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Opening extract from

Bloodline

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PROLOGUE

Journal of
Captain Quincey Harker

13th July 1916

Blood from last night's raid has hardly dried on my uniform. Still the familiar craving builds in my belly and I long to wield my sword.

I can almost feel the blade slicing through air, then skin, then flesh, then bone; blood spraying the wooden walls of the enemy trench, the smell of it suffusing the air so sweetly.

I feel my mouth moisten as I drag the enemy soldier, screaming, into the shadowy recess of his trench. I snap back his head and bury my teeth into the succulent flesh of his neck. Fear makes the pitiful creature's blood pulse so fiercely through his veins that at first piercing, I have to swallow greedily so as not to gag.

I revel at the thought of the killing to come and, with it, the feasting—so different from the sly, quiet stalking of prey

in days before the world was at war. Here in battle, no such artifice is necessary. I take my victims how I please, so long as they wear the uniform of the enemy.

Outside I hear the steady thump of the artillery and closer, the clatter of my men; they will be fixing bayonets to their rifles and inspecting their battle gear one last time, their sodden boots slipping in the mud that covers the floor of the trench.

Even in my dugout I can smell their delicious fear mingled with the evening mist that rolls in from the corpse-strewn craters of no-man's-land. My lust for blood rages inside me.

Enough. I must tend to my own weapons—not that I have any need of them. Why waste the tearing of flesh on a senseless bullet when it is so pleasurable to drain a life away personally?

It is time to prepare for battle.

Chapter 1

Letter from Lieutenant John Shaw to Miss Lily Shaw

Northern France
13th July 1916

Dearest Lily,

Just a few short lines to let you know I've arrived at the front. I am told I will report to my new commanding officer—one Captain Quincey Harker—first thing tomorrow.

Captain Harker has become something of a hero to the men here, it seems. I just hope that I shall prove a worthy aide and fulfill my duties as communications officer to his satisfaction.

Your parcel containing the new red leather journal was waiting for me when I arrived. It was such a comfort to be welcomed by something from home. Thanks. You've been a darling, as ever—the best sister a chap could have. All those blank pages to fill will be a boon, for I'm told there is

little else to do here in the trenches when one is not on duty.

Worry not, Lily. With such a well-regarded commander as Captain Harker, I am certain to return to you safe and sound.

I'll write more when I've settled in.

Your loving brother,
John

Journal of Mary Seward

30TH AUGUST 1916

It has been nearly seven weeks now since the town of Purfleet sent over a hundred of its men to fight in the Great War. A convoy returned fifteen of them to the sanatorium late this afternoon—as casualties.

Some have lost limbs; others have been gassed, eyes blinded and lungs so burned that it pains them even to breathe. Their suffering has been made worse, no doubt, by the long journey from France. We only managed to find room for them by moving some of the more recovered onto camp beds in the corridors.

The number of wounded in this war seems endless. Each

of my new cases stirs a longing inside me—a fervent wish for this horrible conflict to be ended.

This morning, Sister sent me to help with one of the new arrivals—a young lieutenant. His eyes were closed and his dark lashes looked like coal smudges against his smooth, pale skin. As the two orderlies laid him on his bed he remained still, almost rigid, clasping a red leather-bound book to his chest.

"A quiet one, this," one orderly commented, gathering up the stretcher.

"Makes a change," answered the other grimly. "They usually start yellin' as soon as we move 'em. Times are I want to stuff a rag in each of their mouths."

Their coarse words didn't shock me. I knew it was their way of coping with the daily horrors we see here at the sanatorium. Low moans of pain and fear seep from every ward, float down every corridor—just as they did before the war, when the sanatorium was run by my father as a hospital for lunatics.

As a child I used to visit him in his office with Mother. She'd hold my hand as we walked down the wide corridors lined with bolted doors, urging me to pity the poor raving souls contained within.

"Here's his chart." One of the orderlies handed me a grubby envelope. "Lucky bugger, by all accounts—carried back from the front line by his commanding officer."

I slipped the card out from inside to read the notes on the lieutenant's injuries. Bayonet wound to the shoulder, healing

well, but brought down by an uncommonly virulent strain of trench fever.

I looked at the soldier's name—John Shaw. It was familiar. Did I know this poor soul? I examined the soldier's face more carefully.

Yes! With a start I realised that this man was indeed John Shaw from Carfax Hall, the estate adjoining Purfleet Sanatorium.

I'd met him and his sister, Lily, only once, in the summer after I turned fourteen. They arrived quite unexpectedly with their rather stern-looking nanny at a neighbour's garden party. I had spent the whole afternoon sighing over this very same John Shaw, then a tall, handsome boy with a lazy smile, on holiday from Eton. He never spoke to me. Nonetheless, our eyes met several times. And for the next week I kept a secret book in which I inscribed his name and mine over and over again, the letters entwined like wild roses.

That was before the war began. Another life. Another world.

I took one of Lieutenant Shaw's mud-covered hands in my own. His flesh was cold, so icy I feared he might be dead. Aghast, I turned my head to call a doctor, but at that moment he drew a deep, rattling breath. He did not seem to know I was there, just lay there stiffly, seemingly untouched by the noises of the ward around him.

Remembering my duties, I left him to fetch soap and water. Then gently, I eased the red book from his grasp, smelling the

earthy odour of its leather over the sterile tang of the ward. From the way he'd clutched it to his chest, all the way from the battlefields of France, the volume was clearly precious to him.

I opened its cover and saw it was his journal. Page after page, written in a strong hand. There were also letters and a sprig of lilac between its leaves.

I closed it and put it safely to one side as I got on with washing the filth from John Shaw's chilled flesh. Except for the tremors that shook his body from time to time, he did not stir.

My heart ached. How different was this homecoming from the one he'd had just a few summers ago!

"Has he spoken yet, Seward?"

Sister's commanding voice startled me. She was standing at the foot of the bed.

"No," I replied. "Not to me, at least. But this man and his sister live in Carfax Hall, just beyond the sanatorium grounds."

She glanced at John Shaw's notes. "Someone should let Miss Shaw know of her brother's whereabouts," she said. "But not until tomorrow. He seems to be at no immediate risk, and we need to get all these men washed and settled."

"I would be happy to call upon Miss Shaw," I offered. "I do not know her well. She and Lieutenant Shaw came to Purfleet after their parents were killed, and they have always lived very privately. But I'm sure I could break the news more gently than a telegram."

"Thank you, Mary," Sister replied. "That would be most kind of you."

For the next several hours, Sister kept me busy as ever tending to the wounded. I had barely time to think. But in spite of myself, my eyes kept wandering to the still form with the red leather book by its side.

By the end of my shift, John Shaw had not stirred. I stood at his bedside, looking down at his pale, unresponsive face. Where was his spirit? What might I do to help him?

Then my eye was caught by his journal. Might words from his own life draw him back into the world?

I picked it up and began reading to him. "'This journal is to be a record of my experiences while fighting for King and Country. It has been sent to me by my dear sister, Lily, back in Purfleet.'"

I glanced at his face. He remained utterly still. I wasn't sure he could hear me, but I read on. And then I heard a low, tortured groan.

I looked up. He was lifting his head slowly toward me. His eyes opened, a beautiful blue, looking into mine. There was such anguish in their depths—as if the bayonet had pierced his very soul.

He rasped out one agonised word. "Stop."

With trembling hands I shut the book.

His head sank wearily back onto his pillow.

I sat there, heart racing. Had I done wrong? Had my reading harmed him somehow?

As I watched, his hands began to do a curious, wandering dance in the air, as if he were batting away invisible insects. Without thinking, I reached out and clasped his fingers in mine. "Hush," I whispered. "Be easy, sir."

His answering grip, sudden and tight, made me wince. His eyes opened once more and fastened upon my face. His gaze widened.

"Angel," he said. His voice was no more than a sigh. "Save me."

He brought my hand up to pillow his cheek. I sat there, not daring to move, as his breathing deepened. The lines of strain in his face eased and I realised with a sort of wonder that he was sleeping naturally. At last, I gently pulled my hand away.

What had he gone through at the front? What hideous memories tormented him so? Again I found myself thinking of his journal. If I knew what he had endured, wasn't it possible that I could use that knowledge somehow to reach him in his darkness?

There was only one way to find out. Without allowing myself to think about it, I slipped the journal into the large front pocket of my apron.

As I write in my own journal, here at home, Lieutenant Shaw's sits unopened on my desk. I wrestle with my

conscience. Should I read its words uninvited? It draws my eye like a living creature, clasping between its pages the letters and articles he has saved. How can I ignore what might give a clue to what tortures him?

Or am I simply making an excuse to pry? Am I hoping to recapture the twined roses and summer smiles of that day we met?

No. I want to help him if I can!

Enough. Enough.

I shall read it.

Chapter 2

War Journal of
Lieutenant John Shaw

Northern France
13th July 1916

This journal is to be a record of my experiences while fighting for King and Country. It has been sent to me by my dear sister, Lily, back in Purfleet, keeping the home fires burning.

She has pressed a lilac from our garden between the pages of this book to remind me of the beauty and peace of England—that very thing I have come to the battlefront to protect.

There is something delicious in beginning a new book, even in such circumstances: the creak of the spine bent back for the first time; the pure, fresh whiteness of the topmost page. Only my ink shall stain it. What stories might it contain by its end?

I arrived here at the front just after sunset. The march

from the train was hard, through a weary landscape, burnt and battle scarred. The constant drizzle had thickened into rain as our party approached the trenches and the roads turned to mud by the constant traffic of lorries and horses. My boots are still caked in the stuff and the smell of it is foul.

A sergeant arrived to lead me to the division I was to join. I followed him to a dark world of narrow alleyways—the trenches.

The earth walls rose eight feet on either side of me as I climbed down into the huge trough. For a moment, I wondered if this must be what it is like descending into one's own grave.

My boots touched down on the uneven trench floor, made of sandbags with duckboards running along the ground. The surface of the wood was slimy with mud.

What a labyrinth it seemed! The tunnels snaked for miles, twisting and turning and dividing until I felt I was in a rabbit warren. The air was rank with the filthy odours of humanity. I fought down the urge to retch.

Soldiers littered the walkways, shuffling about their business. In the darkness, I could distinguish them from the mud only by their movements.

"We're here. Front line," the sergeant told me. "This is Corporal Jenkins. He'll take you from here."

I could just make out a stocky man, whose face wore a look of resignation. "Ah, our new communications officer," he said, saluting.

I returned the greeting and fought off another wave of nausea.

Jenkins noticed the look of disgust on my face. "You'll get used to the smell, sir," he told me as the sergeant withdrew. He pointed up to the darkening sky overhead. "We're just grateful they haven't roofed the place over. We'd probably choke from the fumes."

Jenkins let out a weary chuckle that was echoed by men at their posts beside us. They stood on the fire step, peering over the top of the wall, looking out for enemy activity. Their rifles were trained on the charred fields of no-man's-land.

Looking down the trench, I could see two soldiers crouched beneath a sheet of corrugated iron. They appeared to be brewing tea on a small charcoal burner.

"Where do you all sleep and eat?" I asked.

"No canteen and dormitories here, sir," Jenkins grunted. "I'm afraid this is it. We cook and sleep where we are." He gestured toward a small muddy alcove carved out of the trench wall. It was only big enough for a man to squat in. "That's where I'll sleep tonight," he told me.

I raised my eyebrows in disbelief. How could a man find comfort and rest in such cramped quarters?

"It's not so bad really, sir," Jenkins continued without a trace of resentment in his voice. "We'll move back to the supply trench in a few weeks; there's more room there. Or if we're lucky, they'll give us a couple of days leave. Then we

can go to the nearest French village and borrow a barn off the locals. A bit of soft hay and shelter for a couple of nights always does us a world of good."

I was about to reply when a shrieking whine pierced the air. A flash like lightning burst fifty feet from the trench. I ducked as an explosion set the planks shuddering beneath my feet. Great chunks of earth rained down on my tin helmet.

"Looks like Fritz has finished his tea and decided to shift his fire," Jenkins commented. "That's the nearest shelling we've had from the Germans in an hour. Come on, sir, I'll show you your dugout. I think you'll find—"

Another explosion drowned out the rest of his words. Jenkins turned and, crouching as he ran, led me along the trench.

I hurried after him and felt guilty relief when he stopped beside a sturdy wooden door in the trench wall. "Here we go, sir. These'll be your barracks." He pulled the door open. A heavy curtain of tarpaulin lay behind it, which Jenkins tugged aside. "Keeps out the mustard gas," he explained. "Just a bit of it burns your skin like the dickens." He let the tarpaulin drop behind us as we stepped inside.

The room was dark and rich with the musty odour of earth and boots. There was a small, dirty window, but the moonlight hardly penetrated it. I waited while Jenkins lit an oil lamp. It illuminated a small space, maybe ten foot by ten foot, with a narrow bunk and a table—and a ceiling so low I felt I should stoop lest I bump my head.

"Safe from shrapnel in here, sir," Jenkins informed me. "Though if it's a direct hit, you don't stand any more chance than those of us outside."

"Quite right, Jenkins," I said, shaking the man's hand. "I guess we're all in the same boat, then."

I scolded myself for thinking poorly of my accommodations. Jenkins and his compatriots didn't even have a roof over their heads. At least here there was a ceiling, shelter from the elements, and some privacy.

I gazed once more around the room and noticed a parcel on the table. I picked it up and saw my beloved sister's handwriting. "Thank you, Jenkins," I said, keen to discover the package's contents. "I'll be all right from here."

Jenkins didn't need more than a hint. "Yes, sir," he said. "I'll leave you to get some rest. Captain Harker will probably want to see you first thing tomorrow. He'll be preparing to go off on one of his night raids at present. Seems he's more at home in the dark."

"A creature of the night, eh?" I joked. "Something a bit unsettling about that, isn't there, Jenkins?"

He didn't smile. "Captain Harker is a fine commander. No one I'd rather follow into battle. You've never seen a man so fearless. He gives us all courage. I think we would follow him to hell if he asked us." Jenkins paused. "But he's a strange one, too. Sometimes takes off on those night raids all on his own. Says it keeps him sharp . . . as if he

needs to be any sharper." He nodded then and took his leave.

I stood there for a few seconds, considering what Jenkins had said. I couldn't help feeling awed at the prospect of meeting Captain Harker—a man brave enough to face the enemy on his own.

A moment later, I remembered my parcel; I picked it up and eagerly ripped off the wrapping. Inside, to my delight, was this handsome journal.

Before I sleep, I shall write darling Lily my heartfelt thanks.

14th July 1916

I was roused from my bunk this morning by Jenkins. "Lieutenant Shaw!" he shouted. "Captain Harker wants to see you, sir!"

I pulled on my boots, then hurried along the trench to my new commanding officer's dugout. I reached his door, straightened my collar, and finally knocked.

"Come!" a voice called in response.

Swallowing the nervous lump that pressed at my throat, I opened the door. I pushed my way past the gas curtain and entered into a room dimly illuminated by the artificial light of an oil lamp. Curiously, the small window in the

room was covered. Not even a glimmer of sunlight filtered through.

The shadowy form of Captain Harker was seated at his desk, leaned over a pile of papers. He did not look up.

As I waited, I stared with unease at his shadow, outlined on the wall beside him.

The shadow's profile, distorted by the flickering lamplight, appeared to belong to some stooping, murderous demon, illuminated on a church fresco.

I stared harder and imagined the demon's muscles taut—ready to strike.

Then, without warning, the demon spread its wings and lurched forth.

For an instant, my heart trembled. Then I realised that the captain was now standing, his movement the thing that had caused the shadow to change form.

I felt a foolish relief and chided myself for my childish imaginings.

As the captain stepped forward, I could at last see his face.

The grotesque form of his shadow had done him a great injustice. His towering height and sharp features would be considered quite handsome, I believe.

He regarded me closely for a few seconds. I could not distinguish the colour of his eyes in the half-light, but they seemed to burn into me with disconcerting intensity.

At last, he held out his hand. “Lieutenant Shaw,” he said genially. “I’ve so looked forward to meeting you.”

His smile was astonishing—so full of warmth and charm that it had the effect of putting me quite at ease. “Thank you, sir,” I responded.

“We’ve been facing the same enemy division for months now,” the captain told me. “The monotony of trench life seems to sap the men’s bloodlust. It will be good for morale to have a fresh soul around the place, not weary or jaded like the rest. And I trust you’ll also prove good company for me.”

“I shall do my best,” I replied.

“I know you will.” Harker’s eyes seemed to glow. He did seem genuinely pleased at my arrival.

“Sit,” he invited, “and tell me about yourself.”

“Where should I begin?” I answered, pulling up a rough wooden chair.

“Begin with explaining how a young man educated at Eton should come to speak Romanian as well as English and German.” He glanced at a file that I assumed must contain my records. “They certainly didn’t teach it when I was there.”

“You were at Eton too, sir?” I asked, pleased at the thought that we must share similar memories.

The captain nodded. “I left in 1905. A while before you arrived, I imagine.”

I quickly calculated that he must be twenty-nine—ten years older than myself. Yet he could easily have been mistaken for

one of my contemporaries. I had seen soldiers my own age already emaciated and gaunt from war. Remarkably, Captain Harker's smooth, fine features betrayed no hardship.

"We lived in Romania with my parents until I was nine," I explained. "My father was a diplomat."

"We?"

"Myself and my sister, Lily," I answered him. "She's a year younger than I. We returned to England with our Romanian guardian after our parents were killed in an accident."

"How terrible," Captain Harker murmured.

The tender subject made it hard to sustain his intense gaze. I looked away awkwardly. "It was harder for Lily than it was for me," I continued. "I was quickly dispatched to board at prep school, while she was left to grieve in a strange old house that our father had purchased in England. At the time I feared the grief might kill her. . . ."

I glanced back at Harker. The curiosity in his expression compelled me to go on. "Lily has always been such a sensitive soul," I explained. "But Antanasia, our nurse, never left her side. I believe that Antanasia's ministrations are the sole reason that Lily pulled through."

Harker nodded. "Have you no other relatives?"

"No," I replied. I forced a smile. "Death seems to have followed our family closely, but I am determined to outwit him until I am very old."

Harker's eyes burned through me with that same intense stare. "I have no doubt you shall get your wish, John."

I couldn't imagine why he was so certain. The battle-weary soldiers I'd encountered yesterday had, in a single day, made me horribly aware of how raw and inexperienced I am in this dark place. Yet his eyes held such conviction that it was easy to believe his words.

Harker returned to his chair. He slid open a desk drawer and took out a bottle of whiskey. "You will be surprised to learn just how much we have in common, Lieutenant," he said, smiling again. "But such a story deserves a drink." He poured a measure into each of the two tumblers that sat beside his lamp.

"My father, Jonathan Harker, died shortly after my first birthday," he began, handing me a glass. "My mother, Mina, was comforted by Count Tepes, a family friend and Romanian nobleman. They fell in love, and she and I went with him to his native Romania, where they married."

I took a sip of whiskey and found it rather strong. "So you too grew up in Romania?" I asked, stifling a cough as my throat burned.

Harker nodded. "Until I returned to England—for Eton—at thirteen."

"You are the first person I have met outside Romania who speaks the language," I remarked, gratified. "Apart from Antanasia and Lily, of course. Whereabouts did you live, sir?"

“Our home is a castle in the Carpathian Mountains. Transylvania,” answered the captain. “Very close to a town named Bistritz. I suppose you lived in Bucharest?”

“Yes,” I confirmed. “But we often travelled around the country. We may have visited Transylvania, when I was too young to remember. My parents loved the Romanian people; they found them warm and full of charm. If a little superstitious . . .”

“Ah, yes.” Harker smiled. “And what did your parents make of Romanian folklore?” he asked.

I felt the heat of the whiskey reach my belly. “They tried to shield us from the peasants’ dark stories,” I replied. “They thought them too frightening for children.”

Harker laughed. “But one should never shield children from darkness. For darkness will find them anyway. And all the more easily if they are not prepared.” He swallowed his drink in one gulp and placed the glass back down on his desk.

“Did *you* believe the superstitions, sir?” I asked him curiously.

Captain Harker raised a sardonic black brow. “I still do,” he said with a smile.