



THE  
CONDITION SERIES

VOL. 1

ELAINE GONZALES

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***Tracie***

***2014—Nashville***

You're probably going to think I'm batshit crazy, or something along those lines, but I assure you, I'm not. I'm quite sane.

My grandmother is one hundred and fifteen years old, but you wouldn't know it if you saw her. She still looks like she did when she was in college. She doesn't have that youthful glow about her anymore, but she would definitely have to show identification to get into a bar. My mother and father would be considered elderly if you only knew them by their ages. They're eighty-five and eighty-seven, respectively, but they both appear to be in their prime. In fact, if you saw me with my parents, you'd think we were siblings, except I'm sixty-two years old.

Are you still with me?

Here's the thing: I have this massive secret that is so intense it could get me killed if anyone found out I was telling you. You must keep it to yourself, or we both might get a visit from a ruthless Protector of this confidential information. I'm not exaggerating when I say this person will scare the crap out of you. Believe me, you don't want to be on their radar.

I'm quite serious about this. I trust that you'll keep this between you and me. Okay, here it is. I belong to a secret society that has existed for almost a hundred years. The reason we have to—or, more accurately, choose to—live hidden from your society is because of the affliction we all share. We call it the Condition, and it prevents us from growing old. We pretty much stop aging

by our thirties. That's why I look the same age as my parents and grandparents. There are thousands of us living with this trait, but there's more to it than being ageless—so much more.

First, our immune system is ironclad. I've never once been sick, not even a cold, and I will never succumb to an illness or a deadly disease. Can you imagine that? I'm sure it sounds great, and it is, except it's hard for those of us who are especially empathetic. It's difficult to hear about all the people in the world who are dying from crap like cancer and HIV. I've heard some of us deal with it by volunteering in highly infectious areas of the world, but that has to be tough to sustain when no one can know why the diseases don't affect you. On top of that, we heal at an incredible rate—a noticeable rate. Needless to say, it's imperative we aren't injured in a public place. We have our own physicians because doctors at a Regular's hospital would notice a dozen red flags. But let me be clear about something, this doesn't mean we can't die. It just means it won't be from natural causes.

Here's another implausible attribute—we have ridiculously acute senses. The abilities vary from person to person, but most of our senses are enhanced far beyond your kind. This can be problematic and downright annoying sometimes. Once I learned to control mine, it became manageable. That's not to say I'm able to avoid hearing or smelling something disturbing, but I eventually became less hostile about it.

Oh, and we're strong—frighteningly so if we train properly. However, I'm not motivated enough to work out regularly just so I can knock someone out with one punch. I'm pretty low-key. I don't put myself in situations where that would be a viable option. Also, I don't want to call attention to myself and have a Protector on my tail. No, thank you. It's hard enough living with this secret affliction. I don't need to be looking over my shoulder constantly.

I've managed to live a peaceful but chaotic life. I know that might sound contradictory, but in my world, it's not. It's the most desirable lifestyle. You can't avoid the chaos. There's a lot to deal with—the paranoia, trying to remember your current identity, being ready to move at a moment's notice—but if you accept the challenges you can live a good, long life. I've never had a problem keeping my circumstance hidden, but I've also never lived in one place for more than a few years. Clan members tend to move around quite a bit. Did I mention the Clans? Sorry, I skipped that part. Let's back up.

When the Condition first came about, everyone who was afflicted formed into Clans to help keep the secret. The Clans thrived and multiplied over the years, and so we refer to ourselves as Clan members. The Clans are a complicated bunch, but I'd rather belong to a group of odd fucks than deal with this on my own.

So, where was I? Oh, yes, I've lived in many different places here in the United States and in Canada. Back when the Vietnam War was going on, my Clan moved to Canada to avoid the draft. At the time, my seventy-year-old grandfather, who looked like he was twenty-five, went nuts thinking the government was going to come knocking on our door demanding he and the other men in our Clan join up. The Governing Order, which oversees the entire Clan structure, worked diligently to prevent Clan members from being drafted. It was a very stressful period, so we left, which was fine with me. Canada is a pretty awesome place. I've returned many times over the years—we all have. The Canadians are incredibly laid-back. I don't think they'd care one bit if they found out about us.

I've never traveled overseas—not yet anyway. I'm not sure I would enjoy it. There are a lot more Clans in Europe, but I've heard terrible stories about how dangerous it is there. There's a ton of crazy shit going on between the Protectors and some disgruntled Clan members we refer to as the Insurgents. I hear everyone's on edge and trigger-happy. They'll take you out for the slightest indiscretion. No, thanks. There was this guy I knew from the New York Clan who picked up and moved to Ireland with his girlfriend. I could never do that. I don't think I could be that far away from my Clan. That's way out of my comfort zone. I'm good right here on this side of the Atlantic.

Speaking of relationships, they can be a bitch. I've only had a few. Two were with Clan members, and once I attempted to get involved with a Regular. Let me just say, it wasn't worth the effort. For one thing, I had to be very careful about what I said. I remember one time we were talking about music and he mentioned how much he wished he had lived through the punk era in the seventies. Well, I did! I hung out at CBGB and saw Blondie and the Ramones before the whole scene exploded. But, of course, I couldn't mention that. He thought I was twenty-nine years old. He also thought my name was Gina. That's who I was at the time. See, there's a whole lot of secrecy involved with being a Clan member. It sucks trying to be intimate with someone when you can't be completely honest. I always felt on guard. I could never let myself be who I

really am. Oh, and the sex. I'll be straightforward about this: sex with a Clan member is *way* different than sex with a Regular. Sorry if this makes you feel uncomfortable. I mean, he was good, but Clan members have an intuition that is hard to explain. We feel things differently, both physically and emotionally. My first boyfriend, Steve, was fantastic. He blew my mind in bed. He was really special, and we were close for a long time. Unfortunately, he tried to enlist in the Army after 9/11. The Protectors warned him not to do it, but he did it anyway, and I never heard from him again. That happens a lot within the Clans. If you have a run-in with a Protector and don't comply—bam, you're gone. The Protectors don't mess around when it comes to keeping our secret under wraps.

Steve and I used to talk about getting married and having a family. Thank goodness *that* didn't happen. I'm not a big fan of kids, especially Clan kids. They're the worst. They're super smart and they know it. I knew it when I was a kid, and I'm sure I was a pain in the ass. Clan kids go through this rough period when they're first getting used to their enhancements. Not only are they going through puberty, but they also have to learn to control their senses when all they really want to do is comment loudly about every conversation they're overhearing. My mother would flip out on me because I would blurt out rude, inappropriate things when I smelled something foul, which was basically all the time. I truly believe humans are smelly, disgusting animals. People don't shower as much as they should—I can attest to that. Honestly, though, I don't think I was cut out to be a parent. My sister has four kids. FOUR. She's insane. Why would you want a brood of highly intelligent, super enhanced, over stimulated, ageless misfits? Go figure. Unfortunately, not everyone feels the way I do about children, so the Clans continue to grow, which can't be a good thing. At this rate, we won't be able to keep our secret hidden for much longer.

I bet you're wondering how long I could expect to live since I won't ever grow old or become ill. That's a good question. The answer is—I don't know. No one knows. The oldest Clan member is one hundred and sixteen years old. I hear he's a grumpy fucker, but he's alive and well—and still looks like a young man—so I guess we'll have to wait and see. I don't really think much about my age, except when I'm checking out a hot guy. I know I'm old enough to be his grandmother, but he doesn't know that. I know, I know, I'm a dirty old lady, but I look good, so why the hell not? I'm having a good time. I'm not trying to save the world or change it. I

don't want to use my skills and enhancements to better humanity. I'm not that person. I want to exist peacefully, stay out of trouble, occasionally have some great sex, and enjoy the ride. I believe I'm very fortunate. How many people get to experience an extraordinary gift like this? Thousands, yes, but in a world of billions, that ain't much.

Well, I think that's about it. You may feel the urge to talk about what I've just told you, but I wouldn't recommend it. Remember what I said: our lives will be in danger if anyone finds out about this conversation.

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Tracie pushed open the church door and stepped outside. It was unusually cold for a spring day in Nashville. The confessional was stuffy and warm, so the fresh air immediately roused her senses. She pulled her sweater out of her bag, but then thought better of it and stuffed it back in. She took a deep breath, stretched out her arms, and exhaled loudly.

"Much better," she said happily as she walked toward the street.

She waited for traffic to clear, then crossed over to the other side. She made her way to the diner a few blocks down, where her friend Bobby was waiting for her.

"How'd it go?" he asked when she arrived.

"Great. I'm all good now." She reached for a menu. "Did you order?"

"No, I was waiting for you. How did he react?"

"Who? The priest?"

"Of course, the priest."

"The same way they always react, with a lot of heavy breathing and sighing from behind the screen."

"How many Hail Marys this time?"

"Eight."

“Ha! I said it would be fewer than ten. Jack owes me a twenty.”

“Well, make sure he pays you this time. You didn’t see anyone follow me in, right?”

“Nope, there’s no one around. Do you feel better now?”

“Definitely. It’s always such a relief.”

“Huh,” he said with a bit of attitude.

“What?”

“I still don’t understand why you have to do this. You’re an atheist. What’s up with that?”

“I’ve told you—it has nothing to do with religion.” She put the menu down. “I’m cleansing my soul, Bobby. I have to do it. I’m not like the rest of you. I can’t keep it in. If I don’t tell someone, it’ll eat away at me and I’ll end up in that institution again. You know I don’t want that. I doubt the Protectors would give me another chance.”

“I think that’s the part I don’t understand—why you can’t keep it secret.”

“Fuck if I know. I’ve never been able to stop myself when I feel the urge to tell someone.” Tracie leaned over the table and whispered, “One time, I went up to a cop and told him. He was very nice and listened to me ramble on as he escorted me to the nearest church where an AA meeting was taking place.” She sat back. “That’s where I got the idea to speak to a priest. They’re sworn to secrecy.”

“Do the Protectors know you’re doing it?”

“I don’t think so. I only see them occasionally now, not like before when they were always around. I have to do it. It’s the only way I’ll survive.” She looked up at him. “Are we cool?”

“Of course. Whatcha having?”

“Chicken salad on rye, baby.”

Tracie and Bobby hung out at the diner for about an hour before making their way back to Bobby’s car. He was always so supportive of her, offering her rides and being her wingman



when they went barhopping. She used to have a major crush on him when she would see him at Clan gatherings, and they dated a few times, but there wasn't that spark between them so they became best friends instead.

When they turned the corner to where Bobby's car was parked, they saw a stranger leaning against the passenger door. He was smoking a cigarette and looking damn fine. Bobby stopped, but Tracie straightened up, flipped her hair back, and walked right up to him.

"Hey, gorgeous, please tell me we can help you in some way," she said flirtatiously.

"Hi, Tracie, did you say your Hail Marys today?" he answered with a menacing grin.

*Oh shit.*

**William**

**1970—Philadelphia**

“Excuse me, would you mind turning that down?” William asked politely. He didn’t want to holler, but he wasn’t sure if anyone had heard him.

“Is this bothering you, Gramps?” the young man acknowledged over the music. “Lighten up—it’s only rock and roll.”

Another man who was sitting in front of William turned around.

“Show some respect. The man asked nicely.” He turned back around. “Damn kids,” he mumbled.

“All right, all right. Take it easy,” the young man said as he switched off his radio. “A little Zeppelin never hurt anyone. Man, I hope I die before I get old.” He laughed and nudged his friend. “Music is life, old-timer. You should try it. It might ease your pain.”

William glared at him.

*What does he know about pain? I could write a novel about pain, you little shit.*

The trolley pulled up to Market Street, and the young man got off. William stared out the window and watched as hordes of people briskly crossed the street and made their way into Lit Brothers department store. He remembered how his late wife once belonged to that tribe. The

ladies who spent their Saturday afternoons browsing makeup counters and rummaging through clothes racks, in search of that perfect whatever it was they thought they needed. He missed her.

William stayed on the trolley until he was a few blocks from Washington Square. He enjoyed walking the rest of the way to the park when his gout wasn't flaring up, and it was a beautiful day—the kind of day that sometimes baited him into a melancholy mood, wishing his sweet Kate was with him.

He was almost to the park entrance when a cab pulled up ahead of him and a woman stepped out. When she closed the door, the hem of her dress caught and she jerked back. William lunged forward as if he were close enough to catch her if she fell, but he wasn't. Fortunately, the cab driver was distracted and hadn't budged. The woman tapped on the window and opened the door to free herself. She glanced over at William and smiled kindly, then proceeded into the park.

William couldn't believe his eyes. She looked exactly like a girl he studied with at Cambridge, except that was forty-six years ago. He knew it couldn't be her, but he was astounded at how much she resembled his old friend Marie.

He followed her into the park and tried to catch up to her, but she was moving purposefully, as if she had somewhere to be. He called out to her.

“Miss!”

She kept walking.

“Miss!”

He was sure she could hear him. Now, he was suspicious.

“Marie!”

He noticed a tweak in her gait, but still she didn't stop.

He wasn't used to walking so swiftly, and he began to lose his breath. He called out one more time.

“Marie Valletta! It’s William, William Taylor, from Cambridge!”

She slowed down, which allowed William to reach her.

“Marie, is that you?” he said while catching his breath.

She turned to him, and he gasped loudly.

“You have the wrong person, sir,” she said.

The moment their eyes met, William knew it was Marie.

“You look the same, exactly the same. How can that be? How can you still be young?”

She turned away and began walking again. “I’m so sorry. I’m not who you think I am.”

“Do you honestly believe I wouldn’t know it was you?” William raised his voice. “I’d know those eyes and those lips anywhere. Who do you think you’re fooling?”

She stopped again and stood still for a few seconds before looking up to the sky. She took a deep breath and turned around.

“William, forget you saw me,” she said.

“Oh, Marie, how have you not changed? I don’t understand.”

Marie glanced around the park as if she were looking for someone, then she came up close to him.

“Please, don’t follow me. You mustn’t,” she whispered.

William gently placed his hand on her forearm. “I’m going to follow you until you tell me what happened to you.”

Marie knew he wasn’t going let up. She looked around the park again, this time appearing more concerned. She touched William’s hand, which was still perched on her forearm.

“There’s a café not far from here on Walnut Street.” She pointed to where they had entered the park. “Meet me there in an hour. Get a table in the back.”

William didn't know what to make of it. He wondered whether it was a ploy to abandon him, or would she really show up? He went with his gut feeling.

"I'll be there. Please don't disappoint me. I mean you no harm. I just want to speak to you."

"I'll come. I promise," Marie answered.

William smiled, and his heart fluttered when she smiled back. They released each other and went their separate ways. William headed back toward the park entrance. Marie sped off in the other direction.

Despite his utter confusion over her appearance, William was thrilled to see her. Staring into her youthful eyes made him feel young again, and it reminded him of how much he adored her. Unfortunately, he never had the opportunity to express his feelings for her. They were classmates and good friends, but the entire time he knew her she was involved with a fellow student named Jonathan Cooper. William wasn't part of the same social circle as Jonathan and Marie. They were considered the upper echelon of the student class—the richer-than-rich future scientists and litigators. William spent most of his time with the less fortunate, which at Cambridge meant those who had to work to earn their keep at the prestigious institution. Marie didn't care much for social standings, though. She treated William with respect. She enjoyed his company, and he made her laugh, hysterically sometimes. They remained close friends until Jonathan graduated and she moved to the States with him.

At first, Marie made an effort to keep in touch with William. She wrote to him regularly, which is how he found out she had married her beau. William wasn't surprised, but there was still a twinge of emotion over it. She had her first child not long after that, and the letters became less frequent. Then they stopped completely. He had assumed her life had become more hectic and she no longer had time to write to an old friend.

After returning home to Chicago, William met Kate and fell hard for her. He knew right away she was the one for him, and he never let go. Still, he often wondered about Marie and how her life had turned out. Apparently, quite well by the looks of it, he thought as he hobbled along. The race to catch up to Marie had caused his gout to return. He tried not to rush since he had an hour to get to the café, but he was excited and couldn't help keeping up a healthy pace.

When Marie arrived, William was on his second cup of coffee. He watched as she made her way toward him, and he knew, without a doubt, it was his friend. He sprang up and pulled out the chair opposite from him.

“Thank you,” she said.

William sat down and gazed in awe at her.

“How, Marie? How did this happen?” he asked.

“Please, William, do not ask me how. I’m not able to discuss it. It happened a long time ago and the details are irrelevant now. You mustn’t tell anyone. It could be dangerous for both of us if anyone knew about me.”

“Dangerous? I don’t understand. What’s happened to you is a miracle. It could save lives, don’t you think?”

“No, it wouldn’t, and it’s not what you think. This isn’t a blessing. It can be torture at times, especially when someone recognizes me.”

William sunk back in his chair—that hurt. He didn’t mean to cause her pain.

“I’m sorry if this is torture for you,” he said. “I’m just happy to see my old friend.”

Marie realized she hurt his feelings and reached out for his hand.

“No, that’s not what I meant. It’s just that ...” She put her head down. “I have to be cautious when I come into town. Not everyone is as cordial as you, William.”

He put his hand on top of hers. “You have nothing to fear with me. You can trust me.”

Marie knew she could trust him, and she was relieved. She ordered a cup of coffee, and they began catching up. As much as William wanted to know the details of her circumstance, he didn’t bring it up again and instead followed her lead in the conversation.

Marie tried to keep the focus on William. She preferred to be the recipient of information, and William obliged. He told her the story of his beloved Kate and their misfortunes. They had desperately wanted a family. They tried for years but had lost three babies shortly after birth,

each one to a congenital disorder. Doctors eventually told them to stop trying. They were heartbroken, and William had spent years caring for his wife. She never fully recovered, but they lived peacefully until she died five years ago from pneumonia.

Marie was devastated to learn about William's hardships. She would never know that kind of pain. Her loved ones were healthy and would be for the rest of their lives. She couldn't hide her overwhelming empathy. William tried to comfort her.

"Don't be sad for me," he said. "I've had a good life, better than most. I've loved, deeply. I'm aware of how special that is, and it will always be mine. No one can take it away from me." He patted her hand. "And now I've become reacquainted with you. I'm the luckiest man alive."

Marie smiled. "You are the *loveliest* man alive, William. You always were, I remember. Do you have any other family here with you?"

"No. I have a few family members in Chicago, but I don't see them often."

Marie took William's hand in hers. "My old friend, you will never be alone again. I believe there's a reason we found each other. I promise I will always be here for you."

William was overjoyed. "Does this mean we're friends again?" he winked.

"Absolutely."

Marie kept her promise and stayed in touch with William. She lived north of Philadelphia and would phone him when she came into town. They would stroll Washington Square, enjoy a meal together, or sometimes Marie would visit him at his home when he wasn't well enough to get around.

William loved those visits most of all. They would drink tea and reminisce about England, and Marie would read to him. He thoroughly enjoyed the intimacy. He missed it, and he knew Kate would appreciate how Marie looked after him.

Yet, despite how comfortable she appeared to be with him, Marie continued to keep her life away from him a mystery. He knew she was still married to Jonathan and had five children, three

girls and two boys, but she rarely mentioned them. If she did, it was in reference to how she felt about them and how much she loved them. She never spoke of them in specifics. William found it odd, but he had no intention of prying. He respected her too much. He loved spending time with her and didn't want to do anything to spoil it.

Two years passed, and their friendship became a lifeline for William. Despite growing older and becoming frail, his spirit never waned. When Marie was around, he breathed deeper, smiled brighter, and moved with just a bit more effort. Nevertheless, Marie knew what was coming. William was slowly deteriorating right before her eyes, and she couldn't stop it. She brought in the best doctors and hired nurses to watch over him around the clock, but it was no use. He wasn't ill. His body was shutting down.

When it was determined nothing more could be done, Marie made sure William was comfortable and never left his side.

"Marie, my dear, you must not stay all night again. I'm sure your family misses you," William whispered.

"My family understands. I'm where I need to be, friend."

William smiled. He didn't want her to go, but he often wondered what her family thought about all the time she spent with him. Surely, they must be concerned, or curious at the very least, he thought. He wanted so badly to question her about her family and her condition, but he swore to himself he wouldn't do it, even if it meant never knowing.

Marie, on the other hand, knew how much he wanted to know, and she wrestled over whether to tell him. As the end grew near, she knew she couldn't let him die without knowing the truth.

One evening after they had dinner and William was tucked into bed, Marie finally opened up about her affliction. She explained how it happened when she was at Cambridge. A group of friends, including Jonathan, attempted to create a serum that would ease the aging process in humans. It wasn't their intention to stop aging completely, but that's what happened. She told him about the Clans, and how they've kept their circumstance a secret for almost fifty years. She revealed everything.



“Why do you look so worried?” he asked her.

“The Clans are growing. They’re becoming more volatile. It’s risky to even speak of it.”

William lifted his head and looked around the room. “I think we’re safe here in my bedroom, dear.”

Marie managed a smile.

“Let me just say how relieved I am,” William went on. “My imagination had gone down a dark path recently, and I was starting to wonder whether you and your family were fugitives or part of a cult.”

“Oh, goodness no, William.” She laughed. “We’re not criminals. We’re hiding for our own safety, as well as the good of mankind. What we created—it would not be wise to share it with the world. Only bad things happen when humans are given gifts of this magnitude. We could never guarantee it wouldn’t be used for the wrong reasons, or manipulated into something evil. We can’t take that chance.”

“I understand. Too bad we didn’t meet up when I was younger. Our story would have a much different ending.”

“Indeed, William, but maybe this is how our story was intended to play out—with me by your side, holding your hand and easing your pain. This is what I was meant to do, my friend. That’s why I stopped for you. I know that now.”

Marie reached over and wiped a tear that was trickling down William’s cheek.

“You’re my angel,” he said softly.

“I am.”

William died in his sleep that night while Marie held his hand. Even though she believed he was in a better place, she cried for hours. She knew that pain now, that terrible feeling of loss, and it was worse than she imagined. She felt it deep inside of her, and it seemed to settle in her bones. She knew it would never leave her.

When the sun came up the next morning, she didn't want to let go of him. He looked like he was sleeping. She leaned over him and straightened his hair, brushing it to the side with her fingers. She ran her hand down his cheek.

“Good-bye, my friend.”

***Rory***

***1981—London***

Rory stared curiously at the dark clouds above him. He hadn't noticed the precipitation in the air, but it looked like the sky was about to open up. He could smell it now.

Moments earlier, when he walked out of Hyde Park, he was oblivious to the weather—and everything else for that matter. He had just left an anti-nuclear rally and was preoccupied with the topic at hand. He was on his way to meet a friend for lunch, so his hunger pains were also a distraction. Consequently, when he was struck, it caught him completely by surprise. All of a sudden, he was lying in the street, staring up at the ominous sky. Then, faces began appearing.

“Is he dead?”

“Somebody call an ambulance!”

“Oh my God, look at his arm!”

Rory attempted to pull himself up.

“Don't move, dude. Someone is phoning for help.” A young man tried to keep him down.

“That won't be necessary,” Rory groaned. He sat up and tried to get his bearings. He had lost all sense of his surroundings. It took a few seconds before he realized what had happened—he had been hit by a car.

He glanced around and was accosted by gawking faces.

“Should you really be sitting up?”

“He might be in shock.”

Rory knew he had to get out of there before the authorities arrived. He struggled to get to his feet, pushing away anyone who tried to help or keep him down. When he stood up, his arm felt like it was on fire. He looked down and saw the blood-soaked sleeve of his denim jacket. He hunched over and cradled his damaged forearm as a stream of thick blood dripped from his fingers.

“Good lord!” a woman shrieked before falling to the ground.

When everyone’s attention diverted to the woman, Rory quickly made his escape. The crowd parted in horror as he stumbled past, bloody and broken. Once he was free from the commotion, he gripped his arm and picked up speed. He could hear people scurrying and shouting for him to stop, but he kept going. He had to get away. The consequences would be much worse if he were caught and transported to a hospital.

Despite the excruciating pain, Rory sprinted until he was sure he was far enough away. When he heard the sirens in the distance, he turned onto a side road. He was still disoriented, but he knew he couldn’t stop. By now his mangled arm was sopped in blood. He couldn’t go on much further in that condition. He searched frantically for somewhere to compose himself.

The rain-soaked clouds loomed directly above him, waiting for just the right moment to burst. As the sky grew darker, Rory could feel the weight of the humidity on him. It was almost too much to bear. He stopped periodically to alleviate the strain—completely unaware of the macabre trail of blood he was leaving behind.

He was on the verge of collapsing when he spotted a small car lot tucked between two buildings. It was secluded and deserted, except for two vehicles parked next to each other near the back. He staggered across the lot, barely making it to the space between the cars before falling to his knees.

The pain was overwhelming. It was coming not only from his arm but also from his chest. He felt along his ribs and winced.

*Oh no.*

Panic was setting in, but Rory tried to remain calm. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back just as the rain began to fall. The cool water trickling down his face gave him a momentary feeling of relief. He knew he was badly injured and that he needed help. He could feel his heart pounding, and it hurt. He took a shaky, deep breath and opened his eyes.

Rory wasn't familiar with the back roads of London. He grew up in a Clan near Dover. He visited often but not enough to know how to skulk around the city unnoticed. Then, it dawned on him that he couldn't be far from where he was supposed to meet his friend for lunch. The pub was only a few blocks from the park. He wasn't sure where he was, but if he could find a main road, he might be able to figure out which way to go.

Carefully, Rory freed his good arm from his now-drenched jacket while keeping the other one secured in its sleeve. He then wrapped the jacket around his injury, concealing the bloodstains and forming a protective cast. He clenched his teeth, gripped the bumper of one of the cars, and stood up. He was about to go forth when a voice from above startled him.

"Oi! You need a doctor?"

He looked up and saw a young girl in the window of the adjacent building. He had no idea how long she'd been there. She flicked her cigarette ash and smiled at him.

"No, I can manage," Rory answered as audibly as he could muster.

"You sure? You seem a bit wonky," she hollered.

He waved her off and continued on. The narrow street was wet and empty. The rain continued to stream steadily, showing no sign of letting up, but Rory barely noticed. He attempted to disregard the immense pain by concentrating on every step he took. He supported his arm and kept his demeanor as normal as possible. At times, he didn't think he would make it, but he didn't falter.

Rory knew he was close when he heard vehicles sloshing over water-soaked roads. He followed the sound until he reached a busy street. He peeked around the corner and was surprised to see he was only a few blocks down from where he had been hit. After what seemed

like miles, he hadn't gone very far at all. He was able to see the police on the side of the road, but the rest of the street was obscured. He pulled back and leaned up against a building, taking a moment to gather himself. He was only a short distance from the pub and his friend.

The rain turned out to be a blessing. Everyone walked hurriedly under umbrellas, paying close attention to the saturated ground beneath them. Rory swallowed hard then stepped out onto the sidewalk. He set off in the direction away from the crime scene with his head down low. He moved swiftly while carefully navigating the oncoming pedestrians.

He was only a block away from the pub when he stumbled and caught himself against a light post. His vision was blurry from the barrage of rain that was still coming down, and the weight of his soaked denim jacket on his wound was unforgiving. A few passersby gave him curious looks, which he ignored and pushed on.

When he arrived at the pub, he walked up slowly and peered in the front window. He didn't want to enter. He had a feeling he looked worse than he felt, which was pretty awful. He spotted his friend Sam sitting at a table. He pulled his shoulders back, stepped into view, and stared intently until Sam saw him. The shock on his friend's face told him he was right about his appearance.

"Jesus, Rory, what happened to you?" Sam exclaimed when he stepped outside.

Rory practically fell into his arms. "I think I was hit by a car. I'm hurt bad. You have to get me out of here."

Sam took his jacket off and put it around his friend. "Come on, my car is right over there."

Sam held Rory up as they made their way through the rain. Sam carefully placed him in the front seat then went around and got in.

"Where are you hurt?" he asked, apparently unsure because of all the blood splattered on Rory's clothing.

"All over, but my arm is smashed." Rory began unwrapping the jacket. Sam's color faded with every blood-soaked layer Rory removed. When his arm was revealed, Rory was as horrified as Sam. Two bones jutted out through the skin right below his elbow.

“We’ve got to call the distress line,” Rory said frantically. “This is going to start mending itself. I can’t have bones sticking out of my arm!”

“I’m more concerned about all the blood you’ve lost. You’re whiter than a fucking sheet. I can’t remember the number.”

“It’s in my wallet.”

Clan members were forbidden from going to a hospital or seeing a Regular physician. Because of their unnatural healing abilities, any injury could incur unwanted attention. Members were taught at an early age to keep the Condition hidden—at any cost. They were instructed to phone for help if they were injured or in need of protection.

“You have to make the call for me, Sam. I don’t think I can get out of the car.”

“There’s a phone in the pub. Here, cover up your arm. Someone might see you through the window. I’ll be right back.”

Sam rushed back into the pub. Rory was wrecked. He began shivering beneath his wet clothes, which intensified the pain throughout his body. He laid his head back and tried to temper his body. The windows in the car quickly fogged up, and he began to feel like he was in a dream. He could feel himself losing consciousness.

*What’s taking so long?*

It was only a few minutes before Sam returned. “Someone’s on the way,” he said. “Here, I brought you some water.”

Rory could barely turn his head toward his friend. Sam put his hand behind Rory’s neck and lifted him so he could have a drink.

“Hold tight, mate. Everything’s going to be okay.”

When Rory came to, the car was moving, and a stranger was behind the wheel.

“Who are you?” Rory mumbled.

“Don’t talk. We’re almost there,” the man said.

“Where? Where are you taking me?”

“Shhh, we’ll have you fixed up and good as new.”

“Are you American?” Rory thought for sure he was dreaming.

The stranger laughed. “Yeah, man. I am. How are you feeling? Are the drugs kicking in?”

“Oh, yeah—I think so.” Rory smiled. “What did you give me?”

“Some sweet stuff. We’re here.”

Rory looked out the window and watched as they drove into an underground garage. As the light faded, so did he.

“Rory, wake up. Come on, love, can you open your eyes?”

The woman’s voice sounded so lovely. Rory didn’t want to wake up.

“Come on, Rory. Open up.”

Rory slowly opened his eyes. “Am I dead?” he whispered.

“Welcome back,” the nurse said, grinning. “No, you’re not dead.” She motioned for Sam to come closer.

“Rory, it’s Sam. Can you hear me?”

“Yeah. Is everything cool?”

“You bet. You’re going to be just fine.”

“Did they cut off my arm?”

He heard a man laugh in the distance.

“No, your arm is still attached,” Sam answered.



Rory squinted until his friend came into focus, then he looked around the room.

“Where am I?”

“You’re in one of the Governing Order’s facilities. A Protector brought you here,” Sam explained.

“Bloody hell. That was a Protector in the car?”

“Yeah, he’s a pretty chill guy. He’s American.”

“Hey, Rory,” the man said as he walked up to the bed. “Your friend told me how you made it to the pub. You were in pretty bad shape. Well done, buddy.”

Rory wasn’t sure how to react. He was leery of the Protectors. He knew a few Clan members who’d had run-ins with them, which didn’t end well.

“I thought I was going to die,” he muttered.

“You almost did. Luckily, you made it just in time. The doctor was still able to reset your arm. You’ve got a few broken ribs, but you should be back to normal in no time.”

“He was afraid he was going to lose his arm or have the bones sticking out permanently,” Sam teased. “He said he could actually feel it healing.”

“I’m sure he could. That’s a strange sensation. You never forget that feeling.”

“Now what?” Rory asked.

“Just take it easy. You can stay here until you feel up to going home.”

“I guess I should thank you,” Rory said reluctantly.

“Don’t sweat it. That’s what we’re here for, to watch over you.”

Rory looked at him skeptically.

“What? You don’t think that’s what we do? Is there something you’re not telling me?”

Sam began to squirm.

“No, not at all,” Rory answered. “You saved my life. It’s all cool.”

“Good. I’ll let you get some rest then. It was a pleasure meeting you, Rory. Look both ways next time, okay?”

Sam laughed nervously as the man left the room.

“Damn, I nearly shit myself right then,” Sam whispered excitedly. “I can’t believe we met a Protector. Have you ever met one before?”

“No. I’ve made a point of avoiding them.”

“He seemed like a proper bloke. He was telling me about American football.”

“I’m sure he’s a wonderful guy,” Rory said sarcastically.

“Hey, he did save your life. They’re not all bad, I suppose. Can I get you anything?” Sam asked, trying to change the subject.

“Yeah, I’m bloody starving. Get your mate a bite to eat, would you?”

“Right. I’m on it,” Sam piped, then set off to find some food.

Rory closed his eyes and stretched his neck back into the pillow. He didn’t feel so bad, but he attributed that to the meds. He couldn’t help wondering what would’ve happened had he not made it to Sam in time. Would the Protector have been as friendly if Rory had ended up in a Regular’s hospital?

*I guess I’ll never know.*

## PROTECTOR

The debut novel by Elaine Gonzales

Veronica Farrell is a young, successful American businesswoman who blends in easily with London's hip, millennial crowd.

At least, that's what she wants you to believe.

She's actually an eighty-nine year old woman who was born into a secret society of Clans whose members are bound by a remarkable affliction—they stop aging by the time they turn thirty.

Veronica is completely devoted to the Clans, willing to die for their survival. When she meets Jude, a mysterious Clan member from her past, their immediate and profound attraction blindsides her, and she allows herself to fall in love with him. Jude doesn't fit into her world, however. He turned his back on the Clans years ago.

Veronica knows she'll eventually have to choose, and she desperately tries to avoid the inevitable, but time runs out when the fate of the Clans comes into play.

Will she abandon her life's work for a peaceful existence that has always eluded her, or will she stay on point and risk losing her soul in the process?

*Protector* is a sexy, suspenseful, unconventional love story set in a violent shadow world that is defined by paranoia and deception.

**Available now.**

### **About the author**

Elaine Gonzales graduated from the University of Arizona with a journalism degree and worked at The Arizona Republic for 17 years. She's an insane sports enthusiast, pop culture/news junkie and an unapologetic fan girl. *Protector* is her first novel.

You can connect with her here: **@MsLaineyG** (Twitter), **mslaineyg** (Instagram), **facebook.com/mslaineyg**, and **elainegonzales.com**.