

# PRECIOUS CATASTROPHE

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HOT  
KEY  
BOOKS



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## Costmary

(maintaining wakefulness, purging phlegm, worms)

‘Catlin Hayes, for the fifth and final time you are not a Dracula.’

I can see the white of Mam’s knuckles clutching the steering wheel as the car whirrs over the stony mountain road. I’m in the back, which is annoying as I don’t have full control over the music that gets played. When we moved to Ballyfrann for the first time, Brian was driving and my hair was still dark red. I didn’t need to nap then, and my throat and my bones didn’t ache or twinge unpredictably throughout the day. My voice didn’t rasp if I forgot to stay hydrated. I hadn’t died. I’d never been in love.

‘I rose from the dead,’ I point out, not for the first time. Mam sighs that old familiar sigh of hers. The Catlin-you-are-reminding-me-of-bad-things sigh.

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‘That doesn’t make you Dracula.’ She has a point, but so do I, and I will beat my point into her as though it were a stake through the heart of a lesser Dracula.

‘I’m sensitive to light.’ I gesture to the small round tortoiseshell sunglasses perched on my nose. They are exactly the sort of sunglasses a stylish but photo-sensitive Dracula would wear, going about the place, wearing capes and causing havoc. I should absolutely get a cape.

‘You’re hungover.’ Mam is now resigned to the back and forth of this. Which is exactly where I want her. I like winning. I’m good at it. I’ve been doing it since the day I was born, with several notable exceptions.

‘*You’re hungover,*’ I tell Mam. We’re both right. I polished off a bottle of coconut rum with Layla Shannon and Eddie Collins last night, trying to get information out of them. Maddy pussyfoots around the strangeness of Ballyfrann, but I prefer a more direct approach. Plus, people feel sorry for me now, because I got my face eaten off, and when it doesn’t clam them up it can make them weirdly gabby. I feel a bit sorry for me too, to be honest, but what they actually should feel is scared. I have a lot of rage inside me now.

A year ago, my sister and I moved to Ballyfrann with our mother and her new husband Brian. And it ruined everything about my life. This town ate my face and stole my sister, and I’m going to figure everything out and make it pay.

Mam’s drinking last night was less purposeful. Brian did some big business deal and a client sent him a bottle of something expensive. They normally never open wine on a weeknight, and I wondered if it was an attempt on his part to delay this

trip until he could come too, and keep an eye on us. It almost worked, in fairness. Mam is hanging.

I adjust my sunglasses and smile a toothy, Dracula-style smile at Mam and Maddy's sleeping form. I'd been looking forward to catching up properly with my sister, but she conked out as soon as she'd clicked her seat belt on. Which might be for the best. Mam's driving isn't wonderful at the best of times, and Maddy's always one pothole away from a cheeky vomit out the window. I don't know why Mamó let Maddy come with us, she's usually much stricter with her. We get the odd dinner, once a week, on her night off, but otherwise, it's hard to know where she'll be or how to get to see her. When we do talk, she's always asking questions about me. Not that I mind that, I've no problem talking about myself, but when she leaves I often realise I barely know my sister now at all. Mind you, maybe I didn't know her then either. There were a lot of things she kept from me.

'Should you pull over, and take a drink of water, or go somewhere and get a coffee or something?' I ask Mam. I'd love a coffee.

'I'm grand, love. It's mainly anxiety, I think. The last time we visited your father's grave, we were all still together and life was much more normal. The two of ye were getting on okay.'

'Hey! I'm getting on okay,' I say. And it's true. I am. Considering.

'I keep thinking of your name on that wall,' she says. When my ex did what he did to me, it became clear that he had also done the same before, to other girls. He carved their names

onto a cavern wall; our names, I mean. Mine was there too. I don't like thinking about it, and when she brings it up, I feel more like a Dracula than ever. Like an undead thing that shouldn't be. Tethered to memory. Mam doesn't mean to hurt me, I know that much, but when she mentions that place, or that night, it's like my bones begin to sweat or something. I've gotten better at hiding it so she thinks I'm healing. She tells me how resilient I am at least once a week. She doesn't hear me when I pray at night, sob to the Virgin Mary to protect me, knowing that when it really counted, she didn't. It was my sister who sacrificed herself so I could live.

Maddy snorts in her sleep, the way she does, and turns.

'It's good she's sleeping,' Mam says, changing the subject, probably more for her benefit than mine.

'I might go to sleep as well,' I say. 'Seeing as the sun has risen. Because of what a Dracula I am.'

'A Dracula wouldn't care about her mam,' Mam says.

'Dracula had impeccable manners,' I say. 'People can be a lot of things at once.'

And then I'm thinking about Lon and it doesn't seem so funny any more. Lon was the love of my life. We met shortly after I moved to Ballyfrann, and we were obsessed with each other. I dreamed about him every night and he was the first thing that I thought about each morning. Both those things are still true, but for slightly different reasons. He keeps coming back, in my dreams. And I relive what happened over and over again. Not the end, but the beginning and the middle. But, with the knowledge of where his love is leading, it's not a bit romantic any more, and I'm trapped in my body, repeating

history again and again, and seeing the cave move closer and closer. Lon was a lot of things: charming and brutal, young and old. Maddy could see through him right away, but she's a witch, and I'm . . . I don't know what.

When I don't dream of Lon, I dream of Dad. Dad burned to death when we were two years old. And I keep dreaming about it. Wild warm fever dreams that feel all too real. I wake up gasping, running for the nearest sink to drown my face in, to remind myself that it's out now. I'm home. I'm safe. Only I'm not at home. I am not safe.

I wonder if visiting Dad's grave will be different this time, with all that's happened. It was always a bit sad, but we got used to it. I never knew him really. I just have memories. A murmured bedtime story. A hand dangling rosary beads over my face and me reaching my two hands up to grab them in frustration. Watering the plants in the garden with a little pink watering can we'd gotten as a present from one of Mam's work friends who visited.

When I open my eyes again, we're passing through a village that's much bigger than Ballyfrann, with art galleries and a cute-looking coffee shop.

'Can we stop for a coffee?' I ask.

'We want to make good time,' Mam says. And then she makes a *hmmm* sound and thinks. 'I'll have to stop for petrol anyway. Let's see if there's a station here.'

'I got bitten by a Dracula!' I say triumphantly. 'The least I deserve is a well-made cappuccino.'

Mam shuts up. I've probably gone too far. And Lon wasn't really a Dracula. A true Dracula would have had more finesse,

or at least stuck to the neck area. That would have made the marks he left much easier to hide. If only.

Mam pulls the car in, parks and gets her purse out. 'I'll be back in a minute.'

Success.

Maddy stirs and opens one eye. 'Where are we now?'

'Mam stopped to get me an artisanal coffee,' I say. 'She'll probably get you one too. She didn't want to wake you.'

'It was nice to sleep . . .' says Maddy. 'Wait. Did you get her to do what you want again by reminding her that Lon ate your face?'

'I did.'

'You're some bitch, Catlin Hayes.' She's smiling though. I don't know if she knows how she feels about my talent for getting Mam to do whatever I want most of the time. Little bit judgemental, little bit admiring. I grin back, unashamed. I mean, if I can get people to do stuff for me, why shouldn't I? I know that there's probably some rule about not using the bad things that happen to you to manipulate other people, but I can't make them not have happened to me. Lon won't un-eat my face, un-break my heart. So the least I can do is guilt people into doing stuff for me and telling me secrets. Secrets that I hope will be the key to getting my sister free of the old wagon who yanked me unceremoniously back from the dead in exchange for her soul and freedom.

'I do what I can. Plus she's hungover. It's way easier to get her to do stuff when she's hungover. It's like she's a tired puppet.'

Maddy blinks and peels back stray strands of hair from

her eyes. 'The way you talk about other people scares me sometimes, Catlin.'

She opens up her bag to check her phone. I know that face.

'Who are you expecting a message from?' I ask her.

'No one. I barely have time to breathe, let alone be messaging people. Mamó has me so busy.'

'You're lying.'

'I might be.' She smiles. 'But I'm not going to tell you either way.'

'UGH. You're so frustrating. I'm sitting here, COVERED in scars. TRAUMATISED.'

'Ah here, you're hardly covered in scars. They're more like birthmarks.' She's not wrong. They're not pocked like scars would be, but they are a mark of violence that was done to me, and *scar* seems the proper word for them. I am scarred now. What he did is written on my skin.

'Don't tell me how I look or what I've been through. Just tell me who's the girl? It's not Oona again, is it?'

Oona Noone is this French one who thinks she's amazing. And in fairness to her, she is a bit amazing. Very pretty, well-liked by everyone, and my sister is thoroughly in love with her. A dose. And much and all as I'd like my sister to have someone to remind her how wonderful she is and make her feel like there's more to life than witchcraft and servitude, I'm pretty sceptical about magical people as romantic partners, for obvious reasons.

Mam comes back with gorgeous fluffy coffees all around. I tell her she's a hero, and she smiles and tells me that there's an expiry date on this 'fancy treatment'.



‘On what? On being murdered? Do you have any idea how callous that sounds?’ I say.

‘Shut up, Catlin,’ they both say with the exact same intonation, and it’s so in-tune that it makes me laugh with surprise. Time passes, and the things we pass on the road bring back old memories. The good kind, from before, when we were normal.

‘It’s lovely, isn’t it, to all be together again?’ says Mam. ‘We should just stay here and not go home at all.’

‘Yeah,’ I say, and I hear the sadness in my voice.

There are some things you just can’t journey back from.