

Cool water rolled slowly down her neck, curving between perfect breasts, caressing her stomach. Slowly, her skin absorbed the moisture.

She opened another plastic bottle, but this time swallowed its contents. Energy flowed through her, renewing her.

Placing the empty container in the sink, she gave herself the once-over in the full-length mirror next to the tub. She twisted to admire her naked body, then parted full red lips and tossed herself a kiss. She looked good as a blonde.

Everything was going as planned. This would be one of her easiest assignments ever.

Maybe she'd buy a boat with the payment. She liked boats.

Shaking her head to give her long hair a bed-tousled look, she stepped from the bathroom. Her toes rubbed sensuously against the plush hotel rug as she silently slunk across the deserted sitting room.

The full moon cast a bright rectangle of light in the dark room. The balcony curtains danced in the cool summer breeze wafting from the Charles River through the open sliding glass door. The only artificial illumination came from a small office off the main room of the suite.

"The time of divisiveness is over," she heard Randolph Brunswick say quietly. "America needs to come together!"

She peeked into the office to find the Governor staring at a laptop screen. He grabbed a handful of M&Ms and popped them into his mouth. He then began typing methodically, hunting for each letter. She shook her head. You'd think a man who might be President soon would know how to use a computer.

“As I accept your nomination, it is with the understanding that it is far better to work across the aisle to get things accomplished than to seek unrealistic goals that... that...”

He paused, let out a heavy sigh, and rubbed his eyes. “Still time...”

She glided into the room, circled to the other side of the table, and silently stood before him, waiting.

Brunswick closed the laptop and looked up. His eyes narrowed as he stared, as if his mind couldn't decide whether she actually existed.

“Good evening, Governor,” she purred with a deep Southern accent.

Brunswick reared back. His mouth opened and closed but no sound emerged. His gaze covered her trim body.

She smiled.

“What ... what the hell is this?” he finally managed. “How did you get in my room?”

“Now, now, sugar. We have other things to discuss.” She edged closer and locked her eyes with his.

“We do not!” he replied. “The Secret Service is just outside my door, young lady...” He stopped talking and licked his lips.

She slinked forward. “Come, Governor. Let's look at the moonlight and discuss this.”

Brunswick rubbed his eyes, shook his head, and stared back. “No!” He reached for the desk phone. “I don't know what sort of game you think you're playing—”

She dived for the phone and slapped it off the table before the Governor could react.

He jumped up and his chair fell to the side. “How did you—”

“Here, look at me,” she said. “Just calm down, it will be all right.”

Brunswick dashed toward the door.

Shit. This was supposed to be an easy assignment. She should have known that someone with an ego big enough to want to be President would be difficult. She swooped before him and he reared back.

“You can’t get away, honey. I’m much faster than you can ever be.” She held out a hand and concentrated on his eyes.

Brunswick blinked. His mouth opened and he backed away.

Making sure his gaze remained fastened to hers, she stepped forward and grabbed his wrist. “You’ll think much clearer if we step out onto the balcony.”

Beads of sweat gathered on his forehead. “I will?”

“Yes. You need some air.”

“Yes,” he replied in a breathy monotone. “Yes. I need some air...”

She slipped her arm through his and leaned close to whisper in his ear as they walked together toward the sliding glass door. He nodded slowly in response.

She opened the door wider for him.

He stepped onto the balcony. The summer breeze blew his few remaining hairs across his forehead, destroying his inadequate comb-over.

Late night traffic rumbled below the balcony on Memorial Drive. The ever-present protestors chanted and shouted below, demanding the governor’s attention. A few bored cameramen, stationed at the hotel in case the governor decided to go out for a late night snack, slouched against trees or streetlamp posts, keeping silent watch.

Behind her, a tinny voice came through the phone headset, which lay across the floor. “Hello? Governor? Are you there?”

“Now would be the best time,” she said.

Brunswick nodded with a smile, oblivious to the phone. He dragged a chair toward the small stone wall, climbed on it, and then took another step onto the wall itself.

“This is a wonderful idea!” he said. He raised his arms, waved to the crowd below, and stepped off.

As sirens blared and people screamed, she congratulated herself on a job well done. “Norman Mark for President,” she mumbled.

The door to the suite burst open just as she flew away.

ONE

Karl Weaver adjusted his tie and gave an exaggerated yawn in an attempt to hide his fear.

The secretary continued to ignore him. She clicked away at her computer and typed periodically. Karl didn't imagine she was really working—probably playing Farmville or tweeting about what she had for lunch.

Karl shook his head. He wondered where literacy in America was headed with more and more people seemingly unable to maintain an attention span longer than a hundred and forty characters.

Still, since nothing else in that office was worth looking at, Karl kept his gaze on the secretary. A black girl, mid-twenties, well-dressed. Gold necklace around a soft neck. Hired for her looks, no doubt.

His nervousness prevented a full appreciation of the girl.

Nick had wanted to see him. *Nick*.

And no one says no to Nick.

Karl shifted in his seat. He glanced at the clock, clasped his hands together, unclasped them, and scratched at his nose.

The door finally opened. The secretary waved him in but had otherwise served no function except to look pretty in the waiting room.

Karl stood, needlessly adjusted his tie again, took a deep breath, and walked in.

In a few seconds, his eyes adjusted to Nick's dim office. One of those green banker lights illuminated the papers on Nick's desk while leaving the face of the man behind in shadows.

His host pointed to the comfortable chair facing the large mahogany desk.

Karl walked to the chair and sat, taking in the office.

Bookshelves lined the walls, full to overflowing with nonfiction—American history mostly, along with popular political and sociological treatises from both the right and the left. The absence of photographs or other personal items gave the office the generic look of a catalog display.

"Nice to see you again, Karl," Nick said, leaning back in his chair. "Not really, but that's the polite thing to say."

Karl nodded. Apparently, after all this time, Nick was still angry with him. Perhaps rightly so.

Nick clasped his hands on top of the desk. "I have a task for you."

Karl resisted squirming in the chair. He coughed slightly. "Yes, well. Right to the point, I see. We haven't spoken in years, and now you have something you need me for? What can I offer you that one of your employees cannot?"

"I can't trust my employees with this. This is about Norman Mark."

Karl nodded slowly. "I thought it might be, given the urgency of your call."

Nick leaned back, clearly enjoying this. "Tell me what you think of Norman Mark."

Karl lifted his head and gazed at Nick through slitted eyes. What was he getting at? Did he want the truth? "Mark," he said slowly, "is a dangerous liberal who, if elected, will

close down my fracking operation and put me out of business. He's practically said as much on the campaign trail."

Nick pressed his fingers together. "What if I told you I could prevent that from happening?"

Karl smiled. "Well, I'd believe you, of course."

"As you should. So you concede that my payment would be sufficient?"

Karl shook his head. "Finnegan's still ahead in the polls. If he wins, what good is your promise then?" He tried to keep his voice calm, but the thought that he was negotiating with Nick chilled him.

Nick nodded. "True enough. You have me there. Very well, then. I can stop the protesters now. Before the election. Surely that is worth something."

Karl considered. "Yes. Yes, I think you could. And the lawsuits?"

"Consider them gone."

Karl smiled, but it was a forced smile. Getting those goddamn hippies off his back would be wonderful, not to mention the lawyers—but what did Nick want in return?

Nick stood and held out a hand. Karl jumped up and accepted, hoping Nick would not notice his sweaty palms. They shook once, let go, and sat back down in unison.

"Now that's settled," Nick said, "let's discuss the details. I need you to ... perform."

"Perform. It's been years since I last performed."

Nick tapped a finger on his desk. "Are you refusing?"

Karl swallowed. "No, not at all. I'm sure I can do this for you. And who is the target audience for my performance?"

"Norman Mark."

Karl burst out laughing. It was spontaneous; he couldn't stop it.

Nick waited patiently.

Karl collected himself, crossed his arms, and gave Nick a long look. "When you said this involved Norman Mark, I didn't think you wanted me to assassinate him."

Nick smiled.

Karl stared at Nick for a very long time before speaking again. "May I ask why?"

Nick shook his head sadly and pursed his lips.

"You know he's a vampire, right?"

This time it was Nick's turn to laugh—but it was short, dismissive, and disappeared immediately. His face once more became unreadable. "This is not your usual assassination; I'll give you more details later. I have a specific time and place where I want this done. Very public."

"I'll need a way to sneak a weapon in."

"I am certain you will find some method," Nick said. "This is your area of expertise, after all—not mine."

"Yes."

"There's a big Democratic rally coming up in mid October," Nick said. "Norman Mark will be there. It's in a baseball park. One of those enclosed box seats at the top should give you a good vantage point overlooking the stage."

Karl found himself getting excited over the possibility—the *challenge*. The assassination of a presidential candidate would surpass his other accomplishments. "Excellent. We also need a scapegoat to distract the police and the press. It should be one of those conspiracy nuts shouting that Mark is a vampire."

“The Batties.”

“Is that what they’re calling them these days? As in ‘you’d have to be batty to believe that’?”

Nick tilted his head. “Blame Jon Stewart for that one. We need more than just a Batty, though. We need a loner, a loser—the kind of person who has been beaten down and shit on by life. Someone who might snap and do something like this. Someone without a family.”

“Why without a family?”

Nick spread his hands. “I’m not completely heartless.”

Karl paused, and then spoke before Nick could read something into it. “We also need someone who conceivably could have access to the assassination spot. A person would have a reason to be up there.”

Nick nodded. “I have already thought of all that.” He reached for his keyboard, typed a few words, and clicked the mouse. After a few seconds, he smiled and spun the screen to face Karl.

Karl leaned forward and read the highlighted by-line on a newspaper article.

“By Steven Edwards.”

TWO

Richmond Times-Dispatch, September 25

VIRGINIA GROUP CLAIMS NORMAN MARK IS A VAMPIRE

By Steven Edwards

Conspiracy theories in politics are nothing new. There are those who believe that certain politicians belong to the Illuminati or other secret organizations bent on world domination. There are those who think the world is controlled by the Elders of Zion or the Trilateral Commission.

But never in American history has a group seriously suggested that a politician is, in fact, a real, honest-to-goodness vampire.

Zachary Oak leads one such group, inconveniently headquartered in the tiny town of Spring Grove on the outskirts of Richmond. They believe that Democratic Presidential candidate Norman Mark is one of the “children of the night.”

He has a room set aside in his home specifically to hold his collection of vampire documentation. A large poster of Norman Mark hangs over his desk, emblazoned with large red letters that say “BLOODSUCKER.”

Oak laughs when asked about the poster. “I was holding that sign at a rally recently, and people thought I was objecting to his tax policies.”

He makes it clear that this is not just about Norman Mark. “Vampires have been around forever, controlling us behind the scenes. Mark is just one of the most prominent ones in recent history.”

Oak says he knows most people won't believe him, but that won't stop him from spreading the word. "They usually work behind the scenes so nobody realizes their power. It's kind of unusual for one of them to be so public."

Oak, a retired truck driver, stated that he learned about the vampire conspiracy from pamphlets and books he has bought over the years. "Now that people can self-publish, there are more of them," he said. "Because before, the vampires made sure the big publishers didn't print anything."

Oak started the group Virginians Against Vampires about ten years ago. The dozen or so local members occasionally get together, review their materials, and discuss who might be a vampire. The group claims that learning about vampires has become easier thanks to the rise of the internet.

Oak is not afraid of reprisal from the vampires. "If they did attack me or other vampire believers, that would make it obvious that they are out there," he explains. "Someone would investigate and find out. But they ignore us and laugh at us, so they can remain hidden."

When reminded that such an ironic conundrum is pretty convenient for Oak's cause, he shrugs. "They're clever. And since they have the power to control minds, they ain't too worried. Look how long they've gone so far without being exposed."

As evidence of Mark's vampirism, Oak checks off a list of suspicious items. "Ask yourself why you never see Mark out in the daytime. Or why he looks so pale. Better yet, find out where he was born, or if there's any evidence of him existing before he took over his business from his father. Find out why the school he supposedly attended in Switzerland burned down, taking all the proof he had ever gone there."

He also discusses the candidate's obvious charisma. "He's handsome and very likeable," Oak says. "They're all like that. That's part of their vampire powers."

Then Oak drops the bombshell.

"That's how he killed Brunswick, you see."

Governor Randolph Brunswick's suicide, accomplished by jumping off a balcony at the Hyatt in Cambridge, Massachusetts on the opening night of the convention, threw the process into chaos and led to businessman Norman Mark's nomination two days later.

Oak dismisses the fact that Mark was miles away attending a Democratic Party function with hundreds of witnesses when Brunswick died. "There's more than one vampire, you know," he contends. "I'm sure he had someone else do that for him."

He states that the power of vampires to control the minds of others explains everything, including the admittedly unusual suicide of Brunswick. "Fortunately, they cannot do this charming thing without personal contact," he explains. "Otherwise, Mark would just go on TV and control us all."

Oak goes on to discuss the myths about vampires. "Fiction writers have added all kinds of crazy things that just ain't true," he said. "Some of them might've been started by the vampires to keep people from believing that they really exist. Like the 'no reflection in a mirror' thing or the 'turn to dust in sunlight' thing. They don't like sunlight, but it don't kill them or nothing. And of course you can take pictures of them, because just look at all the pictures of Mark." He clarifies one rumor: "The bat thing is true, though."

Virginia Commonwealth University Psychology Professor Dr. Miles Lizak studies fringe groups such as these. "Conspiracy theories provide people with explanations as to why the world is not how we would want it to be," he says. "They provide meaning where

real meaning often is difficult to find. And once entrenched, they are resilient and resistant to logic and fact.”

Dr. Lizak went on to say, “People who believe these theories thus have a way to morally blame a specific group for all the world’s evils, and, most importantly, separate themselves from that group in such a way as to function as that group’s nemesis and, in doing so, absolve themselves from responsibility for those evils.”

According to anthropologists Todd Sanders and Harry G. West, “Evidence suggests that a broad cross section of Americans today gives credence to at least some conspiracy theories.”

“People who believe in conspiracies tend to also believe in more than one,” Dr. Lizak states.

Oak, however, makes it clear that this does not apply to his group. “We don’t believe in Bigfoot or a faked moon landing or Area 51 aliens or any of that crap,” he insists. “We’re not conspiracy fools. The difference is this: *vampires are real.*”

THREE

“Why did you put a damned vampire story in my paper?”

Steven Edwards grinned and held up his coffee cup in a mock toast. “Come on, boss. Have you been to our web page? My article has more comments than anything else in today’s paper.”

Gary crossed his arms as if to restrain himself from throwing one of his precious signed baseballs at Steve’s head. That is, if he could have found one under all the clutter. Assuming there was indeed a desk under there.

“It’s embarrassing,” he bellowed. “I don’t want to be known as the ‘crazy vampire paper.’ I wanted to avoid that ridiculousness completely. I’ve been ignoring all those idiots for months, as you very well are aware.”

Using his free hand, Steve removed a stack of old newspapers from the closest chair. He sat, holding his hot coffee away from his body, but the plastic lid kept it secure.

Gary’s office met the exacting standards of Gary’s image of the ideal editor’s office. A maze of comfortless chairs and a couple tables, all covered with paper, faced the desk. Awards, commendations, and framed copies of screaming headlines crowded the walls and the lone bookcase. Since his promotion to the job, Gary had created a space that emulated the offices of the two he believed to be the world’s greatest newspaper editors—J. Jonah Jamison and Perry White. Steve just couldn’t wait until Gary started saying “Great Caesar’s Ghost!”

“I didn’t make the paper look bad at all,” he said. “It was a human interest story I assumed you’d like.”

“You slipped it past me!”

“Patty approved it.”

“When I wasn’t here! And yes, I will have a word with her too.”

“Come on, boss,” he said, using the generic title Gary preferred to his real name.

“It’s not like I gave their story any credence. It *is* news, you know.”

Gary made an inarticulate growl as he stared at the ceiling for a second, holding his hands above his head, fingers curled in. Always dramatic. “You’re doing it again, aren’t you? You haven’t learned your lesson?”

Steve took a deep breath. “Everything is sourced. Nothing is made up. There’s been no harm done. And I hardly spent any time on it. A few minutes with the loony, a quick call to the VCU Prof, and the rest cut from Wikipedia. It’s no big deal—”

“It is to me,” Gary interrupted. He growled and threw himself into his seat. After a few seconds, he appeared to calm. “Look, Steve, I know you want to cover the national stories, so here’s what we can do. There’s a Mark rally coming in a few weeks at the Diamond. The AP will be there, but you can go and write something from a local angle, okay?”

Steve smiled. “Thanks, boss!” He stood to leave.

“Remember, I did you a favor by hiring you when no one else would,” Gary said.

“You can be replaced easily enough, and cheaper.”

Gary’s final words tempered Steve’s mood as he left the office. He knew if he fucked up this job, he had nowhere else to go.

FOUR

Sousa's "Liberty Bell" blasted through the room.

Steve reached over to put his arm around his wife. She wasn't there.

Slowly, his eyes opened as consciousness snuck in. That's right, she hadn't been there for years. Suddenly the tinny Monty Python theme music blasting from the phone didn't seem like such a good idea after all.

He pounded the phone's snooze alarm and then patted the side table until he found his glasses. He put them on and stared angrily at the clock.

Half an hour and one hot shower later, Steve shut the door and locked the deadbolt. The corridor already sweltered. As he ambled down the wood-floored hallway, his sleepiness transformed to aggravation. He stopped beside the black bag of garbage outside Apartment 31. *Those lazy bastards won't even take it downstairs. Damn college kids.*

Steve glared at the bag. No matter how many times he complained to the landlord, nothing ever changed. They'd put their trash out in the hallway, where the heat would slow-roast its contents until every apartment on the third floor smelled like stale beer and rotting pizza. Maybe, after a few days, the kids might notice or remember—or, god forbid, smell it—and then someone from the accursed flat actually might decide to haul it downstairs and throw it in the dumpster.

Or, as usual, Steve could carry it down himself in order to avoid returning home to its rancid scent.

Muttering under his breath, he grabbed the bag, lifted it, and trudged to the staircase. Months ago he had dragged the bulky bag, only to have it burst open and spew its contents all over the hall. After that, he made sure he carried it high enough to avoid contact with the stairs.

At the bottom of the two flights, a glass door led to the small alcove where the mailboxes for the apartments lined one wall. Steve gently placed the bag on the floor, opened the door and propped his back against it to keep it open, retrieved the bag, and took a step.

Chinese menus, drenched from the previous night's rain, slid under his feet. His back slammed against the floor. The garbage bag flew across the small room and burst against the mailboxes. Beer cans careened off the walls, like cartoon atoms in an educational film.

Steve lay there for a minute, breathing heavily. His head pounded and his back sent him nasty messages about its condition.

"Fuck it," he said.

He slowly pulled himself to his feet. He held his hands from his side and stared down at his now wet, stain-covered shirt and pants. With a shake of his head, he pulled out his keys, opened the door, and trudged back to his apartment.

Emerging five minutes later in clean clothes, he made his way back down to the foyer, which remained a smelly mess. Walking tenderly around the garbage to avoid contact, he emerged into the morning light and headed to his car.

He slid into the beat-up Saturn, started the engine, and sighed with relief when the engine kicked in. It wouldn't be long before the old thing would need to be replaced. He

pulled out and headed straight for the Broad Street 7-11, a routine so entrenched he often found himself there without remembering the trip.

He entered the 7-11 with his shoulders slumped.

A few minutes later, two coffees in hand, Steve slid back into the Saturn. The smell of fresh coffee filled the car and lifted his spirits slightly. He placed his cup in the plastic cupholder stuck into the driver's side window and the other on the passenger side and then started the engine.

Richmond is a beautiful city, even if Hell exports its weather there every summer. The smell of tobacco that used to permeate the streets had vanished many years ago, but on certain Tuesdays, a waft of fresh vanilla still drifted over the Fan from the spice factory on Broad Street.

Stonewall Jackson stared straight ahead as Steve drove by, and Steve, as usual, paid him no mind. Wide Monument Avenue, with its ancient brick paving, required constant attention (and constant shock absorber replacement). The cavalcade of Southern Civil War heroes that lined the broad median provided the road with another moniker among the local college students, who referred to it mockingly as "The Avenue of Losers"—a constant reminder that Richmond remained a city sprinting to the future while being heavily anchored in its past.

Steve used his driving time to mull over ideas. The book he planned to write about politics had bubbled in the back of his mind for years. *How Politics Has Been Ruined by Politicians*. A treatise discussing how the media had transformed government by weeding out anyone original and presenting the voters only with an array of terrible leaders. One day he'd get around to starting it...

As Steve pulled into the *Times Dispatch* lot and grabbed his usual parking spot, he shelved the book plans in the back of his mind. Back to covering the idiots in the House of Delegates and the morons in the State Senate.

Like many newspapers, the *Times Dispatch* had seen better days. Once thick and thriving with local news, it was now scrawny and filled with articles culled from syndicates, releasing the paper from having to pay and give benefits to its own reporters. The few remaining reporters concentrated on local sports and politics. “Investigative journalism” had practically disappeared.

The building seemed cold and uninviting from the outside. The parking lot needed paving, and overgrown and unattended bushes partially blocked the sidewalk.

Steve grabbed the coffees and exited his car, slamming the door with a push of his ass. The back door facing the lot was always locked, so Steve headed toward the alleyway.

“Here you go, Red.”

A dirty man in a cardboard box wedged between a chain-link fence and the mottled walls of the neighboring building flashed a toothless smile. He reached for the offered coffee. “Thanks, Steve.”

Steve nodded, then trudged through the glass doors. He headed to his cubicle, ignoring his coworkers.

Situated in the middle of a row of similar boxes, his spot contained a coffee-stained table, a standard-issue office chair, a computer, a small lamp that looked too tacky for even K-Mart to sell, and a black desk phone with a hold button that didn’t work.

Today's first task would involve an impossible effort to make a city council meeting about a new parking garage interesting to readers.

Steve tossed his bag in the corner, placed his coffee on the desk, and threw himself into his chair, which swiveled under him like a tilt-a-whirl. He slowed it with his feet and stared at nothing. In the back of his mind, he imagined Terry Gilliam's animations.

He blinked and stared at his bag. He then reached in and grabbed his greenphone. He checked the screen.

Linda. Just what he needed.

"Hello."

"Steve, you never got back to me about the trip."

With his free hand, Steve pulled at the white plastic top covering his coffee cup, which slid slightly across the desk—but the lid remained stubbornly closed. "Whatever. Do what you want. I'm sure Gabby won't miss me."

"Your vacation time with her can be changed. We've been planning this trip for months, and she really wants to go to Paris."

"She thinks she'll see Belle and the talking teacup there."

"Don't be ridiculous; she's a smart girl and you know it."

"Can I talk to her?"

"No, she's at school."

The cup wobbled in his hand. He placed his palm over the top and tried to pick open the white plastic with his forefingers.

"Well, ask her to call me when she gets home."

"You know you're late with your child support again."

“And of course, Gabby is starving because of it. Good thing you married a doctor who can treat that.”

“She’s still your daughter and you’re still—”

“I know, I know. I don’t need a lecture. But I’m not earning what I used to.”

“That’s your fault, not mine.”

Steve grabbed at the coffee cup as it shifted under his grip. He didn’t reply.

“You could have had your lawyer file to have your payments reduced—”

“I can’t afford a lawyer.”

“You always were stupid. It’ll cost you more in the long run.”

“You didn’t used to think I was stupid.”

“That was before you got stupid and did stupid things. Look, we’re taking Gabby to Paris, and if you want to object, you’ll just have to get a lawyer to do something about it.”

“Good thing you called, then, to let me know.”

“Steve, do something with your life! You’re stuck at that rag of a paper and you’re going nowhere—”

“Hey, I’ve got big plans! You’ll see!”

Steve heard a huge sigh and then Linda said, “I gotta go.”

The phone went dead. Steve reared back as hot coffee spurted over his shirt.

“Son of a bitch!” Steve jumped up, dropped the crumpled cup in the trash can under his desk with one hand, and lifted his shirt away from his chest with the other. He ripped off his shirt and tossed it to the floor, cursing Linda’s name. Rubbing his burned chest, he walked to the storage closet and retrieved one of the promotional tee-shirts the paper had given out at a recent ball game. The fit was tight, but at least the shirt was clean and dry.

He then grabbed some paper towels from the break area, marched back to his desk, and began mopping up. Moving papers, CDs, pens and keys off his desk, he slowly wiped the area, glad that the splattering coffee had spared his computer and keyboard. He dropped to his knees and dabbed at the thin carpeting.

After tossing the paper towels into the trash bucket, he stood and inspected the cubicle walls surrounding his desk to make sure no coffee had splashed there. Old campaign posters shared space with favorite political cartoons and comics—Doonesbury and Candorville especially. Pictures pinned over his computer smiled down at him—his red-haired daughter Gabrielle beaming while riding a merry-go-round; an old friend from political campaigns long gone; his old punk band from college; him at his desk at the *New York Times*...

Twenty minutes later, he realized that he was still standing.

FIVE

Associated Press, October 5

POLICE FIND NO EVIDENCE OF FOUL PLAY IN BRUNSWICK DEATH

A spokesperson for the Cambridge Police, working in conjunction with the FBI, stated today that they have uncovered no evidence to indicate that the death of Governor Brunswick was anything more than an unexplained suicide.

“The investigation is not complete,” stated Cambridge Chief of Police Scott Gillespie, “but so far we have discovered nothing to suggest that foul play was involved.”

The FBI has interviewed witnesses, analyzed videos, and thoroughly examined the scene. Witness testimony corroborates the physical evidence, which shows that after meeting with his staff, the governor remained alone in the suite.

Surveillance video confirms the Secret Service testimony that no one entered or left the room during that time. Amateur video taken from outside the Hynes show the Governor stepping out onto the balcony, standing on a chair, waving to the crowd, and then diving to his death.

The governor’s wife of twenty-seven years, who had planned to join her husband at the convention for his acceptance speech, received the news at home from a staff member. Kathryn Brunswick has remained in private mourning with her children and family since that time.

The autopsy report names blunt force trauma as the cause of death. Investigators found no evidence of alcohol or drugs in the governor’s bloodstream which could explain his strange behavior.

None of this has prevented bloggers from presenting any number of theories to explain the incident. The more mundane range from an unusual brain aneurism which caused spasms or some other unknown family or personal health problem to political corruption which has yet to be disclosed. On the more fanciful side, some have proposed terrorist hypno-rays, alien mind control, or even vampiric charming powers.

SIX

Two months of the most exciting political news in modern American history had passed without any real input from Steve. He snorted. He had his regular blog posts where he commented on the national race, but he was lucky if fifty people a week would read it.

Still, enthusiasm filled him that night. He would get to see Norman Mark live, and maybe even be lucky enough to ask him a question with the rest of the press corps.

He shuffled along with the thousands who trickled into The Diamond—the ridiculous name for the baseball stadium which had replaced Richmond’s Parker Field many years ago. Stoic protesters holding crosses posed for the cameras while standing to one side. A few attendees pointed at the occasional “Mark is a vampire” sign and laughed, but most ignored the demonstrators.

Behind a barricade on the opposite side of the ingoing crowd, a few drunken college students, dressed in their best Halloween gear with fangs dripping red and black capes swirling, jeered at the protestors.

One by one, people stepped through the scanners to get their bags the once-over from the guards. Security seemed very tight. Obvious Secret Service agents—still wearing their sunglasses even though the sun had set—stood alone or in pairs in every direction Steve looked.

Steve had submitted the required picture and ID days earlier in order to obtain permission to enter the press area. With the press pass dangling around his neck, security quickly passed him through.

Steve dodged people walking in every direction to cross the promenade to where he could look out at the field. Bright night lamps lit the scene, obscuring the stars above. The hoard of American flags flapping in the cool autumn breeze added to the festive feel of the evening.

Center field now contained a wide stage, canopied in case of rain, and a perfectly centered stark podium. Behind and flanking the podium, two groups of seats had been positioned on a tiered platform to offer local politicians superior camera coverage. They'd sit dutifully, listen attentively and clap in the right places, leading the audience like human "applause" signs at a sitcom taping.

The first speaker was scheduled to appear on the stage within the hour, and by that time, the place would be packed. Mark's charm and youthful appearance appealed to the many college students in Richmond, and liberal Democrats—who weren't always appreciated outside of the city itself—poured in for that rare opportunity to gawk at a politician they actually liked.

Steve walked through the crowd with ease, the pass dangling around his neck. He felt invigorated—finally, the chance to write a story with national implications. Perhaps Mark would even take questions from the media afterwards.

He headed toward the press section, trying to think of a way to "keep it local" to please Gary.

"Hey, you're Steve Edwards," came a voice from behind.

Steve turned to find a smiling middle-aged man with dark hair and brown eyes. A deep blue business suit fit snugly and red tie hung loosely around his neck. He held out his hand.

“Yes, I am,” Steve said, warming to the man instantly. “And you are?”

“Collin Babcock, manager of The Diamond.” He held Steve’s hand in a strong grip. “Pleased to meet you. Don’t suppose you know me, but I recognize you from the paper, and that story about the vampire believers was quite interesting.”

“I’m happy you liked it,” Steve replied sincerely.

“You don’t believe the Suckers, do you?”

Steve laughed. “They don’t like being called that, you know. Others call them ‘Batties,’ but they call themselves ‘the Illuminators,’ like the light they think will expose the vampires.”

Collin shook his head. “Just when you think politics can’t get any crazier.” He nodded toward a refreshment stand and indicated that Steve should follow. “I stay out of politics myself, but I do read your blog every now and then, even though I disagree with you a lot. Especially the one you wrote about taxes. I don’t know how you—two waters, please—I don’t know how you expect a businessman like me to hire people and run a business with even a slight profit if you’re going to tax the hell out of me.”

Steve graciously accepted the water from Collin, who waved away Steve’s offer to pay. “Well, it’s more of the huge corporations that are the problem, not the small businesses...”

Collin snorted. “That’s what they always say ... and then my taxes go up so the government can pay bums with food stamps. But you don’t want to talk about that, I can tell. You’re here for Mark. You think he’s going to win? Wouldn’t that be something?”

“It’s possible,” Steve said. “He has the advantage of being something new. People often project their hopes and desires on the new guy, and it takes a few months before they start getting disillusioned. Fortunately for Mark, by that time, the election will be over.”

“He’s still behind in the polls, though.”

“Well, his very liberal views are not going over too well with much of America,” Steve conceded. “Thanks for the water. I’ve enjoyed talking to you, but I need to get to the press area before all the good seats are gone.”

“Listen, would you like to see this thing from the box seats?” Collin asked. “You can watch from my box, if you’re interested.”

Steve glanced around the park. He didn’t need to be near the stage to write his story. He could easily grab quotes from the prominent notables after the speeches had ended and the crowd thinned—no politician leaves until the last TV camera is turned off. In fact, watching the crowd from a high angle would give him a perspective on the gathering that no other reporter could claim.

“Sure, that would be great.”

“Here,” Collin said, pulling the string over his head and handing Steve his pass. “We’ll switch passes and turn the pictures face down. With this green one, my people will let you by. They’re not checking passes on people once they’re inside. I’ll stick yours under my tie. Everybody knows me. No one will ask to see it.”

Steve accepted Collin’s pass and looked at it. A color picture of Collin with his name beneath in boldface was set against a green background with the word “Staff” in an oversized font.

“I don’t know,” Steve said. “We’re dealing with the Secret Service here. If they challenge us...”

“No one’s going to question you while I’m with you. Look, in the unlikely case that any of the Secret Service should stop us, I’ll explain that we dropped them accidentally and then put on the wrong ones. They’re not going to arrest you because of that—after all, you really do have a badge and are allowed here. The worst they’ll do is not let you up in the box seats. No big deal.”

Steve pulled his pass off and handed it to Collin and then placed Collin’s around his neck.

Collin motioned for Steve to follow. “Walk this way.”

Steve grinned as he imagined John Cleese saying those words, but wasn’t sure if Collin would get the reference if he replied with “If I could walk that way...” Instead, he followed silently.

The guards didn’t give them a second look.

SEVEN

By the time Mark took the stage, the crowd had grown restless. The previous speakers must have felt as invisible as the bands who opened for the Beatles—sure, they were competent, but they weren't *the Beatles*. They weren't who everyone had come to see.

Mark's appearance certainly reminded Steve of a rock star's performance. The crowd cheered and clapped as he waved his hands and pretended to recognize people in the audience. Large screens on either side of the stage amplified his image to the farthest reaches of the stadium.

"See?" Collin said. "This is much better than being down there in that mob."

Steve couldn't disagree. The two of them, cans of cold Coors in hand, perched comfortably above the din in a private booth above the bleachers. A large refrigerator in the back held more beer and other refreshments. The cool night breeze wafted through the open booth, which gave them an unobstructed view of the stage and the field. Even so, a large flat-screen TV hung over their heads, providing the same feed as the amplified versions on the sides of the stage.

"*Are you ready to take your country back?*" Mark cried to the crowd, who roared back their assent.

Steve leaned forward and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Free Bird!" he yelled.

"*It's time we, the people, ran our country—not the banks, not the insurance industry, not the lobbyists, and not the same old politicians who got us into this mess!*"

Collin took a long swig of his beer as the crowd cheered again. “He sure knows how to get the crowd cheering.”

“I’m enjoying this campaign,” Steve said. “Mark is a dynamic candidate, and I hope he wins. The problem is that all he is doing is exciting the liberals. He needs to get the moderates if he wants to win. The polls show he’s not doing that yet.”

“Well, neither is Finnegan. His VP choice is a loon. Did you read what he said about gays? And Muslims?”

Steve nodded. “Had Brunswick not died, it would be a fairly reasonable debate between two moderates, but instead, with Proctor pulling the Republicans to the right and Mark pulling the Democrats to the left, we’re getting a battle between extremes.”

“That makes it a lot more interesting though,” Collin commented. “And now Proctor is getting press because of what Mark said about religion.”

“They’re blowing that all out of proportion. All he said was that religion didn’t belong in politics. It’s not like he said he was an atheist.”

“The atheists think so, though ... Silverman and his gang are supporting him now. I even saw some ‘Atheists for Mark’ buttons out there.”

Steve snorted. “Atheists aren’t organized. That’s why they’re atheists. I doubt it will make much of a difference. There’ll be more liberal Christians who will now refuse to vote for him because of those comments than atheists who will.”

They paused to hear what Mark was saying. “*Are you happy knowing that your taxes keep going up so that rich people like me don’t have to pay our share? Do you sleep well at night despite the fact that your child may get an inferior education because a huge farm conglomerate is getting your tax money to not grow anything? Do you feel confident*

in your government when you hear that lobbyists invested billions of dollars last year to get laws passed that allow them to sell you inferior products with no oversight? Is there anyone in Washington on your side?"

Collin let out a low whistle. "Class warfare! He doesn't play around."

"Right now, the oil companies in America receive tax breaks and subsidies to encourage them to drill. Last year, they took in four billion dollars of your money—four billion! And what was their annual profit? Forty-five point six billion, which includes the four billion you gave them!"

Mark, who evidently had a small microphone attached to his lapel, left the podium to speak directly to the crowd. He made eye contact, jabbed his finger at them to emphasize key points, and made sure to stay within camera range. He spoke like a revival preacher raging against the sins of the flesh, stirring the faithful. The crowd ate it up.

"They don't need your money. Do you really think they will stop drilling if we don't pay them their extortion? Of course not! It's profitable! Instead, they take your money and give it to their CEOs in the form of million-dollar bonuses because we let them! Because no one tells them no! That's a welfare program that needs to be cut now!"

"You've got to admit, he has charisma," Steve said.

"Actually, I have to take a second to apologize," Mark intoned seriously, and the crowd grew quiet. *"I wasn't completely honest when I said that the oil companies earned forty-five point six billion in profits last year."*

He lifted his eyes slowly to the camera, paused for effect, and then said, *"That was just Exxon's share."*

Once more, the crowd cheered.

"...And that's just the oil companies," Mark was saying. "You add in the tax breaks and subsidies all the other corporations in America get—including my own—and now we're talking real money!"

"That's ridiculous," scoffed Collin. "His policies will cause the stock market to plummet. Businesses will panic. These tax breaks means jobs for Americans. Companies will move overseas if he keeps this up."

"No, they won't..."

"And he's simplifying everything to the point of absurdity. This is just a drop in the bucket when you look at the total budget."

Steve laughed. "It's symbolic and meaningful, and it's getting a great response. I'm very impressed. He's doing pretty well for someone who has never run for office before."

"And especially for a vampire," Collin added with a wink.

"What are you, a bigot?" Steve taunted. "This is America, where all persons are entitled to equal rights, living or undead. That's in the thirty-seventh-and-a-half Amendment."

"Oh, so you're the spokesman for Undead Americans now, are you?"

Steve grinned and reached for some potato chips Collin had poured out into a large wooden bowl.

"And why should you trust me to bring our country out of this mess, when every other politician has not? Because I ... can't ... be ... bought." Mark stretched each word out dramatically and received the expected explosion of support. "What could someone possibly offer me that I don't already have? I will not accept lobbyist money for my

campaign. No special interests will have a say in my policies. My only concern will be the well-being of the American people.”

Collin finished his beer. On the stage, Mark stressed all the great things that the money America would get from cutting tax breaks and loopholes would provide: better and cheaper education, clean energy, aid to small businesses—all the Democratic buzzwords to pump up the audience.

“A lot of Christians aren’t going to vote for him because they think he’s a vampire,” said Collin.

Steve shrugged. “They already believe in magic and devils, so to them, vampires are a real possibility.”

“You don’t think vampires can exist?”

Steve paused, embarrassed at his comment since he did not know his host’s views. He hoped he had not touched a sore spot. “Um, no, I don’t believe in vampires. I mean, look at him—you can see him in a mirror, he’s been doused with holy water by one of the Batties, and recently some people handed him crosses and he accepted them without a problem. He’s no undead.”

“But what about all that stuff about the bat in the video?”

“You mean the clip showing Brunswick’s balcony right after he jumped? Yeah, that’s all over the web. It might show a bat, but it might be a bird, too.”

“At midnight?”

“Some birds fly at night. And even if it was a bat, it could have just flown by right then. It’s not a good video, and doesn’t clearly show the creature coming from his window.”

Collin’s mouth stretched. “Still, it’s a coincidence you can’t overlook.”

“If I have to choose between a coincidence and something that defies the laws of nature, I’ll choose the coincidence.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes while Mark launched into his traditional “many different cultures and ideas forming America’s greatness” speech. The diverse crowd loved it.

“I’m going to get another beer,” Collin said, rising. “Want one?”

“Sure.”

Soft thuds, clinks and clanks sounded behind him, but Steve’s attention centered wholly on Mark, who had become very serious, and the crowd very silent.

“This is a dangerous quest we are on,” Mark said in a hushed voice. “Many powerful people do not want us to succeed. They don’t want change. They know that if I’m elected they won’t be able to take advantage of the American citizen anymore. They know that I’ll shut down their tax shelters in the Cayman Islands and cut off their tax breaks when they ship our jobs overseas. They know that they will not have someone in the White House they can buy. And they will do everything they can to—”

The shots echoed across the stadium. Mark’s eyes grew large on the giant screens and then he fell backwards, clutching his chest.

Screams filled the air. Steve jumped up, unable to hear over the ringing in his ears.

Below him, politicians dove off the tiered platform and scrambled for cover. Mayor Ross clamped her hand over her leg, blood spurting through the gaps between her fingers. Another victim lay still in a pool of blood. Secret Service agents stormed the stage with weapons drawn. Two knelt at Mark’s side; the others turned in all directions. People in the audience tripped and fell over each other in a mad dash to the closest exits.

Steve noticed all this in the brief, stunned moments before he turned to Collin, who cursed, dropped the high-powered rifle, then turned to Steve and winked.

In a matter of seconds, Collin's transformation into a bat was complete. His clothes fell to the floor and the bat disappeared into the night.

Someone threw open the door.

For the rest of the story, get "Bloodsuckers"

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