

# **DRINK MY BLOOD**

By

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This edition published by AWritersWork.com 2010

## Chapter I

Dave Olson was out of work, but so were a lot of other people. Hanging on to his pride, he still got up at 7:00a.m. and went jogging. When he returned home, he would shower and shave, dress in khakis and an oxford cloth shirt, comfortably scuffed loafers and walk the few blocks from his bungalow to Sierra Madre's downtown. With only eleven thousand residents, it was a small suburb by Los Angeles County standards, but he loved it.

He had once been one of the city's top realtors, but with real estate in the tank, his income had dropped to zero, forcing him to close his office. There was a bright side, however, unemployment had given him the chance to write his first novel.

He bought a coffee at Bean Town and sat down at one of the tables in front. It was a beautiful morning with a shocking blue sky and the San Gabriel Mountains a luxuriant green. It was a day to rejoice in being alive.

He pulled a letter from his pocket from the last editor he had queried. He tapped it on the white table. It could be a request for his manuscript, or another brief rejection, with the odds tending toward the latter. By the time his coffee cup was empty, he had gathered the courage to slit open the envelope. It was another rejection, but a personal letter this time, not a form sent out by the thousands.

The editor had liked his cool, crisp style but did not believe there was a market for his coming of age story. The editor suggested he pick a more commercial venture and query him again. Seizing upon that meager bit of encouragement, he returned the letter to his pocket, bought another cup of coffee, a copy of the Los Angeles Times, and sat down at his table.

He shifted through the news, and while there was enough mayhem in the world to

inspire a thousand stories, none caught hold as a dynamite idea he would want to pursue. Too damn many of the articles were sad, like the one about the man who had poisoned his wife, and exploring them would only make him that much more depressed than he already was.

He looked up as the owner of the Jewelry Box came out of Bean Town. Without waiting for an invitation, John Blanchard slid into a chair at Dave's table. He was a tall, thin man with the thick thatch of white hair evangelists and senators envy.

"I don't know why I still bother opening the store," John said. "There is always the hope someone will buy a watch for a graduation present, but men aren't buying diamonds for an anniversary gift anymore. I could be open two days a week and do just as well."

"At least you still have a business," Dave offered.

"I'm grateful for it everyday. It keeps me from sitting home with Marilyn and watching The View."

Dave had recently caught The View more times than he cared to admit, but he nodded in sympathy. "Good luck today." He stood and left the newspaper on the table.

As he crossed the street, he thought he would be wise to visit Sierra Madre Books and take his own survey of what was selling. With Louis L'Amour gone, he doubted Westerns were big, and he was out of luck if they were because he had never ridden a horse. John Grisham sold a ton of books, but he was an attorney who drew on his legal expertise. With his sorry track record with women, Romance was out of the question, but something more suited to his experience had to be selling well.

The bookstore was new, owned by a young couple who had just had a baby boy. They looked impossibly young, which was a thought Dave had far too often nowadays. He had worked with Jeff and Sally on the Wisteria Festival and considered them friends.

"Morning," he said as he came through the door.

"Morning, Dave," Jeff replied. "Beautiful day, isn't it?"

“Sure is.” Dave surveyed the display of bestsellers, and just as he had expected, there was John Grisham.

“What’s really selling well?” he called to Jeff.

“Vampires. Stephanie Meyer has held several places on the bestseller lists for nearly a year. HBO is showing True Blood, another vampire series.”

“I can’t afford HBO anymore.”

“I hear you.”

“You’re not kidding me? Vampires really are popular?”

“Yeah, paranormal stories are big.”

Dave shoved his hands in his pockets and walked slowly around the store. “Vampires,” he muttered under his breath. He had always loved Stephen King’s novels. Maybe he ought to try horror where he could depend solely on his imagination. The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea.

He left the store with a copy of Stephanie Meyer’s TWILIGHT, and read it that afternoon. He liked the teenage vampires, but what he admired most was that Mrs. Meyer had made up her own rules for how vampires might behave. Inspired, he opened his laptop and used Google to research vampire lore.

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While he was not training for the upcoming race up the mountain, the next morning he climbed the Mt. Wilson Trail. On such a warm day, he just wanted to sit and look out over the hazy San Gabriel Valley and consider vampires.

He was fascinated by the breath of vampire lore stretching across centuries and a variety of cultures. Now all he needed was an original take on the ancient theme. So he breathed deeply and let his mind wander in new directions. When the bells rang from the Congregational Church’s stone tower, a wonderfully bizarre idea struck him with the force of a fist.

He scrambled back down the mountain and raced home. He found his Sunday

School Bible, carried it out to backyard to read, and turned to the New Testament. He knew the Apostle's stories, but read them with more understanding than he had possessed as a child.

The elm trees whispered overhead and the orange tree's blossoms perfumed the whole yard. It was a lush setting to think and dream, and when it grew dark, he went inside and wrote an outline as fast as he could type on his laptop.

\* \* \*

Eric Collins taught in the Art department at the University of Arizona in Tucson. The semester had just drawn to a close, and he was tackling the odious ritual of cleaning out his office when he received Dave Olson's e-mail. They had grown up together in Sierra Madre and had remained good friends.

Eric had read Dave's novel, and recognized himself in one of the lead characters, even if Dave wouldn't acknowledge it. Now Dave was sending him an absolutely astounding idea, and Eric could not help but laugh.

Dave had laid it out so logically. When Jesus had gone to the desert, he had been tempted by the Devil. Dave posed Satan had won the encounter and turned Christ into a vampire. The evidence was there in the scriptures in a promise of everlasting life. Jesus had admonished his disciples to remember him by considering bread as his flesh and wine as his blood. He had risen from the dead, but Dave asked if it were a miracle, or a vampire's natural awakening.

Thinking it a satire of coincidences, rather than a preposterous beginning for a horror novel, Eric forwarded it to his friends. Many were also university professors, and they were sure to get a laugh out of it too. He then sent Dave a quick reply and got back to sorting his books, slides and papers.

\* \* \*

The next day, when Dave checked his e-mail, he was overwhelmed with more than a hundred responses to his vampire plot. They were from people he had never even

heard of, and there was only one person who could have scattered his gem of an idea to the winds.

He called Eric Collins and fought to remain calm rather than fly into a murderous rage. “Should I have marked my e-mail confidential? Didn’t you understand I wanted a serious opinion on my new book, not hundreds of new friends?”

Eric and just gotten out of the shower, rubbed his hair dry with his towel and tossed it aside. Clearly he was in trouble, and there was only one way out.

“I’m sorry, Dave, but I had no idea you were serious. I only forwarded your plot to a few friends, and I’ll warn them today they aren’t to share it.”

“You’re too late. They’ve already forwarded your e-mail to everyone they’ve ever met and plenty of people weren’t amused. I even got a couple of death threats. Do you hear me, death threats!”

Eric could only speak for his own friends, he had no idea who their friends might be. “Look, I’ll straighten this out. I’ll describe your plot as a send-up of vampire films and insist everyone who got my first message send out an apology to anyone who was offended.”

“This went way beyond being offended, Eric. People are denouncing the story as blasphemy and hoping lightning will strike me dead.”

Eric had never screwed up this badly, and he felt sick to have hurt Dave. “We both know that won’t happen. Do you plan to actually write the book?”

“I did, but now the idea is hanging out there in cyberspace, someone else may beat me to it. It was a damn good idea too.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t realize what it was. Don’t read the e-mails from people whose names you don’t recognize, just delete them. The hate mail should disappear in a day or two.”

Dave sighed unhappily. “I’d planned to use a pseudonym for the book to avoid any consequences from the religious right, but it isn’t difficult to find someone once you

know their e-mail address.”

“If you’re really worried, why don’t you meet me at my place in Sedona this weekend. I plan to be there all summer, and there’s plenty of room.”

“What happened to Iris, or Petunia, whatever her name was?”

“Lily. We’ve gone our separate ways, so you won’t have to compete for my attention.”

“I’ll think about it. You just do what you can to unscramble this awful mess.”

“I’ll get right on it.” Eric said good-bye, picked up his towel and tucked it around his hips. He didn’t understand how he could have made such an awful gaffe, but he went right to his Mac to correct it.

\* \* \*

Dave stopped opening e-mails until he recognized an editor’s name. Someone had forwarded his plot to her office in New York, and she loved the idea. She requested an outline and the first three chapters ASAP.

Dave’s hand shook as he printed out her message to convince himself it was real. The woman had been among those sending him a form letter, but she had written a bit of encouragement in the margin. Apparently she had remembered his name.

Perhaps what he had seen as a disaster might work to his advantage after all.

\* \* \*

Mae Lambeau rapped lightly at Eric’s open office door. A fellow member of the Art department, her field was Primitive Art, while his was the Renaissance.

“Hi, Mae. Come on in. Are you teaching this summer?” he asked.

Her soft gauze skirt brushed the floor as she took a chair. A brown-eyed brunette, she wore her long hair straight. She was tall and slender and favored exotic dress well-embellished with ethnic jewelry. Silver bracelets sang as she gestured.

“No, but I need to rework my lectures to keep them fresh. I just wandered over to ask about your friend’s vampire tale.”

Eric groaned. “You got my second e-mail?”

“The one telling me to forget I’d ever heard the idea? Yes, but now I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Try,” Eric stressed. “Apparently Dave has gotten some really nasty e-mail, which is entirely my fault, and I want the story forgotten.”

Mae had a sultry, throaty laugh. “You’re trying to slam shut Pandora’s box. I do hope he writes the book. I’d like to read it.”

“So would I, but he intended to use a pseudonym to keep controversy from landing in his lap.”

“It’s a good idea. We’re used to dealing in ideas and accept challenges far more agreeably than the general public does. What are you doing this summer?”

Eric leaned against his desk and crossed his arms over his chest. He was fair-haired and blue-eyed, tall, with a runner’s lanky build. He was also too smart to allow such an attractive woman to walk in and out of his office without encouraging her to stay awhile.

“I’ll be up at my place in Sedona soaking up the energy pouring from the vortexes. I need to update my lectures too.”

“Sedona is such a beautiful place. Could it really be where the world began?”

“That’s the Yavapai legend, and many believe it’s true. Do you ever get up to Sedona?”

“I would if I were invited.”

Eric pulled one of his cards from his desk and wrote his cellphone number on the back. “Consider it done. I’m going up this weekend. Give me a call when you’d like to visit. I’ve got several bedrooms and my own reputation to protect, so you needn’t worry about yours.”

Mae licked her lips lightly. “What’s the point of making the trip then?” She laughed as she left his office and a hint of lavender lingered in the air.

\* \* \*

Dave deleted the unopened e-mail in the morning, hoped that was the last of it, and worked on his book all day. In the evening, while the light was still good, he sat out in his backyard to read and edit. He had struggled with his first book to find precisely the right word for each and every thought, but now ideas flowed so smoothly he found little to correct.

He was warming up leftover spaghetti when the next door neighbors' Doberman, Brutus, began to bark. The Parker's beast took the job of watchdog seriously, and Dave made certain both his doors were locked. He peered out the front windows. A couple was playing tennis on a well-lit court in Memorial Park across the street and nothing seemed amiss. Coyotes came down from the mountains searching for food, but he wasn't about to go outside to scare one off.

Instead, he sat down at his kitchen table to eat his spaghetti, right from the pan cushioned by a potholder, which saved him the trouble of doing extra dishes. Spaghetti was always better the second day, but after a few bites, he lacked much appetite.

Brutus continued to bark, and while Dave doubted anyone was crawling through the neighborhood shrubbery stalking him, those first incensed e-mails still worried him. He ran the rest of the spaghetti down the garbage disposal and dialed Eric Collins' number.

It was time to visit Sedona.

\* \* \*

"Do you believe in the Devil?" Dave asked. They were sitting out on Eric's deck with a glorious view of the Oak Creek Canyon and cold bottles of Dos XXs.

"A big red guy with horns and a tail?" Eric asked. "No, I don't. What I do believe in is evil as a powerful force, but it's manmade, not from some shrieking demon."

Dave nodded. "I agree, but clearly a lot of people don't."

Iron oxide turned the earth a vivid terra-cotta here, and Eric scraped a hunk of the

colorful mud off his boot on the redwood deck rail. “If you want to write a horror novel, throw in demons, ghosts, ghouls and vampires. The people who love a scary read will be thrilled. The people who would be offended won’t buy the book.”

“Do you suppose other writers worry this much about how their work will be received?”

“Ask Salman Rushdie. He’s still alive.”

“Yeah, and I bet he’s still receiving nasty e-mails too.” Dave was tempted to throw his empty bottle, but the Sedona terrain was far too beautiful to litter with trash. He placed it next to his chair and grabbed another from the ice-filled cooler between them.

“I’m been playing around with the idea of having one of the Apostles tell the story. Thaddeus is suitably obscure. He went to Armenia at King Abgar’s request, and was murdered by Abgar’s nephew, who had become a Christian then regretted it. So Thaddeus disappears from history soon after the crucifixion. If he were a vampire, however, he could still be alive and wreaking all manner of havoc to this day.”

“He could have inspired the gruesome vampire lore in the countries he visited,” Eric added.

“Exactly. He could have wandered and meant no one any harm; or perhaps he was fleeing what he had become.”

Eric nodded, intrigued. “But it overtook him, time and again.”

Dave laughed. “I tell you, this idea goes in so many wild directions it’s hard to know which one to pursue. Thaddeus can be a tortured soul, or a man who lusts for the blood of others.”

“You have two thousand years to work with; he could evolve one way or the other.”

“Yes, I’m leaning toward a tormented man who gradually accepts what he is, and then finally exalts in it.”

“What about women?”

“Vampires are supposedly great lovers, so there ought to be plenty of sex.”

Eric swallowed the last of his beer. “When was the last time you went out on a date?”

“Dates I don’t remember, but sex I do. Besides, I have a fertile imagination, no pun intended.”

“Then you better get busy before the real estate market picks up, and you have to reopen your office,” Eric advised.

“That’s not likely to happen any time soon.”

Eric laughed. “You’ll be selling houses again before I have freshmen who’ve actually come to the University eager to learn. Let’s get cleaned up and go into town for dinner.”

“Is that Mexican place with the fried ice cream still open?”

“Sure is.”

“Then my luck isn’t all bad.”

\* \* \*

Dave went home on Tuesday afternoon. Wednesday night, Mae Lambeau called Eric. “Is your invitation still open?” she asked.

“How long will it take you to get here?”

“If I leave Tucson in the morning, I can be there by early afternoon.”

Eric supplied his address and directions and hurried to get the house in shape before she arrived. Fortunately, the surrounding rocky red monoliths were breath-taking, so she probably would not notice a bit of dust.

\* \* \*

Mae drove a light blue Beetle convertible with a sprig of silk violets in the dashboard vase. She arrived at Eric’s house around two in the afternoon and hugged him when he came out to greet her. Unlike her usual ultra-feminine attire, she was dressed in figure-hugging Levis, a turquoise silk shirt over a white eyelet tank top and boots.

“This is the most glorious place!” She turned slowly to take in the whole view.  
“How long have you owned your house?”

“It was my aunt’s, and she left it to me in her will. She moved here in the 1960s, and was what is generally referred to as a colorful character.”

“Then she must have felt right at home here.” A gentle breeze tossed a strand of hair into her eyes, and she swept it away. She wore an armful of silver bracelets, hoop earrings, and a heart-shaped turquoise ring.

“I brought steaks, so I hope you’re not a vegetarian.” She opened her car door to remove a Styrofoam ice chest, and Eric carried it into the house.

“I’m not fond enough of vegetables to even consider going vegetarian,” he admitted.

The kitchen was small, but the appliances were new. He put the paper wrapped steaks in the refrigerator. “I will eat a salad though.”

“Good, steaks and salad is enough for me too. Do you have a barbecue?”

“Of course, and I can turn out a decent steak. Let me get your things, and I’ll show you around.”

She followed him out to her car. “I didn’t bring much. I don’t want to impose.”

“Impossible, besides, I need a good excuse not to begin the work I brought with me.”

“I didn’t bring along even a scrap,” Mae assured him. “Let’s just have fun with the energy pouring from the vortexes.”

“Sounds good to me,” Eric replied. Lily had been a pretty blond nurse, who had continually expected him to guess what it was she wanted. He had swiftly grown tired of her silent pouting when he failed, which was far too often.

Mae, however, struck him as a woman who said what she wanted, and he looked forward to whatever energy she cared to exchange. He carried her tapestry bag into the bedroom next to his.

“I’ve left my aunt’s Southwest decor, but I do think the saddle in the living room is a bit much.”

“No, it’s perfect, as long as you don’t keep a horse in there too.”

“Hadn’t even thought of it, although there is enough land to build a corral and keep a couple of horses. If this were my full-time home, I would. We could rent horses if you like to ride.”

“After a morning in the car, I’d rather take a walk. Are we close enough to Oak Creek to walk down there?”

“We are.”

Mae was drawn to the framed terra-cotta drawing of Cathedral Rock placed above the dresser. She leaned close to read the signature. “This is yours, and it’s superb.”

Eric hesitated at the doorway. “I like to sketch from time to time.”

“This is much better than a casual sketch. You’ve the talent to be teaching studio classes rather than art history.”

“That’s a matter of opinion. A lot of people can draw, Mae, and I prefer the challenge of teaching history rather than still lifes and portraits.”

“I understand, although I’m not sure one is more mentally challenging than the other. It’s a shame to hide your talent.”

“It’s right there on the wall.”

Mae brushed by him as she left the room. “Draw something for me, and I’ll not only display it in my home, I’ll reduce it for note cards and send them all around the world.”

Uneasy with such unexpected praise, he shrugged. “There’s a whole new source of income I’d not even considered. I’ll put it on my to do list.” He pulled the backdoor closed behind them.

“You do that,” she replied. Her peach-toned lipstick made her smile doubly charming.

She took a broad-brimmed straw hat from her car and was ready to go. “I stayed at the Creekside Inn last year when one of my friends got married. The Victorian rooms seemed a bit odd here in the desert, but the surroundings are so beautiful.”

“The whole canyon is gorgeous. Watch your step, the rocky soil can be slippery.”

Mae had to grab her hat a few times as she caught herself, but she made it down to the creek without falling. It tumbled over the rocky bed with a gurgling hum, inviting a restful stay. A fallen sycamore provided a convenient bench, and she sat down and fanned herself with her hat.

“It’s so peaceful here. Can we stay awhile?”

“As long as you like,” Eric responded. Although women often described him as handsome, he never thought much of his looks, but Mae was remarkably beautiful. She had the longest eyelashes he had ever seen, and they were hers, not glued on. Her fingernails were short with clear polish rather than bright red acrylic daggers.

His mind ran in only one direction when he was with her, and he was sure other men suffered the same failing. While an affair with her would undoubtedly be regrettably brief, he knew she would take him on a wild ride while it lasted.

“Have you ever been married?” she asked.

Eric chuckled. “You don’t waste a breath, do you? Yes, while I was in grad school. Amy was a wonderful girl, but one day we looked up from our books and realized we were married to strangers. It was an amicable parting. She married a dentist, has a couple of kids and sends me a Christmas card every year. What about you?”

Mae dug her heel into the red dirt. “My story is a lot like yours. I was living in Tahiti writing my thesis for my Ph.D. and fell in love with a French artist. The sex was amazing, but he wanted a beautiful model to show off in art galleries, and I was too bright not to pursue my career.

“We never should have married in the first place, and our parting definitely wasn’t amicable. For years Pierre painted the most hideous paintings of me, sort of

twisted Picasso style portraits done in glaring colors. Thank God, no one could recognize me!”

Eric understood completely. “Now we see things too clearly, and that might be as big a mistake as our youthful rush into disaster.”

Mae leaned close to kiss him lightly, an invitation for so much more. “You mustn’t think at all in such a serene and lovely place.”

“Unfortunately, my thoughts are running in only one direction.”

Mae plunked on her hat and stretched as she stood. “I’m not easy, Eric. You’ll have to prepare my steak as rare as I like it to get more than a good night kiss.”

She flirted with a husky voice as well as her words, and he couldn’t help but laugh. “I’ll barely sear it if that’s what you want.”

She started back up the trail and paused to glance over her shoulder. “Be careful what you promise.”

Her hair was the color of bittersweet chocolate and watching the softly curled ends sway against her hips, Eric could not even remember what he had said.

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Dave paused several times a day to delete e-mails, and by Thursday night, he thought the worst was over. He had pinned a world map to the living room wall, and circled the countries with the most terrifying vampire legends. Now all he had to do was walk Thaddeus through them.

When someone rang his doorbell, he took the precaution of looking out. A man with a wild mop of black hair in a Grateful Dead t-shirt stood on the doorstep holding a kitten. People dumped unwanted pets in the park all the time, which infuriated Dave. He opened the door.

“I’m sorry, but that’s not my kitten.”

“I know,” said the man. His voice was soft and deep, and he smiled as he came on in.