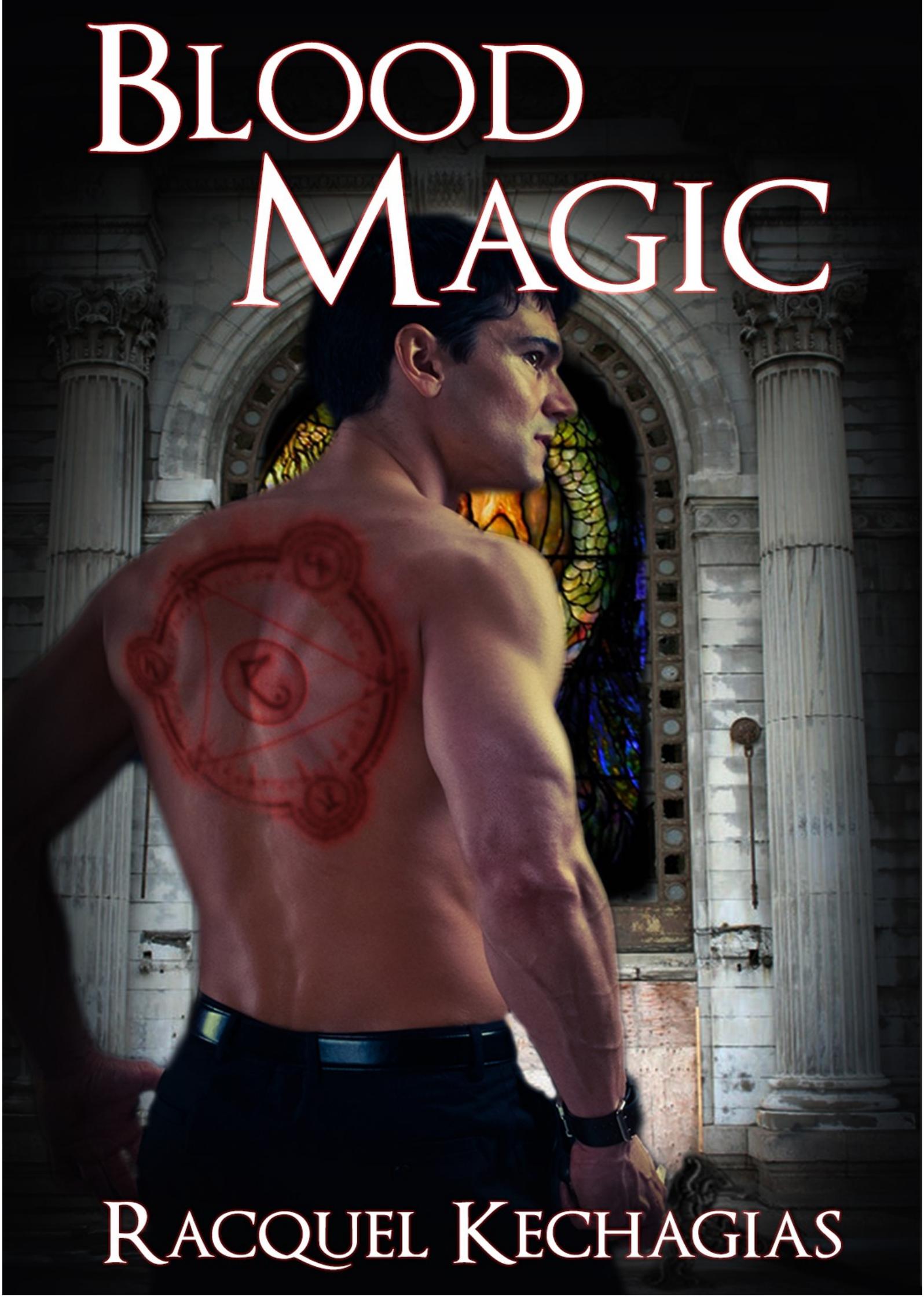


# BLOOD MAGIC

A shirtless man with dark hair is shown from the back and side, looking towards the right. On his back is a large, intricate red magical sigil or tattoo. He is standing in a gothic-style doorway with a stained glass window behind him. The scene is dimly lit, with light coming from the window and casting shadows on the man's body. The background features stone columns and arches.

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“We are who we are for a lot of reasons.

And maybe we’ll never know most of them.

But even if we don’t have the power to choose where we come from,

we can still choose where we go from there.

We can still do things.

And we can try to feel okay about them.

- Stephen Chbosky

# CHAPTER 1

Darkness is everywhere. The world around me is deeply asleep, the late hour and absolute silence proves this. However despite this, I cannot sleep. All I can think about is the hazardous cough that emits from my mother's throat that echoes throughout the vast house. She is sick, dying and although there is a cure, it is unattainable. I roll over in my bed to face the other side of the room, where my younger sister lays sleeping. She tosses and turns in her bed. Her sleep is restless and I can hear her saying our mother's name, Amara, over and over again. She too is worried for our mother and with each frightful whisper of her name I flinch. She needs her and so does my father, they both need her to survive. I need her too and so I know that this choice must be mine.

There had been whispers between the men at the pub today, whispers that I had overheard as I worked my shift. Whispers about a place where men like me, who didn't earn a lot of money and who had nothing to lose would be able to earn a year's wage in a single nights work. The whispers didn't include what type of work would be required. Those who spoke of it left it to our imagination, allowing us to hope that it would save us and at the same time we'd fear it. I cannot stay here, lying awake listening to my mother coughing up her life as I stay still and I think. The time for thinking has passed and I've thought this well through. I kick the blankets off and get up from the bed. I cross the room as quietly as possible and I freeze when I hear Eva make a small sound. When she doesn't wake, I exit the room before she catches me in the act of leaving. I make my way out of my home and into the stables, where my father's horse would rest if he were actually at home. He has been gone for weeks, chasing witches throughout Salem. We haven't seen him since Leo - my older and only brother - was promoted to general, which was nearly two months ago. From the stables I grab my sword tucking it into the sheath which is attached to my belt. My father's position may have had some influence over the men that I was to meet tonight. I wouldn't allow it to define me though. I can't allow myself to be anything like him but I may have no choice after all I have no idea of what I'm going to find tonight. First thing is first though, I have to meet up with Benjamin, the unlucky bastard that got to call me his best friend.

A loud howl comes from outside of the stable. I grab the hilt of my sword as I exit the building. Outside is Benjamin. He has his hands cupped around his mouth and I relax my stance. He was the one howling and he's bound to wake my family with his noise.

“Golden Boy, where have you been? I’ve been waiting for you for an hour! They’re gonna start wondering if we’re even coming at all.” Ben shouts as I walk the short distance between the stable and him.

“Shut up Ben, you’re going to wake the girls with all of that hollering!” I say quietly. I smack him across the back of the head to accentuate my point. He laughs as he rubs the back of his head as if that smack had actually hurt him.

“What was that for?” He demands as his soft brown eyebrows furrow together.

“For being the dumb-ass that’s going to wake my sick mother and my little sister with his loud mouth,” I say wanting him to realize how important it is for him to keep quiet.

“Well how was I supposed to know they’d be sleeping?” He demands, this time making sure to keep his voice down.

“What do you think they’d be doing in the middle of the night? Knitting?” I say, my voice filled with irritation. I don’t know what had been crossing his mind, to make him think that they’d be awake. After all it wasn’t far from dawn and anyone who has any sense would be sleeping now.

“It doesn’t matter anyhow, it got you outta the house didn’t it?” Benjamin says and at this I cannot help but grin. The fact that he knows how to make me have fun and lighten up whether or not I wanted to was the reason I kept him around despite his lack of sensibility.

“I suppose it did,” I say. We had been talking as we walked towards town. We pause on the outskirts of town. Our voices had been carried on the soft wind, waking the animals of the forest as we passed it. We have to be silent as we pass through the town as we can’t offer to wake anyone. I raise a finger to my lips to motion to Ben that we must be quiet. He nods his head, all joking manner entirely gone from his behavior. Now he is as stoic as I am. We step onto the cobbled stone road. The only thing that moves at our presence are a few loose rocks that scatter as our boots kick at them. We pass multiple stores and houses, lit candles illuminate the streets in their iron boxes and casts our shadows against the plaza. We had been summoned to old Mickey’s farm on the other side of the village, a bit out-of-town. The old codger had passed away three years ago. He had no family, no wife or children, no one to inherit his farm and due to this it had become abandon and run-down. It is the perfect setting for illicit business. The whispers of gossip are the only words that get out about this place and even those eventually are silenced.

I’m pulled out of my thoughts as Ben trips. I reach out and grab onto the back of his shirt. I help him steady himself on his feet. I turn away from Ben and catch a glimpse of

myself in the illuminated window. My dark hair is tousled from the hours I spent lying awake in my bed tonight, turning from side to side in restlessness. The dark shadows underneath my eyes are proof of this restlessness, they are striking against my pale skin. I can see and feel the stubble on my cheeks. Ben's reflection comes into the mirror as well as he steps towards me. I look down at his hand on my arm and shrug it off as I take a step away from the mirror. I look like what I imagine a younger version of my father would look like. That thought is unpleasant and I shake my head as if I could physically shake it away.

"What do you think they'd be doing in a place like Old Mickey's anyways?" Benjamin asks once we exit the town. His voice pulls me out of my thoughts.

I shrug my shoulders as I say, "I don't know Ben, they could be running a drug house or a brothel. Honestly they could be doing anything." His question holds merit and it's what concerns me. They could be doing anything here but what would they'd need young men to do for them? Whatever it is it has even caused grown men to gossip and talk in whispers, in hopes that no-one will overhear.

We had walked so far in our silence and it's only now that I can see Old Mickey's place in the near distance. We turn off from the main road and travel up the old dust road, approaching the small abandon cabin. The tall windmill towers above the cabin in the background. The overlarge barn used to store the crops that Mickey grew in these fields stands not far from the cabin and the windmill. Mickey use to run a good farm, brought in a lot of business back in his prime days - or at least that what Mum use to say. Now the old place is depressing to look at. I can't help but wonder if Mickey's ghost haunts this area. I'm certain that he would if ghosts did exist. We enter the building to check if anyone is waiting inside for us.

"It doesn't look like anyone's here. Maybe we should go Adrian," Ben says. At first I don't pay attention to his words, they're too soft for my wandering mind to hear. Somehow I see a shadow move within the dark room. I glance down as my glass crunches underneath my feet, I don't feel them stabbing into my skin though. The boots must be too thick. I glance back up to see if I can find the moving shadow again but it's gone now, hidden from sight, blending into the dark room again. When Benjamin says my name a second time I move my eyes from the room to the man standing beside me.

"They wouldn't have summoned us here if they weren't going to show," I say and now that I'm looking at Ben, really looking at him, I can see how nervous he is.

"If you're scared Ben, maybe you should go home. Pull out now while you still have the chance," I say hoping this will eliminate his fears but it doesn't seem to help. People who

assume that they can summon you believe that they have some kind of power and that power makes them dangerous. It isn't a good idea to run from someone like, no matter who they are.

I walk up to the door that sits slightly ajar and push it open. I know that Ben is following me as I hear his footsteps cracking the small shattered glass on the old wood floor. The house has been abandon since Mickey's death but there is still furniture in the room, covered in white sheets and layered in dust. Ben and I are the only people in the room, perhaps even on the whole farm. For a moment I regret my decision of coming at all. Ben grabs my arm and forces me to turn round.

"God Ben, it's just Mister Grant," I say.

"Welcome Adrian, Benjamin. The council is waiting upstairs for you," Mr Grants says and he makes his way back over to the staircase. I follow behind him quickly, not caring if Ben has the guts to follow as well.

The old staircase creaks underneath our weight and I hesitate for a moment, concerned that the stairs will collapse underneath us. I only pause for a moment though, before I quicken my pace.

The stairs end at the middle of beginning of a corridor. Ben and I follow Mr Grant down the hallway and to the second door that we pass. The door creaks from lack of use as Mr Grant opens it. Waiting in the room is four men, all old friends of my father. In the far left corner are three other men, all in their early twenties. These are men that I know, boys that my brother grew up with. They're twice as large as he is was the last time I saw him but I don't linger on the observation. One of them I know particularly well. Andrew use to be Leo's best-friend before they got into a fight over a girl. They had both been interested in her and she had played them both, leading them on, making each of them believe that she had true feelings for them. In the end they had both been played as fools for Alexa - the girl they had been chasing - had confessed her 'undying love' for me. Leo had been furious at me for weeks, but he forgave me when he realized that it had not been my fault. Things were never fixed between Leo and Andrew. I wonder if Andrew will hold it against me now. I turn my attention away from Andrew and back onto my father's friends for

"Welcome Mr. Klein, Mr. Every. We were beginning to wonder if you had ignored our summons," The man in the middle says. He appears no different to the men he sits besides, a young but old face, a short scruffy beard, pepper and salt hair. His eyes however are sharp and I stand to attention under his scrutinizing gaze.

“We would not have been so foolish to ignore a summoning,” I say, answering on both mine and Ben’s behalf. The man who had just spoken gives me a slight nod of his head, as I had provided the correct answer.

“Do you know why we have summoned you here?” The same man asks and I shake my head in the negative. He sighs as if this is to be expected before he goes on, “We are an organization that deals with entertainment and to be specific we run illicit fights. The fights do get rough and due to this we have lost men in the past couple of months. Due to this we’ve had to fill five positions, clearly we already have three. We only need two more men to fight for us. Will you do it?”

“Perhaps. But what exactly is in it for us?” I ask and this is something that I have to know before I can make any type of decision. He gives me a sly grin, one that says ‘That’s what they all ask’.

“We have bidders who bet on each fighter, raising the stakes. If you win, you get a hefty portion of the cash that is made on you. If you lose you are given medication to help you become faster, stronger. Either way you boys can’t lose,” The man says, and I can see no deceit in his stone grey eyes. I let his words sink in for a moment. They have the power to punish me if I decide to pull out later. It won’t be tolerable, they will punish me in the worst way possible. Not only through physical pain but through emotional, psychological pain. Can I risk them hurting my mother or sister? Even if joining these men will help me to save them? Then again, with my father being who he is, I have a small upper hand and a greater chance of getting out of this alive. Can I make this choice and not regret it? Do I even have a choice?

I meet the gaze of the grey eyed man. I try to learn his motives but his eyes give nothing away.

“I’m in,” Ben says. The man’s grey eyes turn from me to Ben who is grinning like an idiot.

“Welcome aboard Mr. Klein, I knew you were a smart lad as soon as I saw you,” The grey eyed man says. His eyes drift back to me as Ben joins my brother’s friends. It is with this concoction of his youthful smile and the glee in his eyes, that the aged look on his face becomes stark in contrast. I want to pull out, tell Ben that it was a stupid idea to come, to allow ourselves to be pulled into this but it is too late. The three other boys in the room are welcoming Ben into their ranks and the council is sitting there, watching the stare down that is going on between the man and myself. He is waiting for my answer and now that Ben has agreed, I know that I now have no choice, that I never had a choice to begin with.

“Well, Mr. Every, what is your decision?” The grey eyed man asks, as if he knows my thoughts, as if he knows that I have concluded that I have no choice at all. He grins, his eyes glint dangerously in the light.

“I’m in,” I say. The grey eyed man flashes a wide smile, his teeth are all white and although that is strange enough it seems as if his teeth are sharpened to a point.

“Excellent choice Mr. Every. Mr Pennyworth will show you to the arena, where we will see to your fighting skills before we throw you into the ring,” The grey eyed man says. Mr Pennyworth steps forward. In the candle light I can see that he isn’t a handsome man. The right-side of his face is mutilated as if his face had melted. He towers above us. Despite what this man looks like, Ben, Andrew, the two other guys and I follow him down to the arena, where they will test our strength and see how worthy we are to be in the ring, to be included in this private group to begin with.