

## Thirst No. 5: The Sacred Veil

By Christopher Pike




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Sita has lived for centuries. She has seen more than most people could ever imagine.

She has loved and she has lost; she has killed many, and she has given life.

Now, at last, Sita's story culminates in an epic—and satisfying—conclusion to the enormously popular Thirst series.

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### Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

In her five thousand years as a vampire, Sita has forgotten only two portions of her life: the eleventh century with Landulf of Capua and her imprisonment with Ralph and Harrah Levine in Auschwitz during World War II. Earlier, she had been sent back “to fix her mistake” during the battle between the Pandavas and the Kaurvas; similarly, their present day quest for Veronica’s veil and the safety of the Levine’s granddaughter, Sarah Goodwin, is forcing her back to her tortuous time in Auschwitz. In each incident she left men she loved to suffer as she escaped. Both events involve the blood of Christ—the sword with Christ’s blood in the eleventh century and Christ’s image from Golgotha stained on the veil in the twentieth—and vimanas, vehicles from outer space. In this fifth and final book in the Thirst series, Pike once again leads Sita and her entourage of ordinary and extraordinary friends through horrifying yet mesmerizing adventures that culminate in Sita’s choice between her past normal life and the present. HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: It’s the conclusion to a New York Times best-selling series, and everyone is gonna want to know how it ends. Grades 9-12. --Frances Bradburn

### About the Author

Christopher Pike is a bestselling author of young adult novels. The Thirst series, *The Secret of Ka*, and the Remember Me and Alosha trilogies are some of his favorite titles. He is also the author of several adult novels, including *Sati* and *The Season of Passage*. *Thirst* and *Alosha* are slated to be released as feature films. Pike currently lives in Santa Barbara, where it is rumored he never leaves his house. But he can be found online at [Facebook.com/ChristopherPikeBooks](https://www.facebook.com/ChristopherPikeBooks).

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### ONE

I’m back in the motel room, staring down at Shanti’s headless body and a mound of shattered glass. The glass is from the window that broke when I threw her head into the parking lot in a fit of rage.

Rage that was very close to pleasure.

“Om, Shanti, Shanti, Shanti,” I say to myself. The repetitive sounds constitute a famous mantra in India. It means “Peace, peace, peace.” It is similar to the Christian prayer “Peace be with you.” How ironic, I think, that the demon I have fought since I first became aware of the Telar and the IIC should have chosen to possess the body of a young woman with such a sacred name.

Yet I feel no pity for the original Shanti. The demon could not have penetrated her heart without her permission. Only at the end did Shanti reveal how much she enjoyed causing others pain, just like her master.

Well, she is dead now, thank God.

But is the enemy? Have I even scratched his armor? Unfortunately, I haven’t a clue. If only Umara were still alive. She was the world’s expert when it came to demons. But Matt’s mother sacrificed her life so I could destroy her people, the Telar, and the evil forces arrayed behind them. The cynical part of me wonders if her sacrifice was in vain. How does one destroy an evil that doesn’t have a physical body?

I hear approaching footsteps and know their source. There's only one other in the miserable motel who has my hearing. Matt must have heard the breaking glass and come to investigate. He knocks lightly and I call to him. He pokes his head inside my door.

"Why is Shanti's head sitting on the hood of our SUV?" he asks.

Matt has on white shorts, no shirt or shoes. His well-muscled body is deeply tanned, his dark hair a mess from jumping up from sleep. But even though I just woke him up, his eyes are highly alert. How his eyes remind me of his father, Yaksha, the first and most powerful of all vampires. Matt is half vampire, half Telar, an immortal coin from his head to his toes.

Looking at him, mostly naked in the room's dim light, I feel heat stir down below. Despite the circumstances, the lust does not surprise me. My attraction to him has been there from the start.

"She was the one. She was the spy," I reply.

Matt steps into the room. "You're sure?"

"She told a few lies, and when I confronted her . . ." I shrug. "She confessed who she was before I killed her."

"What does this mean?" Matt asks. His question appears simple but it is multilayered. Like me, he wants to know if we've finally destroyed the demon. He's also asking if Shanti's death means the computer program that was planted on the Internet by the Cradle—a group of psychic children—is going to stop hunting us.

We have been on the run since we blew up the IIC's headquarters and supposedly killed every member of the Cradle except for one, Ms. Cynthia Brutran's five-year-old daughter, Jolie. The two are asleep three doors away. I can only assume they failed to hear the breaking glass.

"I'm not sure," I say. "But at least with Shanti out of the way what we talk about will no longer be heard by those who are trying to kill us."

Matt's puzzled. "You were close to her. You miss nothing. How was she able to fool you for so long?"

The question stings.

"She played me. It's no excuse, it's just . . ." I pause, searching for the key to her deception. "She made me care for her."

Matt glances out the motel door, at the trickle of blood that runs over the SUV hood from the base of her severed skull. "You weren't alone. You know Seymour loved her. This is going to kill him."

"Let's not tell him until morning."

"Fine."

"I don't want him to see her like this."

Matt nods. "Don't worry, I'll take the body and bury it in the desert. No one will find it."

“Thank you.”

Matt reaches down and lifts Shanti’s headless torso with one hand. The blood of Yaksha and my daughter, Kalika, flows through my veins, which makes me almost invincible. Yet I know Matt is stronger than me, although I’m not sure of the extent of his power. He’s reluctant to show it, even to me, but I don’t take offense. In this way we are alike: He has a hard time trusting people. That’s why his question continues to sting. I was the first one in the group to meet Shanti, and trust her.

“While I’m taking care of the body, go through her things,” Matt says. “You never know what you might find.”

“Good idea.” I had already planned to do that. “Are you sure you don’t want help?”

“It’s not necessary. I have a shovel in the trunk.”

“What made you bring a shovel?”

“Times like this.”

Matt stuffs the torso and head into several large-size garbage bags and walks off into the desert. He doesn’t take the SUV; he doesn’t need it. I feel a wave of relief as he disappears into the dark. Seymour’s a night owl. There’s always a chance he’s up, watching TV or reading. He could even be writing a new book. He once told me he seldom went a whole day without writing a few pages.

Shanti has a small suitcase in our motel room but a larger one in the back of the SUV. I find it interesting that she went out of her way to leave it in the vehicle. When I first open it, I’m disappointed. It’s stuffed with clothes, a few magazines, a pair of boots, running shoes, a watch, and a cell phone—devoid of any stored numbers.

Yet when I have finished emptying the suitcase on her bed, I notice a faint bulge on the interior of the lid, beneath the leather lining. Human eyes would never have noticed it. The area is sewn shut; indeed, it looks as if it has never been exposed since the day the suitcase was constructed. If I were to hide something, I think, and it were important to me, I would put it in exactly the same place.

I tear off the inner lining of the suitcase.

There’s a manila envelope inside. I open it with a swipe of my fingernail. Inside are two items: a business card and a photograph. The card lists the name of a lawyer: Michael Larson of Pointe, Wolf, and Larson, 1250 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York. The card is made of high-quality paper, the printing is impeccable. It smells of money.

Written on the back of the card, with a dull pencil, is another New York phone number.

The photograph is of a middle-aged couple. The woman looks familiar, even though I’m certain I’ve never met her before. The couple sits smiling on a couch beside an open window that looks out on rolling grassland with a lake in the distance.

They appear to be a typical couple. The man has his arm around his wife. I’m certain they’re married. There’s an ease between them that only comes from having lived many years together. I see their love for

each other in their eyes.

Looking out the window, behind them, I'm pretty sure I see a piece of land that belongs to North Carolina. The type of trees, the color of the lake, the way the green fields slope—I've visited the area before.

On a small end table, to the right of the couch where they sit, is a black-and-white photograph. The picture is handsomely framed but it was taken with a primitive camera. The print is grainy, the focus questionable. I suspect the photograph was snapped in the forties or fifties.

Once more, there's a couple, although these two are younger and they're standing on Ellis Island, near the foot of the Statue of Liberty. They're not alone—a hundred people mill in the background. Most look weary and I can understand why. They have just crossed the Atlantic and arrived in the New World.

But the couple at the forefront of the group don't look exhausted. On the contrary, they're bursting with excitement to be standing on the doorstep of New York City. Studying their faces I can see all the hopes and dreams they have for their future. But I also see their joy is tempered with sorrow. Even if I didn't know them, I'd still see the pain in their eyes.

But I do know them.

Their names are Harrah and Ralph Levine.

I met them during World War II, in Paris, and spent time with them in the most hellish place the modern age has ever known: Auschwitz, the concentration camp where over a million Jews were slaughtered. It was only because of Harrah and Ralph that I survived the camp.

Now I know why the woman on the couch looks familiar.

She's the granddaughter of Harrah and Ralph.

I'm still staring at the photograph when Matt returns. I hand it over, along with the card, and tell him who the people in the pictures are. Matt listens closely and studies them with a penetrating gaze. I don't bother to point out the numeric codes imprinted on Harrah's and Ralph's forearms. Matt misses nothing.

"How did you happen to become friends?" he asks when he hands back the picture.

"We worked together in Paris, with the French Resistance."

"Did you stay in contact after the war?"

"Not exactly." I pause. "We were all sent to Auschwitz."

Matt is stunned. "You're not telling me you were a prisoner?"

"I wasn't a guest."

"Sita, how could the Nazis contain you? I don't understand."

Those days are difficult for me to talk about.

“It’s a long story, an unbelievable story. Toward the end of the war, I decided to help the Allies defeat the Nazis. My reasons were complex—I’d just as soon not go into them now. But I never imagined for a moment that I’d be taken prisoner by a bunch of fanatical Germans. The idea was preposterous. But the Nazis—they had weapons I never imagined.”

“I’m not following you,” Matt says.

I shake my head. “It would take time to explain. And even if I do tell you everything, there’s a good chance you’ll think I made most of it up.”

Matt takes my hand. “Sita, come on. I know you’d never purposely lie to me.”

His fingers feel good wrapped around mine.

“There’s the rub,” I say. “I might lie to you and not know it.”

Matt stares at me, waiting for me to explain. My body trembles. I feel a sharp pain inside my head and a dull ache in my heart. Loss, I feel loss.

“Those were dark days, Matt. The darkest of my life. The Nazis did terrible things to me, unspeakable things. It got to the point where I didn’t know my own name. I don’t know how I escaped. But I do know if it hadn’t been for Harrah and Ralph, I wouldn’t have survived.”

“How exactly did they help you?” Matt asks.

His question is reasonable. How were mere mortals able to help a five-thousand-year-old vampire? I wish I could answer without sounding like a complete nut.

“The Veil of Veronica. Have you heard of it?” I ask.

“I’ve heard the stories, or I should say the myths. Isn’t it supposed to be a cloth that Christ wiped his face on when he was carrying the cross to Calvary?”

“Harrah called it Golgotha but I suppose the name doesn’t matter. It was where the crucifixion was supposed to have taken place. But Christ did not wipe his face on the cloth. It was the other way around. Veronica, the woman in the tales, dipped the cloth in water and wiped his brow. And an image of his face was immediately imprinted on the cloth.”

Matt considers. “From what I’ve read, it was fluids from portions of his face that stained the cloth. From his nose and his cheeks and his brow—the raised parts. The liquid contained just a small amount of blood. It was mostly sweat and lymph fluids. Only a rough outline of a face was created. There wasn’t supposed to be a clear picture.” He adds, “But I’m no expert on the matter.”

“The veil isn’t popular like the Shroud of Turin. Still, there are dozens of stories surrounding its history. These days, the Catholic Church avoids talking about it. But during the Middle Ages, for at least two hundred years, they had it on display in the Vatican. I saw it.”

“Did it have a face on it?” Matt asks.

“It had a face most people associate with early Christian paintings. The image was remarkably clear. It had three Vs on the bottom, all in a row. One from his beard, the others from his long, draped hair. I always found the symmetry curious. It didn’t fit the style of art that was popular at that time.”

“Why did the Vatican hide it away?”

“Some say it got stolen. Others say it was shown to be a fake. A few say it burned in a fire.”

Matt frowns. “But somehow, a thousand years after the Vatican lost it, your friends ended up with it.”

“Yes,” I say.

“How? And please don’t tell me it’s a long story.”

“It is, and I have a feeling I’m going to have to tell it to the others. So I might as well tell it all at once.”

“You’re stalling. You know Seymour’s not religious and Brutran is certainly not a regular churchgoer. They won’t have any interest in this veil.”

“They will when I explain why I had to kill Shanti.”

“You think she was going after it?”

“Why else would she have these pictures?”

“Because they’re pictures of people from your past.”

“That means nothing. I’m not in these pictures. What’s important is that these people saved me.”

“Using the veil?”

“Yes. But it’s not the way you think. You have to hear the whole story.” I pause. “Or as much of it as I can remember.”

Matt stares at me, his puzzlement growing. “Sita, you’re the same as me. You don’t forget anything.”

I squeeze his hand and lean over and give him a kiss. He reaches out to hug me in return, but I avoid his embrace by sitting back. All of a sudden I feel dirty, unclean. I fear to infect him. I stare down at the photo again.

“Maybe I’m afraid to remember,” I say.

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