

A Girl, a Goat, and a Zombie

(ANITA BLAKE: VAMPIRE HUNTER short story #25.5)

I've been asked to raise zombies for a lot of reasons: for historical research, insurance fraud cases, witnesses that died before they could testify in court, family members that missed that last therapy worthy good-bye, but I've never been asked to raise the dead so a team can win the World Series. Let me start by saying I don't follow baseball. I knew that Chicago's baseball team was the Cubs and that they never seemed to win anything, but that was it. I had no idea that there were people who believed sincerely that the Chicago Cubs will never win another World Series because they insulted a man and his pet goat, who cursed them. The man cursed them, not the goat; to my knowledge the goat was an innocent bystander. The man was William "Billy Goat" Sianis owner of the Billy Goat Tavern, his pet goat was named Murphy. He took Murphy to a baseball game at Wrigley Field in Chicago in 1944. Sianis even paraded Murphy on the baseball diamond before the game with an advertisement banner on him to promote the tavern, then Sianis and Murphy went to their two box seats to watch the game as planned. But someone complained that Murphy the goat smelled well . . . Like goat and Sianis was asked to leave before they could finish watching the game that they'd paid to see, so he cursed them that they'd never win again. Fast forward to 2016 and the curse has worked up to now. The Cubs have tried to break the curse before, with priests blessing Wrigley Field, and witches blessing it with some good ol' positive energy, but it didn't work. Sianis' nephew Sam had tried coming to Wrigley Field with various goats to try and break the curse. Sianis actually tried to break it himself by coming back to Wrigley Field and basically saying, I take it back, but even that didn't work.

The Cubs were in the play offs and someone got the bright idea that if they could raise Sianis from the dead, he could finally lift the curse. I thought it was just one of those internet memes, a joke, so when someone contacted me via FaceBook to see if I'd raise a zombie for the Chicago Cubs I said, "Sure, if you pay my normal fee, why not?"

I thought that would be the end of it, because my normal fee is a lot of money. Raising the dead is a specialized psychic ability to begin with, less than forty people in the entire world can do it. That makes it a seller's market, if you know what I mean. Now take that forty and subtract anyone who isn't gifted enough to raise a zombie that died in 1970, so forty-six years dead. That brings it down to about thirty-five, we were all young and learning the craft once. Now subtract anyone whose zombies are just the shambling dead, incapable of answering direct questions or showing any of the personality they had when alive, that cuts the list down to about twenty. Here's where it gets even trickier, because almost all animators, or even voodoo priestesses or priests, must sacrifice at least a chicken to raise a zombie. To raise someone nearly fifty years dead most of them would need a bigger death, like a goat. Somehow slaughtering a goat to raise a man from the grave who cursed people for just making him and his pet goat leave a baseball game early seemed counterproductive. Twenty people in the entire world that could raise Sianis and have his personality intact enough for him to answer direct questions and maybe, just maybe, figure out a way to lift the curse, but all of them needed to slaughter his favorite animal to get him out of the ground, so subtract nineteen from that twenty, because the only person on the planet that could raise Sianis without having to sacrifice an animal to do it was me. To my knowledge I was the only living animator that wouldn't need a smaller death to raise a human being from the grave, and I knew he'd be a good, fresh looking zombie that could answer questions and help people lift the curse, if it could be lifted. I mean the man had tried to lift it while he was alive and it hadn't worked, so I wasn't sure that him doing it as a zombie was going to be more effective, but it wasn't my dime, it was all the Cubs' fans who had contributed to a Kickstarter campaign and raised an amazing amount of money in an amazingly short time. I had totally not understood how badly the Cubs' fans wanted their beloved team to win, but as I stood in

the cemetery that unseasonably warm November night with police holding both the fans and the press back fifty feet to give me room to work I began to understand that this was a big deal to the fans, the Cubs, Chicago, baseball in general, and the playoffs for the World Series which was a very big deal indeed.

The last time someone had filmed me and put it up on YouTube they'd had to hide in the trees and be sneaky about it; this time I was going to be on most major news services both online and off. Hell, I might make ESPN which would just be weird for someone like me who was 5'3" and had never played a team sport in my life once I escaped the hell that had been gym class. I'd discovered Judo in college and now trained in the gym to try and keep up with my fellow U. S. Marshals in the Preternatural Branch, but I would never, ever describe myself as an athlete. Me on ESPN might finally impress my family, instead of just being an excommunicated Catholic that raised the dead, which only Jesus should do. Yeah, I don't go home for family reunions much.

Its never really dark in most major cities, but the lights that the TV crews had put up were like floodlights, it was so bright that I could see color and I was glad I'd taken off my Cardinal's baseball cap. A friend had given it to me as a joke, because he knew I didn't follow the Cards anymore than I followed the Cubs, but somehow wearing it might give the wrong idea, like I wasn't serious about helping the Cubs out. I was serious, serious enough that I'd been prepared to use my own blood for their zombie. How much more serious could I get than opening a vein? I'd raise the zombie, but I wasn't the one who would be taking it to Wrigley Field. One of the highest prizes in the Kickstarter campaign was a chance to be the fan inside the circle of power with me. A chance to get the sweet smelling graveyard mold ointment smeared on your forehead, your hands and over your heart. I was wearing the ointment, too, though I normally didn't use it. It was to help clear your mind and help you raise power, I hadn't needed that kind of help in years, but to make sure the woman standing across the grave from me would have the ability to control the zombie I couldn't skip as much. Shortcuts were for professionals, and Mrs. Irma Wadowski was not a professional necromancer, she was a retired accountant.

She was tall, at least 5'8", maybe an inch or two taller. She was dressed head to foot in Cubbies blue with bright red C's here and there and a cute blue bear cub on her ample chest. She was almost round with that soft extra weight that some women get when fifty to sixty is their decade. She'd pulled the Cub's ball cap low enough to touch her wire-framed glasses. Her hair was short and curly, the color somewhere between white and a gray that was almost blue. If she had been a little shorter I'd have said she looked like the proverbial old-fashioned grandmother, until you got to her eyes. There was a very serious glint to her pale gray eyes, a near fanatical light. I'd seen that look a lot tonight in the faces of the fans that had been willing to put up their own hard earned cash to help their team.

The first time I pulled my machete out of my bag Mrs. Wadowski had gone pale, but she'd stood her ground, this time she didn't even flinch just squared her shoulders and said, "Let's do this." I was pretty sure that Mrs. Wadowski had been hell on wheels when she was younger, or was it ageist to think that she must have mellowed as she'd gotten older?

I laid the freshly cleaned machete against the tip of my finger beside the already bandaged one on my left hand. I was careful not to cut too deep, because I kept the blade sharp enough to behead a chicken with one blow, which was pretty damned sharp.

My finger started bleeding immediately which meant it was a shallow cut, yay! I hated when I accidentally cut too deep and needed stitches. I healed more than human normal, but not when I was cut by a magically charged blade, not even when it was my own. I laid my finger against the flat of the machete so that the blood would trail down the blade as I pointed it at the ground between the gravestones of the Sianis family. The graves were so close together that the “circle” was going to be less round and more odd-shaped blob to make sure I only got one grave inside with us. The first drop of blood fell onto the ground and I felt the echo of power of a necromancer’s blood and a blade that had raised more zombies than most animators would see in a career. The ground seemed to almost shiver as I dripped red dot by red dot across the ground. I heard the crowd like a distant ocean of noise, but it faded to the feel of me walking the circle, protecting what I was about to do, keeping Irma and the zombie we would raise safe from the things that wandered the night searching for dead bodies that were lively enough to take for a test drive.

The power jumped from blood drop to blood drop, it didn’t need to be a continuous line of blood, thankfully for my health and wellbeing. The last drop fell into place and the thrill of it ran through me in a way that no zombie raising had ever done until I did it in front of the wall of eager and deeply invested Cubs’ fans. It was as if their energy was upping everything, as if just by wishing they could make this happen and make it work.

Irma shivered, but knew not to say anything this time. I wiped my blood on the tombstone and tapped it with the machete and called out, “William Sianis, with steel I call you from your grave.” I touched the machete to the tombstone. “With blood I call you from your grave!” I smeared my bloody hand along the cool stone. I moved carefully to the foot of the grave so that I didn’t smear my own “circle” of power. “Hear me, William Sianus, with steel, blood, and power I call you from your grave. Hear us and obey! I command you to rise from your grave. Rise from your grave and walk among us!”

The grass of the grave rolled over as if it had become green water, the dark earth underneath spilling upward. In the movies zombies crawl from the grave as if they have to dig their way out, but it’s more like the ground becomes liquid and the zombie floats to the top. William Sianis sat blinking on top of his grave. There were gasps from the crowd and the noise and click of hundreds of smartphones taking pictures. There were also a few screams, because by using just a little of my own blood, William “Billy Goat” Sianis looked more like a movie zombie and less like the handsome man on the small portrait set into the tombstone. He was obviously older than the portrait, but the waxy white skin, sunken eyes devoid of any thought, the bones showing underneath the wasted flesh said, this was a dead thing. It was sitting up and moving, but that didn’t make it alive.

I looked at Irma Wadowski who was clutching the tombstone like it was the last solid thing on the planet. She looked pale, but determined. She held out her hand and tore the bandage off her finger where we’d cut it earlier. The Kickstarter had promised the highest contributor would be in control of the zombie, but to be sure he obeyed her for tonight she had to put more than just her money where the zombie’s mouth was. She held out her hand wordlessly.

I brought her around the grave, careful to stay in the circle, and guided her hand to the zombie. “William Sianis, drink of this blood and speak to us.” He sniffed at the blood and then grabbed her wrist with one cold hand. Irma flinched, but when he put his mouth around her bleeding finger and started to drink her blood she didn’t faint or scream. She was pale and a light dew of sweat started on her skin, but she was rock solid beside me.

The zombie's eyes blinked and suddenly there was someone looking out at us. He was in there. I helped Irma get her finger away from the zombie, and said, "William Sianis."

"Bill," he said in a voice that sounded gruff. He cleared his throat and looked up at us, clearly confused and who could blame him?

I explained as simply and clearly as I could why we'd raised him from the dead. If I'd been him I might have been miffed to be raised from the dead for something this frivolous, but he wasn't upset. He looked sincerely sorry as he said, "I tried to break the curse when I was alive, but it didn't work."

"You went back to Wrigley Field by yourself, but you didn't take your goat back," I said.

He nodded and agreed, but said, "Murphy was dead, by then."

"I know," I said, and motioned for the other ardent Cubs fan that lead a goat on a leash and halter forward from the crowd. The goat didn't look much better than Bill Sianis, but hey how many people could even raise a zombie goat?

Bill Sianis called out joyfully, "Murphy!"

The goat bleated and it was a happy sound. I took down enough of my circle so that Bill the Zombie could greet his zombie goat. Murphy capered and rubbed against his old master while Bill petted him, if they hadn't both been partially rotted it would have been a true Hallmark moment.

Irma came out of the circle with me. She hugged me. "You did it!"

"Not yet," I said, "you need to take them to the game."

Bill Sianis looked up and I swear the goat looked at me, too. "What do you mean?"

"You and Murphy are going with Mrs. Wadowski to Wrigley Field and finish watching that game that you missed."

He smiled a little too wide snapping a ligament in his cheek, but he looked so happy it didn't phase Irma and I'd seen worse. Irma told him they were getting in the limo to ride to the game. The goat bleated happily as Bill led Murphy to the limo to ride to Wrigley Field in style to break the curse on the Cubs, and that's exactly what they did.

Bill Sianis and Murphy the goat are safely back in their respective graves having finally gotten to see the Cubs play a game. Congratulations to the Chicago Cubs, winners of the 2016 World Series!

The End