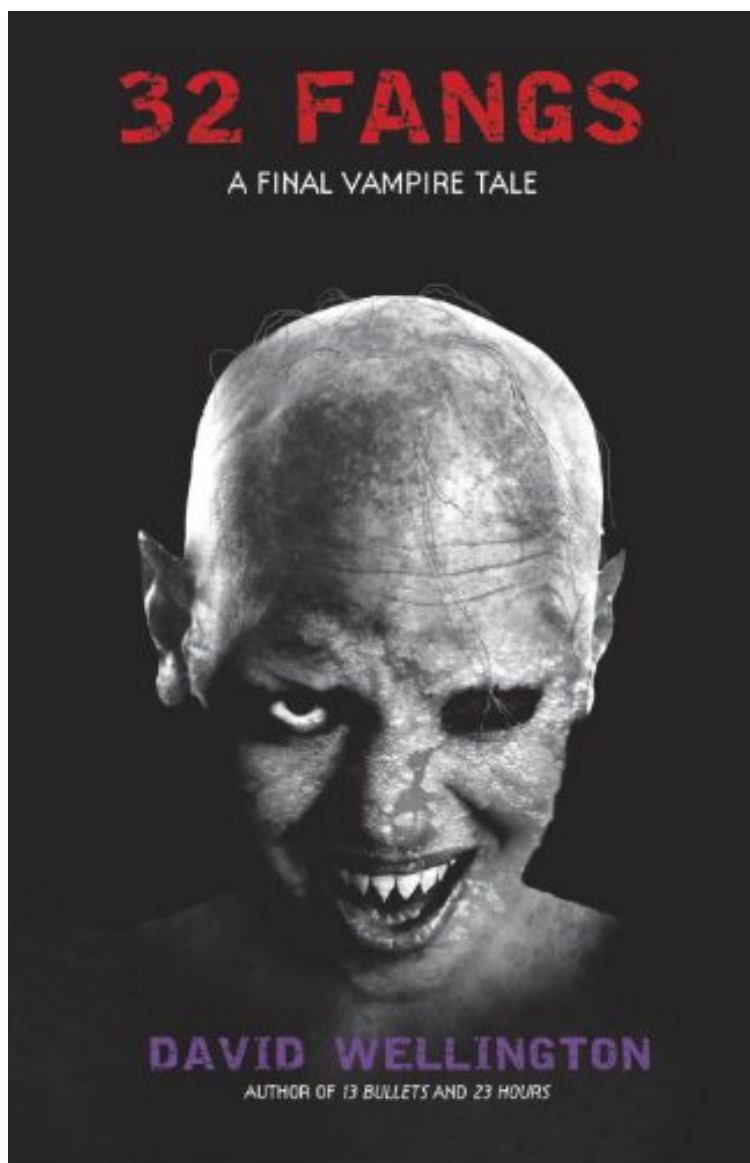


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32 Fangs: A Final Vampire Tale



Par David Wellington
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe Final ReckoningLaura Caxton's battles against the ancient vampire Justinia Malvern have cost her nearly everythingher badge, her freedom, her friends and family . . . maybe even her humanity.And as she hides out in the deepest backwoods of Pennsylvania, pursued by the cops who were once her colleagues, Laura certainly looks beaten. But as Laura sees it, what little is left of her soul is perfectly adapted to the job of ridding the world of its last vampire. And thanks to the terrible clarity she's found, Laura's come up with a planone that will finish Malvern once and for all.But the ever-wily Malvern has a few last aces left to play and is quietly dealing a hand that will involve a terrible fate for the few friends Laura's got left. When the two adversaries meet for the last time in their most epic battle, the

vampires will force Laura to pay a price far beyond anything she's sacrificed before. Extrait 1702 What kind of monster are ye? Father demanded, as he slammed his fists again and again into Uncle Reginald's stomach. The girls but seven years old! James, I beg of ye, stop! I am wholly innocent! Uncle screamed. Just as he'd been screaming since the beating began. She demanded I give her a piece of candy, and I simply refused, but--Tis not the way she tells it, Father insisted. He turned away for a moment, seething with rage, and took up the first thing to hand--a pair of iron sheep shears, honed to a razor edge. He drove the blades of the shears deep up under Uncle's rib cage and twisted them. Uncle Reginald stopped screaming then, but his whole body convulsed as the blade dug through flesh and sinew. Foam flecked his lips, and his eyes, which had been swollen shut with bruises, bulged outward from their sockets. She says ye offered her some candy if she would take down her small clothes. Seven years old! Uncle made no reply. It did not occur to the girl that he might already be dead. Clearly it did not occur to Father, either, as he drove the blade of the shears home again and again. The girl stepped backward as blood spread across the straw-covered floor of the barn. Behind her the sheep stared placidly at the scene, wholly disinterested spectators. Eventually Father threw down the shears, and wiped one gore-coated hand across his mouth. He was breathing heavily and sweat poured down his bald head and pooled in his ears. He turned to look at the girl and the expression on his face was one she would never forget. He was not angry anymore. His face had gone as pale as paper and his mouth hung open, his slack lips wide to suck in breath. In his eyes was a look of desperate pleading. He wanted something from the girl. But what? Thanks, for what he'd done? The validation of knowing he'd done the right thing, been a good father? Or simple forgiveness? She would never know. She would never, in fact, see her father after this day. He would be taken to the assizes, given a quick trial, and hanged in the town square as a fratricide. But all that was in the future. This special moment, this very first of her murders, was frozen in time as she stood before the sheep and away from the spreading pool of blood that threatened to touch her shoes. She was too young to comprehend what had just happened. She was only peripherally aware that something very important, something consequential, had changed in the barn. There had been three people there. Now there were two. Father dropped the shears and ran out through the wide doors, into the sunlight. He did not speak to her before he left. The girl was left alone with the corpse. Uncle's eyes had receded back behind their lids and he wasn't moving, not at all. The blood parted as it rolled around her shoes. She felt it soak through the thin cloth and touch her flesh, and though she had expected to be revolted by the feeling, disgusted by the wetness of it, instead one simple fact impressed itself upon her. The blood was so very warm. She splashed through it toward Uncle's body, as if she were playing in a puddle in the rain. Red as rubies it was. When she reached Uncle she leaned over close to peer down into his battered face. How different he seemed now from the man she'd known all her life. How funny a person could change so quickly. He looked a million years old already. She leaned down further, and kissed him on the forehead. He had been wholly innocent, just as he claimed. She had made up the funny story. How easy it was to make things up. How easy it was to make things happen. Ye should have given me the candy, she whispered to him. From outside the barn she heard her mother calling, her voice cracked with alarm. Are ye in there, child? Are ye in there? Justinia--where are ye? The girl turned toward the door, and made a mask of her face.

A mask of fear she did not feel. She forced tears to her eyes. In here, Mama, she shouted. In here! 1. Television and the Internet had given the public the false impression that it was impossible to get away with a crime in the twenty-first century. That advances in forensic science and law enforcement techniques meant a criminal could be tracked by the subtlest of evidence. That if he left behind a single fiber from his clothing, or so much as a fraction of a fingerprint, a burglar or a rapist was as good as caught. If it was that easy, Clara Hsus' back wouldn't hurt so much. At the ripe old age of thirty-one, she was already starting to feel like an old lady. Squatting on the floor of a convenience store in Altoona, a jeweler's loupe screwed into one eye, she groaned with every duckwalking step as she studied the bottom shelf of a display of snack cakes. She was looking for anything, and nothing in particular. Fibers were next to impossible to spot at the best of times. Dusting the entire store for fingerprints would take days, since every surface had to be studied individually under special lights and from multiple angles. If she found anything, even so innocuous a clue as a scuff mark on the floor tiles from the perp's sneakers, she would be happy. She'd been working this scene all day and into the twilight hours and so far she remained unhappy. Outside, beyond the wide glass windows that looked out on gas pumps and colorful signage, a single flashing light and hundreds of feet of yellow tape cordoned off the crime scene from the summer night that thrummed with the noise of crickets. Inside the store every available light was burning so she could get a better view, while the store's audio system droned out some pop music hit she'd never heard before. That had been the first sign that she

was getting old, that she had stopped keeping up with the Top Forty. The way her knees popped when she stood up helped reinforce the feeling. There was no blood anywhere in the store. The teenaged kid who had been working behind the register had been found dead at his post, but without a speck of blood on him. That had been enough to get Clara's attention. For two years now she had been looking for just that kind of murder. The State Police and the local authorities of twelve counties all knew to call her whenever a bloodless murder occurred, and she always went when they called. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, it only meant that the victim had been killed with a blunt instrument that failed to break the skin. But still she went out whenever they called, and still she gave every case her full attention. Most forensic specialists wanted blood on the scene. Blood was easy to work with--between DNA, blood types and factors, spray patterns, trails of blood leading away from scenes, bloody footprints retaining the tread pattern of the perp's shoes, and a dozen other kinds of clues, blood always talked. But there was one kind of killer who didn't have DNA. Or fingerprints. Who almost never wore shoes. And who, unless they were rushed, would never leave so much as a droplet of blood behind. Vampires tended to be very thorough. Luckily for everyone, they were just about extinct. There was only one vampire left in the world. Justinia Malvern, the one who got away--or so Clara believed. She'd been looking for Malvern for two years now, with no official support. Her bosses believed that Malvern was dead, burned to a crisp during a riot in a women's prison two years prior. Clara knew they were wrong, but so far couldn't prove it--for two years, Malvern might as well have disappeared off the face of the earth. And in her business, proof was everything. She sighed as she pushed aside a stack of frosted mini-donuts and squinted for fibers behind them. Nothing. She checked behind the frosted chocolate cupcakes. Nothing. The cinnamon twists mocked her. She grabbed one pack and tore it open, then shoved a spiral pastry in her mouth and bit down. She'd worked straight through her dinner break and her energy level was low enough to excuse breaking her diet. As she chewed the dry dough, she let the loupe fall out of her eye socket and caught it with her free hand, then shoved it in her pocket. She dropped the empty snack wrapper on the floor in front of her, and then massaged both eyes with the balls of her thumbs. She pressed hard enough to make flashes of light burst behind her eyeballs. She blinked the afterimages away, then reached for a fruit pie. A shadow fell across her arm. Just for a moment, then it was gone. Hello? This is a sealed crime scene, she called out, thinking one of the local cops must have come in to see how she was doing. I need to maintain the integrity of the space, so--The door to the convenience store's bathroom stood open, revealing nothing but shadows. It had definitely been closed before. Clara put a hand on either thigh and started levering herself up to a standing position. Every joint in her legs complained. Whoever was in the store with her would, she was certain, hear her knees popping over the beat of the sound system. Hello? she called again. There was no answer. Most forensic specialists didn't wear sidearms. They typically weren't cleared for them, and anyway they never approached a crime scene until the uniform cops had already cleared the place and taped it off. They didn't need weapons. Clara, on the other hand, had been taught by a very paranoid teacher to always stay safe. She reached for her holster, intending only to unfasten the safety strap. Before she could do that, however, a shoe came out of nowhere and cracked her across the jaw. Clara's head flew to the side and back and her feet went out from under her, spilling her to the floor. Clara toppled into a rack of magazines, spilling glossy pages all over the floor. The attacker punched her in the kidney and she fell down in a heap. She hadn't even gotten a good look at him yet. If she were someone else, someone stronger, faster--if she were Laura, she thought, she would already have this guy down on the ground and cuffed. But Clara was no action movie cop. She'd never wanted to be. She'd wanted to be an art photographer. She'd wanted to be famous for her tasteful nudes or maybe just poignantly expressive still lifes. Signing on with the police had just been a way to pay the rent. A fist caught her in the side of her head and she nearly passed out. Spots danced in her vision and her hands felt numb. Her hands--her hands had been reaching for--for--Right. She had a gun. She managed to get the catch undone as the assailant stomped on her shoulder. She whipped the gun out of its holster and fired blind into where she thought he might be. And--she hit him. She felt shreds of flesh fall on her face, like pulled pieces of chicken. The flesh was strangely cold. She expected to be soaked in blood but wasn't. She did not have time to wonder why, or to be disgusted, though she knew she was eventually going to have to throw up. The attacker screamed, a high-pitched wail that didn't sound anything like what she'd expected. For all the pain she was feeling she'd expected the attacker to be some hulking guy, seven feet tall and just as wide through the shoulders. He sounded more like a demonic puppet. Wait--no--it couldn't be--He didn't stick around to let her get a good look. He bolted through the store, bouncing off a rack of paperbacks by the register, and out the doors into the night. Clara blinked, trying to clear her vision. It felt as if he'd detached one of her retinas. Overhead the sound system launched into

another pop song. She had to go after him. She had to catch him. That was what Laura would have done. That was what a cop was supposed to do. Well. Technically she wasn't a cop, she was a forensic specialist. But then technically the cops were supposed to have already combed the scene and made sure there weren't any drug-crazed madmen hiding out in the convenience store's bathroom. Clara struggled up to her feet. Everything hurt. She slipped on the glossy magazines and nearly cracked her head open on the floor tiles. But she got up. She stood up and looked out through the windows at the front of the store, hoping to see a blood trail. Something she could follow. Instead she found her attacker standing out there, looking back in at her. He was over by the gas pumps, lit up bright as day by the store's floodlights. He wore a pale yellow hooded sweatshirt that concealed his face, and he was clutching at a wound on his arm--almost certainly where she'd hit him with her shot. There was no blood on his sleeve. Damn it, if she could just see his face, she would know for sure. His face--or maybe his lack of same. When he saw her he gave another little shriek and ran. Coward! she shouted at him. She doubted he heard her through the glass. She pushed through the door of the store and gave chase.

1712 Gentlemen, Justinia said, smiling as she made eye contact with each of the three players, the game is whist. Strict silence shall be observed. She held the cards up close to her décolletage to keep attention away from her hands as she dealt. Thirteen cards to each player, and the last to determine trumps. This time, hearts were trumps. The single red pip like a blot of blood landed in the center of the table and play began. Over their heads, in the room upstairs that Justinia shared with her mother, a bed began to creak. The man across from Justinia, her partner, chuckled at the sound, but she wagged one finger for silence. In a world so filthy and full of sin as this, the quiet rhythm of the game was sacred to Justinia. One clean thing she could call her own. Which was not to say she didn't cheat with the cards.

Présentation de l'auteur

The Final Reckoning

Laura Caxton's battles against the ancient vampire Justinia Malvern have cost her nearly everything: her badge, her freedom, her friends and family . . . maybe even her humanity. And as she hides out in the deepest backwoods of Pennsylvania, pursued by the cops who were once her colleagues, Laura certainly looks beaten. But as Laura sees it, what little is left of her soul is perfectly adapted to the job of ridding the world of its last vampire. And thanks to the terrible clarity she's found, Laura's come up with a plan one that will finish Malvern once and for all. But the ever-wily Malvern has a few last aces left to play and is quietly dealing a hand that will involve a terrible fate for the few friends Laura's got left. When the two adversaries meet for the last time in their most epic battle, the vampires will force Laura to pay a price far beyond anything she's sacrificed before.