

SARAH PALIN: VAMPIRE HUNTER

TWINKLE

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Sarah Palin: Vampire Hunter: Twinkle
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TWINKLE

Twinkle, Oregon

Twilight's last gleaming fell softly through the mist between the trees. Sinuous fingers of fog caressed the upright shafts and trailed teasingly through the underbrush. The sun plunged into the wet darkness of the roiling sea. Above, parting clouds exposed a full, round, ripe, pale moon heaving upward into the night sky. Its tender light groped downward to find a young couple in a forest

clearing, clutched in a tight embrace, their lips melded together in a deep and passionate kiss. They broke apart.

“Oh, Edmund!” said Stella, gasping. “Sometimes I think I’ll suffocate from kissing you! It’s like you never need air.”

“Sorry,” said Edmund. He smiled apologetically. “Sometimes you make me forget to breathe.”

Stella grinned. “When you put it like that, I don’t mind at all. Oh, Edmund, I love you so much!”

“And I love—”

“I mean, I really, really, deeply, completely love you with every single part of me from my head to my toes.”

“I feel the—”

“I mean every single molecule of me loves you! Every atom! Every one of those sub-atomic thingies Mr. Flagg talks about in science class but I don’t really know what they are because I spend the whole class staring at you or passing notes to Callie about how much I love you or writing your name on my notebook.”

“I know,” said Edmund. He ran his fingers through her stringy brown hair. “Stella, you have to—”

“When I’m with you, I don’t care about anything else! Not school or shopping or television or even the Jonas brothers. Who cares about them anyway?”

“Good to know.”

“And when I’m not with you, all I think about is you. How you look. How you move. How you sound. How you smell.” She inhaled deeply. “I’m so drawn to your scent. Does that seem weird?”

“I tried that Axe body spray, so no.”

“I dream about you when I sleep, except I don’t sleep. I just lie awake thinking about you. Or texting my friends about you. Sometimes, late at night, I update my Facebook profile to say how much I miss you and that I’m thinking about you. And then I write poems about you in my LiveJournal.”

“Yes, I’ve read some of those,” said Edmund. “You don’t pay attention in English class either, do you?”

“I can’t! Maybe I should set my LJ to private, but I don’t care. I don’t care, Edmund! I don’t care who knows how I feel because I want everyone to know how I feel about you because it’s how I feel about you and everyone should care.”

“About?”

“How I feel about you!”

“Right.”

“Oh, Edmund, you’re so sparkly and gorgeous and moody. I want to be with you forever!”

His tourmaline eyes flickered red. “Do you really mean that?”

“Yes. I want to spend every second with you until the end of time! I have this aching, longing, yearning, indescribable need to be with you that I can’t even describe.”

“I think you just did.”

"It fills me, Edmund! My need to be with you constantly, always, forever. It fills me up. It makes me ache and tingle and ties my stomach in a knot and I love you so much that sometimes I just throw up on myself!"

"Lovely," said Edmund. "But, listen, Stella—"

She knit her brow in confusion. "Listen? What does that mean?"

Edmund sighed. "It means you stop talking and I say something." He cupped her face in his hands and stared deeply into her chocolate chip eyes. "It mean you use these cute ears of yours for once."

"I record myself reading the poems I write about you and then I upload the recordings to my iPod and I listen to them while I curl up in a ball under the dining room table because I miss you so much."

"Stella, this is important. Do you really want to be with me forever? Do you even know what that means?"

"I do, Edmund," she said breathlessly. "I do know!"

"And is it what you want? What you really, really want?"

"I want to be with you no matter what it takes, Edmund."

"You'll have to give up everything you are, Stella, abandon your identity and forsake any semblance of a normal life. Are you willing to do all that to become...like me?"

"Yes! It is what I want more than anything, Edmund! To be like you. To be with you forever and ever until—"

"Hush." Edmund pressed his index finger to Stella's lips.

"What is it, Edmund? What's wrong? Do you not love me enough? Are you worried about what people will think? Because I don't—"

Now Edmund clamped his entire hand across Stella's mouth, silencing her.

"Just hush," he said. "Please. Not another word. You are so beautiful, Stella. So perfect. I love the way the moonlight shines on your luminous white skin. The way your dark hair catches the shadows. The heat of your body. So, so perfect."

"*Mmfph!*" said Stella.

"And the beating of your heart." Edmund pressed his ear against Stella's chest. His head rode the rise and fall of her breath. "The perpetual pulsing rhythm, pushing your delicious—I mean, precious—blood through every part of your body. Through your fingers, through your toes...through the veins of your throat. I love that sound. But I can't hear it, even with my exceptional hearing, over the unyielding cacophony of your incessant yammering. So, please, don't spoil our last moment together, Stella. Just hush."

He removed his hand. Stella took a breath. She opened her mouth to speak. Edmund regarded her sternly. She hesitated, but could not contain herself.

"Last moment?" she asked, half in hope, half in fear of what he meant.

"The last moment before everything changes for us," he said.

"Do you really mean this, Edmund? Is it time? Are you finally going to do it to me?"

"Yes, Stella."

"Oh, Edmund! I'm so happy! You have no idea what this means to me! I can't wait to finally be—"

Edmund clamped his hand over her mouth again and bent the girl's head back, exposing the soft white flesh of her throat. The scent of her excitement, the rush of her quickening heartbeat, sent a thrill through his cold form. She shuddered in his grasp.

"This may sting at first," said Edmund. His incisors protruded. "But it will all be over soon."

Edmund pulled Stella more tightly against him. He leaned in, brushing her skin with his lips. He opened his mouth. She closed her eyes. Stella's whole body vibrated with anticipation of what was to come next.

Then Edmund's head exploded.

His skull flew apart from the inside out, evaporating in an expanding cloud of sticky brain bits, liquefied bone, and blackish goo. The mixture covered Stella's face and hair. It flew up her nostrils and landed in her open mouth. The taste was sour, like stewed prunes seeped in rank vinegar.

A loud report shook the air. The booming sound and the wet spray across her face were not what Stella was expecting. She opened her eyes to the horrifying sight of Edmund's headless body holding her.

But even more horrifying was what happened next—*Edmund stood up!*

Stella screamed.

A person dressed all in black stepped into the clearing.

Stella screamed again.

Edmund turned to face the intruder.

Except he had no face, on account of having no head.

Even so, he lurched with outstretched arms toward the figure in black.

The intruder aimed a Glock semi-automatic pistol and put three rounds in Edmund's chest.

He staggered backward, tumbled to the ground at Stella's feet—and crumbled into ashes.

"It's always so funny when they do that," said the newcomer. She holstered her sidearm. "You see, with these critters the energy pattern of the brain sometimes persists for—well, it doesn't really matter. Are you all right there, sweetie?"

Stella couldn't stop screaming.

The woman wore lace-up combat boots and a tight-fighting black bodysuit. She moved with a cat-like economy of motion as she crossed the clearing toward Stella. Various pouches and compartments hung from her belt and shoulder rig, including two Glocks strapped to her shapely thighs. Her brown hair was pulled back in a tight bun. A high-tech wraparound visor protected her hazel eyes.

"Sorry about the mess. There was just no time to getcha clear. I had to take the shot." The woman winked while making a pistol gesture with her thumb and forefinger.

Stella scrambled backward across the ground until she backed into a tree trunk. "Stay away from me!" she shouted. "You killed Edmund!"

The woman in black stopped short. “Just take a deep breath, honey. Slow deep breath. You’re in a bit of shock there. Just calm down. Everything is okay now.”

“Everything is not okay! *You killed my boyfriend!*”

The woman shook her head. “Your ‘boyfriend’ there died a hundred years ago, sweetie. I just made him stop moving.”

“You’re crazy!”

“Well, a lot of people think so, that’s for sure.” The woman opened a belt pouch and produced a square of orange cloth. “You’ve got ick all over your little face there. Ya might just wanna clean that up.”

She held out the cloth. Reluctantly, Stella took it and dabbed at her face.

“The technical term is ichor,” said the woman. “Though I have to say mythologically speaking that isn’t quite accurate. But what can ya do? I just call it ick and let me tell you from long experience, nothing soaks the ick up like that little ShamWow. Holds twelve times its weight in liquid, by golly!”

“You’re insane!” said Stella.

“You already said.”

“Wait a minute. Your face. Your voice. I know you!”

“Do you now?”

“I’ve seen you on television. You’re Sarah Palin!”

Palin winked. “Guilty as charged.”

“You killed my boyfriend!”

“I told you he was already dead. You see, sweetie, crazy as this is going to sound—and I admit, it does sound a little out there—your boyfriend there was a vampire.”

“*I know he was a vampire!*” wailed Stella.

Palin started. “Well, good golly girl! If ya knew that, what the heck darn were ya doing way out here alone in the woods with him?”

“We were in love! He was going to make me a vampire too so we could be together forever!”

Palin rolled her eyes. “Listen, honey, the only thing lover boy was going to turn you into was dinner.”

“You’re wrong! He loved me!”

“Honey, just because a boy says he loves you and wants to take you off into the woods and ‘turn you into a vampire’ doesn’t mean it’s true. By the way, ya might want to cover those up. You’ll catch a chill out here.”

Numbly, Stella buttoned her blouse.

Palin produced an iPhone. “Just by the by, what was your boyfriend’s name?”

“Edmund! Edmund Mullins! And you killed him!”

Palin tapped at the screen. “Let’s see, McIntyre...Monroe...Mullins! There we are! And I’ll just scratch ya right off the list you little booger!”

“You have a list?” said Stella accusingly.

“Unfortunately it’s not enough to kick butt. I have to take names too,” said Palin. “I do love this touchscreen. That Steve Jobs may be a dopey spacey hippie but he sure designs some neat stuff, don’t cha think? Though I’m amazed I can get a signal out here.”

“You killed Edmund and you don’t even care! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you, Sarah Palin!”

Palin shook her head sadly. “Like I haven’t heard *that* before. Now let’s get you home before—”

Crack!

A twig broke nearby. In one fluid motion Palin turned, dropped into a crouch, and drew her sidearm. She peered intently into the now gloomy forest.

“Stay behind me, sweetie!” she said.

But Stella was already on her feet and running away.

“You may as well come on out,” said Palin. “Because I know you’re there.”

“You killed our brother,” said a deep voice from somewhere in the foliage across the clearing. “You will die for that,” added the unseen speaker, now sounding from behind her.

“We’ll see,” muttered Palin. She didn’t bother to turn around.

“I’m behind you now,” said the voice.

“Yeah, I know.”

“I got over here really, really fast.”

“I realize that.”

Now the voice came from her left. “Are you scared?”

“Not really,” said Palin.

“You should be.” He was on the right of the clearing now, up in the branches of the trees.

The gap in the clouds closed, blocking the moon and plunging Palin into near total darkness.

The unseen vampire laughed. “I can see in the dark, little human.”

“Well, aren’t you just the lucky star!”

“Huh?”

“Huh what?”

“I’m a lucky star? What does that even mean?”

“I dunno,” said Palin, scanning the tree line. “I just think it in my little brain and out my mouth it comes.”

“You will die painfully,” said the vampire. Behind her again.

“Probably so,” said Palin. “But not tonight.”

A blur of motion like a sudden gust of wind swept past Palin. She felt a cold sensation on her gun hand. Then her gun was gone.

“Sneaky little devil,” she said.

“Scared yet?” said the vampire.

Palin scrunched up her face in a mockery of deep pondering. “Let me think that one over—ah, no.”

“I took your gun.”

“Yeah, I noticed on account of my hand being empty. Good thing I didn’t have my finger on the trigger or ya mighta broke that little booger straight off, huh?”

"I'll take your life next."

"Yeah? Are ya planning to talk me to death?" Palin glanced at her watch.
"I've got places to be, sweetie."

Another rush of wind. Palin's feet were swept from under her. She slapped the ground to break her fall as she tumbled to the turf.

"I plan to enjoy this, killing you."

"Gonna be like that, huh?" said Palin. She snapped her hips and bounced to her feet without using her hands.

"Do you want to run?" said the vampire.

"I want to get this over with," said Palin.

Something fell from the trees on the opposite side of the clearing.

"Your gun," said the vampire. "If you want to grope around in the dark for it, go ahead."

"No, thanks!" said Palin, drawing her other Glock. "I carry a spare."

"I can take that one away from—"

BLAM!

Palin squeezed off a shot. The vampire tumbled from the trees with unearthly grace and landed in an elegant heap on the ground. He was big and muscular, with curly dark hair.

"You shot me!" He clutched his gut. The wound oozed black ick.

"That's what guns are for, silly boy."

"How can you even see me?"

Palin tapped her visor. "These aren't for fashion. I can see in the dark too."

"Not fair!"

"Yeah, well. Life's a bitch. Deal with it."

She squeezed off three more rounds. The vampire evaded the shots, disappearing into the trees.

A long silence followed. Palin stood still, waiting.

"Why is this wound not healing?" whined the vampire.

"That would be the silver nanoparticles," Palin said. "Unless you caught one of the nanoscale UV laser rounds. I like to mix 'em up. Keeps things interesting."

"It burns!"

"Definitely the UV."

"You won't shoot me again," he said.

"I suppose you're right," said Palin.

She holstered the pistol. She had been lucky to tag the vampire. More accurately, he had been careless and cocky, as vampires often were when confronting a lone human. They always assumed they had the upper hand. But now he would be wary. It was darn difficult to get a bead on these critters when they were on guard.

"I will tear you limb from limb!" raged the vampire.

"Yeah, how's that working out for ya so far?"

As she spoke, Palin reached into a vest pocket and pulled out a thumb-sized drink can. She popped the lid and gulped its contents, a special beverage called Liquid Amplified Combat Enhancer—LACE. Palin called it 5-Minute Energy. LACE was a highly concentrated chemical cocktail of epinephrine, taurine,

ginseng, B-vitamins, caffeine, high fructose corn syrup, artificial cherry flavoring, desert scorpion venom, and weapons-grade amphetamine. A two ounce shot of LACE provided a baseline human being a burst of speed, strength, and stamina comparable to that of a vampire—for about five minutes.

“Yeah, that’s the stuff!” Palin said, as the burn raced through her veins. It felt like being stung by a swarm of bees—over and over and over again. LACE wasn’t pleasant. There was a high risk of cardiac arrest. But it gave her a fighting chance, and that was all Palin could ask for.

That and for vampires to be as stupid as vampires usually were.

The dark-haired vampire stepped into the clearing. He still clutched his oozing belly with one hand. “This hurts!” he said. “But I swear it is nothing compared to the pain you are about to experience!”

“I swear, you fellas must all have the same dialogue coach!” said Palin.

Palin felt as much as heard the second vampire—the one who took her gun earlier, the one who had yet to speak—approaching from behind. LACE amped up her senses as much as it did her reflexes. He meant to catch her in a choking hold. He was utterly unprepared for Palin to duck, pivot, grab him by the crotch and shoulder, judo throw him over her shoulder, plant her boot on his throat, draw the Glock, and put three in his face. The rounds mashed up his no doubt ethereally beautiful features pretty good, but his skull remained more or less intact. Palin squeezed the trigger one more time for good measure. His head exploded.

“There’s my little explosive round!” she said. “It’s like finding the Cracker Jack prize!”

“Feldspar! No!” Enraged, the dark-haired vampire charged across the meadow, even as Feldspar, assuming that was his name, crumbled to dust.

Despite her heightened reflexes, Palin was unable to get off another shot before he was on her. Foolishly, he went for the gun, reaching with both hands. Palin released the weapon and pulled him off balance, planting a hard karate chop on the back of his neck. The blow would have shattered a living man’s spine. It merely stunned the vampire long enough for Palin to slip free of his grasp.

He swung a fist. Palin dodged it. She dropped into a cat stance.

“You boys...thought you were clever,” she said, blocking and evading his blows while landing several of her own. “But you...gave the game away...at the start...saying *our* brother.”

“I’ll rip your throat out!” said the vampire.

The two combatants dueled in a whirling tango of kicks and punches. The vampire was slightly faster, significantly stronger, and had greater reach. But he was an untrained brawler, used to overpowering much weaker prey. Palin’s extensive training in hand-to-hand combat techniques more than negated his advantages. When he struck, she blocked, ducked or dodged—then countered with precision blows to joints and pressure points.

Not that they mattered much on a dead man.

“If there is one thing...I’ve learned fighting vampires...it’s that you talk too much!” said Palin. She smashed the heel of her palm into the vampire’s chin, rocking his head back, and followed up with a foot sweep. “And someone should have taught you not to play with your food.”

“I won’t make that mistake again!” said the vampire. He caught Palin by the arm and hurled her across the clearing. Palin fell flat on her face and skidded through the turf.

“You just did,” she said. The first Glock lay an arm’s length away. She rolled to it, scooped it up and fired. The vampire danced away from the barrage and fled again into the trees.

He didn’t return. Apparently the desire for self-preservation outweighed his thirst for revenge. Or for Palin’s blood.

She retrieved the Glock’s mate. “Well, Sarah,” she said to herself. “Two outta three ain’t bad. I just hope girly girl had the good sense to run home.”

Stella ran deeper into the woods. She kept tripping over rocks and vines and colliding with trees. It was pitch black and she was clumsy, so running through the forest was a chore. But she had to get away. She had to get help. She had to—*oh, Edmund!*

Her poor Edmund. Poor beautiful, glorious, musical, intense, mysterious, Greek god-like, perfect, shiny, hunkalicious Edmund. He was dead! Or more dead, or whatever vampires became when psycho trigger-happy washed-up politician nut job Sarah Palin blasted them to ashes. Ashes! Nothing left at all! It was a tragedy! She could never again run her hands across the marble-like slab of his chest, nuzzle his icy neck, kiss his strong, sensuous lips, or feel his—

SMACK!

Stella slammed into a tree for the fifth or sixth time.

“Why are there so many trees in this forest!”

As she picked herself up, she heard gunshots in the distance. Was crazy Sarah Palin coming after her? It was insane! She hoped this wasn’t real, just another of her absurdly frequent and vivid nightmares. That had to be it!

This isn’t real! This isn’t real! This isn’t real!

But she kept running just in case.

Which way was the road? Was this the right trail? Which way was she running? Did it matter? She had to get away, keep away from that deranged woman until she woke up.

Right?

Stella hit another tree, bounced off it, tipped over backward and slid down a steep incline.

“Let me help you up,” said a familiar voice.

“Where—where am I?” said Stella.

“Trespassing on the Quixote reservation.”

“Jake? Is that you?”

The clouds parted and the moon revealed to Stella it was indeed her childhood friend Jake. The muscular, dark-haired, bare-chested Quixote Indian teen wore sandals and a pair of cut-off jeans. He pulled Stella to her feet with effortless ease.

“What are you doing here, Stella?” he asked, flexing his biceps.

"I was out here with Edmund, my boyfriend, who is gorgeous and perfect and sparkly and dreamy."

"Oh," said Jake. He made the face one might make after stepping in something squishy.

"Yes, we were making out in a moonlit meadow, his full lips devouring mine, when—"

"I get it," said Jake, curtly.

"No, I don't think you understand. We were about to take our relationship to a new level and seal our love for all—"

"I get it, Stella! You and Edmund! Kissy, kissy, lovey-dovey, *Edmund this, Edmund that, Edmund, Edmund, Edmund!* Edmund is all you talk about every freaking Edmund minute of every freaking Edmund day! So you're out here with Edmund. Awesome. I don't need the details. Where is Mr. Awesome Sparklefingers anyway?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. Edmund is—*oh my gosh!*"

"Edmund is oh-my-gosh what?"

Stella dropped her voice to a whisper. "Jake, don't move! There are like three humongous wolves standing right behind you!"

Jake rolled his eyes. "I know. I'm amazed you managed to notice them, though, seeing as *none of them are Edmund!*"

"Why are you being so weird?" said Stella. "Aren't you worried about those wolves?"

"Never mind the wolves. What about Edmund?"

"Edmund is dead!" blurted Stella. "A crazy woman killed him! She shot him in the head and then again and his staggeringly flawless body crumbled into dust just like that and now she's after me!"

"Someone shot Edmund?" said Jake. He grinned. "Are you sure?"

"Yes! And he's dead! Or deader. Whatever."

"Sucks to be Edmund," said Jake. "Get it? *Sucks* to be him."

The wolves made chortling sounds.

"Why are you being so mean? Sarah Palin shot Edmund and he was going to change me into a vampire so we could be together forever and now he can't and he's gone forever and I—"

"Whoa!" said Jake. "Did you say Sarah Palin?"

The wolves growled.

"Yes."

"She's here? Are you sure it was her?"

"Yes," said a new voice. A dark-haired vampire materialized from the shadows. His hand was pressed against an oozing abdominal wound.

"Egbert!" said Stella, recognizing Edmund's adopted brother.

"You shouldn't be here," said Jake. The wolves bristled.

"I know," said the vampire, raising an open palm. "But this concerns us all. Little Miss Motormouth is right—Sarah Palin has come to Twinkle!"

“Governor, we had no idea you were coming!” gushed Sam Tanner. The manager of the Walmart Supercenter on Highway 19, just inside the Twinkle city limits, was a balding, paunchy, earnest, cherub-cheeked man. “We’d have put some signs up. Let people know.”

“Sam, don’t you worry about it.” Palin gave him a dazzling smile and waved away any hint of a problem. “This is an unscheduled stop anyhow. We were cruising along in the tour bus on our way to Portland and when I saw your store, I said to my driver Jimmy we’ve just gotta stop there and pick up a few things for the road, don’t cha know?”

“You’re going to Portland?” said Tanner, confused. “You do realize Twinkle is on an isolated peninsula? Portland is the other way.”

“Oh, look! You’ve got the five-pound drum of Moose Jerky!”

“Only \$3.99,” said Tanner.

“I’ll take four. Anyhows, I thought so long as I’m here I’d see if you want me to autograph any copies of my book you happen to have on hand here.”

“We have it in our Books section, right this way,” said Tanner.

“Well, where else would it be?” said Palin brightly. “How’s that selling for ya, my book?”

Tanner flushed. “Well...er, this is Oregon,” he said. “But pretty good, considering.”

“Well, hunky-dory! I’ll sign all you’ve got. Maybe it will help those little boogers move on out the door. Gotta keep the cash registers a-ringing!”

Today Palin wore a stars and stripes parka, dark jeans, and her trademark hairstyle and rimless glasses. She needed to be the Sarah Palin the public expected to see. Twinkle wasn’t a scheduled stop on her nationwide book tour, but the tour gave her cover to pop up anywhere without raising too many questions. Last night proved her intel was correct—Twinkle had vampires. Two less than before, but any was too many. The one who got away would run straight back to the nest and raise the alarm. Which was what she wanted. By showing herself in town, Palin was sending a message to the bloodsuckers. Word would get back to them—vampires always had spies in town—and tonight they’d come to her. They’d gather their forces and converge to eliminate the threat—never suspecting they were playing right into Palin’s hands.

So predictable, she thought. Being dead probably kills the brain cells.

For the next hour Palin signed books, shook hands and posed for pictures. There were a few hostile stares and muttered insults, but by and large folks were friendly. The morning crowd grew steadily. Palin’s presence caused a stir, but most people were more intent on doing their shopping than celebrity-gawking, God love ‘em.

Then the lights went out.

“—and then Jake and his friends found me and then we hiked back to his car and then he drove me home and it was the worst night of my whole entire life!” said Stella.

“That’s nice, honey,” said her father, not looking up from cleaning his service revolver. Chuck Finch was a middle-aged man with tired eyes, a weathered face, and salt-and-pepper hair. He was also Twinkle’s chief of police.

“Nice? Daddy, are you even listening to anything I said? Sarah Palin killed my boyfriend! You have to arrest her!”

Chief Finch chuckled. “Sounds like a crazy dream, baby. You probably shouldn’t watch the cable news before bed.”

“It wasn’t a dream! It was true! It was real and true and it really happened! See, look, I’m all bruised and scratched from running into trees and falling down a hill!”

“Stella, you’re always bruised and scratched from running into things. You probably just fell down the stairs sleepwalking, like you usually do. Lucky you didn’t break your leg and several ribs again.”

“Sarah Palin shot Edmund!” Stella slapped the table in frustration, which sent her bowl of Fruit Loops flying.

“Him too? I thought she shot your boyfriend. Quite a rampage.” Finch shook his head.

“Edmund is my boyfriend!”

“I thought you were dating that nice kid Mark.”

“Daddy! Mark’s a total dork. Edmund is perfect and chiseled and handsome and creepily attached to me—or at least he was until last night when Sarah Palin shot him!”

“The 2008 vice presidential candidate and former Alaska governor. That Sarah Palin?”

“What other Sarah Palin is there?”

“Apparently the one who runs around the Oregon woods shooting teenagers for no reason.”

“She shot him because—” Stella caught herself.

“Because why?” said Chief Finch, looking up.

“I...don’t know. Because she’s crazy! Everyone says so!”

“She’s not the only one a few Fruit Loops short of a full bowl,” said Finch.

“What do you mean?” asked Stella.

“Stella, honey, you’re not doing drugs are you?”

“No!”

“Well, good.” Finch reloaded his pistol. “Because it would be a real shame to have to arrest my own daughter. So if you’re not high on drugs, you just had a bad dream. Sarah Palin has no reason to come within a hundred miles of Twinkle. Finish your cereal and you’ll feel better.”

Finch’s belt radio crackled.

“Come in, Chief.”

“Go ahead,” he responded.

“Chief, you’re not going to believe this! Sarah Palin is at Walmart!”

Finch could not hide his shock.

“I told you!” said Stella triumphantly.

The chief signaled for her to be quiet. “Say again?”

“Yeah, her tour bus pulled in about half an hour ago. She’s signing books. Quite a crowd building up. Thought you’d want to know.”

“10-4. I’ll be right over.”

“Do you believe me now?” said Stella. “Are you going to arrest her?”

“No, honey, I’m going to get her autograph. Where did I put my copy of *Going Rogue*?”

Everyone froze. With the exception of a few emergency exit signs and a dim pool of sunlight near the front entrance, the interior of the cavernous store was as dark as a dungeon. Shoppers and clerks reacted with shouts of surprise, a few lame jokes, and nervous laughter.

Palin stripped off her patriotic windbreaker, revealing a sleeveless black t-shirt over which she wore a shoulder rig for her Glocks. She swapped her eyeglasses for the combat visor. Maybe this was nothing but an accidental power failure, but she doubted it. She had not expected the bloodsuckers to move in the daytime. But that didn’t mean she wasn’t ready for them.

She keyed her throat mike. “ROGUE here. Roll call.”

“This is PLUMBER. I’m in Hardware.”

“AXEL,” reported a husky-voiced woman. “I’ve got Sporting Goods.”

“GOGO. I’m on the bus.”

Palin felt good to having the whole team with her. Last night was fun—she enjoyed a lone hunt—but it was always better when someone had your back.

“This could be nothing,” said Palin, moving out of the book section and down a shelf lined with DVDs. “If it’s contact, your priority is getting civilians out. Leave the fangheads to me.”

“Roger that,” said PLUMBER.

If they followed their typical pattern, the bloodsuckers would start a panic, then use the chaos as cover for their attack. Palin assumed they marked her position before killing the lights. But just to make it easy for them, she called out, “Looks like somebody forgot to pay the power bill here, doesn’t it?”

That brought a few strained chuckles from the nearby shoppers. Ignoring them, Palin scanned the rafters. The first attack would come from above, if it came at all.

“Maybe you should all move calmly to the nearest exit,” continued Palin.

As if on cue, there was a loud flash and bang from the front of the store. A cloud of thick black smoke obscured the doors, blotting out the feeble sunshine filtering in through the glass.

Palin gulped a 5-Minute Energy.

“Fire!” someone shouted.

“We have to get out of here!” said another voice, eerily compelling.

All across the store, newly frightened shoppers took up the cry. Feeling their way along shelves and displays, they moved faster than they should in the darkness. They tripped. They crashed into each other. They knocked over racks of low-cost apparel and household goods. Confusion spread. A second smoke

grenade went off near the center of the store. Three more followed around the outer walls.

“Fire! We have to get out!” The same shout came from almost every mouth, as if scripted, programmed, directed.

“Stay calm!” shouted Palin. “Get low so you can breathe and walk to the nearest exit!”

“Run!” commanded a deep, hollow voice. “We’ll all die!”

Double darn it! The vampire was using the old Jedi mind trick to manipulate the crowd’s fear, turning them into a herd. Palin looked in vain for the source of the voice, but the vampire did not show himself.

“Get the people out!” she ordered through her comlink. “Go! Go! Go!”

Mocking laughter echoed through the store. “No one gets out alive!”

“Who was that?” said Sam Tanner. He was coming down the aisle with a flashlight in hand. “Folks, if you’ll just stay calm we’ll have the lights on in—*arrrrgh!*”

A shadow swooped down from the ceiling to lift the Walmart manager into the air and hurl him fifty yards across the store. He bounced off a support column and crashed somewhere in the Juniors section. The flashlight went spinning out of his hand, sending a wild trail of light across frightened faces and running figures before it hit the floor and shattered.

Now there were screams as more shoppers and blue-vested Walmart associates were plucked into the air and flung about like beanbags.

“Leave them alone!” said Palin. “I’m right here!”

“You die last,” said the voice. “After you watch the rest suffer.”

“Saving me for last never works out well,” said Palin.

“Hmm. Yes, you do have a bad habit of popping up again and again.”

A vampire materialized before her. He was extremely tall and thin, with gray hair, a high, domed forehead, and dark, sunken eyes. His shoulders were rounded. His face protruded forward and moved slowly from side to side, reptile style. He wore all black, with not a speck of color on him. His hands rested on an antique walking stick.

“Well, well, well,” said Palin. “I never took you for a Walmart shopper there, Professor.”

“Wry as ever.” The Professor’s manner of speech was soft and precise.

“Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve seen your ugly mug since I ran you and your little gang out of Alaska. How’s the old fam doing, by the by?”

“You killed two of my boys last night,” said the Professor.

“Why so I did, Prof,” said Palin. “But the job’s never done until ya get the head vampire.”

“Unlikely,” said the Professor.

Animal growls and snarls filled the air. Palin saw a swarm of vampires, perhaps two dozen, scuttling like spiders across steel beams in the ceiling, climbing down pylons, and launching themselves through the air to pounce on their terrified prey. The screams of the dying galvanized Palin into action. She drew both Glockes and fired at the Professor. He dodged the bullets without seeming to move at all.

"I find the bleating of dying cattle a restful sound," he said.

"You monster!" Palin rushed him, but grasped only mist.

"We have always been called so," said the Professor, once more invisible in the shadows.

"Let them go! It's me you want!" Palin sprinted down the aisle, toward the screams, looking for targets.

"It is blood we want," said the unseen Professor. "When I heard you were here, I summoned my minions from across the Pacific Northwest. They came during the night, in great haste, from so far as Vancouver and San Francisco. They are hungry. They must feed to reach their full strength before engaging you."

"PLUMBER, get these people out!" Palin shouted into the com.

"They're blocking the exits, boss! They've moved shelves, refrigerators, riding lawn mowers. No way out!"

"That won't do!" said Palin. "Make it happen!"

In the Toy section, she caught a vampire bent over a limp thirty-something woman, feeding. He looked up, mouth smeared with blood, and hissed at her. Palin put an explosive round between his red eyes and kept moving. The woman would bleed out soon—if she wasn't dead already—but there was no time for first aid. Not with a big box store full of bloodsuckers on the loose. Against—what, two dozen?—inhumanly strong, fast, lethal, untiring, undead predators the only hope for anyone walking out of Walmart alive was for Palin and her crew to keep moving, keep shooting, keep them off the civilians. A running fight they might survive. But if the fangheads swarmed, no amount of LACE would even things up. Palin was already pushing her luck with two doses in less than twenty-four hours. Heart attack was not out of the question.

A vampire dropped down on Palin from the ceiling, pouncing like a jaguar. Palin sensed his descent, twisted as she ran, and put two .40 calibers in his chest. He hit the tiled floor like a bag of cement. Amazingly, he stood up. Running backward, Palin took out his knees with two more shots.

"AXEL, how you doing?" said Palin.

"I'm dodging barbells!" said the ex-Olympian. "There's too many! They're too fast!"

"Hang tough, sweetie! Help is on the way!"

"Indeed it is," said the Professor, materializing at Palin's side.

She fired on principle, knowing it would do no good. The Professor was a formidable vampire. At least a century old, possibly much, much more. He had powers and abilities far beyond those of ordinary vampires. He could, she knew, kill Palin and her entire team with ease. But that wasn't his style. He didn't like to get his hands dirty, preferring to manipulate and direct others, concoct vast and elaborate schemes while sitting at the center of an ever-expanding web of intrigue and deceit.

Just for the fun of it.

"What do you mean?" said Palin, knowing she wouldn't like the answer.

"I invited some new friends to join this little shopping holiday," said the Professor.

Double doors leading to a stockroom swung open as a huge reddish-brown wolf shouldered through. The beast locked eyes with Palin. Loosing a howl of pure hatred, it charged. Six more wolves followed.

“Werewolves!” said Palin. “I hate these guys!”

“I assure you the feeling is mutual,” said the Professor. “So much so the local pack, despite their ancestral antipathy to our kind, was easily persuaded—indeed, eager—to make common cause with us against you.”

“Yeah, my werewolf eradication project back home in Alaska didn’t go over so well with the shapeshifter lobby,” said Palin. “Or the Sierra Club for that matter.”

The lead wolf, eager for the kill, outpaced its pack and launched itself through the air, aiming its thrusting jaws at Palin’s throat. If it expected her to throw up her arms in a futile gesture of self-defense, the wolf met with fatal disappointment. As its paws left the floor, Palin dropped to her knees and leaned back, her head almost touching the tiles. The werewolf, unable to compensate, sailed over her. Extending her arms, Palin fired, placing twin explosive rounds into the underside of the wolf’s shoulders, all but severing its forelimbs. The crippled monster hit the ground and slid, leaving a bloody trail on the floor as its useless front legs crumpled and twisted at unnatural angles.

“Not a leg to stand on!” said Palin. She snapped up into a kneeling position. Now she was at eye level with the rest of the pack, who were half an aisle away and coming on fast.

Palin fired.

Click. Click.

Both mags were empty.

Palin dropped her pistols and yanked at a nylon cord around her neck, retrieving a silver whistle from beneath her shirt. She put it to her puckered lips and blew.

No sound could be heard. At least, no sound detectable by human ears. But the effect on the werewolves was immediate. They recoiled as if smacked with sledgehammers. Yowling with pain, the animals fell twitching to the floor.

Palin continued to sound the hypersonic wolf whistle as she gathered up the Glocks and reloaded. The sound would give the shapeshifters splitting headaches and a bad case of vertigo, but did no permanent damage.

Nothing was perfect.

“If I’d know you were coming, I’d have packed my sterling rounds,” said Palin. “As it is, you boys will have to wait your turn. I’ve got vampires to deal with!”

PLUMBER had the same problem. Three male vampires, apparent age mid-twenties, harried him near the checkout lanes in the front of the store. They circled, hissed, darted at him, fainted, but kept a respectful distance, mindful of PLUMBER’s reach.

PLUMBER —his name was Joe—was breathing hard. His face was red. His bald head and dark green coveralls were covered with sweat and blood. The sweat was all his. The blood wasn't. Going hand-to-hand with one vampire was bad enough. Three was suicide. But a moment ago it had been four, until Joe knocked one's head completely off. The decapitated body lay at his feet, still twitching. ROGUE had explained something once about brain energy patterns persisting, but Joe didn't really understand or care. Sticky bits of vampire brain smoked and sizzled on the weapon in his hand. Good enough for Joe.

Like his boss, PLUMBER could see in the dark, thanks to the high-tech contact lenses he wore. Unlike Palin, Joe wanted nothing to do with 5-Minute Energy. That juice was bad stuff and his heart probably couldn't take the strain anyway. If it meant fighting vampires with only human strength and speed and stamina, then that was how it was. Joe could only do what he could do, no more, no less. When his gun jammed, he threw it aside and drew out the 18" Stillson pipe wrench that was always by his side, either in a coverall pocket or a specially designed leather scabbard. It was always better this way. Up close and personal.

Except these three were wary of getting close enough. Joe was trying to reach the front entrance and clear a path for the civilians to escape. If any were still alive. It was a horror show in here, innocent people dying in the dark, blood spilled and lives taken by nightmare beings that should not exist.

One of the vampires, sensing an opening, rushed him. He was a blur to Joe, but it didn't matter. Joe had developed an instinct about these things, how they moved, how they fought. He didn't have to be as fast or as strong as they were. He just had to put the wrench in the right place at the right moment, like a Major League batter swinging at a fastball he couldn't see either. Maybe he struck out two times out of three. But .333 was decent batting.

Joe's wrench connected.

The result was spectacular. The cold steel caught the vampire's jaw and knocked his head sideways with punishing force. But worse for the undead creature was the wreath of white sparks and flame that detonated from the point of impact and burned his flesh as thoroughly as holy water or a crucifix or the desert sun at noon. The vampire screamed and faltered and stood still long enough for Joe to hit him again, this time bringing the wrench down in a smooth strong arc to and through the vampire's skull. Dead brain cells and supernatural ick sprayed outward.

Only two more between Joe and the door.

And one less undead horror in the world.

Joe smiled.

It was a cheerless smile, and at some level a guilty smile. Saving lives was what mattered. Joe knew that. But it was hard to let go of the thirst for vengeance. It was what drove him. Because he had already failed to save the lives which mattered most to him.

Joe never believed in things that go bump in the night. He was a practical man, with a practical job. He was a plumber. It was a good living. Until he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, asked the wrong questions—and lost everything.

The pipes in the Claven mansion were older than radio. And the owner—some stuffed shirt named Bartholomew Claven III—apparently didn't like to run the furnace, even in the middle of one of the coldest Ohio Februarys on record. Was it any wonder the old pipes burst and the basement flooded? Joe got the call. He was still the junior man at A-1 Acme then, so a midnight emergency call in the dead of winter was all his.

Should no heat in February have made him suspicious? Maybe the furnace was broken too. Not his problem. Were the client's pale complexion, strange black eyes and weird way of looking at him sidelong a giveaway? Now, yes. Then, no. How could he know that late night creepshow monsters were real? There was no way for Joe to know. But he was on edge the moment he walked in the door. He should have known something wasn't right. Every instinct in his body was screaming *get out of here!*

He should have listened. Empty open coffin in the basement? People had all kinds of junk, especially in a big old house like this. Client doesn't want you to come back tomorrow when you have the parts to finish the work—would rather you come back tomorrow night and pay emergency rates again? Okay. Weird, but it's his money.

For every red flag, Joe's rational brain had an explanation. He waved every warning sign away without even knowing he was doing so. The truth was too incredible for him to comprehend or accept.

Bartholomew Claven III was Bartholomew Claven II and Bartholomew Claven, Jr. and Senior before that. Claven was a vampire. Joe didn't know. So Joe's wife and daughter paid with their lives for what Joe didn't know. Because as far as Claven was concerned, Joe knew too much. Had seen too much. Claven came to Joe's home a few nights later. To feed and to tie up loose ends. Joe was out, on another emergency call. He found them when he got home. What was left of them.

The police had few clues. But they soon had a suspect—Joe. Joe was numb. Broken. A mess. Not thinking clearly. Acting strange. Drinking heavily. The cops decided his story didn't add up. They turned up a tax lien he didn't even know about. A suspicious life insurance policy he knew he had never signed. They put his life under a microscope and decided he was their killer. Joe decided he was being framed and started an investigation of his own. The trail led back to Claven and the impossible truth. Armed with nothing more than his knowledge of plumbing and the tools of his trade, Joe avenged his family. His Stillson wrench dispatched its first vampire.

The first of many.

Joe left town just before the cops came to arrest him for the murder of his own family, as well as "harmless local eccentric" Claven. With nothing left to lose but his life, Joe the fugitive figured he'd use whatever time he had left on earth to take out as many of the things that killed his family as he could. Eventually his efforts were noticed by the right people. The Pope himself blessed Joe's pipe wrench—and Sarah Palin recruited him to her team.

So here he was at a Walmart in Oregon, killing vampires.

Joe smiled again.

AXEL wasn't smiling. She rarely did. And right now she had no reason to. The fangheads really were hurling sports equipment at her. She ducked under a barrage of baseballs and skidded around an end cap display of yoga mats and hand weights. Finding an open aisle she picked up speed and sprinted to the far side of the store.

Her custom-made boots—with Velcro fasteners, because she hated laces—doubled as in-line skates. Never as graceful as the ice skates she wore in her competition days, but far more practical. With their aversion to running water, meeting vampires on ice was a rare event.

She shed her leather duster as she zoomed down the lane. Beneath she wore a loose tunic and leggings—and a genuine MADE IN JAPAN Samurai katana in a scabbard strapped across her back.

AXEL rounded a corner in Housewares, and found herself face to face with a dark-haired female vampire who had drained at least one victim judging by her blood-smeared facet. Not slowing down, AXEL drew her sword, beheaded the vamp, and kept moving.

For AXEL this vampire-hunting gig wasn't personal like it was for PLUMBER or some kind of crazy higher calling like for ROGUE. It was about being a champion. About having the discipline and training and drive to excel.

And the paycheck wasn't bad either.

Once upon a time, AXEL was one of the world's best figure skaters. But she flamed out in spectacular fashion when her competitive urges compromised her good judgment and she crossed the line into conspiracy. Her fall from grace was hard. She was banned from her sport and became a national punch line. After the dust settled she tried comebacks in women's boxing and humiliating celebrity reality shows, but those experiences only fueled her downward spiral into drugs, alcohol, Milky Way bars, and misery.

Then she met Mikoto. Her *sensei* helped her to pull herself together. She guided AXEL along a better path. She combined her interests in fighting and skating into an entirely new martial discipline—one in which AXEL was the best in the world because she was the only person on earth who could do what she did.

Which was well and good—but who needed a Samurai Skater?

Apparently, Sarah Palin did. AXEL signed up to fight vampires and found she enjoyed it. It was the ultimate competition for the ultimate prize. Death was on the line every day.

And no one cared if you cheated.

Palin blasted her way through Swimwear. Most of her shots were going wild, though she had downed at least two vampires. Drawing them off the civilians was another matter. The screams had subsided—but that might only mean that everyone else was dead.

“We gotta get the doors open!” said Palin.

“Working on it,” said PLUMBER.

“Too slow!” said Palin. “GOGO, get in here!”

“You got it!”

Outside, an engine revved. Moments later, an armored 45-foot red, white, and blue motor coach with Sarah Palin’s face pasted on the sides burst through the front entrance in a spray of glass and twisted metal, crunched over a row of shopping carts, flattened several registers, and stopped just short of the jewelry counter.

Two pivoting weapon pods popped out of the roof. Each was a remote-operated Metal Storm 36-barreled stacked projectile machine gun firing 180-round bursts of anti-vampire shot. The guns locked on targets and opened up, sending the fangheads scurrying.

“Anyone in the sound of my voice, run to the light!” said Palin.

A handful of terrified survivors and five fast-moving wolves ran for daylight. Staggering along behind them came a reddish half-wolf, half-man whose mostly severed arms dangled at his sides like bloody wet noodles.

“Let the puppies go!” said Palin. “Get the people out! Sweep for survivors!”

“Don’t bother with that,” said the Professor.

Four quick metallic pops and a whoosh of flames filled the store. The vampires had set off incendiaries to cover their retreat. The fire suppression sprinklers activated, but there was no saving the store or anyone left in it.

“Darn it all!” said Palin, shielding her face from the wall of heat. “Get the bus out, GOGO! That’s a wrap!”

Chief Finch and Stella—who insisted on riding along— pulled into the Walmart parking lot just in time to see the Palin tour bus back out of the store at high speed, bringing mangled carts and merchandise with it. A jet of flame trailed after the motor coach like the tongue of a hungry frog, then receded. A moment later, a series of low rumbles from inside the store presaged the collapse of the roof.

Finch spotted Sarah Palin and several other armed individuals gathered near the bus.

“Do you believe me now?” said Stella. “Do you see, Daddy? Sarah Palin is crazy! She killed Edmund and she tried to kill me and now she’s killing everyone she sees. Do you believe me now?”

“I’m starting to,” said Finch. “Now get down.”

He put on the lights and siren and sped across the lot while calling for backup over the radio. He braked to a hard stop, flung the door open and crouched behind it, drawing his revolver.

“Police!” he shouted. “Drop your weapons! You’re all under arrest!”

Palin and her accomplices came quietly. Booking them proved to be a challenge.

“What do you mean they don’t exist, Steve?” said Finch to his puzzled desk sergeant. “I’m looking at them. That’s Sarah Palin for crying out loud!”

“I ran their names, their prints, their IDs and it comes up nothing.”

“You mean they don’t have arrest records or outstanding warrants.”

“I mean there is nothing. I may as well have typed in Mickey Mouse.”

“Try it again.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“The system is down. Soon as I got the first results back, the whole thing crashed.”

Finch shook his head in exasperation. “Keep trying. This is—I don’t know what this is. But it’s big and we better dot all our *I*’s and cross our *T*’s, understand?”

The interrogation room held a table and two metal chairs. Palin sat in one. Her hands, cuffed together, rested on the table. Finch ignored the other chair.

“You’ve been read your rights?” he said as he closed the door behind him.

“I can recite ‘em,” said Palin brightly.

“You want to tell me what happened? Why you and your friends shot up the Walmart? Burned it to the ground? Killed a bunch of good people?”

“No,” said Palin. “Actually, I want to talk to your mayor. Grissom, isn’t it?”

“You want to talk to the mayor?” Finch shook his head. “Lady, you’re talking to me!”

“No, I’m not, because I’ve got the right to remain silent. Which I will, until I talk to the mayor.”

“That’s not happening,” said Finch.

Palin opened her hand. She was holding a black plastic card, the size of a credit card.

“What is that?” said Finch. He snatched the card away. “Where did you get this?”

“It’s mine,” said Palin.

“You should have been searched.”

She shrugged. “They missed it.”

Finch turned the card over in his hand. On one side was an odd, but vaguely familiar gold symbol. On the other, a string of numbers. “I’ve never seen a card like this.”

“Call that number,” said Palin.

“I’m not calling any number! This isn’t even a phone number. It’s too long.”

“I get a phone call, don’t I?” said Palin. “That’s my call. And I want you to make it for me.”

“I’m not—”

“It’s the best lead you’ve got there, Chief.”

Finch frowned. "Maybe."

"Say, is your mayor a lawyer?"

"Yes, but—"

"Perfect! I get a lawyer, don't I? I choose the mayor. Now you've gotta let me talk to him, don't cha?"

The mayor's office was on the second floor. It was modestly furnished with hunting trophies, plaques, and pictures of groundbreaking ceremonies, ribbon cuttings, and Rotary Club dinners. Mayor Grissom was in his fifties, a pear-shaped man, mostly bald, with a fringe of grey hair. His wide redwood desk was cluttered with loose papers, folders, a lamp, and a fancy pen set.

"Dave, I don't think this is such a good idea," said Chief Finch, glancing out the door.

Palin, smiling, handcuffed, waited in the hallway. An officer held her by the arm.

"I'll be fine," said Grissom. "If she wants to talk to me, then maybe we can get to the bottom of this whole mess faster."

"Well, look, you're not going to represent her are you?"

"Heavens, no!" said Grissom. "I'm a real estate lawyer. I'll make that clear. But if she's willing to talk, what have we got to lose?"

"I don't like it," said Finch. "But you're the mayor."

He gestured for his officer to bring her in. They seated Palin in a leather wingback chair across from Grissom's desk.

"Ya think we could do this without the bracelets?" said Palin, lifting her hands.

"The cuffs stay on," said Finch firmly.

Palin turned puppy dog eyes on Mayor Grissom. He shrugged.

"If it makes you feel better, Chuck, we'll keep 'em on."

"Fine," said Finch. "And I'm posting my man right outside the door. So I want no trouble."

"You go call in that card," said Palin. "You'll feel better when you do. Maybe."

The door closed behind Chief Finch. Palin and Mayor Grissom regarded each other in silence. Grissom waited for her to speak first. Long seconds dragged by, each an agonizing eternity of suspense. He shifted uncomfortably. The chair squeaked. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead. He mopped them off with the back of his hand. Palin sat placidly, lips set primly, her face neutral, her eyes a bright impenetrable cloud, but Grissom could tell she was sizing him up.

He could take the silence no longer. "Well, say what you have to say!" he blurted. "You wanted to talk to me alone and here we are. So spit it out! Why did you kill all those people and burn down our Walmart?"

"You know, I was the mayor of a small town too," said Palin. "Wasilla."

"I know that!" snapped Grissom. "What does it have to do with anything?"

"It's a bigger job than people think," said Palin. "Mayor is tougher than being governor in some ways, because you're so much closer to your constituents and they sure let ya know when they don't like something."

"My constituents don't like murder and mayhem!" said Grissom. "So you'd better start explaining yourself."

"You're a mayor. I'm a mayor. Let's just talk here, mayor to mayor," said Palin.

"All right."

"So, Dave—can I call ya Dave?—let me just lay it out there for ya. You've got a problem in your little town."

"And what is that?"

"Twinkle is lousy with vampires. Werewolves too. Do you know that?"

Mayor Grissom's eyes widened. "Werewolves and vampires? Ridiculous!"

"Dave. Look me in the eye and tell me it ain't so."

Grissom looked away and said nothing.

"Okay, sure, who would believe such a crazy thing," said Palin. "But I've seen them, Dave. I've seen them. I fought them. I fought them today, in that store, to protect your citizens. So tell me I'm wrong."

Grissom bit his lip and stared at his sweaty hands clenched together on the desk. He said, softly, "Yeah, we've got 'em. It's true."

"And what are you doing about it?"

He looked up angrily. "What can we do? We just pretend they're not there!"

"That's no solution."

"Governor Palin—"

"Mayor. Mayor to mayor here. But you can call me Sarah."

"Sarah, then. You may have noticed we're pretty isolated out here on the peninsula. We're at their mercy. So we just live and let live. We don't bother them and they don't bother us. Much."

"Seemed like a lot of bothering going on down at the Walmart there."

"You brought that on!" snapped the mayor. "Stirred things up."

Palin grinned. "That's kinda what I do."

"But now Twinkle's got to live with the consequences! There is going to be trouble with...those folk. Big trouble. And we'll pay the price while you go on with your million dollar book tour!"

"Not necessarily. I think it's time you took back your town, Dave."

Grissom shook his head in violent denial. "We can't! We're powerless against those things. You have no idea what they're capable of!"

"Oh, I've got a pretty good idea."

"Don't you understand? We're cut off here! We're outnumbered, overmatched."

Palin's face tightened. "You don't think Alaska is isolated? There are towns back home that make Twinkle look like Times Square for isolated! But we dealt with our vampire problem. Yessir, we did, by golly! And with no outside help."

The werewolves too. Don't tell me it can't be done. But the first step is, you've got to be willing to fight back."

"We can't," said Grissom. "We'd need an army. No one is going to send an army here to look for vampires, believe me."

"You don't need an army," said Palin. "You've got me!"

"That isn't reassuring."

"Well, it should be," said Palin. "Let me tell you why."

"It all goes back to our Founding Fathers, God bless 'em," said Palin.

"Are you serious?" said Grissom.

"Now you just hush up and listen," said Palin. "The Founders knew the first responsibility of any government is to protect the people. Provide for the common defense. It's right there in the Constitution, don't cha know?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, that means more than fighting foreign armies and terrorists and such who want to destroy our American way of life. It also includes protection against the supernatural forces. Your vampires and werewolves and wendigos and what not. Ever see a wendigo?"

"No."

"Believe me, you don't want to! You see, the supernaturals, they've been around since Bible times. And it was always the job of the kings to oppose them and protect their subjects. Like when David slew Goliath."

"Goliath wasn't a—"

"Never you mind that. The point is when our thirteen colonies there decided for themselves that we hold these truths to be self-evident and we're not going to have us a king any more, well, then it wasn't King George's job to look after us any longer in that regard of opposing the supernatural forces. So the British Secret Office pulled out along with those darn redcoats."

"Huh?"

"Part of being a new country is saying we better hike up our big boy britches and start solving our own mess. But the so-called Age of Enlightenment had come around with lots of new ideas about science and reason and it just wasn't considered rational or fashionable any longer to believe in your vampires and devils and witches and all, right?"

"Er...right?"

"So when our Founders sat down there in Philadelphia to write our blessed Constitution, they had to decide how to protect America from the supernatural threats without causing that popular alarm that would happen if it were acknowledged. So they wrote two Constitutions."

"Two Constitutions? I've never heard anything like that!"

"That's because the one ya haven't heard of is a Secret Constitution, written in invisible ink designed by Benjamin Franklin on the back of the main Constitution."

"Wasn't that in *National Treasure*?" said Grissom.

Palin frowned. "That was a movie, Dave. This is real. But wasn't it a great film? That Nicolas Cage is a hoot!"

"So what did this Secret Constitution do?"

"Glad you asked! The Constitution we all learned about in school sets up a structure for governing our great land. The Secret Constitution sets up a parallel structure for protecting us from those supernatural forces of evil and such. It give authority for this to a College of Lictors."

"Lick what?"

"Lictors, Dave. In Roman times the lictors were a special class of public servants who protected the magistrates of the Republic. They carried the fasces."

"They carried feces? That's disgusting!"

Palin shook her head. "Fasces. I guess you're not a classical scholar like me. The *fasces lictoriae* or 'bundles of the lictors' were the symbols of their authority. A bundle of rods tied around a bronze axe. The same symbol on the card I handed your police chief."

"So this was some kind of fascist thing?"

Palin slipped into full sarcasm mode. "Do ya think George Washington and James Madison had Mussolini in mind back in 1789 when they wrote this? Of course not! Stay with me, Dave! I'm gonna bring this home for ya. The Electoral College elects our president and the Lictoral College leads the defense against the supernatural enemies. It's a fourth and hidden branch of government. Under the Lictoral College, see, is the U.S. Special Service. They're like those roving marshals who ride into town when there's trouble, do what has to be done, and clean up the mess after the fact."

"This is nuts!" said Grissom, crossing his arms. "I can't believe the Founding Fathers would set up some kind of secret police force accountable to no one."

"Well, of course they're accountable to someone! The Service answers to the Lictoral College and the lictors are organized under the Prime Lictor, who is an elected magistrate of our nation."

"You mean the president? You're saying the president knows about this?"

"The current guy?" Palin rolled her eyes. "No way! Some presidents have been aware, but not all. You see, it's a totally separate structure and presidents don't usually want to know. But the Founders—and how right you are to point this out, Dave—they did want that accountability to be there, so they put the Lictoral College under the direction of the one officer of the United States who is elected by all the people but has almost no responsibilities under the main Constitution."

"Who?"

"The vice president, of course! Think about it. Madison, Hamilton, Franklin, and all the rest were the smartest political thinkers of their day. Why would they create an office so seemingly useless as the vice president? Well, they wouldn't! They didn't give him much to do because the vice president's real duties as the Prime Lictor fall under the Secret Constitution."

"How do you know all this, if it's so secret?"

"I know because I'm a secret marshal. I'm a sworn deputy of the Special Service. I have been since I was recruited outta college. I spent years cleaning up

Alaska. Hunting down these nasty critters or running them out of my state. I'm a fighter, Dave! I don't believe in making peace with these things and I don't have much use for this namby-pamby 'live and let live' attitude you've got here. You can't live and let live with something that's not alive."

Grissom flushed. "You have no right to come here and tell us how to run things!"

"You're wrong. I have every right. The supernatural things are getting the upper hand. They have penetrated our media and altered our popular culture to convince people that, oh, they're not such a threat and it's perfectly all right for our daughters to date vampires and our sons to rot their brains out with the death metal and the Xbox to make easier chewing for the zombies. It is way past time for us to stand up and do something about it! You know, when I had the great honor being Senator McCain's running mate I thought I'd be overseeing that whole effort after the election. Well, that didn't turn out quite as planned. So I decided to just do it anyway."

"By going rogue?"

"Not quite. Fortunately, the new Prime Lictor sees things my way and he has expanded on my jurisdiction to cover the whole nation, not just Alaska. So, you see, Twinkle is my concern and I am here to deal with the situation as I see fit. So my question to you, Mr. Mayor, is this: are you going to help me help you?"

"We don't need your help!" said Grissom. "You should just leave. I'll have Chief Finch drop the charges and you can leave. Immediately." Grissom reached for the phone.

"It doesn't work that way," said Palin. "And the charges have already been dropped. Last chance, Dave. Are you with me or against me?"

"You have to leave!" said Grissom.

"Do you know what a ghoul is?" said Palin.

"What?"

"There are several meanings of the word. You've got your desert demons and your Massachusetts corpse-eaters. But some people apply the term to living human beings placed under the control or direction of a vampire. Isn't that the darndest thing?"

"I don't know what you're getting at," snapped Grissom. He was sweating profusely now. "We're done here."

"Your typical vampire there can't go out in the sunlight. They're vulnerable during the day. They need servants. People who can protect them, cover their tracks, even help them find their prey. People in positions of authority are best. Like a doctor at a hospital. A coroner. Like a policeman. Or like...a small-town mayor."

"I told you to leave!" said Grissom. He opened his desk drawer and pulled out a revolver.

His hand shook as he aimed it at Palin.

"That you did," said Palin. "I wonder when the special election will be?"

"What special election?"

"The one for your replacement."

Grissom fired. Palin was already in motion before his finger squeezed the trigger. She dived to the floor. The bullet punctured the leather of the chair. Palin rolled up against the desk. Grissom, still seated, couldn't see her. He stood, foolishly leaning over the desk to get a look instead of stepping around. Palin surged up from the floor, snatched the fancy fountain pen from its display, and drove it into Grissom's throat. Blood geysered. He slumped back into his chair, dropped the gun. Palin rounded the desk, took his head in her hands, and snapped his neck.

Just to be sure.

The officer posted outside burst into office and pointed his gun at Palin.

Palin stepped away from the body and raised her bloody, bound hands before her.

Chief Finch bounded up the stairs, gun in hand.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"Regime change," said Palin. "Meet the new Mayor of Twinkle!"

Finch examined Grissom's body. "You killed him!" he accused.

"Obviously," said Palin. "Did you call that number I gave you?"

Finch hesitated. "Yes."

"And?"

"They said to release you from custody, drop all charges, delete all records, give you full cooperation, and don't ask any questions."

"That's what I thought," said Palin. "So you know I have the carte blanche, as the French say, to do whatever I deem necessary here."

"But you just killed the mayor!" protested Finch.

"See, that was something I deemed necessary," said Palin. "He wasn't a very good mayor anyhow."

"But—"

"He's dead," said Palin impatiently. "Let's move on from that, because we've got loads to do before sundown."

"Like what?"

"Like you could start by getting these cuffs off me and releasing my team."

Finch produced a handcuff key.

"Much better," said Palin, rubbing her wrists. "You had those kinda tight. Really cuts into the old circulation. Now, tell me, what's the biggest meeting space in town?"

"The high school gym, I guess."

"Perfect! I want you to round up everyone in Twinkle and send 'em to the gym. I'm calling a town meeting. We've got lots to discuss, me and the good people of Twinkle!"

Twinkle was not a large town. The population was a smidge over a thousand people on a good day. As the rainy afternoon faded, Twinklers streamed into the gym and took their accustomed seats in the bleachers. But they weren't here for a basketball game or school play. The townspeople greeted one another with nods and handshakes, huddled together, and spoke in low voices.

Palin's bus was parked outside. That drew comment. The ruins of Walmart were still smoldering despite the rain. It would take days to dig through the rubble. Chief Finch wasn't answering questions, merely directing people to take a seat and wait.

Several tribal elders from the nearby Quixote reservation arrived. After a hushed conference with Finch, they sat stone-faced and silent at courtside.

At last, Palin entered from a side door. Her boots clacked on the floorboards as she strode to center court. She wanted to make the right impression here, so she wore camouflage tights with the Glocks slung low on her hips, her favorite vampire-fighting black t-shirt, and those gold hoop earrings she got for her birthday.

No one said a word.

Palin raised a wireless microphone. "Hello, Twinkle! It's good to see ya all here! I got to meet some of ya earlier down at the Walmart and let me just say how sorry I am about what happened there. So many good folks that were victims of a terrible supernatural evil and my heart just goes out to the families. Yeah, it does."

The crowd made no response.

"Anyhows, I'm sure the good folks at Walmart will build you a new store, so don't you worry about that. What I want to talk to ya about is why all this took place and what you can do, together, to make sure nothing like this ever happens again in your little town."

"Where is Mayor Grissom?" someone shouted.

Palin nodded. "Thank you for your question. Mayor Grissom is permanently indisposed and one of the things I should have mentioned up front is I am temporarily filling in as your mayor here."

"Can she do that, Chief?" another Twinkler called out.

"She can," said Finch glumly. "Just hear her out."

Palin beamed. "Thank you, Chief. And let me say how much I admire and appreciate the good work our brave law enforcement personnel do every day. Let's have a hand for Chief Finch and his department."

Palin held the mike awkwardly in the crook of her elbow and clapped, the sound explosive through the speakers. After a brief hesitation, some of the townspeople joined in. The applause didn't last long.

"Thank you," said Palin. "Now as I was saying, the problem you have here in Twinkle has to do with the infestation of supernatural monsters such as vampires and werewolves and the like. Okay, I see by your faces some of you are shocked by my statement. And some of you, I just betcha, are only pretending to be shocked. Shame on you!"

Palin read the faces of the crowd. Some were confused, others openly skeptical. There were angry scowls here and there. A few folks looked at her like

she was mentally disturbed. She gave them a moment to digest her words, to whisper and grumble and shake their heads.

“Are you for real?” called a voice from the back row.

“Yes, I am,” said Palin. “And so is the danger of the vampires and werewolves living among you!”

One of the Quixote elders stood. “Sarah Palin. I have something to say to you and the people of Twinkle.” His voice was slow and rhythmic. “Long before the white man came, all of this land that the eye can behold, from the great water of the west to the mighty snow-capped mountains of the east, was a gift from the spirits of the Earth and Sky to my people, the Quixote. In those days, the Quixote made their living by catching from the rivers and streams our brother, the Fish, who—”

“Not to rush you there, tribal elder,” said Palin, “but sunset is coming and I really need to wrap things up here.”

The elder frowned. “Sarah Palin, the strife between you and our brother, the Wolf, in the land called Alaska, is known here. But I say that between you and the Quixote there is no quarrel. What you call the ‘Wearing of the Wolf’ is to us a sacred bond between Man and Wolf. It has come to the attention of the tribal elders that some of our young men, acting with the rashness of youth, abused this sacred bond by attacking you unprovoked in the company of your enemies, whom my people call the Cool Ones.”

“That came to my attention too,” said Palin.

“Then please accept my apologies on behalf of the Quixote and our thanks for sparing their lives. They have learned a valuable lesson about not sticking their wet noses into the business of others and not getting involved in the quarrels of the white man and the pale man.”

“Apology accepted!” said Palin. “So long as the ancient treaties are respected, I’ve got no problem with what you do on your reservation. Dance naked. Open a casino. Turn into a wolf. It’s only when folks cross that line that I get an itchy trigger finger. So keep your boys under control and we’ve got no beef at all!”

“Then I have said what must be said.”

The Quixote left.

“All right, never mind the werewolves,” said Palin. “Let’s focus on the vampires.”

“It used to be that everyone knew what to do if you suspected that vampires might be real,” said Palin. “If you thought one might have moved into your neighborhood, you found yourself a cross and a sharp wooden stick and you took care of the problem. Sure, the authorities probably wouldn’t believe you, but citizens just stepped up without waiting for the government to come bail them out. That’s what our pioneer forefathers did! That’s what the old Hollywood used to teach us, back when the good folks at Universal and Hammer Films were sending out the right kind of message. But somewhere along the line, sadly, America lost its way when it comes to vampires.”

The Twinklers sat forward now in rapt attention. Even the most skeptical were intrigued in spite of themselves.

"Maybe it started with Count Chocula and that mathy fellow on Sesame Street. I don't know. But somehow we got this notion of vampires being not dangerous. And that's a dangerous notion for our nation. Because, believe me, the vampires are dangerous, no matter what the mainstream media and today's Hollywood elite would have you to believe."

Stella could take no more. She was sitting near the back row of bleachers with her friends from school. Now she stood and shouted, "You killed my boyfriend! You're a horrible person!"

"Now, Stella," said Chief Finch, "You calm down."

"She killed Edmund, Daddy! Don't you even care? Why are we even listening to what this crazy horrible boyfriend killer says? You should arrest her right now!"

"I can't, sweetie," said Finch. "I wish I could. We can talk about it later."

"I won't sit down!" screeched Stella. "I won't sit down! I won't! I won't! I won't!"

"Chief, I'll just address this if I might," said Palin. "Because it illustrates exactly the problem I'm talking about. Too many of our young girls and even grown women have made vampires out to be this romantic ideal of the perfect man. And if a bloodsucking predator or a rotting corpse is your idea of the perfect man, then sure, there ya go. But just speaking as one wife and hockey mom, I prefer a hot-blooded man over a cold stiff. And I think you do too. If ya know what I mean." Palin winked.

"Who cares what you want?" said Stella. "You killed my boyfriend!"

"Now remind me which one was he?"

"Edmund Mullins! Don't you even remember who you kill?"

"Not always," said Palin. "But, as I think I mentioned previously, your Edmund there was a hundred years old, honey. You're what? Seventeen? That is not a healthy relationship! So really, I did you a favor breaking it off. I think your father here will back me up on that."

"Er...we'll talk when we get home, Stella" said Chief Finch.

"I can't believe this!" Stella burst into tears and ran from the gym.

"Moving on," said Palin. "The reason I called this meeting is that most of the vampires in these parts answer to one called the Professor. You might know him here locally as Professor Mullins. Harmless old retired math scholar, right? No, not at all. Let's just say me and the Professor go way back and he is not going to pass up an opportunity like I'm giving him, being here on the Twinkle peninsula. He's called up all his little fiends and they're coming for me. They're coming here. They're coming out of the shadows where they lurk and the holes where they hide. And why? Because I make them crazy stupid and they just can't help themselves!"

"You've doomed us all!" shouted a distraught grey-haired woman.

"That's right!" said a heavysset man. "Yeah, I knew about the vampires. We all know! But we have a sort of unspoken understanding. We don't bother them and

they mostly feed on drifters, truckers, and tourists. Now you've ruined everything."

"Okay, we're getting somewhere!" said Palin. "Now an angry vampire army of indeterminate size descending upon your isolated town may seem like a crisis, but crisis is just another word for a blessing in disguise."

"You're insane!"

"People keep saying that," said Palin. "But what I'm giving you is a once in a lifetime opportunity to take back your town and no longer have to live in fear of monsters. You see the vampires only thrive where there is fear and ignorance. If you stop being afraid, if you stop ignoring them, if you all stand together, you can win! You can take back Twinkle! You can take back the night!"

"No, we can't."

"Yes, you can! Vampires pick off their victims one by one. They divide and conquer. But they can't take out a whole town. Well, okay, it did happen that once in Maine, but that was years ago. Anyways, denial is no longer an option for ya. You can either knuckle under and go on being juice boxes for the undead or you can stand up for yourselves."

"You're asking us to go up against vampires! That's suicide!"

"All I'm asking you to do is make a statement. My crew will handle any fighting. Unless someone has a better suggestion?"

A scowling dark-haired man dressed in jeans, a dark jacket, and old, rundown cowboy boots stood. "I have a better suggestion." He turned to address his fellow Twinklers in the bleachers. "Palin is the problem. She's the one who brought trouble to our town. Who poked at what ought to be left alone and upset the balance we had here."

Nods and murmurs of agreement rippled through the gym.

"So," continued the dark man, "the only logical thing to do is seize the outsiders and crucify them on the goalposts as a blood offering to appease the powers of the night. Then things can return to normal."

"And you there, sir, I didn't catch your name?" said Palin.

"Flagg. Randy Flagg. I'm the science teacher here."

"Well, Mr. Flagg, that is a very interesting suggestion you make, but I'm gonna have to put the kibosh on it." Palin's hand strayed to her gun belt.

"We must seize the harlot and sacrifice her on the altar to save ourselves!" said Flagg.

"Randy, sit down and be quiet," said Finch.

"But—"

"Now."

"Sorry, Chief."

"All righty," said Palin. "I've said about all I have to say. As you can see, twilight has come again. So it's time for me and my crew to go out there and face off with those vampires as best we can. Think about what I've said here, look into your hearts, and do what ya think is right for your town, your families, and most of all your precious children who are the next generation and bright hope for the future of this great nation of ours that we all live in. I hope to see ya outside real soon!"

Joe met Palin at courtside. "They're here, boss," he whispered in her ear. "Maybe a hundred."

"My goodness!" said Palin. "That's quite a turnout!"

Joe handed Palin her favorite AA-12 combat shotgun with a 32-round drum. "I loaded the FRAG-12's boss. Alternated HE and the UV rounds."

"You're a sweetie!" said Palin. "I hope you dropped a Sparkler in." She punched his shoulder playfully.

"Maybe," said Joe.

"Well let's go light it up!" said Palin. "Can't keep the Professor waiting."

AXEL met them outside. GOGO was on the bus. The gymnasium sat just beyond the end zone of the football field. Despite the field lights being on, an unnatural mist reduced visibility to less than three feet. Slipping on her visor, Palin saw dozens of figures darting to and fro across the field, none of them staying still long enough for a clear shot.

The vampires were getting smarter. In showdowns like this they usually liked to bunch together en masse for the intimidation effect. It looked cool, but made for easier targeting.

Of course, if you keep shooting the stupid ones, eventually only the smart ones are left, thought Palin. "We'll engage here and give the local folks time to think things over," she said. "If it goes like I hope, it shouldn't take long. If not, we'll fall back to the bus and try to draw off as many fangheads as we can."

"What if they don't follow us?" said Joe. "The locals are sitting ducks in there."

"Honestly, Joe, if they're not gonna lift a finger, I'm done with 'em. It's a long ball game. We can't win every inning there, can we?"

The Professor spoke without showing himself. "It was most kind of you to assemble all of the cattle in one pen for us," he said.

"Well, as that great American writer Mark Twain said, sometimes it's best to put all your eggs in one basket and *watch that basket!*" said Palin.

"Shall we begin?"

"Ready when you are."

The lights went out.

The argument in the gym was heated. The flash and bang of the firefight outside made Twinklers wince and hunch down in their seats. Children were crying. Grown-ups were shouting. Then the lights went out. Coach Walters found a flashlight and a box of emergency candles, which he distributed over the objections of the fire marshal.

Mr. Flagg renewed his pitch for leaving Palin and company to their fate. Chief Finch, to his own surprise, found himself championing the view that the town should take action. Despite living in Twinkle all his life he had honestly not

realized there were vampires and werewolves about. He wasn't even sure he believed in such things.

Bigfoot was another matter.

He had seen Bigfoot once, on a camping trip when he was fifteen.

But vampires? It was tough to swallow.

Yet, despite a lawman's natural skepticism, Finch accepted Palin's story. Lots of odd occurrences over the years made sense if what she said was true. On top of that, it seemed that many of his fellow Twinklers had known for some time. Even been working with the things, like Mayor Grissom. That was even more shocking.

Then there was the matter of his daughter dating one of them right under his nose.

I'm the worst father ever, thought Finch.

He had to admit this was the main reason he had an urge to go out there and help Governor Palin shoot vampires. But it would be a meaningless gesture unless the rest of the town joined him.

"Listen folks," said Finch. "We can argue all night, but that's the same as doing nothing. I say we put it to a vote right now. Majority rules and we all go along with the decision. We'll vote by show of hands. Fair enough?"

It was agreed. Twinkle put its fate to a vote.

The field was littered with the ashes of fallen vampires. Others writhed and howled in agony as they were cooked from the inside out. A single UV grenade round contained millions of ultraviolet nanolasers that mimicked the effects of full sunlight. Palin and the Metal Storm batteries on the bus were laying them down hard. AXEL was wreaking the usual havoc with her sword and Joe had, inevitably, dropped his guns and gone for the wrench. He was somewhere around the forty-yard line, covered in reeking, steaming ick.

"Time to fall back!" said Palin. "We've given Twinkletown long enough to make up their ever-lovin' minds! Fall back to—belay that! Looks like the white smoke at last!"

Chief Finch emerged from the gym. Alone.

Palin emptied the AA-12's drum and somersaulted across the turf to reach him.

"What's the good word, Chief? Things are a little hairy out here."

Finch shook his head. "The town voted to sit this out. I couldn't stand it so I came to do what I can."

"Well, I'm real disappointed to hear that, Chief. I had my hopes for Twinkle. But sometimes change is just too hard for folks set in their ways."

"I know," said Finch. "Listen, Governor, I need to go find my little girl, if you've got things under control here."

"Sure thing! Can I give ya a lift home? We were just about to leave anyhow."

"My squad car is in the parking lot," said Finch.

"Actually, it's that burning wreck on the roof of the field house over there," said Palin. "Which is why I offer."

“Then I’ll take you up on that ride, thanks.”

“Well, let me get the team together and—wait! What’s that sound?”

It was singing.

Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, to be precise. It was coming from inside the gym. The door opened and the townspeople streamed out, single file, holding lit candles as they sang Twinkle’s unofficial anthem. They packed the end zone.

“What is this?” said Finch, flabbergasted.

“When you walked out here alone, some folks started to feel a little sheepish,” said Coach Walters. “A few of us decided to come with you, never mind the vote. And then a few more, and a few more, until—well, it’s the whole town, Chief! We’re with you!”

“Even Flagg?”

“No, he vanished in a puff of green smoke. Darndest thing.”

The shooting stopped. The vampires pulled back, awaiting new instructions from their master.

Finch turned to Palin. “Now what?”

“Now it’s up to you,” she said. “It’s your town.”

“Vampires!” said Finch. The word felt awkward in his mouth, despite everything that had happened. “Vampires! You’re not welcome here anymore! Twinkle is our home and we want you out!”

The Professor materialized, leaning on his walking stick. He appeared older and more stooped and fragile than he had in Walmart. More human. But anger flashed in his dark eyes despite his best efforts to conceal it.

“You can’t possibly mean that, Chuck,” he said smoothly. “I’m sorry I was late for the town meeting, but I’d like to be heard on this matter before we reach any rash conclusions.”

“The way I hear it, Mullins, you’re one of them, and one of the worst!” said Finch. “So we don’t want to hear from you. Vampires are no longer welcome in Twinkle.”

“Think about what you’re saying, Chuck,” said the Professor.

“We have. Get out.”

“You know the rules, cupcake,” said Palin. “You can’t enter a home without an invitation. And if the whole town says get out, then out you go.”

“True enough,” said the Professor. “But listen to me, Twinkle! You’ll regret this! What is Twinkle without vampires? Nothing! A useless little nowhere! Our presence has propped up your economy in ways you cannot possibly comprehend. But without us? Bah! Twinkle will dry up and blow away! And good riddance!”

“That’s our problem,” said Finch. “Now go!”

The mist cleared. A shrieking flock of bats passed across the rising moon. It was over.

The morning sun sidled up to the horizon. The team was on the bus and the engine was running. Only Palin had yet to board.

“Governor, I can’t thank you enough,” said Chief Finch. “It feels like a brand new day here in Twinkle.”

“That it is,” said Palin. “Try to keep it that way.”

Finch blushed. “I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind...” He held out his copy of *Going Rogue*. “I never got a chance to ask you yesterday, what with arresting you for arson and murder and all.”

“Glad to!” said Palin, taking the book from his hands. “How about I make it *To Chuck, a great American?*”

“That would be fine.”

Palin signed with a flourish and returned the book. Finch offered a handshake. “You’re welcome back in Twinkle anytime.”

“Well, hopefully, next time it will be pleasure, not business. Goodbye, Chief.”

Palin boarded the bus. GOGO put it in gear, turned east, and drove into the dawn.

Thick, wet clumps of Stella’s hair, newly dyed black, fell into the bathroom sink as she worked the scissors. She glared at her own puffy eyes and tear-stained face in the mirror. The black lipstick looked right. She would get her lip pierced when she got to Portland. Maybe other things too.

And a tattoo: Edmund Forever.

Her backpack was full of clothes, her journal, her iPod, some cash. The truck was gassed up.

There was nothing left for her here in Twinkle.

“I’ll never forget you Edmund,” she told her reflection. “Never! And I’ll never forget who took you away from me!” She spat the name: “I’ll get you, Sarah Palin! No matter what it takes, I’ll get you if it’s the last thing I do!”

Greetings, Loyal Reader!

I hope you enjoyed *Sarah Palin: Vampire Hunter*. Thanks for reading.

If you were suitably entertained and would like to read some of my other stories, please check out the list below. I also invite you to find me online at the various coordinates indicated.

Best regards,
Dan McGirt

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