

BLOOD RED
JAMES A. MOORE

+ AN EXCERPT +

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CHAPTER TWENTY

I

The fog came first, in a thick wet wave that swept over the shore of the bay and into the town proper at a maddening speed. There was nothing subtle about the stuff; it was overwhelming.

The houses along the Cliff Walk were works of art, every one of them an architectural accomplishment that had cost preposterous amounts of money even when they had been built, and were now so expensive that the taxes alone would have ruined a lot of lower-income families. The fog buried them completely as it rose and moved ashore.

Kelli lost track of her friends almost immediately. She was taking care of a little girl named Jayce Thornton. Jayce had planned to dress as a witch for the event and had lost her hat when the wind picked up. So the two of them stayed behind to look for it, and by the time they discovered the black, pointy affair, it had wedged itself in a tree. Kelli did her thing and climbed up the elm while the little girl watched her. The air had been misty when she started up, but the fog had struck and done its damage by the time she finally climbed down with the hat's brim caught between her teeth.

In thirty seconds the visibility was down to nothing.

In a minute, she and Jayce couldn't even see the sidewalk under their feet and all the damned flashlights did nothing but make the air glow brightly.

"Where are we?" Jayce was laughing, but she sounded a little nervous. Kelli couldn't blame her. It was crazy dark out.

"Hey, perfect weather for Halloween. Let's go find some goblins."

She took the little girl's hand in her own and they started walking, listening for the sounds of the others. Happily, the noises were still there, because it didn't take them too long to find the rest of the group.

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Erika was just about completely gone in the fog, and she used it to her advantage to scare the shit out of Kelli. One second, everything was just dandy and the next, the whiteness came alive and shot a flashlight beam in her face. The little ghost next to Erika did the exact same thing to Jayce. It could have gone south fast, but she managed to stop the witch from beating the bejesus out of the little ghost. If she'd been a little slower on recovering, she would have never stopped the fist Jayce swung at the ghost kid in time and there would have been a lot more boohooing and a bloody nose.

A minute later both of the kids seemed fine again and all was well, give or take the fog. They finished with the last house on the seaside of the street and were getting ready to head for the other side when things really did go wrong.

The little boy dressed as Spider-Man let out a very sincere shriek. As Kelli looked around for him in the fog, calling out his name—her list told her it was Nicky dressed that way—she realized he wasn't anything because he wasn't answering.

"Nicky? Hey, Nicky? Where are you?" she called, and soon her friends were joining in. They kept the kids gathered in a little island between them and called out, waited, called out again.

The fourth time they called out, Rita didn't add to the cacophony. Kelli got a chill down her spine and when she called out again she also called for Rita.

Rita didn't answer, either.

"Okay, this is sooo not funny, guys." Erika didn't sound amused. There were parties to be hit and she wanted to be there already. She was only doing this for Kelli's sake.

"Rita! If you're joking, you can stop it!"

No answer.

Kelli moved in closer to the kids, quickly doing a head count. There were still sixteen. Only one had vanished.

Only one. And Rita hadn't answered her.

"Okay guys, let's all go."

Several children started protesting at the same time and she waved her flashlight and her hands. "Calm down. We're just going to move over to my place and then you can all check out what you already have, but Rita and Nicky might be lost and we have to find them."

"Man, this sucks..." Barry Winston was a brat and there was no reason for that to suddenly change. Superman had never looked more pouty. His bottom lip was stuck out like a diving board.

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“Barry, it’s just for a few minutes.”

“No it’s not! You’re just trying to ruin Halloween!” Eight years old and he was already a major-league drama queen.

“Barry, we’re going, *now*.”

Something came out of the heavy fog and grabbed Barry before he could respond. It was big and black and had the boy in its arms before he could even catch a breath to scream with.

They all saw what happened next. Damned near every flashlight in the group turned to Barry as he was grabbed. The dark shape that caught him stood revealed. His skin was loose on his face, and bloated with water. He was deathly pale, save where some kind of black fungus was growing on his features. His eyes shot back a silvery glare into the beams from the flashlights, and his teeth, the teeth she had always thought looked perfect in his handsome face, were bared, made longer by the way his gums had receded.

He looked directly into Kelli’s eyes as he leaned over and bit down, his mouth covering the wound he made, but not before she saw Barry’s blood leaking from behind the moldy lips.

Not a single person there thought for even a second that it was a fake-out.

Erika reached for the man and clubbed him over the back of his head with her flashlight. She didn’t recognize him; she’d never met the man. The man didn’t recognize her, either, but he attacked her for her efforts. His hand reached out and grabbed Erika’s face. He caught her pretty skin in the grip and it tore as easily as tissue paper. Erika’s scream was cut short by her jaw and nose breaking under the force he applied.

After that, everyone started running. Kelli managed to catch Jayce’s hand and the little boy in the devil outfit’s wrist before she turned and started hauling ass. Neither of the kids had a chance in hell of keeping up with her so she wrestled them both into her arms and ran faster. Jayce wrapped her legs around Kelli’s waist and the little devil did his best to monkey crawl over her back as they moved.

She had no plans, but spent most of her time looking at the ground to make sure her feet didn’t hit the curb and take all three of them down.

“They’re coming, Kelli! They’re coming!” Jayce’s voice was so loud and her speech so fast she could barely make out the words. She nodded instead of answering and pushed herself as fast as she could. She didn’t even have time to wonder what had happened to the man. She was fixed on the dead look of him and the way his teeth disappeared into Barry’s flesh. Adrenaline kicked into her

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system at the thought and she groaned.

The little devil boy was pulled from her arm with enough force to strain her muscles. His screams vanished, rising higher into the air until Kelli had to turn and look. She saw him reaching for her, his toddler hand stretched out and his eyes grown frightfully wide. He kept rising, a black, fluttering form going with him until they were both lost in the fog....

"BLOOD RED will become a classic like Stephen King's 'SALEM'S LOT. James A. Moore has proven with his latest novel that he is one of the grandmasters of the horror genre." — THE MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

"James Moore may be one of the best kept secrets in horror fiction, but I think the secret is finally getting out. His latest novel is certainly indicative of a mature and confident talent. He tackles vampires this time, but not the uncertain, introspective, and sometimes romantic vampires that fill much recent horror fiction. His are downright nasty, and there are a lot of them, and they're about to escape into our world just in time to make Halloween in one small town more than just a scary holiday. Moore mixes traditional devices with innovative ones, and never lets the tension settle down once the plot gets thoroughly underway. For those of us who like our vampires evil, Moore provides the real stuff." — CHRONICLE

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