

Blood Cull Chapter 1

By Jay Tinsiano and Jay Newton

His muscles burned with the effort, yet there could be no stopping now. Joel Hopkins drew in sharp, ragged breaths as the adrenaline coursed through his body.

He glanced behind but couldn't see anything, yet he knew his pursuer was there. Forcing his exhausted muscles on, he grunted, the primitive sound spliced with fear.

The dark woodland was quiet, just the thud of his bare feet on the woodland ground, the cracking of deadwood, and his thumping heart in his ears. Joel Hopkins was running as fast as he physically could, passing flashes of green bushes and the blur of trees through wet, terrified eyes.

In his left hand, he clutched a small knife. How or why he had it, he did not know, but his pursuer must have given it to him. It felt useless, pointless to have. His pursuer moved unseen somewhere behind him, edging closer like his own shadow. Still, he clung to the blade as if it was a lifeline.

Then his foot caught on an unseen root. He stumbled forward, falling hard on the ground. Joel groaned out loud, quickly turning his head to look behind through the dense woods. Moonlight cast an eerie greenish hue through the canopies that caused mottled patterns on the ground. For a brief moment, he caught the smell of wild garlic and bluebells. It was as if nature was reminding him of reasons to live.

Joel tried to slow his breathing. Attempted to gain some control. He wasn't used to this. He was usually the one calling the shots, telling people how it was.

He desperately tried to calm himself. To listen.

A slow wind moved through the trees. Had he lost the pursuer? Joel felt a slither of hope.

Perhaps he had?

He gazed down at his Armani jacket sleeve for a moment, ripped and smeared with mud.

The silence was almost peaceful, then there was a crack from dead wood being broken somewhere in the distance. Joel's stomach lurched with

dread. He looked around and realised the knife he had been clutching was gone and nowhere in sight. He crawled along the ground to a nearby oak tree, circling around the thick base and hid in its shadow. Now he waited, listening, barely able to breathe.

Several hours earlier, he had come back home from work. Still in his suit, he took a gin and tonic onto his patio that overlooked his immaculate garden.

Claudia, his wife of twenty years, was visiting a friend and with his only daughter out of town, it felt great to have the house to himself. He sat down to read, devouring his property investment magazines and then moved onto International Living to immerse in opportunities abroad. His property conveyancing firm had recorded one of their best years ever, and a massive bonus was assured. Joel was smart enough not to blow his money on fancy cars or piss it against the wall like so many of his colleagues.

No, he would invest wisely, every penny he could—property, shares, precious metals. One day the world would surely go to hell, and he wanted to be sitting pretty looking down on the shitshow when it did.

It was getting dark when his Labrador, Mollie, came bounding in, reminding him it was time to take her for a walk. Deciding not to change and to take her on a short loop around the country lanes, he put her on a lead, and they headed out. Further down from his walled property, he had noticed car headlights but thought nothing of it. They went up around the lanes that skirted the woodlands nearby. Mollie pulled at the leash, eager to enter the woods as they usually would.

“Not tonight, Molly, sorry.”

Joel’s memory of what happened next was blurred. There was the wisp of movement in his peripheral vision, a moving shadow before someone grabbed him from behind and suffocated his face with a pungent sweet odour.

He heard the sound of glass breaking and then his senses faded to darkness.

Memory fragments.

In a vehicle. A low engine. Then coming round from his stifled coma. Another potent odour invaded his nostrils, followed by hard brutal slaps across his face.

“You will run,” the voice said. “For your life.”

And he had.

Now, trembling behind the tree, Joel knew he had to get going again to save himself. The thick woodland was all around him, waiting to swallow him up and shield him from the eyes of his pursuer.

Yet he couldn't. His body had frozen, muscles incapable of moving.

Get up. Get up and run. Now, Joel!

But he could not physically move.

He sensed the person first before hearing the slow, deliberate footfall approaching his position.

Please.

Joel began to whimper like a terrified child, his suit trousers slowly dampening as he urinated uncontrollably, and he wrapped his arms around his knees, waiting for death.

A rapid swish through the air.

Then a shockwave of pain exploded throughout his whole body. Joel collapsed, rolling on to his side with rapid gasps. With wide eyes, he looked down to see a metallic point protruding from his chest.

He coughed, and blood splattered over his once crisp shirt. The light padding of footsteps drew closer before a boot pressed against his neck, shoving his face into the leaf-covered earth.

Joel heard his own scream bellow, the sound distant and detached, as the object was ripped out of him. A rough hand grabbed his hair, pulled his head back and rolled him over onto his back.

As consciousness was slipping, his vision blurred, Joel met the eyes of his killer.

He knew that face.

Joel tried to speak, to beg, but just coughed up thick dark blood, spraying from his mouth and into the air.

The figure held up a long object with a metallic point covered in blood that dripped onto the ground.

In one swift motion, it plunged into his throat. Joel's vision of the killer's face and the moonlit canopies behind ebbed away into darkness.

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