

BLOOD and SUNLIGHT

A Maryland Vampire Story



Melanie would love to believe in fairytales. She'd love, in fact, to believe in anything. The twenty-three-year-old college dropout is stuck — stuck in a dead-end waitress job, stuck in her hometown of Ellicott City, Maryland, and stuck with a boyfriend who likes to play dress-up as a vampire.

Vampires. Her world and her reality are turned upside down when she encounters the real thing. Along the way, she meets Lucas, the would-be vampire slayer, his father the sheriff, and ultimately the vampire himself. Melanie learns that fairytales can come true, and evil isn't always where you expect to find it.

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by

Jamie Wasserman

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~AUTHOR DEDICATION~

For Michelle, Alex, Shana, and Baby Number Three — my happily ever after.

I'd especially like to thank my wife Michelle, who read dozens and dozens of drafts of this book. She should, by all rights, be working as an editor at a large publishing house. I'd also like to thank my parents, Joe and Nadia, who surprised me by not only reading the book but telling me how much they enjoyed it. They're not particularly good liars, but they are great parents. I'd also like to thank Gerri Hernandez, Chris Huza, Ron Raynor, Samantha Anamasi, and Katie Catalano — your encouragement and suggestions made this happen.

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And Little Red Cap thought, “As long as I live, I will never leave the path and run off into the woods by myself.”

—*Little Red Cap, The Brothers Grimm*

PART I

Fall



Prologue

“...and they lived happily ever after.” The man closed the book and waited.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, darling,” he said, smiling to himself. He was never lucky enough to get away with reading just one story.

“I’m not sleepy.”

“You haven’t tried. Close your eyes,” he recited. This was their nightly ritual.

“It won’t help.” The little girl frowned, sat up in bed, and crossed her arms.

“Would you like some water?”

“No.”

“Another blanket?”

“Daddy...” the little girl whined.

“Another story?” the man asked, sighing.

The little girl nodded happily.

“Okay, okay.” The man flipped the big book in his lap open to another page. He had already bookmarked which story he was going to read.

“Sleeping Beauty?”

“I don’t want a story from *that* book.”

“Oh?” the man asked, surprised. This book was her favorite, and he

couldn't remember the last time she had asked him to read anything else. "Okay," he said, unsure, and reached towards her small book shelf.

"Uh-uh."

"Uh-uh, what?"

"I want the story you know by heart."

The man leaned forward and smoothed back the girl's hair. "The one I used to tell your brother when he was little?"

"Yes, that one."

"I don't know ... it's been a long time since I've told that one. I may not remember it."

"You remember."

She was right, of course. How could he forget? Things were much better then. "It might be a little scary for you," he said, trying one last time to distract her.

"Please, Daddy!"

The man watched her lips turn down at the corners, and he knew he had already lost. He just couldn't stand to see her cry. He kissed the girl on the forehead and took her hand. "You know he's going to be fine, right? Your brother's pretty tough."

"I know."

The man studied the little girl. Even in the dark, her face looked serene, untroubled.

"Okay," he said. "Move over. Let me sit next to you."

"How come?" she asked, scooting over quickly.

"So *I* don't get scared." He crammed as much of himself as he could onto her small bed. "Let's see..." he said to himself.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, dear."

"Is there a princess?"

"Yes, but she doesn't know she's a princess."

"Just like Cinderella?"

"A lot like Cinderella, yes."

The man waited. His daughter's questions always came in twos.

After a short pause, she added, "And, Daddy?"

"Yes, sweetie?" He folded his hands in his lap.

"Are there monsters?" She pulled the covers up past her mouth.

"Yes." He tugged the blanket away from her face. "All fairytales have monsters. But these are a little different. These monsters look just like you and me."

"Then how do you know they're monsters?"

"You don't. Not always," the man said sadly.

The little girl chewed at the inside of her lip, mulling this over.

He looked at his daughter. She had the same worried expression her mother had. It made the man smile at the memory. "Are you sure you want to hear this?"

The little girl nodded up at her father.

"Okay, I think I remember it now. This story begins like any other fairytale. Do you want to start it for me?"

The little girl closed her eyes and snuggled next to her dad. "Once upon a time..."



Chapter 1

Ellicott City is a former mill town cut into the rocky Maryland hillside. The Patapsco River runs alongside the train tracks at the bottom of Main Street, part of the old B&O railroad connection. Every spring, the river banks flood and pour over the cobbled streets. And every fall, part of the shopping district, once home to migrant rail workers, catches fire and destroys another small piece of the town's history. The steeples from a dozen Victorian churches rise above the trees, their bells the only note heard clearly above the Sunday morning tourist exodus. There is much history here, but for the most part the dead are silent, despite the many signs advertising ghost walks and haunted tour groups.

In June, when the rains finally relent, the air is sticky and thick and gets into everyone's eyes and hair. The stores close early but remain lit, warding off the night like garlic. An old wooden train bridge marks one end of Main Street; a rickety, soot-covered mess that sprawls across the road like a gateway into something terrible. It signals a stopping point for tourists.

Just on the other side of that bridge sits the Old Monk, a brick and mortar restaurant thrown together somewhat haphazardly off the main road.

* * * * *

It was only 8:00 pm. The last of the locals finished their meals as Melanie listened to the soft clinking of glasses and plates, and the dull thrum of conversation drifting from an open window. An empty coffee cup sat untouched on her table. It had been at least an hour since a waiter had bothered to check on her, and that was part of the appeal of this place.

She sat in the courtyard in the back of the restaurant, or rather, what passed for a courtyard — discarded patio furniture and an umbrella or two that had no doubt been washed to the back of the building by the nearby

Patapsco River in the latest storm. She sat in the dark, watching the even darker water crest and bubble, half expecting a body to be suddenly cast from its murky depths. She was in that kind of mood. Expecting the worst, and confident that she wouldn't be disappointed.

Soon they would arrive, in long dark coats and velvety sashes, reeking of Marlboros and skunky beer and opium incense, and maybe that would lighten her thoughts, or at least take her mind off the anniversary of yet another missed year of college, yet another year stuck in this town.

She returned her attention to the black cat that sat cleaning itself on the flat-topped roof. She didn't mind sketching the little fur-balls, but if it got within kicking distance, she couldn't be held responsible for her actions. It wasn't just that she was allergic; there was something in her that seemed to bring out the worst in cats. Like she was wearing mouse-scented perfume.

Melanie tucked a newly dark strand of hair behind heavily pierced ears. She had a heart-shaped face and large, bright eyes that made her seem keenly aware and always interested. Melanie was thin and almost always wore black clothes, which gave her a hungry, desperate look that men seemed to love. She felt old, jaded, and over the hill — she was twenty-three.

Tonight she wore cut-off jeans and a sheer tank top; a hold-over from the sweltering afternoon. Though the night had cooled considerably, her body still felt warm, and she figured she'd most likely be drunk or high soon enough that the evening cold wouldn't matter anyway.

She thumbed through her sketchpad, looking for a clean page. She'd need another one soon. With stark and sharp charcoal lines, she began to sketch the cat, who preened and purred at the attention. Just before she could add the eyes, always her biggest challenge, the world went completely dark.

Two clammy hands held fast over her eyes.

"Guess who?" a voice said. It was high and shaky. The hairs on the back of Melanie's neck stood up. "You smell nice," the speaker said, lingering at her throat and nibbling playfully at her ear.

"Hi Bryan."

"Lucian," he corrected. "I told you to call me Lucian." He slumped in the chair next to Melanie.

Bryan was tall and skinny and seemed skinnier still in his long black overcoat at least two sizes too large. He wore a crumpled black top hat that covered stringy black hair dried out from too many dye jobs. He was pale and powdered his skin wherever his Mediterranean coloring threatened to poke through.

"What happened to your teeth?" Melanie asked, hurriedly tucking away her sketchbook in her worn backpack serving as both a purse and art portfolio. She didn't mind sharing her photographs, but her drawings felt more personal. They weren't simply something she saw, but something she felt, and she fully believed in keeping those types of things hidden.

Bryan stuck a long finger in his mouth, "I took them out. They were tearing up my gums. I may get mine sharpened. I haven't decided."

Melanie shook her head. She knew Bryan wouldn't go through with it. He even opted for magnetic earrings instead of full piercings. She herself had five tiny silver studs that ran up and down both ears like Braille, and she had been thinking of adding more.

Whatever the reason, she should be grateful Bryan had ditched his fake teeth. Not only did the plastic vampire teeth he liked to wear make him lisp and drool, but they were the cause of at least two bar fights. It made him look *ridiculous*.

"Did you bring anything to drink?"

Bryan produced a small bottle from a tattered backpack, "Wine. Blood red." He winked.

Melanie smiled despite herself. Bryan could be corny, but it was hard to deny his enthusiasm.

"I like your hair." He rested a hand on her thigh.

"I figured you would." She leaned in to kiss him. She liked the way he tasted, like smoke and Chardonnay. He was dry but sweet.

They met in a summer art class. Night school, of course, because traipsing about in daylight would ruin his finely cultivated pale complexion. Bryan was deeply appreciative of Melanie's series of photographs of garbage cans. Of everything about Melanie for that matter.

On their first date, he stood nervously at the door and waited for her

to invite him in. Later he would ask permission to kiss her. She chose what movies they saw and where they went to dinner. She decided when they were finished making love, even if he hadn't. He made her feel strong, and if that meant pretending tomato juice was blood and swearing off garlic, then so be it. Besides, this strange relationship gave her the days totally free to herself.

While Bryan playfully nipped at her lips like a puppy, she studied the turrets from an old castle-like house or church that rose dizzily above the legacy oaks on the hillside. Though the way the building sat precariously on the edge of the cliff sickened her, Melanie felt obsessed with locating the property. She imagined climbing into the house on a rope of spun gold, a wealth of untold treasures awaiting her discovery, but subsequent attempts to find it despite detours deep into the woods had proved fruitless.

Tonight, she noticed smoke pouring from a chimney, the first sign she'd ever seen of anyone living there. She had assumed it was long abandoned.

A not so distant howl interrupted them.

"Listen to them, the children of the night. What music they make," Bryan said, doing his best Bela Lugosi.

Melanie snapped back to attention, "It's just Carl."

"You have no imagination." Bryan slumped in his chair and searched his pockets for a cigarette.

Melanie did not understand why so many of her dates had to include Bryan's minion — or posse, or whatever he was calling him these days.

Suddenly, a large black shape landed on the patio, taking out a rusted metal chair. Melanie's cat, sleeping peacefully now in the shadows, screeched and ran up the nearest drainpipe. Melanie didn't even flinch — God help her, this was becoming an all too familiar routine.

"What's up, suckas?" Carl picked up the broken chair and hurled it as far as he could. It landed on the soft ground by the river's edge. He watched it, disappointed, and brushed rust from his hands.

Tonight he was wearing a frilly white shirt and purple velvet pants. His naturally dark curly hair was bleached nearly white. Yin to Bryan's Yang. Melanie often tried to imagine Carl as he was in the Marines; scrubbed,

shaved, and pressed into a uniform. The mental image always went up in a cloud of dust when presented alongside the real thing.

When Melanie met Bryan, he and Carl were already inseparable. Carl waited for Bryan after class, and the three of them would drink coffee at the student union or catch the last showing at the Golding Theater. She began to wonder if she were dating both of them and how sex would work.

Back then, Bryan seemed pretty unremarkable. He and Carl shared an apartment near the community college, volunteered nights at the local homeless shelter, and even wrote an article or two for the local paper. His hair was blonde and close cut, and without the goofy plastic Halloween teeth sticking out of his mouth like ill-fitting braces, he might be considered pretty attractive, or at least normal enough to sit next to on a bus.

Bryan always had a fascination for all things morbid — zombies, ghosts, werewolves, serial killers — but his first love was always vampires. After a recent ‘pilgrimage’ to New Orleans with Carl, he returned completely caped out, looking like a cross between Inspector Gadget and Count Chocula. Melanie hoped it was just a passing phase and that he would soon find something else ghoulish to obsess about. Maybe even her.

In order to appease him, Melanie began ditching the long, flowing hippy dresses she loved for tighter, darker clothing. She painted her bright turquoise eyes with black liner so they’d look more baleful, and took right away to the endless supply of drugs and liquor that Carl provided. Melanie suspected visits into Bryan’s albeit limited fantasy world might be the closest she’d come to an exotic getaway.

“What’s the plan?” she asked. Though she already knew the answer, she hoped, just once, Bryan might add a change of venues to his limited repertoire. Maybe they could even leave the city, if only for just an evening.

“Where else?” Bryan grinned. “Anybody got any ‘shrooms?” He rummaged through his backpack.

“Better.” Carl dropped a small plastic baggy filled with white tablets on the table. *Ecstasy*.

His choice of drugs was getting progressively bolder but he had yet to produce something Melanie refused. She wondered if she had any limits; if

there was nothing she wouldn't swallow.

Bryan smiled, and he and Carl let the small pills melt on their tongues, then washed it down with swigs of wine. Melanie secretly dropped hers in the back pocket of her bag — she needed to be clear-headed for the walk to Hell House.



Chapter 2

If the legends were to be believed, Hell House, or rather the ruins of Hell House, were a monument and tomb to a terrible evil. The building began life in the 1800s as a monastery, but an outbreak of typhoid or cholera forced its doors to shut. Some say that the dead were interred within its walls.

Hell House reopened in the 1900s as a convent but quickly burnt to the ground under mysterious circumstances — the nuns burned alive with it. Fifty years later it was rebuilt as a seminary, run by priests rumored to practice satanic rituals. Following the mysterious deaths of several students, the place closed and remained abandoned for decades.

Eventually, a caretaker was appointed to guard the property against the onslaught of teenagers looking for a good scare or a secluded place to screw. He carried with him his own set of urban legends — he was a convict, a squatter, a Satanist come to reclaim the property. It was said he brandished a sawed-off shotgun in one hand and a monstrous pit bull on a chain in the other. Last Halloween, the house burned to the ground a final time, and the caretaker disappeared completely into myth and rumors and the Maryland night.

Melanie did not accept or believe anything she couldn't see or touch. Years of Catholic upbringing had literally beat any faith out of her head. So one Saturday afternoon, while Bryan slept, she spent the better part of an afternoon in the cramped Maryland Historical Society building to learn the real history behind Hell House.

The truth, Melanie noted, was far more mundane than the legend. Its real name was St. Francis Xavier College — and it did once serve as a seminary for the Redemptionists, a group of devout Catholic missionaries. She discovered cracked and yellowed newspapers with photos of a lovely Gazebo that overlooked the river, sprawling well-kept grounds, and even an outdoor pool in the back. The school ran uninterrupted for almost a century.

Yes, fires were part of its past, but that was also true for everything in this ancient, fragile town.

The caretaker was a man named August Grund, a Vietnam vet who drove a beat-up pickup and sometimes had run-ins with the police, but always over late-night intruders. He lived in a small, well-kept trailer at the back of the house.

Melanie took a trip to Hell House one spring afternoon and ran into August. He showed her where wild rose vines climbed the chain link fence that surrounded the property, and where to watch out for poison ivy. His 'hellhound' was a half-blind fourteen-year-old Doberman named Linda who licked Melanie's hand and whimpered at her heels. In a final move which ruined almost all the remaining mystique of the ancient grounds, August asked Melanie back to his trailer for a cappuccino.

None of this Melanie shared with Bryan.

Ever since he had discovered the hidden tunnels, Hell House had become his official hideout and playground. Underneath the rotten pile of ashes and timber that was the actual house, the fire exposed a ruined network of underground tunnels, most likely remnants of the old boiler room and later the laundry and electricity tunnels. But for Bryan, they represented a descent into something far more mystical. The unknown. An underworld of his own making. Although Melanie hated every rat-infested step, she refused to take the romance out of his world, and in fact hoped secretly that some of it might even enter hers.

There were easier ways to get to Hell House. Just past the Old Monk, where Main Street ended and gave way to abandoned buildings, the town's only formal restaurant, and the old Legionnaire's hall, a small side road veered off through the woods, ran over the river and stopped next to the defunct mill. It was narrow enough that only one car could pass at a time, but it didn't matter — no one ever took the road anyway, especially at night when the absence of streetlights and the closeness of the trees made it seem dark as a hollow. From there, it was an easy climb up the sixty-six stone steps that led to the seminary grounds.

Bryan preferred the road even less traveled — a mile-long stretch of

railroad line that connected Ellicott City to Catonsville.

Melanie didn't mind the dark woods that leaned as close to the tracks as the occasional train would allow. She didn't mind the tortuous walk over rocky ground that caused her to lose her balance and wrench her ankle, or having to hold her breath as she moved silently past the abandoned switch-house where a turkey buzzard made its nest. She didn't even mind having to step over the occasional pile of white deer bones, bleached whiter still in the moonlight.

The part of the walk that made her sweat and shiver with fear was the train tunnel. Built inexplicably above ground, out of concrete thick as a bunker, the tunnel was the only way to get to the house from this direction.

Dark did not bother her. At home in her apartment, she'd let the sun go almost all the way below the horizon before she'd even think about turning on the lights and, even then, she'd only burn candles. But there was something about the tunnel and the dark contained there that was suffocating. It wasn't simply dark; it held within it the possibility that it would never be light again.

Two steps into the tunnel, and the temperature dropped fifteen degrees. Another few steps, and whatever light that remained from the moon or road suddenly vanished, unable to push its way through. At that point, she lost all perspective. All she could do was trust that she was going the right way and continue.

Whatever meager light produced by a cigarette or a lighter never carried far enough — her feet were left to shuffle along the ground in total blackness, kicking up God knows what. Melanie imagined that this darkness was hundreds of years old, boxed in, growing thick with rage. All sorts of malevolent patterns swirled in front of her, reshaping into terrible and hungry creatures. Her fears, which she kept carefully stowed in the back of her mind, suddenly took shape right before her.

When she finally did spill out the other end of the tunnel, she was left gasping for breath and sweating despite the cold. The dark took something from her every time she passed through it.

Though it was a cool evening and already almost midnight, she felt hot

and blinded by the streetlamps burning at the old paper mill. Still, she felt comforted by their presence, and her mood lightened instantly.

She looked back into the mouth of the tunnel. Bryan and Carl stumbled out of the darkness, smiling, relieved.

"Hell, yeah!" Carl shouted and bumped fists with Bryan.

Melanie shook her head in disgust. It seemed like such a hollow victory. To her, the trip was the price of admission to a happy boyfriend. To Bryan, it was a test of self.

Melanie rifled anxiously through her bag and found the Ecstasy tablet Carl had given her and dropped it on her tongue like communion. She knew it wouldn't be long before she felt its first syrupy effects. Her blood was naturally slow and thick. Her doctor told her the name for her condition, which she instantly forgot, along with a list of necessary precautions. Essentially, it meant she'd probably never have kids, and she might die if she ever got on an airplane. Her blood was a clotted pool, and anything she put into it eddied and lapped against her veins but hardly waned. She felt light-headed and cold all the time.

Bryan caught up to Melanie. "How is it you always beat us? We went in first."

"I don't know." She had often wondered that too. This time she had even stopped twice just to catch her breath. The air was as dense and murky as swamp water.

"Did you finish reading *Feast of Blood* yet?" Bryan put his arm around her.

"No."

"What part are you up to?"

"The middle?"

Behind her, Melanie heard a thud and something skitter along concrete.

"Take that bitches!"

Carl was throwing rocks at the mill's barred windows. Occasionally one would go astray and clatter over the roof, landing with a sploosh into the river on the other side.

The factory's location was chosen carefully for its proximity to the quick Patapsco River. At its peak, the waters were nearly clogged with dead tree limbs tossed into the current, headed for use in the saw mills up north. That much Melanie remembered from school. For Carl, it was just something else to throw rocks at.

"You haven't even started it yet, have you?"

Melanie looked back to Bryan. "I will. I've just been busy."

"Add it to the pile."

"I said I'd read it."

"Whatever." He took his arm off her shoulder and quickened his pace.

Lately, Bryan had been feeding Melanie a steady diet of vampire books and movies that he told her she absolutely *must* read or watch. At one point, she had them stacked into an elaborate pyramid in the corner of her bedroom. After a while, she got bored with the exercise and simply shoved them under her bed.

"Whatever yourself. It's all the same old crap anyway."

She held her breath expectantly. The last few weeks, she'd been trying to get Bryan to lose his temper. To show some semblance of passion, of being more than just someone who would follow at her heels. That was nice for a bit, but without a little giveback, she often felt lonely. Like she was stuck in a relationship with herself and found she didn't much like the company.

"Forget it. It's no big deal. It's just a book, right?" Bryan conceded as he stopped and waited for her to catch up. "You should sketch this." He pointed to the broken stone steps sunken with moss and ivy that led up to Hell House.

"Yeah, maybe," Melanie said, disappointed, and kicked at the first step that wobbled loosely like a tooth.

"Hey, man," Bryan shouted back to Carl, "You coming or what?"

Carl was struggling to pick up a rock bigger than his head. "You should feel how smooth this stone is."

"What?"

"I'm serious." He rubbed his cheek against the rock.

Bryan giggled. "He's wasted. You feeling anything yet?"

Melanie rubbed her arms. Now that Bryan had mentioned it, she realized her arms had been tingling, but now they felt like a thousand fingertips were gently poking her. She touched her ear, then couldn't stop touching it.

"You okay?" Bryan rubbed her back. He had an unlit cigarette hanging from his lip.

"Yeah. I think it's kicking in." Melanie felt a warm sensation pass from where Bryan touched her — it ran from the base of her neck to the bottom of her spine. Her muscles contracted and then released. She leaned over and kissed him, and the warm sensation returned, shooting straight to her toes. There was nothing better than trying a new drug for the first time, feeling its soft medicinal effects cover your brain like a warm, fuzzy blanket. The ultimate in protection from the outside world.

On top of the sudden peace she felt, there was also a stirring between her legs, a desperation of her body to be connected to someone, anyone else. Bryan would do. She took his hands and held them over her breasts. "We need to find somewhere to go right now."

"Go?" Bryan looked confused.

She pulled him up the stairs.

"Oh ... *go*," he confirmed with a grin.

Melanie strode confidently up the crumbling steps and across the grounds. The house held no fear for her as it seemed to for everyone else in this town. This was not hallowed earth, just another grand gothic building reduced to a pit of rotting timber and corroding ironwork. She was all too familiar with ruin, and old enough not to be afraid of campfire stories. She saw nothing spectral here, even at night when dark shadows crept over the hillside, and tiny, rustling creatures crisscrossed the grounds.

But regardless of what time of day it was, Melanie always felt ill at ease walking by the old statue of the Virgin Mary that sat miraculously unbroken in the center of the clearing. The graffiti that covered its like a multi-colored straitjacket did not bother her. It was the way someone had completely blacked out Mary's eyes, giving her the appearance of a Susan Keane painting — something soulless, with a wide, impassive face. For a girl

raised on a strict Catholic upbringing, even a wayward one, the notion of an indifferent holy mother was simply too much to take. While she was tripping on the X, the statue seemed larger in size, the spray-painted graffiti blurred together into something pulsing.

Bryan pulled Melanie away from the statue and headed off towards the edge of the grounds. As he walked, he sang cheerfully, "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf, the big bad wolf, the big bad wolf."

"Please. Stop." Melanie gritted her teeth. Her thoughts felt sluggish, purposeless, drifting like cells in a thick stream of warm blood. The singing was forcing her to focus, the last thing she wanted, and on something unpleasant, at that.

"Wait for meeee!" Carl called as he raced up behind them.

Here the ground opened up, revealing the network of underground tunnels that stretched off into nothingness.

Melanie and Bryan had only been brave enough to explore the first thirty feet or so before, but the X was kicking in, and Melanie experienced a comforting mixture of horniness and invincibility.

"Aww, I know what you guys are going to do."

"Go break something."

"Break this baby," Carl grabbed his crotch.

Bryan smirked at his friend.

Melanie took a tenuous step towards the broken ladder that someone had propped up at the tunnel entrance. It seemed to be missing every other rung.

"F-that." Without thinking, Carl jumped down into the dark and landed with a heavy thud. "Ow."

"You okay?" Bryan looked down.

"Am now. Won't be tomorrow."

Melanie took another step and was on the top rung of the ladder now. If she was any less wasted, she wouldn't be doing this. She'd be thinking about ledges and plummeting and air rushing through her hair and the ground rising like a fist to meet her. She'd probably be getting sick.

"Mel?"

"Yeah?" Maybe she wasn't so okay. She could see the bottom, but it seemed further away than it did before.

"You're looking a little green. Can I help?"

"No," she said sharply.

"Whatever. Do it yourself. You always do." Bryan crossed his arms and waited.

He was only trying to be supportive, and she had hurt his feelings. *Nice one, Mel.* "I'm sorry. Yes, actually, I could use some help."

Bryan nodded and tried to hide his smile. He was needier than a new puppy. "We'll climb down together, okay? Just keep looking up."

He helped Melanie to the first step, then awkwardly climbed behind her so she had no way of looking down where all that ground was. She could hear him panting for breath.

So, he wasn't the woodsman, dragging the big bad wolf by the ears into the forest. He remembered birthdays and her favorite kind of plant, the pale swallow-wort. He was sweet and thoughtful, and that was enough. Though it did sometimes make her feel guilty that she rarely returned the favor. Would it have really killed her to read his damned book?

When they finally reached the bottom, she patted his cheek. "Save your energy, stud."

He smiled back gratefully.

Carl was sitting on the ground with one of his pants legs pulled up past his knee.

"Check it out — blood. Want a taste?" After sticking his finger in the wound, he held it up to Bryan.

"Yuck, just go."

"Suit yourself." Carl flicked the blood off his fingers, onto the ground, and wiped his hands on his pants.

For all his posturing about vampires, Bryan would have made a lousy bloodsucker. He couldn't even sit through ten minutes of the medical channel. But if Carl ever crossed over, you'd probably struggle to tell the difference.

He staggered down the tunnel with Melanie and Bryan in tow. As they walked, Carl kicked aside rotting and burned-out timber, and they pressed

further than any of them had ever gone before.

The narrow walkway opened into a larger space. The old boiler room. Mangled power lines occasionally crackled as if electricity still flowed through their veins. A rotting mattress lay in one corner, and broken glass covered the floor. Melanie marveled at the level of effort it must have taken to cram a mattress down here, but never thought about why it was done in the first place. In another corner of the room, a chair was inexplicably bolted into the floor.

Bryan found a sweatshirt in his backpack and spread it across the filthy mattress like a blanket. “*Pour vous, my darling.*” he said and swept his hand gallantly low.

Melanie put her hands over her heart. “Thank you, *monsieur.*” She had to suppress a giggle at his attempt at chivalry, then frowned — this might be the closest she got to being treated like a princess.

She flopped on the mattress, and Bryan snuggled in clumsily next to her. She could feel the heat from his body, his staggered breath. Too many cigarettes, not enough trips to the gym. In a few years, Bryan would look just like Melanie’s mother had — leathery, slug-like skin, and a dull listless mouth. She reminded herself to stay in the here and now.

Melanie’s legs tingled, and her hands trembled. She ran her hands along the mattress, then Bryan’s legs. Her clothes felt too constricting and suddenly heavy. She pulled and tugged at her collar. Her belly clenched, but she wasn’t hungry, at least not for food. She immediately tore at Bryan’s shirt. She wanted to feel his skin against her, to taste him and be dominated. But even on the X, Bryan was patient and gentle in their lovemaking. When Melanie moaned too loudly, he would ask if she was okay.

She pulled him on top of her, and he fumbled, unused to being the one in control. Across the room, sitting in the ancient chair, Carl groaned softly, watching them. Melanie could see the glint of his eyes, his ring-covered fingers sliding down his jeans...

It wasn’t the first time Carl had watched them make love. Melanie wondered if Bryan knew, but he never mentioned it. He definitely seemed oblivious to the constant stream of lewd comments Carl made to both of

them. Nobody took Carl seriously. That's probably how he got away with as much as he did.

Regardless, for Melanie it was exciting. She chickened out last semester, after volunteering to be a nude model for a sculpting class, but in Bryan's arms she felt less inhibited and enjoyed the attention. Secretly, she wondered if Carl would ever be brave enough to join in.

Carl moaned slightly and lowered his head. He never lasted long, but the X made him come even quicker. He adjusted himself and staggered back down the tunnel the way they had come in.

Bryan, on the other hand, could go all night. The Seroquel he took for anxiety had robbed him of orgasms but allowed him to keep it up for hours. Much better than the Zoloft he used to be on — he would go months without touching her and, on the few occasions when he did rise to the occasion, would run to the shower immediately afterwards.

Bryan finally fell into a nice rhythm, and Melanie locked her legs around him, pulling him deeper as her muscles tensed. She tilted her head back, and her body shook. Bryan tried to pull away, but she held him closer, rocking her hips against him until they were making love again.

Bryan got bolder — he nipped at her throat like he had always joked about doing. Melanie winced but willed him on. He bit harder and sucked at her neck and then her nipples as she moaned and shuddered.

They continued to make love until their thighs and back ached, until the X finally sweated its way out of their system. Then they fell back on the worn mattress, Melanie's ear against Bryan's chest, the sound of his heartbeat amplified, pounding away, tapping out a long-forgotten message.

Melanie heard glass breaking down the hall — Carl had probably found something new to smash. That was the last sound Melanie remembered before she fell into a deep sleep.



Chapter 3

“Mel! Mel!”

Bryan must have been calling Melanie’s name for some time, for though it came in whispers, his voice was urgent and ragged. She looked up and saw him hurriedly pulling on his pants.

“I heard a scream,” he said. “Get dressed! Get dressed!”

Melanie listened for a moment, but heard nothing. “Are you sure?”

They both listened intently. All Melanie could hear was the sound of blood rushing in her ears.

“It’s just the X. Go back to sleep.” Melanie rolled over. She did not like being woken up. Ever.

“I know what I heard.” Bryan continued getting dressed, but more slowly and with less confidence.

“Do you have any water?” Melanie smacked her lips together. Her tongue felt like cotton.

Just then, she heard a distinct snapping sound and something that sounded like a rock clattering across a concrete floor. She sat up and met Bryan’s eyes.

“Probably just Carl.”

They listened together again, but no sound followed. Regardless, Bryan looked spooked. “I heard screaming earlier.”

Melanie was sure it was nothing, just a drug-induced nightmare, like the time Bryan woke up screeching about owls after doing mescaline with a Mexican hitchhiker they picked up.

“Let’s go. I’ll check it out with you.” If she had been at all concerned, she never would have volunteered. She would never be the person who ran back into the house to save the family dog from the fire. That was why she didn’t keep pets around — nothing should be dependent on her for protection or survival.

She slipped on her denim shorts and sandals and threw on her shirt. There was some light streaming through the tunnel. Melanie realized it must be close to dawn. Her chest felt dry and sticky, and she had a sharp pain in her neck. Bryan had opened a welt. It felt like a really nasty hickey.

"I'm sorry about that," Bryan whispered. "Does it hurt?"

She shook her head. "Dracula."

Now dressed, Melanie took Bryan's hand, and they walked back along the corridor until they got to the mouth of the tunnel.

Melanie was still smirking at her own joke when they came upon Carl sprawled on the ground, his neck twisted at an absurd angle. A small shadowy object sat on top of his bloodied chest. Melanie thought it might have been a cat at first, but as they got closer, the creature looked up. It was a girl who looked about Melanie's age. Her face was dirty and marred with heavy black streaks. Her hair was matted and tangled. Her face was drawn, and her stomach heaved as she took in air. She looked starved. Blood dripped from her lips and down her chin. Carl's blood. "What the hell?"

When the girl saw Bryan and Melanie, she hissed and positioned her hands protectively on Carl's body.

Bryan pushed Melanie behind him and whispered to her, "My backpack. I left it in the other room." He nodded towards the tunnel, "There's a knife in there."

This was news to her. She wanted to ask why, but the girl began to growl, softly at first, from somewhere in the back of her throat, and it was getting louder. She wondered how something so frail looking, so clearly damaged, could have hurt anyone, let alone Carl, a sociopath with military training.

"Carl? You okay buddy?" Bryan took a step to the right, drawing the girl's attention to him.

For a second, Melanie saw Bryan as the shattered knight pushing back the dragon into his lair, if only to spare a few precious seconds so the damsel could escape. Had she been completely wrong about him?

"Go!" he whispered to Melanie.

She backed down the hall, slowly at first, never taking her eyes off the

girl. When she was out of sight, she hauled ass back to the room where Bryan left his backpack. She tried to tell herself Carl had just passed out or banged his head, that the girl was probably high on some whacked-out weed. Yes, that would make sense, but her heart still felt like it was trying to pound its way out of her chest. On the way, Melanie scratched her cheek on a sharp metal rod jutting out of the wall, but continued as quickly as she could. The growling was getting louder.

She found the backpack lying at the foot of the mattress along with her bra and Bryan's boxers. She grabbed the bag and ran back, something warm dripping from her face. Melanie thought she might be crying until she rubbed her cheek and saw her hand smeared with red. She felt like there was a hollow space in her throat, that she might be sick — the blood an all too real reminder that she was human, vulnerable, and deliberately heading into danger.

Down the hall, the growling erupted into a series of sharp, precise snarls, and Bryan let out a scream.

Melanie's stomach lurched, and she ran faster, dragging the heavy backpack behind her. When she returned, the girl had Bryan pinned on his back and was slashing at his face with long and broken fingernails. What Melanie initially thought was dirt on the girl's face, turned out to be scars and burns, like she had survived a fire. She remembered the rumor about the nuns who were supposed to have been burned alive here, but this was no ghost.

"Get the knife. The knife!" Bryan yelled, holding up his arms to protect his eyes.

Melanie feverishly dug through the backpack. Retrieving it was one thing, but her hands were shaking so bad, she was as much a danger to Bryan as she was the girl.

She found the knife and kicked it across the floor, then edged away. It landed about a foot away from his grasp. *Add it to the list*, she thought. *One more thing Bryan had asked of you, and you had disappointed him again.*

The girl sunk her teeth into Bryan's arm, and he screamed again, trying to shake her loose. He flailed desperately for the knife, but it sat uselessly out of reach.

“Oh God, Mel, help me!”

Panicked, Melanie backed into a corner. She felt herself peeing and sobbed. She wanted to run but her legs felt cramped and heavy. Instead, she slumped to the ground and covered her eyes like a child.

The girl let go of Bryan’s arm and lunged at his throat. With her ear only inches from his mouth he leaned forward and clamped down as hard as he could.

The girl screamed and tried to pull away, but Bryan would not release his hold. She tugged like a mouse caught in a trap until she finally pulled free, bits of her ear still in his mouth. The girl whimpered and bounded out of the tunnel in a single inhuman leap into the night, clutching her wounded head.

“Mel,” Bryan whispered, his voice hoarse. He spit and wiped his face on his sleeve, trying to clear his mouth of the girl’s flesh.

Melanie rocked back and forth in the corner. The girl was nowhere in sight, and blood poured out of Bryan’s neck. His shirt was soaked in gore.

“Mel,” Bryan called out again, obviously struggling to speak. He tried to pull himself up, but coughed and choked and gasped for air. “It won’t stop bleeding.”

But Melanie did not hear a thing. Her body was soaked with sweat and her ears filled with the sound of rushing air. The room grew dark, darker, and then her body shut down, tight as a glass coffin.

* * * * *

It may have been a few minutes or a few hours when Melanie’s vision cleared, and the dark room quieted and reformed around her. She touched her legs, face, and chest. Though wet and achy, she was whole. And then she saw Bryan. He lay motionless, his body curled into a question mark.

His cuts were smaller than she would have thought. Tiny half-moon indents on his arms and neck. A dark ring of blood pooled underneath him — far too much to have been created by such simple wounds.

She crawled over to him, “Oh God, Bryan. Lucian. Are you okay?”

He still felt warm, but his face was drawn and pale.

Across the room, Melanie saw the prone body of Carl. His eyes were rolled back in his head, his neck twisted inhumanly and exposed right down to the bone.

Melanie gasped, though it wasn't the first time she had seen a dead body. After coming home from a night of partying, she'd discovered her mother slumped over. It was a familiar pose for her mom, who usually drank herself to sleep, so Melanie left her there without even a blanket to keep her warm. It wasn't until the next morning when her mom's lips had turned blue that Melanie realized something was wrong. But that was a very different situation — Carl's throat was opened, his head clung to his body by the thinnest of muscle. There was no point in even checking for a pulse.

"C'mon, Mel, get it together," she whispered to herself and bit her lip hard.

There was no way Melanie could carry Bryan out — the floor was covered in broken concrete and shattered glass — let alone get him up the ladder by herself. She ran over to his backpack and rifled through it, looking for his phone. Nothing. She checked his pockets carefully, afraid that the slightest of movements might open his wounds again. Nothing again.

"You brought a knife but left your cell phone at home? Jesus Christ." Melanie paced back and forth, her thoughts a jumbled mess. She wished she had paid her phone bill. She wished she had the money to pay her phone bill. She wished she could bring herself to search Carl's blood-soaked pockets, but she couldn't. She wanted a cigarette and sleep and to be anywhere but right here.

"I need to get help." She touched Bryan lightly on the arm. "I'll be right back, okay?" she said, trying to reassure herself as she climbed into the night.

* * * * *

Melanie carefully sidestepped down the stone steps that led to the road. She was all too aware of what she must look like — bloodied, sweating, and wet. She wondered who would stop for her. There wasn't

exactly a large amount of neighbors nearby. Desolate woods, one-lane roads, and rivers and cemeteries were her only options for at least a few miles, and by then it might be too late. Melanie shivered at the cold and at the thought of being left alone.

Though the caretaker had left soon after the last fire, Melanie wondered if someone else might still occupy the small trailer. She ran up the small path that circled the grounds and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw the old trailer still parked at an awkward angle pressed tight against the woods. Though it was dark with the windows boarded over, it looked untouched by the previous fire and still habitable.

She banged on the door with the palm of her hands and shouted out between deep sobs that made her cough and choke, "Please, I need some help!" She collapsed on the ground and cried some more.

"You shouldn't be here," a voice said; it was rich and tinged like cinnamon.

Melanie jumped to her feet and looked around, but didn't see anyone. "Who said that?"

"You *can't* be here." This time the voice was more forceful.

A man stepped forward out of the dark and, for a moment, Melanie thought it might be Bryan, that this was all some kind of sick joke. He wore a faded pair of jeans, a clunky set of combat boots, and a black t-shirt that settled over his shoulders like a second skin. His hair too was black, long, and wavy on top, but shaved closely on the sides. As he got closer, Melanie could see his hair was naturally dark as coal, not like Bryan's, which had a tinge of blue. His skin was so pale, he almost seemed to glow. No amount of powder could give anyone an aura like that. Most striking, though, were his eyes — almond-shaped and so green they seemed to draw in all available light. He would have been at home on a Greek coin, or propped up on a stone column at the Louvre. A simple silver chain disappeared into his shirt.

"I need help," Melanie pleaded again.

"You're bleeding," the man said. He looked to be in his mid-twenties but carried himself so steadily, so confidently, he might have been much older.

No shit. Melanie covered her neck self-consciously.

"No, here." The man brushed her cheek. Melanie shivered at his touch. Though he seemed delicate, his hand was strong and cool and smelled faintly of cedar.

Remembering herself, Melanie said, "My friends are hurt. We need a ride to the hospital."

The man didn't move.

"Please, they're back there in the tunnel. They need help."

"What happened?" The man looked around absently at the empty road, the trees, and finally at the shrinking moon.

"We were attacked."

"By what?"

"A girl, I think." Melanie frowned. Nothing of this night seemed to fit. Maybe it was the X. Maybe Carl was fine, and Bryan was simply waiting for her to return, but her wet jeans and scratched face reminded her otherwise.

"Are you hurt?"

Melanie took a silent inventory of her damages and shook her head.

"You're shivering," the man said.

"Do you have a phone or a car?" she asked.

"No," he said, without further explanation. "Don't worry about your friends. I'll see to them. Are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine. Will you help me?"

"You don't look fine. In fact, you look like you might pass out any moment."

"I said I feel—"

His eyes flashed with a liquid quality.

Melanie felt thirsty and light-headed; her legs felt suddenly weak. Before she could finish her thought, her whole body went limp, and the world went dark.