

Blood Poison

by
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Prologue

The bulging trash bag snagged on a rock and tore, spilling eggshells, orange peels and coffee grounds as Dottie dragged it across the dirt. They weren't even supposed to be in there, but at this point, she didn't really care. Soon, she'd be gone, and she wasn't going to miss the place one bit.

It took both hands and a grunt to heft the bag over the edge of the trash can. Just as she let go, her arms still raised in front of her, she felt a strange, sharp pressure, like someone punching her in the back. At the same time, she heard a faint, hiccupping gasp that sounded like it had come from someplace far away. It took her a moment to realize the noise had come from her own mouth.

Surprised, she tried to turn around, to see what was going on behind her, but she found herself rooted in place.

A dull tingling started in her feet and quickly spread up her legs. Feeling unsteady, she reached out to the porch post for support and as she did, the underside of her arm brushed against

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something sharp and cold and wet, causing a deep scratch that stung.

When she lifted her arm to examine the cut, she saw what had caused it: six inches of some sort of blade, protruding from between her breasts, glistening with blood.

Her blood.

Dottie's eyes focused beyond the blade as the tingling in her lower body resolved into a distant numbness. She was surprised to see that one of her feet was quivering violently. She couldn't feel it at all.

The blade started to wiggle, first a little bit, back and forth, then more violently. Her entire body shook from side to side, until she felt another, weaker pressure on her back.

With a light push and a sickening hiss, the blade vanished. It was as if it had never been there, except for the bright red stain rapidly growing on the front of her shirt.

She felt suddenly free, unencumbered, like she was flying. She hardly even noticed the impact when her body hit the ground.

Her mouth filled with blood. She spat it out but it was immediately replaced by a torrent of red gushing up out of her throat. She coughed, then coughed again, choking on the liquid bubbling in her lungs.

Something tugged at her feet, and her body started to slide across the ground, her cheek scraping the dry, hard-packed dirt.

Someone was dragging her.

She was about to die.

By the time the recognition of that fact penetrated her shock, she was feeling too fuzzy, too detached to panic.

As her vision faded, she wondered what it was going to be like. She hoped all her churchgoing was about to pay off.

Chapter 1

Leaning against the wall next to the back door, Tommy Parker surveyed the scene. “So whattaya think, there, Newbie?” he asked in his thick Georgia drawl.

Three months had passed since Madison Cross had bailed out of a promising medical career to work for her uncle in the Philadelphia Crime Scene Unit, and she had already solved some tough cases on her own. It rankled her that Parker still called her Newbie, but the last thing she was going to do was to let him know it. Besides, he might be a pain in the ass, but he was one of the best crime scene investigators in the department and she had already learned a lot from working with him.

A smug grin spread across Parker’s face. “You see any ‘signs of a struggle?’” he asked, quoting the neighbor who had seen the body and called the police.

“Well,” she said, deliberately, putting enough into it to let him know she was annoyed, but not so much as to add to his amusement. She crouched down for one more look at the body before answering. “There’s signs of a struggle, all right,” she replied, waiting almost long enough for him to butt in and correct her. “Looks like Mr. Grant here had a struggle to keep his heart beating.” She smiled grimly. “At least his struggles are over.”

Derek Grant was sprawled on the kitchen floor, just like the neighbor had said. One of the chairs had been upended and a small bookcase had been overturned, spilling cookbooks across the floor. Signs of a struggle, the neighbor had said.

He looked to be in his early forties, slim, with pale skin and receding blond hair. He lay face-down, one arm at his side, palm up, the other curled under him, clutching his chest.

An electrical cord was wrapped partially around his ankle. One end of it was attached to a portable TV, precariously balanced on the kitchen table. The other end extended longingly but futilely toward the outlet in the wall six inches away.

A small pool of orange vomit had soaked into the threadbare kitchen rug by his face. Spreading out from under his hips and soaking through his khakis was a mixture of feces and urine. The edges of the puddle had dried, leaving a crusty ring that surrounded the wet center.

With the kitchen door closed, the stench was almost unbearable. Madison pretended she couldn't smell anything.

"We'll need lab tests to be sure," she said as they walked back through the dining room, "but it was probably some sort of cardiac event."

Parker nodded. "Yeah, that's how I make it."

The neighbor who had called it in was pacing the path out front, occasionally peering through the dining room window over the shoulder of the patrolman who stood blocking the path. A heavyset woman in her sixties, Helen Schloss was wringing her hands, waiting to find out what had happened.

She overheard Parker telling the patrolman it might have been a heart attack.

“A heart attack?” she exclaimed as they walked outside. She seemed relieved there hadn’t been a murder on the block, but saddened and shocked as well. “Poor Derek. He was so young.”

Madison didn’t know what to say, and Parker didn’t seem to care. “Well, thanks for your help,” Madison offered weakly.

“Oh, sure,” Schloss replied. “It’s just so sad.”

The patrolman beckoned Parker off to the side, discreet but anxious. Parker seemed annoyed that he was being summoned, but he stepped toward him anyway. He stopped when he realized Mrs. Schloss was still speaking to him.

“It’s just hard to believe... I’ve known him since he was a little boy, you know?” She looked up and seemed to sense Parker’s impatience. “Well... if you need anything, I’ll be right across the street.” She pointed to a small rancher across the street.

Her house was almost identical to Derek Grant’s, but instead of patchy weeds and dirt, there was a manicured garden populated by small gnomes, squirrels and bunny rabbits that seemed to be watching the events unfolding across the street, as curious as Mrs. Schloss.

Parker stepped over to the patrolman, his irritation more evident. “Jesus, Ralston, what is it?”

The patrolman came closer, meeting him halfway. “So, it’s natural causes, right?” he asked hopefully.

“Looks that way. Why?”

Ralston seemed embarrassed. “Well... my shift actually ended an hour ago... And my kid’s got a soccer game.”

Parker looked at his watch and chewed the inside of his cheek. “Where’s the wagon? Did you call the M.E.’s office?”

“I called them again twenty minutes ago. They said they was on their way.”

Parker glanced at Madison, frowning. “Right.” He sighed. “Yeah, all right. Go on.”

Madison smiled and Parker glared at her, daring her to say anything.

Ralston looked immensely relieved. “That’s great. Thanks, Parker. I owe you, man.”

Parker nodded in agreement.

“What a guy,” Madison said, ribbing him, as Ralston hightailed it out of there.

“Hmph,” Parker grunted. “You hear what Ralston just said?”

“What’s that, ‘thanks?’”

“No, he said, ‘I owe you.’ And now he does. I’m just racking up a favor, Newbie. Make a note of it, cause they tend to come in handy.”

“Right.”

Ralston got in his squad car and sped off, giving them a wave as he turned the corner. Madison thought his haste had more to do with getting out of there before Parker changed his mind than getting to the soccer game on time.

“So what now?” she asked.

Parker shrugged.

“We wait for the meat wagon.” He looked up and down the block. “Hell, should be here any minute.”

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It occurred to Madison that since they'd taken separate cars, there was no need for her to wait with him, but just as she opened her mouth to point that out, Parker's cell phone went off.

He answered it without hesitation. "Parker."

Madison slowly closed her mouth as Parker listened to his phone.

"All right..." he said into the phone. His eyes flickered in her direction, then guiltily scurried away. "Yeah, okay..." he said. "Yeah, I'll be right there."

He avoided her gaze as he slipped his phone back into his pocket.

"What?" she demanded.

"Huh?"

"What? What was that all about?"

"Oh, um... nothing. That was just the Lieutenant."

The Lieutenant was Lieutenant David Cross, their boss. Madison knew him better as Uncle Dave, the man who had more or less raised her.

"And?"

"Nothing really. There's just... they found a Jane Doe over by the river. In some bushes over by Strawberry Mansion Bridge. Looks like she's been there a while. Anyway, Rourke's stuck on a train somewhere or something, so he needs me to get over there."

Melissa Rourke was the unit's other crime scene investigator. Not quite as skilled as Parker but a lot easier to deal with.

Madison glared at him, her mouth pursed, waiting for him to finish.

“Alrightey then,” he said nonchalantly. “I guess I better go meet the Lieutenant.”

“Bullshit.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, suppressing a guilty laugh. He knew he was screwing her over. “The wagon should be here any minute, okay?”

“No, not okay. You make promises to your buddy, now he owes you a favor and I’m stuck babysitting some stiff in his own living room? It’s bullshit, Parker, and you know it.”

His laugh-suppression efforts failed him and he started cracking up.

“I know,” he laughed. “I know it’s fucked up. And I’m sorry. It’s a shame, too, cause you haven’t worked on a really ripe one, and apparently this one’s like six months, maybe nine months old. We got Elaine Abner coming in, forensic anthropologist. You can always learn a thing or two from Elaine.” He clapped his hands together. “But seriously, the wagon’ll be here soon. Lookit, why don’t you meet us down there, okay? I’ll try to save the body for you, okay? Make sure they don’t take it away before you get there. But if I don’t get going right now, the Lieutenant’s going to have my hide.”

“Racking up a favor, huh? Well, I guess I just racked up one of my own, didn’t I?”

Parker didn’t respond.

“Didn’t I?” she repeated.

Parker pretended not to hear her. “Gotta go.”

He hunched his shoulders against the stream of abuse Madison hurled at him as he got in his car. He pulled away

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almost before the door slammed shut, and then he was gone. The street seemed empty and quiet in his wake.

Madison turned and went back into the house, muttering a few more obscenities. A spicy vocabulary was another thing she had learned in her tenure at the CSU.

Chapter 2

Once inside, Madison's shoulders slumped and she allowed herself a tired laugh at her own expense.

As she pushed open the kitchen door, the stench hit her once again. With no one there to witness it, she allowed herself a grimace at the smell.

Part of her annoyance at being stuck waiting there was that she still hadn't overcome her aversion to dead bodies in their natural habitat. Lying on a slab, sliced and diced and chopped into pieces — no problem. But seeing a guy lying dead on his kitchen floor, it still kind of creeped her out.

Even so, she felt obliged to check on the body once more.

It wasn't as if Derek Grant looked like he might open his eyes and get up. His face was a ghostly white, almost blue, except for the vivid reddish purple where his cheek pressed against the floor. And his eyes had flattened out, a distinctly dead appearance that was somehow both disquieting and reassuring.

As Madison stared at Derek Grant, it occurred to her that part of her unease was due to the fact that she knew Derek Grant wasn't actually dead, not really. His heart had stopped beating

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and his lungs had stopped breathing, but his body was still very much alive.

Derek Grant's death was more a command and control problem than anything else; the cells that once made up Derek Grant were still mostly alive, they simply no longer had as a common goal maintaining and prolonging whatever it was that had once been Derek Grant.

Meanwhile, the other cells, the ones that were inside Derek Grant but for whatever reason weren't considered part of him, were now growing unchecked.

Parker had asked if she saw signs of a struggle; Madison knew that for all of what was called Derek Grant's life, there had been a struggle between the living cells that were considered part of Derek Grant, and the ones that lived in him, but were not him. Some of those were beneficial microorganisms essential to the day-to-day operations of being Derek Grant; some were potentially lethal ones that were kept in check by a delicate equilibrium.

But all of them were controlled and kept in the proper proportions by the cells that made up Derek Grant. Now, the tide had turned, but while the outcome of the war might by now be a certainty, that didn't mean there weren't still some pretty spectacular battles to come. Madison knew what those battles would be, and she knew which side was going to win. Even with an autopsy and embalming and burial in a lined casket, those battles would be raging for weeks. And even after the battles were all fought, what was left might not be Derek Grant anymore, but it would be alive for quite some time.

She shook her head, rousing herself from that line of thinking, and took out her cell phone, jabbing in the number for the Medical Examiner's office as she left the kitchen.

Frank Sponholz answered on the third ring. "M.E."

"Spoons, hey. It's Madison Cross." Some of the smell from the kitchen seemed to have followed her out and she edged away from the kitchen as she spoke.

"Hey kid, how's it going."

"Where's the fucking wagon? It was supposed to be here like an hour ago. I'm stuck here babysitting this guy, it's getting a little old. He's not the best conversationalist, you know?"

"All right, all right. Jeez. It should be there any minute, okay?"

"All right. But if you hear from them, tell 'em to hurry the hell up, okay?"

Frank hung up on her.

Madison looked down at the body on the floor. "Sorry."

She looked at her watch, calculating how long it would take Parker to get to Strawberry Mansion Bridge. Two minutes later, she was checking it again when she heard a scratching noise at the front door.

"Finally," she mumbled, crossing to the door.

She was just reaching for the knob when the door swung open to reveal an old man in a wheelchair, a small overnight bag perched on his lap.

"Oh!" he said, surprised and somewhat taken aback. "Hello..." He looked confused. "Who are you? Are you a friend of Derek's?"

For a second, Madison just stood there, looking at the old man and trying to think of what to say. The one thought that kept coming to her was, ‘Parker is going to pay for this.’

“Um... my name is Madison Cross...”

“Okay... is Derek here?” A twinge of alarm appeared in his eyes. “Where is Derek?”

“Are you Derek’s father?”

He looked at her. “Yes, I am, but... Who are you, anyway?” His face hardened. “Where’s Derek?” he demanded.

Looking down at the man was awkward, so Madison crouched down, which made it almost worse. “Mr. Grant, is it?”

He locked onto her eyes and nodded almost imperceptibly. “Horace,” he said tentatively.

“Mr. Grant, I’m afraid something has happened.”

The old man’s eye started to twitch.

“We think it was a heart attack, but we don’t know yet... but... Mr. Grant, Derek is dead.”