

# CIVIL BLOOD

by Chris Hepler

"Americans... are as much disposed to vice as their rulers,  
and nothing but a vigorous and efficient government  
can prevent their degenerating into savages,  
or devouring each other like beasts of prey."

–Dr. Benjamin Rush  
Signatory to the Declaration  
of Independence  
1788

## 1 - INFINITY

August 4th

A generation from now

I don't like vampires, underhanded politics, or the idea of being put down like a dog, but the little stick in my hand tells me I can't avoid any of the three. I'm never supposed to say the word "vampires." No one on the team is. But we're not supposed to get infected, either, and I'll choke before I call myself a newly minted "disease vector." I've got a year's supply of names we made up, but all I want to use right now is profanity.

The last ten hours have been a string of freakish dreams, night sweats, and aches that feel like every tendon is stretching farther on the bone. The thought of food is gag-worthy. The light from the bathroom window stings my eyes. I want to break something. Throwing up is the last of the early-stage symptoms. I can check off food poisoning, and it's not the flu. Now that the pregnancy test is negative, it's obvious. I have VIHPS.

I flush the toilet and brush my teeth. The stink is bad, but the scents of toothpaste and the smoke in my hair help cover it. The test stick was a last-ditch hope; not that a positive result wouldn't *also* be a kick in the gut. I've gotten used to the idea of my twenties ending, but I always thought I'd have something more permanent to show for it than a three-year car lease. Temping gave way to modeling, which gave way to jiu-jitsu, which gave way to Forced Protection.

F-prot, as we call it, is responsible for the Band-Aids on my hand. On Monday night, I was the bait for the Los Angeles team, crashing in on some San Fernando fuck-pad with a spectacular ganja-to-air ratio and a cultie vipe who thought the infection made him a sex god. We went in expecting a pair and found three more of his chew toys in the house.

One went for my gun, so I split my knuckles across his teeth. Then, Louis and Jared were on top of him, cracking him with Mag-Lites until he stayed down. The rest of the team asked if I was all right and took me at my word. Saliva-to-blood isn't supposed to happen this way.

The previous Friday wasn't much safer. I'd gone clubbing and caught myself a visual effects artist. In answer to your next question, once on the balcony, once on the bed. Then, I found out he was a Darwin-lifer, and that's the kind who poke holes in condoms. That's L.A. for you: every dick is out to screw you in at least two ways.

The door shakes. My boyfriend Aaron.

I decide at that moment that I prefer karma when it's subtle.

"I think I'm coming down with something," I announce.

"Fantastic," I hear through the door. "Is there, like, medication for it?"

"Of course," I say real low. "Take one dose of hollow-points through the ear cavity."

"What?"

Louder, I try, "I'm going to take a shower." I need time to think.

The water is hot enough to scour away everything but the black dye in my hair. I attempt to

formulate a plan and only succeed in repeatedly grinding the same few panicked thoughts into my head. First stop, the confidentiality agreements I signed with the Benjamin Rush Health Initiative when they recruited me. Next, the security clearance which is my only real shot to stay hired in a shitty economy. Finally, the extreme unlikelihood that if I tell anyone at work what happened last night that they will ever again let me walk free.

That's the thing about EBL-4, the virus that causes VIHPS. There is no cure, no vaccine. There are handcuffs and high-capacity magazines and a mental hospital that has been converted to a research lab. I'm not supposed to see the inside of that place when we drop off the vipes, but oh well.

One tough night when we brought in a cold one, and Jared was sporting a broken rib, I asked whether the bodies were taken to the county morgue and what kind of permits they need to bring them back. I was immediately assured that another staffer knew all that, I period, E period, don't worry your pretty head about it. I didn't, until today.

The shower stops, and yesterday's underwear goes back on, as does any clothing that can get me out of the apartment quickly. I open the door into Aaron—last week's haircut, designer blue contacts. He's two years younger than me, an amusingly cynical hedonist with a band and some talent who hasn't yet realized that in L.A., there are two hundred thousand people with exactly that much going for them. Realizations often come to him slowly.

"Hey, sweet knees." Aaron's nose crinkles. The vomit. "Still not feeling good?"

I inhale to tell him the truth. He smells odd. Not sweaty but sharp, warmer somehow, and I swallow. I've started salivating.

I've thought about telling him. The fantasy in my head starts with *Sit down*, moves on to *I actually capture and kill vampires: P.S., they exist*, and then, *you can't ever tell anyone*. Today I'm feeling a Kids Story Time vibe and want to start with *I really need to tell you about my special friend, European Bat Lyssavirus-4. See, he causes VIHPS, and someday when you won't freak, I'll tell you what that stands for, 'kay?*

"It's bad," I say.

I have a stash of four hundred dollars inside a sock in the drawer. A visit to the ATM will get me another thousand as a daily maximum. Only at times like this do I realize how little that is. I have to get moving. I don't have any good answers yet, not for Aaron, nor for the phone calls from my supervisor, Darcy, who'll ask why I didn't file my after-action report last night. I have to focus on the essentials, what I'll need to survive.

Toothbrush, toothpaste, not the half-empty one but the spare box, pads, razors, cosmetics and towel. I also grab jewelry; my credit cards leave an e-trail, but a pawn shop won't care.

I have a chipped passport and most definitely a birth certificate: Lilith Infinity DeStard. Even in Hell, new employers want two forms of ID.

"Is this what I think it is?" Aaron has the pregnancy stick in his hand.

"Yeah, we dodged a bullet."

"Okay... so why are you packing like you want to get out of town?"

*Because otherwise I'll have to dodge fifty of them, I don't say. "It's work."*

"A conference?" I shake my head. "A stakeout kind of thing?" I hesitate, deciding whether to say yes. It would be easier, but I have to pick words carefully. If I stay, I am well and truly fucked. In about an hour, I'll need an answer for Darcy about when I'll report for my next assignment, and oh, by the way, remember to be at Epidemiology by five for my monthly blood screening. Because just to put the cherry on top, the calendar says it's time.

If I don't stay, I might live, but Darcy's team will be here checking on me, and Aaron will be answering the door. He'll say everything I tell him, one way or the other.

I snag my Glock from the holster at the side of the bed. Aaron never likes arguing with me while I wear it. But he really doesn't like my preoccupied silence.

"Look, can you let me in just a little?" he implores. "I know I don't get to ask about work. But I get to know if you're worried. And this..." he waved the test stick, "...this is all us, right?"

I stop throwing high-capacity mags and sweat socks into the suitcase. The sensible thing to do, the normal thing, is to stay here in bed and let Aaron hug my worries away. Vipes do that all the time. They tell people about their symptoms and cry and get fed and cuddled. And when their loved ones survive the first attack, the next stage is more shock and reconciliation and an invariable resolution that they should at least go to the emergency room to get stitches. From there? They get flagged. From there? Downhill.

"There's a lot of things I'm not ready for right now," I say.

"Me neither," Aaron says. "But we face them head-on together. That's the deal, right?"

I wince. My words, recycled and weaponized. Sticking to straight talk is how Aaron lasted longer than any of my previous bed-friends. On a good day, I can call our relationship open and be satisfied with it. On a bad day, it's like ground glass in my mouth, making me wonder if it's no better than the mountain of coping strategies that came before it. The thread by which it all hangs is the honesty. It gives the illusion of progress so I can think I'm wiser now.

"Okay," I say, "the truth is I didn't follow procedures, and my boss is going to call me on it. So now I'm... volunteering. To get brownie points so all that goes away." There. Euphemisms are better. They are how F-prot rolls. If your EBL-4 gives you Virally Induced Hematophagic Predation Syndrome, you're a "vipe." Our operations are all about "disease vectors" and "isolation complications" and people "retiring for health reasons." Even the name "Forced Protection" alleges that we confine vipes for their own good. Which we do, provided they don't resist. I'd resist.

"Is that all? How long are you going away?"

"I don't know, so I'm packing for five days."

"We should say goodbye." He has his euphemisms, too.

"I just got clean."

"Then you'll taste nice." Aaron leans in, and my senses flood. He smells like a steakhouse. I can feel the heat of his face as it gets close. His mouth opens, and I realize that his tongue, full of blood, will soon be between my teeth. I could chatter them like an addict or deliberately latch on, hold him in place with strength and leverage.

But no. I keep my teeth clenched, my body as unresponsive as a wooden doll. His lips mash against mine but make no headway. He pulls back, frowning.

"That's... different." It's one of the better things about him. He likes enthusiasm. When I don't have any, he stops.

"I can't do this," I blurt. I hug him, sticking my face way out so I don't have his neck pressing against my mouth. His whole body is warm where our torsos touch.

"There's things I can volunteer," he says. I know them all. Massage, fingers, oil, tongue. But my heart is in fight-or-flight, beating against my rib cage as I realize he has nothing with which to defend himself. This boy couldn't break my grip with a hammer, and his idea of how to deal with me is extra foreplay.

My cell phone rings, with its tinny Beethoven music no one will ever dance to. It rings, eclipsing the silence. I keep holding and smelling Aaron, keep thinking of highs he's given me and songs he's played, and the phone keeps screaming at me with its Fifth Symphony electronica remix that there is nothing rational about this situation because I have to run, they will lock me up. I don't do well locked up. I learned that pretty young.

I pick it up and see the number.

"Who is it?" Aaron asks.

"Louis and Jared. They're going to be by later." I don't need to answer to know that. I set it to block, first Louis, then Jared, then Aaron.

"But you said you're not going to be here...." He doesn't see the screen, but he's putting it together.

"They're worried about me," I say. "And to tell you the truth, they have reason to be." Time to spin. "I pissed some people off this week. For a few days, I shouldn't be at my home address. You shouldn't act like you know me."

He's incredulous. "These guys know where we live?"

I have backup. "I don't know for sure, but it's my name on the lease," I say. "Louis and Jared will find the bad guys. It shouldn't take long." I try to imagine what the F-prots will tell him when they knock on our door. They are pros. If he doesn't know what a vipe is, they sure aren't going to tell him.

As he mulls that over, I pack. He has more questions, all about what the bad guys might look like if they loiter around the house, but I bat those away by sounding experienced. He should be vigilant, everything is under control, the baddies aren't known for hurting civilians, garbage garbage garbage.

"Wait," he says after a few more reassurances. "You said you're sick, you didn't follow procedures, and there are people looking for you."

"Yeah?" My oh-crap senses fire up, but I have to stay cool.

"So, how is that not changing your story?" he asks. "I just wanna say, if we don't have the truth, we don't have anything."

I stop packing. He's right, and the terrible thing is, it won't matter. "What would it take to

convince you that I'm coming back?" I ask. "Calls every day?"

His face drops its guard. "That... it'd be a start, yeah."

"All right, then we'll do that," I say, "but to be safe, I'm going to need a burner phone, and we should get you that privacy app I told you about. I'll call through there."

Aaron nods. "Show me which one." I do. It takes only a few minutes, sitting next to him on the bed, and by then, he is calmer.

"Why do you need a burner if you have this?" he asks.

"If my office caught me using that app for personal business, they'd freak," I say, continuing to spin. "So, I'm thinking a cheap second phone and, poof, no panicked firing of Infinity. You want me to go get it, or do you want to be my hero?"

"I can get it," he says, and I see I've calmed him. "Back soon, but first..." He tries a kiss again. If I freeze him out now, I'll be explaining it forever. I open my mouth and taste him. All nausea is gone. He's more than delicious—he has an energy, a vibrancy to him, that I want inside me in all kinds of ways. When he starts to pull back, it's my teeth squeezing his lower lip that keeps us together. At first, I don't even realize I've done it. After a guilty glance, I let go.

"Well, now," Aaron says, face flushed. "Don't go anywhere."

He leaves the room, and I can breathe again. I was stupid. If he'd had a bad floss that morning, the cuts in the mouth could have done him in. As soon as I hear the front door click, I scramble to the wall over the bed. I get my black belt off its hook and the last portable piece of my life.

It rests on the dresser: a little tablet of cherry wood. I look at the god carved into its face, then throw it into my bag. It was a god to me once, or at least a goal, when I had none. I couldn't see any future with me alive in it, but making this was something I could do.

It's coming with me.

I consider waiting for Aaron, but by the time my suitcases are full, twenty minutes are gone forever. My nerve breaks.

I go out the door and squint in the hot, unfriendly L.A. sun. Will Aaron be mad? Of course. But on that day far in the future, in which I take his calls again, I'll figure out what to say then. Hurrying down the apartment complex's steps, I make it into a cool, dim parking garage.

The last choice that lies before me: cycle or car? The cycle can handle my bags fine and gets more kilometers to the volt, but once I'm out of SoCal, it'll be toast in any kind of rain. If I'm trying for distance, the car will be more comfortable. And if I need to sleep in it because I can't afford a motel, well, three strikes and you're out.

I drop my cases and roll the little blue Zero out of the way of the Dodge Atlantis. Its kickstand is still too loose; something that Aaron has been meaning to fix forever. The cycle has been with me for eleven years, which beats Aaron and any of my other boyfriends. Doesn't it?

I have no trailer to bring it. And the day a cycle, even a small one, fits in the back of an Atlantis will be the day the angels break the seals and all that shit. So, I kiss my hand and touch it to the cycle. If I get reincarnated as a machine, I hope someone does the same for me.

Then, I throw the suitcases in the trunk of the car, climb in, and start it up. What I am doing is wise. It spares Aaron a nasty fate. If I had a real choice, I would have been loyal.

Somewhere around San Bernardino, I find out I've forgotten to pack tissues.



## 2 - RANATH

August 4th

Tonight, I have to lie a lot. Good evening—it isn't. Glad you could make it—not really. Traffic wasn't bad—please. The petty deceits are practice for a larger fiction: that every conversation is normal, and everyone is safe.

The Folger Shakespeare Library is within a rifle shot of the Capitol, tucked behind the Supreme Court and a half-dozen other Masonic stone buildings with killer *feng shui*. Here, I have to lie about many things but mostly about what I do for a living.

"I'm in marketing," I say, this time to a socialite-for-life sewn into a black dress. She doesn't ask for details, and the lie slips away with the empty martini glasses. I handle her long enough to find out she's funny, vivacious, and a waste of time.

"I work at a travel agency."

I have a little game I sometimes play. I question my companion and commit their story to memory so I can recycle it for the next inquisitor. I take the socialite's job now.

"I'm in human resources."

I am at the Folger to find Simon Walter Davis, height one point eight meters, weight ninety-five kilos, born forty years ago to Gary and Meredith Davis. Simon has never been married, never been in jail, and is a registered member of the Solar Citizens Party, all of which he blathers about on social media.

It would not be difficult to become Simon Walter Davis. Davis has never lived outside Maryland and got his master's in business administration from UDC. He's overqualified for his accounting position, but he's loyal. I've already spent the requisite time online to speak knowledgeable about Davis-like subjects for five minutes or less—more than that is rarely necessary. But Davis is the last person I want to be.

It would be very difficult for Simon Walter Davis to become me.

"Where do you work?" A businessman this time, starched collar and tight tie with a jacket already over one arm because D.C. humidity can make you stink.

"At a desk."

I move on. The Elizabethan Great Hall held one hundred and eighty-one people when I arrived and studied the guest list a rented receptionist was checking off. One hundred and eighty people are not enough for Simon Walter Davis to hide behind.

The lights blink over the Folger lobby. Cue audience. Well-dressed adults walk to the theater past the display cases of Shakespearean memorabilia. Under glass are two swords: not the domesticated fencing foils used by actors but Elizabethan-era rapiers, wild and long and with an edge that can flick off an ear. I finger the container of needles in my left jacket pocket. Weapons change over the years: intent, never.

Simon Walter Davis tested positive for the antibodies for European Bat Lyssavirus-4, the virus that causes VIHPS. The syndrome is not listed in any disease directory, and the epidemiologists that run the tests at the Benjamin Rush Health Initiative have never heard of it. I have committed the symptoms to memory: overwhelming hunger, violent urges, bone ossification and muscle attachment, significant synaptic plasticity and phenomenally accelerated cell regeneration. As for the blood, and their consumption of it, that's a separate lecture.

I see a balding pattern, Davis-like, not far from the exit. It would not be out of character for Davis to be a wallflower—he was allegedly infected eleven days ago, and headaches and nausea often put a damper on vectors' sociability. Another percentage—I honestly forget how much, as it changes so often—are uncomfortable seeing people from their pre-infection lives.

The man in the corner is not my quarry. I turn on my heel and hurry to the Reading Room. Oak bookshelves, balconies, chandeliers. No cover but desks.

I spot an unkempt beard. Most vectors have trouble concentrating in the first weeks after infection, and Simon Walter Davis is neither well-dressed nor well-groomed. He probably has no clue what he's infected with, but he knows something is wrong. He's concentrating so much on acting normal that he misses it completely.

I am practiced at acting normal.

He moves through the stragglers, eyes downcast. Then, he looks relieved: he sees a familiar face. His conversation partner has a sport coat and the short limbs and muscular build of a wrestler. They head off together. Not to the theater.

Vectors like isolation. It takes no imagination to figure out why.

I try not to run, try to keep the coldness from my face and eyes. If Davis knows the building, he might be headed for the gardens. Though vectors are often too nervous to do anything within shouting distance of a crowd, "often" is a very thin shield. Vectors and criminal masterminds have little in common.

Three people block my way. Living static.

"—you should have been here for the First Amendment March. It had everyone from every adult film ever *made*—"

"—I was. That's that time I got hit on. We're nose-to-nose in the subway. I mean, like *here*, and not only was he a porn director, it was fetish, and then he starts asking what spas I've been to, and I'm not sure if I should take it as a compliment—"

"—it's totally a compliment—"

"—and then the Metro conductor's like, 'Next stop, Dupont Circle,' and the whole train goes, 'YAWHOO—'"

I glance over. Though I am tall and quite distinctive, Davis has no idea who I am and so does not flee at the sight of me. He is intent on his conversational partner. Their talk would be audible if it weren't for the theatergoers who have wandered into my face.

"—so, that's my experience with demonstrations."

"What about you? You ever been in a march?"

The three twenty-somethings look at me. I fake it. "Two. One for stimweb control, one for water rights." My politics range yellow rather than blue or red, but D.C. is deep sapphire on the electoral map, so the answer helps me blend.

There. Davis is leaving with his friend, a viral transfer in the making if I've ever seen one. But the three chatterers are drunk and interpose.

"God, another one who wants to get away from me."

"Yeah, why might that be?" says the woman, who is popping Vitamin C from a bottle. "Don't let him scare you, whats-your-name."

"Roland," I say. I have forgotten the last person I spoke to, so I use my standard alias. "I do sanitation."

She doesn't miss a beat. "So, I guess you can take a lot of shit?"

"I don't need public appreciation," I say. "If you'll excuse me, I'm with him." I point to a cluster of four men. I slip past the trio, smile and, as I reach the next cluster, clap one man on the back as he goes by, completing the illusion of a friend. While the man tries to place me, I make for the restroom, cutting across voices.

"—her statements are so out-there. She wants the Freedom Forever candidacy—"

"—but that's what actors say, right? Nobody's a villain in their own mind—"

The crowd thins as the audience flows slowly to their seats. Cold molasses.

In the restroom, I shut myself in a stall. Shadowing Davis directly is chancy. I have an alternative, if I'm fast. I pull the straps of my stimweb out from my sleeve and loop them over my fingers. I pin its baggy fishnet in place with the acupuncturist's needles I take from my jacket pocket. Unlike in Chinese medicine, here the needles go in the doctor, not the patient.

I was a doctor once. What I do now is not medicine, traditional or otherwise.

Two more needles go through the conductive web under my jacket collar and into the flesh of my ring finger. Touching thumb and ring finger together, I feel for the interrupted rhythm of qi flow.

Qi? It's life's energy. It was elusive for centuries, until Dr. Jessica Ulan finally tamed it with technology and biofeedback. Remember Jess. She's the famous one for a reason.

*Thap-thap.* My heart pumps blood, and I dial up the stimweb. Three-quarters of a volt circulates through my arm, a faster, pulsing twitch. *Thap, thap, thap.* I hold my right thumb and forefinger in a circle, making a ring of living qi. I concentrate: my thumb and fingers warm, signaling a dot of invisible energy growing in the center of the ring.

The circle spreads out, shimmering like heat on a desert road. It expands in an ever-larger donut. For a qi function to last and grow, you need to balance opposing positive and negative energies, spin them like a record with a carefully calculated drop-off rate. I increase the stimweb's voltage by squares to keep the energy's expansion steady despite its diminishing power. When it flows easily through my body and reaches the stall wall, I kick the cybernetics.

Roughly two dozen jolts go through my body from nanotech pulse-points. The effect on the biowave is like lighting an acetone fume, and the spiralling energy shoots out. I feel it flicker

against a moving yang-within-yin field. My vector, outside the building but caught in the net. Davis has left by the street, not the garden. Going home.

Like a tide leaving behind seaweed, the wave marks Davis. I feel a gentle tug drawing me closer while the stimweb keeps the function sustained. The chancy part, the long-range part, is done. Now, it's time to allay suspicion. I close my eyes and stroke my fingers over them: they tingle. I push my hair back. It warms my skull. This biophysical field is easier, a familiar function that toys with other people's perceptions. I check my reflection in the chrome of the toilet: irises gray, hair a sandy blond. The truth has been masked.

A shudder runs through me. I am wet with sweat, and my saliva tastes like metal. Biochemical imbalance: hazard of the job.

Checking outside the stall to ensure no one is near, I pull at my shoe. I produce a four-round magazine that fits in a hollowed-out steel heel. From my breast pocket, I pull a thick pen with ends that come off, forming a rifled barrel. From my jacket, a box that I twist, releasing an all-plastic pistol grip. I rack an eleven-millimeter Glaser into the firing chamber.

The murmur of the crowd has stopped. I hear the chant of a chorus.

*Two households, both alike in dignity,  
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,  
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,  
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.*

Anchoring my personal qi field, I alter the biophysical radiation emanating from my hand. It shimmers in the bright light of the bathroom stall, and the pistol vanishes. Yes, my hand still reflects the same number of photons per square centimeter and other such dross. But with a concealment field radiating out from it, humans nearby won't register it as anything other than bare and empty, which makes it ideal for my line of work.

I am a magician. I make people disappear.

\* \* \*

The air outside is like a swamp's breath. Simon Walter Davis and his companion don't seem to mind sweating. They push a brisk pace down East Capitol Street, away from the eyes of his former colleagues. The streets are largely deserted, but my qi function is like a wire connecting us. I can fall back to a good shadowing distance. I dial the number for the hot van.

"Hello."

"I have a dog in heat." It's code. "Is this the number for animal control?"

"It is not." The phone clicks as if hanging up. I stay on the line, allowing the F-prots to cue up their finder program. The van now knows exactly where I am in real time.

Davis turns a corner, and I close the distance, staying only a block behind. Running three qi functions, I am in no shape to sprint for long, either toward or away. By all precedent, Simon Walter Davis will be nervous and irritable from the strange new senses flooding his brain. Being

sick will only make him stronger, more capable of lashing out.

The hot van has restraints, but no one on my team believes in them.

I withdraw the last section of my pistol from my pockets; a disposable silencer. Last night I downloaded its specs off some eternally mirrored Net site, slid them into a forgebox, and one nasty smell of burning plastic later, produced a small assembly line of muffler-shaped, killer Tupperware. Now, of course, it smells like hand soap from the bathroom sink, a precaution for a vector's sensitive nose. I thread the silencer and thumb the slide lock into place. It'll be a quiet shot, but I'll only get one.

Simon Walter Davis hears none of this, intent on his companion.

Davis and his friend turn in to a brownstone on East Capitol, through a low, decorative iron fence. I pause in the shadow of a tree and key in the emergency number. With a civilian out of sight, I must assume Davis is aiming for infection. But the F-prot program is strict: never confront a vector alone.

My skin starts to sting a little from the functions as I wait the long minutes before the hot van pulls up. It's red and white with just the right amount of attention. The whole neighborhood will remember an ambulance but rarely any additional details.

"Is he alone?" asks the driver, a former prison guard named al-Ibrahim.

"No."

Al-Ibrahim circles his finger in the air, and two F-protos open the ambulance's back doors. One unloads the gurney. The other dons yellow gloves, the kind a novice might mistake for a surgeon's or a dishwasher's. These go up to the shoulder. Deer hunters call them gutting gloves.

That one, Breunig, comes with me to the door. I'm the specialist. Breunig leads the team. Hands-on, from the front. He has a touch-and-talk tablet ready. I remove my jacket and bind my long hair up in a fry-cook's net, then tuck it under a cap with a caduceus on it: EMT gear.

I ring the bell, wondering what I will be interrupting. Davis, smoking weed and playing Scrabble? Vectors are often surprised, and that's the safest. Davis, interrupted during feeding? Happens all the time. It's wet and messy, every drop of blood turning a suburban living room into a biological minefield. Davis, reaping the rewards of a proposition? Plenty of them don't even get dressed to answer the door.

There was an incident a year ago in Anne Arundel County where four vectors assaulted a jogger, Andrew Leyman, on the side of the road. One of them slashed Leyman's throat with a serrated plaster-saw and, using a Big Gulp container taken from a nearby convenience store, passed around a liter of his blood to the others. Not being direct from the wound, it didn't give them the energy they needed to live, but one vector later said under interrogation that it had a certain amusement value. When a young mother, Ani Sikorsky, saw the blood-splattered trio and sent her sport utility vehicle's brakes squealing, she froze in confusion for four seconds. In that time, two of the vectors tipped her SUV over with brute strength and tore the passenger door off. They then beat her to death within the confines of the vehicle because she screamed too loudly.

The last member recorded it on digital video, again for the amusement value.

Copies of this video are on file at Forced Protection's headquarters, where they have been used to effect several changes in procedure. The first meeting on the subject ended in a unanimous decision to show the video to all newly recruited F-prots. It was my suggestion.

"Who is it?" asks Davis through the door.

"Mr. Davis, my name is Doctor Albert Burks. We got a telephone call that someone was in distress here."

The door opens. There is nothing protecting me. "No."

"Really?" I see the vector's eyes flash to the gurney. "We received a call a half hour ago from this address, saying someone had chest pains. Trouble breathing."

Davis looks like he has a headache. "No, I don't know who could have called..."

I look behind Davis to the wrestler from the theater, now in undershirt and slacks. The man is on the couch, just reaching for a remote control. He looks unhurt. It's time to effect the second procedure change. "I'm sorry to take up your time, sir, but there are a few questions I have to ask everyone in the house as part of my job. Is there anyone here other than you two?"

Davis glances back at his friend, flushed. "No, just us."

I relax and let the locator function fizzle out. I have to be calm. Loose.

"Can you sign here?" asks Breunig. "We need a record that someone in the household said no exam was necessary." He holds out the tablet.

"I suppose..." Davis says. As he hands the tablet back, I step to where I can verify that Davis's friend is engrossed in the TV and shoot Davis in the face.

The unseeable pistol doesn't sound like a gunshot. The neighbors will hear something like a stone thrown against the floor. The bullet plows through the vector right into the apricot-sized brain structure that keeps him standing. He falls forward against the doorframe, and Breunig catches him and the tablet in one motion. I push in. Simon's friend turns to see, but the angle is bad. By the time he twists around like he means it, I'm on him.

I press my palm to his head. Behind the push is a yin qi-function, a straight line instead of a circle. My body comes alive with electrostim points. The man blinks, as if that will clear his vision, but the signals in his brain are cracking like popcorn. He can't think through this.

"Simon? Are you—whoa. Is Simon okay?"

"Problem, sir?"

"I can't... getting up is—" He struggles, but it's as if someone's pushing his brain down.

"It's best if you remain seated," I say. The man keeps twitching at the overstimulation but no more. He is foggy but awake, excessively so.

"Did you touch?"

"What?"

"Simon Walter Davis. Did you touch him? Did he touch you?"

"Is something wrong with me? I can't—"

"Sir, Mister Davis has been sick for some time. It's best if he is looked after in a hospital." The gurney clatters as the F-prots bring it up to the stoop. Everyone outside will see professionals doing

their job. Reassurance is key.

"Is this about the virus?"

Great. I watched Davis to stop an assault, not to obtain a sidewalk confessional. But a well-placed question is more trouble to the Forced Protection Program than a whole neighborhood of vectors. The gun shifts in my hand; in all likelihood, the man is infected already—

I make myself let go, coiling my arms over one another. This man is Forced Protection's mission statement. Unless Davis has bitten him, until the minute he shows symptoms, he lives. He didn't even see Davis fall. He is an us, until he becomes a them.

My voice comes out pleasant. "Mister Davis may have said many things under stress, not all of them accurate. I'll need your contact information." The man stares. The flush in his cheeks might be from qi or fear... or fever. "Sir, have you been in contact with his bodily fluids?"

"No. He just... he hugged me. He said he was afraid for his life."

I give him my wearied stare, like an overworked orderly searching for a better bedside manner. I sit on the corner of the couch and use that sympathetic, low voice reserved for extremely bad news.

"Mister Davis has an infection that settled in his brain tissue. I advise you to take what he *said* with a grain of salt. Now, I'll need some ID and to know what he told you about the virus." The man reaches for his wallet without thinking about how odd this all is.

Shortly, the gurney is in the van. All that remains is for the F-protos to collect everything the vector might have touched. Simon Walter Davis's life goes into plastic biohazard bags; his pillowcases, his dirty dishes, his bedsheets. As for Davis's guest—Neil Berman, according to his license—I keep his brain spinning in neutral. All he can comprehend is that there is a voice of authority in the room, and it is a good idea to cooperate and wait.

After copying down Berman's address and phone numbers, I make as if to hand the license back. As Berman reaches for it, I touch his head.

For the rest of his life, Berman will never know exactly what happened next.

I, on the other hand, have extensive experience classifying the properties of qi, the most essential being that the effects generated diminish with distance. When I touch Berman's head, that distance is zero, and hitting Berman's brain so hard that his memories of this night can't form becomes very, very easy. After as many functions as I've thrown tonight, easy is good.

"You done with the surgery?" asks Breunig.

"Yes." I shake out my hand. It is more than fevered-hot. Berman lies on the couch, temporarily unconscious from the bioshock. I have his home address, in case I need to pay him a visit in three days and see if he exhibits symptoms. Breunig hands me a kit, and I take a blood sample. Berman will wake up a few hours later, and he might remember there was an ambulance, but he will likely think he called it himself.

Another F-prot pours lye onto the floor where Davis bled a few drops before being whisked onto the gurney. It won't kill the virus, but it masks evidence. I do one last sweep of the house before joining the others at the door. I leave on the electronics—when Berman wakes, it will seem

as if he fell asleep in front of the TV.

The drive back is quiet. Davis's body, even though it took a bullet to the head, is held to the gurney by Kevlar straps. This much restraints can do.

We watch for signs of consciousness. The body jerks when we hit a pothole, and I flinch. The pistol is gone, and I have a long, thin knife we keep in the van. If the bullet has not done its job, I will direct the blade into Davis's eye.

This procedure has not emerged from a particular incident but by van consensus.

"Dispatch, hot van one-oh-three, coming in with a spayed dog and papers." The radio squawks back, and we make for the drop-off point. In a few hours, Simon Walter Davis will advance the cause of scientific research.

After a few kilometers, I turn off the stimweb, and the ongoing functions surrounding my hand and head cease. The others in the van see me as I am, knife-hand gloved, hair long and silver, still bound up to prevent evidence from falling to the floor. My eyes, green now instead of gray, are fringed by metallic lashes, changed in the same accident that colored my hair. I stretch my legs and lay my bare hand across them. Gradually, the hand cools to its normal temperature.

Without the adrenaline, exhaustion settles in. Breunig passes me a bottle of water, knowing I have run too hot. I glance every now and then at the collection kit and Berman's sample. A few minutes' work online reveals Berman is a personal trainer. If he turns out positive, a bereavement specialist at BRHI will call his clients and let them know he will not be keeping any future appointments.

Breunig catches me staring off into space. "Hey," he says, "buck up. We did a genuine save just now."

I shrug. "We'll find out in three days."

"You had Shakespeare and surgery in the same night," Breunig says. "It doesn't get any better."

I watch the body and try to recall the few lines I heard. Then, I give up. They cannot be as important as the cold face I see in front of me. His name was Simon Walter Davis, and he was a victim of VIHPS. I have to remember that.