

## Chapter 1

I looked at the three undead figures far off in the ink black night. They stood as still as statues, never breathing, never moving. That's the creepy thing about the undead. They truly are nothing more than animated death. Corpses with fangs. Walking maggot farms. Coffin bait.

Each one of them looked at me as I pulled the stake out of the heart of their fellow vein weasel and wiped away the slime on my jeans. Death and I had somehow synonymously become one. I pulled the large Bowie knife from its sheath on my belt and cut the bleeding heart from the dead maggot's chest. I held in my hand and showed it to others in the distance as though I was the wicked witch offering them a poison apple.

Cockroaches. There was no other word for what they were. Those a little more politically correct than I am call them vampires, but when it comes down to it, they are nothing more than cockroaches.

It took the work of the bleeding hearts in this country, known as the Knights of the Night, to turn them from the killer monsters they really are, to legal citizens with rights and protection. The cockroaches are now seen as historical artifacts that can no longer be killed unless they were turned after the laws went into effect. They crawl through our cities, spread their nasty diseases, live on the filth of humanity. Take it from me, simply killing these four is not enough. The only solace will be in total genocide of the species.

All this compromises what I do for a living. You see, I'm Paul Isaac, vampire executioner. It's dangerous and has very few rewards other than knowing that you are ridding the world of

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one more bloodsucker. Some say I have a hidden agenda in what I do and I don't deny it. They killed my parents and still roamed the street with no fear.

I threw the muscle into the swamp and stood again. I was about to change all of that.

All four of these coffin sleepers had been given death warrants by the police department. Seems they were having a little too much fun with a freak, or willing blood donor, and drained her dry. Shame, but death warrants are the only way I'm able to kill the monsters anymore without retribution from the new laws and the Cockroach Nation. Unfortunately for them, I usually don't let a little thing like the law get in the way of what I do.

We moved further into the cypress swamp, filled with all the creepy crawlies I could handle. Spanish moss hung from the branches like grotesque bats, glowing in the moonlight. The darkness was working for the blood slurpers better than it was for me. I stopped to listen for any sounds that I could hear. My eyes searched for any movement. Shadows ahead of me in phantom form.

I lit a cigar and got ready for the only thing worth living for. With my right hand I pulled out the Magnum filled with ultra violet bullets from my shoulder holster and began to move. My leather trench coat pulled away so I could get to my other arsenal if needed. That was the good thing about the coat. It had plenty of pockets and places to keep things such as holy water, crucifixes, and extra weapons.

The big one saw me and began to move away from the other two. He climbed in a tall cypress, trying to hide among the endless branches. I pulled the Magnum up and held my breath, waiting for a clean shot to present itself. Being younger daisy pushers, they weren't as quick and strong. But at least they were smart enough to know they weren't a match for me and my playground of firepower.

Our eyes met for only a brief second. His filled with fear, mine with joy. Finger touched the trigger. An explosion filled

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the emptiness of the desolate night. My bullet found its mark, turning the monster into cinder, showering the swamp below in unholy ash.

In the darkness I could hear the other two moving fast. Branches gave way to speed. Feet struggled to make distance.

I exhaled the cigar smoke from my lungs and began to move through the dark maze again. The last thing I wanted to do was gloat over my kills while the other two escaped in this mosquito filled hellhole.

My boots were slick with wet mud as I began to pursue the two monsters that remained. Sweat rolled off my clean shaved head and threatened to go into my eyes. Even on an October night in Florida, the temperature can be an issue. Being a chain smoker and out of shape didn't help either. Go figure.

I stopped from time to time and listened. I followed the sounds and kept my eyes open for a sneak attack. Remember, two monsters remained. Playing fair was not something that vampires were known for. Especially when they knew they were in a life or death situation. I looked in every direction, including up. Cockroaches could levitate if powerful enough. Yeah, I said they weren't that powerful, but I wasn't about to find out I was wrong the hard way.

Silence.

Nothing.

Not even the frogs were making a sound. It was as if death had taken over everything in the swamp. A silence so thick it became an entity all its own.

I turned in circles trying to see or hear anything I could. My breath and heart the only sounds. Shadows of branches the only sight. I kept the Magnum up and ready, knowing somewhere nearby two cockroaches were waiting for me to make the next move. My breath became shallow sniffs.

From the right I was hit with the force of a freight train. Spinning in circles, I landed on the soggy swamp bottom, mud mixing with stagnant water on my skin. Cigar shooting from my mouth. Still, luck was on my side for the moment. I ended up

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on top of the cockroach with my Magnum still in hand. Unfortunately for me, it was pointed away, harmless to the monster. Resisting hands trying to pry it free.

I looked down at the cockroach and noticed it was the female monster. Gleaming white fangs inches from my throat. I used every bit of human strength I had to keep my body on top of hers. If she got free before I killed her, she would have the advantage. Even newly turned roaches have far more strength than humans. To win in these situations, I had to fight as dirty as I could. Just because I was fighting with a bitch dirt napper wasn't going to change that.

A knee jammed between my legs, knocking me off the monster and on my back. Instant nausea. I guess it's safe to say bitch cockroaches know how to fight dirty too. I tried my best to catch my breath as the bloodsucker scratched me across the face, bringing with it instant pain and blood. Now I was simply pissed and about to show it.

I never had time to react when the second cockroach joined in the fight. He landed on me with an incredible force, shoving out what little air I still had in me. Long fingernails dug deep into my skin. I saw the female monster move toward me. A sinister smile rose on her lips.

With every ounce of strength I had, I turned the Magnum on the male blood junkie and pulled the trigger. Demonic music filled the quiet night as blood rushed from the wound, followed by smoke, then fire. Ultra violet light spread through him like a foul disease. Evil fireworks shot from the wound and reflected on the swamp water.

I tried to fire a second shot at the female fang head but there wasn't enough time. She was back on me. Determined to either kill me or really piss me off. The result would be determined by whether or not I got an advantage.

Her hands wrapped around my throat like a vice, cutting off all air. I moved the Magnum in her direction, only to feel a foot crush my wrist and pin it in the inches of muck underneath me.

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I fired the shot anyway, hoping that I'd get lucky. Hoping that it scared her enough that I might be able to regain some ground. Tonight wasn't looking like my night for that sort of luck. The gun went off with a violent growl but the bullet missed everything but the sky.

I felt one hand loosen from around my neck and grab the wrist with the Magnum. With a quick aggressive move, my wrist met with a cypress stump. I heard a sickening snap of bone and the Magnum fell harmlessly next to the water. Pain flooded into my hand, spider webbing to numbness.

Nothing says panic like a broken wrist *and* losing the best firepower you have on you in the middle of a life and death struggle with a cockroach. With my remaining good hand, I reached into my trench coat pocket and blindly searched for any of my other weapons that might do the job. Fingers found a crucifix. Christianity never felt so good.

She laughed. "Tonight you die, Avenger."

Sucks when the monsters might be right. No pun intended.

She began to drag me deeper into the God forsaken muck and water. Undead hands pushed forcefully on my throat. My face plunged under the water.

Now, a minute ago, I was thinking nothing says panic like a broken wrist and losing my Magnum, but I was wrong. There was suddenly another factor coming in to play. A broken wrist. Losing my Magnum. *And drowning*. That was a true triple threat of panic for me.

I had to give that one to her. At least she was more creative than most other roaches I came across. Still, drowning or bleeding meant the same thing right now. Death. The only saving grace drowning had was in the fact that I wouldn't rise as a blood sucker.

But I wasn't in the mood to die just yet.

From under the water, I could see her emotionless face staring back at me with dead eyes. Most people can't look a roach in the eyes without the monster gaining control, but I was able to do it with the less powerful ones.

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My lungs burned, deprived of oxygen. It felt as though my head was caving in. I wanted to fight back with the broken wrist enough that I could get my head back above water, but the pain was way too much. Chances were, I was going to die, but I wasn't about to die without leaving a little reminder for her.

I jammed the crucifix in her right eye and twisted it with as much pressure as I could. Streams of clear liquid mixed with crimson blood as I burst the eyeball like a ripe grape. From under the water, I could hear her hellish screams and it made everything all right again.

Wrong.

She grabbed me out of the water, hands still firmly around my neck. The crucifix still dangled in the eyeball, bouncing on her cheek.

I gasped for air. It was the most incredible sensation I had ever had. Teetering on erotic. You never know how wonderful a set of lungs full of air can be until you've been under water for who knows how long.

She lifted me up to her fangs. I knew what this was going to feel like. I had had a cockroach bite me before. It hurts like a son-of-a-bitch. A sensation I'd be damned if I would repeat.

I drove my fist into her temple, repeatedly. I could feel the flesh on my knuckles ripping with each drive, but so far it was less painful than having fangs pierce my jugular.

Her head twisted toward mine and I caught the crucifix and eyeball with my hand. I pulled them both free from the socket, then drove them into the gaping mouth at my throat. Dark screams bellowed out of her. I could hear and see the destruction the object was doing.

Without warning, she began to shove me back under the water again. She pounded my head on the sediment on the bottom. Again and again. I fought to remain conscious. But with each smash of my skull, it looked more and more like a losing effort.

I saw colors forming in my eyes as I began to pass out. Was it from the concussion or from drowning? Did it matter? One

thing was for sure, I wasn't going to go towards some damn light if things faded to black.

Then the unexpected happened.

Her hands released my throat. Weight lifted off of me. One minute full on, the next non-existent.

Lifting my head back above water, I looked over at the fang mouthed bitch and saw her face down in the water. Floating. Shit, that's not right. To be face down, she'd have to have a head.

I wiped the mud and water from my eyes as I continued to gasp for breath. Skin crawled. Knowing I couldn't have been lucky enough not to have at least some cockroach blood on me. My lungs felt as though they were on fire. I gagged and puked, not from the headless monster, but from the water I strangled on. I wasn't going to die from a vampire. I was going to die from some microscopic entity I just swallowed. Ameba City, here I come.

Only steps away from me, I saw the Magnum lying on the ground at the water's edge. I stumbled the few feet and picked it up. Something told me I was far from out of danger. Vein weasels don't pop their heads off like this. And even if she swallowed the crucifix and eyeball, it wouldn't have done this much damage. Im-freaking-possible.

I pointed the Magnum in every direction with my left hand. I wasn't as dangerous with it as I was with the right, but I did what I had to in these situations. My eyes tried to focus as I continued to catch my breath.

Only trickles of light from the large moon overhead gave me any source of sight painting the swamp with different shades of darkness. When dealing with monsters like these, I wanted as much light as I could get.

The big question was a simple one. What the hell took the head off the cockroach that had been on top of me? The first thing that came to mind was maybe there had been five roaches frolicking in the woods with me, but that didn't make any sense. Given the choice between me and their fellow living dead, they

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would choose me to lose my head. Next thought was werewolf. They definitely had the strength to do it. And their alliance with the cockroaches weren't all that tight.

I made sure I still had the 9mm in the hip holster just to be safe. It was filled with silver nitrate bullets. There was nothing I could put my finger on, but something told me that this attack wasn't from a fur ball. They usually move in packs, make a lot of noise and eat what they kill.

Power.

Like electricity, it moved over my skin, raising the hair on my arms and along the back of my neck. Mystery solved. Somewhere very close by was an extremely old and powerful cockroach.