



*Beautiful  
Dangerous*

By  
Paul Speller

# **Beautiful Dangerous**

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The drum beat its seedy, slow grind. Twin spotlights swirled up to the ceiling. When they swivelled back down onto the stage, to the cold hiss accompaniment of dry ice, each one encircled a woman standing with her head bowed.

One was dressed in a grey suit, blonde hair scraped into a stern ponytail. Horn-rimmed glasses were balanced on the end of her nose; black high heels provided an extra curve to her calf muscles.

The other woman was wearing some kind of military uniform, a sergeant's stripe on the arm of her khaki blouson. Matching trousers reached down to brown lace-up boots that seemed to go higher than

normal Army issue. Raven hair cascaded down from beneath a peaked cap.

The women looked up, in tandem. There was a cheer from the audience as the drums continued their rhythmic thump through the PA system.

One man in the dark crowd asked himself what he was doing there.

It was a rhetorical question. Jake knew exactly why he was there, surrounded by a melting pot mix of the well-off, the care-free, the curious, the lonely and the desperate. He was keeping his boss company at the end of the first day of their business trip.

It was not his choice of venue.

The metronomic thunder of the drums was joined by a bassline pounding a lustful rhythm, followed shortly after by the sleaze-ridden wail of an electric guitar.

The woman in the business suit reached up and pulled her hair out of its ponytail. As blonde curls fell around her shoulders, she winked in Jake's direction.

He smiled, awkwardly, and moved his hand around the half-

empty glass he was holding, to ensure his wedding ring was visible.

The dancer smirked, before turning to her partner. The military woman licked her blood red lips. Crimson-tipped fingers reached across and slowly started to undo the buttons on the top half of the blonde performer's suit. Beneath the jacket, the lace-edged swell of the woman's breasts pushed out from the low neckline of her blouse. A crucifix with ruby coloured edges fell out from her chest.

Another cheer came from the alcoholically-engaged audience, followed by disappointed boos as the dark-haired performer's hands retreated from the blonde woman's clothes and the two stepped back from each other.

Unlike many of those around him, Jake appreciated the tease.

He was still annoyed that his boss had dragged him along at all, describing it as "harmless fun".

That afternoon they had been approached by a man in a leather biker's jacket with shoulder-length, dirty, bleach-blond hair. The man looked as though he had walked into a police box on LA's sunset strip in the late 1980s and stepped out of it in modern day London. Mötley Crüe's missing link had promised the club would offer "tasteful" and

discreet entertainment, before giving a sly wink to Charlie, Jake's boss. That had been enough. At the conclusion of a series of tedious meetings, followed by dinner with a zombie-personality accountant, Charlie had announced they should let their hair down – and produced the business card that the man in the leather jacket had handed them earlier.

So that was how they came to be in a backstreet club, paying over-the-odds prices for drinks and refusing the offer of under-the-counter supplements.

Charlie was loving it; not surprising considering the amount of alcohol already taken on board. Jake had chosen to pace himself more carefully. He fully intended to call his wife when they got back to the hotel and he wanted to sound sober.

The raven-haired performer – who, minutes earlier, had been sat at the bar in a blue cocktail dress, allowing Charlie to buy her a drink – moved centre stage. She pulled off her peaked cap and skimmed it through the air towards Jake's companion, who grasped ineptly at it with flailing hands, before laughing drunkenly when it fell to the floor. There was a look in Charlie's eye that Jake had seen before. It showed

that his boss was definitely taken with the dancer.

Jake tried to remember the name she had given them. Carmilla, he thought it was, although he guessed that was not what it said on her passport.

There were whistles from those sat at the other tables. Jake looked up to see that Carmilla was undoing her blouson, swaying in time to the dirty bassline. The stage lights made her deep brown eyes glow red as she ripped off the last of her buttons and let the jacket drop to the floor. Carmilla, or whatever her real name was, stood before the baying audience, her corseted chest rising with each drumbeat. She licked her lips once more, brilliant white teeth glistening in the bright spotlight.

Then, darkness. The lights went out and the music stopped.

All that could be heard was a collective cheer of anticipation.

Strobe lighting spiralled outwards from the back of the stage, slashing through the smoky night atmosphere, created by fresh blasts of dry ice.

A silhouette appeared against the dazzling lights. The figure turned sideways, making it clear it was that of a woman and that she

was naked.

Lithe arms reached upwards from the dark outline. A slow but emphatic handclap started among the tantalised audience members, eager for the shadow to become fully visible.

A wolf-like howl screeched its way up from floor level. The stage lit up once more with a firework flash.

There was no one there.

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Jake bought Charlie another cocktail and ordered an iced water for himself. He tried not to think about the cost.

It had taken several moments for the audience to realise that the disappearing silhouette was the finale of the first act of the show. Charlie had sat there for much of that time, jaw drooping down; until Jake decided that a move to the bar might bring a return of senses.

As they sipped at their drinks, from behind a sleek figure, wrapped up in a dragon print dressing gown, glided towards them with languid ease. She sat down on the barstool between the two of

them. The woman had her back to Jake as she focussed on Charlie. The dark hair that fell down onto the silk robe, gave the game away it was Carmilla, returning to the prey she had lined up earlier. No doubt, she was intent on earning herself a good tip and a few drinks.

The way in which Charlie's face lit up confirmed Jake's initial suspicion. Bored, he wondered where the other dancer was. He looked along the length of the galley bar, but saw no sign of anyone else seeking to seduce money out of any customers.

A moment later, however, he spotted her stood by a door marked *PRIVATE*. She, too, was wrapped in a dressing gown. She was talking, distractedly, to the dirty-haired glam metal throwback who had earlier enticed Charlie and Jake to come into the club. The dancer glanced across and caught Jake's eye. She smiled before appearing to end her conversation.

She ambled smoothly towards Jake, surefooted in her high heels. The smile broke out on her face again. Blue eyes, no longer hidden by the fake glasses that had been part of her costume, pierced into his.

“Something tells me that you were dragged here.”

Jake smiled, guiltily. “I bet they all say that.”

“Not all of them,” she grinned. “But I noticed that your friend seemed a little more enthusiastic than you did.”

There was a mock expression of disappointment on her face.

Jake tried to place her accent. It sounded continental. Possibly Italian.

He raised his left hand and wagged the fourth finger.

“Ah yes, the wedding ring,” said the dancer. “Two ostentatious displays should be enough to get the message across.”

Jake started to mumble an apology. The woman laughed.

“Please, do not worry. You’re much better than the ones who suddenly think to take their ring off when I get close to them.”

She smiled once more.

“I’m Isabella,” she said. “I always try to say hello to customers who seem nice.”

“Do you say hello to many customers?”

“Not really.”

“That’s a shame,” said Jake. He was not sure of the protocol in such a situation. “Do you want me to buy you a drink?”

Isabella laughed again.

“Oh no,” she said. “I have too much to do this evening. I just thought I should say hello. I hope you enjoy your night out.”

She brushed past him, a featherweight glance between shoulders, before turning to speak to once more.

“Try to stay out of trouble. Things can flare up quickly.”

The earnest look on her face bemused him. But then it did seem to be a rough club.

Isabella disappeared towards the backstage area and Jake turned back to the bar.

The body language between Carmilla and Charlie was about as subtle as some of the dance moves they had witnessed earlier. Charlie was leaning in towards Carmilla, puppy dog eyes looking into hers. The dancer stretched a stockinged leg from her beneath her dressing gown and let it hang close to – but not touching – Charlie’s thigh.

“Do you smoke?” Jake heard her inquire.

Charlie gave an apologetic shake of the head.

“Does your friend?” For the first time, even including the brief visit by Isabella, Carmilla acknowledged Jake’s presence. She turned to look at him.

Jake's face flushed. He did. In fact, he was pretty desperate for a cigarette.

"Yes," Charlie chipped in from behind, failing to hide a faint tone of disappointment.

"Perhaps we can step outside for a cigarette?" Carmilla smiled hopefully at Jake, before noticing Charlie had edged, anxiously, a little closer to her shoulder. "All three of us, of course, as long as you want to keep us company, Charlie?"

Charlie gave an obedient pet nod. Cigarettes were the last thing on her mind, but not losing out on her attention to Jake, or his cancer sticks, was.

Jake rolled his eyes. Charlie was the one female colleague his wife did not mind him going away with on business trips.

"That's settled then," said Carmilla in her cut-glass voice. "Follow me."

She slipped down from the chair. Aware that Charlie was still watching her, she refastened the belt on her dressing gown, although not altogether more tightly, and eased her way towards a fire exit.

The bald, burly security guard sat by the exit nodded at Carmilla.

His take-no-shit expression melted into a knowing grin as soon as he spotted her two followers.

Once outside, in the cobbled service alley that ran behind the club, the wintry air hit them with an ice-pack slap. Neither Jake nor Charlie had bothered to collect their coats on their way. Despite her flimsy clothing, the cold blast did not seem to bother Carmilla.

Jake took out his cigarettes, sliding one into the corner his mouth and offering another to Carmilla. Her hand brushed Jake's as she took it and placed it between her lips. When he presented his lighter, she leaned forward and steadied his shivering wrist with a firm grip. The skin on the pads of her fingers was unexpectedly rough, as though it belonged to a woman much older.

Once she had her cigarette, Carmilla turned away from Jake and refocused her attention on Charlie. The cigarette-free hand rested on Charlie's elbow. Even Jake could sense the lightning bolt excitement that shot through his colleague.

When Carmilla leaned in to whisper something into Charlie's ear, the aroused intake of breath was audible.

To Jake's relief, the moment was interrupted by a middle-aged

man stumbling into the back lane. The intruder leaned carelessly against the solitary lamppost for support, the light from above flickering in recoil.

Anger flashed across Carmilla's porcelain face as she pulled away from Charlie.

"Carmilla," the middle-aged man slurred. He was well dressed, but his drunken state took his Saville Row suit down to Smash Alley. In his right hand, a huge cigar balanced precariously; wisps of smoke spinning into the still air.

"You were told to stay away," she snapped. Her pristine voice, temporarily, betrayed signs of a harder origin.

"I can't," the man protested. His voice had a pitiful tone, while a forelock of heavily gelled hair drooped down pathetically. "Please don't ignore me."

Carmilla rolled her eyes and said nothing. Her body had tensed, hackles raised like a trapped hound. Jake was sure he saw a flash of red in her eyes.

The drunk man steadied himself.

"I know, Carmilla," he declared. "I know it all."

He started to approach her.

Darkness eclipsed the yellow glow from the street light. A rush of air hurried through the lane.

When the lamp resuscitated, there was no sign of the man. His cigar lay on the cobbles, a small red glow resting on its tip.

Jake looked on astonished.

He turned to Carmilla and Charlie. Carmilla's face was without expression. Charlie was a picture of lust, possessed eyes fixed firmly on Carmilla, uninterested in anything else.

“Did you see that?”

Carmilla looked directly at Jake. There was a strange coldness to her that had nothing to do with the season.

“See what?” she asked.

“That man? He just disappeared.”

Carmilla laughed. Well, it was more of a dark chuckle.

“He just walked away when the light went out, that's all.”

“Did you know him?”

“Only vaguely,” she said, taking a last suck on the cigarette. Rings of smoke curled out from her lips as she crushed the discarded

end with her stiletto heel. Her voice had regained its rich and naughty allure. “Some of our customers do occasionally try to become a little too familiar. I suspect he realised what the bouncers’ reaction might be if he stayed for long.”

Charlie interrupted the discussion.

“Jake, shall I see you back inside?”

The expression on her face gave a clear message. She wanted some alone time with her new friend. Jake felt uneasy. Charlie was drunk and something strange had just happened in the dim lane they were standing in. On top of that, they had known Carmilla for little more than an hour, even if it was plain Charlie wanted to get to know the dancer a lot better.

What was the right thing to do? Charlie would not thank him for interfering, but would they both regret it if he left her?

“I promise to look after her,” Carmilla intervened, a warmer smile spreading across herself. “Besides, I have to be back on stage in five minutes. What possible trouble could we get into?”

*Plenty*, Jake thought.

But he nodded. Carmilla knocked on the fire exit door, which the

bald-headed security officer opened from the other side. Jake went through, turning to look back at his colleague.

Charlie glanced at Jake through the closing door and smiled sheepishly.

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All the lights were on inside the club, which Jake took to mean that there was still some time before the next performance was due to start. He presumed that Carmilla would be up on the stage and wondered whether she would be joined once more by Isabella.

He decided to wait at the bar for Charlie, keeping the fire exit in his line of vision. There were goose bumps on his arms. He was not entirely sure they were a result of the cold.

Jake was not convinced by Carmilla's explanation as to where the drunk man had disappeared.

To kill the time before the show began again, he tried to send his wife a text message, but there was no signal from inside the club. He contemplated returning outside in search of a reception, but did not

imagine his presence would be welcomed by either of the two women he had just left. Nor did he believe the bald-headed security man, whose take-no-shit demeanour was back in place, would be quite so acquiescent to let him back outside, without Carmilla's influence.

The text message would have to wait until later. Instead, Jake indulged in some people watching. He was not from London and, if the mix of customers he saw waiting for the next woman to disrobe was a microcosm of the city's populace, he was glad of the fact.

There were the loners, sat apart, hoping that the waitresses in short black dresses would give them a second glance as they ghosted between tables. There were the businessmen who had worked hard to convince themselves there was nothing sleazy about the club, but who would still neglect to mention it when they went home to their wives. There was a young couple in danger of putting on a show of their own if they didn't find some self-control. There was also a stag party. Five men, in all. One of them had an L plate hung around his neck and looked like the condemned prisoner. Given the surroundings, there was a good chance it would be a public execution.

In the furthest corner of the room sat a group of four of women.

Jake was not sure if they were other dancers waiting their turn to perform or they were there to be entertained. The shadowy lighting around the table gave their faces a uniform pallor, interrupted only by the redness of their lips.

The lights above the audience dimmed, to a reception of raucous cheers from the stag party and several others. But the courting couple remained quiet. Their mouths were far too busy for cheering.

A soft chime of bells, like those of a child's jewellery case that produced a ballerina when you opened it, signalled the start of the show. Blue uplighting projected onto a prone dancer, who began to unravel coyly into a standing position.

As she turned to face her audience, Jake recognised Carmilla. She smiled wickedly, before licking her lips as if she had just enjoyed a sumptuous feast. The spotlight beamed down from above to show she was wearing a spray-on, black PVC dress with matching thigh-high boots. Her eyes looked darker, her face leaner. The tips of her raven hair had a golden sheen to them.

The cheers got louder.

Jake looked around for Charlie but, except for the stage area,

everything was dark.

The histrionic cry of an electric guitar tore apart the dainty music box introduction and Carmilla threw her arms into the air, craning her neck backwards to look towards the sky and letting out a silent scream of rapture.

With the beat of the drum, she snapped her head back and looked directly at the stag party. With a silk-gloved hand, she pointed at the groom-to-be and beckoned to him.

Pushed forward by his friends, the man, who was in his early thirties and very much worse for wear, stepped uncertainly onto the stage. Carmilla took him by the hand and brought her mouth close to his, before pulling away, to the roared approval of those watching.

Jake was worried about Charlie. She might well be watching backstage, or waiting for Carmilla in her dressing room, but, equally, she could be slumped on the cold cobbles outside, both humiliated and minus her possessions.

*Give it one more minute*, he told himself.

He looked back towards the stage, where Carmilla had pushed her victim onto all fours. She pressed into his back with the stiletto

heel of one of her boots, cupping a hand to her ear and nodding slyly when the audience signalled its encouragement. From behind her back she produced a riding crop and, to leering jeers, proceeded to whip her unfortunate performance partner across his buttocks.

Jake was surprised at the force she used, but not nearly as much as the groom-to-be, who let out a yelp of pain.

Carmilla stroked the man's backside in faux apology, before pulling him up by his shirt collar. A second spotlight was shining down on a chair at the other side of the low stage. Carmilla ordered the man to sit on it, flexing the riding crop in a warning of what would follow if he did not obey.

She leaned down and whispered something in his ear, which brought a smile.

*Ten more seconds and then I go to look for Charlie.*

Carmilla pulled down the zip at the front of her dress; just enough to tease both the audience and her victim. She reached below the chair and picked up a bottle of baby oil.

The crowd cheered.

She poured the oil onto the skin she had just exposed and

grinned as it ran down between her partially covered breasts.

With a wink to the audience, Carmilla turned back to her victim and sat astride him. She motioned to him to finish off the important job of undoing her dress. As trembling hands reached towards her zip, Carmilla's lips moved towards the groom-to-be's face.

The music stopped.

The lights went out.

The celebratory roar from the other stag party members almost drowned out the scream.

But, not quite.

When the darkness lifted, the groom-to-be was still tied to the chair. But his neck was bent backwards at an impossible angle. A fountain of blood sprayed out of his jugular.

Carmilla was no longer a picture of cold beauty. Inhuman red eyes blazed out from her face. Liquid poured down from her lips, a river of blood snaking its way down her half-naked body. She shook in a twisted ecstasy.

The cheers from the other members of the stag party were the first to turn into cries of horror. They were followed soon after by

those of the cavorting couple, then the loners and, finally, the besuited businessmen, who would never have to explain to their wives what they were doing in the club.

The corner where the group of women had been sat was now empty. Blurs of black were darting among the audience members, whose screams of fear had become shrieks of agony.

A sea of red bubbled on the floor and flowed towards the bar, washing over the bodies of the two waitresses who, moments earlier, had only to contend with the wandering hands of customers.

Jake stood, frozen in horror, as the crimson tide reached his feet. It had been two seconds, at most, since the lights came back on and before him lay a deathly tableau of carnage.

A firm hand grabbed his wrist.

It was Isabella. Gone was the silk dressing gown. Instead she was wearing black leggings and grey sweater, as if ready for a night in front of the television. Her face was a picture of urgency.

“Come with me,” she whispered. “Now!”

She pulled him towards the door marked *PRIVATE* that he had seen her stood by earlier. Jake glanced back, in the hope of seeing

Charlie appear. Alive. Instead, his eyes were drawn to Carmilla. Her mouth was clamped on the neck of the groom-to-be. The wedding was cancelled.

Carmilla halted her feast and looked up. Her eyes burned into Jake. There was a bullet-speed rush of air and the next thing he felt was a vice-grip of cold hands around his neck.

The air was squeezed from his lungs and everything went black.

\*

A slap to the face brought Jake back to consciousness. Blurred vision began to return gradually to focus . A woman's face, framed by blonde curls, appeared before him.

“Can you hear me?” Isabella asked.

Jake nodded and, as he did so, he felt a scalpel stab of pain in his neck. He lifted his hand and rubbed at a scratch just above the level of his shoulder.

“It's okay,” said Isabella. “It was only her nails. She didn't break the skin.”

*Who?*

Jake remembered where he was. At least, where he was before he lost consciousness. He had no idea for how long he had been out.

From what he could tell, he and Isabella were the only people in the dark room they found themselves.

As the pre-blackout vision of horror he had witnessed burned itself into his waking mind, he guessed that was a good thing, when compared with the other option of location.

“What happened?”

“Carmilla.” Isabella said her name as if it was an explanation for everything that had occurred.

“What about all the others?”

“Dead, mostly.”

It was like being punched in the stomach. Jake was afraid to ask the next question.

“And Charlie?”

“I don’t know yet. Carmilla may have stored her up for later.”

*Stored her up?*

“What about you?”

“I’m not storing you up. I saved you.”

Jake rubbed his eyes.

“How? Why?”

“Why is easy. It’s my job.”

“You’re not a stripper, then?”

“Burlesque dancer,” she corrected him.

“What’s the difference?”

For the first time in the darkness, he noticed what she was doing: wiping dust from a stainless-steel spike, about one-foot long. She was crouched next to him. Her sweater had ridden up and he could see that tucked into the waistband of her leggings was a revolver.

She looked up from her task and gave a brief sigh. As if she was about to give an explanation she had been forced to make a number of times before.

“Ask yourself precisely how much of me you actually saw,” she said. “Anyway, that’s not really the point. I’m attached to a special unit with the Polizia in Italy. I’m on secondment here.”

She examined the spike. Whatever purpose she had for it, Jake thought it would prove more than adequate.

“Undercover? Or not, as it turned out.”

As jokes went, it wouldn't trouble the Billboard 100; but Jake's overloaded brain was seeking a defence mechanism to deal with what he had just seen. It failed on every level.

Isabella ignored the feeble attempt at humour. She stood up and held out her hand to assist Jake to his feet. He was surprised at the how little effort it appeared to require on her part as she pulled him up.

“The unit I work for deals with dangers that most people are not aware of.”

Her English was good, but he fancied her teacher had instructed her with a dictionary in their hand and a plum in their mouth.

“Such as what I just saw?” he asked.

She gave him a grim nod.

“Exactly what did I just see?”

Isabella took a deep breath. He could see in her blue eyes that she was weighing up how to tell him something that he would not comprehend, in the little time that he presumed they had left.

“My job is to stop the forces of evil,’ she said, matter-of-factly, as if she was describing an accountancy position. “Do you believe in

vampires?”

“Not really.”

Isabella put down the spike and stepped towards only door of the room, which was near to them; pressing her ear against it momentarily. She lifted her head and turned to him.

“I do not blame you,” she said. “But it doesn’t really matter, so long as you believe what you saw.”

Jake wished he didn’t believe it; wished he could forget it.

An earlier memory was also poking through the jumble of thoughts spinning in his mind. Of the drunk man in the service alley and how he disappeared after confronting Carmilla.

To say what Isabella told him might make sense of that was maybe putting it too strong, but it was an explanation.

“Carmilla is a vampire?” He couldn’t believe he was asking.

“Yes,” replied Isabella. She had picked up the spike once more. “We have been tracking her for some time. She has acquired some more followers, too.’

*The women from the corner.*

“But it is still unusual for someone like her to act as randomly

and openly as this. Unusual and dangerous.”

There were many questions Jake wanted to ask, but he knew most of them would have to wait for another time. If another time was an option.

“So, what can we do?”

“You need to stay here,” Isabella whispered. “In a moment, I’m going to open this door. Wait until you hear me call you, then you come too.”

“What if I don’t hear anything from you?”

Isabella reached down to a small black bag next to the door and produced a clear flask of water. She pressed it into his hands. Her skin felt softer, younger, than that of Carmilla’s.

“You stay here until daylight. If anyone comes in and draws blood, pour this liquid on the wound straight away.”

“Will that save me?”

“Only your soul.”

*You may as well give a prayer book to a drowning sailor,* Jake thought.

But he kept the bottle in his hands; hands which he realised were

trembling.

“You don’t have a spare one of those, do you?” he asked, finger pointing at the revolver.

“My guess is you would not know how to use it,” she said. “Even if you did, it would not help.”

Jake was not sure how a gun could be less use than a flask of water, but decided not to argue. She was right, he would have no idea how to use one anyway.

“Good luck,” he offered. He couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Isabella smiled. Softly, she eased back the flimsy bolt on the door and slipped out. Jake fastened it behind her and stood in the semi-darkness, unsure what to do.

So, he pulled out his phone. Still no signal. He started to draft a text to his wife anyway, realising it might be the last chance he would have to say anything to her.

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The phone told Jake that only five minutes had passed since Isabella had left the room. It felt like an hour. He had written the message for his wife to read but found himself explaining that it had been Charlie's idea to come to the club. So he erased it and composed a new one. If it was to be the last thing he would tell his wife, there were many more important things to say.

Then the low battery warning had shown and he decided to save what juice was left, in the unlikely event he would ever get the chance to make a call.

From the other side of the door, he could hear the sounds of movement. How far away, he had no idea.

A feline scream sent a shiver down his spine, but then all went quiet.

His eyes had adjusted further to his dim surroundings. There was a mirror on the other side of the room, a feather boa hanging off its edge and a laddered stocking draped on the chair next to it. Through the skylight above, Jake noticed a cloud move away from the full moon. Was the skylight an escape route? Not a chance. It was too high for Jake to hope to reach it, but the light it provided did enable him to

notice something else less expected in a strip club changing room. A large crucifix was attached to the wall.

There was a knock on the door.

“It’s Isabella.”

For a moment, Jake weighed up whether it could be a trap, that Isabella was in league with Carmilla, or that she was being used as bait. It felt like a stupid thought, but so did the idea that he had locked himself in a changing room, with only some old lingerie and a chair to protect himself from a vampire attack.

He opened the door a fraction. Artificial light peered in from the other side. He pushed the door further and saw that Isabella was stood in a grey corridor, breathing heavily. She was wiping down the metal spike, but it was no longer dust that she was removing from it.

Jake looked past her shoulder and saw four entangled bodies collapsed on the floor, already decomposing.

*The women from the corner.*

He was lost for words. He did not need any. His face said it all.

“It’s better that you do not ask,” said Isabella.

She took his hand and led him into the corridor. He was relieved

to find she was heading in the opposite direction to where the bodies lay.

At the end of the corridor was another dressing room door, which was open. Jake peeked through and saw Charlie. She was slumped on a battered chaise longue, catatonic eyes staring into the distance. One side of her chemise was torn and there were two tiny puncture wounds in her neck.

Jake feared the worst.

“She’s not dead,” Isabella whispered. “Carmilla is keeping her for other things.”

Jake called upon his limited knowledge of vampires, which amounted to a couple of Hammer horror films and an interest in the *Twilight* series that was aborted about ten minutes into the first movie.

“Is she a vampire now?” he asked.

Isabella shook her head. Sweat had matted her blonde hair against her forehead and the back of her neck.

“Not yet,” she said. “But we need to get her out of here before Carmilla comes back.”

Confirmation that Carmilla was still around to strip and strafe in

equal measure caused Jake's knees to buckle. He had always liked to think an untapped heroic nature would emerge in a crisis; he was wrong. He looked over his shoulder, expecting a half-naked harpy to be preparing for her next meal.

Isabella pressed something cold and metallic into his hand. It was the revolver she had earlier told him would be no use.

“If she returns before we get out, use this.”

“I thought you said it would be of no use against Carmilla?”

“It won't be,” said Carmilla, her hand still grasping Jake's.

“I mean use this if Carmilla bites your friend again before we get her to safety. It is the best thing you can do for her.”

Jake wanted to give back the revolver. He knew that he would not have the stomach to take aim at Charlie, even if it was clear she was facing death, or whatever worse fate Isabella was hinting at. If the gun was not going to save him, either, he didn't see the point. Isabella, clearly, had her own method for dealing with vampires and bullets were not part of it.

She entered the room, lit by a solitary bulb, and Jake followed. Keeping close to Isabella seemed the best way of not ending up as an

involuntary blood donor.

“Can you carry her on your own?” Isabella asked, motioning her head towards Charlie.

Jake nodded with confidence. He tucked the revolver into the back of the belt on his trousers. If the safety catch was going to fail, he would prefer it to fire downwards on that side of his body rather than the front.

As soon as he picked up Charlie, he realised his confidence was misplaced. It was like carrying a dead weight. She was unresponsive and heavier than he could have imagined. He tried to wrap her arms around his shoulders, but her corpse-like state dragged them both back down onto the chaise longue. Jake notice a smell of decay and was not sure whether it came from Charlie or the ancient furniture.

“I need a little ...”

Jake never finished the sentence.

There was a rush of air and a banshee howl as blackness crossed the dim light. Charlie was yanked from his grasp by an irresistible force.

A moment later, she was in a crumpled heap on the floor.

Jake's eyes refocused, to the accompaniment of another howl, and he saw that Carmilla was upon Charlie; a tiger on its prey. Isabella threw herself on top of Carmilla and dragged her off.

Carmilla spat back angrily at her former dance partner.

“She's mine!”

Isabella whispered back with her own words, in what Jake guessed was either Italian or Latin. He did not know which, but they had an effect on Carmilla, who recoiled momentarily, disgust etched on her face.

Isabella raised the stainless-steel spike. Carmilla returned to her senses quickly and grabbed the sharp end of the weapon with her left hand. Jake looked on in horror as the point pierced through flesh and bone.

Carmilla used her other hand to wrench the blunt end of the spike from Isabella's grip. Slowly, she removed the blade from her bleeding hand, which she raised to her mouth, and began to drink her own blood.

Isabella lunged towards Carmilla and tried to regain control of the spike. It fell to the floor, The two women, if it was right to call

them both women, crashed into each other as they dived to reach it.

Jake knew he had no way of getting past them, either on his own or with Charlie.

Instead, he withdrew to the furthest corner of the room and, to his own surprise, said a silent prayer. He had not believed in a higher presence since primary school; but, then, until a few minutes ago he had not believed in vampires.

He did not know whether it was God that told him to take out the gun, or his own instinct, but he trained it carefully on the two women, as the fight continued.

He was unsure whether he had the nerve to fire a shot. Isabella had already told him it would be of no use against Carmilla. But he felt he had to do something.

There was an almighty crash as Carmilla hurled Isabella against the wall. She was clearly winded, but Jake was amazed to see she was not knocked out.

With an unhurried confidence, Carmilla stepped forward, to reach her enemy, who had nowhere to go.

Isabella muttered something to herself. Then she looked past the

approaching Carmilla and saw Jake holding the gun, two-handed – in an attempt to recreate a pose he had seen in countless television shows – but with no idea whether it would help. She stared at Carmilla, looked again at Jake and nodded.

*Does she mean shoot Carmilla, or shoot her?*

Jake fired. The force of the gunshot threw him backwards. He landed on the comatose Charlie.

He looked up, hands shaking but still holding onto the gun, to see he had hit Carmilla, but the impact had not even knocked her down. Blood was pouring out of her shoulder from a wound that reached through her from back to front. She was only one step away from Isabella.

Carmilla's back arched. She spat out a curse, using a language that Jake could not even begin to identify.

Isabella threw something at Carmilla. Jake could not make out what, at first. Then he saw she was holding a flask similar to the one she had given him earlier. It was now empty.

There was a squeal of agony from Carmilla, who staggered backwards. Smoke was coming from her shoulder wound.

The vampire turned, momentarily, to glare covetously at the unconscious body beneath Jake. Her face bore little resemblance to the beauty who head earlier inspired lust from Charlie and many others. It looked old, reptilian, even; skin drying out before his eyes.

She hissed more incomprehensible obscenities. There was another rush of air and a cloud of blackness.

Then she was gone.

\*

Jake and Isabella stood in the service alley, watching as an unmarked van took away Charlie, wrapped in a blanket and mercifully not in any state to comprehend what had happened.

Isabella had explained to Jake that Charlie would receive special treatment, both medical and psychological, at a private hospital. She also told him not to expect his boss back at work any time soon.

Isabella was holding a black overcoat around her shoulders. Jake had taken, gratefully, the blanket offered by the van driver, whose dirty, bleached-blond hair was tucked beneath a baseball cap.

“Is that the end of Carmilla?” Jake asked, as the vehicle ambled to the end of the lane and turned out of sight.

Isabella let out a weary sigh. Her nose twitched, as if she was trying to pick up a scent.

“I think not,’ she replied. “But she has been badly weakened. Hopefully, she will not be a problem for some time.”

“What about all the others?”

There were unsuspecting wives, blissfully ignorant girlfriends, the family of the over-amorous couple and a bride-to-be whose lives were never going to be the same. Isabella looked down at her shoes momentarily. When she looked up again, her eyes were rimmed red. There was a sadness that hinted at more than a reflection of what had just happened. This was not her first time in such a situation.

“The authorities will come up with appropriate explanations as to how they died and why they will be in closed coffins,” she said. Emotion allowed her accent to show through. “Don’t be surprised if you read about an horrific road accident not far from here.”

“Surely their families have a right to know?”

Isabella looked directly at Jake.

“Would you believe it if you had not seen it for yourself? Better that they have a chance to grieve over something their mind can cope with.”

Jake was not convinced. But not much was making sense any more. He was tired and his brain hurt. He decided it was a good time to change the subject.

“So,” he said, “sometimes you’re a burlesque dancer, sometimes a police officer. Is there anything else you do?”

The ruby lined crucifix on her chain, the one that Jake had first noticed when Isabella was dancing, caught the yellow glow from the solitary streetlight. It occurred to Jake the crucifix had not appeared to be much use against Carmilla.

“I’m a nun.”

She saw the look of disbelief and chuckled, albeit not happily.

“Really?” she asked of his puzzlement. “After everything else you have witnessed, you find that the hardest thing to comprehend? How do you think I ended up doing this? Fighting evil is God’s work.”

Jake shrugged. He was sure she had described it as police work earlier. Maybe it was a special alliance. He did not have the energy to

question it., anyway His mind was spent.

Isabella held out her hand for him to shake and he took it.

“Maybe I can buy you a coffee some time?” he asked. “As a way of saying thanks.”

She smiled. It was a warm, friendly smile. Isabella was a good advert for God.

“I’d like that. Bring your wife, too.”

Isabella pulled the coat tight around her, turned and walked away towards the night, training shoes brushing softly on the Victorian cobbles.

Jake took out his phone and deleted the message that he had drafted for his wife when he thought he would never see her again. When he looked up, Isabella was gone.

It was just him, alone in the still night.

There was a rush of air. The solitary streetlight spluttered.

The mobile phone dropped to the ground with a hollow clatter.

Then, the back lane was empty.

Whatever life the lamp above had shown previously was now gone.

Darkness embraced all, save for the flickering neon sign above the exit from the club. Two pink words in a sea of black.

Beautiful Dangerous.

THE END

*Beautiful Dangerous was first published in the USA,  
as part of the Bloodbond series.*

*Paul Speller is a writer and journalist living in the Isle of Man.*

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