
BRANDED

Marked

EMMY LOU HAYES



Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

©2020
All rights reserved.

No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The trademark Blushing Books is pending in the US Patent and Trademark Office.

Branded
Emmy Lou Hayes

EBook ISBN: 978-1-63954-447-9
Print ISBN: 978-1-63954-448-6

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or
the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Nearly a millennium ago, a prophecy was told:

In time, two days of nightfall will descend.

A marked one revealed. A beacon in the darkness.

One to be wielded for both power and greatness.

A vessel of hope for those who prowl unseen, shielded from day.

Two races will merge. A third will rise to rule over both mother and father, light and dark.

Chapter 1

SASHA

I slam closed the back hatch of my SUV, letting out a huff, and glancing down at my watch. Noticing it is quarter past three, I am getting a later start than I had planned. I stomp my feet, not just in frustration, I hope that the movement would warm me and get some of the clumps of ice and slush off the soles of my boots.

I know that the traffic will be terrible, the incoming winter weather will make the regularly eight-hour drive take closer to twelve. By the time I get to my sister's home in Ohio, I'll be sore, exhausted, and over the entire trip from day one. I laugh at my own thoughts. I'm supposed to be excited to be going home. Not seeing it as a temporary trip. But I simply can't help myself.

Finally settling myself behind the wheel I turn over the engine, a loud whine splinters my ears and I wince. Wondering, not for the first time, if the old Toyota would even be able to make the trip. The not-so-subtle purr of the

engine fills the car around me as I put the car in reverse and back out of the parking space. Looking up through the windshield I catch my last glimpse of the hall that has housed me for the past six years of my life. Glancing over my shoulder as I continued to back out of the space, I stare at the entirety of my belongings that have now been reduced to the two small boxes and one suitcase in the back seat.

This is what I have to show for six years of my life. I have spent my entire existence since the week after my fifth birthday focused on my education and this rusted out RAV4 and the measly pile of things in the back are all I have to show for it. I scoff, whatever idea made me think that getting a Master's in Liberal Arts would lead me to changing the world for the better has long left me now. Headed home to my sister's couch, to start my life completely over, once again. Once in a lifetime is enough for most people. Here I am on my third restart.

Four hours later, as I stare into the horizon I start to wonder if the sun will be up soon. My eyes are straining in the darkness, trying to see through the falling snow. Daylight cannot come soon enough for me. I have spent the entirety of my trip so far fighting with the broken heat vents and struggling to keep finding a radio station with reception. I haven't seen another car in over an hour and the mountains are starting to close in on me in the darkness.

Honestly, I was fine up until about thirty minutes ago when the deep scars on my left arm, shoulder, and parts of my chest started to itch relentlessly. This happens now and then; it has for as long as I can remember. I have had them for nearly as long. Rubbing my back on the seat, trying to

scratch the now burning itch, I get lost in the memories of the day that restarted my life for the first time.

The car accident that took our parents and left me so deeply scarred happened when I was only ten years old. On a drive not so different from this one. We set out as a happy family of four, U-Haul in tow packed with my sister's belongings. Headed to start her new life in the Midwest.

Straight out of high school she rented a house not far from our mother's childhood home, got herself a decent paying job working overnight at a doggie daycare, and convinced my parents to pack her up and move her cross country. Back to Ohio where the entirety of our extended family still lives to this day.

I don't remember the accident itself. My memories start again in the hospital, weeks later. When the burns had healed enough for them to start reducing the amount of pain medication, I was being continually given to keep me barely conscious for the majority of the ordeal. It was months before they finally released me from the hospital.

On one of the early days during my stay Emily sat down on the edge of my bed and explained that there had been a man in the road as we came around a bend, she could see only a glimpse of him in the moonlight. Our dad had slammed on the brakes, trying to avoid hitting him but the wheels locked up and we slid on the ice, when he jerked the wheel, it caused the rollover. Emily was the only one left conscious as the trailer and SUV went up into flames around us.

Kicking out the back window she pulled me to safety with her, but when she turned back for our parents it was too late. The entire vehicle was engulfed. To this day the police reports and those who arrived on scene insist they never found the man's body. That he must have been a figment of Emily's imagination and without our parents as witnesses

there was no telling what really caused the accident. Her story was discounted as that of a hysterical young woman, and we were sent on our way. Just like that, orphaned and alone in the world, starting our lives over.

Emily raised me and supported me with the help of the hefty sum we were awarded in the lawsuit that the auto insurance company filed on our behalf against the car manufacture when they discovered that a recall in the driveshaft and antilock brakes was released mere days after the accident.

I haven't been home in six years. The last time I saw Emily was at my graduation and she came to visit me at school every chance she got, but I refused to return home. It doesn't feel the same. Not after the day I turned eighteen and restarted my life for the second time.

The brands that now interlace my scars were my birthday gift to myself. I was tired of looking in the mirror and seeing the ugly red burn and skin graft scars. Now, I absentmindedly run my fingertips over the starburst just below my collar bone. The first of many I had branded into the scarred skin in an attempt to make myself beautiful again. The burning across my brands continues to intensify as I drive further into the darkness that I am beginning to loathe.

The day after I was branded, I moved away, unpacked my things in my new dorm and decided to never look back. Now I have no choice but to return home. I am no longer looking back. I am looking to what is both my past and my future.

The crackle of the radio signal breaking through startles me out of my musings and the sound of the emergency alert tone makes me nearly piss myself. Listening intently, I expect to hear a weather announcement. I grip the steering wheel so

tightly my knuckles are turning white, praying that I won't be in for blizzard conditions.

"This is an emergency alert. At this time reports have come in from around the world..." I glance down at the clock and notice that it is past eight. I have been driving for longer than I had first thought. Why is it still so dark?

"...not risen. This unprecedented event is being considered a phenomenon unlike any ever seen before." I catch the last few words as I tune back into the alert.

"Shit!" I slam my hand on the steering wheel, I missed the damn announcement.

Squinting at the radio, I will them to repeat it.

"This is an emergency alert. At this time reports have come in from around the world. What is being considered a major solar eclipse has caused weather changes for many across the country. The sun has not risen. This unprecedented event is being considered a phenomenon unlike any ever seen before. All citizens are advised to remain indoors and avoid travel. Take shelter immediately." The alert ends and the radio announcer comes back through the speakers.

"We will be updating you each hour on the hour and keeping on top of the situation. Please be advised that this channel is now being considered an emergency station and our regularly scheduled broadcasting will not resume at this time."

Just as he starts to give us an update on what the National Weather Service has to say about the weather in my current county the signal cuts out again and there is silence. It takes me a few seconds to realize that it isn't the signal that has cut out, it is my car that has died. A clanking sound from under the hood startles me and I pump the brakes, slowly guiding my now dead vehicle to the side of the road. Once I am safely parked on the shoulder, I press my forehead to the steering wheel and squeeze my eyes closed, taking a deep breath. When I reach over and grab my purse from the

passenger seat I wince at the tightness in my left shoulder. The skin there feels hot and is burning again.

As I dig out my cell phone I glance down at the screen, no signal.

“Damn it!” I scoff.

Glancing around the back seat I see my emergency blankets and coat, grabbing the coat I slip into it and climb out of the car. The frigid weather slices through the warmth of my coat almost instantly. When I pop the hood of the old Toyota I look down at the engine and sigh. I have no idea what I am looking at, or what I am looking for.

I have no other option but to wait and hope someone who can help me comes along down the road. Slamming the hood, I turn around and scan the horizon. Looking for the glowing circle of the sun that should be seen low in the sky by now. There is no sign of a solar eclipse, no signs of the sun at all. Or the moon for that matter, I notice as I spin in a circle looking up at the sky. The one thing I spot is a single star just above me. Brighter than any I’ve ever seen before. Squinting at this I wonder if maybe it isn’t a star at all, but rather a planet. But where are the stars? I’ve never seen anything like this before. By the time I settle back into the shelter of my car it is starting to snow again. I keep an eye on the rearview mirror, watching for any sign of approaching headlights in the distance.

Alaric

Blake and Theo sit on either side of me as we laugh at a joke that Theo just delivered the punch line to. Looking up at the horizon I realize it is long past time for us to head home or

we will be caught in the sunlight. Something that Theo and I would be able to handle, but it would mean certain death for Blake.

My brothers and I start to head back toward the truck parked on the top of the hill. Theo shifts along the way, taking on his wolf form and preparing to go back into hiding as my mere companion.

“Something’s wrong.” I turn to Blake, my eyebrows knitting together. “It is nearly sunrise and there isn’t a whisper of sunlight on the horizon at all.

The blaring sounds of our phones ringing in unison makes us jump. When we pull them from our pockets and read the message on the screen, we turn to each other again.

“It’s time,” I turn to Theo and tell him.

The message is calling us back to the coven’s compound. I was right, the sun was due to rise, and it hasn’t. The time is now.

Climbing behind the wheel of my truck I see Theo in the back stretch out across the seat and yawn.

“None of that,” Blake tells him over his shoulder, “we are going to be in for a sleepless day. They’re no doubt going to be sending us hunting for her. Now that the time has come. We have limited time. If we have any hope of bringing Father’s dreams to fruition, we need to find her first.”

A light snow begins to fall as I easily maneuver my way through the serpentine pattern of the road coming down through the mountains. A yip comes from the back, and I glance at Theo as he looks out of the windshield.

“What is it, Lassie? Did Timmy fall down the well again?” I tease him. As his brother it is my job to do so. Blake laughs, but stops, nearly choking and lifts his hand to point out of the windshield. Following the direction of Theo’s gaze and Blake’s finger I spot it high in the sky, a single massive star, brighter than any ever seen before.

The Beacon.

Nearly three centuries ago my pack was approached by a man, a vampire. He claimed he had found a second prophecy. One that opposed that which the largest coven in North America had been working to bring about. Claiming that he and his son, Blake, could stop the original prophecy our pack had worked centuries to keep from coming true.

The only catch was that he needed a volunteer, a werewolf who would be willing to take on the impossible. Someone who would allow himself to be bitten and possibly changed, a half-breed who, according to this second prophecy, would be the key to stopping the coven from finding the Marked One and breeding her, making them the wielders of the most powerful vampire half-breeds to ever walk this earth. Day walkers, half human, half vampire. To be delivered unto us by the Marked One, the only woman in existence ever to be foretold as capable of breeding with the race that was cursed to live in the shadows by the Devil himself.

Gordian presented us with this second prophecy that night. The same night that I agreed to be his guinea pig, the same night I killed the man who had presented me with the answer to my pack's prayers. Squeezing my eyes closed at the thought, I see the image of The Beacon in the sky which is burned onto the backs of my eyelids.

"A Beacon to rise out of the darkness. The light of hope in the darkest of nights. He who is both cursed to walk in the shadows but able to bear the light will rise. This one who is not what he once was is the key to salvation and the survival of humanity." I sigh after I recite the words. "It's her. The Beacon. It's her. The Marked One."

“We have to go back, or they’ll be suspicious.” Blake turns to me and then looks back up to the sky.

“No! Call and tell them we have a lead on The Beacon,” I snap at him.

Pressing my foot down harder on the accelerator we speed into the darkness in the direction of The Beacon and my future. It is her. I know it is. I can feel it in my gut. I watch as Blake pulls his phone from his pocket and sends a quick text. Theo paces in the back seat, grumbling. I know he is feeling helpless trapped in the car and would rather be in the woods hunting her down that way.

“You can’t, Theo. It would blow your cover. Just calm down and be patient. We are closer than anyone else in the coven.”

“Then what are you going to do when we get to her? Just walk up to her and say, *‘Oh by the way you’re cursed to be abducted by a coven of vampires and I’m here to save you.’* Right like that is going to work,” Blake shoots in my direction.

“I don’t have a fucking plan all right?” I glare at him for a moment.

“You have had hundreds of years to come up with one, now we are flying by the seat of our pants. Wow, Alaric. Just wow!” Blake retorts.

“Cut me a fucking break, damnit! It isn’t like any of us thought today was going to be the day! I thought we had more time! Fuck!” I slam my hands on the steering wheel and it shudders.

A low snicker comes from the back seat, if that’s what you would call it. I glare at Theo’s deep brown eyes in the rearview mirror. “Shut up you.” I jab my elbow back, barely missing his muzzle.

Blake is looking down at his phone, then up at me again and again. “They’re coming,” he finally says, his face going white.

I gun the engine, but I know if they have a lead on The Beacon, we will never make it in time. The dim shaft of light that has shot up toward the lone star in the sky as we have gotten closer is still miles away and my old pickup isn't built for speed. Especially not in these mountains and conditions.

"Fuck," Blake and I both say.

"Fuck," I echo again.

It is time to start thinking of this as a rescue mission and no longer as one where we have hope of getting the upper hand.