

# Evernight

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Evernight

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Children's Books, a division of HarperCollins Publishers,  
1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10019.  
[www.harperteen.com](http://www.harperteen.com)

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Gray, Claudia.

Evernight / Claudia Gray. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Summary: Sixteen-year-old Bianca, a new girl at the  
sinister Evernight boarding school, finds herself drawn  
to another outsider, Lucas, but dark forces threaten  
to tear them apart and destroy Bianca's entire world.

ISBN 978-0-06-128439-7 (trade bdg.)

ISBN 978-0-06-128443-4 (lib. bdg.)

[1. Boarding schools—Fiction. 2. Schools—Fiction. 3.  
Vampires—Fiction. 4. Horror stories.] I. Title.

PZ7.G77625Ev 2008

2007036733

[Fic]—dc22

CIP

AC

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Typography by Andrea Vandergrift

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



# Prologue

THE BURNING ARROW THUDED INTO THE WALL.

*Fire.* The old, dry wood of the meetinghouse ignited in an instant. Dark, oily smoke filled the air, scratching my lungs and making me choke. Around me, my new friends cried out in shock before grabbing weapons, preparing to fight for their lives.

*This is because of me.*

Arrow after arrow sliced through the air, stoking the flames higher. Through the haze of ash, I desperately sought Lucas's eyes. I knew he would protect me no matter what, but he was in danger, too. If something happened to Lucas while he was trying to rescue me, I could never forgive myself.

Coughing from the soot-thick air, I grabbed Lucas's hand and ran with him toward the door.

But they were ready for us.

Silhouetted against the flames, a dark, forbidding line of figures stood just beyond the edge of the meetinghouse. None of them brandished weapons; they didn't have to in order to make their threat clear. They had come for me. They had come to punish Lucas for breaking their rules. They had come to kill.

*This is all happening because of me. If Lucas dies, it will be my fault.*

There was nowhere to go, no place to run. We couldn't remain here, not with the blaze around us roaring, already so hot that it stung my skin. Soon the ceiling would collapse and crush us all.

Outside, the vampires waited.

# Chapter One

IT WAS THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL, WHICH MEANT it was my last chance to escape.

I didn't have a backpack full of survival gear, a wallet thick with cash that I could use to buy myself a plane ticket somewhere, or a friend waiting for me down the road in a getaway car. Basically, I didn't have what most sane people would call "a plan."

But it didn't matter. There was no way I was going to remain at Evernight Academy.

The muted morning light was still new in the sky as I wriggled into my jeans and grabbed a warm black sweater—this early in the morning, and this high in the hills, even September felt cold. I knotted my long red hair into a make-shift bun and stepped into my hiking boots. It felt important to be very quiet, even though I didn't

have to worry about my parents waking up. They weren't morning people, to say the least. They'd sleep like the dead until the alarm clock woke them, and that wouldn't be for another couple of hours.

That would give me a good head start.

Outside my bedroom window, the stone gargoyle glared at me, fangs framing his open grimace. I grabbed my denim jacket and stuck my tongue out at him. "Maybe you like hanging out at the Fortress of the Damned," I muttered. "You're welcome to it."

Before I left, I made my bed. Usually it took a lot of nagging to get me to do that, but I wanted to. I knew I was going to freak my parents out badly enough today, so straightening the covers felt like I was making it up to them a little. Probably they wouldn't see it that way, but I went ahead. As I plumped up the pillows, I had a sudden strange flash of something I'd dreamed the night before, as vivid and immediate as though I were still dreaming:

*A flower the color of blood.*

*Wind howled through the trees all around me, whipping the branches in every direction. The sky overhead churned, thick with roiling clouds. I brushed my windswept hair from my face. I only wanted to look at the flower.*

*Each rain-beaded petal was vividly red, slender, and blade-like, the way some tropical orchids are. Yet the flower was lush and full, too, and it clung close to the branch like a rose. The flower was the most exotic, mesmerizing thing I'd ever seen. It had to be mine.*

Why did that memory make me shiver? It was only a dream. I took a deep breath and focused. It was time to go.

My messenger bag was ready; I'd loaded it up the night before. Just a few things—a book, sunglasses, and a little cash in case I needed to go all the way to Riverton, which was the closest thing to human civilization in the area. That would keep me occupied for the day.

See, I wasn't running away. Not for real, where you make a break and assume a new identity and, I don't know, join the circus or something. No, I was making a statement. Ever since my parents first suggested that we come to Evernight Academy—them as teachers, me as a student—I'd been against it. We'd lived in the same small town my whole life, and I'd attended the same school with the same people since I was five years old. That was just the way I wanted it. There are people who enjoy meeting strangers, who can strike up conversations and make friends quickly, but I'd never been one of

those people. Anything but.

It's funny—when people call you “shy,” they usually smile. Like it's cute, some funny little habit you'll grow out of when you're older, like the gaps in your grin when your baby teeth fall out. If they knew how it felt—really being shy, not just unsure at first—they wouldn't smile. Not if they knew how the feeling knots up your stomach or makes your palms sweat or robs you of the ability to say anything that makes sense. It's not cute at all.

My parents never smiled when they said it. They were smarter than that, and I always felt like they understood, until they decided that age sixteen was the right time for me to get past it somehow. What better starting place than a boarding school—particularly with them along for the ride?

I could see where they were coming from, sort of. Still, that was theory. The first moment we'd come up the drive at Evernight Academy—and I'd seen this huge, hulking, Gothic stone monstrosity—I'd known that there was no way I could possibly go to school here. Mom and Dad hadn't listened. I would have to make them listen.

On tiptoe, I eased my way through the small

faculty apartment my family had shared for the past month. Behind the closed door of my parents' bedroom, I could hear my mother snoring lightly. I shouldered my bag, slowly turned the doorknob, and started downstairs. We lived at the very top of one of Evernight's towers, which sounds cooler than it is. This meant I had to make my way down steps that had been carved out of rock more than two centuries ago, long enough to be worn and uneven. The long spiral staircase had few windows and the lights weren't yet on, making for a dark, difficult trip.

*As I reached out for the flower, the hedge rustled. The wind, I thought, but it wasn't the wind. No, the hedge was growing—growing so quickly that I could see it happening. Vines and brambles pushed from the leaves in a tangled snarl. Before I could run, the hedge had almost surrounded me, walling me in behind sticks and leaves and thorns.*

The last thing I needed was to start flashing back to my nightmares. I took a deep breath and kept going downstairs until I reached the great hall on the ground floor. It was a majestic space, built to inspire or at least impress: marble-tiled floors, high arched ceiling, and stained glass windows that stretched from floor to rafter, each in a different kaleidoscope pattern—save one, right in the center, which was clear glass. Setup for the day's events must

have been completed the night before, because a podium stood ready for the headmistress to greet the students who were arriving later today. Nobody else seemed to be awake yet, which meant that there was no one to stop me. A hard tug opened the heavy, carved outside door, and then I was free.

Early morning fog blanketed the world in bluish-gray as I walked across the grounds. When they built Evernight Academy in the 1700s, this country had been wilderness. Even though small towns now dotted the distant countryside, none of them were very close to Evernight; and despite the hillside views and the thick forests, nobody had ever built a house nearby. Who could blame them for not wanting to be anywhere near that place? I glanced behind me at the school's tall stone towers, both of them coiled with the twisted forms of gargoyles, and shivered. Within a few more steps, they began to fade into the fog.

*Evernight loomed behind me, the stone walls of its high towers the only barrier the thorns couldn't break. I should have run for the school, but I didn't. Evernight was more dangerous than the thorns, and, besides, I wasn't going to leave the flower behind.*

My nightmare was starting to feel more real than reality. Uneasy, I turned from the school and started to jog, fleeing the grounds and van-

ishing into the forest.

*It's all going to be over soon, I told myself as I hurried through the underbrush, fallen pine branches crackling beneath my feet. Even though I was only a few hundred feet from the front door, it felt like much farther; the thick fog made it seem as though I were already deep in the woods. Mom and Dad will wake up and realize that I'm gone. They'll finally see that I can't take it, that they can't make me do this. They'll come looking for me, and, okay, they'll be mad that I scared them, but they'll understand. They always understand in the end, right? And then we'll leave. We'll get away from Evernight Academy and never, ever come back.*

My heart pounded faster. With every step I took away from Evernight Academy, I felt more afraid, not less. Before, when I'd come up with this scheme, it had seemed like such a good idea. Like it couldn't fail. Now that it was real, and I was alone in the forest running into a wilderness I didn't know, I wasn't so sure. Maybe I was running away for nothing. Maybe they'd drag me back there no matter what.

*Thunder rumbled. My heart beat faster. I turned away from Evernight for the last time and looked back at the flower as it trembled upon its branch. A single petal was torn away by the wind. Pushing my hands through the thorns, I felt lashes of pain across my skin, but I kept going, determined.*

*But when my fingertip touched the flower, it instantly darkened, withering and drying as each petal turned black.*

I broke into a run, heading east, trying to put some distance between me and Evernight. My nightmare wouldn't leave me alone: It was that place; it had spooked me, made me scared and hollow. If I got away from there, I'd be okay. Panting, I looked behind me to see how far I'd gone—

And I saw him. A man in the woods, half concealed by the fog, maybe fifty yards from me, wearing a long, dark coat. The second I laid eyes on him, he started running after me.

Until that moment, I hadn't known what fear was. Shock jolted through me, cold as ice water, and I found out just how fast I could really run. I didn't scream—there was no point, none, because I'd gone off into the woods so nobody could find me, which was the dumbest thing I'd ever done and looked like it would be the last. I hadn't even brought my cell phone, because there was no service up here. There was no rescue coming. I had to run like hell.

I could hear his footsteps, snapping branches, crunching leaves. He was getting closer. Oh, God, he was fast. How could anybody run that fast?

*They taught you how to defend yourself,* I thought. *You were supposed to know what to do in a situation like this!* I couldn't remember. I couldn't think. Branches tore at the sleeves of my jacket and snagged the strands of hair that had fallen loose from my bun. I stumbled over a stone, and my teeth sank into my tongue, but I kept running. He was even nearer to me now, too near. I had to go faster. I couldn't go any faster.

"Unh!" I choked as he tackled me, and we fell. The ground slammed into my back, and his weight pressed down on me, his legs tangled up with mine. His hand closed over my mouth, and I pulled my arm free. At my old school, in the self-defense workshop, they always said to go for the eyes, seriously just poke the guy's eyes out. I always thought I could do that if I had to, in order to save myself or someone else, but as terrified as I was I wasn't sure I could stand it. I arched my fingers, trying to screw up my nerve.

At that moment, the guy whispered, "Did you see who was after you?"

For a few seconds, I just stared at him. He lifted his hand from my mouth so I could answer. His body was heavy atop mine, and the world seemed to be spinning. I finally managed to say, "You mean, besides you?"

"Me?" He had no idea what I was talking about. Furtively, he cast a glance behind us, as if on the defensive. "You were running from someone—weren't you?"

"I was just running. There was nobody after me except you."

"You mean, you thought—" The guy jerked back from me that second, so that I was free. "Oh, hell. I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to— Man, I must have scared you to death."

"You were trying to *help*?" I had to say it before I could believe it.

He nodded quickly. His face was still close to mine, too close, blocking out the rest of the world. Nothing seemed to exist except us and the swirling fog. "I know I must've freaked you out, and I'm sorry. I really thought—"

His words weren't helping; I was getting more dizzy, not less. I needed air, quiet, something that I couldn't think of while he was so close to me. I pointed a finger and said something I'd hardly ever said to anyone in my life, definitely never to a stranger and certainly not to the single most terrifying stranger I'd ever met: "You—just—shut up."

He shut up.

With a sigh, I let my head flop back upon the

g r o u n d .

I dug the heels of my hands into my eyes, pressing down so that I saw red. The taste of blood was thick in my mouth, and my heart was still thumping so hard that my rib cage seemed to shake. I could have peed myself, which would have been just about the only way to make this scenario more humiliating than it already was. Instead, I kept taking deep breaths, one after the other, until I felt like I was strong enough to sit up.

When I did, the guy was still there next to me. I managed to ask, "Why did you tackle me?"

"I thought we needed to take cover. To hide from whoever was chasing you, but that turned out to be, uh"—he looked embarrassed—"nobody."

He ducked his head, and I got a good look at him for the first time. There hadn't exactly been time for me to notice anything about him before; when your first impression of somebody is "psycho killer," you don't take time to analyze the details. Now, though, I could see that he wasn't a grown man like I'd assumed. Although he was tall and broad shouldered, he was young, maybe about my age. He had straight, golden-brown hair that fell across his forehead, mussed from

the chase. His jaw was strong and angular, and he had a solid, muscular body and amazingly dark green eyes.

But the most remarkable thing of all was what he was wearing beneath his long black coat: battered black boots, black wool trousers, and a dark red V-necked sweater emblazoned with a crest—two ravens embroidered on either side of a silver sword. The crest of Evernight.

"You're a student," I said, "here at the school."

"About to be, anyway." He spoke quietly, as if he were worried about scaring me again. "You?"

I nodded as I shook my tangled hair loose and started to pin it up again. "This is my first year. My parents got jobs as teachers here, so I'm stuck."

That seemed to strike him as odd, because he frowned at me, and his green eyes were suddenly searching and unsure. In an instant, though, he had recovered and held out his hand. "Lucas Ross."

"Oh. Hey." It felt weird, introducing myself to somebody I'd thought was trying to kill me five minutes before. His hand was broad and cool, and he gripped mine firmly. "I'm Bianca Olivier."

"Your pulse is racing," Lucas murmured. He studied my face intently, and I felt nervous again—but in a much better way. "Okay, if you weren't running from an attacker, why were you running like that? Because that didn't look like a morning jog to me."

I would've lied if I could have thought of any plausible excuse, but I couldn't. "I got up early to—well, to try and run away."

"Your parents treat you bad? Hurt you?"

"No! Nothing like that." I felt so offended, but I realized that of course that was what Lucas would have to assume. Why else would a totally sane person be running through the woods before the sun was completely up like she was escaping with her life? We'd only just met, so maybe he still counted me as totally sane. I decided not to mention the nightmare flash-backs, because that would probably tip the balance toward crazy. "But I don't want to go to school here. I liked our hometown, and, besides, Evernight Academy is— it's so—"

"Spooky as hell."

"Yeah."

"Where were you going to go? Do you have a job lined up, something like that?"

My cheeks were flushed, and not just from

the exertion of the run. "Um, no. I wasn't really running away. Just making a statement. Sort of. I thought if I did this, my parents would finally get how much I don't want to be here, and maybe we could leave."

Lucas blinked for a second, then started to grin. His smile changed all the weird pent-up energy inside me, transforming it from fear into curiosity, even excitement. "Like me with my slingshot."

"What?"

"Back when I was five, I thought my mom was being mean to me, so I decided to run away. Carried my slingshot with me because I was a big strong man, you see. Could take care of myself. I believe I also took a flashlight and a package of Oreos."

Despite my embarrassment, I couldn't help smiling. "I think you packed better than I did."

"I swaggered out of the house where we were staying and took myself all the way to . . . the far corner of the backyard. There I made my stand. Stayed out there all day, until it started to rain. I hadn't thought about taking an umbrella."

"The best laid plans." I sighed.

"I know. It's tragic. I came back in, all wet and my stomach aching from eating about twenty

Oreos, and my mom—who is a smart lady even if she drives me nuts—well, she acted like nothing had happened.” Lucas shrugged. “Which is what your parents are going to do, too. You know that, right?”

“I do now.” My throat tightened with disappointment. I’d known the truth all along, really. I’d simply had to do *something*, more to act out my own frustration than to send a message to my parents.

Then Lucas asked a question that astonished me: “Do you want out of here for real?”

“Like—run away? Really run away?”

Lucas nodded, and he looked serious.

He wasn’t, though; he couldn’t be. No doubt he had asked me that to snap me back to reality. I admitted, “No, I don’t. I’ll go back. Get ready for school like a good girl.”

There was that grin again. “Nobody said anything about being a good girl.”

The way he said that made me feel warm and soft inside. “It’s just—Evernight Academy—I don’t think I’ll ever belong there.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that. Might be a good thing, not belonging there.” He looked at me, serious and intent, like he thought he had another idea about where I might belong. Either this

guy really liked me, or I was inventing things in my head because I wanted him to like me. I was much too inexperienced to guess which.

Hurriedly, I pushed myself to my feet. As Lucas stood also, I asked, “So what were you doing? When you saw me?”

“Like I said, I thought you were in trouble. There are some rough characters up in these parts. Not everybody has self-control.” He brushed a few pine needles from his sweater. “I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions. My instincts got the best of me. Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay, honestly. I realize you were trying to help. I meant, before you saw me. Orientation doesn’t start for another few hours. It’s really early. They told students to arrive around ten A.M.”

“I’ve never been very good at playing by the rules.”

That was interesting. “So—you’re a morning person, getting a jump on the day?”

“Hardly. I haven’t gone to bed yet.” He had a fantastic grin, and I’d already noticed that he knew how to use it. I didn’t mind. “Anyway, my mom couldn’t bring me herself. She’s away, on business, I guess you’d say. I caught the red-eye train in and thought I’d walk up here first. Get the

lay of the land. Rescue any damsels in distress."

When I remembered how fast Lucas had been running after me, and realized that he'd been doing that in an attempt to save my life, the memory changed. The fear was gone, and now it made me smile. "Why did you come to Evernight? I'm stuck here because of my parents, but you could probably have gone someplace else. Someplace better. So, like, anywhere else."

Lucas honestly didn't seem to know how to answer. He pushed branches back as we kept walking through the forest, keeping any of them from scraping my face. Nobody had ever cleared a path for me before. "It's a long story."

"I'm not in a hurry to go back. Besides, we've got a few hours to kill before orientation."

He lowered his head, but kept his eyes fixed on me. There was something undeniably sexy about that move, though I wasn't sure he meant it that way. His eyes were almost exactly the same color as the ivy that grew on the towers at Evernight. "It's also kind of a secret."

"I can keep a secret. I mean, you're going to keep this whole incident secret for me, right? With the running and the freaking out—"

"I'll never tell." After a couple more seconds

of consideration, Lucas finally confessed, "An ancestor of mine tried to go to school here almost a hundred and fifty years ago. He washed out, I guess you'd say." Lucas laughed, and it felt like the sunlight had broken through the trees. "So it's up to me to 'restore the family honor.'"

"That's not fair. You shouldn't have to make all your decisions based on what he did or didn't do."

"Not all my decisions. They let me pick out my own socks." I smiled as he tugged up his pants leg to reveal a sliver of argyle sock above his heavy black boot.

"How did your great-grand-whatever wash out?"

Lucas shook his head ruefully. "He got into a duel during his first week."

"A duel? Like, somebody insulted his honor?" I tried to remember what I'd learned about duels from romance novels and movies. All I knew was that Lucas's history was definitely a lot more interesting than mine. "Or was it over a girl?"

"He would've had to move fast, to meet a girl in the first few days of school." Lucas paused, as if he were just realizing that it was

the first day of school and he'd already met me. I felt this tug, like something was almost physically pulling me to lean toward him—but then Lucas turned his head and glared at the towers of Evernight, just visible through the pine branches. It was as though the building itself had offended him. "Could've been anything. Back then, they'd duel at the drop of a hat. Family legend has it that the other guy started it, not that it matters. What does matter is that he survived but not without breaking one of the stained glass windows in the great hall."

"Of course. There's one that's just clear glass, and I never understood why."

"Now you do. Evernight's been closed to my family ever since."

"Until now."

"Until now," he agreed. "And I don't mind. I think I can learn a lot here. Doesn't mean I have to like everything about it."

"I'm not sure I like *anything* about it," I confessed. *Except you*, added the voice in my head, which had turned awfully bold all of a sudden.

Lucas seemed to be able to hear that voice. There was something knowing in the way he gazed back at me. With his chiseled features and school uniform, he should've looked like the all-

American boy, but he didn't. During the chase, and in the moments afterward when he'd thought we'd be fighting for our lives, I'd glimpsed something a little wild lurking just beneath the surface. He said, "I like the gargoyles, the mountains, and the fresh air. That's it so far."

"You like the gargoyles?"

"I like it when the monsters are smaller than me."

"Never thought of it that way." We had reached the edge of the grounds. The sunlight was bright now, and I sensed that the school was waking up, preparing to receive its students, to swallow them through that arched stone doorway. "I'm dreading this."

"Not too late to run, Bianca," he said lightly.

"I don't want to run. I just don't want to be surrounded by all these strangers. Around people I don't know, I can never talk or act normal or be myself at all—why are you smiling?"

"Seems like you know how to talk to me."

I blinked, astonished at myself. Lucas was right. How was that even possible? I stammered, "With you—I guess—I think you scared me so badly that I got all the fear over with right away."

"Hey, if it works—"

"Yeah." Already I sensed that there was more to it than that. Strangers still terrified me, but he wasn't a stranger. He hadn't been since the first moment I realized that he'd been trying to save my life. I felt as though I'd always known Lucas, as if somehow I'd been waiting years for him to arrive. "I should go back before my parents realize I'm gone."

"Don't let them hassle you."

"They won't."

Lucas didn't seem sure of that, but he nodded as he stepped away from me, edging back into the shadows while I walked into the light. "See you around, then."

I raised one hand in a farewell wave, but Lucas was already gone. He'd disappeared into the forest in an instant.