

# BLOOD GROOVE

Dear Reader,

Prepare to meet Baron Rudolfo Zginski, an intelligent, devious and deadly vampire who, in chapter one of Blood Groove, meets his match in veteran spiritualist Sir Francis Colby. That's in Wales, 1915; sixty years later, in 1975, Zginski awakens in Memphis, Tennessee to a world of Seventies music and fashion, with a decided Southern flavor. How will he fit in, both among humanity and with other vampires, who know of their nature only by what they've seen in the movies? Be warned, though: this is no romance, paranormal or otherwise. These vampires are killers, and if you catch their eye, you're in more danger than you know!

I hope you enjoy this sneak peek. Please feel free to share it with your friends! If you have any questions or comments, stop by my website and drop me a line. I love hearing from readers!

Cheers!



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CHAPTER ONE  
Memphis, Tennessee, 1975

“Shit,” said Patricia. It was an understatement.

“Yes, ma’am,” her assistant Joe agreed, and scowled at the musty odor, strong despite the morgue’s chill.

The body inside the enormous coffin had the unmistakable look of someone buried alive. The limbs twisted in the folds of dry, brittle clothing; the jaw hung open in an eternal cry of despair. But the knife driven through his heart, still gleaming after more than half a century, was what held their attention.

It was solid gold.

Joe moved around the casket taking photographs. The hum of the flash recharger echoed in the silent room.

Patricia took a magnifying glass from the table and leaned into the coffin to examine the knife.

“Careful,” Joe said. “One wrong move, we’ve got nothing but a big ol’ pile of dust.”

“Not after only sixty some-odd years,” she said good-naturedly, but he had a point, and she forced herself to be extra cautious.

At first she thought the knife was some ceremonial dagger, but a closer look showed it to be a crucifix, with an inscribed three-inch crosspiece and, visible between the ribs, a base sharpened to a point and flattened into a blade. The artwork was exquisite, with tiny Aramaic characters strongly suggesting a Middle Eastern origin. It was out of her area -- she taught pathology -- but she still knew impressive workmanship when she saw it.

“Christ on a stick,” Joe said, and wrinkled his nose as he took the film from his camera. “So that’s really a . . . .” He made an exaggerated frightened face. “. . . vampire?”

“No, it’s a crime victim,” Patricia said. “See the knife? He was murdered, allegedly by Sir Francis Colby, sixty years ago.”

Joe put the camera aside. “And they want an autopsy done on him now? Is that Colby guy still alive or something?”

“No, he died quite some time ago. I’m not sure why the museum wants it, but it should be interesting as a technical exercise. You don’t see many corpses like this.”

“You mean ones that might rise from their coffins?”

Patricia scowled at him. “Did you read anything past the first paragraph of my memo?”

Joe rolled his eyes. “Yes. This is the corpse of Baron Zginski, the only man to have ever been legally proved to be a vampire. His trial was one of the first live broadcasts ever in Europe, but no recordings exist, and the various transcripts don’t agree on details.”

“You can read, then.”

“But why are we cutting into him now, after all this time?”

She shrugged. “Professional courtesy. Someone at the museum wants to know the cause of death, and since we’re part of the state system, they don’t have to pay us extra. And you don’t get experience with a body in this condition very often, so if you’re serious about your education, you’d do best to shut up and pay attention.”

She ran her hand along the coffin’s firm, expensive wood overlay. The casket looked like a bulky version of a

standard coffin, but they'd had to use a forklift to move it from the Colby Archives warehouse into the medical school's morgue room to examine it. Under the paneling the coffin was solid metal, probably lead.

"He looks . . . dried out," Joe observed. "Not decayed. Mummified."

"Until the rubber dry-rotted, there was an air-tight seal on this thing. The fluids drained out of the body while it was sealed, and when the rubber started to go, they evaporated."

"He does look like he has fangs," Joe pointed out.

"Just slightly enlarged canines," Patricia countered. "My grandmother had teeth just like that and she wasn't a vampire, either."

Her eye kept drifting back to the cross. If it was real . . . .

She forced her attention back to the moment. "Okay, we're pathologists, time to pathologize. Let's cook some tissue samples and see what really made everyone think this Baron Zginski was a vampire: Porphyria, anemia, or just plain psychosis."

"There's no chemical test for psychosis."

"Your point?"

"It's nearly six o'clock."

"You have a date?"

He looked down. "No," he said pathetically.

"Well, you do now. With a Bunsen burner."

"I'm your T.A., not your slave," he said.

Patricia's eyes widened in mock outrage. She was the only black on the school's faculty, and one of only three women. But she'd worked with Joe long enough to know he had no idea how appallingly insensitive his remark, intended as a joke, might be. Maybe someday this would change, but now, in 1975, she decided to simply treat it as intended.

"All right, all right, I'm going," Joe said, and went to gather the test tubes.

Two hours later, while Joe prepared the tissue samples in the lab, Patricia went into the empty teacher's lounge, poured the last of the godawful coffee and settled onto the green vinyl couch. The museum curator had been kind enough to send along Sir Francis Colby's original documentation on the Zginski case, in which Colby had been prosecutor (and executioner, as it turned out). She opened the folder and read the first yellowed, handwritten page.

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## **16 June, 1915.**

Passelwaithe nestled amongst the Welsh hills, almost cut off from any sign of civilisation. Were you to stand in the centre of the town square and look in any direction, only green hills and grey sky would greet you. The people were equally isolated, aware of the modern world but preferring to exist in the superstitious nether regions of their ancestors. Magic still existed in Passelwaithe, or at least the belief in magic persisted.

I journeyed to Passelwaithe in response to a cryptic summons from one Arthur Jermin, the local physician. He'd been referred to me by Professor Alistair, and his letter described a problem so unusual I was unable to resist. I arrived just before sundown, as requested. It was a relief to be away from London, after the zeppelin air raids at the first of the month. Here in Wales, no trace of the ghastly war could be found.

The town seemed to be deserted as I climbed from my motorcar. Usually the sight of the great rumbling beast, technology's dire imitation of the horse, drew entire populations. I lit a cigar and waited to be noticed, one foot rakishly on the running board; that is, as rakish as a man my age could be.

In a few moments another man, as middle-aged and portly as I, literally skulked toward me, checking frequently behind him. Finally he stood erect and made an effort to reclaim his dignity. 'Sir Francis?' he asked.

'Indeed,' I said. 'And you are Dr. Jermin?'

'Quite. Come, let's get inside, in case -' He caught himself before giving away too much, and I followed him into the nearest building.

A typically Welsh choice, it turned out to be the local pub, and the entire male population of Passelwaithe filled

it. Dark, muscular men with faces like battered gargoyles, they gazed upon me with an expectancy almost religious in its intensity. Dr. Jermin stepped forward.

‘We have only a few minutes of safety left to us, lads,’ Dr. Jermin announced. ‘This is Sir Francis Colby, the eminent spiritualist. He’s here to rid us of our problem. Is that not correct?’

‘I must know this problem first,’ I demurred.

‘It’s that devil, the Baron!’ one man cried.

‘Aye, Baron Zginski!’ echoed another.

‘And who is Baron Zginski?’ I demanded.

‘A vampire,’ a man in a cleric’s collar stated. ‘An unholy being who survives on the blood of the living. And he’ll be the ruin of us all if he’s not stopped.’

Having been briefed somewhat by Professor Alistair, I was not entirely surprised. The grip of superstition was still firm in Passelwaithe. Indeed, they knew me only as a spiritualist, not understanding that my primary mission was to expose fraud and misinterpretation.

‘True vampires,’ I said carefully, ‘are not native to this land. They exist only in isolated central European districts, or in books by Irish theatre managers. How is it one may be found here?’

‘He came to us as a rich immigrant,’ Dr. Jermin explained, ‘claiming to have been disenfranchised by the war, and to have barely escaped with his life and fortune. That was six months ago. Since then, our wives and daughters have begun exhibiting strange behaviour. Our young men are disheartened and morose. And all due to this . . . this foreigner!’

A grumble of assent rose from the gathered men-folk.

I understood all too well the dynamic at work here. ‘Tell me, is this Baron Zginski a young man?’

The priest nodded. ‘He appears young, yes. And handsome as the very devil. Yet rumors say he is centuries old.’

I considered my words carefully. This young, rich Continental European was clearly such a threat to the stolid males of Passelwaithe that they’d inferred supernatural origins to his attractiveness. Inwardly I was amused, but to all appearances remained deadly serious.

‘Gentlemen,’ I said, ‘if this Baron is all you say, we must proceed with caution. Vampires are the devil’s own tricksters, and --’

‘Very little gets past them,’ a new voice said.

A dashing, debonair young man stood in the doorway. Of medium height, slender, with raven-black hair and moustache, he dominated the room with his blazing eyes. The royal blood of Europe clearly flowed in his veins, and he stood for our inspection as if he were used to such scrutiny. His clothing was more appropriate for a Parisian salon than a Welsh pub, but he wore it with ease and flair.

‘Sir Francis Colby, I believe?’ he said in a light Eastern European accent.

I stepped forward. ‘Indeed. Baron Zginski?’

‘Baron Rudolfo Vladimir Zginski,’ he said with a bow. ‘At your service. I understand my neighbours have some rather unusual ideas about me.’ Each man at whom he gazed directly, immediately turned away.

‘Some concerns, I believe,’ I said in as conciliatory a tone as I could muster. ‘I’m certain at the root it’s mere misunderstanding.’

‘No doubt,’ Zginski said. He had none of the pomp of royalty, but rather an unassuming quality that was most endearing. ‘When I heard you were to visit, I thought between the two of us we might clear this whole thing up. Your reputation for discovering the truth in such matters is spotless.’

‘Devil,’ someone muttered.

‘Incubus,’ came another voice.

Zginski smiled. His teeth were quite white, quite even. He said, ‘I am open to any suggestion you make, Sir Francis. I wish only to live in peace with my neighbours, in my adopted country.’

‘Very well. I suggest, then, that at this time tomorrow evening we meet here as a judicial body. We shall, Baron Zginski, put you on trial for the crime of being a vampire. Because of my experience in such matters, I shall act as prosecutor.’

Zginski clearly understood my meaning. ‘And I shall defend myself, Sir Francis,’ he said with a slight smile, ‘with the mere truth.’

‘Is there a magistrate?’ I asked Dr. Jermin.

A white-haired gentleman announced, ‘I am the magistrate. Alun Toomley.’

‘Very well. I shall return at this time tomorrow evening, at which time we shall meet here to settle this. Oh, and incidentally -- while I shall abide by any ruling you make, sir, I shall take steps to insure no prior prejudice will be allowed to operate. Baron Zginski will be judged on the facts alone.’

Baron Zginski nodded his assent and departed. Conversation resumed around us, low and bitter and menacing. I motioned Dr. Jermin to join me at a table.

‘This is not an example of Christian charity,’ I said quietly. ‘That young man is rich, handsome and, I assume, unmarried. That is why your village menfolk feel threatened.’

‘I thought so at first, too, Sir Francis. Yet why would a rich, handsome bachelor pick such a tiny, out-of-the-way village? Why not London, or Glasgow?’

‘Perhaps he has different priorities,’ I said.

Jermin considered carefully before he spoke. ‘Or perhaps he was aware that, in all of the United Kingdom, no village has as large a population of women. I’ve lived here for forty years, and attended births for nearly that long. In that time, daughters have outnumbered sons almost three to one, and the isolation we face here has kept most of them unmarried. If I were a young, handsome rich man, this would be an ideal location. And if I were also a vampire . . .’

I finished my pint of bitters. ‘Your fingers clutch at the proverbial straws, Dr. Jermin. Vampirism is a superstition, nothing more. Tomorrow night, we shall prove it.’

‘I thought you were to be the prosecutor.’

‘And I shall be. I shall submit Baron Zginski to every test of vampirism I know. And when he passes them all, we shall have settled this nonsense. Agreed?’

‘Agreed,’ Jermin said reluctantly.

As I drove from Passelwaithe, two things impinged on my consciousness. One was Dr. Jermin’s description of the male-to-female ratio in the village; it was, indeed, an ideal situation for a male creature which fed on living blood.

The other was a moonlit glimpse, nothing more, of two figures on a hill, clutched in an embrace. One was a slender, dark-clad man, as Baron Zginski had been. The other was smaller, paler and unmistakably feminine. The second figure seemed to have swooned in the arms of the first.

At the time, I convinced myself they were merely lovers meeting for a tryst. Subsequent events would prove otherwise.

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Joe tapped on the lounge door and opened it. “You decent?”

“Much as I ever am,” Patricia said.

“Everything’s running right now, so we should have basic toxicology screens pretty soon. I’m going to get something to eat, if that’s cool. You want anything?”

She stood and stretched. “No. I’ll probably be down in the morgue when you get back.”

“Hanging out with the guest of honor?”

“Sometimes you spot new things if you keep looking. Have fun, but be back in an hour.”

“Yes, massah,” Joe said. Patricia merely sighed.

For reasons she couldn’t really pinpoint, Patricia wanted to read the rest of this story in the room with what was left of poor Baron Zginski. Sure, it was morbid, but she was a pathologist, and she’d done her thesis on historical murders. Besides, being a black professional woman in Memphis, she knew just how strong provincial resentment could be; she felt like she and Zginski had something in common. Had anything really changed between 1915 and 1975? Different was still different, and still feared and hated.

She closed the door, buttoned her lab coat against the cold, and dragged a chair next to the coffin.

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As promised, I returned to Passelwaithe the following evening with two security measures. One was quite obvious -- I brought along an army signalman and his broadcasting apparatus. Passelwaithe was too wrapped up in itself, and this connection with the outside world would prevent any hysterical mob violence. The experiment served two masters: it provided the scrutiny needed to insure justice was done, and it allowed the military to test aspects of their latest equipment with a broadcast of such absurdity that no spy could take it seriously.

The other measure was insurance against a possibility so outlandish I chose to keep it my secret.

By prior arrangement, Dr. Jermin would escort Baron Zginski into town, and the tavern would be set up for our purposes by the time I arrived. When Signalman Reynolds and I arrived, quite a crowd had already gathered outside the low building, trying to peer through the closed blinds and locked doors.

At the sight of the gathered masses, Signalman Reynolds immediately perked up, straightened his uniform and put on his best winning smile. The image of Mercury on his cap badge accented his jaunty air. The group clustered outside the tavern was exclusively female, and all frowned with desperate concern. The women and girls of Passelwaithe had gathered there to learn what fate their bitter, jealous men had in store for the handsome stranger who had brought excitement into their isolated and dreary lives.

The women parted ranks to let us through. I noted another curious detail: a full third of the women wore neck kerchiefs or scarves, an unlikely fashion and certainly not due to inclement weather in this warm Welsh summer. The bescarved women all looked pale and drawn, as if recovering from some wasting illness.

Reynolds lugged his portable wireless unit into the tavern, where the unruly menfolk clustered in little grumbling knots. Baron Zginski sat in the corner, in a large isolated chair, as if either a prisoner or some sort of exhibit. He seemed unmoved by the open hostility around him, and perhaps even a bit amused. Dr. Jermin stood nearby, and I nodded to him as we entered.

Signalman Reynolds established communication with his unit and confirmed the broadcast connection. Magistrate Toomley called the assembly to order, and I stood before them to make my opening pronouncement.

'Gentlemen of Passelwaithe, tonight we shall enter the modern age together. This is Signalman Reynolds of His Majesty's armed forces. He shall supervise the broadcast of this proceeding, so the entire outside world will be aware of what goes on here. And I shall aid you in dispelling this superstitious nonsense once and for all.' A few dissident grumbles were heard, but most said nothing.

Toomley banged a judicial gavel on the bar counter. 'I hereby open this meeting of the Passelwaithe Town Council. Our first item of business is the charge against Baron Rudolfo Zginski of being a vampire. Sir Francis?'

Dr. Jermin had provided me with a list of the most vitriolic accusers. 'I call Arvel Walker as my first witness,' I said.

I will refrain from boring the reader with a detailed account of the witnesses against Zginski. Enough to say that, to a man, they presented evidence not of supernatural evil, but of very mortal jealousy and resentment. My irrational misgivings of the previous night faded with each man who spoke.

After the testimony, I established that Dr. Jermin had that very day, and on numerous other occasions, seen Baron Zginski moving about during the hours before sunset (the very reason I'd arranged for the good doctor to be Zginski's escort). Although the tradition varied a bit, most authorities agreed that vampires stayed motionless and inert whilst the sun hung in the sky, and that a glimpse of its cleansing light would be enough to destroy them.

I reminded the assembly that several witnesses had testified that the Baron easily crossed streams and rivers. In folklore, running water formed an impenetrable barrier to vampires.

Finally it was my turn to question the Baron himself. First I asked him to eat some garlic, which he did. Then I held a mirror up to him, which clearly cast his reflection. I sprinkled holy water on him; it caused no damage. The Baron was calm, confident, perhaps even amused by these bits of folklore, as any normal man would be. Still, something in his demeanor struck an odd chord.

Nonetheless, I went ahead with my most theatrical test. A virgin white mare was brought into the room. If Zginski had been a traditional vampire, the horse would have become quite violently agitated. She merely looked around the room and waited patiently to be led away.

The crowd was silent. They were forced to confront the real root of their resentment, Zginski's wealth and handsomeness, and this did not sit well. As Toomley asked meekly if anyone had any other evidence to present, I surreptitiously studied Zginski, attempting to identify what about him disturbed me so.

Suddenly I isolated it. The man was not breathing.

Instinctively I took his wrist and felt for a pulse. By the time he yanked his arm away, I'd learned the truth.

‘Great guns!’ I ejaculated. ‘He is a vampire!’

The room collectively gasped. Zginski regarded me with a look of superior disdain. ‘Whatever,’ he said calmly, ‘are you on about?’

Dr. Jermin leapt to his feet. ‘Heavens above, Colby, are you certain?’

I met Zginski’s cold, lifeless gaze. ‘Beyond any reason,’ I said, and before he could respond, withdrew my revolver and fired point-blank into his chest.

The report rang out, silencing all in the room. Zginski remained in the chair, eyes wide, then looked down at the smoking hole in his expensive waistcoat. Before he could react, I turned to the assembled roomful of gaping Welsh mouths and said, ‘As you can see, he has been shot point-blank and yet does not bleed, nor has he registered any pain.’ Facing Zginski, I concluded, ‘Your concealment was almost perfect. But now you have been exposed.’

Zginski smiled weakly and started to speak. Then, with no warning, he leapt to his feet, his face twisted into a mask of fury and animal intensity. He grasped me by the throat in a grip of iron, his eyes blazing with demonic power and pushed me against the nearest wall.

‘Fool!’ he hissed. ‘No one need have died this night, if not for you! Now I shall slaughter them all, and you shall be the first!’

His arrogant confidence proved his undoing. While he flaunted his immense physical strength, he failed to note the second security measure as I produced it from my within my waistcoat. He did notice, however, when I plunged it into his heart above the still-smoking bullet hole.

Instantly he stumbled back, clawing at his chest. It took mere moments for him to collapse and, at last, expire on the floor, his body frozen in twisted agony.

I glanced at Signalman Reynolds. He was as pale as Baron Zginski’s now-lifeless corpse.

I knelt by the fallen vampire. Protruding from his chest was a golden cross, a crucifix found by Richard the Lion Heart on his first crusade to the Holy Land, blessed both in Jerusalem and later in Rome. A metalsmith monk in a distant cloister had reshaped it into a thin-bladed dagger for me, and it had proven too sharp indeed for the luckless continental nosferatu.

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Patricia put the manuscript aside and pulled on surgical gloves. She leaned over the coffin and examined the spot where the cross entered the withered tissue. The damage was so slight it was barely visible: just a tiny, thin slit where the blade parted the flesh. She took the handle in two fingers and gently pulled the cross from the corpse. It slid away easily, although she felt a little tingle when it finally pulled free, like a tiny arc of electricity just strong enough to pierce the rubber gloves. When she looked back, the injury had vanished into the folds of the wrinkled, dry flesh.

The cross rested in her hand, solid and heavy, the sharpened end stained black with sixty-year-old blood. She held it under the illuminated magnifier, studying the wealth of detail carved into the soft metal. This was a genuine piece of art, and would make a magnificent display in the university museum. She placed it carefully in a plastic bag, sealed it and put it on the nearest examination table. It looked even more unreal and majestic against the cold, flat stainless steel. She removed her gloves and turned to the final page of the manuscript.

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I was charged with murder at the official inquest, but had two factors in my favor. One was, of course, a roomful of witnesses who supported my claim of self-defense. The other was the report of the official examination by Dr. Jermin, establishing that the rate of decomposition in Zginski’s body was consistent with a body that had actually died at least thirty years earlier. No one could explain that, of course, but neither could anyone dispute it.

How could Zginski have been a vampire, and yet passed all the classic tests? I can only assume that vampires, like other creatures, are capable of evolving and adapting.

Baron Rudolfo Zginski was understandably refused Christian burial in the local cemetery. As there was no identifiable next of kin, I claimed the body and stored it in my cellar. I sealed it in an iron coffin, grounded through a lightning rod. I considered burning the body, which is the only way to be thoroughly certain a vampire cannot return. Yet Baron Zginski was such a singular character, I could not bring myself to do so. He had learned to mimic human behavior to an astounding degree, and forced me to rethink many things about which I was previously certain. I knew that, as long as the cross remained imbedded in his heart, the world was safe.

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Patricia's heart raced with excitement. This could be her academic ticket out of this backwater college if she could identify some rational, physiological explanation for the events Colby described, something that showed the face of prejudice in 1915 Wales as clearly as she knew it in 1975 Tennessee. After all, vampires didn't exist, so it simply couldn't be that.

She looked up with a start. An overpowering odor suddenly filled the room. It was no chemical she could identify, or any organic process she recognized. She jumped to her feet and peered into the morgue's darker corners, looking for a spilled bottle or leaking container. Then she gingerly approached the air conditioning vent. The smell did not grow stronger near it, which was a relief. The danger in any educational environment was that some careless or stoned student might accidentally mix two harmless substances into something lethal, and if those fumes got into the ventilation system it could hurt a lot of people.

The odor was, in fact, the scent of recomposition. Its unique tang was reminiscent of ripening fruit, meat being warmed over a slow fire and blood pulsing from an open wound. It was the olfactory byproduct of a process so rare that only a handful of people in all human history had ever witnessed it, although none had survived to document it. The fumes themselves were harmless; it was what they heralded that uniformly proved lethal.

The smell began to fade almost at once. Patricia sighed with relief; whatever it was, it was neither extensive nor, apparently, dangerous. Probably the residue of some cleaning chemicals mixed by accident in the garbage elsewhere in the building. She turned her attention back to Colby's manuscript. She smiled as she straightened the pages. She could only use excerpts from Sir Francis' narrative in her professional paper. Whatever his other skills, one thing was painfully obvious. Sir Francis Colby couldn't write worth a da --