

BLOOD IMPERATIVE (*Unfinished*)

A Novel By

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Chapter One

The door was easy—two Yales and an old Medeco. After I dealt with those, I slipped from the empty corridor into her apartment as swiftly as an errant thought, then turned and nursed the door quietly shut behind me. I locked it up again.

The air inside was crowded with smells: her Clinique, her powders and lotions and creams and gels; her shampoo and soaps (the very nice Yardley Lavender). And curling beneath all those was a thin sleek ribbon of dark scent, a potpourri of cinnamon and brown butter and bitter almond that was innately her own.

And very nice that was, too. It was what had first snatched my attention, a few days ago when she'd strode past me, Valkyrie-like, on Waverly Place.

You almost never see Valkyries on Waverly Place. And you almost never get that lovely, lancing scent of bitter almond.

I did a quick survey of the living room.

There's always something heady about that first exploratory scan around the nest. You feel what the conquistadors felt when they went clinking across that first green parcel of jungle in their tiny metal boots. For us, every new citizen is a whole New World.

Some street light was sifting in from the window curtains, but naturally I didn't need it. The room was the standard squarish New York box with a low popcorn ceiling. Everything inside it was clean and neat, feminine and pertly ordered. The wall opposite the windows held two large framed Lautrec posters, Jane Avril and Aristede Bruant, both excellent copies. Here and there on the hardwood floor, contemporary throw rugs had been thrown with crackerjack precision. The furniture was politely austere – stained and polished pinewood, roughly textured canvas, Very Simple, Very Now, Some Assembly Required. Not my style, really, but pleasant enough when you were just starting out, even if this wasn't exactly the very first time you were just starting out.

I had a feeling that this wasn't her very first time. The cinnamon and the bitter almond.

I could see traces of her everywhere. Pale yellow curlicues of finger-strokes, beginning to blur away into mist now, were wraithing along the coffee table and the hard-cover book she'd left lying on it (*Looking For Mr. Goodbar*, a cautionary tale of the day). Pale yellow bare footprints softly glimmered across the floor. Along the angular futon sofa that faced the friendly box of her RCA console, the shape of her trim, now-absent body was trembling above the fabric: fading pinks and greens and oranges

lazily chasing each other in slow circles through the pale amber recumbent cloud. She had lain there for quite some time, apparently; for at least a couple of hours.

Ah well. An evening with a book, or even an evening with the tube, was no crime. There are worse ways to while away the hours. As we all know.

More pale finger-strokes ghosted along the shelves of the book cases behind the sofa. The books themselves were standard mid-70s Young Manhattan stuff. Thick hard-cover best sellers (*Watership Down*), thin pop psychology (*Embracing Your Inner You*), glossy coffee-table door-stoppers (*Batik!*), paperback murder mysteries (tea and crumpets; whiskey and cigarettes). Rod McKuen had supplied Contemporary Poetry; Carlos Castaneda, a survey of the Mystic Arts; and Shere Hite, studies in Advanced Sociology.

A Radio Shack receiver and turntable, flanked by trim no-nonsense black speakers, sat patiently at the top of the bookshelf, waiting to be fed some vinyl.

There was a nice selection. Dylan, Baez, Van Ronk, Buffy St. Marie, Leonard Cohen, Simon and Garfunkel, the Beatles, the Stones, the Doors, Jefferson Airplane, Stevie Wonder. An artistic type D.J., in mid-slide along the standard '70s transition from folk to rock. Very good stuff in general, although all of it was a bit after my time.

I padded into the kitchen. The yellow strokes were flickering along the refrigerator, the cabinets, the faucet and sink. In the air, mingling with the musk of cinnamon, were the cosy household smells of Spic-and-Span, Comet, Joy.

A traditionalist. No doubt these were the same fine products, back in the old days, that mom had kept squirreled away beneath the sink.

The fridge was murmuring to itself, a low Slavic insomniac drone. When I pried open the door, the interior light flared out like a penitentiary floodlight over a carton of skim milk, a container of Dannon blueberry yoghurt, a few bottles of Saratoga water, a wedge of goat cheese primly sheathed in D'Agostino deli paper. In the butter dish, real live genuine butter. Arrayed along the interior of the door were your basic diner-food condiments, the Hellman's mayo, the festive yellow stadium mustard and the festive crimson ball-park ketchup, along with two jars of jam, Smucker's blackberry and *Bonne Maman* strawberry. Inside the veggie bin were fresh broccoli and bright shiny green beans and a small tight fist of radicchio, creamy white and rich cerise. In the freezer, an unopened half-gallon of low-fat fudge-ripple ice milk, a flattened and dispirited packet of Thomas's English muffins, and a nearly empty cellophane bag of French Roast coffee, rolled into a tube and staved neatly shut at the ends with two rubber bands, looking like the bed roll of a miniature frozen cowboy.

No meat anywhere.

I had suspected as much, of course, from the clarity of her scent; but it was nice to have my suspicions confirmed. Meat eaters can make us a bit logy.

Some of us, however, quite enjoy that. Carl, over in Chelsea, deliberately seeks them out. But then Carl has a few other quirks as well, which none of us ever mention aloud. Not when Carl's in the room, anyway.

I glanced around the kitchen once more, sniffed lightly at the unmoving, scented air. No alcohol, no cannabis.

Sweetness.

As I glided toward the bedroom, the scent of her grew denser. I opened the door slowly, with anticipation and ceremony, as though it were a royal Christmas present, and abruptly the swirl of fragrance clotted my head, my chest, my heart.

She lay there in the blackness, her face and shoulders and her long slender arms radiant above the sheet. She owned a truly impressive aura – a rich golden brilliance that shimmered out from the velvet of her flesh, thrumming slowly and steadily as she slept, the golden light shot through with wavering translucent filaments of red and blue.

Perfect.

No sedatives, no depressants, no stimulants but the coffee, and not much of that. No congenital abnormalities, no bacterial infection, no viruses.

We can deal with any of these, of course, and if necessary with all of them, but they do take their toll.

Beneath the sheet, her long lean body was clearly naked. She lay on her back, her head resting on its right side, her blond Valkyrie hair fanned across the pillow. Her slender neck was exposed: gently, softly, matching the steady deliberate rhythm of her heart, her carotid throbbed beneath its thin sheath of skin, like a springtime rivulet pulsing beneath a lacy filagree of ice. I leaned down toward that throb, my chest aching and my lips parting.

Her eyelids snapped back and her round blue eyes glared up at me, spiky with alarm.

Chapter Two

This is one of the problems with your truly healthy citizens. All those sit-ups and leg lifts; all that endless jogging. These people tune their metabolisms so finely that often theirs become nearly as alert as ours. No normal New Yorker, lumpy with pasta and pizza, could have sprung so smoothly from sleepy-time stupor.

There are three distinct consecutive parts to a scream – 1, the wrenching open of mouth; 2, the in-suck of the air; and 3, all the bloody noise.

I tuned her in at Part 1, made some minor adjustments, a pinch here, a spritz there. My *prana* was low – if it hadn't been, I wouldn't have needed hers – but there was enough in reserve for a few minutes of Power.

Her eyes softened at once, her face relaxed, and she smiled up at me. "I can't see you very well," she said. "Okay if I turn on the light?"

"Sure."

She stretched her long right golden arm out to the nightstand, switched on the small reading lamp. The bright bloom of her aura fell away, as it always does in full light.

She smiled at me again. "Hello," she said.

"Hi."

"Who are you?" Her soft voice was cushioned in a simple, almost childlike curiosity. At that moment, with her adrenal glands clamped down and her pituitary hosing oxytocin directly into her amygdala, *childlike* was about as complicated as her curiosity could get.

I sat down on the bed beside her. She scooted over a bit to give me more room, and I reached out to take her right hand. She squeezed my fingers.

"I'm Jason," I said. "And who are you?"

"Brenda. Brenda Loring. What are you doing here, Jason?"

For obvious reasons, we don't often reveal ourselves to citizens. When the necessity presents itself, however, I always embrace it.

"I'm here," I told her, "to take some of your blood."

"My blood?"

"That's right."

She raised her eyebrows, curious. "Will it hurt?"

"No, not at all. And I won't be taking much. About a cup. Less than the Red Cross."

"But why?"

"Why am I taking it?"

"Uh-huh. Yes."

"Well, it's what keeps me alive."

She frowned, puzzled. "So you're...what? Kind of like a vampire?"

I smiled. "Exactly like a vampire."

She frowned again. "But vampires...they're not real...are they?"

"Well, Brenda. The short answer is yes. Actually, they are."

"Really? Honest to God?"

"Cross my heart."

She thought about this for a moment. Then she raised her eyebrows hopefully and said, "Will there be sex involved? I mean, with you and me?"

"No. Sorry. I've got a girlfriend."

“A vampire girlfriend?”

“A normal-type girlfriend.”

“Does she know about you?”

“About my being a vampire?”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s a bit complicated,” I admitted.

She nodded. “I’ll bet.”

She let go of my hand and raised her own to touch the side of her throat, lightly. “Um. Will there be marks? On my neck, I mean. You take it from the neck, right?”

“No marks,” I said. “We’ve got a kind of enzyme. It numbs up the puncture and then zips it closed. Better than surgery. No scar. And the neck is the usual thing, but that’s mostly just tradition. I can take it from somewhere else, if you want. Anywhere, really.”

“What about...” Suddenly she giggled and pulled up the sheet and tucked her head beneath it.

“About what?” I asked.

From under the sheet she giggled again. The sheet fluttered. “*You* know,” she said from beneath it. “From my *breast*.”

“Sure,” I said. “My pleasure.”

“Wow,” she said. She tugged the sheet back down. Her eyebrows were raised. “And you’re sure? No marks?”

“No. You’ll never know it happened. No one will.”

“What about your girlfriend?”

“She definitely won’t know.”

"But I mean if she did know, would it be okay with her?"

"Well, like I said, it's complicated."

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "You're not going to tell her."

"Probably not."

She looked away for a moment, her brows lowered and her lips pursed. Then she turned to me again. "This is kind of weird, isn't? Us just sitting here and talking about all this?"

"Well, yeah. In a way. I can see why you'd say that."

Her eyes narrowed. "Jason. Am I going to remember all this? Tomorrow? When I get up?"

I shook my head. "Nope. I'm sorry, Brenda, but no. You aren't."

Suddenly sullen, she looked away, her lips plumped into a pout. "That's not really fair," she said to the ceiling.

"I know. I'm sorry. But that's the way it has to be."

She looked back at me, her chin upraised. "And what if I don't want to give you any blood?"

"Then I'll just have to go somewhere else. Find someone else."

True. But unlikely at the moment, while Brenda's brain was lolling about in a Jacuzzi of dopamine and serotonin.

"Well," she said. She looked down, took a deep breath, looked back up at me. "How will it feel? How will *I* feel? When you...you know. Do it."

"People say it's better than sex."

She considered that for a moment. "How many of them say that?"

"What percentage of them?"

“Sure. Yes. What percentage of them say that?”

“Just about all of them.”

She brushed a few strands of blonde hair from her eyes. Then she said, “How much better?”

I smiled. “Lots.”

“You wouldn't lie, would you, Jason?”

“Sure. But not about this.”

She nodded solemnly. Then, flipping the sheet aside, she grinned up at me. “*Okay*, then,” she said.
“Let's get going.”

Chapter Three

Afterward, I chastely kissed her good night, then gently put her back to sleep. I left the bedroom, shutting the door behind me, and padded into the living room. I sat down on her sofa to let the Merging happen.

The Merging isn't absolutely necessary. As soon as we begin to feed, the host's *prana* goes whizzing out along our arteries, swooping into our receptor neurons. Almost instantly, every cell in our body is thumping with strength. Within the space of two heartbeats – three, tops – we're at maximum Power.

Obviously, in the old days, that could come in handy. There were times when your entire existence might depend on it. (Think peasants with torches.) Even today, from time to time, it can still be useful. But these days most of us, when we can, like to sit back and experience the Merging. It's a way to share with our host, with the citizen who has just surrendered some of her own (or his own) *prana* to us.

And it doesn't take as long as it seems to, while you're in it.

Merging, see, works in a kind of dream time.

There's a famous dream set in the French Revolution. It's in all the books. The dreamer – us – gets hurled into a prison cell, rats and roaches and drifts of stinking straw fanned across the rough stone floor, and there's a trial before a full Revolutionary court, lawyers preening, judges scowling. This ends in a conviction, no big surprise there, and then naturally we're tossed onto a creaking tumbril and ferried over streets packed with the usual jeering rabble, until at last we're yanked from the cart, marched by a pair of mouth-breathing louts through the mob and up the uneven wooden steps, forced to kneel, wrenched into place, pinioned at the neck by the rough wooden supports. And there, after an endless moment of anticipation and dread, we hear the mob's feverish murmur suddenly freeze into a vast surrounding dome of silent awe. And then we hear that quick sibilant whisper as the thin triumphant blade comes hissing down. *Thunk.*

And we awake to find ourselves in our familiar bed, our bodies aswirl in twisted sheets and tortured blankets, our minds already lurching toward the dull awareness that a spiteful headboard has somehow broken loose and slammed us along the back of the neck. Ho ho ho, what a joke!

The entire dream – the capture, the trial, the rabble, all of it presented with a scrupulous, stitches-along-the-button-hole attention to detail – it all took place in a fragment of a second.

So it is with Merging.

I sat there on the nubby red canvas of Brenda's futon sofa and I lived up through her life with her, the scenes flicking away like the faces of cards in a riffled deck, each emotion melding with my own.

Perfection arrives with the light, and it is everywhere. The woman's face above us lambent with love, the lovely round breast unfolding from a soft cotton blouse. Time passes and we are shaped: satisfactions are no longer immediate, some things are part of us and some things are not. There are many dangers out there, but also a few delights. Crawling, sleeping, weeping, wailing, laughing, and the world sometimes abruptly tumbles onto its side as plump little knees collapse and we kerplunk to the carpet. Daddy leaving very businesslike for work, all dressed up in a suit like the funny little men on TV. Brother Eddie tugging at my hair. Mommy's face growing longer and thinner. At the dinner table, Eddie the pig sticking out his tongue, Daddy slapping at his head, Eddie erupting into volcanic tears. Mrs. Lansdale-from-next-door telling me it's the Blacks causing all the trouble, you mark my words. Miss Hanson loving my third grade sketch and telling me Brenda, my dear, you MUST become a painter, have you ever read Patricia Highsmith? Mom's eyes so tired that these days she can't even cry. Secret blood and burning shame, my clumsy hateful body betraying me. Jerry the football player is so incredibly cute. If I touch myself just exactly right, oh, oh, and here, like this...oh, so sweet and perfect...what if...?

I followed her up through high school and off to a live-away college and a few live-in men, and I followed her into her mid-level job at a mid-level graphic arts department in Boston, and then another one, here in Manhattan, in mid-town.

Slumped back on Brenda's couch in that small dim living room, amid the Clinique and the Spic-and-Span and the butter and bitter almond, as all her memories toppled into me, all her hopes and losses, joys and griefs, victories and fears and failures, for a while there I stopped imagining that I was me, and I imagined that I was Brenda.

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As soon as I stepped from her apartment out into the corridor, I knew that someone had been there.

Even in the hospital-bright lights of the corridor, the footprints on the carpet glowed a deep strong purple. The prints had been made by large brogues, at least a size 12, and they led directly to her door. Just outside the door, the flattened nap of the carpet flickered with the same angry color.

Someone had stood there for a while. Shuffling from foot to big foot. Shuffling and pacing.

Listening? He couldn't have heard anything. Neither Brenda nor I had spoken much above a whisper.

What had he been doing out there?

There were more footprints, fresher, their purplish gleam slightly more vivid, that led away from the

door and toward the stairway.

None of the footprints had been there when I arrived.

And purple wasn't good. Purple was never good.

Chapter Four

I walked down the corridor and down the stairs to the building's entryway. Here, against the dark tiles of the floor, the purple gleam of the footprints was even brighter. They traveled down the passage and out the front door. I did the same.

I stood at the top of the stoop and I looked around. It was four o'clock, full dark yet on an early morning in early September. The black bowl of sky overhead was invisible beyond the glow of the street lights, the ambient aura of the city. The faint coolness in the air now, as soft as a memory, would burn away when the sun rose. And so would I, unfortunately.

No sunblock. I hadn't expected to be out this late.

I was on Seventh Street, just east of Third Avenue. At the moment the street was empty. But I could hear the drumming of tires and the drone of engines from the two or three cars skimming along Third. From the south, muffled by distance, I heard the lumbering bang and clank and wheeze of a garbage truck.

Any minute now, I knew, the other trucks would start rumbling and clanking through the neighborhood, ponderous with bread and bagels and donuts, sides of beef and loins of pork, schools of cod and tuna swimming through tons of shaved ice, bulging cartons of lettuce and celery, tomatoes and onions. Food to fill the multiple gaping mouths of the city that never slept, and seldom even nodded off.

Fairly quickly, I needed to deal with rest of this.

To the left of the stoop, at sidewalk level, were steps that led down toward the basement apartment. The apartment's door was hidden in the alcove beneath me, under the stoop, and the glowing purple footprints tramped down that way, into the shadows.

When I got to the bottom of the stoop, suddenly, as I had known he would, he showed up. He exploded out of the alcove and came clomping up the steps, huffing out great fetid fumes of beer, and then he swung at me, a big blundering right fist.

I recognized him from the Merging. Leonard.

Brenda had met him a few weeks ago at One Fifth, one of the newish bars in the Village that on weekends became a singles meat market. She had gone out with him twice, slept with him once, and (very wisely, I thought) decided to move on. He had been calling her ever since, the calls growing

increasingly more strident and, from Brenda's point of view, more chafing.

He was big, well over six feet tall, a few inches taller than I, and he was bulky, with a face that was all flat masculine planes. A burly chest swelled his Knicks sweatshirt out over the notch of his belt. His aura at the moment was mostly purple, furious spidery filaments of bright electric green snapping through it like whips. And I could also see, wavering sluggishly inside there, some thick dull tremors of gray. Which signaled beer, an unseemly amount of beer. Well, I knew that already.

I leaned back slightly and his fist missed me and whooshed through empty air. The rest of him followed right behind it, momentum tugging him merrily along, and for a moment he went into a chunky pirouette, stumbling about, flapping his beefy arms. I moved out along the sidewalk and glanced quickly behind me. The street was still empty.

He huffed out another poisonous cumulus of fumes, lowered himself into a simian crouch, raised his forearms, and began to move those big fists in small tight circles in front of his broad face, just the way Charlie Bronson did it in the movies. His eyes were pinched into narrow malevolent slits. "Bastard!" he said.

He cannoned his big left at my nose.

I slipped it, weaving to the right, and then danced away. I hadn't raised my hands yet. I was still mulling over my options.

Leonard had failed to notice that he'd already lost on points. He lumbered toward me again.

"Saw you go in," he breathed. "Saw the bedroom light go on. You were in there, you bastard."

I have no real objection to violence. Let's agree, shall we, that it's basically an evil. Sometimes, of course, in certain unavoidable situations, it may be necessary. Had there been more citizens around at the time, witnesses, a cheerful mob hooting us on, then probably I would have happily traded punches with my new friend for a while. It wouldn't have been a fair trade, naturally, and it wouldn't have been a long while. I was popping with *prana* and I was in a bit of a hurry.

But the street was still empty, and there was no need to damage him.

I held up my hand like a traffic cop, and I said, "Leonard."

He stopped rotating his fists. "Hey, how'd you –"

"Repeat after me," I said.

“Huh?” he said. But he straightened up from his crouch and he opened his big hands and let them fall limply to his sides. He blinked at me, looked sadly down at his seditious body, looked back up at me, and blinked again.

“I’m an asshole,” I said.

“I’m an asshole,” he repeated. For a brief moment, puzzlement tautened his face. He glanced around, left and right, as though trying to locate the person who had spoken.

Sometimes, at first, they fight it. They don’t know they’re fighting it, don’t even know what it is they’re fighting.

But they don’t fight it for very long.

I was indulging myself, and that was a silly thing to do. “Okay,” I told him, “here’s the deal.”

“Okay,” he said, “here’s the deal.” His voice was a monotone now. His eyes were blank, his jowls slack.

“Brenda is too good for me,” I said.

“Brenda is too good for me,” he repeated.

On all the available evidence, that was certainly true.

“I’m going to forget about her,” I said.

“I’m going to forget about her.”

I heard a car behind me, coming down Seventh Street, and then it drove by us, a tan Dodge Gremlin. Its driver glanced at us out the window. Couple guys on the sidewalk, shooting the shit. Move along, nothing to see here.

“Time to go home and get to bed,” I told Leonard.

“Time to go home and get to bed,” he said.

On a whim, I added, “And when I wake up, I’m going to quit drinking for good.”

“And when I wake up,” he said, “I’m going to quit drinking for good.”

“Bye now.”

“Bye now.”

“You don’t have to repeat anything else. You can just go.”

“You don’t – oh. Okay. Yeah. Goodbye.”

Mechanically, he turned and trudged away.

A few minutes from now the trance would mist away, but he’d still feel compelled to go to home and get some sleep. He wouldn’t bother Brenda again.

As for the not-drinking part, well, maybe that would work and maybe it wouldn’t. Addiction is a powerful thing. It offers them the possibility of escape while it steals away whatever tiny possibility of real escape they might actually have.

If the Post-Hypnotic held, I had just done him quite a large favor. Saved his liver and possibly his bacon.

If it didn’t, then at least maybe I’d given him something to think about.

Esther is always telling me that I’m a Boy Scout.

Their loneliness is so profound. No matter how basically cheerful their lives may seem, when the account is toted up (which it is, naturally, whenever we re-live it with them), when all the happiness is precisely shuffled into one column, all the sadness into another, that fundamental loneliness is what always tips the balance.

Always. For every one of them.

And so whenever we Merge, despite the immediate quickening of Power, the surge of sweetness and strength, we are all of us left in the end with a kind of post-coital, slightly sodden sense of loss. We’re left with a feeling that somehow, somewhere, we need to find a way to set things right for these people.

Because in the long run they are isolate, forever lonely and forever lost. And, truly, all we want to do – after the Merging, after we share their essence, after we’ve *become* their essence – is help them, all of

them.

But of course we can't.