



The Blood (Morpheus Road Book 3)

By D.J. MacHale

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At the end of *The Light*, Book One of the *Morpheus Road* trilogy, Marshall uncovered the truth about what happened to his best friend, Cooper. Now in Book Two, we get Cooper's perspective. What does his story have to do with Marshall and the journey along the Morpheus Road? It's time to learn more....

From a master of scary stories, *The Black* takes readers down a dark path of discovery and will leave them clamoring for the conclusion.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

D. J. MacHale is a writer, director, and producer of several popular television series and movies that include Flight 29 Down; Are You Afraid of the Dark?; Encyclopedia Brown, Boy Detective; Tower of Terror; and Ghostwriter. Pendragon, his first book series, is a #1 New York Times bestselling series. He lives in southern California with his wife, Evangeline; his daughter, Keaton; a golden retriever, Maggie; and a kitten, Kaboodle.

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Blood

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Sydney Foley was about to die.

Impending doom rarely telegraphs itself, which meant she was blissfully unaware of the fact that a chain of events had been set in motion that would likely end with her being cast, violently, to the next stop along the Morpheus Road.

Sydney had been working all summer as an algebra tutor at Stony Brook Junior High. It was a job that would normally warrant battle pay for most hapless young tutors, but Sydney had no trouble handling the challenge.

“I’m smarter than you,” she would announce at the beginning of each class. “So either pay attention and learn something or zone out and I’ll see you back here next summer. Your choice. I get paid either way.”

Sydney wasn’t subtle. She intimidated the girls and mesmerized the normally hyperkinetic boys, who quietly admitted that there were worse ways to spend time than staring at a hot teacher like Sydney ... even if she was lecturing about exponents and factoring.

When her lesson ended on that particular day, she decided to stay in the classroom and grab a little study time. Her goal was to gain early acceptance to Stanford University, and Sydney never fell short of her goals, even if it meant spending a beautiful summer afternoon in an empty classroom calculating the effect of gravity on linear acceleration. She stared at the open book, glassy-eyed, thinking about how she would rather be lying on the beach with her boyfriend.

“Bored,” she texted him. “Come visit me at SBJH. I’ll be your best friend.”

Two months before, the idea that she would be texting Marshall Seaver and calling him her boyfriend was about as likely as her not getting into Stanford. The events of the early summer had changed that. Drastically. The two were thrown together by the tragic death of her brother, Cooper ... and by the haunting. Sharing sorrow and terror tends to forge a bond between people, and to the surprise of everyone who knew anything about either of them, Marsh and Sydney had become inseparable.

Sydney stared at her phone. There was no reply from Marsh, which was odd. He was usually quick on the

draw when it came to returning her texts. With a shrug she reluctantly turned back to her study guide for the twentieth time, and for the twentieth time her mind wandered. She gazed out at a sea of unoccupied desks, suddenly feeling very alone.

Not lonely alone ... vulnerable alone.

It was too quiet.

Schools were always full of noise and activity, even during lunch. Especially during lunch. Quiet wasn't normal, even during summer school. She thought maybe everyone had gone out to eat, but the entire school couldn't have emptied out so quickly. Something felt off. It raised the small hairs on the back of her neck. That didn't happen often, so when it did, she paid attention. Quickly she gathered her books, phone, and purse and started for the door.

That's when the smell hit her. It was a stagnant, dead smell. The room had grown warm, as if the air-conditioning had failed. Small beads of sweat formed on her upper lip. Her eyes started to burn and tear up.

What the heck?

She stood in front of her desk, trying to understand what was happening, when her eye caught movement. She glanced up to the air duct near the ceiling to see tendrils of smoke drifting from the grate.

Fire, was her first thought.

Get the hell out, was her second.

She ran for the door, but before pulling it open she flashed on a boring fire safety lecture she'd gotten in third grade. She stopped, cautiously placed her hand on the wooden door ... and felt heat.

"Oh man," she gasped.

She touched the metal doorknob and quickly recoiled. It was searing hot. There could be only one reason: The building was on fire. She took a quick look through the narrow vertical glass window in the door to see that the corridor was filled with smoke. The fire was close. She didn't panic. Sydney never panicked. Glancing around she saw a red fire alarm on the wall next to the door. She had always wondered what would happen if she pulled one of those. She was about to find out. Sydney lunged for it and yanked the lever down, breaking the thin glass tube that seemed to have no purpose. She held her breath and waited, expecting the harsh blare of an alarm to break the eerie silence. Seconds passed. No alarm sounded.

"Seriously?" she exclaimed as she fumbled for her purse to grab her cell. "A fire and a defective alarm?"

Her fear about being alone was suddenly justified. If the alarm didn't work, she could be the only one who knew about the fire because she just so happened to be in the middle of it. The wispy vapors turned to dark, thick smoke that poured from the air-conditioning vent. Digging for her phone, she hurried toward the only other possible escape route ... the door at the rear of the classroom. She found the phone, wiped tears from her burning eyes, and punched in 911.

Seconds passed. There was no answer. Sydney shook the phone in frustration.

“How is that possible?” she screamed.

She had full bars and the battery was charged. Why hadn't the call gone through? She stopped worrying about alerting people who weren't there and decided to focus on joining them. She got to the back door, praying that the fire hadn't moved that way. She was about to put her hand on the door to check for heat, and realized she needn't bother. Looking out through the window, she saw flames. The fire was burning right outside the classroom.

Sydney stared at the dancing flames, mesmerized, unbelieving. How could a fire spread so quickly? She leaned in to the window, until her nose nearly touched the glass, to stare into a corridor that had become a furnace. It was almost pretty the way the orange flames twisted and danced ... as they drew closer, coming to burn her alive. It was hypnotic, but not so much that she forgot how much trouble she was in. The flames would soon be in the classroom. She was trapped and knew if she stayed put the fire would only get worse. She knew what she had to do ... run through the flames. It was crazy, but better than doing nothing.

While keeping her eyes on the flames through the window, she reached for the doorknob, but stopped when she saw movement outside in the corridor. It was a dark shadow that floated in hazy contrast to the brilliant fire. Her hopes soared. Was it a firefighter battling through the blaze, coming to her rescue? She leaned forward, trying to make out detail of the shadow as it drew closer.

“Hurry up!” she screamed.

The dark silhouette was nearly there. The smoke was getting thick inside the classroom, making Sydney's eyes sting, but she could still make out the vague form of a person. She leaned in closer to the window, hoping to see the face of a heroic, handsome firefighter looking back at her. The shadow floated right up to the glass and snapped into focus, inches from her face.

Sydney screamed.

The face was that of a burning skeletal head with its mouth open in a ghastly howl. Its flesh was on fire, turning black as it burned away from the bone to expose the charred skull beneath. Its hollow eyes were focused directly on Sydney.

Sydney threw herself backward, tripped over a chair, and landed on the floor. If she had hurt herself, she didn't know it. Her mind was spinning too quickly. Who was that? What was that? Some poor guy trapped out in the corridor? She scrambled to her feet and ran back for the door to open it and let the tortured victim into the room, though she knew it would be too late. He was a goner. Still, she had to try. She reached for the door and was about to turn the handle ... as the narrow window in the door smashed in, spewing shattered glass and dark, choking smoke into the room.

Sydney jumped back again, hacking out a cough as a new wave of acrid smoke filled her lungs.

The burning skull pushed through the frame where the glass had been and glanced around the room until it spotted Sydney, and offered a ghastly grin.

“Unlock the door, Sydney,” the skull commanded in a dry, gravelly voice.

Most people would have snapped. Not Sydney. She had been through too much that summer and had seen things far worse. She now realized the truth: The only victim was her.

“Bite me,” she snarled, and turned away, looking for another escape route.

She ran into a large storage closet in the back of the class, hoping it would lead to an adjoining classroom. No luck. Dead end. She quickly realized that if she was going to get out of the building, there was only one way to go. The window.

A low bookcase ran the length of the classroom across from the doors. Above the bookcase were five large sealed windows. Beneath each was a small hinged window that opened in. None were large enough to crawl out of. Sydney yanked them all open, hoping the smoke would be sucked out before she choked to death.

“That’s right,” the flaming skeleton cackled. “Feed the flames ... feed the flames.”

“Shut up!” Sydney barked. She leaned down to a window and screamed to the outside world.

“Help! Somebody! I’m trapped in here! Help!”

“This is a race you’re going to lose,” the fiery ghoul taunted as it rattled the door, trying to get in.

The classroom was on the fourth floor. It was a long way down to the parking lot. The empty parking lot. There were no fire trucks or ambulances racing to save the building. Or her. Sydney had to make a choice. Fast. She looked back to the door to see the skull peering through the broken window, only now the wooden door was ablaze. It would soon burn through, allowing the fire to leap inside, along with the ghastly creature.

The decision wasn’t a hard one. She grabbed a desk chair, wound up, and heaved it at one of the large windows. The chair hit the glass, bounced off, and clattered back to the floor.

The demon laughed. “Or you could just die gracefully.”

Sydney ignored the taunt. She picked up another chair and heaved it at the window. This time the glass splintered as it rejected the chair. Sydney felt the heat at her back. It wouldn’t be long before the room was engulfed ... or she died from smoke inhalation. She coughed, wiped her eyes, and kept fighting. She picked up another chair and whirled it into the glass. A spiderweb of cracks spread across the pane.

Sydney was getting dizzy as the smoke grew so thick, it became hard to see the windows. She grabbed another chair, summoned her strength, and hurled the chair forward. This time the glass shattered and the chair kept going, sailing out into space and falling to the pavement far below. The thick smoke rushed through the jagged opening, creating a swirling storm inside the room. Without stopping to admire her work, she grabbed another chair and used the legs to punch out the remaining glass from the window frame.

She climbed up onto the bookcase and leaned out to see a sheer wall of windows with no ledges or handholds to grab on to. Four stories down was hard pavement.

Sydney couldn’t imagine what it would be like to fall so far. How should she land? What possible way could she hit and survive without breaking her legs? Or her back? As the choking smoke rushed past her and out the window, Sydney stood frozen, paralyzed with fear.

There was a wrenching sound, followed by a loud crack of splintering wood as the classroom door blew down. She instantly felt a tremendous rush of heat as the last barrier between her and the flames was removed. Sydney whipped around to see a wave of fire rush into the classroom moving impossibly fast,

eating up the desks and the floor, revealing the beams beneath and the classroom below.

“Ready or not!” the voice taunted as the skeletal face appeared through the wall of flame, floating closer.

Sydney focused and made a decision. Burning to death would be worse than falling and being smashed like a china doll. She had to jump. She took a breath, leaned out of the window and pushed off ...

... as strong hands gripped her ankles from behind.

“No!” she screamed, fearing that the skeleton was trying to pull her back into the inferno.

She kicked violently, desperate to get away from its grasp and out into space.

“Stop!” came a voice from behind. “What are you doing?”

The voice cut through her panic. She recognized it. It wasn't the flaming skeleton. But then, who? Was it a trick to make her think she would be better off giving up and allowing herself to be incinerated? She looked to the ground far below and imagined herself lying in a broken heap. It was too much to bear. She gave in and let the grabbing hands do their work. She was pulled roughly back through the window frame and over the bookcase until she fell rudely to the floor. With the little presence of mind she had left, she twisted from the grasp of her assailant and spun to see ... Marsh.

“My god, Sydney. What are you doing?” he cried in panic.

Sydney's sense of reality had been wrenched inside out. Seeing Marsh sitting on the floor across from her made even less sense than being grabbed by a flaming skeleton. She stared at him in shock, not sure if he was real or a hallucination that would soon burst into flames. Glancing around quickly, she saw that the smoke had cleared. All of it. Could it have been sucked out of the windows so quickly? A look past Marsh gave her the answer:

The door was still there. The fire ... wasn't. Nothing had been burned. The floor was intact. People were - gathered outside, staring into the room with curiosity, wondering what all the yelling was about.

Sydney looked up to the window she had thrown the chair through. That was no illusion. She had indeed smashed through the window to escape, but from what? There was no flaming ghoul, no smoke, no fire. The only threat was the shattered window that Sydney had nearly jumped through ... to escape a fate that wasn't real.

“Go away!” Marsh shouted to the people in the corridor. “Close the door!”

They scattered, not sure what they were seeing. To them it looked as though the unflappable Sydney Foley had inexplicably flapped and tossed a chair through the window for no reason.

Marsh tentatively crawled closer to her, trying not to scare her any further.

“What happened, Syd?” he asked calmly.

Sydney finally accepted that she was no longer in danger. At least not from Marsh. She relaxed and threw her arms around him, holding him close, grateful to be alive and for his being there for her. But she didn't

cry. Sydney never cried.

She did her best to steady her voice and said, “You didn’t answer my text.”

“Yeah, I did. I was already on my way.”

“The fire alarm didn’t work.”

Marsh didn’t have to reply to that. Sydney’s focus had returned enough so that she was able to register a blaring horn. The fire alarm was working just fine. She hadn’t heard it ... or had been prevented from hearing it. Another harsh sound intruded. It was the urgent shriek of a siren from a rapidly approaching police car.

Sydney said, “I guess that means my 911 call went through too.”

“Did you think the building was on fire?” Marsh said as calmly as if asking for the time of day.

“Isn’t it?” she asked tentatively.

Marsh shook his head.

“You didn’t see anything?” Sydney asked, though she knew the answer.

Marsh surveyed the room and ended by staring at the smashed window.

“No,” he said with a frown. “And I can guess why.”

He pulled away from her, reached into his pack, and took out a tennis-ball-size golden sphere that was covered with carved symbols.

Sydney nodded. She understood.

“He’s back,” she said soberly.

“Damn right he’s back,” came a bold reply from the other side of the room.

Marsh and Sydney turned quickly to see that someone else had arrived.

“It’s about time he showed himself,” the new arrival added.

“He tried to kill me,” Sydney declared. “Why would he do that?”

“Because he couldn’t get to me,” Marsh said, holding up the golden ball. “This wouldn’t let him.”

“So it’s starting again?” Sydney asked, with a slight crack to her usually strong voice.

“It never ended,” the new arrival corrected. “But this time is different.”

“How?” Marsh asked.

“This time he’s not getting away.”

“Bold talk ... for a dead guy,” Sydney said to her brother.

“Hey, it’s good to be a ghost,” Cooper Foley replied. He walked over to the smashed window and added, “Can’t wait to see how you’re going to explain this.”

Marsh took a deep breath and said, “That’ll be the least of our problems.”

Users Review

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Leonard Bassett:

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Alfonso Miller:

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