

MAKE ME A MONSTER

BOOKS BY KALYNN BAYRON

For older readers

Cinderella Is Dead
Sleep Like Death

This Poison Heart
This Wicked Fate

You're Not Supposed to Die Tonight

Make Me a Monster

For younger readers

The Vanquishers
The Vanquishers: Secret of the Reaping
The Vanquishers: Rise of the Wrecking Crew

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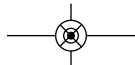
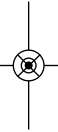
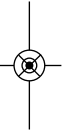
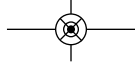
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*To Mary Shelley
You would have loved gel pens,
Ziploc bags, and The Cure*

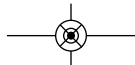
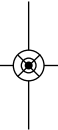
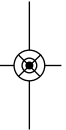
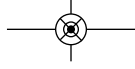


It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from
all the world; but on that account we shall be
more attached to one another.

—Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

“Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering
from the Nightly shore— Tell me what thy
lordly name is on the Night’s Plutonian shore!”
Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

—Edgar Allan Poe, *The Raven*




PROLOGUE

In the dream, I'm always sitting in the back seat. Dad is driving and Mom is in the front passenger seat. A song plays on the radio. I can't make out the words. Mom looks back at me. There is an expression on her face that I can't place. Then, there's a flash, like a lightning bolt. It tears through the car as an undulating orange haze surrounds me—panic sets in. My father's cries split the air and when the smoke clears and I finally see him, he is crouched over my mom's lifeless body on the side of some rain-slick road.

This is usually where I wake up.

But not this time.

Now, for the first time in what feels like forever, there is something new in this hellscape between sleeping and waking. I'm outside on the ground, lying on my back, looking up at a starry night sky. I turn my head and pain rockets up my neck. I cry out in agony.



This is the dream I've been having for years. The same sequence. The same creeping dread. The all-encompassing terror. Always the same.

Now it has a horrifying new chapter. I have no idea what it means. All I know for sure is that watching my mother die in my dreams makes me feel like a hole is being punched directly through my chest. In the gaping wound, there is only despair.

CHAPTER 1

WELCOME TO REDWOOD FUNERAL HOME

There's a dead body waiting for me at home and I'm excited to see her.

It's not what most people look forward to when they get home after a long day at school, but for me, I know it'll be a nice quiet afternoon of prepping our newest guest.

Guest.

Dead body. Decedent. Corpse. Cadaver.

There are lots of names for the dearly departed, but *guest* just sounds more professional.

I run up the front steps of my house and stick my key in the door.

"I'm home!" I call as I go in. It's mostly silent aside from the ticking of the large grandfather clock in the front hall. "Mom! Dad!"

Silence.

I kick off my shoes and put my coat and backpack on the hook in the entryway. I hit the light switch and it clicks but the light doesn't flicker on. I glance around. None of the lights are on—the usual hum of the fridge, the computer in my dad's first-floor office, they're all silent.

I peek into the first room off the main hall. The mahogany catafalque is sitting there empty. No casket perched atop it . . . yet.

"Mom," I call again. "You here?" The boards creak under my feet as I step back toward the hall. "Dad?"

I catch something in the air.

"Meka," a voice calls.

It's less like a call and more like a whisper. It filters through the silence like a puff of smoke, there and gone in the space of a breath. I hit the light switch in the viewing room and . . . nothing.

"Meka," a voice says again.

I step back into the main hall and stand still, listening.

"Meka."

I have a choice to make. Run or investigate. I've seen enough horror movies to know what I'm not gonna do. I sprint to the front door when a rush of running footsteps comes bounding down the hall behind me. I glance back.

"Caleb?" I ask, confused.

Caleb, one of my best friends, is stumbling out of my kitchen and down the hall straight toward me, a terrified expression plastered on his face.

"Girl, move!" he says as he pushes me out of the way and runs into the street.

My mom, Dad, my boyfriend Noah, and my other friend Cipriana come tumbling out of the kitchen.

“Caleb!” Noah yells. “You’re ruining the surprise!”

Noah jogs up to me and kisses me gently on the cheek. He’s wearing a black suit and his face is painted ghostly white. The hollows under his eyes are darkened with black face paint.

“Ummmm,” I say, bewildered at why he looks like a walking corpse. “Somebody wanna tell me what’s going on?”

Cipriana gives me a big hug. “Caleb is a crybaby.” She leans out the front door. “Caleb! Get your scary ass back inside!”

“Language,” my mom says as she breezes up to me.

“Sorry, Mrs. Redwood,” Cipriana says, heat rising in her face. “He’s ridiculous.”

“He’s scared,” my dad says. He hangs back near the kitchen, clearly uncomfortable with so many people being in the house. I’m still a little confused as to why everybody is here.

“We were planning a surprise for you,” Noah says.

“What kind of surprise?” I ask. “Why do you look like a zombie?”

“I’m not a zombie,” he says, laughing. “I’m dead.”

“Oh, right,” I say. “Because that makes sense.”

I stare up into his big brown eyes, and a little flutter invades my stomach. My mom goes out and guides Caleb back inside. I put my arm around him.

“Sorry,” Caleb says. “Your mom was whispering your name and we were tryna get you to come to the kitchen and she cut off the power so it would be dark but then I saw the hearse outside and I got scared and I know you got dead bodies in the freezer and—”

“Caleb,” I say, interrupting his spiral. “It’s okay. I promise. Try to breathe.”

“And why did we have to cut all the lights out anyway?” Caleb asks.

“Ambience,” Cipriana says. “And it worked. Look at yourself. A mess.”

Caleb takes a few deep breaths as he tries to calm himself down. Caleb almost never comes to my house because he’s scared to death of dead bodies—a very unfortunate thing to be when, as one of his best friends, I live in a funeral home.

“Everybody into the kitchen,” my mom says. “I got cupcakes!”

I grab Caleb by one arm and Noah takes him by the other. We steer him into the kitchen and prop him on a stool in the corner. A handmade sign hangs across the kitchen window and it reads Congrats, Meka! A paper chain of little tombstones dangles from the edge of the counter.

The kitchen counter is cleared and Noah hops up and lies back, crossing his hands over his chest like a corpse lying in state. My mom places a cupcake with a single black candle stuck in the middle on his chest.

“We’re so proud of you,” my mom says, beaming. “Make a wish and blow out the candle.”

I wish for the same thing I wish for at every birthday or when the clock says 11:11 or any other time a wish is required—that my mom stays safe and that the dream that haunts me will never come true. I blow out the candle.

I am officially Ithaca, New York’s youngest certified mortician’s assistant. At seventeen, I just received my certification and clearly, my friends and family want to celebrate. Everything is weird but I wouldn’t have it any other way.

We divvy up the other cupcakes and Cipriana tries to sing a song to the tune of “Happy Birthday” but makes up some lyrics about doing makeup on the dead and Caleb almost passes out, so we stop. My mom scrapes the icing off her cupcake, then decides

to abandon the whole thing so she doesn't get an upset stomach. Caleb doesn't eat at all and spends the whole time holding my hand like his life depends on it. He is scared to death of what goes on in my house but the fact that he tries to set his feelings aside to be here to celebrate my accomplishment means a lot to me. If I'm honest, my other friends feel the same way Caleb does, but they're better at hiding it.

I can't say I blame them. Death is my life and for most people, that is simply too much to handle.

Mrs. Lang lies stiff and cold on the mortuary prep table. My mom had applied the woman's foundation perfectly. I'm following up by painting on a rosy-pink lip lacquer with a brush intended for an artist's canvas. I guess technically, I *am* an artist, only I'm painting dead people's skin instead of a stretched canvas.

The lips are very delicate. They tend to flake and sometimes they're so dry they peel back, exposing the teeth. A thick layer of moisturizer must be applied first, and the lip stain glides on like butter. I attach a few individual lashes. Mrs. Lang's are sparse, and her daughter told me she loved to wear falsies because she loved that old Hollywood movie-star look. I gently glue the hairs on and paint them with a layer of mascara before clamping them between an eyelash curler. I dust a fine layer of blush over her cheekbones and temples. I think she's done. She looks good, rejuvenated even. She's ready for her big—and last—entrance.

"All done, Mrs. Lang," I say. "Hope your homegoing is peaceful."

At the foot of the prep table I slip on her shoes. Grasping her discolored ankles, it takes a firm shove to get her feet in—this is

why shoes are almost always a no-go but her family had insisted. There is a small rustle from the head of the table. I glance up. Mrs. Lang's head has shifted slightly to the right. I huff, move back to her side, and readjust her head but her lids are now slightly parted, revealing the little white eye caps covering her actual eyes.

"No peeking," I say as I close her open lids with the tips of my fingers.

I don't know if it's healthy to think about death as much as I do. I can't get away from the dead no matter how hard I try. And the thing is . . . I don't really want to.

I've watched corpses get wheeled into the prep room in the basement of my house for as long as I can remember. When I was little, I used to try and guess who was in the body bag based on how lumpy it was. Was it a tall person? Somebody's grandma or uncle? A short person? A kid? The images I conjured up were always worse than the reality—dead people don't look dead. They don't look like zombies, all rotting skin and tattered clothing. Most of the time they just look empty. Those little things that make them human leave when the heart stops and the brain shuts down. Some people call it a spark, a flame, a soul. Whatever it is, whatever it's called, it leaves when a person dies and it's impossible to put back once it has departed.

It's not all gloom and sadness, though. There are perks to this job, this life, too. A decommissioned autopsy table makes a really great sled in the winter. Scalpels and bone saws make excellent pumpkin carving tools and I'm never short on makeup during Halloween. It's all in how you look at it. That is the tale I tell myself because deep inside, I know that riding autopsy tables down snow-covered hills and carving pumpkins with bone saws is weird. And maybe that means I'm weird too.

My circle of friends is less of a circle and more like a square. Everyone who was at the little surprise party make up the four corners—Noah, Caleb, Cip, and me. I like it that way and besides, nobody else is fighting to be friends with a girl who spends most of her days in the company of corpses. I've lost count of the number of times somebody from school spotted me pushing a body into the basement of my house while they were out for a walk or driving by. I try to see myself through their eyes and when I'm out moving bodies with my hair wrapped up, in sweats, pimple patches on my face, I probably look scary as hell. I'm fine with that. Hauling bodies isn't even the strangest part of my job.

On this gray afternoon in early January, I'm staring down at Mrs. Lang one final time before we move her upstairs and place her casket on the raised platform in the viewing room. Her hair and makeup are finished, and she looks stunning.

The cool flush of the AC causes a few loose strands of her hair to dance across her forehead. I gently tuck them back into place and put my hand on her shoulder. Her family is probably already missing her so much. My chest aches a little at the thought. I shut my eyes and take a deep breath.

When I open my eyes, Mrs. Lang's lids are parted again. I sigh. I grab a small tube of superglue and gently lift one of Mrs. Lang's lids. I apply one small bead of the stuff to her waterline, then reclose the lid. Repeating the process on her other eye solves the problem and she still looks great.

I hang my plastic apron on a hook and toss away the mostly empty tube of superglue. There's suddenly a loud, metallic-sounding groan. I spin around to find that the table Mrs. Lang is resting on has rolled slightly to the right. My heart crashes in my chest as I quickly grab hold of the table's edge. The metal tables

are solid but can move if a body is shifted around on it. I check the wheel locks and find that two of them are not snapped in place. I shove the table back into position and set the locks, pushing on it to make sure it doesn't move. Mrs. Lang's body rocks stiffly but the table stays in place. I hiss out a long, slow breath, then head upstairs.

There, I finish prepping the front room of our house for Mrs. Lang's wake—lining up the chairs and arranging flowers on the table near the back. Bool's Flower Shop provides most of our funeral arrangements but sometimes we get stuff shipped from Bri's in Brooklyn or their sister shop in Rhinebeck. I inspect the large bouquet of white mums and rearrange the vases of lilies and carnations in a way that allows for a little stack of programs to sit among them. Mrs. Lang's antemortem face is on the front surrounded by a wreath of white and pink peonies. The whole setup is beautiful, and I think it's a shame Mrs. Lang is too dead to see it.

One thing I know for certain is that people need something when a person dies. They need to mourn, to feel like other people see their pain, and ultimately, they take part in these rituals—embalming, a wake, a burial, a repast, the whole homegoing process—to make themselves feel better. These death rituals are mostly for the living, not the dead, but that doesn't make them any less necessary or important.

"Meka!" my mom calls from somewhere in the house.

"Ma'am?" I call back.

"Put out the sign, would you?"

"I'll do it right now," I say.

I pull the sandwich board out of the closet and drag it down the front steps. I prop it in front of the house. It reads Redwood

Funeral Home, Service in Progress, Please Be Respectful in scrawling burgundy script. The sign was my mom's idea. A while ago, we had a man show up selling Kirby vacuum cleaners right in the middle of a service. The sales guy would not take no for an answer even though we had Mr. Eddelston's body laid out in the viewing room. The man even offered to demonstrate the Kirby's legendary suction strength on the carpet in the hallway. I didn't even know people sold vacuums door-to-door anymore. I don't know if the sign would have kept the guy away to begin with but if Mom says put it up, that's what I'm going to do.

I adjust the sign and tuck my arms in close as I glance up and down East Court Street. Things are quiet. It's one of those frigid but beautifully overcast days. A perfect day for a funeral. I hustle back in to finish up.

Part of my job also includes distracting kids in an adjacent playroom, who are too little to handle seeing their dead relatives lying stiff in a coffin. Babysitting used to be my main job, but now that I have my official license I get to make our guests feel welcome whether they're living or dead.

After I've checked the playroom, I go into the viewing room directly across the hall and peer down at Mrs. Lang after she's been moved into position.

"She looks great," my mom says.

I try to keep my heart from leaping into my throat. "You scared me," I say, grabbing my chest dramatically.

"Sorry," she says.

She stands in the doorway like a burst of sunshine in an environment that feels like a gray storm cloud a lot of the time. She checks her makeup in the large mirror that hangs just inside the

viewing room and touches up her lipstick before joining me at the coffin side.

I reach into the coffin and adjust a large brooch on Mrs. Lang's knitted sweater. It's a gaudy thing with an emerald-colored stone at the center. It doesn't go with what she's wearing, but her oldest son insisted we put it on her. In fact, he'd been the one who insisted on us putting her shoes on too. He'd been wearing a suit that looked like he'd stolen it off a dead body when he dropped off his mother's things. I should have known he was going to have his poor mother looking a mess.

"Having to take fashion advice from a man even when you're dead has gotta be some kind of punishment, right?" I ask.

"Depends on the man," Mom says. She eyes the brooch. "In this case, yes. A punishment."

I continue primping Mrs. Lang, making sure everything is just right. "I think we did good," I say.

"We always do," says Mom. "I thought the skin slippage would be an issue, but I put a little Dryene on her. The wax covered it right up."

"You did that," I say, smiling.

My mom pretends like she doesn't want the compliment, but only for a second. She isn't the type of person who believes in being overly humble.

"I can't take all the credit," she says. "Her pallor was tough to correct but *you* did that. You get better and better every time, Meka."

Now it's my turn to poke out my chest a little. I had worked really hard on the color matching and texture to make sure it was flawless. Mrs. Lang's skin felt like it came alive under my brush. She was pale with blue-green undertones and her skin was dry

and rough. Burst capillaries had made little reddish webs of the broken vessels around her nose and under her eyes. We could have slapped on some foundation in a near-match color and called it a day but that's not what we do here.

As Mom admires our work, something catches my eye—a small wire, maybe as long and thin as an eyelash, protrudes from the skin above Mrs. Lang's top lip on the side of her face closest to the inside of her coffin. It looks like a metallic whisker.

"Oh no," I say, leaning in to get a better look. "Why is it sticking out like that?"

I pinch the wire and tug it. Mrs. Lang's perfectly painted lips bulge. I sigh. Dead bodies tend to open their mouths if they aren't sewn shut. I can't think of anything more traumatic than looking into your loved one's coffin only to find their mouth agape in a silent scream. We keep that from happening by using a needle injector to place two lengths of wire in the upper and lower lip; then we twist them together, cut off the excess, and fill the divots with mortuary wax. Problem solved. No more silently screaming corpses.

"We need to clip the loose ends a little bit shorter," Mom says. She gently touches her own lip as if she's calculating the adjustments that need to be made in the same place on Mrs. Lang.

I reach into my pocket and take out a tiny pair of shears. My mom gifted them to me when I first started assisting her. They're shaped like a bird, a crane, I think. The wings make up the handles and the scissor mechanism is in the shape of a beak. I clip the ends of the wire and re-form the wax around Mrs. Lang's lip.

"Picture perfect," my mom says, smiling. "You didn't even need to touch up her makeup." She glances at my shears and then back to Mrs. Lang. "You've got the magic touch, baby."

She readjusts the big loopy bow at her collar and smooths out the front of her pleated pants.

“You look really nice,” I say.

She laughs lightly and kisses me on the top of my head. “I try, baby. It’s getting harder and harder to do the older I get.”

I hug her tight. “Stop. You look like we could be in class together. You know how many seniors have asked me if they can get your number thinking you’re my sister or something?” I cringe. “It’s annoying.”

“Yeah, that’s not cool,” she says. “But you really think I look like I could be one of your little friends?”

I nod and laugh. “Yup.”

“Hmm,” she says thoughtfully. “I don’t know how I feel about that but I’ll take it as a compliment for now.”

My mom is always dressed to impress, no matter the occasion. She’s particular about the way she looks because she’s the face of Redwood Funeral Home. She handles almost all our face-to-face meetings with clients because my dad is whatever the opposite of a people person is. She always tells me that you only get one chance to make a good first impression. She’s the kindest, gentlest person I know but she’s hard on herself no matter how much me and my dad tell her she doesn’t need to be. Working on dead bodies all day probably isn’t helping the issue. Nothing will give you a complex faster than seeing, up close and in person, the way time ravages the body. I give her a hug, breathing her in. She smells like flowers, like roses. Anybody who doesn’t work in a funeral home every day of their life might think it’s just a nice floral perfume. They would never guess it was the scent of the mortuary paint we use to prep the bodies.

An hour later, Mrs. Lang's family begins to trickle in, and I herd the smaller kids into the playroom while the adults grieve openly at the coffin. They wail and sob, and I know my mom will pat them on their backs and offer them words of comfort. I can hear them even through the closed door so I put on music as the kids play with our assortment of battered toys and draw pictures of their recently deceased grandma. I settle myself in a child-size chair at the low table and a little girl in a frilly black dress with a head full of brown ringlets scoots up next to me. She hands me a piece of paper.

"Is this your artwork?" I ask, smiling at her.

She nods and smiles back.

Stick figures clearly meant to represent Mrs. Lang and the little girl are holding hands, but they are far beneath the grass rendered in evergreen crayon.

"What's going on here?" I ask.

She curls her little hands around my arm as she looks at the picture and then back to me like it should be obvious. "That's me and my grandma. We're holding hands."

"I can see that," I say gently. "But why are you both under the ground?"

"She's dead. She's going under the ground forever," the little girl says so matter-of-factly all I can do is stare blankly at her for a moment.

"Oh, right," I say. Images of me and my mom handling Mrs. Lang's mortal remains in the previous days flood my brain. Stuffing her stiffened limbs into her clothes and shoes . . .

I push those thoughts aside and lean toward the girl, cupping my hand over hers. "But you're still here, right? You're okay."

The little girl looks thoughtful and then tenderly leans her

head against my arm. "I wanna hold her hand even when she's under the ground," she says. "She can be dead and I can be alive. It's okay."

Kids are so nonchalant about death sometimes, it's actually a little unnerving.

"You want me to draw you a picture too?" she asks.

"No, that's okay, I—"

She either doesn't hear me or she doesn't care what my answer is because she immediately grabs a crayon and a piece of blank paper. She sets to work, drawing the arms and legs of a figure that's supposed to be me. She glances at me, studying my face, and then back to the paper, scribbling in the curly black hair slicked back in a bun. She continues on to the gray pantsuit, the shiny black shoes and finally, a six-sided shape completely surrounding the figure.

"Is this me?" I ask.

"That's you," she says, grinning.

"And what's that shape around me?" I ask.

The little girl looks up at me, her big brown eyes shining. "That's your coffin," she says. "You're dead."