

BLACK CRIMSON

a little red riding hood story



Warning: The following excerpt is unedited. Typos and grammatical errors galore.

Double Warning: Since this is rough-draft material, the scene I'm sharing with you may or may not end up in the final book...if the story even makes it to publication.

Triple Warning: Sorry, I don't really have a third warning; I'm just a goofball who wanted to write "triple warning." It's so fun! Anyway, enjoy the excerpt!

CHAPTER 1

camille

A sudden gust of wind had me jumping and then burrowing deeper inside my fluffy Sherpa blanket on my couch as a violent splatter of raindrops pounded against the window panes in my living room, making them rattle ominously.

Nestled snugly, I tucked my knees tighter against my chest and curled my toes inside my thick, cozy socks as I glanced at my muted television across the room to see if any severe weather warnings had popped up yet. When I found no dooming forecast scrolling across the bottom of the screen, I went back to reading the kindle I had propped against my kneecaps.

My paranormal story had reached a particularly gruesome pinnacle. Blood and body parts were flying liberally. So many bones had been broken in the span of the last five minutes that my own were beginning to ache in sympathy. I winced and nearly ducked for the heroine when a severed arm whirled past her head.

Though, really. I still couldn't fathom why she'd followed the hero out there in the middle of the night, to begin with, when she *knew* exactly what he turned into

during the full moon? Just because he'd told her he loved her didn't exactly mean he'd refrain from killing her too once his monster was unleashed.

Silly character.

But then, I guess that would mean foolish *me* too because, more importantly, no one was forcing me to read this.

At night.

During a thunderstorm.

Creepy stories always kept me up, restless and alert to every creak and groan around me, especially when I'd been drinking. And yep, after a glance toward the coffee table in front of me, I noticed my wine glass was empty. As was the bottle sitting next to it.

I was so doomed. Sleep would most definitely be eluding me tonight.

But I didn't particularly care. My big vice was romance novels. I just loved them. And the cheesier and sappier and more unrealistic they got, the more I invested myself in them because by that point it was pretty much only the emotions they seemed to evoke that mattered. They were just so yummy and filling and...and...and amazing. I devoured them like potato chips, damning any sleepless-night consequences that might follow.

So basically, I was pretty much determined to finish this entire book tonight.

*The monster who had once been
Declan, her lascivious lover—*

Cue eye roll from me, but a brief one, because this shit was too intense to spend too much time making fun of right now. Maybe later, though, since finding the problems was almost as fun as reading the good parts the first time

around. Made me feel like a detective, sussing out these little issue eggs that—

But yeah. Later.

—Spun at her gasp. His eyes glowed red with lust and hatred as they focused on her. A throb of primal yearning pulsated between her legs.

“Oh, Jesus, really?” I muttered. “You just watched this dude rip out your history professor’s throat, and *now* you want to get freaky with him after repeatedly turning him down when he was being sweet and nice and human? Unbelievable.”

But I bet the scene that followed was going to be too hot to resist, so sign me up right alongside her because *I* was the one who flipped the page on my eReader, eager to see what happened next.

Celeste stretched out a trembling hand and called his name, imploring, “I know you’re in there, my love. Stop this madness and come back to me.”

The fur-covered beast arched back his neck—long snout gaping, sharp fangs flashing in the moonlight—and spread his arms wide at his sides before roaring his frustration into the night. His need to kill warred with the devotion for her blooming from his human side.

“I love you,” Celeste said simply, her damp, translucent gown fluttering

against her heaving breasts. "Kill no more. I beg it."

I sighed. Tacky dialogue notwithstanding, I still wasn't sure when it had started raining to even make her gown damp. Or were her clothes wet and clinging—sorry, make that *fluttering*—from sweat after her long, strenuous dash through the night to find him? And why had she gone out *barefoot* in her silky, white *translucent* nightgown?

Shoes. Socks. Long, warm pants and sweatshirts, maybe even some gloves and a stocking cap. Survival, people. It was actually a thing some considered important. And it wouldn't have taken her long to throw them on before tracking Dec down, either. I mean, come on, Celeste. Really?

But I guess I had to give her props for being so brave. Utterly stupid, but still...brave. And all in the name of love.

A jealous longing sigh hissed from my lungs. It was just so freaking romantic.

I doubted I would ever be so brave for any reason. And I *seriously* doubted any man would ever change his natural inclinations just because he loved me above all else. But wouldn't that be something: a love so strong and resilient that it defied logic and reason?

Damn, I loved these books. I'd totally be messaging the author after this to tell her how much I adored her story.

Curious to know if this all-consuming devotion they spoke of really *could* conquer this dude's bloodlust, I polished off the next paragraph in record time as Declan beat his clawed fists—yes, I quote, *clawed* fists—against his chest, fighting an internal battle of wills before, finally—decision made—he dropped his hairy arms to look at her and—

The screen of my Kindle went blank.

Battery dead.

“What? *No!*” I screeched.

No way had I gagged my way through all the heroine’s cheesiness just to be denied the hot, elemental werewolf sex that surely followed. The culmination of their everlasting love finally being unleashed would’ve been epic too. I just knew it. And *now*—now, I was going to have to freaking *wait* to experience it with them?

Totally not fair.

“You gotta be kidding me here,” I muttered, tossing off my blanket and huffing out my aggravation as I crawled from my couch nest in order to find a charging cord.

I couldn’t remember if I’d left it next to my bed or on the kitchen counter. I suppose I should probably leave it in one spot, but then I wouldn’t be able to read and charge while I was cooking supper or while I was snuggled in bed or—

Buy more charging cords; that’s what I’d do.

Yep. Adding that to my mental shopping list now.

Finally finding my cord in the bathroom from when I’d been reading while I’d blow-dried my hair for work this morning, I plugged it in there and decided to continue with the rest of the story on my phone. It’d be a smaller screen, but at least I wouldn’t have to wait another five minutes to let it charge enough to turn on again.

Now...

Where the heck had I left my phone?

Not in my purse. Or on my nightstand. Not on *its* charging portal or in the kitchen. Not with a fox or on a box.

Except wait. Maybe it *was* in the kitchen. It was kind of hard to tell at the moment. Grumbling about the mess on my countertops, I tossed the cardboard container that had housed my TV dinner from supper and an emptied packet of cocoa mix, then piled a few dirty plates into my arms before filing them into the dishwasher. But my phone hadn’t been hiding under the mess.

Oh well. At least I'd gotten something cleaned in the search so it hadn't been a total lost cause.

"Oh, phone," I called, shuffling from the kitchen to check in my room again. "Here, girl. Come to mama. Help her finish her book, huh?"

Not in a million years did I actually expect the phone to answer, so when a ringing echoed from the living room, I let out a startled yelp and nearly jumped out of my skin as I pressed a hand against my chest to keep my leaping heart from beating right out of my ribcage.

"Uh..."

Nah, that wasn't eerie at all, nope. *So* not going to wig out about the fact that my phone had actually answered my summons.

In reply, it merely kept jangling out the ringtone I'd assigned for my grandma.

Realizing *she* was the one calling, I hissed, "Shoot," and scampered toward the front room to retrieve my cell from the coffee table in front of the couch where I finally remembered I had specifically left it so it'd be nearby in case she called.

Because Gran always called when it stormed.

"Hey," I said breathlessly as I snagged up the phone to answer her. "Everything okay? Did your electricity go out again?"

The electricity in her apartment went out basically every time the clouds gathered over her building and merely contemplated rain.

"No, dear," she said. "I mean, yes. But only for a moment. It's back on now."

Which meant her *cable* was screwed up, then, and needed to be reset. I had tried to talk her through the process of getting it back online over the phone enough times now to know trying to explain the steps wouldn't work, so I held in a sigh while I said, "Okay, I'll be right over."

Celeste and Declan's sexy fates were going to have to wait just a little longer to be revealed, I guess.

"Oh, thank you, baby," Gran gushed. "But there's no hurry. Really. I'm fine right here *without* my trusty weather channel and therefore *any* idea if the storm is going to take a turn for the worse or not. I mean, if a tornado comes along and sweeps me away, unaware, we'll just chalk it up to being my time to go, I guess."

I rolled my eyes at the overdramatized rendition of her circumstances in order to hurry me along after she'd just told me to take my time. Gran was a master at manipulating me into coming over, though I really didn't know why. I probably spent more time at her place, *visiting*, than I did at home. She never had to guilt-trip me into stopping by.

I'd been a hopeless grandma's girl ever since I was seven when I'd moved in with her. My parents had split then and didn't really want me around because they both decided to start new lives with other families. So I took my granddaughter's duties very seriously. Ergo, it was just plain strange to me why she ever bothered trying to finagle bonding time together because I always had a slot in my day open for my favorite person on the planet. I would've gone over whether she called and begged or not.

My gaze fell on my own television as I said, "The weather looks fine, Gran." And it did. From the little weather map posted in the bottom left-hand corner, the rain seemed to actually be moving out of our area for the night.

Thank goodness, too. Because tonight I'd be walking to grandma's house on foot. After a bottle of wine, driving definitely wouldn't be on the agenda, that's for sure. And I didn't particularly relish the idea of dashing a dozen blocks through the rain to reach her. I seriously doubted I'd look as appealing as Celeste with soaked clothes and streaming wet hair.

“But I’ll be over soon, anyway,” I assured Gran.

“Honestly,” she argued in her sweet, innocent voice that was completely fake because Gran was neither sweet *nor* innocent. Spicy and full of mischief was way more her style. “There’s no need to—”

“I’ll be right there,” I cut her off tightly, eager to get this over with so I could get back to my story.

I really did love to visit her, honest. I swear. But tonight, there was werewolf sex waiting. I repeat, *werewolf* sex.

“I mean, if you’re entertaining some handsome young man, you really shouldn’t—”

“You know I’m not,” I told her dryly as I scoured the floor for my shoes.

“Well, I’m not sure why *not*,” she retorted tartly. “You’re a beautiful, bright, charming girl. You should have scores of men just—”

“Yep, I should. Totally,” I agreed quickly. “Just gotta settle on one good enough for me. So I’ll be there soon, okay. Love you.”

And then I hung up before she could add anything else to make me feel miserable and alone.

But damn, hanging up on Gran probably wasn’t smart. I was going to have to bring apology presents now to make up for it.

I just hadn’t been in the mood for the usual lecture about how I needed a husband and babies. Especially not with a three-quarters finished story just waiting for me to return to.

It wasn’t like I *wanted* to be alone. If given the choice, I’d gladly be the type to get married off and pop out a couple of kids. I was all for settling down and getting in some happily-ever-after time for myself with a nice Hallmark-movie ending. I kind of dug the idea of being a woman who had it all: a family, a career, and a love that

transcended storybooks. But it just hadn't happened for me.

So why didn't Gran realize she was digging the knife in deeper and turning it in my chest every time she brought the topic up, as if nagging me about it enough would suddenly inspire me to magically make it so? Geesh.

"If I could make it so," I muttered, tugging on a pair of ankle boots over my fuzzy socks and pausing as I blinked at my around-the-house flannel pants I was still wearing before I shrugged, deciding I didn't care how I looked. They were clean enough. The only people who'd see me, anyway, were Gran and any stranger I might pass on the street, and the first wouldn't mind, while the second didn't matter. "I would. Damn, Gran. My fairy godmother must be in the shop or something because this hopeless princess just ain't getting it done any time soon."

Finding a hoodie, draped over the back of my easy chair, I pulled it on and then grabbed my purse before returning to the kitchen to scour the cabinets for food. I found a half-empty box of those Little Debbie cream-filled white fancy cakes in the cupboard, so I dumped them into the opening of my purse and moved to the fridge, to find a full bottle of chilled wine and an unopened package of those pre-sliced cheeses.

Yep. That would appease her just fine. After digging around a second to fit everything nice and snug into the mammoth bag, I turned off all the lights and locked up after myself.

I wasn't sure why Gran wouldn't just move in with me. But every time I brought up the subject, she adamantly declined. I suppose it was possible she might've thought I'd make a bad roommate. I wasn't exactly a neat freak, and I rarely cooked, like, *real* meals. But maybe she wanted to feel independent and not like a burden.

Whatever the case, I had eventually stopped asking, and so we both continued to live apart.

Apart and alone.

But I wasn't going to let that depress me right now.

Making my way outside and onto the sidewalk, I hummed to myself as I dodged fresh puddles in my path and tried *not* to think about all the possible dangers the night might hold in this neighborhood.

I'd be fine, I assured myself. I had survived every other trip I'd made down this block before. I'd survive this one too.

Forcing myself to calm down, I drew in a lungful of the cool evening. The air was still wet from the recent rain and not many people had crawled from the various holes they'd harbored themselves in since the storm had finished. It was actually really nice to have so much of the sidewalk to myself. Made me feel like I was tranquilly wandering through an urban forest, exploring my cement woods however I pleased.

With a content sigh, I lifted my nose to the night, noticing that the clouds had cleared away enough to reveal some stars. I smiled and closed my eyes, enjoying the chill that hit my cheeks.

I didn't hear the approaching footsteps until it was too late when a solid mass collided with my shoulder, nearly knocking it out of joint and causing my purse to tear free of my arm and slip out of my grasp.

CHAPTER 2

camille

For a split second, I was sure I was being mugged, and some jackass was about to get away with my purse and wallet and phone and all of Gran's apology gifts.

Except the person didn't run off, leaving me stranded and broke.

A male voice immediately gushed, "Shit, sorry. You okay there?"

Oh, thank goodness. Not a thief.

Opening my eyes to a face full of black cloth and a surprisingly pleasant male cologne, I muttered, "Yeah. Fine," on a miserable groan and temporarily ignored him in order to turn away and scan the ground for my fallen things. "But I'm the one who's sorry. I wasn't watching where I was going. At all."

Finding the purse, I bent down to check on the contents, sure the wine bottle had broken and soaked everything inside. That would be my luck.

But surprisingly, it seemed untouched when I pulled it free to examine the bottle. "Oh, thank God. The wine's fine."

“But you dropped your cheese,” I was told.

“Huh?” I twisted around and looked up to find a shadowed form looming above me.

In the dark, I could tell he wore a black zippered hoodie with the hood pulled over his head and the front zipper tugged down enough to let me know he wasn't wearing a shirt underneath. Add a pair of dark jogging pants, running shoes, and a white cord that extended from either ear to his pocket, and it seemed pretty obvious I'd interrupted him mid-exercise.

He tugged one side of his earphones out to repeat, “Your cheese.” Then he extended his other hand from the darkness toward me, containing my sealed package of cheese in his palm.

“Oh.” Well, that was embarrassing. I'd never spilled the cheese in front of anyone before. It was better than cutting it, though, I suppose. “Sorry.”

“No worries. It fell from your basket.”

“*Purse*,” I corrected, immediately frowning. “It's a purse.”

“Really? Huh. Looks like a basket.”

“Well, it's a purse.”

“Okay,” he answered good-naturedly.

Geesh. Everyone mistook my beloved purse for a basket just because it was made from woven wicker. And was probably too big to be classified as a true purse. And it had an open top.

It was like no one had any imagination, I swear.

It's okay, basket. I petted the wicker side, soothing its injured feelings. *I know you're really a purse.*

Sighing over the insult to my poor handbag, I blinked at the hand still holding out my cheese and noticed flecks of red and black splattered against his knuckles and a bit of white on the cuff of his black sweatshirt that partially covered the start of a smartwatch.

Strange. You didn't see a lot of smartwatch-wearing people in *this* neighborhood.

Maybe he was a fairly successful drug-dealer or something like that.

Who liked to jog in his free time.

I mean, you had to stay in shape if you planned on running from a lot of law enforcement, right?

"Thanks," I said, reaching out slowly.

"I think," he told me, his voice amused as his hand retracted into the darkness after I retrieved the cheese. "That your line there was actually supposed to be *you're welcome*."

His voice was deep, making that inner feminine spot in me blink awake and begin to sit up, while my brow furrowed in confusion. Because—

"What?" I lifted my gaze to the darkened area where his face should be and squinted against the glare of a streetlight that seemed to be shining down on *me* with blinding brightness yet kept him completely shadowed.

"You just made a man's entire day," he told me conversationally when I rose to my feet to tuck my cheese away. "Here, I just got full body contact with the sexiest redhead this side of the tracks, and you're thanking *me*? Nuh-uh, honey. The least you can tell me is *you're welcome* when I gush a grateful *thank YOU* for a sample of all that warm, softness."

O...kay.

Just who the heck *was* this guy?

My romance-loving brain immediately decided on mafia hitman...with a heart of gold, of course. Nice voice, hard, sculpted chest, an expensive watch, and amazing smell, plus he took care of his health. So yep, I was going with deadly hitman who tried to appease the guilt from every kill by being an extra-passionate lover that made every woman he encountered orgasm from simply looking at him, which would explain why he had to hide his face

under a hood. Can't just set off random ladies he passed by on the street; that would get awkward.

When my body gave an involuntary shudder of longing, I decided it was time to stop dilly-dallying and daydreaming and return to reality now.

"Alright, then," I said slowly, nodding at his darkness. "You're welcome." Hopefully, it didn't matter that he hadn't technically thanked me yet. "Now if you'll excuse me..."

Since, in all actuality, he *could* be anyone—a total creeper or the nicest guy on the planet—I turned away, not willing to take my chances, and I started down the street away from him, ready to move along. I had a grandma to see. And werewolf sex to read.

Only to realize he'd fallen into step behind me.

Um...

Not cool. Really not cool.

"What's a tasty morsel like you doing out here in this dark, ominous, not-so-safe neighborhood, anyway?" he asked conversationally, sounding harmless enough and not like I would expect a hitman to sound at all.

But you could still never be too sure.

"Causing mischief and mayhem," I shot back, sending him a scowl over my shoulder and trying to scare *him* away with the power of my glare. "What else?"

Now, go away, sexy-smelling man. I don't consort with hitmen. No matter how scintillating their voices may be or hard their chests were.

"Mischief and mayhem, huh? Mmm," He made an appreciative hum deep in his throat that reminded me of a half-purr, half-groan. "I like the sound of that. Count me in."

Latching onto every ounce of bravado I had, I jarred to a halt and whirled around to face off with him, scowling as hard as I could and lifting my finger like an irate teacher

warning a student not to talk out of turn. “Are you following me?”

He stopped in his tracks right under a streetlamp, revealing a tall figure with wide, powerful shoulders. The upper portion of his face was still shadowed under his hood, though, so all I saw was a bit of his nose, all of his mouth, and his jaw covered by the start of a beard.

But, oh, what a perfect jawline and sinfully wicked, full mouth he had.

Whoever he was, he should definitely be proud of having a mouth like that.

Lifting his hands in a surrendering motion, he said, “No. Of course not. I wouldn’t think following a mysterious woman through the night like some kind of stalker. That would be all kinds of wrong.”

“Weren’t you walking the other way, though?” I challenged suspiciously.

“Was I?” That entertained tone in his voice as his full lips quirked into a sexy smirk caused a jump of interest to reverberate through my stomach.

I narrowed my eyes, letting him know I wouldn’t put up with any misconduct from him, even if my fear of him was fading.

“Yes. You were,” I confirmed. “Now, I suggest you keep going *that* way.” And I shooed him along toward the correct path.

“But, Mayhem,” he pleaded impishly, his lips spreading into an enigmatic smile as he flashed me perfectly straight white teeth and leaned against the pole of the streetlamp to lazily cross his arms over his chest. “Your way suddenly looks so much more enticing than mine.”

“Oh, brother,” I mumbled, rolling my eyes.

The dude was one of those consummate flirts, wasn’t he? Those types had always annoyed the heck out of me before. But that had only been because they’d always flirted

with every woman *around* me, never me specifically. This might be the first time *I'd* ever actually hit one's radar.

Huh. Fancy that. Maybe flirty men weren't so annoying after all.

"You know," he murmured, bobbing his head at me. "I could give you a ride to that liquor store you're knocking over. Or is it an ATM you're robbing? Whatever mischief and mayhem you're causing, I'd gladly play getaway man. For *you*."

I sniffed and shook my head, turning away. *Resist the allure, Camille*, I told myself. This guy could be *anyone*.

"No thanks," I told him. "I prefer to walk."

"Yeah, I can tell," he shot back.

The smirky amusement in his voice had me slowing to a stop before spinning back again. "Did you just check out my ass?" I asked in a low, warning voice.

He sighed dreamily. "I like to think of it as appreciating the scenery. Never thought flannel pajama pants had any sex appeal before, but you have definitely proven me wrong."

As compliments went, I totally dug that one, even though I was pretty sure he was partly laughing at me while he made it. But the timing was all wrong; I still had no idea if he was an ax murderer or some good Samaritan. So instead of letting myself feel flattered, I scowled. "Yeah? Well, Appreciate this!"

And I flipped him off before stomping away.

"If that's an invitation, I definitely accept," he shot back, keeping pace behind me.

"It *wasn't* an invitation."

"Didn't think so," he answered easily, his voice way too cheerful to be bothered by my obvious rejection. "But you can't blame a guy for hoping, right?"

Reaching the threshold of my patience, I spun toward him. "Didn't I tell you to stop following me?"

I could almost *hear* him squint in thoughtful consideration as he said, “Did you?”

“Yes. Now, follow me one step further, buddy, and I’m pulling out my mace to intimately introduce you two. Got it?”

“Fine, fine.” He chuckled as he stopped and even retreated a step. “I can be a good boy. On occasion. But hey, Mayhem,” he called when I turned away again to stomp off for the last time. “Be careful out there, alright? You’re way too deliciously enticing for the average guy to handle. Don’t want you leaving a trail of broken-hearted carnage behind.”

“Hey, creepy hooded man,” I called back. “You got a little white stuff.” Turning to walk backward away from him, I wiped at the corner of my own mouth with my index finger. “Right here.”

He repeated the act, only making the whiteness smear more as he drew his thumb over the smudge and then examined his hand to discover I hadn’t been lying.

On cue, his beautiful lips smirked into another entertained grin as he looked up at me. “Well, that’s embarrassing.”

Except he sounded as if he’d never been embarrassed about anything a day in his life.

“Hmm,” I smarted back, unable to conceal my own smarmy smirk. “Maybe you should consider swallowing next time.”

Throwing his head back, he shouted out a laugh that filled the night with his amusement as I turned away to walk forward and rounded the corner at the end of the street, leaving him behind.

“Damn, Mayhem,” he shouted after me. “I think you just became my dream woman.”

Chuckling, I shook my head, proud of myself before I sobered desolately. “You better keep on dreaming, then, pal,” I murmured to myself.

Because I'd never been *anyone's* dream woman. And I seriously doubted I ever would be.

I knew he'd stopped following, but I couldn't help but look back, a part of me hoping he hadn't given up, while the rational side sighed in relief, glad he'd left me alone.

Being sly and flirty and having a heart-stoppingly gorgeous grin didn't mean he wasn't dangerous. You couldn't be too cautious in this world.

At the end of that block, I was still missing the stranger's playful teasing while glad I'd gotten away from him unscathed when I turned the corner, only to jar to a halt and gape open-mouthed at the sight before me.

But seriously...

Holy wow.

Black Crimson had struck again.

END OF EXCERPT
