



STACEY JAY

“Sizzles with action,
danger, and romance.”
—Jennifer Estep,
author of
the Elemental
Assassin series

BLOOD ON THE BAYOU

Definitely not
your mother's
fairies.

BLOOD
ON THE
BAYOU



Nightmares suck. Not being able to wake up from one sucks even more.

But that's what happens when you double up on sleep aids the night after an unexpected murder-investigation-inspired visit from your ex-boyfriend.

But maybe I'd be okay right now if I'd had a nice, calm sandwich before bed instead of a few beers and extra-cheesy nachos, topped off with extra-strength Benadryl, in the hopes that Alcohol and Antihistamine would heroically join forces and fight back the evil duo of Jalapeño Sauce and Stupidity, allowing me to snag a few hours of REM sleep.

Maybe I'd *still* be okay, if I hadn't popped a Restalin an hour later, on the off chance that Alcohol and Antihistamine needed some insomnia-crime-fighting help.

All things considered, I earned this. I *deserve* it. And I *know* it's just a dream.

But that doesn't make the solo trudge through the menacing darkness any easier.

I'm walking barefoot through the swamp, mud

oozing between my toes, an unseasonably cold wind reminding me with every step that a T-shirt and bikini panties aren't the best choice for a walk outside the iron gates. I shouldn't be out here after dark without some serious protective outerwear. I'm immune and the fairies will probably leave me alone, but the gators and snakes don't care if my blood kills the Fey.

Ugh. Snakes. *Shudder.*

On cue, the mud beneath my feet spits forth a legion of snakes that slither between my legs, hissing and twitching, baring their glistening fangs, but refusing to go ahead and *bite me* already. Because biting would take the edge off the *fear* of being bitten—the jaw-locking, bone-shuddering, skin-crawling fear inspired by all those hard, reptilian bodies squirming around my ankles. The fear that swells even larger when the moon slips from behind a cloud and I get a good look at the shoreline spreading out in front of me.

Nothing but snakes and snakes and more snakes as far as the eye can see, an undulating carpet of horror that, for a moment, I'm stupid enough to believe is as scary as this dream is going to get.

And then it gets worse.

Of course it does.

Because that's what nightmares *do*.

Grace Beauchamp materializes under a nearby cypress, glowing like she's swallowed a piece of the moon. She looks the way she did the last time I saw her, after her mother-sister and father-brother killed her and dumped her body outside the gates. Her extra-small child's nightgown is muddy, her pink bow

lips are torn, peeling back to reveal crooked little teeth. Her white-blond braids are fuzzy and coming undone on one side.

“Your cat ate my hair tie,” she says in a bell-ringing-inches-from-your-ear voice that’s painful to listen to.

“I’m sorry.” I cross my arms and squeeze my legs together, trying to ignore the snakes and pretend her face doesn’t make me want to scream. “Gimpy eats crazy things.”

“That was my favorite hair tie.”

Don’t you have bigger grudges to hold, kid? What about the family members who murdered you?

Instead, I say, “I’m really sorry.” It’s tacky to pick fights with dead people. Especially dead children.

“No you’re not.” What’s left of her nose wrinkles. “I’m dead. You think I don’t matter.”

“No. Of course I—”

“But you’re wrong.” She drifts toward me, floating above the carpet of snakes. As she passes, they scream and shrivel into black curlicues, as if her moonglow feet are made of blue fire. “Dead people matter, Annabelle. Sometimes, they matter more than the living.”

Like Caroline, I think.

“Just like Caroline,” Grace says, privy to my unspoken thoughts in the way of dream people. “But you can’t see her face anymore, can you? You’ve forgotten what she looked like.”

Yes, I have. “No, I haven’t.”

“Your own sister.” A piece of her ruined lip curls. “That’s horrible. You’re bad. I’m glad I didn’t know you very well when I was alive.”

"Thanks." I barely resist the urge to roll my eyes.

"You're *not* welcome."

"You know, I heard you weren't the nicest person yourself," I say, even though I know she's right. I *am* horrible. And I *have* started to forget. I held Caroline after she was bitten by fairies, watched the convulsions of the severely allergic snap her spine and shatter her teeth before she was allowed to die. Even if I hadn't spent sixteen years looking up to my older sister, I never thought I'd forget the pain on her face that last night.

But I have.

"And now you're picking on a murdered kid." Grace sounds like she's about to cry. "I was six years old. I couldn't even tie my own shoes."

"Sorry," I mumble.

"I couldn't use the microwave by myself, except for the popcorn button." She swoops closer, destroying snakes at a rate that would be encouraging if I weren't starting to wonder what will happen to me when she gets close enough to touch. "I couldn't run my bath, or ride my bike without training wheels, or give myself my shots."

The shots. The same shots the invisible people who were running Breeze in the bayou gave me after I was bitten. I'm immune, so was Grace, and unlike 95 percent of the human population, we shouldn't have had to worry about the effects of fairy bite. But both of us were affected, in the form of headaches and messed up eyes and . . . magic.

Real magic. The kind that allows you to manipu-

late matter with your mind, float objects through the air, and eventually disappear and reappear at will if the rest of the Invisibles are any indication. Both Grace and I were approached by these unseen folks and told to inject ourselves with mystery medicine every four weeks to keep from catching bad cases of crazy.

Grace's mother-sister, Libby, stopped giving Grace the shots months ago, hoping she'd die without them. She didn't. She went off the deep end, killed the bunnies for the Easter raffle, and tried to off Libby by dropping a box of canned pickles on her head. Unfortunately, she failed, and Libby smothered Grace in her sleep, framed my best friend, Fernando, for the murder, and killed her housekeeper—and very nearly myself—in an attempt to cover her tracks.

But Libby got her just desserts. I was there when the leader of the invisible people took care of Libby and her brother, James. I heard the satisfaction in the Big Man's voice as he sent them to their shared hot tub in hell. The pleasure he took in their murders made me hope I'd never have to *not see* the man again.

Then tonight he'd sent Tucker, his right-hand man, with his "present"—the motorcycle he promised me if I survived the anaphylactic shock from Libby's killer shrimp muffin and healed my ex-boyfriend's fiancée's bullet wound. I did both, saving myself, Stephanie, and her unborn child, ensuring Stephanie would live happily ever after with the man I think I'm still in love with.

“That’s stupid. Hitch hates you,” Grace says. “He’s going to marry Stephanie and they’re going to have the cutest baby *ever*.”

“I know.”

“Way cuter than if you and Hitch had a baby.” She coasts to a stop a few feet away, close enough that I can feel her ghost power tingling along my skin. “Stephanie’s a *lot* prettier than you.”

“I know.” I fight the urge to step back. The tingling isn’t a good feeling, but at least it’s scared off the snakes. I’m back to standing in plain old mud, and appreciating it a lot more than I did when this dream started.

“You should call Cane. See if he’ll take you back.”

Cane *would* take me back. At least I think he would. But not until I’m ready to promise him Forever. As much as I love him, Forever still scares me. What if I can’t be the person he needs me to be? How can I vow to love and honor him when I’m still carrying a torch for someone else?

“A pointless torch,” Grace says. “That’s going to burn you.”

I go ahead and roll my eyes. “What are you? My mom?”

“No, your mom wouldn’t talk to you this much.”

“Thanks.”

“Just telling it like it is.” She shrugs. “You shouldn’t let Cane go. He’s nice.”

“I know.”

“Too nice for you.”

“I know.”

“Because you mostly suck. Even the FCC isn’t sure they want you anymore.” She giggles a mean giggle. “I mean, who gets suspended from scooping fairy poop? Can’t a monkey do your job?”

“Probably.”

She crosses her arms and huffs, sending a piece of lip flapping. “Don’t think I’ll stop telling the truth just because you stop fighting back.”

“You’re not telling the truth.”

“I am.” She floats close enough that the tingle becomes a sting. “I’m a messenger from the other side.”

“You’re chips with jalapeño sauce and refried beans.”

“Really?” Her face snaps into sharper focus and suddenly the air seems colder, the nightmare bigger. A breeze ruffles the bottom of my T-shirt. I fist it in my fingers, needing something to hold on to. “Could chips with jalapeño sauce do this?” She lifts her small, white hands and the glow beneath her skin becomes a blinding light.

I wince and squeeze my eyes closed, throwing my arms up to block the glare as the wind starts to blow in earnest. It blasts in from every direction at once, a twister that rushes through my legs and whips my hair into a wild red tangle. It smacks and patters and beats at my skin and then I feel it—unbearably soft, hot flesh brushing against mine, and the tickle of silky wings.

This isn’t wind. It’s a swarm of fairies.

My eyes fly open. They’re everywhere. The air

is alive with naked humanoid bodies glowing pink and gold, with flat, black eyes, and rows and rows *and rows* of teeth. All of them have their detachable jaws dropped and their layers of sharklike fangs out for show-and-tell. I'm immune to their venom, but I know how badly those teeth hurt when they break the skin, how freely even one bite will bleed.

This many fairies could kill me. They would die after, but if enough of them dig in for a suicide nibble, I'll bleed to death and all the immunity in the world won't matter.

"Dead woman," a voice rasps in my ear. I flinch and scream and brush wildly at my head. I knock the fairy away, but he flies around to hover in front of my nose, his ancient prune face screwed up in a scowl.

He's easily the oldest fairy I've ever seen. About two inches from head to foot, with a concave chest that gives way to bony ribs and a belly that sags like an empty pouch. His skin is more yellow than gold and even his eyes seem duller than the rest of the fairies', but his teeth are just as sharp.

I get an up-close-and-personal inspection when he bares them in a hiss. "Dead," he shouts. "Dead. Dead. Dead!"

Spittle flies into my eyes, but I swallow the scream rising in my throat. My eyes *feel* like they're burning, but they aren't. This isn't real. Fairies can't talk. Grace is dead. And I would never go for a stroll in the bayou in my underwear.

Just a dream. A stupid dream!

“Your last nightmare,” the old fairy assures me in a voice like sandpaper scraping down my spine. “Leave the breeding ground of the Slake.”

“What?”

“We suffer no more Gentry!” He jabs an angry thumb over his shoulder and the crush of fairies parts, revealing Grace and her glowing hands.

“No. Not me! Not me! You promised!” Her ruined mouth drops open and her eyes fly wide and then they’re on her.

The fairy swarm descends and Grace’s skin blossoms with red. One, two, three, ten, fifty blooms, like she’s being hit with tiny paintball pellets that burst open and soak into her nightgown. She screams and it feels like the entire world will shatter, but I can’t close my eyes and I can’t take a step toward her. I’m frozen, with the shriveled old fairy fluttering near my cheek, grinning his yellow grin as Grace’s skin is stripped from her bones.

“Stop!” I try to shout, but it comes out a whisper, almost unintelligible over the screeches of the feeding fairies.

They’re ripping mouthfuls of her away, chomping and chewing and flinging scraps of nightgown from their fangs before going in for another bite and another and another. I’m going to be sick. I can feel it rising in my stomach, a heavy fist thrusting toward my mouth.

“Go.” The old fairy pokes my cheek with his hot finger. “Leave the land of the Slake or die like the girl.”

“You’re not real!”

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“We are all that is real.”

“No! Stop! I want to wake up! I’m going to wake up!” I scream, loud enough that the nightmare begins to rip at the seams.

Holes tear in the night, and Grace’s bloody body smears into a red stain. The last thing I see clearly are the old fairy’s cruel button eyes narrowing to slits and then nothing but bright, mind-numbing light.