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Published by Camilla Monk AKA "Yaypub"

Cover Art by Kathi Juloski, design by Camilla Monk

OF BLOOD
& *Light*

C. MONK



Etched under the scutcheon of our coat of arms, our motto demands that we temper strength with magnanimity—*Balko saken Trägkaro*: strong, yet merciful. It shames me to confess that there was no trace of either in my heart that night, only a seething beast that demanded I hunt her, crush her, squelch every last bit of freedom this gullible husband had so foolishly granted to the subject of his devotion. Blinded by rage, I ran after her on the Deckwenn T'irr, nearly seized her, only for her to slip from my grasp and fall in roiling waters as black as my anger.

Had our fates been woven from a different thread, I might, I believe, have turned into the monster she saw in me. But it is you whom I saw disappear in the depths of the river, you whom I dove to retrieve.

You whom I found, and who found me.

*From the private correspondence of His Grace the Duke of Caid, K. T.,
Thunor Hall, AUD 1851.*

Chapter 1

It's not the first time I've found myself racing through Toronto in the back of an ambulance, but the fear always carries a new, different tang. There's no getting used to it, no controlling the frantic drum of my heart as I watch Sage's listless form on the stretcher. I can barely make out her doll-like features under the mask covering her mouth and nose. One of the EMTs is rechecking her pulse while his partner resumes squeezing the silicone bag that's forcing oxygen into her airways.

Sage's lungs are giving up.

We knew it would happen eventually, that her breath would fail her like the rest. Like her digestive system, that can no longer assimilate nutrients without a feeding tube connected to a stoma in her belly; like her bones, inexplicably too brittle; her heart, never strong enough. This time, it was bronchitis, back in October, that turned into pneumonia. Within a month, Sage's already dwindling lung capacity plummeted below 40%. Now we have an oxygen concentrator humming twenty-four-seven in the living room, connected to a seventy-foot tube snaking around our house. It funnels the air Sage desperately needs directly into her nostrils through a cannula.

But it's not enough. It never is. She needs new lungs; she needs a whole new, healthy body that no one will give her because no one knows

what she has. Most of the doctors told us it's autoimmune; others think it isn't. Some of her symptoms match cystic fibrosis; others don't. It's hemolytic anemia, her kidneys, her liver . . . One douchenozzle even accused my dad of having Munchausen by proxy, just the kind of memories you want to give a seventeen-year-old girl.

"Stick with me . . ." I murmur, trailing shy fingers along the edge of the silver thermal blanket covering her. I'm afraid the slightest touch might bruise her.

I'm only four years older, but she's always been so small, elfin, with her fine-spun limbs, jade-colored irises that we both inherited from Mom, and baby-soft hair, which turned a stark white early in her childhood, when mine grew black as ink. I desperately want to believe she'll fight and push through once more, but tonight there's barely any fog on the underside of her oxygen mask. She won't open her eyes, and her legs are so emaciated that the moose-print yoga pants dad bought her last month no longer cling to her thighs.

My gaze lingers on the tattoo on the underside of my wrist: her name, written in flowing cursive. It was the first tattoo Dad ever gave me when he opened his parlor. A gift that might outlast her.

I'm not ready. Sage's clock is ticking too fast, and I don't think I can live without the pain and joy of being together. I can't accept that there will be no more heated symposiums in our bedroom to discuss trash-lit and astrophysics, no more walks along Woodbine Beach in summer when it's a good day and she feels strong enough to go out.

I don't realize my eyes have grown hot until a gruff male voice spears through the haze in my mind.

"Miss?"

I blink to focus through the sporadic blare of the siren and the lights flashing all around us. We're speeding up Eastern Avenue toward the compact stacks of skyscrapers cramming downtown.

"Miss, you've got a call. Could be your father."

My gaze cuts from Sage to the phone buzzing in my hands. I texted Dad ten minutes ago because he wouldn't pick up—late afternoon is the busiest time of the day at his shop. I swipe to take the call. On the other end of the line, the warm grit of his voice envelops me and quiets my fear. “Don't worry, Possum. I'll be there in twenty. Any change?”

“No. I found her passed out on the couch when I came home. She still had her cannula.” Thank whoever is in charge up there for small blessings: if Sage's tube had slipped off while she was out, and she'd remained without sufficient oxygen for several hours . . . I don't want to think about that. Not now.

Dad is on the same wavelength; he knows better than most how to make the best of a crap situation. “That's good. That's something already,” he reasons. There's some honking in the background; he mutters something about ‘fucking traffic cones’ before he returns his attention to me. “You stay with her, and you wait for me, Possum. We're gonna get through this.”

“We're almost there,” the paramedic clips as we round the corner of Shuter and Victoria to pull into the ER drop-off, a gaping maw at the back of the St Mike's looming, austere brick structure. I jump off the second the ambulance doors slam open and follow Sage's stretcher on autopilot, barely aware of the gusts of snow chilling me through my sweater and jeans. I forgot my parka, my gloves, everything . . . It doesn't matter.

Wheels clatter across the cold concrete. Glass doors hiss and close shut that lead to a bright and warm lobby where pair of nurses in purple scrubs hurry toward us to take over. The handoff is expedited in two minutes tops: The female EMT, a girl barely older than me, drones through Sage's symptoms while the triage nurse examines her.

They have questions for me too, and my voice sounds brittle, robotic as I rehash the same brief I've given a hundred times to a hundred doctors. Yes, she has a record here at Saint Mike's. Yes, she's had syncopes before. Am I her primary caretaker? No . . . but yes. Officially it's dad, but I'm the one trying to major in biology and angling for med school, so I've

pretty much been running that show since I was sixteen. I list all the meds she takes: so many of them, organized with military precision in the pink plastic crate we keep on the kitchen counter. An entire life spent fighting, summed up in three dry words: unidentified autoimmune disease.

When they start carting her away, I instinctively move to follow, but a hand lands on my shoulder to stop me. Another male nurse, one I hadn't noticed popping up behind me as Sage disappears down a hallway. "They'll call you when you can see your sister, but for now, we need you to register her," he says gently, tipping his head to the admission booth behind us, where a bored clerk motioned for me to come over.

I manage a stiff nod. "Yeah, I . . . I have her OHIP card with me."

"Excellent." A compassionate smile stirs dimples in his cheeks. I don't like it. It reeks of canned sympathy, but the syrupy kindness in his voice doesn't reach his eyes. They're a frosty gray, like the ice on the lake on a cloudy morning.

On a different day, my gaze might have lingered on his slim but powerful build, or the sandy-blond waves framing his almost-too-symmetrical features, but tonight he's just a rando keeping me away from my sister. I force the annoyance out of my voice: I'm going to need all the help I can get. "Do you know where they're taking her? The ICU?"

He's about to reply something when dad's voice booms across the lobby. "Possum!"

I don't care that the dozen people waiting are watching me as I run toward a craggy biker with a silvery braid and Joe Thornton's beard. "Dad!" I hug him hard, gripping his leather with both hands. You can take the Hell's Angel out of the club, but you can't really take the club out of the ex-member. Even without his patches and the tattoos he covered, people tend to stare.

And yet dad is one book you shouldn't judge by its cover: he parted with the Frisco chapter almost four years ago when his mom died. They hadn't spoken to each other in years, but she left him her tidy little house in the Beach, every doily and piece of mid-century furniture frozen in time since the day he'd walked out.

Maybe she knew that was what he truly needed: not words, but a reason to come back home. Dad had spent his entire adult life in California—Sage and I were born there—but after our grandma died, he decided it was time for the Greers to reconnect with their Canadian roots... because Medicare and cheap college. So, he rode back home with us and his Harley in tow, opened a small tattoo parlor in Downtown, and he's been a model citizen since—if you overlook the shrooms he sometimes sells under the counter to a select clientele.

He made everything better. He always does. “They took Sage away,” I mumble in his Mötley Crüe shirt. “She was still breathing, but she was cyanosed, and she won’t wake up.”

He squeezes me tight and strokes the braid in my back, twice as long as his. “Did they say how long before we can see her?”

“No. I was about to finish registering her when you arrive, they still need to swipe her card.”

“Okay, you do that, and I’ll go ask around.”

I let go reluctantly and watch him stalk toward the blond guy who talked to me earlier. He’s still here: doesn’t he have stuff to do? I can’t help but spy on the two of them from the corner of my eye while I fill in the admissions form. Name: Greer, Sage. Address in Ontario: 1905 Queen Street East, phone number . . . *Hang on.* The blond guy just motioned to a door down the hallway. Dad rushes back to me just as the clerk confirms that we’re done for now.

“He says they’re taking her to imaging, but they won’t let more than one family member in there.”

I bite back a sigh of frustration. “I’ll wait for you here. Go. But . . . Text me if you can?”

He grabs me to press a gruff kiss to my forehead. “Will do.” I think he meant them to be reassuring, but the words come out strangled. I reach to stroke his cheek and gaze into his tired brown eyes. All the lines on his face, the grooves and the old sunspots . . . they’re like a map to his soul. He doesn’t speak much about the past, about himself. But tonight, sorrow weighs on his wizened features, bare for me to see.

“We’re gonna get through this,” I murmur, echoing his earlier reassurance.

His jaw works in silence until the words escape. A secret pain between us. “River . . . Baby possum . . . I can’t lose one of my girls again.”

We never talk about this. We keep pics on our battered sideboard, pics where there’s five of us, not three. But dad isn’t great with words, and I’m not either. So, the past remains buried: we never talk about the morning mom went out with Floe to the grocery store, and they never returned. Dad looked for them for months, years. His brothers even helped, but it was as if mom and Floe had vanished off the face of the Earth. There was never any lead, no remains to help him grieve and understand. Only sudden silence.

How strange than this wordless pain would still linger in my chest after all these years when in truth I barely remember the two of them. It’s been so long, and I was so small—only five. Even Floe, the mirrored half of me, is little more than a foggy outline in my memories.

This time I can’t stop the tears. My vision blurs into shimmering sequins that I wipe with the back of my hand. “Go to her. She needs you.”

“I won’t be long.” Dad lets go and walks away, but not without one last brush of his fingers along my braid as if it were his good luck charm.

Then it’s just me, hugging myself in that lobby full of quiet strangers, under the artificial glare of tube lights. I eye the seats closest to me. I’m drained, shivering all over, but I’m almost afraid to sit down. I need the energy, the momentum that keeps dark thoughts at bay. I *hate* waiting.

“Everything is going to be all right, River.”

My head snaps up. The blond nurse. He’s standing a few feet away near the entrance, still in his scrubs—still slacking around, from the looks of it. The doors slide open in a whisper to admit another stretcher, then close once more. He doesn’t move to help the EMTs, doesn’t walk out either. Another of those soulless smiles. His eyes seem colder than ever as he adds, “I’ll look after your sister while you’re gone.”

Wait... what?

About the Author

Camilla Monk is a French native who grew up in a Franco-American family. After studying business in Paris, she taught English and French in Tokyo before returning to France to work in digital advertising. A self-taught programmer, she spent ten years building rickety websites for financial companies, before publishing *Spotless*, her debut novel.



Camilla is now a full-time writer and lives in Montreal, where she keeps a close watch on the squirrels and complains on a daily basis about the egregious number of Tim Hortons.

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