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Opening extract from

Blessed

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MAIN STREET MASSACRE

Only moments outside of New Schwarzwald, lightning cracked, thunder boomed, and rain fell in sheets across the windshield.

“Looks like weather,” Zachary said, refusing to slow down.

Meanwhile, I handed out snacks. Aimee wanted to help, but if we spun out into a tree, it was more important that she was the one wearing a seat belt.

“I categorically refuse,” Harrison said, taking a whiff of porcine blood.

“Drink it,” Freddy ordered. “Or we’ll hog-tie you for the rest of the trip.”

Harrison wasn’t impressed. “You know ropes can’t hold me.”

“We have chains in back,” his twin replied.

Just before dawn, Zachary slammed on the brakes and the SUV skidded to a stop on wet pavement.

“My God,” Aimee exclaimed, opening her door to spring from the car.

“Wait!” Freddy called, but Clyde had already followed her.

“Stop them!” Zachary shouted over the thunder.

I jumped out and wiped my immediately rain-soaked hair from my eyes.

We’d parked in the middle of what looked like a historic small-town main street. Dark clouds blocked the rising sun. Lightning had set a church on fire. Countless blood-stained bodies of werewolves in gray and red Wolf form littered the pavement—necks and spines at horrible angles, heads and limbs torn off and cast aside. I heard the whines and whimpers—the moans of the wounded, the dying, largely muffled by the storm.

I shouted for Aimee, Clyde. I shouted for Kieren. I damn well did not let him leave me so he could come here and be killed.

On the far other side of the fur and annihilation, I glimpsed a shadowy figure, a man, facing my direction, wrestling with a girl. He hurled Aimee—“Aimee!”—aside, and she collided with the picture window fronting a single-story white building.

I ran toward her attacker, trying to land my feet between the fallen bodies, grimacing as bone broke beneath my shoe. Though Bradley’s back was turned to me, as I drew closer, I had no problem recognizing him. In the jeans and western shirt, he didn’t look much different from when we’d first met. Many of the Wolves he’d just decimated could take me in a tooth-and-claw fight, which didn’t say much for my odds against Brad himself. But he wanted me on this earth, with him. The fact that I didn’t return the feeling gave me a tactical advantage.

I launched off the balls of my feet, and we tumbled together. Tangled in his arms and legs, I gazed into Bradley’s red eyes and found no recognition. I’d have sworn he didn’t know me. That he’d never seen me before.

I threw a bent elbow into his jaw, knocking his head into the pavement.

Then Brad blinked, and his burning eyes cooled to hazel.

Pushing away, I felt his terror, his confusion, his slow-building awareness.

“What is all of this? I never act this way. I kill with purpose, calculation, for personal gain or to feed. True, a threat lurks here, among the beasts, the vermin, but why didn’t I risk less of myself, remove it like a scalpel?”

“Get the hell out of my head!”

“Baby, help me. You don’t understand. I don’t understand. Help . . .” His lips kept moving, even as his face lost consistency. Then his body dissolved, mist into the storm.

That’s when I saw Kieren, standing above me, his torn black T-shirt plastered to his wide chest and shoulders, dark hair dripping, a gash above his left eye. He’d shaved his goatee, but his brows had thickened. “Kieren?”

He tossed aside a wooden stake and, falling to his knees, winced as his claws retracted. He tried to speak, but the sound was guttural.

Kieren wrapped an arm around his ribs, as if to hold in the pain, flinching when I reached for his shoulder. I noticed the raised scars crisscrossing his hands where he’d turned his claws on himself to save me. I noticed the scar at his neck where I’d sunk my teeth in. “Bradley’s gone,” I said. At least for now.

It had to be torture for Kieren, the anger and adrenaline—his trapped Wolf tearing at him from inside. Not useless, never that, but so much less than he should’ve been.

I glanced at Aimee, crawling into the covered recess in front of the door to the public library, her arm stiff at her side. My friend needed me. But Kieren was here, too, and he was hurting.

For a moment, he lowered his head. His broad shoulders shook, and his breath became raspy. Then he glanced up, pulling himself together.

“Stay here,” I said. “I’ll be back.”

As I began to stand, he reached for my arm. “Quince—”

“I’ll explain everything later. Can you stand? Can you find Clyde?”

“Clyde’s here?”

“Somewhere.”

Damn it, I should’ve never let the sophomores come on this trip. I made my way, catty-corner, across the street to Aimee. She’d been thrown into the window of the public library, cracking the old glass.

Curled on the sidewalk, she cradled her left arm. “I’d barely gotten out, I’d gotten out of the car—I thought I saw Kieren—”

“He’s fine,” I assured her. “I just left him.”

“The vampire—Brad, right?—he grabbed me and dragged me down the street. It happened so fast.” Aimee took a deep breath. “When he moved in to bite, he

hissed—like a snake—and threw me away.” The crosses tattooed on her neck had saved her.

“What about Clyde?” I asked, remembering that the Possum had gotten a similar tattoo. That he’d been the second one after her out of the SUV.

“I don’t know,” she said, tentatively wiggling her fingers. “I didn’t see.”

“Will you be all right here while I track him down?”

At her nod, I turned to look for Kieren and Clyde, Zachary and Freddy. Even Harrison. At first glance, I couldn’t spot any of them. But the rain had slackened. The sky had begun to lighten. The smell of death still filled the air, and the grisly scene made a sharp contrast to the wholesome small-town backdrop.

Some of the wounded stirred, a few shifting back to human form. They looked more beaten somehow, maybe because of their nakedness.

Just then, I spotted Kieren standing in front of the fudge shop, and picking my way back across the street, I promised injured Wolves that help would arrive soon.

Sabine and Philippe had said the pack scholars were the ones with the greatest knowledge of magic, both healing and demonic. I only hoped that Bradley’s true targets—those teachers who might be able to tell us how to defeat him—had somehow been spared. I didn’t know who they were, not specifically. There was no way Bradley had gotten that information from me.

Reaching Kieren's side, I grimaced at the sight of Clyde, who'd apparently been heaved into a public bench. The Possum lay on his back on the sidewalk, his eyes closed, his face and body covered with short gray hair. His mouth hung open, revealing tiny, sharp teeth, and a broken wooden bench spindle had impaled his thigh. "Is he?"

"He's not playing dead," Kieren said, "and he's not really dead—at least not yet."

BUT FOR THE GRACE

*T*wo young male Wolves loaded Clyde onto a gurney, securing his head and neck, and I could see that his half shift to Possum form had started to recede.

“Healers in training,” Kieren explained, gesturing at the medical team.

Unconscious, the Possum looked more innocent, more vulnerable, and less like a smartass.

When the Wolves began carrying Clyde off, I asked where they were taking him.

“The library,” one answered. “We’ve opened it so we can use the community room to treat the wounded. For now, we want everybody else to stay out of the way.”

That made sense, I guessed. I briefly wondered what had happened between Clyde and Kieren on their own road trip, why the Possum had said the two of them had parted on bad terms in Denton. Not that it mattered now.

“Quince,” Kieren began, “what’s going on?”

As more apprentice healers spread out among the wounded, I offered him a bare-bones update—about Brad, the two knives, Carpathian magic, and the ramifications for the baby-squirrel eaters.

When a passing Wolf bitch studied me a beat too long, Kieren growled in reply.

She kept moving.

I was about to ask Kieren about the town’s human residents, assuming there were any, when Zachary jogged up, out of breath. “It’s different,” he began, “when you can smell the pain. When you’re allowed to help but you still can’t fix it.” Different on earth than the celestial plane, he’d meant.

“Zachary is . . .” I wasn’t supposed to tell the whole truth, not to Kieren, not to anybody. The GA had forgiven my slip-up with Clyde and Aimee, but he’d made me promise to “respect heaven’s mysteries.” Of course I couldn’t very well lie in front of an angel, either, so

I settled on, “He’s a new waiter at Sanguini’s. And a friend.”

“Quincie talks about you all the time,” Zachary said, offering his hand.

It wasn’t technically true. I’d always been private about my feelings, maybe more so since Kieren had left. But I had confided in Zachary, and in any case, it had been the right thing to say. Kieren clasped his hand.

I hadn’t seen anything of Harrison, but Freddy headed our way with the first-aid kit from the car. Behind him, Wolves worked to douse the church fire.

I turned to discover a crossbow pointed at my nose.

“Come with us,” ordered the young woman. She stood about five foot ten, tall for a Wolf, and I wondered if she was a hybrid like Kieren.

“My friend, Aimee,” I began. “She’s at the library. Her arm . . . She’s hurt. We can’t just leave her there.” Even before I finished speaking, I realized how ridiculous my request had sounded, coming here and now from a suspicious stranger.

“Please, Graciella,” Kieren said. “Aimee is my friend, too. She’s a human and a shifter sympathizer. She’s no threat.”

“Friend” had been overstating it. From what Aimee had told me, she’d met Kieren on a few occasions but mostly knew him from hearing Clyde and Travis talk.

“You have prior knowledge of these people?” Graciella pressed.

“Just the teens—the girls and the young boy. But they all came together.”

Apparently Harrison had stayed with the car. I hoped he wouldn’t steal it.

“Interesting timing.” Graciella lowered her bow. She looked like some kind of Amazon warrior. Older than us, more like Zachary’s age. Rain had soaked her tight black curls, low-slung jeans, and T-shirt, and I could tell that she wasn’t wearing a bra.

Clyde would’ve been over the moon, but to his credit, Kieren didn’t seem to notice. Then again, pack Wolves saw each other naked all the time. Or at least when they shifted. I preferred not to think too much about that.

“Very well,” she declared. “I’ll send someone to look after . . . Aimee.”

My GA motioned to Freddy, who fell in step behind us.

Making my way down the sidewalk, I took in the Sausage Haus, Zimmermann’s Restaurant, the Black Forest Inn. Main Street boasted several ordinary businesses, like a pharmacy and Laundromat, along with the more Germanic flavored. Maybe one out of five shops appeared empty, and a few had been boarded up.