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Chapter One

“Felix, drop your pants.”

The last time I heard those words were from a topless stripper.

Tonight was different. Mel said them but the wound on my leg hurt too much for me to protest.

Mel was the acting head of the local nidus, Latin for nest, in this case the community of Denver vampires. Tendrils of anxiety writhed from his orange aura, a bright contrast against the gloom of an autumn night. With a greasy gray mane combed back to his shoulders and scraggly white muttonchops, Mel projected none of the glamour associated with Hollywood vampires.

We were on a deserted construction site in Aurora, a suburb east of Denver. Though Aurora’s the second largest city in Colorado, it’s the Fresno of the Front Range: square mile after square mile of strip malls and cheap rents that run together to create an asphalt grid of nothing.

I rested against the foreman’s trailer, unbuckled my trousers, and slid them to my knees. Smoke and blood trickled from the teeth marks on the inside of my left thigh.

“Smoke?” Mel asked, astonished. “That damn zombie must have left silver fillings when he bit you.”

Silver. No wonder this hurt so much.

Mel’s right index fingernail extended into a talon. “Hold still.”

I gripped the muscle around the wound to distend the punctures. Mel crouched and slid the razor-sharp nail into an opening where the smoke puffed out. A fresh jolt of

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pain coursed up my spine and out my arms. He flicked his wrist and a tiny piece of smoking goo spun to the dirt.

He spit into his palm and pressed it over the wound. “This is as close to a hand job you’ll get from me. Doesn’t mean we’re in love or anything. In fact, please don’t call me in the morning.”

I massaged the injured muscle. “How about a card on Valentine’s?” The vampire enzymes in his saliva dulled the pain and accelerated my supernatural healing. By this time tomorrow all I’d have is another battle scar to add to my collection.

I put weight on the leg and it finally felt like I wouldn’t collapse from the pain. I fastened my trousers and limped to the edge of a hole excavated for the basement of a large building. Concrete slabs formed two sides of the hole but the rest was still packed dirt.

The zombie shambled within the hole where we’d chased it. He--obviously once a man--cradled his head under one arm and used his other to grope along the concrete. His mottled, waxy complexion and the clumps of trash stuck to his grimy clothes made it look like he’d been rotting in a shallow grave for a week.

I had removed the special contacts that masked my tapetum lucidem, the mirror-like retinas at the back of my eyes. The contacts were part of my cover to hide from humans, but wearing them kept me from using night vision or seeing psychic auras.

I didn’t know if zombies had night vision; I had no idea of any of their powers other than they were reputed to be hard as hell to destroy. Tonight I had discovered an important fact, they had no auras, which made them a bitch to track in the dark.

The zombie clawed a dirt wall, climbing up a foot before stumbling backwards. He dropped his head. It plopped against the dirt and rolled like a lopsided melon. The animated corpse sank to its knees and crawled along the ground, one arm searching in a wide arc.

The head worked its mouth and turned onto its face, where it used its nose and chin to inch toward the body. I was more disgusted than fascinated. Yes, zombies are

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undead, as we vampires are. But comparing them to us was like comparing turds to eagles.

The Araneum, the world-wide network of vampires has one standing order: Destroy all zombies.

The reason?

We must ruthlessly protect the Great Secret--the existence of the supernatural world--from humans. Their disbelief of the supernatural was what kept us vampires safe.

We've seen what humans have done to each other.

War.

Genocide.

Wal-Mart.

Against their growing technical prowess and corporate savagery, what chance did we the undead have? Our best hope for survival was to remain cloaked by superstition and fable.

Zombies have no regard for keeping the Great Secret. They materialize (From where? I don't know.) and begin their rampage for mortal flesh, literally mindless of the consequences. Vampires have been able to disguise zombie attacks as examples of deranged cannibals--Jeffery Dahmer copy-cats. Zombies may make one attack too obvious and then humans would be on to all of us supernatural creatures. After that, we can expect the methodical obliteration of the undead.

Therefore, all zombies must be exterminated.

Protecting the Great Secret is what I do for the Araneum. My day job is private detective. My real job is the pro bono work I do as a vampire enforcer.

"This your first zombie?" Mel asked.

"Yeah."

"How'd he get the drop on you?"

"By me being stupid," I replied. "After I laid him out with a shovel, I was going through his pockets."

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“Why didn’t you decapitate him?”

“I did. Right after that he shot from the ground, head in hands, and clamped onto me. Don’t let that walking corpse routine fool you, he’s got moves.”

The zombie found his head, picked it up, and stood. Strands of muddy drool hung from the lips and the neck stump. The dull eyes swiveled left and right and fixed upon a wooden surveyor’s stake pounded into the dirt. The zombie approached the stake and yanked it free. He worked the square end of the stake into the raw meat of the neck opening in his torso. Using both hands, he fit his head over the sharp end of the stake. He gave himself a rap on the top of his skull and the head squished tight into the collar of his shirt.

Looking at this repugnant creature was like watching an abscess ooze pus.

Where did the zombie come from?

Who made it?

And why?

Mel propped himself against a length of pipe that he’d used to club the zombie. He handed me a wallet. “Your zombie dropped this.”

The wallet looked--and smelled--like it had been recovered from a New Orleans gutter. I opened the wallet and sorted through a Colorado driver’s license, supermarket cards, and a debit card. The money bills and business cards were scraps of wet, dirty pulp.

I read aloud, “Name on the driver’s license is Barrett Chambers. From Alamosa.” That was in the San Luis Valley, over two hundred miles away. “How did he get here? I didn’t think zombies could drive.”

“Maybe he car pooled.”

I slid the wallet and cards into my coat pocket. I brushed my hands across my trousers to wipe away the slime.

The zombie made noises like he was gargling sludge. The smell hit us. Make that sewer sludge.

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“This guy doesn’t seem much for conversation,” Mel said. “Wouldn’t do any good to question him.”

A young vampire named Dagger appeared from around an excavator and walked to the edge of the hole. Mel had brought Dagger because the newbie bloodsucker wanted to prove himself as an undead terror.

Trouble was, Dagger was a high school dropout and a punk. Once undead, he changed his name from Bartholomew, said it lacked vampiric panache. Must’ve taken him all day to find that word in the dictionary.

Dagger carried a metal garden sprayer. He set the sprayer between his feet. “I filled this with super unleaded. It’s gonna make one hell of a flame thrower.” He waved the sprayer nozzle at the zombie. “Hey smelly boy, feeling cold dressed in those rags? Let me warm you up.”

The zombie turned toward Dagger. He stopped at the bottom of the wall, raised his arms, and emitted a guttural moan.

Dagger laughed, kicked dirt into the zombie’s face, and aimed the nozzle. Gasoline splattered on the zombie’s head and soaked his clothes. He waved his arms to block the spray.

Dagger took a cigarette from his shirt pocket and set the butt between his lips. He dug a plastic lighter from his pocket and pulled it up to the cigarette.

“I wouldn’t do that,” I warned.

Dagger dismissed me with a fanged sneer. “Hey, I got it, pops. Anything happens, I got my vampire reflexes.” He went, “Ha. Ha,” and bobbed side to side.

I wanted to find the vampire who had turned Dagger and slap her. She hadn’t done our bloodsucking tribe any favors by converting this arrogant dumb ass.

Dagger thumbed the lighter. It sparked and the gas fumes went whoosh. His clothes on fire, Dagger screamed and tripped over the sprayer, tumbling him and the sprayer on top of the zombie. They tangled together, their flailing bodies sandwiching

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the sprayer. Flames jetted from the pile, followed by a roaring fireball that mushroomed into a column of black smoke.

The heat slapped Mel and me and we were surrounded by the stink of burning compost. We stepped back. He covered his sideburns and said, “Awesome. I would’ve paid good money to see this.”

The charred bodies settled in a burning heap.

We experienced vampires have a mandate to protect the newly turned, to protect them against everything except their own stupidity.

“That Dagger,” Mel said, “what a dumb ass.”

“At least he took one with him. What now?”

Mel ambled toward the excavator and climbed over the caterpillar treads to get into the cab. “Gotta make sure the zombie is a goner.” He fumbled in the cab and tossed a padlock to the ground. A minute later the diesel engine grunted to life. The excavator boom lurched up and jerked left and right.

I hobbled out of the way.

The bucket on the end of the boom swiveled outward until its claws pointed down. The boom dropped and the bucket cleaved the bodies. Mel raised the boom and the bodies fell apart in halves. Smoking embers of flesh and clothes fluttered to the ground. He lifted and dropped the boom again and again, hacking the bodies into smoldering pieces. He yelled out the cab. “Hey, I oughta get a job at Benihana.”

I heard a slight hum. I turned to hear if a motor in the nearby machinery had turned on. None had. The only other noise was the rumble of the diesel in Mel’s excavator.

The humming increased in volume and pitch until it became a shrill ringing. I put my hands over my ears but that did nothing to silence the noise. I couldn’t tell where the ringing was coming from and moved my head to locate the source.

The noise was strongest when I looked across the excavated hole and the rest of the construction site. The tractors and compressors sat mute. The closest houses were on

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the other side of a vacant lot. I didn't see a signal mast, a dish antennae, or an aircraft, anything that could be responsible for the noise.

The penumbra of my aura distorted in the direction of the ringing. A wisp drew away from the aura, like a plume of smoke sucked toward a vacuum cleaner.

I had no idea what caused this. My nerves sparked with confusion.

The ringing abruptly stopped, like a switch had been thrown. My aura smoothed but the confusion didn't ebb.

Mel climbed from the excavator. "What's with you?"

I pulled my hands from my ears. "You didn't hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"A loud ringing."

"Ringing?" Mel's hairy eyebrows bunched together. "What? A bell?"

"Yeah, sort of." I felt as bewildered as Mel looked.

"Naw, I didn't hear nothing." Mel pointed to my leg wound. "Maybe it was a reaction to the zombie bite. We're vampires. You gotta expect weird shit."

Weird shit all right. Was what happened tonight about more than a bite from a zombie?

I stared across the empty lot. First a zombie. Then the mysterious ringing noise.

I hoped this was a coincidence.

I didn't want it to be an omen.