



HOLDING  
BACK  
THE DAY

JAMIE WASSERMAN

# HOLDING BACK THE DAY



by

*Jamie Wasserman*

Claire Vincent is a misunderstood and confused girl who has no friends her own age. The kids at school think she's weird, and she'd rather be left alone than have to deal with their rude stares and hurtful comments. Her only friend is her bold and adventurous grandmother Millie, who's traveled the world and done everything from going on safaris to flying planes. Claire wants to be just like her, but that's much harder for her than anyone realizes. She's not courageous enough to even try – and so she remains a loner, burying her nose in books and escaping into the imaginative magical worlds she reads about.

But when a new kid, Matt, moves next door, she finds herself slowly drawn into the world of the living, despite her misgivings. Matt would do anything to please her, and she finds herself depending on him for everything – friends, social life, and recognition. But it's a dependence she eventually grows to despise because it just makes her own weakness that much more apparent. She yearns for more – real magic in her life, to sweep her away from the land of the boring.

When Claire's father decides to throw her grandmother a surprise seventy-fifth birthday party despite her grandmother's vehement aversion to celebrating birthdays, Claire finds out that a magical life might not be as desirable as she naïvely believed. An unexpected guest at her grandmother's party – Jack, a handsome boy new to town – seems to know Gran very well. Claire soon discovers her grandmother has been keeping a very big secret – and that secret might just be the perennially mysterious Jack.

## ~OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR~

### ***Blood and Sunlight*** ***A Maryland Vampire Story*** (2010, Penumbra Publishing)

#### *Praise for Blood And Sunlight*

*Blood and Sunlight: A Maryland Vampire Story* is one of my favorite vampire novels. I'll tell you why I love this book. Simply put, Jamie Wasserman is a great storyteller. There is something about his writing that makes it impossible not to enjoy this book. – *Natasha Larry, author of the series Darwin's Children.*

Author Jamie Wasserman presents an astute glimpse into the dichotomy of youthful female sexuality. There is power, but insecurity tempers it. Vulnerability can leave scars, and trying to separate physical pleasure from emotional warmth is complicated. Melanie has learned from the past to be wary; and cannot forgive and forget: 'She carried grudges around with her like other people kept pictures of their kids in their wallet.'

*Blood and Sunlight* is a tale of responding to love, when all the indications say: BEWARE. The home town ennui can shift and bring unexpected changes. In Jamie Wasserman's first novel, there is triumph in opening up to what is extraordinary. Even when it occurs in the vicinity of one's own backyard. – *Sheila Merritt, HellNotes.*

I didn't want this story to end! I am a huge fan of good vampire fiction. With *Blood and Sunlight*, I really got more than I anticipated, because it wasn't [just] good, it was absolutely excellent! On a scale of one to five, I would give this book a six, it's that good! – *Wine Voice Readers Favorites.*

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*by*

*Jamie Wasserman*

*“You can have anything in life if you will  
sacrifice everything else for it.”*

*J. M. Barrie (Peter Pan)*



# PART I



*Millie and Jack*

1960

*Twenty-five and Counting*

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illie looked in the mirror and frowned. She brushed a strand of red hair away from her cheek and scrunched up her nose.

“Are you almost ready, love?” Jack called from the other room.

“Almost.” She sighed and traced the small lines around her mouth with her fingertip. Laugh lines. Of course – she had spent a lot of time laughing lately, and now she was paying the price for too much happiness. Soon they’d be wrinkles.

“What’s wrong?” he called again.

“Nothing.” Millie tore herself away from the mirror and stared at the floor, embarrassed.

“You’re scowling.”

She looked up quickly – the door was still closed. “I don’t like it when you do that, Jack.”

“It’s not magic, Mill. I can hear it in your voice.”

She could tell he was standing outside the door now. He tapped softly and asked, “May I come in?”

“Do you need an invitation?”

The door swung back gently. “That’s just a myth.” Jack smiled so she could see just a hint of his white teeth.

Tonight, his blonde hair was newly trimmed, slicked

back, and appeared darker. Millie didn't like it. She preferred it longer, when his hair was gold and fell around his face like a mane. The tux he was wearing looked like it was custom-made for him. Another restriction. He had the appearance of a jungle cat in a cage – savage, fierce, but utterly contained. She hated to think he'd probably done that for her ... to appear gentler, civilized. *More human.*

“Now, what's wrong?”

“I'm twenty-five.”

“I've got you beat.”

“You know what I mean. And *you* don't have wrinkles.”

“Neither do you, pet.” He leaned in close and kissed Millie's neck. “You look gorgeous.”

She closed her eyes and wrapped an arm around his neck. “Oh Jack.” She turned and found his lips.

He sighed and ran his fingers through her hair, then pulled back suddenly. “We're going to be late.”

“I don't care.” She pouted and looked back at the mirror.

“Do you have any idea what it took to get these reservations?”

“A phone call?”

“Now you're sour.” He leaned against the wall and folded his arms.

Millie did not like to see him cross. It made him look like a sullen teenager, which, she supposed, he really was. She took a deep breath and summoned up her courage. “My dad called—”

“That explains it, then.”

Her dad was a sore point. Just like her mom, her sister, her friends, her coworkers, and anyone else Millie vaguely knew or cared about. “No, that doesn't explain it. People are beginning to say things, Jack.”

“Let them.”

She wished it were that simple. “I’m not like you.”

Jack knelt beside her and took her hand. “You’re nothing like me,” he whispered, kissing her arm. “And I love you for it.”

“Stop it.” She tugged her hand away. “I’m upset. You can’t make this right by—”

Jack stood up and stroked her neck, then ran a finger along her cheek.

“I said stop!” She pushed him away. “We need to talk.”

Jack frowned and sat on the floor. “Forget dinner then. I hate this damned bowtie anyway.” He tugged at his collar. “What did your dad say?”

“Mom’s sick.”

“She’s been sick.”

“She had another episode.”

“I’m sorry. Is she alright?”

Millie bit at her lower lip. As much as Jack griped about her family, he could always muster genuine concern when something troubled her. That only made this that much harder. “Dad doesn’t think she’ll leave the hospital.”

“You should have told me. We can do this another night. We’ll go see her—”

“No.”

“I don’t understand. What do you want?”

“How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Carry the dead around with you.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake. Not this again.” Jack rolled his eyes.

“I want to know.”

“You’re being overly dramatic. Everyone has lost somebody. You get angry, and then you cry, and eventually,

no matter how much you swore that you wouldn't, you find a way to live without them. After a while, there'll be no one left to lose. It'll just be you and me. Then we'll be free."

"But I'm not like you," she said again.

"You could be." Jack smiled.

"No."

"It doesn't have to be now, Millie."

"You're not listening. I can't. Not now. Not ever."

"Is this because it's your birthday? You get like this every year."

"I can't not be a part of my family's lives." And she thought of that night along the railroad tracks years ago, the first and only time she saw Jack feed.

"I could be your family. I'll marry you tonight."

Millie gently shook her head. It wasn't the first time he'd offered, and she knew he was serious, but something always held her back. She just wasn't sure what it was until tonight. "Do you remember the night we met?"

"Of course." Jack grinned. "You had your hair twisted up and you were wearing a tight-fitting skirt in the middle of December. I thought I'd finally found another—"

"I was fifteen and stupid."

"You were amazing. Still are." Jack's voice cracked. He rarely got upset and, when he did, it always seemed to be when he was defending her.

"I was coming home from the library and slipped on the ice."

"You cut your leg pretty badly, but you were more worried about getting blood on your skirt than finding help."

"And there you were."

"I carried you home."

"We didn't speak a word to each other that night."

"We didn't have to."

“And a night hasn’t gone by that we haven’t spent with each other.”

“Beat that, Romeo.” Jack laughed.

“What were you doing there?” Millie turned away from Jack, but watched him discreetly in the mirror.

“I told you—”

“You were out for a walk.”

“Yes.”

“What were you *really* doing there?”

“Mill?”

“I told that story to every one of my friends. I told that story to my mom. I said I never believed in fate or love at first sight until that moment.”

“I never believed in anything until I met you.” Jack met her eyes in the mirror.

“But you weren’t just out there for the fresh air, were you?”

Jack creased his forehead.

“The reason I slipped was because I was walking too fast. The heels didn’t help, but I was also scared. I felt like something was watching me. It really spooked me.”

“It was dark. You were alone. It was a natural reaction.”

“I heard something moving through the woods. Following me. I just thought it was a deer or bird or the wind. But it was you, wasn’t it?”

“Does it matter?”

“I saw something in your eyes that night, Jack. You were hungry.”

“I was enchanted.”

“How long were you on your own before you met me?”

“I don’t see what that has to do—”

“I never asked what you did during that time. I could tell you were uncomfortable talking about it. But it must

have been pretty terrible.”

Jack licked his lips. “Depends on who is telling the story.”

“Does it stay with you? Do you ever forget? Do you ever get to leave the past behind?”

Jack contemplated this. “No. It’s a long life, Mill, but nothing is ever forgotten.”

“See, I couldn’t do that.”

“You do that now.”

“Maybe, but my pain has an expiration date. Yours goes on and on.”

“It would be different. We’d have each other.”

“But for how long?”

“Forever.”

“No such thing. Not even for you, Jack. We’d fight. You’d get bored. Find someone else—”

“You know that’s not true.”

“Something would happen. And I’d be left on my own. Only this time, everyone I know would be dead. What happens to me then?”

“Millie.”

“I become the monster in the woods, don’t I?”

Jack crawled over to her and set his head in her lap. “Never. I wouldn’t allow it.”

She stroked his cheek. “There is only so much love and grief and guilt a person is meant to handle. One lifetime. That’s it. And if you’re one of the lucky ones, you don’t die alone.”

“This isn’t you.” In a flash, Jack was on his feet, his hands balled into fists.

“It is me. This is where I belong. Here.”

“I can turn you. I don’t need your permission. You wouldn’t be able to stop me.”

“You won’t, though.” Millie stood up and smoothed

out her dress. The hard part was over, and she didn't have to say the word she dreaded. Jack already knew.

"I love you. In a year, you'll change your mind."

She shook her head.

Jack made a last desperate attempt. "Fine. I was following you that first night. I waited until you were on the quietest, darkest part of the path. Not because I couldn't have taken you sooner, but because I knew you'd be more afraid. You heard me before I arrived because I wanted you to. I wanted you to know that something was coming for you. Something awful. That's who I was before I met you, and that's who I'll be if you leave."

Millie shut her eyes and said simply, "I don't believe that," then took a step towards the door.

Jack appeared out of nowhere right in front of her. His eyes were blue and watery, lighter than usual. He had a small, elegantly wrapped box in his hands. "You forgot your birthday present."

She reached out to take the gift, but he grabbed her arm.

"I have to go see Mom."

"I'll be here next year. And every birthday after that. I'll wait for you forever."

"I don't have forever, Jack." She pulled her arm away.

"Your gift." He held the small, silver-wrapped box out to her again.

"Keep it. I don't want to celebrate another birthday without you." And she turned and rushed through the apartment and out into the street. She hoped to hold back the tears until she was further away, until she was sure he could no longer hear her, but they poured forth now.

By the time she found a cab, she was shaking, and her chest heaved with grief.

"You okay lady?" The cab driver glanced in the rear



view mirror at her.

“Please. Just drive.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Your dime.”

The cab pulled away and disappeared into the night. And this time Millie knew with absolute certainty that no one was watching over her, no one was following her steps, and no one would ever carry her home safely again.

2010

*The Lookout*

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S

he's not going to like this, Dad."

"Give it a rest, kiddo."

"I'm serious. She's going to be majorly pissed."

"First of all, save that kind of language for your friends. And second of all, she's my mother. I think I know what she wants."

"But you don't," Claire muttered under her breath. She sat sulking in the big loveseat near the window. Her only assignment was to be the lookout, and she accepted it begrudgingly.

Her father finished taping up a strand of letters above the fireplace that spelled out 'Happy 75<sup>th</sup> Birthday.' "How's everything look?"

Claire glanced around the room. Streamers hung from every corner. White and blue balloons bobbed harmlessly around the ceiling. The dining room table was covered in a paper tablecloth and enough food to feed the entire neighborhood. She heard her mother rattling around in the kitchen, preparing even more dishes. "It looks like a circus threw up in here."

"That's probably the closest I'm going to get to a compliment from you, so I'll take it." He turned and smiled at her. "Seriously, pussycat. She's going to love it."

“Seriously, Dad...” Claire shook her head. “She’s not only going to hate it, she’s going to freak out.”

“Why would she do that?” Her dad actually looked slightly concerned.

“We talk. A lot.”

“I know that, honey—”

“And I don’t know why she’s never celebrated her birthday. But I do know she looks forward to this time of year as much as a root canal. Why can’t you just leave her alone? She’ll be fine in a few days. She always is.”

“She’s seventy-five. Fifty years without a birthday is enough. Besides, birthday parties aren’t just for the birthday girl. They’re for the family and friends, too. I want to do this for all of them. Alright?”

Claire wished she had something more concrete to tell him, but Gran wouldn’t talk about her fear of birthdays – not even with her, and Gran told her everything – even a few things she’d like to forget. “Fine. Do whatever. I’m gonna go watch the street from my room.” And before her dad could protest, she ran up the stairs and slammed her bedroom door behind her.

Claire thought turning sixteen would change the way her parents treated her. But, in their eyes she was still just the same little girl who played with dolls and was afraid of the sound of her own voice. At least Gran listened to her. But then, no one in the family listened to Gran either.

Claire crammed herself into the tiny chair and desk leftover from her childhood and wrote two words on a sheet of paper, ‘I tried’ in nice big letters so Gran could see them. At some point, she’d find a way to slip the note to her without her dad or mom seeing it. She didn’t know what her grandmother had against birthdays, but she did know she did not want to be associated in any way whatsoever with the planning of this one.

When Claire was six, she saved up her allowance all summer just to get Gran a present for her sixty-fifth birthday. No party, no card, just a necklace with a pretty crystal on it. The lady who sold it to her said it was for protection, and no one needed protecting more than reckless old Gran.

But when Claire gave it to her, Gran didn't even open the box; she just threw it in the trash and cursed and screamed until Claire ran out of the house. She apologized later, even paid Claire back for the necklace, and then some, but Claire had never gotten over that. She saw something in her grandmother's eyes that day she had never seen before – fear. This was a woman who taught skydiving at fifty, who ran with the bulls in Barcelona. She even drove a motorcycle until the state took her license away. What was so scary about a birthday?

1950

*Beautiful Hunger*

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Something was following her. She was sure of it now.

Through a rare break in the forest cover, Millie saw that the sky was cloudless and bright. The snow from the night before shut down the city, so everything was absolutely quiet and still. Everything, that is, except the trees, which shook gently as if disturbed by a sudden breeze. But only just opposite her, as if something was out there in the woods, stalking her. She'd only just realized it a few moments ago, and the hairs on the back of her neck stood up in warning.

*Don't freak out, Millie, she told herself. It's probably just a squirrel or a deer. Maybe a bird.*

She decided to test her theory and slowed her pace. The trees too slowed their rustling.

She sped up, and ice and snow fell from the branches as the thing hastened its pace.

She slowed down again, scared that she was just exciting whatever was out there.

She cursed her sister Helen for bugging her so much that she felt compelled to get out of the house. She cursed herself for grabbing Helen's favorite pencil skirt and high heels just to impress the new boy who worked at the

library, remembering too late that he wouldn't even be there because the snow had brought the city to a standstill. And she cursed the fact that no one in this stupid town had anything better to do, so the streets went unplowed and remained snowed-in until it just melted away at first thaw. If she could have driven to the library – if the library would have even been open – she wouldn't be stuck walking all the way back home in the middle of the woods, long past curfew, alone.

Millie realized she wasn't gaining any distance on whatever was out there, so she stopped completely. "Hello?" she called. She watched the dark woods for any signs of movement, but they had stilled. "Is anybody out there?" She reached down and picked up a rock and hurled it into the woods, but all remained quiet.

She was ready to write the whole thing off as the product of an overactive imagination when the rock came hurtling back towards her and landed at her feet.

Millie gasped and took off running. Behind her, she heard something crash through the trees and saw from the corner of her eye a dark shadow leap towards her. "Help!" she cried, positive she heard footsteps close at her heels.

She glimpsed over her shoulder and lost her traction on the ice. Her legs slid out from under her, and she landed on her back, the wind knocked out of her. She winced, sucked in a deep breath of air, and struggled to sit up. She quickly looked around – the path was empty, the woods were silent. Whatever she thought was out there was gone now. Her leg, though, was bleeding; a heavy gash ran up her thigh. *Crud*, she thought. *Helen is going to kill me if any blood gets on her skirt.*

She stole another look around. The bright moonlight made everything look stony, immovable, like a mausoleum. And, like a mausoleum, she realized, she was the only living

thing in sight. She smiled, relieved. *No more pulp novels*, she told herself.

She stretched out her leg to see if anything was seriously hurt. “Ow!” Her ankle was twisted, and the heel of her shoe was broken. She’d have to walk barefoot the rest of the way home on the ice, and it was at least another half mile just to get out of the woods and back to the street. “So stupid,” she muttered to herself.

And then something dark passed over her, blocking out the white face of the moon.

She looked up slowly, then reared back in fear. A boy about her age stood directly in front of her. He was wearing a faded pair of jeans and a thin tee-shirt. Horribly underdressed, just like her, but he didn’t shiver or seem affected by the cold. His hair was so blonde it looked almost white and hung loosely at his shoulders, with bits of snow and ice clinging to the ends. He may have been young, but his face was dark and haunted. *Beautiful*, Millie thought, but *desperate*, *hungry*. She braced herself, half expecting him to lunge at her throat.

When their eyes met, however, his expression changed – a mixture of frustration and then concern ... and something else. Something she didn’t recognize.

He grinned, and Millie suddenly felt comforted, and warmer too, if that were possible. Without a word, he bent over and scooped her up in his arms. Millie winced, but no pain followed. The boy was gentle and hefted her without any seeming effort.

She reached down and tried to brush away some of the blood off her leg so it wouldn’t drip onto her skirt, and the man chuckled, set her down, and carefully wiped her wound with a handkerchief he produced from his back pocket.

His eyes, which appeared so black and endless before,

now glimmered bright blue. She smiled back at him.

A sudden breeze whipped through the dark path, calling up snow and ice and a bitter chill. Millie didn't feel a thing.



