

A Ravenous Romance™ Original Publication
www.ravenousromance.com

The Darkness and the Night: Blood and Coffee
Copyright © 2009 by Lisa Lane

Ravenous Romance™
100 Cummings Center
Suite 125G
Beverly, MA 01915

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in whole or in part without written permission from the publisher, except by reviewers who may quote brief excerpts in connection with a review.

ISBN: 13: 978-1-60777-129-6

This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Chapter One

They moved together, grinding and seizing, their bodies slick with sweat from the summer heat. He kissed her tenderly, feeling her long, soft hair through his fingers, taking her into his arms as he continued to power into her. She wrapped her long legs around him, taking him close, moaning lightly. She dug her nails into his back as she tensed, savoring him, prompting him to move harder and faster. Their eyes met, their faces tight, their breaths measured and heavy as they came together, lost in hot, heavy passion.

She found her clit, wet and ready, and massaged herself rigorously as they pushed and worked into one another. She took him in, deep and defiantly. A loud cry escaped her, as he beat in even harder, and a low, pleased groan emanated from him. They held one another tightly, sweating and trembling. They collapsed into one another, their hearts pounding and their bodies faint. He pulled out of her, and then slumped over to her side, catching his breath.

Karen lay on her back, enjoying the cool breeze that suddenly picked up through the open window, brushing over her sweaty body. "I love you, Jeff," she said. He swallowed hard, seemingly unable speak.

"This trip is going to be great," she added, the silence killing her. "You're going to love the old Victorian."

"About that," he began, pausing for a moment to find his words.

Karen felt a painful flutter in her chest, suddenly understanding his hesitation. She thought to speak, to find some magic line that might hold him to her and make everything okay. Instead, she held her tongue and waited for the inevitable.

“I’m not going with you,” he said with a sigh, imposing more pain into his words than Karen knew could be genuine.

“It’s my father, isn’t it?” she asked, her throat going tight.

“No...it’s me. I just need some time, I guess,” he said, although she knew it was more than that. “I think we should break up.”

She got up from his bed, finding her clothes, fighting tears. “And you waited until the last minute to tell me this? Why?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“Good job with that!” Karen dressed quickly, storming around the dorm, negotiating moving boxes and packed bags in search of her shoes. “I have a twelve-hour drive ahead of me! Now I have to do it alone?” She wiped at her tears, unable to hold them back.

“I wanted to tell you before, but...” he paused, seemingly at a loss. Suddenly looking embarrassed, he disposed of his condom and slipped on his boxers.

“But you wanted to get laid one last time!” she growled, finding her shoes and angrily mashing her feet into them.

“That’s not fair!”

“Don’t you tell me what’s not fair!” Karen searched the tiny room for miscellaneous items that she knew were hers, and then grabbed her purse and stormed to the door.

“Have a nice life!”

Karen spent the entire long, lonely drive replaying the scenario in her mind, recapping what each of them had said, coming up with retorts she wished she might have thrown back at him when she had the chance. She wondered if she could have found a way to salvage the relationship but she reminded herself that a partnership that wasn't reciprocal wasn't really a partnership at all. She would only end up hurting herself if she tried to hang onto a man who just didn't want her anymore. It was over, and it was for the best, as painful as that realization was. They had spent two wonderful years together in grad school and now it was time to move on.

The hours dragged on the tedious drive with numerous cups of take-out coffee being her only companion. She always thought better with a coffee in hand, her years of working as a barista at the college café having given her a special appreciation for the brew. By the time Karen reached her destination, she had come to terms with the fact that a new chapter of her life had begun, and it was her choice either to mourn the past or embrace the future.

Karen stretched her tired legs and stepped out of the car. She gazed at the old Victorian house. An unexpected mix of reflection, sadness, and detachment came over her as she leaned up against the side of the car, remembering the house in much better condition when she last saw it just a few years earlier. Kept privately by the family for its generations of childhood memories, the house had been shuffled through various family members before it eventually become Karen's family's vacation home.

Karen recently graduated with a master's degree in English, although she had no idea yet what she was going to do with it. While her family was pushing her to teach,

Karen secretly hoped to write the next great American novel. This summer was her last free ride before she would have to stand on her own two feet and leave the security of her parents for good. She hoped she might be able to take advantage of the quiet, remote location to relax and catch up with her family while paying whatever attention she could to her muse and her trusty laptop.

Karen walked up the narrow pathway, toward the steps at the front of the veranda, and surveyed the vast property. The house sat on several acres of now unkempt land, resting awkwardly against the foothill of a small mountain. Tall oak trees grew on either side of the house and thick overgrowth came clear up to the veranda on all four sides. A cool, clear stream ran off in the distance, pooling into a small private lake just visible from the front of the house.

Karen moved to the front door. She knew it would be locked, but decided to try it anyway. It figured that she would rush to get there, only to wait for the rest of the family to arrive with the key. She walked the length of the veranda, questioning the structural integrity of the old house as she got a closer look. It was a shame that her family had allowed the house to fall into such terrible condition. A few years ago, Karen's dad had a falling out with Aaron, the house's hired caretaker and long-time family friend. Aaron had kept the house three quarters of each year, doing repairs and keeping the yard directly around the house manicured and watered in exchange for a free roof over his head. A horrifying and embarrassing string of events, most of which neither of Karen's parents were willing to talk about, led to Aaron leaving the house to rot. Karen's father had been in the wrong, that much she knew. He had let her in on his little delusion before his rampage: he had believed that Aaron and his entire family were vampires. Karen could

only imagine what horrific act her father had performed to land him in a mental institution for so long, but it led to the house being abandoned for some time.

Now the outside of the house was lined with long strips of old, discolored paint peeling and curling all along once-smooth, perfectly white wooden walls and beams. Several shingles were visibly missing from the roof. The rain gutters overflowed with leaves and other debris. Karen crossed the veranda and peeked through one of the front windows. Thick curtains hung behind the dusty, time-warped glass.

She peered through a tiny crack between the two heavy layers of opaque material, squinting in her attempt to survey the living room. The room was dark and Karen could hardly make out the silhouettes of sheet-covered furniture. She hadn't expected to see anyone in there, and yet a wave of disappointment hit her just the same when she saw the dark, empty room.

With a sigh, she sat down on a bench built into the side of the veranda. She was already feeling impatient and eager to unpack her car and settle in for the summer. Despite the past issues and the house's shaky condition, Karen hoped that the family's stay this time around would be cathartic and refreshing. She knew she wouldn't really be able to relax until the family came and she could see for herself that her father was no longer a raving lunatic. Hopefully, she wouldn't have to wait much longer.

A light breeze picked up, adding a faint chill to the late afternoon air. Karen pulled her thick, dark hair into a knot, hoping to spare it from the wind's wrath, and then searched her purse for some lipstick. She had not seen anyone in her family for close to a year, and her last visit with her father had been terribly strained due to his unfortunate mental condition. Her mother promised that he was in much better shape now, though,

claiming that his doctors had finally found just the right combination of medications. Her mother insisted that he hadn't spoken of his delusion for months. Finally, he was himself again.

This would likely be Karen's last summer vacation with the family for a while. She knew that she had a life of her own waiting somewhere out there, once she found her place in the world. She knew that her parents and brother would ultimately have only a small place in that new life. Feeling bittersweet about both the summer and her future, Karen was glad for the opportunity to find some closure to the hell they had all endured throughout the past few years. Perhaps the trip would be healing for everyone, she hoped with a smile, remembering lazy summer days, cool swims behind the house, and breathtaking sunsets on the veranda. Even if this trip ended up proving less than memorable, she reminded herself that she still had good memories of this place, memories that didn't have to fade simply because unpleasant ones overshadowed them.

Karen grabbed her purse as her cell phone began to ring, seeing from the Caller I.D. that it was her mother. She quickly answered. "Hello?"

"Karen?" her mother asked, the connection threatening to cut. "Can you hear me?"

"Barely."

"Where are you?" her mother's voice crackled.

Karen glanced at the empty dirt road that disappeared off into the horizon. "I'm at the house. Where are you?"

"What?" her mother yelled.

"Where are you?" Karen repeated, yelling into her phone.

“There’s a fire at Yosemite,” her mother said, her words barely audible as the phone connection continued to cut in and out. “We had to take a detour.”

Karen rolled her eyes. “You’re still all the way up there? You know I don’t have a key!”

“Oh, you’re already at the house?”

“I told you I was!” Karen growled, the choppy conversation frustrating her even more than the prospect of spending the entire night out on the veranda with the mosquitoes and June bugs.

“You can break in really easy through the back door,” her mother said, and then added apologetically, “We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

“Break in?”

Her mother gave a frustrated huff. “There’s just the chain. You can get it off with a coat hanger or a stick when you crack open the door.”

“Okay,” Karen said, annoyed. “Why did you guys get such a late start?”

“Honey, you’re cutting out. We’ll see you sometime tomorrow,” her mother said, and then the connection dropped.

With a disappointed sigh, Karen threw her phone back into her purse and went to the back of the house to take a look at the door. Tall, twisting oak trees shaded the entire back side of the house, accentuating the sudden darkness coming in from the southwest horizon. Heavy clouds threatened rain and lightning in the distance and a black haze slowly grew, as smoke from a wildfire hundreds of miles away blew in with the breeze.

Karen tried the back door, finding it unlocked but secured by a slip-chain. Thankful that she had brought some of her clothes on wire hangers, she ran back to her

car.

She froze as it seemed that a curtain behind one of the dark windows overlooking over the veranda had moved. She stared at the window, watching it for any further movement, but she saw nothing. She was probably just tired considering the drive she just made from her dorm back in Nevada. She rushed to make it across the state, perhaps a little too eager to leave her past behind her. Just to be safe, however, she readied her mace as she contorted the coat hanger through the partially open back door.

As her mother promised, the door unlocked easily. Karen slowly searched the downstairs rooms, mace in hand, carefully clearing every area. Satisfied that no one was down there, she searched the upstairs just as thoroughly before returning to her car for her luggage. She made sure that she was locked in as securely as possible and then made her way up to her bedroom.

She set her belongings down and slipped a large, dusty white sheet off the elegant king-sized bed. The headboard was carved out of deep mahogany and the frame lifted the entire bed several feet off the ground. There was a tall, matching footboard and wooden drawers along the sides of the bed in place of a dresser. On the adjacent wall a matching desk, mirror, and vanity table finished the set, sitting along the far wall between two windows that overlooked a vast field of overgrowth and old trees.

Karen jumped onto the bed and laid back for a moment, stretching, relaxing, and enjoying the silence. She decided that her family's tardiness might very well be a blessing in disguise. With no distractions, she might find the inspiration to get started on her novel. Ideas had been brewing for some time now, but she had yet to get anything substantial down on paper. It seemed that there was always something more pressing to

do, between work and school. It felt good to have some time to herself and she hoped she would be able to put at least some of it to good use.

The evening slowly settled in. As the sun began to set, Karen was relieved that the bedroom lamp was still in good working order. Annoyed that there would be no food in the house until her family arrived, Karen grazed on tortilla chips, mixed nuts, and soda -- all the snack food she had left from her drive. There was a mom and pop convenience store about twenty miles down the road and within a few miles of that was a truck stop with a gas station and a small diner that served excessively greasy food. The only other establishments in the area were ranches and private homes, all situated several miles apart from one another.

Karen stared at the blank document on her laptop monitor. Her stomach growled and she cursed the fact that there were no Chinese restaurants or pizza parlors close enough to deliver to the old house. As far as she knew, there wasn't a decent place to eat within a fifty-mile radius of the place.

Determined to have something to show for her time, Karen began to force a few words onto the screen before her: *My father was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia three years ago. He snapped one night and, from what I can piece together, he killed a man and then the men in white coats put him away.*

Frustrated, Karen erased the sentence, once again staring at a blank screen. She tried once more, deciding this time to shift her person and write her story as a piece of fiction: *Sharon was a beautiful and intelligent young woman, with long, dark hair and her father's subtle blue eyes. Although Sharon was undoubtedly disturbed, she was so far spared the horrific mental illness that surfaced in her family just a few years ago.*

Karen turned as she saw something move past her window out of the corner of her eye. She got up and went to the window, thinking that perhaps she had seen an owl flying outside. She looked out, scanning in all directions, seeing nothing but darkness. With a cold chill running down her spine, she closed the curtains and went back to her desk.

Karen jumped with a startled gasp as there was a knock at the front door. Snatching the mace from her purse, she quietly moved down the staircase, flipped on the porch light, and opened the front door as far as the latched chain would allow. She peeked out, not recognizing the man peeking back at her from the other side.

A good-looking man in his early forties stood on the welcome mat, grinning as he took an uncomfortably close look at Karen's face through the inch-wide opening. He had a pale complexion, blue eyes, and short platinum hair, prompting Karen to wonder if perhaps the man was an albino.

Aaron had been an albino, at least from what Karen could recollect.

The strange man smiled at Karen, his face warm and suave. "Is this the Miller residence, by chance?" he asked.

Immediately suspecting a connection between this man and Aaron, Karen felt uneasy about giving him any information. The thought that Aaron or his family would somehow know to find her family there this summer was a bit paranoid, and even more disturbing was the thought that they would send a relative over to...to do what, even the score?

Karen shifted back slightly, adding some much-needed distance between them. "Who's asking?"

“My name’s Mark,” he said. “I’m one of your neighbors, an old friend of Ron’s. You wouldn’t happen to know Ron, would you?”

“He’s my father,” Karen said, catching herself only after she finished offering the quick piece of information. Her heart sped up as something about the way Mark glared at her suddenly came off as unsettling.

“Is he around, by chance?” Mark asked, taking a quick, nervous look behind him.

Karen thought for a moment, trying to find some way around answering the strange man’s question.

“Are you here all by yourself, sweetie?” he asked as he turned back to her, his demeanor shifting from unsettling to creepy.

“My family’s at the store,” she quickly said, almost choking over her words. “They’ll be back soon.”

Mark cocked his head, clearly not believing her. “I see.” He shifted a rogue lock of pale hair from his eyes as his face contorted with thought. “Is something the matter?”

Karen shook her head, although she was clearly shaking. She had her mace ready, hidden in her hand behind the door. Mark was very handsome and Karen couldn’t help but get lost in his piercing blue eyes. She simply stared, unsure what to say or do next. The mace slipped from her hand, but she didn’t move to retrieve it. Instead, she found herself toying with the lock on the door. The thought suddenly occurred to her that she was being an awful neighbor and she should invite Mark in for a cool glass of iced tea... but then she realized that she didn’t have any iced tea.

Karen turned away, unsure of what just came over her. “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to come back later.” She closed the door and quickly locked the deadbolt. She leaned

against the door, grabbing her mace, hoping Mark would simply go away if she ignored him long enough.

Or, perhaps he would figure out for himself how easy it was to break in through the back door.

Karen was afraid to move and stayed where she was for some time. She thought to go upstairs and get her phone, but she wasn't sure that 911 even worked that far out. Even if she did connect to a local sheriff's office, how long would it take for its officers to find her? What would she say?

Sorry to waste your valuable time, Officer, but my neighbor is creeping me out; could please you tell him to go away?

Karen moved to a window and peeked out. To her surprise, the man was gone. Quickly watching to make sure that no one returned, she opened the front door and carefully searched the overgrowth in all directions. Seeing nothing, she closed the door, made sure it was secure, and went to the back of the house. She reinforced the back door with a chair from the dining room set, went upstairs, and locked herself in her bedroom. She pulled her phone from her purse and set it on her desk, her ears growing vigilant of every sound that creaked through the old house. She sat down in front of her laptop and proceeded to stare at her screen saver, not sure if she would have it in her to do any writing that night.