

Human No Longer

A vampire novel

by Kathryn Meyer Griffith

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(a vampire fiction novel)

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Prologue

St. Louis, Missouri...a sultry night in August

"You're as beautiful as the day I met you." Her husband lifted his wineglass, toasting her, as they were having dinner. His eyes were tender in the flickering candlelight; the restaurant elegant with its high-priced menu and attentive waiters.

"All those many years ago?" Jenny teased, lifting her glass to touch his. The touching tinkled musically around the room, an intimate soundtrack to the snow-white tablecloths and sparkling table settings.

Jeff had insisted on the most expensive eatery in St. Louis to celebrate their twelfth anniversary; though it wasn't actually their twelfth, to be exact, because of the divorce after their first marriage. It was a sort of joke between them that if they'd remained married the first time they'd be celebrating twenty-two years instead of twelve. Jenny didn't care. All that mattered was they'd found each other again, had two children they adored, Sarah and Teddy, and had moved to Illinois to begin a new life far from the old one in Florida.

"Yes, as beautiful as when you were fifteen and I was sixteen."

"Ah," she sighed, "we were such babies, weren't we?"

He took her hands and brought them to his lips. "Yes, we were. But I knew then what I know now...that you are the love of my life and we'll be together for the rest of our days and beyond, if there is a beyond."

"The rest of our days," she echoed. He leaned across the table and their lips met. There was a smile on hers as the waiter moved up and asked if there was anything else they needed.

They'd had their salads, their generous plates of Tutta Mare, the crusty bread and a glass of red wine each. She was content. No more hard times or tears for them.

They'd already had enough of both in their lives.

The construction company Jeff had formed and nurtured when they'd moved to the small town of Millstadt a decade before had grown into a profitable enterprise. He employed fifteen men and women and the company made them a solid living. The carpentry skills he'd learned during their first separation had served him well. Jeff's Construction had gained a reputation for being one of the best homebuilders of middle-income family dwellings in the area. It'd taken years, but now they were finally reaping the rewards. For the first time in their lives they had more money than they knew what to do with.

Jenny was proud of him. She'd kept the business's accounts and helped answer the phones from home during the early years. Three years ago they'd opened an office in downtown Millstadt and hired a secretary so Jenny could resume being a full-time mother and writer.

Her life was full. She had her children and loved them dearly. Being a mother was more important than anything that had come before, but somehow, with Jeff's encouragement, she'd also found the desire to return to her writing.

She'd written three more books to go with the three she'd written during the years of their first marriage; one of them, a tale about a band of vicious vampires using a refurbished theater as a base to lure in their victims, had sold quite well.

Few people ever knew it'd been based on a real experience.

The last novel, a ghost story set on an isolated island, hadn't done as well. The publisher had gone bankrupt right after the release, leaving her book in limbo. Her agent said not to worry. It was the deplorable economy. It'd even seeped into the publishing industry; publishers were slashing costs and employees like dying trees shed leaves. The next book, her agent said, would do better.

Of course, that would be when she got around to writing another one. Lately she'd been too busy raising her family. Enjoying life. Writing was no longer as important as Jeff, Sarah and Teddy. They always came first.

And she'd never been happier.

"This was a great idea," she whispered after kissing him, "getting away from our everyday lives and the kids for a night of fine dining and a hotel suite...just the two of us. It's been a wonderful night. You're a good husband."

"I know. Now, what do you say we order dessert? It's getting late and that hotel room with the luxurious bed, big screen TV, room service and *no kids* is calling." His hand beneath the table caressed her bare leg. She'd worn the sexiest dress she had and laughed softly when his hand moved upwards to brush her inner thigh. His touch still sent shivers through her.

"Sure. You know what I want," she replied coyly. "A big bed and room service." She chuckled. She was looking forward to their night alone. Having an eight and a twelve year old was a blessing in many ways, but private time, just the two of them, was almost impossible to come by and they never wasted it when they had it.

He ordered them dessert with a gentle eagerness in his eyes.

Gazing through the window framed in velvet curtains, she thought how pretty the city looked in the fading summer light. Everything bathed in a rosy glow. The sidewalks and streets seemed speckled with gleaming diamond chips. The people hurrying home from work or to personal appointments were muted blurs. Everyone smiling. Talking. Laughing. Living their lives on a hot summer night. When the sun went down the shadows and breeze would cool things off. Then it'd be perfect.

By the time they'd finished their dessert, paid the tab and strolled hand-in-hand from the restaurant, dark had claimed the city. Deep purple shadows pulsed and the air hummed with the sounds of the night. The gloom was a warm, heavy cloak around them. There wasn't a breeze stirring anywhere. The crowds had thinned.

In the shade of the building Jeff stole a moment to kiss her. A long slow kiss that made her remember why she'd never stopped loving him. When he pulled away she reached out and slid her fingers along the side of his face. "I love you, husband. Forever and always."

"And I love you more." He kissed her one last time.

"Let's get our car and drive it to the hotel, instead of walking. I don't like where we're parked. Since it's later there's bound to be a better parking space somewhere else," she told him and he agreed.

Lost in their conversation and each other, they strolled along the street by the river to the parking lot. They'd left their car in an isolated spot, a pool of soot, beneath a concrete viaduct. Not the safest of parking spaces. Usually, they'd never put themselves in danger like that because they, of all people, knew any place that secluded and shadowy could hide something unexpected. Because, in the world, monsters did exist.

But they weren't thinking about that. They were only thinking about the moment. The years of their safe normal lives had lulled them into a false sense of security.

Under the overpass it was as silent as a tomb. No one else around, or so they thought.

Jeff unlocked the car at a distance with the click of his key control and had his hand on the passenger side door handle when she glanced up. A capricious breeze drifted across her face where there shouldn't have been any moving air. Her skin shivered as she caught a faint whiff of something she hadn't smelled in a very long time.

The scent was fresh dirt, ash and something...long dead.

"Jeff, get in the car now!"

Across the vehicle's roof a large shadow enveloped her husband and he screamed.

It was the last thing she saw and heard before something invisible grabbed her, slammed her to the ground and plunged something sharp into her neck. The excruciating pain lasted a millisecond, an eternity, before the blackness took her.

Chapter 1

Two Weeks Later

Jenny

She awoke in the hospital. A weak kitten with a fuzzy wandering mind.

A nurse informed her she'd been in a coma for two weeks. *Two weeks.* Her waking up was nothing short of a miracle, especially after the amount of blood she'd lost. It'd take time for her to regain her bearings, her strength. She had to be patient. Her memories would come back.

In the beginning the nurses turned away and wouldn't answer when she asked about Jeff. They pretended as if they hadn't heard or would mumble under their breath. Oh, they'd speak about her children, being cared for by Jeff's older sister, Lulu, back in Millstadt. They'd tell her the children were doing fine, they missed her and couldn't wait until she was well enough to return home...but they didn't say anything about Jeff.

One morning, when her mind was clearer than the days before, she demanded, "What happened to my husband? Is he here in the hospital? Is he okay?" *Why hasn't he come to see me?* She was afraid of the answers, but more afraid not to know.

The nurse patted her hand. "Dr. Lester's coming in this morning to talk to you about it, my dear. I'll let him answer your questions." And off she scurried.

What weren't they telling her?

When the doctor came she found out.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Sanders, your husband is dead," Dr. Lester told her with a compassionate expression and a gentle hand on her shoulder. "It happened the night you were attacked and they don't know who did it."

"They don't have any leads?"

"Unfortunately, no. Not yet. The police officer said your purse and your husband's wallet weren't taken. There didn't seem to be any apparent motives for the assault."

According to the police, her husband's cause of death was as suspicious as Jenny's injuries and as mysterious as her eventual recovery had been, even to the doctors and nurses who'd treated her. She'd fallen into a coma, most likely from a concussion, when she'd been knocked to the ground. Then there'd been her substantial loss of blood, the same thing her husband had died of. The doctor was vague about most of it and Jenny assumed her husband had bled out from his wounds, wounds she'd never seen because before she'd awakened he'd been put in the coffin and into the ground.

Jeff's family wasn't sure when she'd come out of her coma, if ever, so they'd held his funeral and buried him in the plot beside his mother and father. His parents were actually the reason they'd moved to Millstadt in the first place. They'd been elderly and needed help, but, in the last two years, both had passed away. His father succumbed after a lengthy bout of cancer, and his mother soon afterwards of a heart attack. It was ironic that now their son was sleeping in the family plot with them. Way too soon.

"St. Louis police Detective Benjamin Bradley, has been in to see you once or twice, and wanted to be advised when you came out of the coma. He has been," the doctor stated.

"Your brother, Joey, was also here the first week. He reluctantly returned home when you didn't regain consciousness by the second week."

Ah, so Joey had come all the way from Summer Haven, Florida, leaving his restaurant and family to be with her. His concern touched her.

"Your brother knows you're awake now and said he'd fly up this weekend to see you."

Joey. Oh, she wanted to see him so badly. Have him hold her. Cry on his shoulder. Be with someone who knew and loved her. Someone she could talk to who would understand, as no one else could,

what losing Jeff was doing to her. Her own injuries meant nothing. All that mattered was that Jeff was...gone.

After her doctor left, she cried until she slipped into an exhausted sleep.

When she was able, a nurse helped her telephone her children and again she wept as she spoke to them. It was sweet to hear their voices, as sad as the conversation was. They knew their father was dead. They'd attended the funeral service. They'd wanted to visit her, but their aunt asked them to wait until she was out of the coma and feeling well enough. They were coming the next day and she was desperate to see them. They were all she had left, and she couldn't wait until she could cradle them in her arms again; plant kisses on their cheeks and brows. Cuddle them and never let them go.

Jeff might be gone forever but she still had his children, their children. Thank God for that. She had something to live for.

She kept her mind on them from then on because she couldn't bear to think of what had happened that night beneath the viaduct. To dwell on it filled her with panic, not only because of Jeff's murder but because she had absolutely no memory of any of it. It was a total blank.

The questions there were no answers to gave her a cold sweat. Who'd mugged them? Why? Was she still in danger? Did they believe she'd seen them? Would they track her down and try to kill her to keep their identities hid?

Yes. Her fears were rampant.

No. The attack had been random. They'd only been a bunch of homicidal hooligans out on a rampage. They didn't care if she'd lived. They weren't looking for her. She was safe now. Her family was safe.

Oh, please God, let it be so.

Detective Benjamin Bradley, an even-tempered man of medium height with quick but sad eyes, questioned her before she was released. She told him, to the best of her ability, what had happened the night of the attack. What she could remember. Which wasn't much.

"So you saw nothing? Heard nothing?" He pressed for at least the third time.

"I told you. No. My memory's just one big black hole. That's all. I was knocked out before I could see or hear anything. I'm sorry."

She wished she could remember. She really did. Ever since the assault she'd had this oppressive sense of dread, of danger close by; that what she didn't know might hurt her. Inexplicable really. Not much else could hurt worse than the death of her husband and a couple weeks in a coma.

As grief stricken, weak, as she was, she still asked the detective before he left, "Do you have any leads? Any suspects yet? Do you know who killed my husband and why?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Sanders. No leads so far. No motives that we can see, either. It wasn't robbery. Nothing was stolen. Your husband's death, the way he died, is bizarre enough. The coroner doesn't know what to make of it."

The detective paused and she had the feeling there was something he wasn't telling her, wasn't asking her. Yet. Perhaps it was her loss or because she could barely stay awake that kept him from a more intense interrogation—or telling her more of what he knew.

"There was no evidence left behind. Nothing to point us in the right direction. Is there anything else, no matter how trivial, you've recalled that might help us?"

She'd hardly been able to reply, a sudden dizziness and bone-weary fatigue had overwhelmed her. "No...so...tired. Sorry." She'd closed her eyes and when she'd opened them again the detective was gone and another night had come.

It seemed the longer she was in bed the worse she felt. Every bone and muscle in her body ached and her throat was sandpaper. But she threw up everything she drank or ate. Her doctor explained it was most likely stress or delayed trauma.

Her sleep was haunted with nightmarish dreams. In cemeteries and mist-covered night fields she chased Jeff but could never catch him. She cried out but he'd hide behind a tombstone or in a mausoleum, and she'd wake with tears trickling down her cheeks. Other nights she'd spy him running through a town, it looked like the town they'd grown up in, and she'd pursue him through one empty house or building after another...but again would never catch up to him. He was always just ahead of her. Out of reach. His wretched face white and his body skeleton thin. He never spoke. Just ran from her. It wrenched at her heart.

The police had no suspects to track down and question. No one had seen anything. No one heard anything. Before she'd slid into sleep and Detective Bradley had left, she recalled seeing an odd look on his face. He probably wondered why she was alive and her husband was dead. What she was holding back.

She bit her bottom lip until it bled and gently touched the healing marks on her neck. Truth was, she was uneasy talking too much about that night or thinking on it too long. If she could even remember it. She'd tried so hard. She couldn't. It was like reliving a nightmare and her mind railed against it. She had the strangest thought: *Your nightmare has just begun.* And the thought wouldn't go away.