

BLOOD
ON THE
Water

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David Burton



By Light Unseen Media
Pepperell, Massachusetts

Blood on the Water

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Perfect Paperback Edition

ISBN-10: 1-935303-50-3

ISBN-13: 978-1-935303-50-3

LCCN: 2014947012

Published by
By Light Unseen Media
PO Box 1233
Pepperell, Massachusetts 01463-3233

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By Light Unseen Media presents the best of quality fiction and non-fiction on the theme of vampires and vampirism. We offer fictional works with original imagination and style, as well as non-fiction of academic calibre.

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Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*As always, to Dee, who pushes
me to do better. Thanks.*

PROLOGUE

Bill Service's House

Justine Kroft sat cross-legged on the floor, staring at the naked man bound and gagged on a straight back chair in the middle of his living room. At sixty-two he kept in good shape—rode a bicycle to work when the weather turned nice, ran a couple miles once a week though he didn't like running much. He played a mean game of tennis with his wife or friends several times a month. "Mean" being the operative word as he was known to be a gracious winner, but a bad loser.

Bill Service was losing big time at the moment, and he was not happy about it.

Justine savored his anger. She almost hoped he would free himself and attack her. Clear provocation. Self-defense, she could tell herself after she sliced off his head with the slightly curved, two foot long sword resting across her knees.

Absently, she ran a finger along the smooth, razor sharp blade; thin, but with some heft to it, it was fashioned to cut through bone as well as flesh—a neck for instance. Simone carried its twin. She had given Justine the blade when they left California after the trouble there. For reasons she didn't need to explain, she thought Justine might have a use for it. Justine did.

Standing by thick carpeted steps rising to the second floor, Simone Gireaux cocked her head, listening. "Justine." A whisper barely heard by mortal ears.

Justine glanced over her shoulder. Simone shrugged. *Get on with it.*

Service knew what that slight movement meant. Yet, his redoubled efforts to free himself proved futile.

With no discernible effort, Justine rose to her feet. As she walked around him like a matador taking his time sizing up a bull, her sword tip left a thin red line around his neck. She raised his head with the blade under his chin and made him look into her eyes.

She didn't want self-defense; she wanted justice.

"Do you know who I am yet?"

Narrowed eyes studied her face.

She leaned over him. "If I remove the gag, do not cry out. Unless you want your wife to watch you die from the top of the stairs. I promise you, it is a good vantage point."

Wide eyes showed he understood very well who she was.

Justine ripped the tape off his mouth.

"You know why I'm here, don't you?"

"Yes." A slight catch revealed fear hidden under a thin veil of contempt.

"Twenty years of extra life, Mr. Service. You should thank me for that."

"You don't have the guts to do it. Your mother would have, not you."

Justine grinned. "Then I'll start small and work up." She placed the sword tip against his crotch.

He jerked his hips back against the chair.

"Like I said, start small." She lifted the sword straight up, jammed it down.

Service hissed, but refused to cry out.

Justine jabbed her blade down in quick little motions—jabjabjab. Service cried out. She clamped a hand over his mouth.

"Not something your wife, or daughter, should see, right?" She flicked his severed member off the chair. It landed with a liquid plop on the hardwood floor. "You won't need that anymore."

She yanked his head back, exposing his neck. In a barely audible whisper she asked Simone, "Do you want to feed on him?"

"He is your kill."

"I think his blood will be too bitter for me."

"Finish it then. We must go."

Justine let Service's head fall forward. A low moan escaped his lips. He struggled to hold his head up.

Avoiding the growing pool of blood, Justine stood in front of the man who had raped and murdered her mother twenty years earlier. Blade held with two hands she pressed the edge against his neck, lifting his head.

"Mr. Service." Justine made sure she held his attention. "I'm sorry." Was that a glimmer of hope in his eyes? "I'm sorry your death will not be as long and painful as I'd like it to be. If there is a Hell, I trust your torment will be appropriate."

With her eyes and mind she held his focus while pressing the blade against his flesh, one hand on the tip, one on the grip. Despite her strength she felt some resistance from the windpipe. It gave with a slight pop and a whoosh of air, cutting off his last attempt to cry out. Slowly, the blade cut through: windpipe, muscles, tendons, veins, carotid arteries, stopping against his spine.

As the blade sliced through Service's head fell forward, attempting to seal the cut. Blood sprayed to the side in unison with the last beats of his heart—PFFFT, Pfft, pfft. His body jerked once, twice, and relaxed into death.

Justine slid the sword out to the side and let the head settle back into place. She stepped back from the blood. Eyes closed, she let her sensitive ears listen to the blood drip from chair to floor like a hammer driving nails into a coffin. She smiled. Finally. Justice. Blood justice.

Silently, Simone appeared beside Justine. She gripped Justine's sword hand and raised up the bloody blade.

"You made the kill, you must taste. No matter the bitterness."

Justine eyed the blade, resisting the urge to slash the body into ribbons of flesh suitable only for rats and cockroaches. She might have done it if the man would have felt the least bit of pain she had felt at twelve as she witnessed her mother's murder and her father's slow decline to suicide. But Bill Service was past physical pain, past who knew what youthful psychic trauma, and past any ability to feel another person's emotional pain. It was done. She looked into her maker's eyes. Simone did not hold with unnecessary killing. To taste the blood was her symbolic way of acknowledging that you deliberately killed, like Native Americans who thank the rabbit or deer for providing food.

Though flush from visiting vengeance a week earlier on her daughter's killer, and now on her mother's killer, Justine was still a Young Blood. Despite Simone's casual demeanor, her 350 years of experience imbued her with an aura of strength which brooked no defiance should she choose to insist. Which she would.

Revenge is sweet, Justine told herself and ran her tongue along one side of the blade. The warm, thick liquid rolled into her mouth like a healing soup, mending, as best they could be, the years of loss. Though her head insisted it was bitter blood, her body responded with a shudder of delight. One crimson trail escaped from the corner of her generous lips.

"Is it bitter as you thought?" Simone asked, close now, eyes bright, voice soft.

"Taste for yourself."

Simone pressed closer. Her mouth captured the blood from Justine's chin, and lips, and tongue.

On the Road

On the road half an hour later, crossing the Mississippi River into Illinois, Teresa Diaz's sleepy voice came from the back seat of their full size SUV. She still carried a slight Hispanic accent from her childhood in Mexico. "What time is it?"

After a long expectant pause, Simone said from the driver's seat, "Almost midnight."

"How far to Boston?"

"About twelve hundred miles. You should sleep now."

Another long silence. "Did you...do it? *Es terminado?*"

Justine stared out the passenger seat window. "Yes."

"I will pray for him."

"Please don't. It's too late for him."

"Then I will pray for you."

"Too late for me, too."

"You're my friend. I'll pray anyway."

Justine reached her hand back through the gap between the front seats. Teresa took it.

"Thank you," Justine said. They held hands for a few minutes until Teresa drifted into sleep.

CHAPTER ONE

Boston

The three women cruised into Boston around eight at night under a clear, moonless sky. Justine drove, Simone navigated.

Teresa stretched in the back seat. "Are we there yet, *amigas*?"

"Boston, dead ahead," Justine said.

"No more dead because we're here, I hope."

"*Moi aussi*," Simone agreed, while perusing a city map.

"I thought you knew where we're going?"

"It has been forty years since I was last here," Simone said. "And I did not have much time to study the city then."

"Is there a crumbly arrest warrant waiting at the bottom of a drawer for you?" Teresa asked.

Simone turned a wounded expression to the back seat.

"Teresa, my mortal friend, you know I am as you say, one of the 'Good guys.'"

Teresa flashed her a scrunched up smile and patted into place her dark hair pulled back into a short chignon. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I know you are."

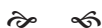
Simone took Teresa's hand and held it against her thin lips.

Just for an instant, Teresa attempted to jerk her hand away from the vampire's gentle vise-like grip. "Sorry."

"I understand you still do not trust me," Simone said. "But I swear to you, Teresa, that I will never take your blood without your permission. *Ça va?*"

"I know that, too."

Simone kissed her mortal friend's hand and turned back to her map. "Exit here. Head for Cambridge."



Justine finally found a parking space a block down from Kendall Square. Only half joking Justine complained, "Couldn't we have pushed

some of these cars together and made a space?"

"This is MIT. We'd return and find the vehicle in pieces," Simone said.

The three women exited and stretched in the glow of a streetlight.

Teresa twisted her solid mortal body. "Couldn't you have turned into bats and flown here while I flew first class?"

A rare chuckle came from Justine. "I wish." She rubbed Teresa's shoulders.

"Oh, that feels so good. I take back everything bad I ever said about your change."

"I hope you never have to take back your take back." Justine kissed her friend on the cheek and turned to Simone. Expression serious, she said, "Lead on."

Trees lined the street. Ivy covered much of the two and three story brick student apartment buildings. Justine and Simone wore long coats, loose trousers, and boots. With dark caps pulled low, one didn't need to know what they were to know they were dangerous. Teresa, the taller of the three, carried a few extra pounds. In sneakers and jeans, hands jammed into the pocket of a worn Cargill coat, she might be described as intimidating, but nothing more.

More than one person negotiating the nighttime streets glanced over their shoulders as the three strode down the sidewalk.

All four corners of the intersection consisted of small store fronts—Laundromat, 7-11, used records and CDs, printing, hole-in-the-wall restaurants. Around the corner, across the street was Kazza's Psychic Store.

Crossing the street, Simone whispered to the others, "Kazza is a friend. Her brother, Treen, and I did not part on good terms." She caught Justine's eye. "He has a temper." Justine nodded, and made sure the short sword hidden by her coat was loose in its scabbard. To Teresa, "It might be dang—"

"It's my daughter we're looking for. I'm going in." She squared her shoulders. "I won't stake anybody without your permission."

Simone shook her head, reaching for the door. "Stay alert."

Kazza's Psychic Store

Inside, they surveyed the narrow store. Glass cases filled with crystal balls, crystals, Tarot cards, ornate herb boxes and other psychic

paraphernalia lined the right side. On the left, tables carried candles, incense and aromatic oils. Books lined the walls – New Age up front, running back to subjects closer to witchcraft, sorcery, vampires and other unsavory creatures. A counter with a well-worn wooden gate stretched across the back.

Spreading out, they approached the counter and waited.

Teresa looked around, searching. "I feel something. Like electricity in the air."

"Magic," Simone said. "No shoplifters here."

"*Oh Dios. Brujeria?* For real?"

Simone shrugged. *Yes.*

"Simone! You have returned." A chunky woman around forty trailing a voluminous tie-dyed gown with sewed on mystical signs burst through a door in the back. At a nod of her head the gate swung open as she came through, arms held wide for Simone. They embraced, kissing both cheeks. "Now you must go away."

"Treen? I told no one I was coming."

"Of course Treen. He felt you the minute you stepped out of your car. He will come for you."

Justine's hand went to the hilt of her sword. The woman arched an eyebrow.

Simone grinned. "Not yet, Justine. Only if he kills me." Justine removed her hand, but didn't relax. "Kazza, this is Justine Kroft."

Kazza held Justine's hand with both of hers while studying her up and down. Justine tried to avoid the woman's gaze, but couldn't turn away.

"You must be a special woman, Justine. Simone makes few Young Bloods." Over her shoulder she asked Simone, "I heard that the Master of the Sinakovs was destroyed. You?"

"Justine."

"See, special already."

Kazza turned to Teresa. "A mortal?"

"This is Teresa Diaz. Her daughter Antonia was taken by the Sinakov Family. We are in search of her."

Gripping both of Teresa's hands, Kazza stared deep into her dark eyes. Into her soul, Teresa thought, squirming under the scrutiny, feeling warm tendrils rummage about her brain and body. With a gasp Kazza stepped back, though she kept hold of Teresa's hand. "Simone, did you know?"

"I thought, maybe."

"Yes, how could you not? Does she suspect?"

"No."

Teresa looked from one to the other. "Suspect what?"

"You are hurting inside. Not only for your daughter. You have given up much to search for her."

"That doesn't matter." Teresa leaned forward, grasping Kazza's hands. "Do you know something? Is she alive?"

"Ah, yes, that would be helpful to know, wouldn't it?"

Kazza held still but for her head swinging with a slow bobbing motion. "I believe her body is alive."

"Her body? Is she...?"

"A vampire? I don't think so. She may be far away, or surrounded by...others."

"Where is she?"

"That I cannot tell you, dearie. But I might know where to find the one person who can. Which is why you are here, is it not?"

A door bell jangled annoyingly as the front door banged open. A tall man, slim, with fly-away dark hair, wearing sneakers, loose trousers tight at the ankles and a knee-length coat, stood framed in the door, looking like an escapee from a romance novel cover. Taking on a full swashbuckler stance, he proclaimed, "Simone. I knew you would come back."

In an instant he stood in front of her, sword point against her neck. In the next instant Justine pressed her blade against his neck.

"Treen, you have been thinking of me," Simone said.

"Oh yes, I have. Thinking I will kill you for what you did to me."

"So, I should have let her die?"

"No!" Treen tensed, ready to thrust the blade through her neck. "You should have died."

"Step back." Justine hissed, voice as sharp as her blade. "No one dies here tonight."

"Don't be so sure, Young Blood." Treen's sword flashed down, swung behind his left side and up, flicking Justine's sword away from his neck.

Simone's boot against his chest propelled him back. He somersaulted backward, landing on his feet.

Simone went after him. In seconds the clang of swords filled the small space as they fought around the tables.

"Don't you break anything," Kazza shouted at them. "Or you are both out of here." She gently restrained Justine from interfering. "Let them go. They've been waiting forty years for this."

"Will he really try and kill her?"

"Nah. He still loves her."

Teresa returned a round, sharpened stake to the three stake holster on her belt. "I've seen too many times when that didn't make any difference."

Kazza shrugged, accepting the point.

Leaning on the counter while Simone and Treen worked out their differences with swords and feet, slamming against bookshelves, rolling on the floor, Justine asked Kazza, "So what is it between them? She mentioned letting someone die."

Kazza winced as Simone snatched a figurine inches before it shattered. "Same old story," she said. "Girl meets boy. He thinks he's too cool for her and meets a mortal girl. First girl gets hurt. There's some trouble and she saves mortal girl's life, but reveals what boy is. Mortal girl freaks and leaves boy. Boy blames girl. Girl leaves town. Now girl has returned with a Young Blood and a mortal searching for a missing girl, and boy and girl are having the fight they should have had then."

"How long can they keep that up?" Teresa asked.

"To long." Kazza cringed as a delicate candle holder almost hit the floor. "Give them another ten minutes. Meanwhile, I don't have to be a psychic to know why you're here. I don't have the power to locate your daughter, but there is one who can, and you'll want to know where she is."

Without a word, Kazza passed through the gate and the back door. Justine heard the bolt shoot home.

"I used to have energy like that," Teresa said.

"Yeah, when we were six."

"That Kazza said Simone was here forty years ago. But she doesn't look much over thirty. Is she one of you?"

"No. I don't know what the hell she is. Something different."

"*Maravilloso*. I am still not accepting that vampires exist."

"Me either."

"What did she mean, 'Does she suspect?'"

"I haven't a clue. Maybe you're a werewolf."

"Aren't werewolves and vampires enemies?"

"Depends on which movie you watch."

Shoulder to shoulder they watched the two combatants for a few more minutes. Then, sword points at each other's throats, it was over. Neither would be the first to remove a sword, so Justine and Teresa pulled the blades away simultaneously.

"Are you going to kiss and be nice, now?" Justine asked.

"*Mais, oui.*" Simone held Treen's narrow face and planted a kiss on him to last another forty years.

With a quick shake to clear his head, Treen looked about. "Where is Kazza?"

"She's in back, locating somebody who can locate Antonia," Justine said.

"Antonia?"

"Teresa's daughter. The Sinakov Family took her."

"Ah. So she is not foo—?"

Justine's hand went to her sword. "As cliché as it sounds, don't even think about it."

Treen bowed an apology. "In that case, there is nourishment and," a nod to Teresa, "refreshments upstairs. Kazza may be some time doing whatever she does behind that door. Shall we?"



A half hour later, ensconced in comfortable chairs, Treen finished telling an amusing story from the Civil War about how he and another Young Blood had become sick from the overabundance of blood after a major battle. Even Teresa laughed.

Kazza appeared at the top of the stairs and surveyed the group. "Been a long time since I heard laughter up here."

"Come, join us then." Simone patted the seat next to her. "And tell us where to find Grace."

"It cannot be spoken aloud."

Breaking an expectant pause, Justine said, "Can you write it down?"

Kazza added a smile to her you-know-it's-not-that-easy look. "Grace is a powerful witch with powerful enemies. Writing or speaking, it is too easy for her location to be discovered by the wrong people."

"If you ask her, I am not the wrong people," Simone said.

"No, you are not, but even the speaking or writing of the location has a very strong warding spell."

Justine asked, "What happens if you write or say it?"

Kazza shrugged. Fingers spread, her hands flew apart. "Puff?"

"Puff what? Puff who?"

"The speaker or writer."

"Even you?"

"I am not immune to her magic."

"So are you coming with us, then?"

"No need." Gaze focused on Teresa, Kazza said, "When the time comes, you'll know where to go."

"Why are you looking at me like that? Does this have anything to do with what I don't suspect?"

Kazza knelt before Teresa and took her hands. Smiling sympathetically, she said, "You have the power of magic in you. You are a *bruja*."

"Oh estupendo."



A bit later over mugs of warm blood for the vamps and hot chocolate for the others, Kazza asked Justine, "I understand why Teresa is searching for her daughter. Why are you?"

Justine stared into her mug of blood. "My daughter Brittany was murdered. I can never have her back. Antonia, Teresa's daughter, is still alive. She's my friend and I want to help her regain what I've lost."

"And revenge has nothing to do with it?"

Justine glanced at Teresa. Her lips formed a fragile smile. "That too."

Kazza's gaze locked on Justine. "And?"

"Don't you know all this already?"

"Vampires are hard to read." Her full lips curled up at the corners, but her gaze never wavered. "Not enough blood in the brain maybe."

Justine stared through the small panes of the window, not seeing the neon of a video rental store, but the past.

"When my daughter was killed, I died, too. Grief and rage consumed me; I didn't care what would happen afterward if I survived." She sighed deeply, dropping her gaze to the floor. "I couldn't save my Brittany, but now I have to help Teresa save her Antonia."

Kazza sat back and sipped her hot chocolate. "And the mortal? A detective? Harry, I think."

Justine's eyes widened. "I thought vampires were hard to read."

"Not when there's strong feelings attached."

Teresa caught her eye and nodded for her friend to continue.

A tiny smile made a brief appearance. "Detective Harry Frazer, San Diego Sheriff's Department. He helped me...us. He was injured, but in any case it was best he didn't come with us. He's too good and honest a man to look past anything we might have to do."

Expression straight as it was possible for him to keep it, Treen said, "Not to mention long days and nights on the road with three women would make him crazy as some vampires I know."

Simone flashed him an aren't-you-a-smartass smile.

Mood lightened, Treen asked, "And you, Simone. Helping a mortal and a Young Blood?"

Simone pressed her lips into a small moue. She glanced at Justine and Teresa. "They are *my* Young Blood and Mortal. I am only 'tagging along' as you say, to keep them out of trouble."

"You gave up much to 'tag along.'"

Simone flicked that idea away. "With the Sinakov Family *en desordre*, it is a good time to be out of town."

"As I recall, you also lost a child to vamps."

Simone locked eyes with Justine. "*Oui, c'est vrai.*"



An hour later Justine drove while Teresa navigated.

They headed north on Broadway in Chelsea, the direction Teresa, for no good reason, felt they should go. With no warning, Teresa screamed and grabbed her head. She rocked forward and back, body vibrating as if electrified. "Who, who, who. No, no, no, no. Noooooo."

From the back seat Simone held her. "What's happening? Teresa, tell us."

Teresa jerked against Simone's hands. "Go back. Kazza. Trouble. Go back. Go back. Treen. *Dios. Dios.*" She slumped back. Her hands dropped to her lap. Sweat glistened on her brow. "It is too late, but go back."

Justine made a screeching u-turn and raced back toward Cambridge through light midnight traffic. All the way Teresa held herself tight and shivered. All she'd say was, "*Agusto.*"

Justine screeched to a stop by a hydrant two stores past Kazza's Psychic Shop. On full alert, swords drawn and held down tight against legs, pistols on their hips, Justine and Simone pushed open the unlocked front door and stepped inside.

The store had a different feel to it, one of violence and death. Fresh blood scent filled the space like a thick mist. At the bottom of the stairs Treen lay slumped against the wall – bloody sword in hand, head three feet away, wide-open eyes staring dully at the beamed ceiling.

Simone made a small noise and dropped to her knees. Her fingers trembled as she closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Justine said from atop the stairs. "At least he took some with him."

One headless body sprawled midway up the steps. On the landing, another knelt in a darkening crimson pool, headless shoulders slumped, arms hanging slack. Justine inspected the shambles of the apartment,

found more red smears and spatters, and broken furniture. "Kazza." She expected no answer and got none.

"Kazza is gone, isn't she?" Teresa said.

"Yeah."

"Vampires?"

"Yeah."

"Because of us?"

"Maybe," Simone said from the door. "The witch...Grace, has enemies. If they heard that Kazza knew how to find her..."

"They'd take her and make her tell them."

"Mas, Dios? A real witch? *Una bruja*?"

"Like you, apparently." Justine gripped Teresa's shoulder. "This is all new to me, too."

Simone slid her sword into its scabbard with a sharp snap. She stood in front of Teresa. "You obviously have a connection with Kazza. Can you locate her, hear her thoughts, see what she sees?"

Teresa inhaled a deep breath, let it out. "I don't know what I can do. I can try."

Justine righted a heavy wooden chair for Teresa. She sat and closed her eyes.

Except for Teresa's breathing the room was silent to the vampires. Justine leaned against the wall next to the kitchen door, waiting.

Tic.

Justine jerked away from the wall, cocked her head and listened. Instantly alert, hand on sword, Simone watched.

Silence.

Creak.

Simone joined her. Together they moved silently into the kitchen. They stepped over a leg severed above the knee. Listened. Sniffed. Simone pointed to a tall cupboard. A drop of blood leaked from one of the bottom doors and plopped softly on the wood plank floor.

Together, they yanked open the doors.

He had crammed himself into the bottom space. With one good hand he held the two parts of his severed forearm together against his chest. His severed leg seeped black blood. Dark eyes flicked from one vamp to the other; wary, uncertain.

Justine tapped his head with her sword tip and inclined her head toward the severed leg on the floor. "That your leg?"

"Yeah."

"Where's Kazza?"

"Who took her?" Simone demanded.

"And why?" Justine ticked his cut arm.

"You know I can't tell you that."

"You know how long it will take to reattach that leg? If you survive that long."

"Your friends left you here. You should show them the same loyalty."

"Tell us where she is, you can have your leg back."

"Why should I trust you?"

Justine grabbed his jacket and threw him sprawling on the floor.

"Because if you don't tell, your head joins your leg. Simple."

Simone rested the edge of her blade on his neck.

A thump sounded in the living room. Justine rushed out.

The wounded vampire lay still on the floor. He appeared to take a breath, though he didn't need to breathe. "A house in Waltham. Summit Street. 56."

In the other room, Teresa had dropped to her knees. She held her head and nodded as if in pain. "*Si, si, si,*" she whispered through clenched teeth.

"Teresa, what is it?" Justine wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Kazza?"

Big breaths. "Yes. A room, big warehouse by the docks. Filled with wooden crates."

"Do you know where? A street? A number?"

"Water. B Street?" She cried out and slumped into Justine's arms, gasping for breath. "Hurts."

Simone stood over them. "He told me where she is."

"Teresa connected with Kazza. A warehouse by the docks. B Street."

"That is opposite of where he told me."

"Great. Who do we trust?"

Simone, recognizing the rhetorical nature of the question, said, "Take Teresa downstairs. I'll be there in a minute."

"Right. The bodies?"

"There's a door to the roof on the landing. By ten o'clock they will be dust."

Justine helped Teresa to her feet while Simone drew her sword and, lips set in a grim frown, returned to the kitchen.

CHAPTER TWO

Boston Streets

“How will we find her?” Teresa asked. She had recovered her composure, but her face still occasionally wrinkled with confusion.

Driving, Justine said over her shoulder, “That’s why you travel with vampires, for our superior senses, of smell for instance.”

“You are full of yourself for a Young Blood,” Teresa said.

“I have a good teacher, or maker, or whatever.” Justine glanced at Simone who stared out the window instead of at the map on her lap. Though no tears stained her cheeks, a tight lipped frown and narrowed eyes were enough to show her thoughts were about Treen. Justine squeezed her arm sympathetically.

Simone’s shoulders rose and fell with a silent sigh. “Stay left ahead. Windows down.”

A few delivery trucks rumbling and spewing exhaust were the only traffic at one in the morning. Justine turned off of Dry Dock Avenue then cruised past a 700 foot concrete lined depression, an empty ship’s dry dock. The aroma of saltwater hung thick in the cool night air, occasionally interrupted by the rank odor of a sour dumpster.

Justine drove slowly while she and Simone focused their sense of smell on detecting any trace of Kazza’s scent. Teresa studied each building, large or small, warehouse or business, for movement or a shadow or anything out of place.

At the inland end, B Street curved right around the dry dock and continued straight back toward the water. They noticed nothing unusual along the row of relatively well maintained warehouses until a hundred yards before B Street turned into Canal Street. Justine stopped the SUV. They checked the wind direction. An abandoned warehouse hulked ahead.

“That building,” Justine said.

“A bit cliché, but yes,” Simone agreed. “Drive past. Next street up, we park.”

Through a chain link gate they could see inside the building through tall, open rolling doors. With their superior eyesight they scanned the big empty space, stripped of all equipment, the only feature a rough, flat-roofed, plywood enclosure constructed against the far end with a single light over the door. Kazza's scent stayed strong.

With the SUV parked so the driver could watch the building, Justine and Simone geared up. They both wore short, slim bladed swords strapped to their backs under jackets, a .45 semi-auto on their hips, and a longer blade slung from the belt.

Simone handed Teresa a sawed-off shotgun and a pistol. "If you are attacked, shoot first and do not worry about the questions. *Ça va?*"

"I don't like it, but I get it."

"Self-defense, Teresa. Antonia will need her mother when we find her."

"I can live with that."

"That is the idea. *Vigilance, mon ami.*"

"You too."

Justine and Simone crossed the road and easily slipped over the fence. They waited a minute, senses wide open, searching for hidden sentries. None detected, they ran across an open paved area careful to avoid rusty metal, rotting wood, and concrete debris to the big sliding doors, the only way in.

A high catwalk ran along the far side of the interior with metal steps dropping down in front of a flat-topped, utilitarian building about fifty feet long. No light showed through the one window next to the only door.

On full alert, they moved silently along the wall under the catwalk up to the building. A crudely painted sign over the door said OFFICE. Kazza's odor remained strong. They crept to the door and tried the knob. It was not locked. Still hanging on to the habit of breathing, Justine sucked in a deep breath and opened the door.

SUV

Teresa tried to relax in the driver's seat. She'd done her time in the seat on their trip from Oceanside, California to St. Louis.

She didn't want to think about what happened in St. Louis, but she did. Of course she did. When Justine began her quest to avenge

Brittany's murder Teresa told her friend that she would help her, but would not kill for her. That guy in St. Louis—she didn't want to even think his name lest he become real—probably deserved whatever might have happened to him. Teresa made the sign of the cross, a habit she was quickly losing, along with her faith in its meaning. Neither Justine nor Simone said what happened, and she did not ask. Plausible deniability—she could live with that. What was done was done. Justine had given up her life to seek justice for Brittany, Teresa could overlook something that may or may not have happened.

They'd traveled mostly at night, but there had been plenty of daylight driving with Justine and Simone under blankets in the back. Teresa's sleep cycle had been completely screwed up. Fortunately, now she was awake and alert, helped by a background hum, like listening to an empty telephone line—the connection she felt to Kazza's soul or chi or, as she didn't want to think of it, magic.

With the shotgun beside her, the pistol tucked between the door and the seat, and cell phone in her hand, Teresa nervously watched Justine and Simone make their way into the abandoned factory. Deep down she knew vampires were both impossible and an abomination. But, having recently lapsed somewhat from her forty years of traditional Catholic upbringing, she looked with awe, and occasional envy, at the attributes of vampires. She hated to admit it, but she felt safe with them. As a mere human without them close to her, she felt exposed and vulnerable sitting alone in the vehicle—shotgun, pistol and wooden stakes on her belt notwithstanding.

Once her two partners faded into the building, Teresa scanned the vicinity. Across the street, a vast area of darkness—water. Behind, streetlights, closed up businesses and newer warehouses. Ahead, a few Quonset huts in an otherwise empty lot. An inoperative streetlight occupied the far corner.

As she studied the huts and her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, the rear end of a black van hidden by the closest hut revealed itself. Teresa's brow wrinkled. The huts were old; weeds grew around them through cracks in the asphalt. The van was new.

She didn't notice the tiny spot of light until it blinked. Once noticed, it drew her attention. It blinked again, this time a slow blink from left to right. Almost as if someone had walked past it. Again the blink. And a change in the background hum in her head. *Fear, a warning, anger.*

At the far end of the nearest hut, movement—dark figures in darkness. Teresa opened the glove compartment door, wincing at the

interior light, and drew out a pair of binoculars. Slumped in the seat, moving slowly—an unwanted idea had occurred to her—she scanned the area with the glasses. Her heart picked up its pace even as she held her breath.

Vampires! She'd recognize that flowing arrogant movement anywhere. She'd lived with it for weeks. The figures vanished, then reappeared on the other side of the hut. Four of them. One had the chin up, shoulders back swagger of a Master—the other three, his minions.

Teresa punched keys on her cell phone. *"I'm here!"* appeared in her head. She had no doubt it came from Kazza in the hut. *"One guard."*

"What?" Justine's voice low, guarded.

"The factory is a trap. Kazza is in the hut across the street. Four vamps are coming for you."

"We figured out the trap part. Can you get Kazza?"

"There's one guard. I will get her."

Metal weapons clashed in the background. *"Good. Gotta go."*

Teresa didn't allow herself time to think. She downed a slug of water, gathered up her weapons and gently exited the vehicle. The end of the chain link fence surrounding the lot left an eighteen inch wide gap to the building. Sucking in her stomach and chest—she was a "big-boned" woman with the figure to match—she slipped through and circled around to approach the hut from the rear.

Justine had told Teresa that if it was quiet enough, she could indeed hear a heart beating. Teresa had killed a vampire before, but that was a spur of the moment action to save Harry. Now, she was purposely, and she hoped not foolishly, putting herself in harm's way. No thoughts, memories or prayers, if she had still believed in their power, would prevent her heart from announcing her approach like a wild bass drum. So, heart thumping, armpits slick with nervous sweat, she crouched and peered through a one inch hole left by a long removed pipe.

What she saw took her breath away, like a punch to the stomach.

Warehouse

Empty!
The only illumination came from a bare bulb over the door. Their heightened vision saw that, except for a long slanted table covered with old blueprints, rat turds and dust, the only interesting thing inside was

a metal folding chair surrounded by blood.

Simone sniffed the blood. "Kazza." She looked close at an object on the chair. "Merde." She picked it up, smelled it, set the severed finger down. "Kazza's."

"Too late," Justine said. Her eyes found Simone's. "Nobody here." She nodded toward the door and looked up.

Simone nodded. Loosening her gun in its holster, she moved to the door.

Justine peered out the window. She motioned for Simone to exit.

Simone stepped out and stopped at the bottom of the steps to the catwalk. She surveyed the empty building, while tapping her sword blade impatiently against her leg.

Less than thirty seconds passed before the young and impatient vampire crouching on the roof jumped.

Justine, waiting just inside the door, leaped to intercept him. Her timing was off a half second. His feet slammed Simone to the pavement as Justine hit him. They all tumbled to the floor. Justine rolled to her feet and she and the jumper went at it with flashing swords.

Simone took a few moments to rise up, as if her knees hurt. Before she could aid Justine a gunshot reverberated inside the larger empty building. Simone's leg kicked out and with a quick yelp of pain she went down again.

For a split second, the gunshot distracted the jumper. With one hand Justine grabbed his jacket and spun him around as a shield. With the other, she flung her sword at the new attacker, a stoutly built man about fifty when changed. Her blade glanced off his ribs. Though not a killing blow, it slowed him long enough for Justine to slam the jumper down next to Simone and rush to the new vamp. She jinked right to dodge a bullet then left to crash into him. Their collision drove him against a support column. With no hesitation Justine jammed her gun under his chin and pulled the trigger. She dropped the body and spun around.

With barely a glance at the first vamp and his now severed head, she helped Simone to her feet. "Do you want me to carry you?"

"I have been carrying myself for three hundred and fifty years, Young Blood. I can make it to the door." Nevertheless, she didn't pull away when Justine took her arm.

Justine's cell phone vibrated. "What?" Justine kept her voice guarded as she scanned for more surprises.

"The factory is a trap. Kazza is in the hut across the street. Four vamps are coming for you."

"We figured out the trap part. Can you get Kazza?"

Four vampires rushed out of the gloom.

"There's one guard. I'll get her."

The lead attacker clashed swords with Justine.

"Good. Gotta go."

Quonset Hut

Almost unrecognizable under the blood staining her face and neck, Kazza slumped in a wooden armchair in the middle of the otherwise bare hut. Blood dripped from the stub of a pinky finger. Alive or dead, it was impossible to tell.

A young vampire with short spiked hair and fingernails filed to points nudged Kazza's foot with a scuffed, steel-toed boot. He held a small cleaver by his leg.

Kazza started, glared at him through swollen eyes, managed a feeble attempt to spit at him, then dropped her head.

Mouth distended, fangs fully extended, Spiked Hair yanked her head back and licked blood from her cheek. "Tell me where that witch bitch is. I'll let you go. This will all be over and you can go back to your crystal ball and Ouija board. If you don't tell me," he caressed her neck with the cleaver's edge, "there will be nothing left of you." Then he ran his tongue across her lips, slurping blood.

Teresa saw her lips move, but could not hear what she said.

The vamp did. "Stupid bitch." He slapped her with the cleaver's flat face.

Fucking vampires, Teresa thought, then didn't think. Just acted.

She jammed the shotgun barrel into the hole, made sure it wasn't pointed at Kazza, and beat on the hut side. Through an open sliver of the hole she watched the curious vamp approach, blocking the light.

Boom! She yanked the barrel out and ran to the door, wrenched it open and charged in. She expected to see the young vampire writhing on the floor. He wasn't. He was nowhere. Only a splotch of blood marked the floor.

Teresa walked around Kazza, searching the shadows. "Where is he?" she asked, not expecting to hear an answer over the rush of blood in her ears.

"Up."

Blood on the Water

"Up?" Trembling, chest constricted, shoulders hunched, she whirled about in near panic. "Where?"

There! In the air. He slammed into her and slid off as they hit the floor. Filed fingernails ripped three gashes in her side. His outstretched hand landed inches from Kazza's foot. Kazza lifted her foot and stomped on his hand. This delayed him long enough for Teresa to roll, aim and shoot. With half his head gone, the vamp shuddered then lay still, out of it.

Teresa breathed deeply to catch her breath, then rolled onto her knees and puked. Unsteady on her feet, she stumbled to Kazza and cut her loose. "Can you walk? Never mind." She bound the mutilated hand with the dead vamp's shirt, then picked Kazza up. "Ahh. Fucking vampires." Her side burned like hell.

At the fence Teresa propped Kazza against the wall. "You have to stand up while I pull you through. Okay?" The wounded woman may or may not have nodded. Teresa slipped through then reached back and dragged Kazza after her.

Her nurse's instinct dictated that she tend Kazza's wounds. A quick inspection revealed that besides the missing finger, she'd been slashed, sliced and burned over her head and body. Fang marks showed on both sides of her neck. Her pulse was weak and erratic.

"We'll get you to a hospital as soon as Justine and Simone return."

"No."

Gunshots from the factory interrupted Teresa's reply.

"Shit." Teresa stared at the woman slowly bleeding to death in front of her, then at the factory. "Shit." Decision made, she strapped Kazza into the backseat. "I don't suppose you can tell me if any of us will be alive in five minutes?"

Putting aside any attempt at stealth, Teresa hit the gas and raced toward the factory gate.

Warehouse

Simone ignored the pain in her leg. No matter how careful a vampire was over a span of centuries, unless she spent all that time in a coffin six feet under, she was going to get hurt. Of necessity, Simone had not been careful and had not spent any time in a coffin, so she had learned about pain and how to use it.

Pain did not slow her down. The bullet had damaged her knee. Until it had time to heal, a half hour at least, she was at a disadvantage. *Turn the pain to power*, a soldier she had met soon after accidentally being turned into a vampire had told her.

Some years after they met in 1648, she and the soldier, Etienne, were on a mission for the King's Investigator when a man who did not want to be found shot Etienne. In great pain, shot in the leg with a musket ball that broke his leg, he used the power of pain to fight on and save them both.

Seeing her limp, a second vamp with broad shoulders and a shaved and tattooed head ran full speed at her. Simone sidestepped and swung at him as he passed. Missed. Shaved Head ran up the office wall, pushed off and came back swinging. He may have been impetuous, but he was no Young Blood. All the attackers were experienced. She could smell it on them, not the sharp acrid perfume of fresh blood, but the slight musty fragrance of just turned earth.

They fought, blades flashing in the dim glow of the office door. A third attacker, a grin on her gaunt forty-year-old face, circled, waiting.

Tito, the leader, six foot, broad shouldered, craggy faced from smallpox, watched them all with ice blue eyes. He would reserve his grin for when the two bitch vamps were dead or strapped helpless to a table. Preferably the latter.

Simone's opponent forced her toward Tito. She caught a whiff of his singular scent, two hundred years of musk, with an edge of disease and decay. Unpleasant, and somehow familiar. Shaved Head took advantage of her distraction, and struck for the neck. Too experienced to allow that, Simone ducked, spun around, swung up to slice his sword arm off, and back to sever his head.

"You old bitch!" the female vamp screamed. She rushed Simone. Simone hopped sideways, sticking out one foot that tripped the female and sent her sprawling.

Simone ran to Justine and stood beside her. Number One, an excellent swordsman, gave no ground against the two of them.

"We must leave now," Simone said.

"No shit," Justine said. "Tell him."

"You tell him. Now."

It was a bit unfair what they did next, but then four against two was also unfair. Simone moved left while Justine moved right until they had One in between and at a definite disadvantage. Simultaneously they impaled him from front and back, their swords snicking together as

they protruded from opposite sides.

Number One coughed and clutched at his chest. Surprised, but not dead, his young face registered the unexpected pain, and perhaps for the first time in decades, fear.

His pain and disbelief did not last long. Blades quickly withdrew, swung about and, striking from opposite sides, decapitated him twice in an instant.

Tito roared. One moment an observer from the periphery, the next a furious dervish attacking with no mercy. His long blade flickered in the single light of the cavernous building. Overwhelmed, Justine and Simone gave way, backing toward the office building wall, suddenly fearful for their existence.

“Time to run?” Justine asked.

Simone’s arm grew heavy. A vampire’s energy was not inexhaustible. What must Justine’s arms feel like? “Yes.”

A loud snap-crash came from outside. Lights flashed. A horn blared. Their SUV blasted through the big doors, the engine wound up as the charging vehicle wove through the building’s support columns.

Taken by surprise—as were Justine and Simone—Tito ceased his relentless onslaught. Without hesitation, the two women sprinted toward their ride.

Tito didn’t chase them. He reared back and flung the sword with all his considerable strength and accuracy at Justine. With Tito’s sword embedded in her back, Justine sprawled on the concrete floor, slamming against a column where she lay still.

Tito moved toward her.

Simone skidded to a stop and turned to confront him.



How cliché smashing through a locked chain link gate was didn’t enter Teresa’s thoughts until after she did it. She’d always thought it was fake when she saw it on TV. *Just like on TV*, she thought. Then she had other things to think about. She accelerated into the cavernous building with no idea what she’d find.

Headlights immediately picked out Justine and Simone battling the one she’d IDed as the obvious leader.

Teresa spied Justine falling. She headed for her friend, who was obviously in trouble.

The female vamp, jaws and fangs extended, eyes bulging with blood lust, intercepted the vehicle as Teresa wheeled toward Justine. She

lunged through the open window and reached for Teresa's neck. Teresa, her own blood lust up, jammed the shotgun into the vamp's toothy mouth and yanked the trigger. Despite the back of her head being splattered across the concrete floor, she maintained her grip on the open window. Teresa swerved close to a column, neatly scraping off the dead-for-real vampire.

Teresa spared her an instant for regret and sympathy—*She was already dead. She was already dead*—and drove on.

Ahead, Simone knelt by Justine and without ceremony, wrenched the sword out of her. Justine rolled onto her back, drew out Simone's 9mm handgun and shot Tito eight times. With each impact he staggered back. After the last shot he sagged, like a sack of wheat opened at the bottom. As implacable as a rogue wave with a scar-marred grin, he pushed to his feet and moved toward Justine and Simone.

Teresa's experience with vampires was limited, but she knew a dangerous man when she saw one. Steering right for him, she stepped hard on the gas.

Justine struggled to her feet and staggered sideways, dead in front of the two-ton SUV. Teresa whipped the steering wheel left, just as Simone jerked Justine right. Teresa fought to keep control as the rear end broke away. She managed to miss the office corner with the front end, but the rear end took a chunk out, busting glass and ripping half the bumper off. Tires squealing, she made a smoky U-turn and slammed into the big vamp five feet from Justine.

He soared twenty feet and landed in a heap. Teresa clenched her teeth and ran over him. *He's already dead*, repeated in her mind as she cranked the wheel, circled through the columns and skidded to a stop by her two friends.

They didn't need to be invited in. Simone threw Justine into the rear seat beside Kazza, tore off the dangling bumper, and jumped in the front seat a second before Teresa hit the gas and left a screeching, tire smoking trail out of the building. A last glance in the rear view mirror showed the big vamp on his knees staring hard at them. Teresa shuddered as if she felt his rage projected right into her brain.

"Kazza needs a hospital," she said once they were headed north on the Expressway.

"No."

"You are bleeding to death."

"Yes." The word carried finality within it.

"Damn it, a hospital may save you."

Blood on the Water

Justine leaned forward from the back seat. "Who are you talking to? Don't go weird on us."

"Kazza. She doesn't want to go to a hospital." Teresa cocked her head, listening. "Call this number. Tell them what's happened."

"What? What the hell's going on?"

"Justine! Call the damn number."