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Opening extract from

The Coldest Girl in Coldtown

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Published by

Indigo (an imprint of Orion Children's Books)

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First published in Great Britain in 2013
by Indigo
a division of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House
5 Upper St Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA
An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78062 129 6

Printed in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

www.blackholly.com
www.orionbooks.co.uk

CHAPTER 1

Nothing can happen
more beautiful than death.
—Walt Whitman

Tana woke lying in a bathtub. Her legs were drawn up, her cheek pressed against the cold metal of the faucet. A slow drip had soaked the fabric on her shoulder and wetted locks of her hair. The rest of her, including her clothes, was still completely dry, which was kind of a relief. Her neck felt stiff; her shoulders ached. She looked up dazedly at the ceiling, at the blots of mold grown into Rorschach patterns. For a moment, she felt completely disoriented. Then she scrambled up onto her knees, skin sliding on the enamel, and pushed aside the shower curtain.

The sink was piled with plastic cups, beer bottles, and askew hand towels. Bright, buttery, late summer sunlight streamed in from a small window above the toilet, interrupted only by the swinging shadows made by the garland of garlic hung above it.

A party. Right. She'd been at a sundown party. "Ugh," she said, her fingers on the curtain to steady herself, popping three rings off the rod with her weight. Her temples throbbed dully.

She remembered getting ready, putting on the jangling bracelets that still chimed together when she moved and the steel-toed oxblood boots that took forever to lace and were mysteriously no longer on her feet. Remembered the way she'd lined her foggy blue eyes in shimmering black and kissed her mirror for luck. Everything got a little blurry after that.

Levering herself up, Tana stumbled to the faucet and splashed water on her face. Her makeup was smudged, lipstick smeared across her cheek, mascara spread like a stain. The white baby-doll dress she'd borrowed out of her mother's closet was ripped at the sleeve. Her black hair was a tangled mess that finger-combing didn't do a lot to fix. She looked like a dissipated mime.

The truth was that she was pretty sure she'd passed out in the bathroom while avoiding her ex, Aidan. Before that there'd been some playing of a drinking game called The Lady or The Tiger, where you bet on whether a tossed coin would come up heads (lady) or tails (tiger). If you picked wrong, you had to do a shot. After that came a lot of dancing and some more swigs from a bottle of whiskey. Aidan had urged Tana to make out with his new sulky-mouthed, strawberry-haired girlfriend, the one who was wearing a dog collar she'd found in the mudroom. He said it would be like an eclipse of the sun and the moon in the sky, a marriage of all things dark and light. *You mean an eclipse of the sun and moon in your pants*, Tana had told him, but he'd been doggedly, infuriatingly persistent.

And as the whiskey sang through her blood and sweat slicked her skin, a dangerously familiar recklessness filled her. With a face like a wicked cherub, Aidan had always been hard to say no to. Worse, he knew it.

Sighing, Tana opened the bathroom door—not even locked, so people could have been coming in and out all night with her *right there*, behind the shower curtain, and how humiliating was that?—and padded out into the hall. The smell of spilled beer filled the air, along with something else, something metallic and charnel-sweet. The television was on in the other room, and she could hear the low voice of a newscaster as she walked toward the kitchen. Lance's parents didn't care about his having sundown parties at their old farmhouse, so he had one almost every weekend, locking the doors at dusk and keeping them barred until dawn. She'd been to plenty, and the mornings were always full of shouting and showers, boiling coffee and trying to hack together breakfast from a couple of eggs and scraps of toast.

And long lines for the two small bathrooms, with people beating on the doors if you took too long. Everyone needed to pee, take a shower, and change clothes. Surely that would have woken her.

But if she *had* slept through it and everyone was already out at a diner, they would be laughing it up. Joking about her unconscious in the tub and whatever they'd done in that bathroom while she was asleep, plus maybe photos, all kinds of stupid stuff that she'd have to hear repeated over and over once school started. She was just lucky they hadn't markered a mustache on her.

If Pauline had been at the party, none of this would have

happened. When they got wasted, they usually curled up underneath the dining room table, limbs draped over each other like kittens in a basket, and no boy in the world, not even Aidan, was bold enough to face Pauline's razor tongue. But Pauline was away at drama camp, and Tana had been bored, so she'd gone to the party alone.

The kitchen was empty, spilled booze and orange soda pooling on the countertops and being soaked up by a smattering of potato chips. Tana was reaching for the coffeepot when, across the black-and-white linoleum floor, just on the other side of the door frame to the living room, she saw a hand, its fingers stretched out as if in sleep. She relaxed. No one was awake yet—that was all. Maybe she was the first one up, although when she thought back to the sun streaking through the bathroom window, it had seemed high in the sky.

The longer she gazed at the hand, though, the more she noticed that it seemed oddly pale, the skin around the fingernails bluish. Tana's heart started to thud, her body reacting before her mind caught up. She slowly set the pot back on the counter and forced herself to cross the kitchen floor, step by careful step, until she was over the threshold of the living room.

Then she had to force herself not to scream.

The tan carpet was stiff and black with stripes of dried blood, spattered like a Jackson Pollock canvas. The walls were streaked with it, handprints smearing the dingy beige surfaces. And the bodies. Dozens of bodies. People she'd seen every day since kindergarten, people whom she'd played tag with and cried over and kissed, were lying at odd angles, their bodies pale and cold, their eyes staring like rows of dolls in a shop window.

The hand near Tana's foot belonged to Imogen, a pretty, plump, pink-haired girl who was planning to go to art school next year. Her lips were slightly apart, and her navy anchor-print sundress rode up so that her thighs were visible. She appeared to have been caught as she was trying to crawl away, one arm extended and the other gripping the carpet.

Otta's, Ilaina's, and Jon's bodies were piled together. They'd just gotten back from summer cheer camp and had started the party off with a series of backflips in the yard just before sunset, as mosquitoes buzzed through the warm breeze. Now dried blood crusted on their clothing like rust, tinting their hair, dotting their skin like freckles. Their eyes were locked open, the pupils gone cloudy.

She found Lance on a couch, posed with his arms thrown over the shoulders of a girl on one side and a boy on the other, all three of their throats bearing ragged puncture marks. All three of them with beer bottles resting near their hands, as if they were still at the party. As though their white-blue lips were likely to say her name at any moment.

Tana felt dizzy. The room seemed to spin. She sank to the blood-covered carpet and sat, the pounding in her head growing louder and louder. On the television, someone was spraying orange cleaner on a granite countertop while a grinning child ate jam off a slice of bread.

One of the windows was open, she noticed, curtain fluttering. The party must have gotten too warm, everyone sweating in the small house and yearning for the cool breeze just outside. Then, once the window was open, it would have been easy to forget to close it. There was still the garlic, after all, still the holy water on the lintels.

Things like this happened in Europe, in places like Belgium, where the streets teemed with vampires and the shops didn't open until after dark. Not here. Not in Tana's town, where there hadn't been a single attack in more than five years.

And yet it had happened. A window had been left open to the night, and a vampire had crawled through.

She should get her phone and call—call someone. Not her father; there was no way he would be able to deal with this. Maybe the police. Or a vampire hunter, like Hemlok from TV, the huge, bald former wrestler always decked out in leather. He would know what to do. Her little sister had a poster of Hemlok in her locker, right next to pictures of golden-haired Lucien, her favorite Coldtown vampire. Pearl would be so excited if Hemlok came; she could finally get his autograph.

Tana started giggling, which was bad, she knew, and put her hands over her mouth to smother the sound. It wasn't okay to laugh in front of dead people. That was like laughing at a funeral.

The unblinking eyes of her friends watched her.

On the television, the newscaster was predicting scattered showers later in the week. The Nasdaq was down.

Tana remembered all over again that Pauline hadn't been at the party, and she was so fiercely, so selfishly glad that she couldn't even feel bad about it, because Pauline was alive even though everyone else was dead.

From far away in the guest room, someone's phone started to ring. It was playing a tinny remix of "Tainted Love." After a while, it stopped. Then two phones much closer went off almost at the same time, their rings combining into a chorus of discordant sound.

The news turned into a show about three men who lived together in an apartment with a wisecracking skull. The laugh track roared every time the skull spoke. Tana wasn't sure if it was a real show or if she was imagining it. Time slipped by.

She gave herself a little lecture: She had to get up off the floor and go into the guest room, where jackets were piled up on the bed, and root around until she found her purse and her boots and her car keys. Her cell phone was there, too. She'd need that if she was going to call someone.

She had to do it right then—no more sitting.

It occurred to her that there was a phone closer, shoved into the pocket of one of the corpses or pressed between cold, dead skin and the lace of a bra. But she couldn't bear the idea of searching bodies.

Get up, she told herself.

Pushing herself to stand, she started picking her way across the floor, trying to ignore the way the carpet crunched under her bare feet, trying not to think about the smell of decay blooming in the room. She remembered something from her sophomore-year social studies class—her teacher had told them about the famous raid in Corpus Christi, when Texas tried to close its Coldtown and drove tanks into it during the day. Every human inside who might have been infected got shot. Even the mayor's daughter was killed. A lot of sleeping vampires were killed, too, rooted out of their hiding places and beheaded or exposed to sunlight. When night fell, the remaining vampires were able to kill the guards at the gate and flee, leaving dozens and dozens of drained and infected people in their wake. Corpus Christi vampires were still a popular target for bounty hunters on television.

Every kid had to do a different project for that class. Tana had made a diorama, with a shoe box and a lot of red poster paint, to represent a news article that she'd cut out of the paper—one about three vampires on the run from Corpus Christi who'd break into a house, kill everyone, and then rest among the corpses until night fell again.

Which made her wonder if there could still be a vampire in this house, the vampire who had slaughtered all these people. Who'd somehow overlooked her, who'd been too intent on blood and butchery to open every door to every hall closet or bathroom, who hadn't swept aside a shower curtain. It would murder her now, though, if it heard her moving.

Her heart raced, thundering against her rib cage, and every beat felt like a punch in the chest. *Stupid*, her heart said. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

Tana felt light-headed, her breath coming in shallow gasps. She knew she should sit down again and put her head between her legs—that was what you were supposed to do if you were hyperventilating—but if she sat down, she might never get up. She forced herself to inhale deeply instead, letting the air out of her lungs as slowly as she could.

She wanted to run out the front, race across the lawn, and pound on one of the neighbors' doors until they let her inside.

But without her boots or phone or keys, she'd be in a lot of trouble if no one was home. Lance's parents' farmhouse was out in the country, and all the land behind the house was state park. There just weren't that many neighbors nearby. And Tana knew that once she walked out the door, no force on earth could make her return.

She was torn between the impulse to run and the urge to curl up like a pill bug, close her eyes, tuck her head beneath her arms, and play the game of since-I-can't-see-monsters-monsters-can't-see-me. Neither of those impulses were going to save her. She had to *think*.

Sunlight dappled the living room, filtered through the leaves of trees outside—late afternoon sun, sure, but still sun. She clung to that. Even if a whole nest of vampires were in the basement, they wouldn't—*couldn't*—come up before nightfall. She should just stick to her plan: Go to the guest room and get her boots and cell phone and car keys. Then go outside and have the biggest, most awful freak-out of her life. She would allow herself to scream or even faint, so long as she did it in her car, far from here, with the windows up and the doors locked.

Carefully, carefully, she pushed off each of her shining metal bracelets, setting them on the rug so they wouldn't jangle when she moved.

This time as she crossed the room, she was aware of every creak of the floorboards, every ragged breath she took. She imagined fanged mouths in the shadows; she imagined cold hands cracking through the kitchen linoleum, fingernails scratching her ankles as she was dragged down into the dark. It seemed like forever before she made it to the door of the spare room and twisted the knob.

Then, despite all her best intentions, she gasped.

Aidan was tied to the bed. His wrists and ankles were bound to the posts with bungee cords, and there was silver duct tape over his mouth, but he was *alive*. For a long moment, all she could do was

stare at him, the shock of everything coming over her all at once. Someone had taped garbage bags over the windows, blocking out sunlight. And beside the bed, gagged and in chains, amid the jackets someone had swept to the floor, was another boy, one with hair as black as spilled ink. He looked up at her. His eyes were bright as rubies and just as red.