

BLOOD PRESSURE

A Vampire Testament

TERENCE TAYLOR

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Dedicated to my late therapist, John Edward Ryan, for teaching me to hear through the noise and to listen to what it has to say. Any depiction of psychotherapy in this book is pure fiction and no reflection on mine, which made all this possible. And to the much-missed Octavia E. Butler, whose furor scribendi lives on in us all.

I

DARK MOON

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock of our accursed lot.

—Claude McKay
“If We Must Die”
(1919)

PROLOGUE

5:46 P.M.—Grand Central Station, 18 July 2007

Lopez checked the van's dashboard clock and counted down.

Three. Two. One. The steam pipe under the intersection of Lexington Avenue and Forty-first Street exploded at precisely 5:47 P.M., a time that Clean Slate Global tactical computers had assured them would look random, like a real accident. Even though it was the height of rush hour, there'd still be time to seal off the area before their targets arrived at nine.

The van drove away from the site while Lopez notified the city agency in charge of the evacuation, then sat back to let them do their work. Everything was on schedule. She was pleased with her new unit's work so far and knew that Richmond would be, too. Her only miscalculation as project manager had been the timing of the traffic light that let a truck through too soon and left it stranded in the crater caused by the blast.

She was sorry for the driver, but if anything it made the setup look even more convincing. As planned, news crews gathered near the blast and never went near the staging area where her teams were assembled and ready to go.

Project Steam Clean was on, with no evidence that could ever connect the blast to Clean Slate Global or their client, the city of New York.

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They'd get in, do their job, and get out undetected. No one would suspect a thing.

Especially their targets.

As Perenelle de Marivaux watched the news report about the midtown steam-pipe explosion on the small, flat-screen TV in her boudoir, she sipped an extremely old cognac and wondered if it would be a good idea to postpone tonight's quarterly meeting of the Hundred. She finished brushing her long, dark hair and bound it up in lustrous curls on top of her head.

According to the news report, the police had sealed off several blocks around the explosion at Forty-first Street and Lexington Avenue. The Grand Hyatt, where the hundred members of the High Council were to meet, was inside the frozen zone, only one street away.

Perenelle didn't like it. The elected Superiors of the Bloodlines of New York would have no difficulty entering; that wasn't the problem. Any of them could walk past the largest army unseen. Her question was whether the blast was coincidence or somehow tied to their gathering.

Others always said that Perenelle was paranoid and gave the humans too much credit. But those who mocked her most were less than a century old, and hadn't personally witnessed the strides humans had made over the last six hundred years, as she had. They didn't understand or care how shrewd, how dangerous, mankind had become with their modern science. Modern vampires, they ignored the obvious. Humans were catching on to them and in time could find a way to wipe them all out.

Perenelle smoothed her ruby-red velvet evening dress in front of the full-length mirror, slipped on new black boots, and admired her reflection as she added jewelry. She looked young, beautiful, eyes large and shining, lips slim but inviting. It was good to live like this again. As much as she'd enjoyed the last few decades as old Perenelle, her reintroduction to her West Village neighbors as her own young relative—come from Paris to nurse her ailing old great-aunt—gave her fresh pleasure.

The inevitable thought came—*If only Nicolas were here to see me.* Losing her husband in a Himalayan avalanche still haunted her; that it had happened while he searched for a way to cure her made it all the worse. Her search for a better way of life after a century of solitude in America had

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ended. What she had now wasn't perfect, but it could have been much worse.

At least she was at peace.

Perenelle opened a wireless laptop to check her e-mail as the sun set. There were already posts to the group list from tonight's host. Evidently he wasn't worried. The meeting was definitely still on. Perenelle sent back confirmation, but decided to take extreme measures to ensure her own safety.

Better safe than sorry.

The Superiors of the hundred vampire Bloodlines of New York flickered into view inside the police barricades as they approached the Grand Hyatt Hotel from the street, singly, in pairs, and in small groups. They were bewitchingly beautiful, men and women of all variety from uptown to downtown, east to west, all five boroughs represented in the latest styles.

They entered the frozen zone undetected, clouded the minds of the police as they strolled through armed barricades, past the graceful, classical curves of Grand Central Station to the starkly modern geometry of the hotel next door. Forty-second Street was empty of casual pedestrians and moving vehicles. Except for the bellowing sound of the geyser spewing mud and mayhem into the air a block away, it was a peaceful night in midtown.

Perenelle faded into view and approached the Grand Hyatt with caution. Twin glass towers soared over the dead street. The hotel's glistening walls reflected the dirty plume of rising steam on the next block. Perenelle didn't see any immediate cause for concern, but that didn't ease her feeling that she was on a closed set, not an open road, that they were all supporting players in someone else's show.

Doormen ushered Perenelle in like royalty. When she walked into the lobby, Perenelle saw that most of the hotel employees had been evacuated with the guests. Those loyal to the Bloodlines had stayed, on one pretext or another, to serve them. She strode through the abandoned street level to the empty elevators, took one up to the meeting. Most of the city's Superiors were already there when she entered.

The vampires of New York City had founded the Society of the Veil by unanimous vote in 1937. It was their only judicial body, instituted to keep the secret of their existence safe at any cost. Their territories were divided

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into one hundred hunting grounds called Bloodlines, since lines drawn on the map of New York City to divide the five boroughs granted blood rights to the territories within.

The Superior of each Bloodline was responsible for protecting the veil of secrecy within its boundaries. Quarterly meetings helped avoid battles between the 'Lines, settled disputes, and aired differences. There were complaints at first, even a few revolts, but in time they'd all come to see how much easier life was in unity.

Perenelle viewed it as a personal triumph. She nodded to her fellows and smiled, blew kisses across the room. Thanks to skills she'd learned from Rahman-al-Hazra'ad ibn Aziz, the Moorish vampire who'd infected her more than six centuries ago, she'd created the imaginary tribunal that brought them together, kept them safe and secure. All made manifest by illusions that deluded even her kind. None of them would ever know what she'd done for them, the sacrifices she'd made over the last century to assure their safety. None of them could ever know.

She tried to look at ease when she saw Dr. Townsend Burke across the room, the one vampire in New York who was in on her secret. Their relationship began in London, in the 1840s, when he used a sample of her blood to infect himself instead of helping her husband, Nicolas, to find a cure for her condition with the new science of transfusion. It had not been the best of introductions. Despite that, he'd shared her belief that the world, human and vampire, had to be protected from the likes of Tom O'Bedlam, the mad vampire whose excesses had inspired them to join with Rahman to form the Veil.

Burke saw her and nodded, made his way toward her. She tensed. They hadn't spoken in some time, had grown distant since 1986 when he took custody of Claire St. Claire, Tom's coconspirator, created in a Berlin brothel in the 1920s.

Burke had petitioned the High Council to free the girl a year early from her fifty-year entombment. As a fledgling, less than a hundred years old, she was entrusted to his care. Her fate since then had been a mystery to Perenelle, of no interest unless the girl fell back into her old destructive ways.

"My dear Perenelle," said Burke as he reached her side. "It has been too

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long.” He bowed low and pulled out a chair for her as he rose. Vampires could sense one another and seldom touched. The low level irritation they felt made contact uncomfortable for most and kept their hunting grounds far apart. That had made it easy to establish borders for the bloodlines when the Veil divided up the five boroughs. Perenelle nodded and sat.

“Through no fault of yours, Doctor. I have found myself preoccupied with other than social matters.” She made the excuse only to be polite. There was no reason to antagonize the head of the East Village Bloodline, one of New York’s most prominent, by telling him she had no interest in his company, especially when he had the power to expose her sham. “How fares your charge?”

He smiled, rueful. “Caring for Claire is never an easy task. Her”—he searched for the right word—“rehabilitation has been a slow process. But she has grown.”

“Cancer grows, Doctor.” Perenelle tried to restrain herself, but couldn’t. “I would hope for a more qualitative change.”

Burke glared at her for a moment, obviously offended, and had started to retort when the overhead lights flashed to call them to order. He nodded grimly to Perenelle, turned away, and went to his seat. She knew she would have to placate him, but there was time for that later. Perenelle let him go, made small talk with those around her as the rest took their seats.

The meeting was called to order.

Other Superiors left their conversations long enough to put down their vintage liquors and stop feeding on fresh blood from enthralled humans provided by the caterers. The long room had been arranged with two rows of tables facing the front. Their cheerful host was a crisp, round vampire in an expensive, custom-made business suit; he occupied a single table centered in the front.

One look at him explained why he’d picked the cleanly corporate Grand Hyatt instead of something more traditional like The Plaza, or the evening Perenelle had assembled them in the Temple of Dendur at the Metropolitan Museum, the unforgettable night when Claire St. Claire had been freed from her fifty-year entombment.

Their host was one of the Wall Street New Bloods who’d bought his way into immortality. He was less than a hundred years old, still living under the supervision of his Old Blood sponsor. Most New Bloods had no real

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style, no flair. This hall could have housed any corporate retreat; their assembly looked no more remarkable than any mortal gathering of New York's high and mighty.

Perenelle looked around at the bland, smiling faces, the designer clothes and styled hair on the women and the men, and wondered for the first time if she'd gone too far in her attempts to tame them. Was diet the only difference left between them and the humans? Had her creation of the Veil civilized the vampires of New York beyond any ability to distinguish themselves from their prey?

The last human left the room and the meeting officially began. Their host made a brief speech welcoming them all and then in a quiet, trembling voice introduced the Triumvirate of the Veil. Perenelle closed her eyes, prepared to cast her illusion and make it seem to them all that the lights faded, as they always did before an appearance of the Triumvirate. Everyone went silent, even those who'd talked through the host's speech.

The Triumvirate of the Veil appeared at the front of the room and stood behind the table as if in judgment of the assembly. Perenelle always made changes in the Triumvirate after each ten-year election. Currently it was a man and two women, always anonymous, features blurred as if in constant motion. Perenelle kept it diverse and had decided on a female majority for a change, one black. When they talked, it was in three distinct voices that spoke as one.

"Welcome all . . ."

As soon as the last human left and the doors were locked, Lopez moved in the first tier of her team from the service elevators. Black-clad troopers lined up along the outer walls of the meeting room. One member of each team took tripods from long cases, telescoped them out to stand tall, pulled out reflector dishes that opened like umbrellas, and snapped them into place to face the conference-room walls. The other unpacked transmitters and locked them into the parabolic centers of the umbrella dishes, then plugged in portable power supplies. In less than five minutes the site was operational. Each outer wall along the length of the meeting room was lined by a row of six-foot-wide microwave dishes made of thin metal mesh.

Lopez didn't speak. Their targets had inhumanly acute hearing. Every-

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thing her team did had been in complete silence, with text-messaged commands. Lopez flipped open her muted iPhone and sent a ready signal from her touch screen to the second tier, got them ready to move in as soon as the microwave pulse was activated. She pushed a button on the master remote that controlled the transmitters on both sides. The assembly squad moved out to make room for the second team.

A red light on top of each of the power supplies went on as the charge built up. The lights clicked to yellow. In a few more seconds the lights would go green and it would all be over.

Then her cleanup crew would go into action.

The Triumvirate vanished amid applause.

The crowd stood, kept applauding as lights in the room rose to normal. Their host held up his hand to silence the crowd.

The Triumvirate had put on a good show, applauded the efforts of those Perenelle wanted to encourage, chided those she felt needed reining in. She always had to resist the impulse to take a bow when her audience was moved by a performance. Perenelle sighed as the host tried to call everyone to order, so that they could deal with specific business. Their host raised his arms and his voice.

“Please, may I have your attention, please . . .”

Then everyone fell to the floor except Perenelle.

It happened in complete silence, with no warning, nothing to explain it. No one moved. Perenelle walked to the middle of the room, looked around in shock. She had an odd psychic sensation, different from the usual sharp, low-grade static of being in the company of other vampires, but it stopped before she could analyze the feeling.

Every door to the room burst open at the same moment on both sides. The operation moved like an assembly line. Pairs of black-clad storm troopers entered on one side of the room, each team with a lightweight metal casket. The first teams opened cases, placed a vampire inside each, sealed the caskets, and carried them out the other side as the next team entered behind them.

Perenelle’s immobile peers were efficiently packed up and removed from the room as she watched. The procedure continued as a white-haired

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woman appeared at the door in the same black coverall uniform as the others, but with a look of command. She saw Perenelle, gaped, and shouted into a microphone for backup.

Perenelle saw fear and confusion in the woman's eyes as she reached up to adjust a small video camera on the side of a headset, recording everything. When Perenelle realized what the woman was doing, she came to her senses and vanished.

Perenelle's astral body dropped back into her real one in her West Village home with a jolt. She opened her mouth and screamed loud and long, wept as she realized that she'd just seen the leadership of her kind across the city either captured or killed. It was only her precaution of using the gift of astral projection tonight that had spared her, learned from Rahman when he'd taught her the illusions she'd used to create the Triumvirate.

It had saved her life in the past, from Rahman himself when he'd turned on her twenty years ago. Now it made her the only vampire in New York who knew what had happened, who could warn the others. She stumbled to her feet from pillows on the floor and poured a cognac.

Her worst fears had been realized.

There was an organized, human task force that targeted vampires, armed with unprecedented weapons to use against them. Not only did the humans know that vampires existed, they knew of their society, their meetings, and had laid a successful trap.

For all her planning and all she'd done to keep her kin from drawing too much attention, she'd done nothing to save them from this. Perenelle hadn't protected her kind at all, only spayed them, pulled their fangs and claws with her dream of peaceful coexistence. When the humans came for them, they'd had no defense, no warning. She'd made them too complacent with a generation of protected peace.

Perenelle tried to focus, told herself that she could correct her mistake. She'd start by using the humans' technology against them. E-mail would warn the surviving vampires of New York. Their communications were safe from surveillance. They'd made sure of that by enthralling the best hackers in the city.

Once the others knew the danger, they could formulate a plan to locate

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the lost, then save or avenge them. If this were really the first volley of a war with the humans, it would not end quickly or easily.

All the power Perenelle had used to keep her kind in line for seventy years would be unleashed to defeat humanity instead, to restore the balance of power between them. If the mortals wanted to wage a war, they'd get one to remember.

Perenelle would see to that.

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