploded from behind the barn in a cloudburst of dirt and rock.

He drove the roller coaster of a dirt road like a stock-car racer in his prime: He barely slowed down for the twist and turns, and at times the Chevy pickup hung precariously on the edge of steep mountain ridges. He sped past grazing cows, never noticing the breathtaking view of dry, arid

mountain slopes. He didn't even glance at the sun—a big orange ball—that simultaneously lit up the sky and the Pacific waters as it began to settle on the horizon below. He pushed the limits of the narrow road, breaking speeds of twenty and thirty miles an hour, unheard of on that narrow and dangerous road. His mind was on the lynx he left behind and the drink waiting ahead.

He didn't begin to slow and notice the beauty around him until descending into a forest of hardwood trees—tanoaks, California bay, live oaks, and madrone. The understory was shrubby, thick with poison oak, California coffeeberry, gooseberries, the delicate blossoms of hound's tongue, and the showy purple and white blossoms of the Douglas' iris. Within this beautiful forest, he began to relax. By the time he saw small redwoods, he still needed the drink but thought about the lynx less and less. As he reached the canyon bottom, the cool breeze and the gentle sound of running water filled him with a renewed serenity. Now the lynx behind him and the drink ahead of him were both completely gone from his thoughts. He slammed a door on the memory of the lynx just as he had the real wild cat and his surroundings refreshed him, as no alcohol could.

The narrow road ran parallel with the fast-moving stream. He saw tall, straight-growing sycamores and much smaller white alders cluttering the stream bank with a dense

and brambly understory of vines, shrubs, and wild fern. A soft breeze rustled the alders' silvery-looking leaves. Redwoods towered overhead on the other side of the road and up the canyon wall. A few California bay and tanoak mixed in with the redwoods mid-way up the canyon wall where a small amount of sunlight could fight its way through the redwood canopy.

This was his idea of heaven. Could anything harm him here?

The road followed the stream for less than half a mile before turning away. The canyon widened and the road wound its way through a stand of pure redwoods. The ground was flat and nearly bare of understory here, where the sunlight couldn't infiltrate through the dense canopy overhead. There was only a thick, soft layer of duff—organic material dropped by the trees.

Old George pulled the Chevy pickup off the road. He parked the truck beside the massive trunk of a redwood and shut off the engine. Sitting behind the wheel with the window down, he listened for signs of life.

The forest was quiet, seemingly devoid of animal life. But this didn't cause the bone-chilling eclipse to cast its dark shadow across his soul again. He knew from years of living in Big Sur that the lack of understory deterred both herbivores and the predators that usually fed upon them.

Redwood groves were dark places of solitude, where only banana slugs, salamanders, newts, and a few lizards lived. At night shrews and mice might become active and attract the attention of a great horned owl. But, although it was dark with shade in the forest, it was not yet night. The scurrying sound of rodents couldn't be heard yet, and the great horned owls were still sleeping.

Slowly, he opened the truck door and stepped out onto the soft duff. He took the rifle with him. Although his surroundings calmed and refreshed him, he wouldn't soon let his friend, *Mr. Browning*, stray too far from his side again. The feeling of being watched had passed, but the fear he had felt when running from the lynx still lived deep within him. Granted, behind a slammed door. But still there.

He let the door of the truck stand open as he strolled through the redwoods back the way he had come, toward the stream. The urge to taste the cool water of the stream is what caused him to stop his hasty flight from the mountain. He was aware that the water around Big Sur was no longer as fresh as it once was. He knew that cattle and human excrement contaminated some of the rivers and streams. But, still, he never bothered boiling the water or using germicidal tablets before drinking it. In thirty years or more, the water had never made him sick. It had never given him cramps or intestinal disorders. And at that moment, he

believed the cool stream water would be the finishing touch to what the redwood forest had already begun. He believed it would release him completely from the dark eclipse that had been inside him.

As Old George approached the stream bank, he became aware of sounds in the forest. Not just the water of the stream rushing over rocks but animals as well. Although he couldn't see them, he heard scurrying in the vines, shrubs, and fern along the stream bank, probably snakes, or crayfish hurrying back into the safety of the water. A Steller's jay let out with a raucous outburst, alerting the entire area of an unwanted intruder. He assumed that he was that intruder.

Old George stopped when his hiking boots sunk into mud, and the toes submerged under water. He hunkered down, setting down his rifle in the brush, eager for the rejuvenating taste of the cool water. He cupped his hands in the water and carefully brought a sample to his lips. In mid-drink the Steller's jay let out with another piercing screech, causing him to choke on the water and spit most of it back up, some through his nose. When the Steller's jay screeched again, he somehow knew that *he* was not the intruder giving the bird concern.

His bones instantly chilled. His soul experienced another eclipse, darkening his mood, his thoughts. He, again, had the feeling of being watched and discreetly

reached for the Browning, then slowly stood. He turned around. He hoped the warning call of the Steller's jay meant nothing. He hoped the cold darkness that had come over him meant nothing. He hoping he was alone.

The lynx stood within a stone throw of him. The wild cat hissed and snarled, showing off its daggerlike fangs. Old George stiffened, as if the wild cat was Medusa and meeting its burning yellow-red eyes had turned him into a granite statue.

The damn thing had somehow followed him. But how?

The lynx snarled again. It meant business. No cat-and-mouse game this time. He was sure it meant to eat him.

That thought shattered the hold the wild cat's stare had on him. He no longer felt made of granite. He could move again.

Before the lynx could pounce, he found his nerve, grabbed the Browning, and quickly cocked it. In one swift move he brought the rifle up to his shoulder and, without really aiming, fired.

The single blast of the Browning echoed through the forest. The lynx flipped up into the air. It came down on its back, rolled, and scrambled to its feet. But before he even thought of cocking again, the lynx quickly limped off into the cover of the trees and brush.

Old George didn't waste time. He took off, running for

the Chevy pickup faster than he ever dreamed was possible—maybe faster than Jim Brown running for a touchdown, maybe faster than Jesse Owens running the 100 meters at the 1936 Olympics. Within four feet of the truck, he vaulted for the open door, landing on the seats headfirst. He scrambled into a sitting position as quickly as he could. He reached out with one hand, pulling the door closed behind him, while his other hand turned the key in the ignition. The back tires kicked up duff and dirt as he punched the gas and backed out onto the road.

The lynx effectively shattered the feeling of serenity and peace the redwood forest had given him. The need to escape and the burning desire for a stiff drink were, again, uppermost in his mind as he switched on the headlights, shifted into drive, and punched the gas again. He didn't slow the truck down until after climbing out of the canyon and emerging from the woodlands, back onto barren slopes.

The sun, just barely kissing the horizon, had not yet submerged itself beneath the ever-growing dark Pacific Ocean. But it could only light up the immediate water and sky around it. Looking at it, from more than a thousand feet up, the sun resembled a night-light in an otherwise dark room. Still, he believed he could see better than he had back beneath the shadows of the forest.

Slowly, the truck followed the zigzagging road down

the west-facing slope of the Coast Ridge. The headlights illuminated the dark, skeletal shapes of the chaparral and coastal scrub that crowded the road. And behind each bonylike shrub, he was sure he saw the broad ruffed face of his adversary.

He desperately needed that drink.

When he reached Highway 1, the night-light in the horizon switched off. The world now looked as if it ended abruptly into pitch-black, unending space rather than the large expanse of ocean that he knew was out there.

But he was safe. Surely, the lynx wouldn't follow down this far, would it?

He stopped the truck at the end of the dirt road where it met Highway 1. As he sat behind the wheel, debating on whether to go north in to the Big Sur Valley or south in to Sur City or Lucia, he rolled up his window. The day up in the mountains had been hot and dry. But down there—close to the ocean, with the sun gone—the air was cold and damp. Besides, what if the lynx did—somehow, magically—follow him. Sitting still, with the window open, seemed an open invitation to be eaten.

Old George switched on the heater, cursing himself for not bringing a jacket. His head swiveled northward, then southward, unable to make up his mind.

He didn't like Lucia. It was too far away. The food was

bad. The beer was warm. And the liquor was watered down. He wanted to go in to the Big Sur Valley. It was situated almost two miles inland and separated from the ocean by a large ridge so it was warmer there. He liked the River Inn or the cozy cocktail lounge at the Fernwood Resort. But it seemed so far, and the need for a drink burned inside him. The encounter with the lynx, although he had come out on top again, had shredded his nerves completely away, until he was nothing but cold, shaking bones.

He turned the heater up.

Nepenthe was just before the Big Sur Valley, not quite as far as the River Inn or Fernwood. But it was cold there, being so close to the ocean and perched precariously on top of the coastal ridge. Besides, he didn't feel in the mood for Nepenthe's higher class of clientele—tourists munching on Ambrosia burgers and sipping imported beer.

That left Sur City. It, too, floated above the rough, jagged coastline, offering an almost unearthly daytime view of the ocean. It, too, was frigid. But it was less than a mile to the south.

He had made up his mind and turned left, heading south on Highway 1. Although the heater was running full blast, he shivered. His cold bones ached with the need for alcohol. He took solace, however, in knowing that he would soon be nursing a drink in Sur City.

Sur City was not really a city at all. It was a gas station, a few rundown cabins meant for tourist rental, and one long building housing The Sur City General Store and Video Rental, Barto's Bar and Grill, and Big Sur Mementos. All three places of business shared common walls and connecting doors. Edward Barto, founder and owner of the entire city, and his family had lived in the living quarters above the businesses. At one time Sur City had been one of Old George's favorite places. That was before Ed Barto and his family had mysteriously disappeared. That was when Barto's Bar and Grill had served as a familiar and cozy place for locals to congregate. But one afternoon, not more than three months ago, he had driven in to Sur City and found things had changed. Changed so much that he thought he had entered that time and space known on the television of his youth as the *Twilight Zone*. While *rediscovering* the small community, he had imagined hearing Rod Serling's voice and the familiar theme song playing through his head.

The Sur City General Store and Video Rental and the Big Sur Mementos had both been there. However, he hadn't recognized any of the employees. Gert and Jim, who for more than twenty years had run the general store and video rental for Ed Barto, had vanished. Hank, a fixture at the gas station, and Doris, who worked in the memento shop, had also left with no trace. Young faces he had never seen

before had replaced them all—faces with eyes that looked at him in a weird sort of way and made him feel uneasy.

But Barto's Bar and Grill had been the biggest shock of all. It was now called The Den, and the once quaint and warm atmosphere inside had changed as well. The new name hadn't referred to a comfortable, secluded room found in someone's home, with walls of books and a cozy fire burning in the fireplace. The Den had proven to be cavernous and dark, like the lair of a wild animal. The shades were drawn, as if sunlight was something to fear. Two neon signs behind the bar and votive candles in ruby-red glass bowls on each tabletop provided the only light. The heads of predatory beasts—wolves, mountain lions, lynx, grizzly bears, black bears, coyotes, and bobcats—hung from the walls. Their glassy eyes had peered through the dark, reflecting the eerie-red light of the votive candles.

From that time on, Old George had never seen Ed Barto, his family, or the other familiar faces of Sur City again. He had never asked any of the new faces what had happened or where those people had gone. But he had always suspected that the new bartender everyone called Lucan had bought Sur City. He had then assumed that everyone had moved away.

Old George parked the Chevy pickup in a space right outside The Den. He stepped outside the truck, then peered

back in at the rifle resting on the floor. He hated to leave it in the truck but knew *Mr. Browning* would not be welcomed inside the bar. So, he slammed the door and hurried up onto the wooden deck, eager to escape the cold Pacific air. He swung the door open and stepped inside The Den. The air inside was as frigid as outside. He shivered as new goose bumps prickled up and down his bare arms. Convinced that only a stiff dose of alcohol could thaw his chilled bones, and with his eyes already adjusted to the dark, he went directly to the bar.

Lucan stepped out of the dark shadows behind the bar. Old George started at the sight of him, not just from being surprised but also from the way Lucan looked. The bartender was tall and gaunt, with hallowed cheeks. He had thick, white hair, swarthy skin, and bushy, white eyebrows that met over the bridge of a greeklike nose. His deep-set eyes seemed to glow in the dark, resembling the eyes of an animal in the night.

"Good evening," Lucan said. He used a white towel to wipe the bar as he smiled, showing sharp, yellow teeth. "What can I get you, tonight?"

"Old Crow...straight up," Old George answered. He looked away, trying to avoid Lucan's strange eyes. At first, he focused on Lucan's hands as the bartender poured his drink. But the long, horny nail of Lucan's left thumb

resembled the talon of a beast and the sight of it made him uneasy, so he had to look away. He scratched at his beard with a nervous hand while looking around the room, hoping to appear nonchalant. But all around him were the staring, glowing eyes of dead animals.

Old George shivered. His blood ran cold. A dark shadow eclipsed his soul. He turned back toward Lucan, but the bartender had disappeared. The glass of Old Crow rested on the bar, in front of him. He grasped the glass with both hands and gulped it down in one swallow. Even with the bourbon gone, he hung on to the empty glass, clinging to it in the same manner a drowning man would cling to a lifeline thrown from the deck of a ship.

Someone was watching him. He could feel it. The same way he had felt the presence of the lynx at his ranch. It wasn't just the glassy eyes of severed heads mounted on the walls all around him. He was sure these eyes belonged to someone that was alive.

An icy shiver of fear streaked up his spine. Gooseflesh revisited his bare arms. Instantly, he realized he was a fool to come there. After all that had happened, this should have been the last place in Big Sur to take refuge. Each time he came, he swore never to return. But for some unexplainable reason, he always did.

Old George set the glass down, releasing his death-

grip. He desperately wanted another drink, but instead stood on unsteady legs and turned to leave. But he stopped cold. For the first time, he noticed the emptiness of bar. No customers. Not at the bar. None sitting at the tables. No waitresses either. And Lucan hadn't reappeared.

Had it been this way when he arrived? If so, he hadn't noticed. The burning need for a drink must have been too strong.

Old George hurried for the door, his legs no longer weak with fear but strong with the need to escape. It was all so damn strange. And although The Den looked empty, he still had the overwhelming feeling that someone watched.

Outside, the night was cold and clear. Bright stars peered down from the heavens above, looking like diamonds against a backdrop of black velvet. Looking up into the sky, he imagined the sliver of moon as a slight tear in the fabric, exposing a small amount of the light of God that must lie beyond. The rhythmic sound of the surf, crashing against the rocks two hundred feet below, periodically shattered the otherwise quiet night. Like inside the bar, no one was around, and the beauty of the Big Sur night gave him renewed courage. He was under God's sky, and he took a deep breath of God's air.

Old George got in the truck and started the engine. He stared at the rifle on the floor next to him. Yes, he was in

God's country, but God protected those who protected themselves. He thanked God for the Browning as he switched on the headlights and backed out of the parking space. He drove north toward the Big Sur Valley, determined to get another drink, this time in the friendly atmosphere of the Fernwood cocktail lounge. But after less than a mile, a dark shape darted into the beam of his headlights. He slammed on the brakes. Even over the high-pitched squeal of the tires, he heard the loud thump of the Chevy pickup hitting whatever had run into the road.

Old George sat very still. He clutched the steering wheel with both hands. He couldn't believe he had hit something—the topper to a terrible day. He threw the gear into park and hurried out of the truck in the hope he hadn't killed what had appeared to be a large dog.

He stood in the beam of the light, searching the road for the injured dog. But he saw nothing. No sign of an animal. Alive or dead.

Then, he heard the menacing growl. Low and guttural. Behind him. Back by the truck.

He slowly turned. The beam of the headlights struck him in the eyes, blinding him. But the menacing growl grew louder, almost deafening.

He took two steps backward.

The growling thing stayed on the side of the truck. Out

of the light. Hidden by the cover of darkness.

Old George quickly turned away. He ran up the highway, cursing himself for leaving the Browning back in the truck and simultaneously praying to God for help.

But God helps those who help themselves.

He had doomed himself with his own carelessness.

Old George ran even faster than he had back in the redwood forest, but the growling thing still gained on him. He could hear the clicking sound its paws made on the pavement, loping behind him, apparently sure of its ability to bring him down at will. Soon more clicking sounds—more paws—joined in, until it sounded as if a whole pack of the growling things were pursuing him.

He picked up the pace, running until his breath froze in his lungs, and his legs cramped with fatigue. He collapsed by the side of the road and crawled on his hands and knees to the edge of the cliff. Below, lay jagged rocks and crashing surf. He sat at the edge of the cliff. Searing pains stabbed at his chest as he struggled to breathe. He prayed for the sight of an oncoming car but no headlights appeared around the bend.

God helps those who help themselves.

The dark, indistinguishable shapes of the growling things formed a semicircle around him. Bright-red eyes stared at him from out of the darkness. He forced himself to

his feet. His rubbery legs almost gave way, but somehow he stood firm. He was going to die. He knew that. But he would not let these things, these demons, eat him alive, and steal his soul. He turned his back on the pack of demons. But before he could jump, one landed on his back. Together, they flew over the edge. As Old George fell the last thing he felt was the sharp pain of canine teeth stabbing into his neck and throat.

Chapter 1

Alfie Free and Tommy Chandler choked on the exhaust from the heavy traffic as they ran down McLaughlin Avenue. They hurried past the graffiti-infested walls of a doughnut shop, Chinese restaurant, Laundromat, taqueria, and tropical fish store that all shared a parking lot resembling more of a junkyard or a dump rather than a place for customers to park. Before reaching the corner, they cut through the parking lot of Rolanda's Check Cashing. They pushed through a small crowd of Latino men loitering outside. The men grumbled and complained in Spanish but reluctantly moved out of the way. They were neck and neck as they ran out onto William Street. But as they sprinted along a dirt track between the road and a fenced-in vacant lot, Alfie put on a burst of speed and pulled slightly ahead of Tommy. The perp, Weasel, was still almost the length of a football field ahead, running gracefully and swiftly, as if he were a gazelle speeding through the savannas of downtown San Jose. A gazelle Alfie and Tommy couldn't seem to catch.

Alfie and Tommy were partners. They were also

friends. And they had been for thirteen years to the day. But, as if in telepathic agreement, neither of them had acknowledged that ominously numbered anniversary.

Now as they ran the high-speed footrace down William Street toward the Selma Olinder University School, Tommy yelled, "Alfie...huh-uhh...I know we view ourselves as invulnerable...huh...super cops...huh-huh...with reputations to uphold."

"Get to the point," Alfie yelled over his shoulder.

"But did you ever wish you had worn a body vest?"

"No!" Alfie yelled back then gasped for air. "But give me a ride in a Sherman tank any day."

Trash swirled around their feet. Alfie hurdled a junked couch that lay along the side of the road like a dead body. Tommy ran around it, losing more ground.

Alfie glanced back at Tommy. "You don't need a body vest," he yelled. "You need...huh-uh...P.F. Flyers."

Tommy grinned. "The sneakers...huh...with the green ball emblem? I had a pair when I was a kid. Huh...uh-huh."

"They help you run faster," Alfie yelled over his shoulder as he crossed the railroad tracks.

"And jump higher," Tommy yelled back, crossing the tracks right behind him.

They cut Weasel's lead down to only fifty yards. But after passing Olinder School, Weasel turned sharply into the

neighborhood center and park. He quickly disappeared within a clump of trees.

"Shit." Tommy gasped on his words. "Uhh-huh...we're losing him."

"No way," Alfie yelled over his shoulder to Tommy. "I'm going to...huh-uh...huh...shoot the little bastard. When we catch him...huh-huh-uh...I'm going to shoot him."

"That's what I love about you," Tommy yelled back as he put on a burst of speed and pulled up alongside Alfie again, "huh-uh-huh...always the consummate professional."

"That's right, highly trained for pressure situations...huh...such as this one," Alfie answered. "And I'm still going to shoot the little bastard."

Alfie and Tommy made the sharp turn into the park together. They stopped at the same time as well, just on the other side of the trees. Weasel was nowhere in sight.

"Damn," Alfie muttered as he tried to catch his breath.

"We lost him," Tommy gasped.

"No! No! Huh-huh-uh! He can't be that fast!" Alfie groaned. "He's a Weasel! Huh...huh. A drug-dealing carnivore...huh-uh...that feeds on people's helplessness! No! He's not getting away! Huh-huh. He went underground! He's still here somewhere! Hiding!"

"Pipe down," Tommy warned, breath finally catching up. "We don't want to attract attention."

But a few people had already glanced at them, even if only for a second or two, after the two detectives had burst through the clump of trees. Fortunately, however, Alfie and Tommy looked ordinary enough. They were detectives, but they did not look like cops. Being undercover, working the streets, they always seemed to blend in well with the racially mixed San Jose community: Alfie, an African-American, had a milk chocolate complexion. He kept his head shaved clean, but a neatly trimmed mustache crept across his upper lip. His features were ruggedly handsome, but not so ruggedly handsome that he stood out in a crowd. Somehow, without moving a facial muscle, he could look both friendly and intimidating. Tommy, being of mixed German and Latino descent, was dark enough for some neighborhoods and light enough for others. With curly, light brown hair and blue eyes, Tommy was more boyish looking compared to Alfie's rugged looks. To help toughen his image, Tommy usually went unshaven. Alfie and Tommy were both in their late thirties. They were both of average weight and height—Tommy just slightly shorter and lighter than Alfie. Today, they both wore dark sunglasses, running shoes, old blue jeans, and light jackets that covered T-shirts and shoulder holsters with Smith and Wesson revolvers.

Even so, Alfie shut up. So as not to cause any further attention than that initial burst through the trees had caused,

they stood perfectly still. They used only their eyes to search the grounds. The suspect shouldn't have been hard to spot: Weasel was a twenty-five-year-old white male, tall and skinny, with red-dyed hair that was long on top and shaved around the sides. He wore earrings, black, leather pants, a sleeveless, white T-shirt, and black combat boots.

To Alfie and Tommy's left stood the Olinder Center, a one story, Spanish-styled building that housed a small recreation room and the Northside Theatre Company. Gang inspired graffiti covered its walls. Being Saturday, it was locked up tight. Bathrooms were in a separate building, unlocked and available to hide out in. The graffiti of local gangs covered its walls as well.

"Bathrooms?" Tommy asked.

"No." Alfie shook his head. "No way to escape if cornered. Besides, the bathrooms aren't safe."

"You're right," Tommy agreed. "Not for a skinny white man."

"How about the school?" Alfie asked. Olinder School loomed behind the center and the bathrooms. A cyclone fence separated the school from the center, the bathrooms, and the rest of the neighborhood park. "Maybe Weasel climbed the fence and backtracked."

"Maybe," Tommy answered with just that one word. But he stared at a group of teenagers playing basketball on the

concrete court just beyond the bathrooms. "Did you see that?" he asked Alfie.

"What? Is it Weasel?" Alfie stared at the game but couldn't pick out anyone resembling the perp.

"That kid took an outside shot. It was at least a fifteen-footer. He had a man open underneath." Tommy shook his head. "Kids today. They don't pass. They just want to score. Dribble and score."

"Yeah, well listen Magic Chandler, what I can't believe is the graffiti. Hell, there's graffiti on the backboards. There's graffiti all over the court. I wouldn't be surprised if there was graffiti on the ball."

Tommy shook his head again. "Kids today."

In front of them, kids ranging from toddler to ten years old climbed on, ran along, and swung from a three-tier apparatus made of wooden planks and thick, redwood pillars. After climbing to the top tier, they slid down the connecting slide and landed in pieces of tanbark, usually on their butts. Even more kids played on two different sets of swings. The bigger kids were on one swing set while parents pushed their toddlers on the smaller one. The other parents, not pushing a swing or helping a toddler climb and slide, sat on benches that surrounded the playground. They watched their kids while talking to each other.

"Unless Weasel shrunk himself down to kid-size, he's

not on the playground," Alfie said and glanced over at Tommy.

Tommy didn't respond. He was busy staring at a young Latino mother sitting on one of the park benches. She was busy breast-feeding her baby.

"Hey, Peeping Tommy." Alfie elbowed his partner. "We're looking for a suspect, not a date."

"I'm sorry." Tommy shrugged. "I was a deprived baby. My mother always bottle-fed me. I've been looking for a substitute my whole life."

Alfie glanced back toward the young mother again. "Nice set of substitutes."

"Exactly." Tommy grinned. Then he continued to scan the grounds.

To their right, a wide strip of grass ran alongside the playground. The grassy field spread out even wider behind the playground and continued on for fifty or sixty yards until reaching a cyclone fence. Four picnic tables with benches, a barbecue in between each, lined the boundary on that side of the park. It looked as though one large African-American family occupied all four picnic tables. Two of the barbecues were lit. A large man had just started cooking, and the savory smell of hamburgers and hot dogs instantly filled the air.

Alfie rubbed at his stomach. "Man, I can almost taste

those dogs. When we catch that little bastard, I'm going to shoot him for sure. He's not only a drug-dealing carnivore, but he's kept us from lunch."

"Hey, do you think Weasel invited himself to lunch?" Tommy asked.

Alfie shook his head. "I don't think so."

They looked at each other and grinned. "Wouldn't blend in," they said at the same time.

Beyond the picnic tables and barbecues, beyond the cyclone fence, two kids played pitch and catch on a baseball field. Beyond the baseball field, a field of wild mustard took over. A dirt path ran through the middle of the wild mustard. After a mile, that dirt path eventually crossed under the freeway overpass and connected with an extension of the same railroad tracks Alfie and Tommy had run over earlier on William Street. Coyote Creek meandered past the grassy field next to the playground, on past the picnic tables and barbecues, the baseball field and wild mustard, and well beyond the freeway overpass and railroad tracks. Cottonwoods, peppertrees, California bay, sycamores, and a shrubby, impenetrable understory of mostly poison oak covered its banks.

"You don't think Weasel went down along the creek bank, do you?" Tommy asked.

"Even Weasel can't be that stupid," Alfie answered,

still rubbing at his stomach in the hope of soothing his hunger.

"If he did, he's gone. I'm not going after him," Tommy said. "If I just look at poison oak I start to scratch. If I touch it, I start to look like a leper within minutes."

Alfie stopped rubbing his stomach and looked at Tommy with disgust.

"It's true. I get blotchy and scaly all over. I look as if body parts could start dropping off any second."

"Why didn't you tell me this before I married you?" Alfie asked as he took a step away from Tommy in mock revulsion.

Tommy grinned. "A little mystery never hurts."

Alfie smiled back.

"Look, man," Tommy said, "let's get out of here. He gave us the slip. Come on, we'll get something to eat."

"No," Alfie demanded. "No, he's here. Hiding. I can smell him."

"Your stomach must be causing sensory overload. That's the hot dogs and hamburgers you're smelling."

"No. I smell that little bastard of a Weasel."

"Maybe it's just leftover vapors lingering in the air from when he ran through here. He's gone, man."

In spite of his hunger, Alfie wouldn't listen. He continued to scan the grounds. "There!" he yelled. His arm

flew up, and his finger pointed into the distance.

Tommy jumped at Alfie's sudden movement and loud outburst. People turned and stared.

"Alfie," Tommy whispered out of the corner of his mouth, grinning at the same time. He elbowed his partner.

"What the hell is with you?" Alfie yelled. He elbowed Tommy back.

"I'm trying to look nonchalant."

"Well, you look like a stroke victim."

"People are looking," Tommy warned.

"I don't give a shit! Look!" Alfie yelled again. "There the little bastard is!"

Tommy stared in the same direction as Alfie pointed. Sure enough, Weasel had come out of hiding. He must have been hiding along the creek bank but apparently was unable to move freely enough or quickly enough through the dense undergrowth. So now, Weasel was back out into view, running down the dirt path between the baseball field and the wild mustard, heading for the railroad tracks and the freeway overpass. There was no mistaking his red-dyed hair.

"Let's go!" Tommy yelled. He took off as if wearing the P.F. Flyers from his youth.

Alfie followed. They both hurried around the playground, through the grassy field, and past the worried stares of the picnickers.

Tommy continued through the gate in the cyclone fence. Alfie stopped at a picnic table. He politely but quickly asked for a hot dog from a stunned woman and grabbed one from a paper plate when she nodded that it was okay before he continued. He caught up to Tommy just beyond the baseball field. Half of the hot dog was already in his mouth.

Tommy glanced at him. "Pig!" he yelled. "You couldn't get one for me?"

Unable to speak with a mouthful of hot dog, Alfie handed the other half to Tommy like a sprinter in a relay race handing the baton to the next runner. Only instead of stopping like the sprinter would, Alfie continued running.

"What, no mustard? No ketchup? No onions?" Tommy shook his head. "Terrible service. I'm not eating at this hot dog stand anymore." He shoved the rest of the hot dog into his mouth.

Alfie and Tommy ran neck and neck, gaining on Weasel, but unable to catch him. As Weasel approached the freeway overpass and the railroad tracks that ran underneath, they both stopped.

Tommy started to yell, "Weasel! Stop—" But he choked on the hot dog.

Alfie, still chewing and swallowing as well, pulled his .38 from its shoulder holster and fired. The bullet ricocheted

off one of the cement pillars that held the freeway above the ground.

Weasel stopped dead in his tracks, raising his hands above his head. Apparently, he had gotten the message. He didn't turn around.

Choking down the last of the hot dog in their mouths, they approached Weasel slowly, maybe with more caution than normal.

Alfie placed the barrel of the revolver on the back of Weasel's head. Then, he belched in Weasel's ear. "Excuse me, but I ate on the run."

Tommy walked around and faced Weasel. His revolver was still in its holster. "Weasel. Weasel. Weasel." Tommy shook his finger at the man with red-dyed hair. "You've been a naughty boy." He had to speak loudly over the freeway noise directly above them. The roar of the cars and the constant whirring sound of rubber tires rolling and thumping across the cement road were almost deafening.

"You've got nothing on me," Weasel answered with a scowl.

Tommy moved closer, his face in the perp's face. He grinned and forced his hand into the tight pocket of Weasel's black leather pants. "Sorry," Tommy said, "I don't usually do this on the first date."

"Better be careful, Tommy, I think he's starting to

enjoy it," Alfie said. He winked at his partner over Weasel's shoulder.

When Tommy took his hand out of Weasel's pocket, he held up a small plastic bag. The plastic bag contained a white, powdery substance.

"Now, what do we have here?" Alfie asked.

Tommy opened the seal on the plastic bag. He stuck his finger into the white powder then took it out and licked it. "Well, it's not talcum powder for his diaper rash," he said.

"Weasel. Weasel. Weasel." Alfie said directly into the perp's ear. "We've got you."

"But it's not you we want," Tommy quickly added.

"I want him," Alfie protested.

"No you don't," Tommy said.

"I don't?"

"No. He's just not big enough to keep. We want the big fish. We want Alex Tenos. But you know what the problem is?"

"No, what?" Alfie asked.

"The last time we threw Weasel back, he gave us phony information."

"Yeah, embarrassed us in front of our colleagues," Alfie added.

"We don't like being embarrassed," Tommy said as he sealed up the plastic bag.

"Arrest me," Weasel demanded. Fear shadowed his face. "I won't help you get Tenos."

"I think he's more afraid of Tenos than us," Tommy said to Alfie.

"Big mistake." Alfie pressed the barrel of his .38 a little harder into the back of Weasel's head. "Big mistake."

"I won't betray Tenos," Weasel said again. "The last guy who crossed him was found dead in an alley. The guy's blood had been completely drained. Not a drop left."

"You trying to tell us that Alex Tenos is a vampire or something?" Tommy asked in a sarcastic tone of voice.

"Arrest me." That was all Weasel would say.

Alfie and Tommy gave each other a quizzical look.

Vampire? Alfie mouthed that one word.

Tommy shrugged.

Simultaneously, they both shivered.

"Let him go," Tommy said.

Alfie lowered his revolver.

"What's going on?" Weasel asked. He looked more worried than ever.

"You're free to go," Alfie assured him.

"Go on," Tommy gave him permission to leave again.

Weasel edged away from them.

"Go on," Alfie told him, "I can use the target practice."

Weasel turned and started to run.

Alfie quickly raised his revolver and aimed. He fired one round into another freeway pillar, just over Weasel's head.

Weasel stopped cold. Without turning around he yelled, "Midnight. 666 South Thirteenth Street." He started running again, his black leather legs moving like pistons in a fine tuned engine. This time no gunfire followed him.

Alfie and Tommy eyed each other.

"Midnight?" Tommy said. "666 South Thirteenth Street? Is he fucking kidding?"

Alfie holstered his revolver. "If he's fucking lying again—"

"We'll put him away for good," Tommy finished.

They turned and started walking back the way they had come.

"Midnight," Tommy mumbled as they passed back through the gate of the cyclone fence. The picnickers had finished eating. The children were off playing, while the adults talked and drank beer.

"What do you want to do until then?" Alfie asked.

Tommy looked over at the beer drinking. "Get a drink," he said.

"No." Alfie shook his head. "We're on duty. Besides, it's probably going to be a long night. We should get some sleep."

Alfie and Tommy stopped walking and looked at each other. "Naaaah," they said at the same time. "A drink," they agreed.

They started walking again.

"Midnight," Tommy mumbled again.

Alfie sighed. "666 South Thirteenth Street?"

"Vampires?" Tommy said under his breath.

"Thirteen years," Alfie said. His voice was barely a whisper.

"Shit."

Alfie and Tommy said it at the same time.

It was almost midnight. Alfie and Tommy sat in the police-issued, nondescript, blue Ford sedan. They had parked on South Thirteenth Street, across from and slightly catty-cornered to the Victorian house with the address 666. The house looked old and somewhat ominous: Both the streetlights and the porch lights were pale yellow, giving the house a sickly, jaundiced look. The shadows of windblown trees moved back and forth through the yellow glow, along the walls and across the porch, like giant black spiders that had lost their way.

But still, the old Victorian didn't seem haunted. It didn't look as though a vampire lived within its walls. It wasn't a vast ruined castle, looming in the night, with tall

black windows and the jagged line of broken battlements against the moonlit sky. It wasn't Castle Dracula.

Besides, although they had never seen Alex Tenos before, even in a picture, they did have a fuzzy description of him. And that description didn't paint Alex Tenos as Bela Lugosi incarnate.

Alfie sat behind the steering wheel. He stared out at the old Victorian house and sipped coffee from a thermos.

Tommy sat in the passenger seat, reading a book with the aid of a small penlight.

Alfie glanced over at his partner. "What are you doing?" he asked.

Without looking up from the book, Tommy said, "Reading."

"No shit." Alfie took a sip of coffee. "What are you reading?"

Tommy still didn't look up. "After you dropped me off this afternoon, I picked up a book on..." Tommy's voice trailed off into a mumble.

Alfie sat up straight. "A book on what?" he asked. "I didn't hear you."

Tommy kept his nose in the book. "You wouldn't be interested."

"Since when did that ever stop you? You've never been reluctant to share your knowledge. In fact, you've always

been more than willing to expound on whatever book you happened to be reading, or movie you'd seen, or some half-baked theory on whatever subject you happened to find interesting at the time. And without me having to ask or even show the slightest interest in knowing. Now, suddenly, I have to drag information out of you?"

Tommy kept reading.

Alfie finished his coffee, capped the thermos, and set it on the seat between them. "Tommy, what's the book about?"

"It's about..." Tommy was mumbling again.

"Yes?"

"Vampires," Tommy said.

"You bought a book on vampires?"

"Yeah, *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin*. A priest wrote it in 1928. His name was Montague Summers. He really believed in vampires. It's really quite fascinating," Tommy said.

"You took out a book on vampires?"

"Did you know that vampires are often referred to as 'Children of Judas.'" Tommy ignored the disapproving tone of his partner.

"I can't believe, you took out a book on vampires. Written by a priest." Alfie shook his head. "You don't believe in vampires, do you?"

"They're called that because vampires, like Judas, often

have red hair."

Alfie stared at his partner. "Then obviously there are no black vampires," he said.

Tommy ignored him again. "Also because a vampire's victim is wounded with the Devil's stigmata—three hideous scars shaped XXX." Tommy used the penlight to draw three invisible X's in the air.

"You took out a book on vampires?" Getting no reaction out of Tommy, Alfie went back to his original question.

"Do you know what the three X's mean?" Tommy asked.

"You took out a book on vampires." This time it was not a question but a statement Alfie mumbled to himself.

"They signify the thirty pieces of silver Judas collected from the Romans for betraying Jesus—the price of blood."

"You took out a book on vampires," Alfie muttered again, then looked over at his partner. "Hey, what's that around your neck?"

"What?" Tommy marked his place and closed the book.

"That...around your neck." Alfie grabbed the penlight from Tommy and shined it at his partner's neck. "Isn't that a crucifix?"

"Uuh, yeah...it's a crucifix." Tommy shrugged. "So what? I'm wearing a crucifix."

"Why didn't you hang garlic around the windows or

sprinkle Holy Water onto the car?"

"I haven't gotten to that chapter yet."

"You're spooked," Alfie screamed. Then, he lowered his voice. "You let Weasel spook you. Alex Tenos isn't a vampire." Alfie talked fast, as if quickly needing to reassure himself as well as Tommy.

Tommy looked at his partner. "Weasel spooked you too."

"No." Alfie denied the accusation emphatically. "Look, Tenos is a blood-sucker all right. A parasite. But he's not a vampire. He's a drug dealer. That's all. Besides, why would a vampire deal in drugs?"

Tommy shrugged. "In today's economy even a vampire needs a steady income. How much do you think the rent is on a house like that? Or maybe he has to pay a mortgage on it. Maybe he has a lot of houses that he's renting or paying mortgages on, all over the country, with coffins in each one, so he can move around. That takes money."

"A vampire with a mortgage to pay. There's a scary thought." Alfie shook his head. "Hey, maybe Tenos has a vacation home in Florida. Furnished with a vacation coffin," Alfie said in a sarcastic tone. "He goes there once a year to feed on the blood of retired old people. You know, a change of taste."

Alfie and Tommy both started as a buzzing sound

suddenly filled the car. The clock in the dashboard came equipped with an alarm that Tommy had set for midnight. Alfie quickly reached over and turned it off.

"Look," Tommy said, "right on time."

The bright glow of headlights slowly came toward them, looking like phantom lights floating in the dark of night. The lights stopped right in front of the jaundiced house. When they went out, a black hearse stood in the wake of the phantom lights, illuminated only by the yellow streetlights.

Tommy crossed himself.

"What was that?" Alfie had caught a glimpse of Tommy out of the corner of his eye.

"What was what?" Tommy kept his gaze on the hearse.

"That. You just made the sign of the Cross." Alfie repeated the gesture for Tommy to see, crossing himself.

"So did you," Tommy said.

"No. No, I was just showing you. You made the sign of the Cross, and you're not Catholic."

"Yes I am."

"You are what?"

"Catholic."

"Since when? I've known you for—" Alfie stopped abruptly.

They sheepishly eyed each other. Their thirteenth

anniversary—telepathically forbidden between them—had almost been acknowledged.

Alfie continued carefully, "I've known you for a long time. This is the first I've heard that you're Catholic."

"I've always been Catholic. Twelve years of parochial school and being an altar boy. I still have the scars to prove it."

"What scars?"

"The scars across my knuckles from where the nuns rapped me with their rulers."

"When's the last time you been to Mass?"

Tommy calculated quickly in his head. "I guess about twenty years."

"And suddenly you're Catholic again?"

"I'm always Catholic when there's a possibility of coming face to face with a vampire."

Both the driver and passenger doors to the hearse opened. Two hulking shadows stepped out into the yellow glow of the streetlights. They closed their doors. Then, they walked around to the back of the hearse and opened a set of double doors.

"I bet one of them is named Igor," Tommy whispered.

"Shut up," Alfie answered.

The two hulking shadows pulled a long box from the back of the hearse. With one on each end, they carried the

box up the steps and into the yellow glow of the porch light.

Tommy crossed himself again.

"Stop that," Alfie demanded.

"That looks like a coffin," Tommy said. "Doesn't it look like a coffin to you?"

"It looks like a coffin," Alfie muttered. "But look, Tenos is using this vampire scam to scare people. Keep them away. He obviously picked this house on purpose—666 South Thirteenth Street. He uses a hearse and coffins to transport his coke in. Don't you see? It's perfect. Everyone's scared of him—the entire neighborhood, the dealers, the cokeheads, the competition." Alfie looked at Tommy. "Even the cops. To emphasize his point, Tenos takes a stool pigeon, kills him, and then drains his blood. It's all a scam to keep everyone in line. It's perfect."

"Perfect," Tommy repeated.

A light inside the house came on. The door opened. The two hulking shadows and the coffin disappeared inside.

"Let's go," Alfie said.

They both opened their doors. Tommy had disconnected the interior light so the car stayed dark.

Before climbing out of the car, Alfie said, "Hey, you wouldn't happen to have another crucifix, would you? You know, just in case."

"No," Tommy said, "but you stay close to me. We'll

share."

Alfie pulled his .38 from its shoulder holster. "At least I have my own gun."

Tommy pulled his revolver out as well. He looked at it. "Won't stop a vampire," he said.

They both climbed from the car, leaving their doors slightly ajar so as not to make a noise. In the sickly glow of the streetlights, they ran silently across the street to the parked hearse. The back doors of the hearse were still open and another coffin was still inside.

"Shit," Tommy whispered. "They're going to come back."

Alfie reached in and started opening the lid.

"What are you doing?" Tommy asked.

"I want to see inside."

"What if...what if Tenos is in there?"

Alfie lowered the lid. "Let's see," he said.

They both used their revolvers to make the sign of the Cross.

"Hey, you're not Catholic," Tommy whispered.

"I've been meaning to convert," Alfie insisted. He slowly raised the lid to the coffin. They both peeked inside.

"Goddamn," Alfie said.

"He didn't mean that, Lord," Tommy said, looking to the heavens.

"That's right, I didn't." Alfie looked skyward. "Forgive me. But there's enough snow in there to cover a mountain top."

"To fill every nostril of every cokehead in the state," Tommy agreed. "And this is just one of the coffins."

Alfie lowered the lid. "Let's have a look inside." He used his revolver to motion toward the house. "Before they come back."

Tommy nodded.

They quietly made their way up onto the porch. Hunkering down, they sneaked past a large picture window and peeked inside.

In the soft glow of the inside light, the two hulking shadows had transformed into two hulking men. One hulk was dark brown. The other hulk was white. But they both looked like over-the-hill boxers—muscle-bound men in their late forties with broken noses and punch-drunk looks on their faces. The hired muscle had set the coffin down on a long table and now stood on either side. The lid of the coffin was open, hiding whoever stood behind it.

Alfie and Tommy could only see well-pressed, dark gray pants and highly polished black shoes underneath the table. A pale hand—long and bony with curved and crooked nails, each the length of a great bird's claw—rested on top of the lid.

"I bet that's Tenos," Alfie whispered, "checking the delivery."

"Should we take them?" Tommy asked.

"No. Not yet."

The hand slowly lowered the lid to the coffin, revealing a gaunt man with sunken cheeks and a deathly pallor. Long, red hair flowed around the man's face and rested on the shoulders of his black cloak. Underneath the cloak, he wore a dark jacket that matched his pants, a white shirt, and a blood-red tie.

Alfie and Tommy swallowed hard, almost at the same time. They crouched down even farther, their heads under the window, and faced each other.

"That has to be Tenos," Alfie said.

"Buries himself in the part, doesn't he?" Tommy said.

They both crossed themselves again.

"Remember, he's nothing more than a blood-sucking drug dealer," Alfie said in as reassuring tone of voice as possible.

"Did you have to say, blood sucking?"

A chilling breeze brushed the back of their necks, like the cold breath of the living dead.

"Did you feel that?" Tommy asked as he simultaneously scrunched his head down and raised his shoulders up around his exposed neck, like a turtle that couldn't get its head all

the way into its shell.

"No," Alfie insisted.

Raising their heads back up, Alfie and Tommy peeked into the window again. Both men hunched their shoulders up around their necks.

Inside, the hired muscle lifted the coffin off the table and lowered it to the floor. Alex Tenos stood to the side. He stared directly through the window.

"Shit, he spotted us."

As soon as Alfie said those words, the lights inside the house went out. A second later, a bright flash of red light blinded them. Alfie and Tommy fell back onto the porch, rubbing their eyes with one hand and clutching their revolvers with the other.

"Shit," Alfie said again. "Tommy, are you all right?"

"I can't see," Tommy answered.

"Me neither. Let's go."

They scrambled to their feet and lurched blindly toward the door. Alfie stood on one side of the door, with his back to the wall. Tommy stood on the other side.

"Open up!" Tommy yelled. "Police!"

A blast of automatic gunfire answered his warning.

"I said, police!" Tommy yelled again.

Another blast of gunfire splintered the door.

"I think they heard you," Alfie yelled over the gunfire.

"Did you call in for backup?" Tommy asked.

"Didn't you?" Alfie asked back.

"Shit," Tommy said. "Can you see yet?"

"No."

"Me neither."

"Let's go." Alfie jumped out in front of the door. With one kick he knocked the door inward. He dived through the open doorway, firing his revolver. Another blast of automatic gunfire sprayed the air.

Tommy didn't move. "Alfie!" he yelled. He kept his back against the wall, staying clear of the open doorway.

"I'm hit!" Alfie yelled back. "Tommy, I'm hit!"

Tommy turned the corner, rushing into the house. He fired blindly around the room, emptying his revolver of all six bullets before diving for the floor. As quickly as he could, Tommy reloaded.

Another spray of gunfire ripped into the wall above Tommy's head. "Alfie, you still with me?" he yelled.

Alfie didn't answer.

More gunfire. A flash of light from an automatic weapon.

Tommy rolled across the floor, stopping on his stomach when he was in direct line with the flashing light. He fired twice. The automatic gunfire stopped. The flashing light disappeared. A loud thud echoed through the now quiet

house.

"One down," Tommy muttered to himself. "Alfie," he said louder, "are you with me?"

"Yeah," Alfie answered. But his voice sounded weak. "I'm with you, partner."

Tommy rolled across the floor, toward the sound of Alfie's voice. He stopped when they bumped together.

"Ouch," Alfie said, "that's the arm I'm shot in."

"Sorry," Tommy said. He moved onto his stomach. "Alfie?"

"Yeah." Alfie grimaced. He rested on his back.

"No one has ever shot one of us before."

"Yeah," Alfie said, "and I always thought you'd get it first."

Tommy grinned. "When you didn't answer, I thought I lost you," he said. "I don't want to lose you, partner."

"You won't." Alfie changed the subject. "Hey, it's been quiet a long time. I bet they escaped out the back."

"Why don't you get up and check," Tommy suggested.

"Me?" Alfie groaned. "I've been shot, remember? You get up and check."

"Man, you're going to milk this little gunshot wound for all it's worth. I can see it now—"

"Listen," Alfie cut him short.

Sirens wailed in the distance.

"Thank God for concerned neighbors," Tommy said.

"I think I saw a neighborhood watch sign in a window next door." Alfie sat up. "I'm thinking about starting one in my neighborhood."

"Since when?" Tommy pushed up off his stomach, onto his knees.

"Since now," Alfie said.

The plaintiff-sounding wail of sirens grew louder. A dog somewhere in the neighborhood joined in.

"Here." Alfie handed Tommy back his penlight. "Find a light switch."

Tommy climbed to his feet. With the aid of the small light, he found his way to a switch on the wall and turned on the lights. "Hey," Tommy said, "I got them both." Using the barrel of his .38, he pointed at the two hulking men on the floor. They both lay face down. Dead. Two M-60 machine guns lay at their sides. Expended cartridges and spots of blood littered the floor.

Alfie struggled into a kneeling position. "What do you mean—you got them both? I got that one when I kicked the door down and came in blasting away. You were still outside, being careful again." Alfie holstered his revolver and pointed to one of the dead hulks.

"No. No. No." Tommy holstered his .38 as well. "I got that one when I came in blasting. Trying to save your butt, I

might add." He pointed to the same dead hulk. "I got that one later, when I thought I was avenging your death." He pointed to the other dead hulk.

"You're always trying to take the credit." Alfie struggled to get on his feet. He couldn't and went back down onto his knees.

Tommy hurried to his partner, helping him to his feet.

Sirens blasted through the air as ten black-and-whites screeched to a halt outside. Red and blue lights flashed through the windows and across the walls.

Alfie smiled at his partner. "You got them both," he said.

"Naaah, you got that one," Tommy assured his partner.

"You're right." Alfie grinned like the Cheshire cat smiling at Alice.

All sirens stopped abruptly. The red and blue lights flashed continuously across the wall. In the distance, the dog continued howling, joined by yet another dog closer by. Uniformed cops stormed the house with rifles and revolvers ready to blast away.

"You're late!" Tommy yelled, "It's over!"

"Harris, did you really need to bring an army?" Alfie asked the officer in charge.

"We heard there was a war going on over here," Harris answered.

"Yeah, and the enemy general got away," Alfie said to Harris. "Have your men search the neighborhood."

"Who are we looking for?" Harris asked.

"Alex Tenos," Alfie said. "He looks like a bat."

"He got away," Tommy added, "to suck blood another day."

Harris looked at Alfie and Tommy as if they were aliens from another planet.

"At least we got his henchmen," Alfie said to Tommy, "and his coke." To Harris, Alfie said, "You guys take good care of it. We want it all accounted for. There's more of the shit out in the hearse."

"And clean up this mess," Tommy added.

They walked through the crowd of uniformed cops, toward the door. Alfie held onto his bleeding arm and leaned against Tommy. Tommy had his arm around Alfie, keeping his wounded partner steady.

"Let's get you to a hospital," Tommy said as they stepped through the doorway and into the night.

Outside, flashes of blue and red streaked through the jaundiced glow of light. Dogs, more than two now, continued howling, as if still trying to answer the wail of the now silent sirens.

The two stopped and listened.

"Listen to them...the children of the night," Tommy

quoted Bram Stoker's Count Dracula.

Alfie smiled at Tommy's joke.

"What music they make," Tommy continued.

Alfie now frowned. "After the hospital...a drink," he said.

Reflexively, they scrunched their heads down and raised their shoulders up around their necks.

"Two...maybe three," Tommy agreed.

They continued on to the car.

Continued in *NIGHT SONGS*

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