



CLAUDIA GRAY

Overnight

# Evernight

**Claudia Gray**

 HarperCollins e-books

## Prologue

The burning arrow thudded into the wall.

*Fire.* The old, dry wood of the meetinghouse ignited in an instant. Dark, oily smoke filled the air, scratching my lungs and making me choke. Around me, my new friends cried out in shock before grabbing weapons, preparing to fight for their lives.

*This is because of me.*

Arrow after arrow sliced through the air, stoking the flames higher. Through the haze of ash, I desperately sought Lucas's eyes. I knew he would protect me no matter what, but he was in danger, too. If something happened to Lucas while he was trying to rescue me, I could never forgive myself.

Coughing from the soot-thick air, I grabbed Lucas's hand and ran with him toward the door. But they were ready for us.

Silhouetted against the flames, a dark, forbidding line of figures stood just beyond the edge of the meetinghouse. None of them brandished weapons; they didn't have to in order to make their threat clear. They had come for me. They had come to punish Lucas for breaking their rules. They had come to kill.

*This is all happening because of me. If Lucas dies, it will be my fault.*

There was nowhere to go, no place to run. We couldn't remain here, not with the blaze around us roaring, already so hot that it stung my skin. Soon the ceiling would collapse and crush us all.

Outside, the vampires waited.

## Chapter One

It was the first day of school, which meant it was my last chance to escape.

I didn't have a backpack full of survival gear, a wallet thick with cash that I could use to buy myself a plane ticket somewhere, or a friend waiting for me down the road in a getaway car. Basically, I didn't have what most sane people would call "a plan."

But it didn't matter. There was no way I was going to remain at Evernight Academy.

The muted morning light was still new in the sky as I wriggled into my jeans and grabbed a warm black sweater—this early in the morning, and this high in the hills, even September felt cold. I knotted my long red hair into a makeshift bun and stepped into my hiking boots. It felt important to be very quiet, even though I didn't have to worry about my parents waking up. They weren't morning people, to say the least. They'd sleep like the dead until the alarm clock woke them, and that wouldn't be for another couple of hours.

That would give me a good head start.

Outside my bedroom window, the stone gargoyle glared at me, fangs framing his open grimace. I grabbed my denim jacket and stuck my tongue out at him. "Maybe you like hanging out at the Fortress of the Damned," I muttered. "You're welcome to it."

Before I left, I made my bed. Usually it took a lot of nagging to get me to do that, but I wanted to. I knew I was going to freak my parents out badly enough today, so straightening the covers felt like I was making it up to them a little. Probably they wouldn't see it that way, but I went ahead. As I plumped up the pillows, I had a sudden strange flash of something I'd dreamed the night before, as vivid and immediate as though I were still dreaming:

*A flower the color of blood.*

*Wind howled through the trees all around me, whipping the branches in every direction. The sky overhead churned, thick with roiling clouds. I brushed my windswept hair from my face. I only wanted to look at the flower.*

*Each rain-beaded petal was vividly red, slender, and blade-like, the way some tropical orchids are. Yet the flower was lush and full, too, and it clung close to the branch like a rose. The flower was the most exotic, mesmerizing thing I'd ever seen. It had to be mine.*

Why did that memory make me shiver? It was only a dream. I took a deep breath and focused. It was time to go.

My messenger bag was ready; I'd loaded it up the night before. Just a few things—a book, sunglasses, and a little cash in case I needed to go all the way to Riverton, which was the closest thing to human civilization in the area. That would keep me occupied for the day.

See, I wasn't running away. Not for real, where you make a break and assume a new identity and, I don't know, join the circus or something. No, I was making a statement. Ever since my parents first suggested that we come to Evernight Academy—they as teachers, me as a student—I'd been against it. We'd lived in the same small town my whole life, and I'd attended the same school with the same people since I was five years old. That was just the way I wanted it. There are people who enjoy meeting strangers, who can strike up conversations and make friends quickly, but I'd never been one of those people. Anything but.

It's funny—when people call you "shy," they usually smile. Like it's cute, some funny little habit you'll grow out of when you're older, like the gaps in your grin when your baby teeth fall out. If they knew how it felt—really being shy, not just unsure at first—they wouldn't smile. Not if they knew how the feeling knots up your stomach or makes your palms sweat or robs you of the ability to say anything that makes sense. It's not cute at all.

My parents never smiled when they said it. They were smarter than that, and I always felt like they understood, until they decided that age sixteen was the right time for me to get past it somehow. What better starting place than a

boarding school—particularly with them along for the ride?

I could see where they were coming from, sort of. Still, that was theory. The first moment we'd come up the drive at Evernight Academy—and I'd seen this huge, hulking, Gothic stone monstrosity—I'd known that there was no way I could possibly go to school here. Mom and Dad hadn't listened. I would have to make them listen.

On tiptoe, I eased my way through the small faculty apartment my family had shared for the past month. Behind the closed door of my parents' bedroom, I could hear my mother snoring lightly. I shouldered my bag, slowly turned the doorknob, and started downstairs. We lived at the very top of one of Evernight's towers, which sounds cooler than it is. This meant I had to make my way down steps that had been carved out of rock more than two centuries ago, long enough to be worn and uneven. The long spiral staircase had few windows and the lights weren't yet on, making for a dark, difficult trip.

*As I reached out for the flower, the hedge rustled. The wind, I thought, but it wasn't the wind. No, the hedge was growing—growing so quickly that I could see it happening. Vines and brambles pushed from the leaves in a tangled snarl. Before I could run, the hedge had almost surrounded me, walling me in behind sticks and leaves and thorns.*

The last thing I needed was to start flashing back to my nightmares. I took a deep breath and kept going downstairs until I reached the great hall on the ground floor. It was a majestic space, built to inspire or at least impress: marble-tiled floors, high arched ceiling, and stained glass windows that stretched from floor to rafter, each in a different kaleidoscope pattern—save one, right in the center, which was clear glass. Setup for the day's events must have been completed the night before, because a podium stood ready for the headmistress to greet the students who were arriving later today. Nobody else seemed to be awake yet, which meant that there was no one to stop me. A hard tug opened the heavy, carved outside door, and then I was free.

Early morning fog blanketed the world in bluish-gray as I walked across the grounds. When they built Evernight Academy in the 1700s, this country had been wilderness. Even though small towns now dotted the distant

countryside, none of them were very close to Evernight; and despite the hillside views and the thick forests, nobody had ever built a house nearby. Who could blame them for not wanting to be anywhere near that place? I glanced behind me at the school's tall stone towers, both of them coiled with the twisted forms of gargoyles, and shivered. Within a few more steps, they began to fade into the fog.

*Evernight loomed behind me, the stone walls of its high towers the only barrier the thorns couldn't break. I should have run for the school, but I didn't. Evernight was more dangerous than the thorns, and, besides, I wasn't going to leave the flower behind.*

My nightmare was starting to feel more real than reality. Uneasy, I turned from the school and started to jog, fleeing the grounds and vanishing into the forest.

*It's all going to be over soon, I told myself as I hurried through the underbrush, fallen pine branches crackling beneath my feet. Even though I was only a few hundred feet from the front door, it felt like much farther; the thick fog made it seem as though I were already deep in the woods. Mom and Dad will wake up and realize that I'm gone. They'll finally see that I can't take it, that they can't make me do this. They'll come looking for me, and, okay, they'll be mad that I scared them, but they'll understand. They always understand in the end, right? And then we'll leave. We'll get away from Evernight Academy and never, ever come back.*

My heart pounded faster. With every step I took away from Evernight Academy, I felt more afraid, not less. Before, when I'd come up with this scheme, it had seemed like such a good idea. Like it couldn't fail. Now that it was real, and I was alone in the forest running into a wilderness I didn't know, I wasn't so sure. Maybe I was running away for nothing. Maybe they'd drag me back there no matter what.

*Thunder rumbled. My heart beat faster. I turned away from Evernight for the last time and looked back at the flower as it trembled upon its branch. A single petal was torn away by the wind. Pushing my hands through the thorns, I felt lashes of pain across my skin, but I kept going, determined.*

*But when my fingertip touched the flower, it instantly darkened, withering and drying as each petal turned black.*

I broke into a run, heading east, trying to put some distance between me and Evernight. My nightmare wouldn't leave me alone: It was that place; it had spooked me, made me scared and hollow. If I got away from there, I'd be okay. Panting, I looked behind me to see how far I'd gone—

And I saw him. A man in the woods, half concealed by the fog, maybe fifty yards from me, wearing a long, dark coat. The second I laid eyes on him, he started running after me.

Until that moment, I hadn't known what fear was. Shock jolted through me, cold as ice water, and I found out just how fast I could really run. I didn't scream—there was no point, none, because I'd gone off into the woods so nobody could find me, which was the dumbest thing I'd ever done and looked like it would be the last. I hadn't even brought my cell phone, because there was no service up here. There was no rescue coming. I had to run like hell.

I could hear his footsteps, snapping branches, crunching leaves. He was getting closer. Oh, God, he was fast. How could anybody run that fast?

*They taught you how to defend yourself, I thought. You were supposed to know what to do in a situation like this!* I couldn't remember. I couldn't think. Branches tore at the sleeves of my jacket and snagged the strands of hair that had fallen loose from my bun. I stumbled over a stone, and my teeth sank into my tongue, but I kept running. He was even nearer to me now, too near. I had to go faster. I couldn't go any faster.

"Unh!" I choked as he tackled me, and we fell. The ground slammed into my back, and his weight pressed down on me, his legs tangled up with mine. His hand closed over my mouth, and I pulled my arm free. At my old school, in the self-defense workshop, they always said to go for the eyes, seriously just poke the guy's eyes out. I always thought I could do that if I had to, in order to save myself or someone else, but as terrified as I was I wasn't sure I could stand it. I arched my fingers, trying to screw up my nerve.

At that moment, the guy whispered, "Did you see who was after you?"

For a few seconds, I just stared at him. He lifted his hand from my mouth so I could answer. His body was heavy atop mine, and the world seemed to be spinning. I finally managed to say, "You mean, besides you?"

"Me?" He had no idea what I was talking about. Furtively, he cast a glance behind us, as if on the defensive. "You were running from someone—weren't you?"

"I was just running. There was nobody after me except you."

"You mean, you thought—" The guy jerked back from me that second, so that I was free. "Oh, hell. I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to—Man, I must have scared you to death."

"You were trying to *help*?" I had to say it before I could believe it.

He nodded quickly. His face was still close to mine, too close, blocking out the rest of the world. Nothing seemed to exist except us and the swirling fog. "I know I must've freaked you out, and I'm sorry. I really thought—"

His words weren't helping; I was getting more dizzy, not less. I needed air, quiet, something that I couldn't think of while he was so close to me. I pointed a finger and said something I'd hardly ever said to anyone in my life, definitely never to a stranger and certainly not to the single most terrifying stranger I'd ever met: "You—just—shut up."

He shut up.

With a sigh, I let my head flop back upon the ground. I dug the heels of my hands into my eyes, pressing down so that I saw red. The taste of blood was thick in my mouth, and my heart was still thumping so hard that my rib cage seemed to shake. I could have peed myself, which would have been just about the only way to make this scenario more humiliating than it already was. Instead, I kept taking deep breaths, one after the other, until I felt like I

was strong enough to sit up.

When I did, the guy was still there next to me. I managed to ask, "Why did you tackle me?"

"I thought we needed to take cover. To hide from whoever was chasing you, but that turned out to be, uh"—he looked embarrassed—"nobody."

He ducked his head, and I got a good look at him for the first time. There hadn't exactly been time for me to notice anything about him before; when your first impression of somebody is "psycho killer," you don't take time to analyze the details. Now, though, I could see that he wasn't a grown man like I'd assumed. Although he was tall and broad shouldered, he was young, maybe about my age. He had straight, golden-brown hair that fell across his forehead, mussed from the chase. His jaw was strong and angular, and he had a solid, muscular body and amazingly dark green eyes.

But the most remarkable thing of all was what he was wearing beneath his long black coat: battered black boots, black wool trousers, and a dark red V-necked sweater emblazoned with a crest—two ravens embroidered on either side of a silver sword. The crest of Evernight.

"You're a student," I said, "here at the school."

"About to be, anyway." He spoke quietly, as if he were worried about scaring me again. "You?"

I nodded as I shook my tangled hair loose and started to pin it up again. "This is my first year. My parents got jobs as teachers here, so—I'm stuck."

That seemed to strike him as odd, because he frowned at me, and his green eyes were suddenly searching and unsure. In an instant, though, he had recovered and held out his hand. "Lucas Ross."

"Oh. Hey." It felt weird, introducing myself to somebody I'd thought was trying to kill me five minutes before. His hand was broad and cool, and he gripped mine firmly. "I'm Bianca Olivier."