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Opening extract from

Changeling: Blood Wolf

Written by

Steve Feasey

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BLOOD WOLF

The first rule of battle with the forces of the Netherworld: the moment you think you're safe, that's when you need to worry . . .

The good guys:
Trey Laporte – fifteen years old. Orphan. The last hereditary werewolf
Alexa Charron – vampire's daughter; skilled sorceress
Tom O'Callahan – human tough guy. A match for any nether-creature

The nether-creatures:
The Incubus – a shape-shifter perfectly suited to trapping unwary humans
The Ashnon – extremely rare and highly valued demon; can perfectly replicate any living creature
The Necrotroph – hard-to-kill parasitic demon. Inhabits a body and controls the victim's mind. Leaves its prey dead or insane
The LG78 – confidential. No further information available

The mission:
They've broken the evil vampire Caliban's power base. They thought it was all over. That's where they were wrong . . .

Bloodthirsty books by Steve Feasey

Changeling

Changeling: Dark Moon

Look out for the next spine-chilling ***Changeling*** *adventure coming soon*

STEVE FEASEY



BLOOD WOLF

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS



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For my three big sisters: Netty, Les and Debs,
who locked me in the shoe cupboard,
but also gave me so much love.

And for Shanders, who simply said, 'Go for it.'

1

The first time the girl woke had been the worst.

She crawled out of the foggy darkness of oblivion towards the sounds of the medical equipment to which she was hooked via various tubes and sensors. She felt groggy and disorientated, and she slowly opened her eyes to look around for a drink to ease the soreness in her throat. The vampire was sitting at her bedside, looking back at her with an expressionless face. He nodded at her and a sad smile momentarily flashed across his features before disappearing again. Her breath caught in her throat and she froze; unable to do anything but stare at the abomination sitting at her bedside, staring back at her.

That he was a vampire she had no doubt. There were no fangs or talons, and except for the fascinating pools of gold and ochre that were his eyes, there was nothing to distinguish him from any other tall, handsome, middle-aged man. But one look told her everything that she needed to know about his true nature, as if she were still looking at things through eyes that were not her own; through the eyes of the demon that had lived inside her. She frowned at this last thought,

pushing away memories that threatened to pile in on her.

'How are you, Philippa?' Lucien Charron asked.

The rising terror that had built up inside her exploded into every cell, consuming her completely. A high, keening sound filled the little room, and she realized that it was the sound of her own scream. The panic-stricken noise went on and on, continuing until all the air in her lungs had gone. She sucked in a great shuddering breath, closing her eyes for a fraction of a second, and when she opened them again the vampire was gone.

She stared around her in panic, her eyes skittering about the room to see where the creature might be. She shook her head in disbelief, her breath coming in great gasps as her heart hammered in her chest. There was no sign of him; he'd gone. She looked down at the seat and noted that the slight indentation in the vinyl seat cushion was slowly filling out, returning to a state that would suggest nothing had ever sat there; that nothing had ever been in the room with her. She shook her head again and allowed the tears to fall.

She had gone insane. She knew that she was now quite mad. How else could she explain her belief that she had been possessed by a demon, and that the same demon had used her to get to, and murder, her father in front of her very eyes?

Philippa Tipsbury cried great sobs as memories of the demon that had inhabited her body flooded back to her. A nurse appeared at the door. The middle-aged woman

hurried to her side and injected a clear liquid into a tube hanging out of Philippa's arm. She cooed at the young girl in the bed as she administered the drug, and when she was finished she gently ran her hand across the girl's forehead, hushing her and waiting for the drug to take effect.

Philippa felt the coldness creep into her again, and she welcomed the calm that it brought with it. She tried to speak, but the drug was working so quickly that nothing came out but an indistinct mumble before the darkness crowded in again at the edges of her vision and then consumed her completely.

That was two days ago.

And now they were back.

She tried to open her eyes gradually to the thinnest of slits and peer out at the person sitting in the chair next to her. The room was quite dark, the only light coming in through the glass window set into the door, and it was difficult to make out the features of whoever it was looking down at a book in their lap, but she was sure that it was not the vampire again. It struck her as slightly odd that the person was able to make out any words on the pages with so little light. She opened her eyes fully and took in the girl who was sitting with her legs crossed to support the book, the fingers of her left hand tapping out a tune on the plastic armrest.

'How are you?' the girl asked without looking up.

Philippa instantly shut her eyes.

'We were all so very worried about you that we've been

taking it in turns to come and sit by your side. After your last encounter with my father we decided that it might be better if he didn't come any more. We didn't want to freak you out again.'

Philippa knew there was little point in pretending to be asleep any longer. She opened her eyes and studied her visitor.

Alexa Charron closed the book, placing a bookmark – which appeared to be made of brown, coarse hair that had been woven and plaited together – between the pages. She smiled across at Philippa, who frowned back as she tried to make out who she was and what she was doing here. The visitor had bright, intelligent eyes set into a face that was extremely attractive. Her black hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she wore a white T-shirt and jeans. 'Hi. I'm Alexa,' she said, holding out her hand in greeting.

The girl in the bed ignored the hand, shaking her head as tears welled up in the corners of her eyes. 'I've gone insane,' she said.

Alexa looked down at the girl in the bed, a sad look on her face. She reached out and gently touched the girl's forearm with the tip of her fingers, letting them rest there.

'No, Philippa. You haven't lost your mind. But what you've been through would be enough to make a lesser person do just that.' She smiled a sad smile. 'We want to help you get over what happened to you.'

'We? Who's we?'

Alexa's eyes stayed locked on those of the girl in the bed. 'We have your best interests at heart, Philippa.'

'My father's dead, isn't he? That . . . thing crawled inside him, forced itself into him, and he . . .'

'Shh. You mustn't upset yourself again.'

Alexa turned towards the small nightstand at the side of the bed. Pouring water from a jug, she helped Philippa to lean forward on her pillows and drink from the glass.

The patient nodded her appreciation, but stared back at the other girl with a look of distrust.

'You look like you want to ask me something,' Alexa said.

'You said that that . . . man . . . the one I saw two days ago. You said that he was your father.'

Alexa nodded.

'Except he's *not* a man, is he?' Her voice was becoming louder and higher in pitch, and she recognized the hysteria in it. 'He's not . . . he's . . .' She sucked in a deep breath, willing herself to say the words. 'He's a—'

'A vampire?' Alexa frowned, lips pursed as though considering how best to continue. 'Yes, he is.' She glanced at the door, as if expecting someone. 'You are not insane, Philippa. I know that right now you must believe that you are, but you are not. Lucien is as real as the Necrotroph demon that inhabited your body when you were in the Seychelles with your father.' The young sorceress looked at her with pity. 'Everything that you remember was real. And yes, I'm afraid your father is dead.'

Philippa nodded, unable to speak. Hearing someone else say those words caused a wave of sadness and grief to break inside her. Everything was too much for her: her father was dead, a vampire had been in this very room with her, and a demon had been living inside her body. She looked away and let the tears soak into the pillow, filling the room with the sound of her muffled sobbing.

Alexa stayed by the girl's side, her hand still resting on Philippa's arm, allowing her to grieve and let out some of the emotions that had built up inside her.

Eventually Philippa looked back at her visitor. 'That *thing* was really inside me, wasn't it? I didn't imagine it all.'

'No, you didn't imagine it. The Necrotroph left your body and inhabited your father in order to find out what he knew about a mission that some of my colleagues and I were on. The demon used you to get to your dad. Your father leaped from the boat that you were on and drowned himself in an effort to try and kill the creature. It was an incredibly brave thing to do.'

Philippa Tipsbury stared down at the white sheets that covered her.

Alexa studied the girl, trying to gauge how much more she should reveal to her, and knowing that it must already be too much for the teenager to take in.

'You still haven't told me who you are,' Philippa said in a small voice. 'Who you are and what you want.'

'Your father worked for my father. He was part of a

worldwide organization that seeks to keep creatures like the demon you encountered from entering this realm from the Netherworld. We're the good guys, Philippa. Your dad was one of the good guys.'

She studied the girl's face as fresh rivulets of tears tracked down her cheeks. Philippa continued to stare at the white bedclothes.

'Your encounter with a Necrotroph is quite . . . unique,' she said, choosing her words with care. 'The demon usually kills the former host upon transfer. Before you, any hosts that were unlucky enough to survive were left completely insane. But you have survived. And as I've said, you are not mad.' She nodded at her as if to emphasize this last point.

Philippa remained silent.

'We need your help. We think that the Necrotroph somehow survived your father's attempt to kill it. It—'

'No. It's dead. You said yourself that my father jumped over the side of that boat. He killed it at the bottom of that ocean. It's dead, I know it is.'

Alexa continued, trying to ignore the feral, frightened look on the other girl's face. 'We don't know how it escaped, but we think that you might be able to help us find it.'

Philippa turned her head and stared at Alexa, her features set in a wide-eyed look of disbelief.

'There is a special bond between you and that creature, Philippa. The dark magic that it used to control your mind and body is still a part of you. The Necrotroph left a part of itself behind – in you.' She looked back at the girl, their

eyes locked and unblinking. ‘You’ve felt it, haven’t you? You *know* that it’s still alive.’

‘I have no idea what you are talking about,’ Philippa said, but her eyes wouldn’t meet Alexa’s.

There was a knock on the door and a nurse put her head around the opening. Upon seeing her patient sitting up in bed, she smiled at Philippa with such warmth that the girl could do little but respond in kind. The hospital worker turned to Alexa. ‘Your father is here and he wonders if it would be OK for him to come in and talk to you both?’

‘Thank you, Greta. Please tell him that I’ll be out in a moment.’

Alexa waited until the nurse had left the room before turning to look at Philippa again. ‘It’s up to you. You don’t have to see him if you don’t want to. But you need to know that my father is not the only nether-creature living among us in the human realm – far from it. And unlike my father, the majority of them are dedicated to bringing death and destruction to this world.’ She paused, pursing her lips before continuing. ‘I think the Necrotroph has irrevocably changed something in your make-up, Philippa. And I think you already know that.’ She waited until the girl looked at her. ‘You can see them, can’t you? See the nether-creatures through their disguises? How else would you have known that my father was not what he appears to be?’ She let that sink in with the girl before adding, ‘We want to help you, Philippa.’

‘What does your father want?’

‘We think that you may have also acquired a skill that is unique to the Necrotrophs: the ability to locate their own kind wherever they are. Now you may not be able to use this ability yet, but given some help we think that you could. The bad news is that if we’re right, the demon will also be able to sense you: it will know that you are alive, and that is a situation it will want to do something about.’ She smiled kindly at the other girl. ‘You might be our only hope of locating and destroying it.’

Philippa closed her eyes, wishing that all of this would simply stop. She wanted nothing more than for the nurse to come in again and inject something into the tube in her arm that would allow her to sink back into unconsciousness – maybe forever.

Alexa waited, knowing that she had to give the girl as much time as she needed.

‘What makes you so sure that I have these . . . powers?’

‘We’re not. Right now it is just a guess. But you *can* see nether-creatures.’

‘I don’t think I can,’ the girl said, frowning. ‘At least not in the way that you suggest. It’s more a . . . *feeling.*’

Philippa thought back to the moment that she’d woken up with the vampire next to her. Nothing about the creature’s outward appearance – except his freaky eyes – would suggest that he was anything but human, but she’d *known.* She concentrated her attention on the wall opposite her, relishing the blandness of it. ‘And if I *can* locate this . . .

Necrotroph for you, your father is going to destroy it?' she said eventually.

'Yes, you have my word on that.'

Philippa took a deep, shuddery breath, unable to believe what she was about to say. 'OK,' she nodded. 'If you promise to stay with me, I'll talk to your father.'

She watched as Alexa left the room and went to fetch the vampire.