

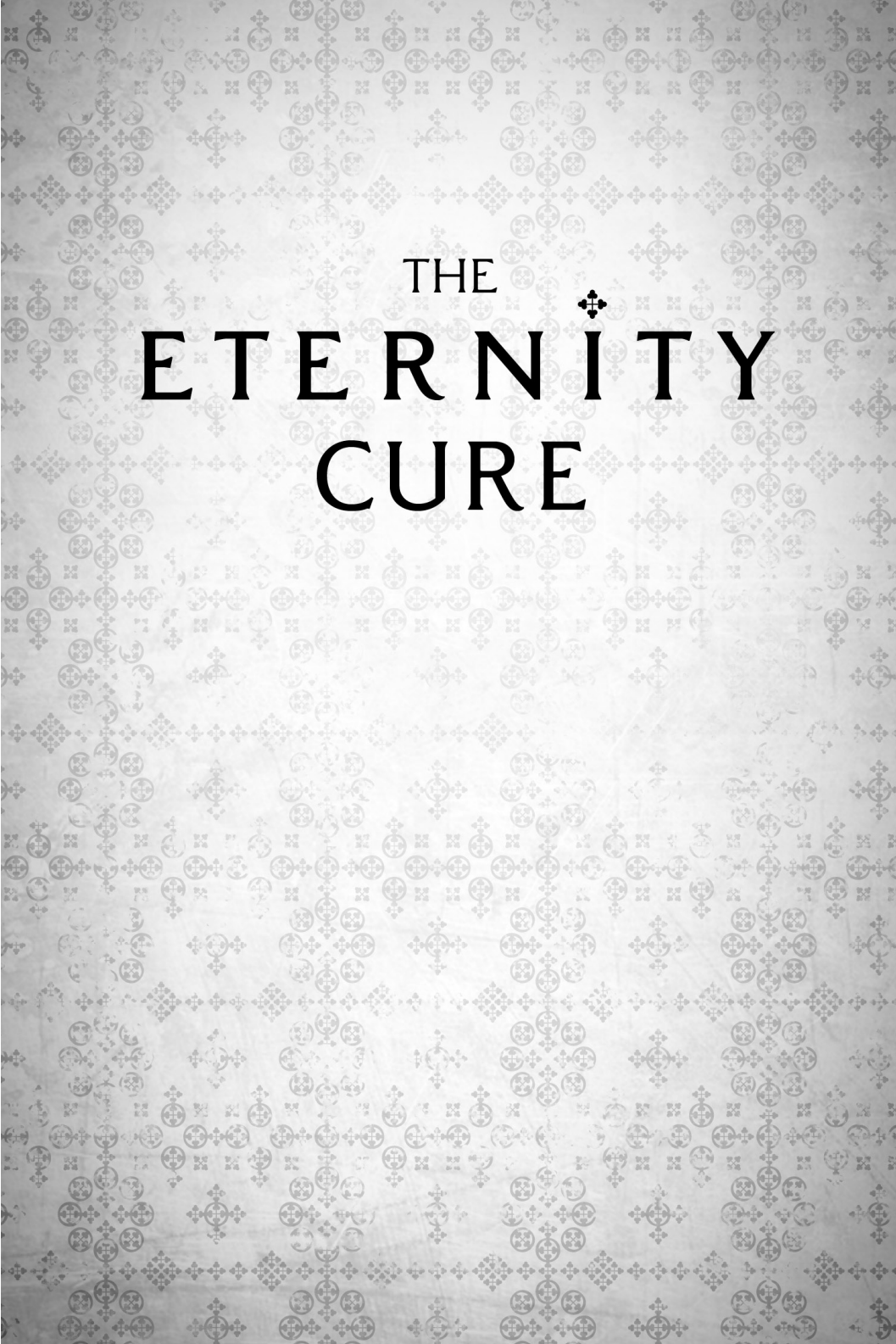
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ETERNITY  
CURE

*New York Times* Bestselling Author

JULIE KAGAWA

◆ A DARKLY THRILLING DYSTOPIAN SAGA ◆

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BLOOD OF EDEN

JULIE KAGAWA

 HARLEQUIN<sup>®</sup> TEEN

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THE ETERNITY CURE

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To Natashya, for encouraging me to kill my darlings.  
And to Nick, for everything else.



PART I



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HUNTER





# CHAPTER 1



I smelled blood as soon as I walked into the room.

A blast of snow-laced air accompanied me, swirling around my black coat, clinging to my hair and clothes as I shoved back the door. The space beyond was small and dirty, with rotting tables scattered about the floor and steel drums set at every corner, thick smoke pouring from the mouths to hover near the roof. An ancient ceiling fan, half its blades broken or missing, spun limply, doing little to disperse the choking air.

Every eye in the room turned as I stepped through the frame and, once settled on me, didn't glance away. Hard, dangerous, broken faces watched intently as I passed their tables, like feral dogs scenting blood. I ignored them, moving steadily across the creaky floorboards, feeling nails and chips of glass under my boots. I didn't need to take a breath to know the air reeked of sweat and alcohol and human filth.

And blood. The scent of it clung to the walls and floors, soaked into the rotting tables, smeared in dark stains across

the wood. It flowed through the veins of every human here, hot and heady. I heard several heartbeats quicken as I made my way to the counter, felt the eager stirrings of lust and hunger, but also the hint of fear, unease. Some of them, at least, were sober enough to guess the truth.

The man behind the counter was a grizzled giant with a snarl of scar tissue across his throat. It crept up his neck and twisted the left corner of his lip into a permanent scowl. He eyed me without expression as I took a seat on one of the moldy bar stools, resting my arms on the badly dinged counter. His gaze flicked to the hilt of the sword strapped to my back, and one of his eyelids twitched.

“I’m afraid I don’t have the type of drink you’re looking for,” he said in a low voice, as his hands slid under the bar. When they came up again, I knew they wouldn’t be empty. *Shotgun, probably*, I guessed. *Or maybe a baseball bat*. “Not on tap, anyway.”

I smiled without looking up. “You know what I am.”

“Wasn’t difficult. Pretty girl walking into a place like this either has a death wish or is already dead.” He snorted, shooting a dark look at the patrons behind us. I could feel their hooded gazes even now. “I know what you want, and I’m not about to stop you. No one here will miss these idiots. You take what you have to, but don’t trash my bar, understand?”

“Actually, I’m just looking for someone,” I said, knowing I didn’t have a lot of time. The dogs at my back were already stirring. “Someone like me. Bald. Tall. Face scarred all to hell.” I finally looked up, meeting his impassive gaze. “Anyone like that come through here?”

A muscle worked in his jaw. Beneath his grimy shirt, his

heartbeat picked up, and a sheen of sweat appeared on his brow. For a moment, he seemed torn about whether he should pull out the gun or whatever he had beneath the counter. I kept my expression neutral, unthreatening, my hands on the bar between us.

“You’ve seen him,” I prodded carefully. He shook himself, then turned that blank stare on me.

“No.” The reply seemed dragged from somewhere deep within. “I didn’t see him. But...” He glanced at the men behind me, as if judging how much time we had, before shaking his head. “About a month ago, a stranger came through. No one saw him enter, and no one saw him leave. But we found what he left behind.”

“Left behind?”

“Rickson and his boys. In their home. From one end of it to the other. They said the bodies were so scattered they never found all the pieces.”

I bit the inside of my lip. “Did anyone see who did it?”

“Rickson’s woman. She lived. At least, until she blew her brains out three days later. But she said the killer was a tall, pale man with a face scarred like the devil himself.”

“Anyone with him?”

The barkeep frowned then shook his head. “No, she said he was alone. But he carried a large black bag with him, like a body bag. That’s all we could get out of her, anyway. She wasn’t terribly coherent, if you know what I mean.”

I nodded, drawing back, though the words *body bag* sent a chill through my stomach. *I’m getting closer, though.* “Thank you,” I murmured, sliding off the stool. “I’ll be going now.”

That’s when I felt the arm on my shoulder.

“Oh, you’re not leaving yet, little girl,” murmured a voice in my ear, hot and rancid. A large hand reached down and gripped my wrist, hard enough to bruise, if I could still bruise. “It’s too cold outside. Come over here and keep us warm.”

A smile tugged at one corner of my mouth. *Finally. Took you long enough.*

I looked at the barkeep. He met my gaze, then very deliberately turned and walked toward the back room. The man next to me didn’t seem to notice; his arm slid down my back and curled around my waist, trying to drag me away. I didn’t budge an inch, and he frowned, too drunk to realize what was happening.

I waited until the barkeep vanished through the door, letting it swing shut behind him, before I turned to my assailant.

He leered at me, the stench of alcohol coming off him in waves. “That’s right, little girl. You want some of this, don’cha?” Behind us, a few more patrons were starting to get up; either they wanted in on the fun, or they thought they could take me out together. The rest watched behind their tankards, tense and wary, smelling of fear.

“Come on then, bitch,” the man beside me said, and grabbed my other arm, his face mean and eager. “Let’s do this. I can go all night.”

I smiled. “Can you now?” I said quietly.

And lunged at him with a roar, sinking my fangs into his throat.

When the barkeep returned, I was already gone. He would find the bodies—the ones stupid enough to stay and fight—lying where they had fallen, a couple in pieces, but most of

them still alive. I had what I'd come for. The Hunger had been sated, and better here, in this outpost full of bandits and murderers, than anywhere else. Better these kinds of men than an innocent family or an old couple huddled together in the ruins of an isolated cabin, trying to keep warm. I was a monster who killed and preyed on human life; I could never escape that, but at least I could choose what kind of lives I took.

Outside, the snow was falling again. Thick flakes clung to my eyelashes and cheeks and stuck to my straight black hair, but I didn't feel them. The bitter chill couldn't touch someone who was already dead.

I gave my katana a flick, causing a line of crimson to spatter to the ground. Sliding it into the sheath on my back, I started walking, my boots crunching over frozen mud. Around me, the wood and tin shanties were silent, dark smoke leaking from windows and chimney stacks. No one was out tonight; the humans were all inside, huddled around steel drums and bottles, keeping fire and alcohol between them and the icy cold. No one would see the lone teenage girl in the long black coat, walking down the path between shanties. Just like the town's other visitor, I'd come, taken what I needed and vanished back into the night. Leaving carnage behind me.

About a hundred yards away, a wall of corrugated steel and wire rose into the air, dark and bristling. It was uneven in places, with gaps and holes that had been patched and re-patched and finally forgotten about. A flimsy barrier against the creatures that lurked outside the wall. If things continued here with no change, this little outpost would eventually vanish off the face of the earth.

Not my problem.



I leaped to the roof of a shanty leaning against the wall, then over the wall itself, landing lightly on the other side. Straightening, I gazed down the rocky slope to the road that had led me here, now invisible beneath the snow. Even my footsteps, coming in from the east, had vanished beneath the layer of white.

*He was here*, I thought as the wind whipped my face, tugging at my hair and coat. *Barely a month ago. I'm getting closer. I'm closing the gap.*

Dropping from the cliff, I fell the twenty feet, coat flapping behind me, and landed at the edge of the road, grunting as my body absorbed the shock. Stepping onto the rough, uneven pavement, feeling it crumble under my boots, I walked to where the road split, weaving off in two directions. One path curved away, circling the tiny outpost before heading south; the other continued east, toward the soon-to-be-rising sun.

I gazed down one direction, then the other, waiting. And just like at the last crossroads I'd hit, it was there again. That faint pull, telling me to continue northeast. It was more than a hunch, more than a gut instinct. Though I couldn't explain it completely, I knew which direction would lead me to my sire. *Blood calls to blood.* The killings I'd found on my travels, like the unfortunate family in the settlement behind me, only confirmed it. He was traveling fast, but I was catching up, slowly but surely. He couldn't hide from me forever.

*I'm still coming, Kanin.*

Dawn was a couple hours away. I could cover a lot of ground before then, so I started off once more, heading down the road toward an unknown destination. Chasing a shadow.

Knowing we were running out of time.

★ ★ ★

I walked through the night, the wind icy in my face, unable to numb my already cold skin. The road stretched on, silent and empty. Nothing moved in the darkness. I passed the tangled remains of old neighborhoods, streets vacant and overgrown, buildings crumbling under the weight of the snow and time. Since the plague that wiped out most of humanity and the rabid outbreak soon after, most cities had been reduced to empty husks. I'd found a few settlements scattered here and there, humans living free despite the constant threat of rabids or invasion from their own kind. But the majority of the population existed in the vampire cities, the great, walled-in territories where the coven provided food and "safety" in exchange for blood and freedom. The humans in the vampire cities were nothing more than cattle, really, but that was the price of vampire protection. Or, that's what they wanted you to believe. Monsters existed on both sides of the wall, but at least the rabids were honest about wanting to eat you. In a vampire city, you were really just living on borrowed time, until the killers who smiled and patted you on the head finally showed their true colors.

I should know. I was born there.

The road stretched on, and I followed as it snaked through white forests grown up around sprawling towns and suburbs, until the sky turned charcoal-gray and sluggishness began to drag me under. Heading off the road, I found a faded ranch house choked with weeds and brambles. They grew up through the porch and coiled around the roof, smothering the walls, but the house itself seemed fairly intact. I eased my way up the steps and kicked open the door, ducking inside.

Small furry creatures scurried into the shadows, and a cloud of snow rose from my entry, swirling across the floor. I spared a glance at the simple furniture, covered in dust and cobwebs, strangely undisturbed.

On the wall closest to me sat an old yellow sofa, one side chewed by rodents, spilling dirty fluff over the floor. Memory stirred, a scene of another time, another house like this one, empty and abandoned.

For just a moment, I saw *him* there, slumped against the cushions with his elbows on his knees, pale hair glimmering in the darkness. I remembered the warmth of his hands on my skin, those piercing blue eyes as they gazed at me, trying to figure me out, the tightness in my chest when I'd had to turn away, to leave him behind.

Frowning, I collapsed to the sofa myself and ran a hand over my eyes, dissolving the memory and the last of the frost clinging to my lashes. I couldn't think of him now. He was in Eden with the others. He was safe. Kanin was not.

I leaned back, resting my head on the back of the couch. Kanin. My sire, the vampire who'd Turned me, who'd saved my life and taught me everything I knew—he was the one I had to focus on now.

Just thinking of my maker caused a frown to crease my forehead. I owed the vampire my life, and it was a debt I was determined to repay, though I could never understand him. Kanin had been a mystery from the very start, from that fateful night in the rain when I'd been attacked by rabids outside my city's walls. I'd been dying, and a stranger had appeared out of nowhere, offering to save me, presenting me with the choice. Die...or become a monster.

Obviously, I'd chosen to live. But even after I'd made my decision, Kanin hadn't left. He'd stayed, teaching me what it meant to be a vampire, making sure I knew exactly what I had chosen. I probably wouldn't have survived those first few weeks without him.

But Kanin had secrets of his own, and one night the darkest of them caught up to us in the form of Sarren, a twisted vampire with a vendetta. Dangerous, cunning and completely out of his mind, Sarren had tracked us to the hidden lab we were using as a hideout, and we were forced to flee. In the chaos that had followed, Kanin and I were separated, and my mentor had vanished back into the unknown from where he'd come. I hadn't seen him since.

But then the dreams began.

I rose, the cushions squeaking beneath me, and wandered down a musty hallway to the room at the end. It had been a bedroom at one point, and the twin bed in the corner was far enough away from the window to be out of the sun if it came creeping into the room.

Just to be safe, I hung a ratty blanket over the sill, covering the pane and plunging the room into shadow. Outside, it was still snowing, tiny flakes drifting from a dark, cloudy sky, but I wasn't taking any chances should it clear up. Lying back on the bed, keeping my sword close, I stared at the ceiling and waited for sleep to claim me.

Vampires don't dream. Technically, we are dead, our sleep that of a corpse, black and depthless. My "dreams" were of Kanin, in trouble. Seeing through his eyes and feeling what he felt. Because in times of extreme duress, pain or emotion, blood called to blood, and I could sense what my sire

was feeling. Agony. Sarren had found him. And was taking his revenge.

My eyes narrowed as I recalled the very last one.

*My throat is raw from screaming.*

*He didn't hold back last night. He was toying with me before, just showing me the edge of his deranged cruelty. But last night, the true demon came out. He wanted to talk, tried to get me to talk, but I wasn't going to oblige him. So he made me scream instead. At one point, I looked down at my body, hanging like a piece of flayed meat from the ceiling, and wondered how I was still alive. I've never wanted to die so badly as I did then. Surely hell would not be as bad as this. It was testament to Sarren's skill, or perhaps insanity, that he kept me alive when I was doing my best to die.*

*Tonight, though, he is oddly passive. I woke, as I had countless nights before, hanging by my wrists from the ceiling, mentally preparing myself for the agony that would come later. The Hunger is a living thing, devouring me, a torment all in itself. Lately I see blood everywhere, trickling from the ceiling, oozing past the door. Salvation always beyond reach.*

*"It's no use."*

*His voice is a whisper, slithering out of the darkness. Sarren stands a few feet away, watching me blankly, his pale face a web of scars. Last night, his eyes glowed feverishly bright as he screamed and railed at me, demanding I talk, answer his question. Tonight, the dead, empty look on his face chills me like nothing else.*

*"It's no use," he whispers again, shaking his head. "You're right here, right at my fingertips, and yet I feel nothing." He slides forward, touching my neck with long, bony fingers, his gaze searching. I don't have the strength to jerk away. "Your scream, such a glorious song. I*

*imagined how it would sound for years. Your blood, your flesh, your bones—I imagined it all. Breaking them. Tasting them.” He runs a finger down my throat. “You were mine to break, to peel apart, so I could see the rotted soul that lies beneath this shell of meat and blood. It was to be a magnificent requiem.” He steps back, his expression one of near despair. “But I see nothing. And I feel...nothing. Why?” Whirling away, he stalks to the nearby table, where dozens of sharp instruments glint in the darkness. “Am I doing something wrong?” he murmurs, tracing them with a fingertip. “Is he not to pay for what he has done?”*

*I close my eyes. What he has done. Sarren deserves to hate me. What I did to him, what I was responsible for—I deserve every torment he heaps on my head. But it won’t make things right. It won’t put an end to what I caused.*

*As if reading my thoughts, Sarren turns back, and the gleam in his eyes has returned. It burns with searing intensity, showing the madness and brilliance behind it, and for the first time, I feel a stirring fear through the numbing agony and pain.*

*“No,” he whispers slowly, in a daze, as if everything has suddenly become clear. “No, I see now. I see what I must do. It is not you that is the source of the corruption. You were merely the harbinger. This whole world is pulsing with rot and decay and filth. But, we will fix it, old friend. Yes, we will fix it. Together.”*

*His hand skims the top of the table to the very end, picking up the item on the corner. It isn’t bright like the others—shiny metal polished to a gleaming edge. It is long, wooden, and comes to a crude, whittled point at the end.*

*I shiver, every instinct telling me to back away, to put distance between myself and that sharp wooden point. But I can’t move, and Sarren approaches slowly, the stake held before him like a cross. He*



*is smiling again, a demonic grin that stretches his entire ravaged face and makes his fangs gleam.*

*“I can’t kill you, yet,” he says, touching my chest with the very tip of the stake, right over my heart. “No, not yet. That would spoil the ending, and I have a glorious song in mind. Oh, yes, it will be magnificent. And you...you will be the instrument on which I compose this symphony.” He steps forward and pushes the tip of the stake into my chest, slowly, twisting it as it sinks beneath my skin. I throw back my head, clenching my jaw to keep the scream contained, as Sarren continues. “No, old friend. Death is still too good for you. We’re just going to send you to sleep for a while.” The stake continues to slide into my flesh, parting muscle and scraping against my breastbone, creeping closer to my heart. The wood becomes a bright strip of fire, searing me from the inside. My body convulses and starts to shut down. Darkness hovers at the edge of my vision—hibernation pulling me under, a last effort at self-preservation. Sarren smiles.*

*“Sleep now, old friend,” he whispers, his scarred face fading rapidly as my vision goes dark. “But not for long. I have something special planned.” He chuckles, the empty sound following me down into blackness. “You won’t want to miss it.”*

The vision had ended there. And I hadn’t had any more dreams since.

I shifted on the bed, bringing the sword close to my chest, thinking. I’d tracked Sarren to one place he *had* been: a rotted-out ruin of a house in an empty suburb, a long flight of steps leading down to the basement. The scent of Kanin’s blood had hit me like a hammer as soon as I’d opened the door. It had been everywhere—on the walls, on the chains that hung from the ceiling, on the instruments spread over

the table. A dark stain had marred the floor right below the metal links, making my stomach turn. It didn't seem possible that Kanin had survived, that *anything* could have survived that macabre dungeon. But I had to believe that he was still alive, that Sarren wasn't finished with him just yet.

My hunch had been confirmed when, as I'd explored further, I'd discovered the stiff, decaying bodies of several humans tossed casually in a closet upstairs. They had been drained of blood, their throats cut open instead of bitten, a stained pitcher sitting on a table nearby. Sarren had been feeding Kanin, letting him heal between sessions. Closing the door on the pile of corpses, I'd felt a deep stab of sympathy and fear for my mentor. Kanin had made mistakes, but no one deserved that. I had to rescue him from Sarren's sick insanity, before he drove my sire completely over the edge.

Gray light was beginning to filter through the holes in the blanket over the window, and I grew evermore sluggish in response. *Hang in there, Kanin, I thought. I'll find you, I swear. I'm catching up.*

Although, if I was honest with myself, the thought of facing Sarren again, seeing that blank, empty smile, the fevered intensity of his gaze, terrified me more than I cared to admit. I remembered his face through Kanin's eyes, and though I hadn't noticed it in the dream, I'd later recalled the film across his left eye, pale and cloudy. He'd been blinded there, and recently. I knew, because the pocketknife that had been jammed into his pupil the last time I saw him...was mine.

And I knew he hadn't forgotten me, either.