

Keeper of the Night (The Keepers: L.A. Book 1)

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Editorial Review

About the Author
New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author **Heather Graham** has written more than a hundred novels. She's a winner of the RWA's Lifetime Achievement Award, and the Thriller Writers' Silver Bullet. She is an active member of International Thriller Writers and Mystery Writers of America. For more information, check out her websites: TheOriginalHeatherGraham.com, eHeatherGraham.com, and HeatherGraham.tv. You can also find Heather on Facebook.

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There was blood. So much blood.

From her position on the stage, Rhiannon Gryffald could see the man standing just outside the club door. He was tall and well built, his almost formal attire a contrast to the usual California casual and strangely at odds with his youth, with a Hollywood tan that added to the classic strength of his features and set off his light eyes and golden hair.

And he was bleeding from the throat.

Bleeding profusely.

There was blood everywhere. It was running down the side of his throat and staining his tailored white shirt and gold-patterned vest.

"Help! I've been bitten!" he cried. He was staggering, hands clutching his throat. *No!* she thought. *Not yet!*

She had barely arrived in Los Angeles. This was too soon, far too soon, to be called upon to take action. She was just beginning to find her way around the city, just learning how to maneuver through the insane traffic—not to mention that she was trying to maintain something that at least resembled steady employment.

"I've been bitten!" he screamed again. "By a vampire!"

There were two women standing near him, staring, and he seemed to be trying to warn them, but they didn't seem frightened, although they were focused on the blood pouring from his wound.

They started to move toward him, their eyes fixed on the scarlet ruin of his neck.

They weren't concerned, Rhiannon realized. They weren't going to help.

They were hungry.

She tossed her guitar aside and leapt off the stage. She was halfway to the group milling just outside the doors of the Mystic Cafe when she nearly plowed into her boss. Hugh Hammond, owner and manager, was staring at the spectacle.

"Hugh," she said, trying to sound authoritative and confident. "Let me by."

Hugh, a very tall man, turned and looked down at her, weary amusement in his eyes. He wasn't a bad sort, even though he could be annoyingly patronizing at times. She supposed that was natural, given that he had been friends with her father and her two uncles. Once upon a time he'd been a B-list leading man, and he was aging very slowly and with great dignity.

He was also the Keeper of the Laurel Canyon werewolves.

"Hugh!" she snapped.

"By all means, Miss Gryffald, handle the situation," he told her.

She frowned and started to step past him, refraining from simply pushing him out of the way. This was serious. Incredibly serious. If a vampire was ripping out throats in broad daylight, in front of witnesses…

"Stop!" someone called out.

Another man, dark where the victim was blond, not quite as tall, his face lean and menacing, broke through the crowd and addressed the bleeding man. "Give in to me! Give in to me and embrace the night. Savor the darkness. Give your soul to me and find eternal life and enjoy eternal lust. Drink from the human soul, the fountain of delight, and enjoy carnal delights with no fear of reprisal."

She was ready to shove through the crowd to reach the victim's side and defend him against the newcomer, but Hugh had his hand on her arm. "Wait," he whispered. "Rhiannon, take a look at what they're wearing and how they're acting, and *think about it!"*

She was dying to move, but she stood still, blinked and heeded Hugh's words.

The two young women reached for the victim's arms, holding him up as the dark man spoke. One licked her lips in a provocative and sensual manner.

"Lord, forgive me," the bleeding man pleaded. "God, help me, for Drago comes and would have his terrible way until none but monsters walk the earth."

Drago walked forward threateningly, then stopped suddenly and turned to the crowd. He grinned pleasantly, and menace became humor as he said, "If you want to see any more, you need to listen up."

Where there had been silence, as if people were frozen with fear, there was a sudden eruption of laughter and applause.

"Thank you! Thank you!" the "victim" announced, lifting his hands to silence the crowd. "I'm Mac Bro-die, actor at large. The diabolical Drago is portrayed by the illustrious Jack Hunter, and…" He turned to the sensual vixens at his side. "Erika is being performed by the beautiful Audrey Fleur and Jeneka by Kate Del-aney. Please, everyone, take a bow."

They did. Drago was darkly handsome, and both young women—Audrey, a brunette, and Kate, a blonde—were extremely pretty. They, like the two men, were in Victorian attire, but in their case it was Victorian night attire. Beautiful white gossamer dresses, with gorgeous bone corsets beneath, and silky pantalets.

Mac continued to speak. "Please, join us at the Little Theater on the Hill this evening or anytime throughout the next three months, where we're presenting *Vampire Rampage*, which will soon begin production as a major motion picture, as well. We ask that you come and tell us what you think. Shows start at eight o'clock every night except Sunday and Monday, but to make up for that, we do have matinees on Wednesdays. Thank you!"

He bowed low, lifted his head and waved to the appreciative crowd.

Hugh stepped up close behind Rhiannon. "Actors," he said, sounding tired, as if he knew the profession and its attendant promo stunts far too well—which of course he did. "This is Hollywood, Miss Gryffald. Everyone's a bloody actor. Get used to it. You've got a lot to learn about life out here." He smiled down at her in that patronizing way that made her crazy, and shook his head. "Looks like your tip jar just disappeared."

Rhiannon turned quickly toward the stage. It was true. The lovely little tip jar her great-aunt Olga had made for her was gone. Along with her tips. And they hadn't been half bad today; a lot of people had thrown in bills instead of nickels.

She wanted to scream. Worse, she wanted to run back to Savannah, where so many people—and…Others—survived on the tourist trade alone that they behaved with old-fashioned courtesy and something that resembled normal human decency.

But Hugh was right. This was Hollywood, where everyone was an actor. Or a producer, or a writer, or an agent, or a would-be whatever. And everyone was cutthroat.

It's Hollywood, she told herself. *Get used to it.*

Go figure that the Otherworld's denizens would be starstruck, too.

"I'm calling it quits for the day, Hugh. I'm heading home."

He lifted her chin and stared into her eyes. "Calling it quits? That's what they sent us? A quitter? It's up to you, but I'd get up there and play if I were you. You can't quit every time there's a snafu. Lord above! We need Teddy Roosevelt, and they send us a sniveling child."

"I'm not a sniveling child, Hugh. I just don't see the sense of going on working today. Since there's certainly no imminent or inherent danger—"

He interrupted her, laughing. "Imminent or *inherent* danger? The world is *filled* with inherent danger—that's why you exist, Rhiannon. And imminent? How often do we really know when danger is imminent? Did you think being a Keeper was going to be like living in a *Superman* comic? You see someone in distress, throw on a red cape, save the day, then slip back down to earth and put your glasses on? How can you be your grandfather's descendant?"

Rhiannon felt an instant explosion of emotions. One was indignation.

One was shame.

And thankfully, others were wounded pride and determination.

"Hugh, I know my duty," she said quietly. "But my cousins and I were not supposed to take over as Keepers for years to come. No one knew that our fathers would be called to council, that the population explosion of Otherworlders in L.A. would skyrocket the way it has and we would need to start our duties now. It's only been a week. I'm not quitting, I'm adjusting. And it's not easy."

Hugh grinned, released her chin and smoothed back her hair. "Life ain't easy for anyone, kid. Now get up there and knock 'em dead."

She looked around the place and wondered drily if it was possible to "knock anyone dead" here. It was basically a glorified coffee shop, but she did need to make something of herself and her career here in L.A.

She'd left Savannah just when Dark As Night, her last band, had gotten an offer to open for a tour. Her bandmates had been incredulous when she'd said that she was moving, and distressed. Not distressed enough to lose the gig, though. They had found another lead guitarist slash backup singer before she'd even packed a suitcase.

Wearily, she made her way back to the stage. Screw the tip jar. She didn't have another, and she wasn't going to put out an empty coffee cup like a beggar.

She could not only play the guitar; she was good.

Unfortunately, given the recent twists in her life, it seemed she was never going to have the chance to prove it.

She stepped slowly back up on the stage. Earlier the crowd had been watching her, chatting a bit, too, but and enjoying her slow mix of folk, rock and chart toppers.

Now they were all talking about the latest Hollywood promo stunt.

Rhiannon began to play and sing, making up the lyrics as she went along, giving in to her real feelings despite her determination not to be bitter that she was suddenly here—and with little chance for a life.

I hate Hollywood, I hate Hollywood, oh, oh,

I hate Hollywood, I hate Hollywood, oh, oh, oh, oh.

Everyone's an actor, it's a stark and frightening factor,

I hate Hollywood….

And I hate actors, too,

Oh, yeah, and I hate actors, too.

Okay, her cousin Sailor was an actress, and she didn't hate Sailor, although she wasn't certain that Sailor was actually living in the real world, either. She was too much the wide-eyed innocent despite the fact that she'd grown up in L.A. County—and had also spent a few years pounding the pavement trying to crack Broadway and the New York television scene. Maybe the wide-eyed innocence in Sailor was an act, too. No, no, Sailor really wanted the world to be all sunshine and roses. And, actually, Rhiannon loved her cousin; Sailor always

meant well. And now, according to the powers that be, she and Sailor and another of their cousins, Barrie, a journalist with a good head on her shoulders, were to take their place as Keepers of three of the Otherworld races right here in L.A.

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeaaaah, I hate Hollywood, And I hate actors, too.

If anyone disagreed with her lyrics, they didn't say so. No one was really listening, anyway. And maybe that was the point. Easy music in the background while the coffee, tea, latte, mocha and chai drinkers enjoyed their conversations.

Polite applause followed the song. Rhiannon looked down, not wanting the audience to see her roll her eyes.

At ten o'clock Hugh asked her to announce that the cafe was closed for the night. She was shutting her guitar case when one of the coffee drinkers came up to her, offering her a twenty. Surprised by the amount of the tip, she looked at him more closely and realized that he was Mac Brodie, the actor who had been covered in fake blood earlier.

She looked at the twenty but didn't touch it, then looked back into his eyes.

Elven, she realized.

Six foot five, she thought, judging that he stood a good seven inches over her own respectable five feet ten inches. And he had the telltale signs: golden hair streaked with platinum, eyes of a curious blue-green that was almost lime. And, of course, the lean, sleekly muscled physique.

She lowered her head again, shaking it. *"Elven,"* she murmured. "It's all right. You *did* ruin my night, but that's okay." She made a point of not looking directly at him. Elven could read minds, but most of them had to have locked eye contact, so looking away made it possible to block the intrusion. And, luckily, the process was hard on them, so they didn't indulge in it frivolously.

"Keeper," he said, drawing out the word. "And new to the job, of course. Sorry. I saw that look of panic on your face. I'm assuming you're here for the bloodsuckers?"

She stiffened. In Savannah she'd been a fledgling vampire Keeper, apprenticing with an old family friend who'd kept the city peacefully coexisting for years, but she'd always known that one day she would take her father's place in L.A.

As she'd told Hugh, this had all been so sudden. There hadn't been a warning, no "Tie up your affairs, you're needed in six months"—or even three months, or one. The World Council had been chosen, and in two weeks a core group of some of the country's wisest Keepers was gone and their replacements moved into their new positions. And there was no such thing as calling the Hague for help. No Keeper business could ever be discussed by cell phone, since in the day and age they lived in, anything could be recorded or traced.

So the new Keepers were simply yanked and resettled, and the hell with their past lives.

"Yes, of course, Keeper for the bloodsuckers," Mac said, his tone low.

"Some of my best friends are bloodsuckers," she said sweetly, looking quickly around. She'd been about to chastise him for speaking so openly, but the clientele was gone and the workers were cleaning the kitchen,

well out of earshot. Of course, he might know exactly what she was thinking even without her saying it aloud. Some Elven were capable of telepathy even without eye contact, so she braced her mind against him. In fact, she knew she was playing a brutal game. It cost an Elven dearly to mind-read, especially without locking gazes, but it cost the target a great deal of strength to block the mind probe, as well.

There were a lot of Others in L.A. County. One thing they all did was keep the secret that they were…unusual. It was the key to survival—for all them. History had taught them that when people feared any group, that group was in trouble.

"Same here," he told her. "I'm fond of a lot of vampires."

She stared at him for a moment. He was undeniably gorgeous. Like a sun god or some such thing. And he undoubtedly knew that Elven usually got their way, because they were born with grace and charm—not to mention the ability to teleport, or, as they defined it, move at the speed of light.

Users Review

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