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KNOWING MICHELLE

by

Emily A. Thrash

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

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ABSTRACT

Thrash, Emily A. MFA. The University of Memphis. December 2011. *Knowing Michelle*. Major Professor: Cary Holladay.

In the main storyline of *Knowing Michelle*, David Shuster is forced to face the fact that his mother, Michelle Riley Shuster, is a serial killer currently on death row in Florida. The secondary tale, contained in the fictional “book within a book,” *Blood & Copper*, is that of historical figure and countess Erzsebet Bathory, who killed over six hundred women in the late sixteenth century. Michelle admired and imitated Bathory, and asked her son to read the historical novel as part of a last request before she is executed. Two women, Ramona and Karen, both help and hinder David as he seeks to understand the nature of his mother’s evil.

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Tallahassee, Florida

August 1996

It was brutally hot. In the bar, fans whirred and the air conditioning units groaned in every other window. The bar was known for its expansive patio, but the outside was deserted, the inside crowded with people. Bryan, a busboy who was moving through the crowd with his tray as best he could, hoped they would spread outside once the sun had fully gone down. Just then, it hung, unmoving, about an inch above the horizon. Sweat stood out on Bryan's forehead, but he couldn't bring himself to swipe at it with his table-rag. Periodically, his eyes flicked to a woman sitting by herself at the end of the bar. She was startling to look at. Her skin was pale, and that alone set her apart from the other women. She was unselfconsciously reading a book, oblivious to the world beyond her corner and her drink. Her hair was a bright, shiny red and fell in perfect ringlet curls around her bare shoulders. She had been left alone so far, but as Bryan peeked over her shoulder, a blonde woman joined her. The blonde was not unattractive, though she was clearly not a natural blond and she was a little wide though the shoulders. She was also a good bit older than the other woman, but was trying to look like she wasn't. Coworker, Bryan guessed.

I'm glad her friend finally came, Bryan thought to himself. She wouldn't be left alone much longer in this crowd.

He hated seeing the pretty ones harassed when they came in by themselves, or even when they were left alone for just a minute. Of course, he didn't consider his own conversations with these women the same way, but such interactions were few and far between.

The two women sat together for an hour or so, in their own world, leaning close to hear each other over the din. Bryan glanced at them now and again as he worked, still startled by the whiteness of the redhead's pearly skin each time.

They stood up suddenly, as if by some invisible signal, and he was sad to see them go, since they had given him something to watch and wonder about to break up the monotony and mindless work. The blonde rested a hand on the redhead's shoulder, a gesture at once motherly and possessive. They made two steps toward the door together when the redhead stopped and looked around. Bryan watched this from the opposite end of the bar as he loaded hot and damp margarita glasses into the racks, where they clanked dully, hanging by their stems. For a moment, he breathed easier, suddenly relieved that the redhead had changed her mind and wouldn't follow the other woman out. He hadn't realized how anxious the thought had made him. The redhead pointed back to the restrooms and then swept past him, rummaging in her purse distractedly as she went, checking for keys, wallet, phone, book, etc. Making inventory as women often did. The blonde waited for her, confidently, leaning against the back of the bar stool. Bryan's chest grew tight again. He was watching over his shoulder and didn't see that the last glass he had tried to slide into its holder had no room for it to go. It toppled to the floor and shattered. A few people clapped sarcastically.

Bryan waved his hand about as if shooing a fly. The crowd parted for him, noticing him for the first time only because of the noise. The sun had gone down now, but only a trickle of people ventured out into the evening air, still oppressive and thick. He passed the blonde twice: the first time, toward the corner closet where the broom was

kept, he kept his head low and stared straight ahead. The second time though, broom in hand, he glanced at her face to find her looking back at him.

She smiled at him. “It’s almost like they make the glasses so they will only break if you’re swamped, isn’t it kid?”

The joke was silly, but kindly meant. The ever-present sweat down his back gave him a chill suddenly, like fever sweats in the night. If he had hair there, it would have prickled against his undershirt. The blonde woman’s manner was simple, southern and friendly, but her smile seemed utterly disconnected from her eyes and cheeks, hovering over her mouth like some eye-trick. Her eyes were grey, muted, feigning dumb.

“Yeah, right,” Bryan stuttered.

He fought his feet against tripping as he moved back, broom in hand. He didn’t look back but imagined those dull, too-open eyes targeting his back. He moved around the bar and knelt to sweep, shaking his head a little at himself, chiding.

“Quit your silliness,” he whispered, something his mother often said to him and his brother.

He had most of the largest pieces and was struggling against the sticky floor when a pair of brown cowboy boots attached to pale, skinny legs walked past him. He stood up suddenly, toppling two pieces out of the dust pan. The crowd moved apart and together, and soon all he saw was a curly mass of hair disappear out the door. The blonde followed close behind.

With them gone, Bryan shook off the willies quickly. But four days later, a Tuesday, when a policeman showed him a smiling picture of Tracy, red hair glowing in

the beach sun, he remembered. He kept the part about her the blonde's eyes—Michelle's eyes—to himself. That wasn't needed.

Woman Serial Killer Convicted, Prosecutor Pushes for Death Penalty

Jules McKinnon

Last week, the jury in the case against Michelle Riley Shuster, the quiet librarian who confessed, in 1996, to the brutal murder of eight women, returned a verdict of guilty on two counts of first degree murder. Chief Prosecutor James Deboneau asked for the death penalty, which he argued was clearly justified by the brutality of the premeditated crimes, but it was still a shock to the community, since, if executed, Shuster will be the third woman ever to be executed in the state of Florida, in a time when many Floridians are asking for the death penalty to be abolished in their state.

Deboneau gave only a brief statement outside of the courtroom, though his message was clear: "The attorney's office will strongly and aggressively advocate the death penalty in this case. It seems to us undeniable that the murders in this case are vicious, premeditated, and appalling to any human soul, while the murderer is sane, yet unremorseful, and shows no natural regard at all for human life. Those are the facts that matter."

Though Shuster initially confessed to eight murders, TPD could only link her by physical evidence to two bodies: Courtney Donahue and Tracy Phillips, the last two of her alleged victims. "The physical evidence we found with Ms. Donahue and Ms. Phillips was clear-cut and undisputable," said Danny Woods, the lead homicide detective on the Shuster case. "I knew, even back in April '96, that as soon as she got a lawyer that her confession would be the first thing under contest, because they always are. The judge

found our procedure for that confession legal to the very letter of the law, but we weren't about to count on that. We wanted her shut up tight. I wish that the parents of Ms. Patterson, Ribaldi, Gregorson, Michaels, Short and McGee could have their says at the sentencing, but I hope that those that Ms. Phillips and Ms. Donahue left behind will remember them and try to speak for all of Shuster's victims, even the ones we may not know about."

Shuster's lawyer will appeal on the grounds that Shuster's actions were beyond her control, that her confession, while admitted into evidence, was not made of sound mind and without the presence of an attorney, and that she could be reformed through extended therapy. Shuster had no family present at the trial, though her son, David, lives with his paternal Uncle in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Lies

Chicago, Illinois

August 2011

When David moved to Chicago in 2009, he was twenty-five, three years out of graduating from college. He transferred to Chicago on a half whim and half dare. His job was boring but not intolerable, and his friends had been steadily leaving New Orleans, until striking out for a new city didn't seem like a scary leap, but a necessity. When he moved, he made the conscious decision to tell anyone who asked (more people than he would have liked, as it turned out) that his father ran off before he was born, and that his mother died when he was six, and that he was raised by his father's brother, Trey. This was true enough to be getting along with, and he thought that even if someone met his Uncle, Trey wouldn't mention his mother at all. He could pretty much count on this, because Trey didn't like to think about his ex-sister-in-law, and he had considered David his own son from the day he put him in school in Baton Rouge.

David was not caught in his lie until two years later, when Ramona Greene called his office on a Monday afternoon. Ramona called him from a hotel room in Tallahassee, Florida, using her cell phone and sitting awkwardly in the edge of her bed, a notebook open on her knees. Ramona had given up trying to find a home number and decided, with a great deal of hesitation, to call his office. She whispered to herself some of what she planned to say as quickly as possible as she dialed. She didn't think she could do this twice if he hung up before she could even begin to explain that she wasn't just another blood-thirsty headline junky.

It was increasingly rare that journalists tried to contact David since the story had long since gone cold, but David preferred to play it safe. He had hated it when a few of the persistent ones had gotten through over the years—the floor and the air seemed suddenly less reliable when he would answer a phone to a brisk, happy voice asking how he felt about his serial murdering mother.

Ramona called the main office line. Though she had easily managed to get David's direct extension, she thought it polite to give him a small heads up. Karen, the office receptionist, answered the phone in a crisp, practiced way of a long-time office worker. Over the phone, she sounded much older and stuffier than she was. An image cultivated carefully to stave off toner salesmen and carpet cleaning companies.

Karen answered the phone as she always did, "Hello, Shoreman Logistics, this is Karen speaking, how may I direct your call?"

"Hello, my name is Ramona Greene, may I speak to a Mr. David Shuster, please?"

Karen couldn't place the name or the voice. If it had not been for David, she wouldn't have thought twice about it.

"May I tell Mr. Shuster what this is in regards to?"

"I am calling on behalf of his mother, Michelle Riley Shuster."

Karen, having heard David's brief explanation of his childhood more than once, narrowed her eyes at the green light on her phone, standing in place for Ramona's face on the other end.

"Are you sure you're looking for our David Shuster?"

“I presume so. Mr. Shuster should be a man of about twenty-seven, from Baton Rouge. Educated in New Orleans.” Ramona hesitated, clearly prepared to continue if necessary.

“Yes, Ma’am. Please hold.”

Karen put her on hold and dialed David’s extension.

Down the hall, David jumped in his chair, unused to his phone ringing after lunchtime. He wasn’t in customer service, so his phone rarely rang except for conference calls around ten in the morning.

“This is David.”

“Hey, it’s Karen. There’s what sounds like a personal call for you, but it’s a little weird. I don’t recognize the area code...but she says it’s about your mother, so it may be some mistake or something.”

David didn’t say anything for a time.

“Do you want me to get rid of her?” Karen prompted. “Or I could give her your home or your email...”

“No, no, I’ll take it.” David exhaled slowly. *Better just get it over with.*

“I’ll send it through,” she switched lines, “Ms. Greene? Transferring you now.” She hung up delicately, looking over her shoulder down the hall toward David’s end.

David’s phone clicked in his ear. He didn’t say anything at first. He could hear a soft feminine breath on the line, patiently waiting, and it suddenly felt very close, intimate, like a woman breathing in his ear. He wondered for the first time if it was his mother, Michelle herself. David had no idea what she would look like now. The last

picture he had seen of her was taken nearly twelve years ago, but as he held the phone to his ear, he pictured *her* holding the other end, waiting. Frizzy blonde hair held loosely back, shadowed eyes a little too open.

“This is David.”

“Hello, My name is Ramona Greene,” Ramona said again,, “Is this David Michael Shuster, son of Michelle Riley Shuster?”

An icy wave of pain started from his clenched teeth and went up toward his temples. His hand found his gel wrist support in front of his computer and he gripped it tightly. Cracks just under the surface spidering out from his grip.

“Mr. Shuster,” Ramona continued, taking his silence for granted. “I understand that it can be upsetting to receive a call at your office, especially since I understand you cut off contact with your mother and avoid reporters. I sincerely apologize for the interruption to your work. I want first to say that I am not a reporter or a journalist. I’m also not trying to serve you with a summons.” She spoke with the rehearsed assurance of a salesman. Or a lawyer. “I am calling on behalf of your mother and would very much like to speak to you, if you’ll allow me, about your mother’s wishes.”

“Are you her new lawyer?” The last he had heard of his mother’s case (which could only be called ‘on-going’ because she hadn’t stopped having lawyers and appeals, not even fifteen years after her initial arrest) was a couple of months ago, when a lawyer had written to him and his uncle, informing them that his mother would need additional counsel (or rather, replacement counsel, if the intent between the lines was understood correctly) if she continued to seek her final options. He had spoken briefly to his Uncle

Trey about it, chiefly asking why he had bothered to contact them, since neither had much to do with her defense.

“I guess she must be out of money,” Uncle Trey had said. “Do you want to do something about it?”

David had told him no, to ignore it.

“No, I am not,” Ramona answered, “She has a new state-appointed one, but she doesn’t talk to me much about the legal details of her case.”

“What does she talk to you about then?” David asked.

Karen had forwarded the main line to customer service and gone down the hall to hover near David’s desk. She leaned against the wall and made a noise so David would notice her. She frowned at him.

Annoyed at Karen’s nosiness, David tried to arrange his face carefully. He gave her a sad smile, imagining possible lies to explain the call: perhaps someone trying to give him something from her will that was just found, or perhaps to sell her something by mistake, or informing him that someone had been using her social security number for the past ten years. Something sad because she was gone, but nothing permanently or egregiously wrong—a simple, easy lie.

“That is actually what I would like to talk to you about,” Ramona was continuing, “but it is all a bit complicated, and I’d imagine that you would rather not discuss it over the phone at work.” There was a pause as she waited for some assent. Getting none, she continued, “I’m flying up to Chicago next week, for the long weekend. Would it be at all possible for us to meet sometime then? It should take an hour, maybe an hour and a half.”

David shrugged and shook his head at Karen, saying into the phone “Ma’am, I don’t think that would be possible at all.” At this, Karen seemed somewhat satisfied and went back down the hall, giving one last look of sympathy over her shoulder. He continued in a hard whisper, “and frankly, I don’t know who the fuck you think you are.”

It would have been an excellent hang up line, but David continued to hold the phone painfully tight against his ear, turning it white around the edges. Ramona seemed to stifle what may have been a cough or a chuckle, and for the first time David became convinced it was a prank.

“You’re right, Mr. Shuster. I apologize; I’m afraid I’m not very good at this cold calling. As I said, I’m not a reporter looking for a new twist or an interview, not a lawyer, a representative of the court, or a detective. I’ve visited your mother several times over the last six months, as part of my work with a research team.”

“So, you’re a student?” David asked, stunned. He realized suddenly that the voice did in fact sound quite young. The longer David continued the conversation, the more his voice felt apart from him, asking questions before he had formed them solidly in his mind. Waves of cold and feverish heat were beginning to come over him, and he wondered if he wouldn’t soon be sick. He glanced at the wastebasket by his feet, an unlined wire thing that would be useless in such an emergency. He wanted to be done with this, but now picturing her as a young person, a nervous student, his attitude had softened toward her and he didn’t want to simply hang up.

“No, I work with, I mean I’m part of a professional research team.” She hesitated. “We work with a non-profit foundation that supports many kinds of research and study.

It's part of my research to visit and interview your mother on a regular basis. I won't say it's my favorite part, but it's essential."

"What foundation?"

"The Greene Foundation." She paused, with an audible breath. "My father started it in 1977," she responded, a bit defensively.

There was a long silence; David held a cupped hand over his eyes. Ramona took a deep breath before plunging along.

"Again, I'm very sorry for disturbing you at work with something like this, Mr. Shuster. If you would possibly be willing to meet with me, there are several things that your mother has asked me to tell you, and I'd be happy to answer any questions I am able to. You may not consider her your mother anymore, but it's not that way for her. You of course do not have to give me an answer right now, but I ask that you think about it, and give me a call if you think you can meet with me. I really do hope to hear from you."

After another pause, she recited a phone number slowly. David copied it down to a post-it, with a numb hand. He tried politeness and told her he would consider her request. Then he put the post-it in the drawer and tried to stop thinking about it, at least to get through the rest of the afternoon. He was not completely successful.

David refused to buy a car, since the lack of such a purchase was one of the reasons he wanted to live in a northern city, and it was on his brief bike ride to the bus stop that he realized that despite his healthy skepticism and preference for the whole thing being a crock, he couldn't help but believe Ramona was legitimate. He was sure, from her posturing and deliberate vagueness, that there was more to the request than she

wanted to say initially, but that didn't take away his feeling that, all in all, she wasn't bullshitting him. Perhaps it was even what convinced him.

Arriving at the bus stop, he stayed perched on his bike, leaning against the bus sign, hunching his shoulders so his high-collared jacket would protect his neck from the wind, which he still wasn't used to, even in the mild summers. When the bus came, he tried to ignore the typical sighs and groans of the passengers as he struggled to attach his bike to the rack on the front the bus. His bike was very large and old-fashioned, with a luggage rack on the back for his satchel. As stubbornly as he refused to get a car, he was even more set against getting a new bike, preferring the height and heft of the thick-framed, pearl-colored antique to the lighter, shorter, much faster new models. On the bus, he tried to stop thinking about Ramona's call, assuring himself he didn't have to make any decisions just now. And even if he thought she really had some sort of message from his mother, he didn't have to take it. Still, these thoughts circled in his head restlessly, never progressing but each growing louder in insistence. The bus ride was about a half hour north out of the Loop, after which he would have another twenty-minute or so bike ride into his neighborhood. A benefit to this route was that the bus deposited him right outside a corner shop that had a small grocery and discount liquor store. He hadn't planned to make a stop, but went in without hesitation, almost forgetting to lock his bike out front.

The proprietor, an aging man with a shifting accent, asked him if he was feeling okay, seeing his glazed and vacant expression. David responded with a shrug and a waggle of his hand, picking up makings for gin and tonic and a bottle of red wine.

"Long day, huh, friend?" the man asked, smiling broadly.

David nodded and tried to give a smile, but it felt awkward and misshapen on his face.

Instead of a briefcase, David carried a rustic, leather saddle bag that he had converted to attach to the rack over his back wheel. He was intensely proud of it, despite the occasional tease he got from Karen about trying to be John Wayne. It was that beaten sand brown, with real copper buckles holding down the straps, and was worn down to a genuine softness that can only come with real, antique leather. Twenty minutes later, he was home, with the bag in the sink. The wine had broken on his ride home, a first. He tried desperately to clean it, but already the soft inside of the leather was stained like dried blood. As the wine dried, it had seeped into the natural cracks in the leather, making crisscrossed veins. He continued to try well after it was clearly a lost cause, cursing under his breath and nearly crying with frustration.

Some small, deep part of him was grateful for it though. It was something tangible to be upset about. Something he could blame for the hot, sick feeling back in his throat without having to think, to consider. He drank into the evening, splashing tonic into gin half-heartedly and not bothering with limes at all. He would give up on the satchel occasionally, start to wander away, and bits and pieces of the telephone conversation would pass through his mind, unbidden. *It's not that way with her.* With that, he would return to the sink, wondering hard if lime juice would work the same as lemon juice, if he should try it. By the time he was able to slink into bed, too far gone to have to think about anything, he had worked at it so hard, scrubbing the inside with whatever he could think of, that two holes had started at the seams.

When he came in forty minutes late the next morning, haggard and with eyes half shut to the light, only Karen seemed concerned. He let the tedious work take the bulk of his attention while the rest of him practically slept. Tracking shipments, updating arrival times, and issuing pick up orders had the effect a comforting puzzle game. It took up just enough of his attention, without much need for focus. Despite this, he was still painfully aware of the post-it in his second drawer with Ramona Greene's number on it.

“Hey stranger,” Karen chirped over the side of his cubicle in the late afternoon.
“Are you okay today? You're pulling a zombie.”

David blinked away from his screen and shrugged as an answer.

“Anyway,” she continued, “I was just wondering if you were still up for Margarita Trivia tonight. If you aren't feeling well, we can skip this week.” She finished with raised eyebrows. Karen never asked questions, really, except with her eyebrows.

No one had spoken to David all day, so he had to shake himself a little to be awake enough to answer. “Who all is going this week?”

Karen smiled. “Right now, it would just be us two. But now you have to go, because if you say *no thanks* my feelings will be hurt.”

“Sure, I'll come.” David said quickly. “We'll just have to hope there are no sports questions.” This quip came easily, being a common joke between them and as automatic as entering truck arrivals and delivery windows.

“Need a ride?” Karen asked.

David shook his head and said it would be easier to take his bike. Karen frowned. David still sat in his working position, giving her only a profile, his wrists resting idly on

the support and his eyes directed at nothing in particular. She stood there another few moments, trying to decide what, if anything, to say. Sensing her still there, David turned his head and looked up at her, making himself smile.

“Ok, seriously, what’s wrong?” asked Karen.

“Nothing. Bit of a headache.”

Karen glared at him.

“Ok, I’ll tell you about it tonight. Promise,” he found himself saying.

He had no intention of telling anyone what had put him off balance. Had no intention of telling anyone in Chicago anything but the story he came with: his father run off, mother dead, raised by Uncle. In another few months, it might have been a true enough story. But then again he did his best to avoid knowing those particulars. Especially the date. He didn’t care to know the day his mother would die.

Satisfied, Karen nodded and wished him a quick end to the day. She tapped the top wall of his cubicle as she moved away, back toward the reception area. He never watched her go, and didn’t know she always hoped he would.

For the rest of the afternoon, David put his attention toward writing his lie. The problem was he had no idea how bad he would have to make it because he had no idea how bad he looked. He couldn’t make it too bad because he would have to account for other consequences, further lying down the line. The best lies always referred to things that were over and done with, and had no chance of recurring. They were never overly satisfying or elaborate, and always seemed to leave something out, as if something was reserved. This way, the person being lied to would spend their wondering energy on guessing what they were not being told, what point or even detail was being held back,

instead of examining the lie too closely and discovering its flaw or false note. One way to do this was to account for one happening but not another—he would account for the phone call but not for coming in late that morning, for instance. The problem was it was all too recent. Liars know the whole story—and it was too soon for him to know the whole story. A lie should not beg questions, but be complete, the end of the story. He knew these rules well and considered them closely as he considered and rejected various explanations.

The workday ended with the usual shuffling of chairs and downward tones of computers shutting down. As he stood up to go, David reached for his satchel and frowned at the rayon backpack he had used instead.

David hadn't always lied about his mother. In high school, he had no choice in it since another boy had discovered the whole thing his first year, though he occasionally told sloppy, angry lies then to keep everyone away from him. He went to college in New Orleans and after the first year told someone at a party. He immediately regretted it, feeling eyes turn to him that had always seem to skip over him or see right past. But they had not reacted as the boys in high school had, but instead were fascinated. They asked him frank questions which he got better at answering over time. During the next few years, he became better at revealing that part of his story, and came to enjoy it. It was like having some awful curiosity behind a curtain, and it became a peculiar sort of pleasure to pull the curtain back and watch eyes light with disgust, fascination, and intrigue. No one reacted quite the same as another, but no one was ever bored or uninterested.

At first, he thought the people were simply different there. That New Orleans, so different from his home or anywhere, had people who could be told. Who could understand, maybe. After a while, as David's social circle grew for the first time in his life, it was taken out of his hands as all such stories eventually are. Someone would ask him about it, then be embarrassed, realizing that another person, someone still in the dark, had overheard. *Oh, I'm sorry, I thought she knew. Well, I mean, I guess I understand why you wouldn't tell everyone, it must be so hard...but I'm sorry I'll stop talking about it...* Inevitably, the story would have to be retold. It became as rehearsed and carefully told as a lie.

More than once he heard it told back to him, altered out of misremembering or the need for dramatization. Finally, there was no curtain at all, and David himself became the awful curiosity. So this time around, in Chicago, he lied.

La Cocina was a Mexican restaurant and bar, with low ceilings and an identity crisis. The walls were a familiar stucco, but the rest of the décor was a conglomeration of found objects: cracked paintings of ships at sea, lamps made of horse shoes, and ultra-modern, brightly colored lacquer on all the mismatched tables. It reminded David of something that might be found on a side street in New Orleans and might become intermittently popular for its cheap drinks and strange appeal, so he favored it highly. On Tuesdays, a guy came in with a portable amp, a microphone, and a tip jar to host a trivia game, calling out questions over the microphone every three minutes or so. David wasn't sure if the restaurant endorsed this practice or simply allowed it, but it had been a steady practice for at least a year. He, Karen, and a various collection of others, whose interest

in it came and went, played regularly and won occasionally. Taking his time on his bike, the details of his lie still uncertain in his mind and a bitter taste rising from his stomach, David was late and nearly missed the first question. Karen waved from a booth, and David found a pitcher of margaritas and a salted glass waiting for him.

As he sat down, a familiar, childish feeling hit him. He wondered if she would have something unique to say. If she, of all of them, would be curious, disgusted, or would try and hide excitement. She smiled at him and opened her mouth to say something, eyebrows raised.

“So,” was all she got out.

“My mother’s not really dead,” David interrupted.

Karen’s face went slack. David reeled, uncertain if he had actually said it aloud, looking for incredulity or shock in her face and finding neither.

Karen shook her head, a little shudder. “I was about to ask if you had trouble locking your bike.”

David laughed, a sound like a deep cough, nearly choking. Karen filled David’s glass, her face patient. She pushed it forward by the stem and sat back, legs crossed and her hands left loosely in her lap. It took a few moments and sips of margarita for David to regain control of his voice, and he realized with some embarrassment that he was disappointed in her reaction.

Karen did not prompt him, but simply waited, her face impassive, gentle, and patient.

David began the story, painfully aware that the words were all the same as those he often used in New Orleans, but he did his best to just tell it as he knew it. He left out

embellishments and the most practiced of lines. His story was occasionally interrupted by a trivia question, but Karen remained mostly quiet.

“When I was six years old, my mom asked my Uncle—Trey—to babysit and never came back. My father had run off, as I said, but his brother Trey still lived in the same place and had looked after me off and on before that. I think, now, that he was only surprised the times that she did come back, not the time she didn’t. I didn’t know anything that had happened until I was fourteen. She was arrested when I was twelve.”

“Who was the first European to sail around the southern tip of Africa?” the trivia announcer asked the room.

“I remember now, the day my uncle must have heard about it. He sent me to my room and wouldn’t let me watch TV at all for a week. I remember, because that wasn’t usually the way he would punish me, even on the rare occasions that he did. It was always cleaning the gutters or something like that. It must have been her face that was all over the news, showing her picture every twenty minutes. My mother is Michelle Riley Shuster.”

David paused, looking up, waiting for a sign of recognition. “If you had lived in that part of the country then you probably would have heard of her. Google her, if you want. She was originally arrested as a material witness in a missing person case—a young woman—and she ended up confessing to the murder of eight women. A serial killer. Ritual killing and torture, the whole thing. She was one of the few women serial killers, so she was a big deal in the nineties. She’s been on death row, in Florida, for a long time.”

Karen was silent, her face still impassive, but David didn't feel like continuing. There was more: how his Uncle had fought to retain continuous custody, how he found out, freshman year of high school, that his mother may be executed, how he kept waiting for it to happen. Though now, fifteen years later, it may either never happen or happen tomorrow.

Karen blinked, still waiting for him to continue.

"That's it," he said. "It's been a long time since I told anyone, sorry."

"Who played Sam Spade in the 1941 detective thriller *The Maltese Falcon*? The announcer inquired.

David pulled the note pad to him and wrote "Jimmy Stewart." Karen leaned over and shook her head.

"Humphrey Bogart. You're thinking of *Rear Window*."

David scratched it out, tearing the paper, and had to flip a couple sheets before he found a whole one to write Humphrey Bogart on. He took the paper up, nearly tottering a waitress as he passed her. He was distantly aware that he was angry, and that embarrassed him. He had no right to expect anything from Karen, and he knew it. It was horrible to be disappointed that she, of all people, was taking all this calmly, without badgering him with comments and questions. Karen badgered him about *everything*—but here, with so many familiar and expected questions, she was silent. The only thing she had to say was Humphrey fucking Bogart.

Do you remember her, what was she like? Is she guilty? How did she do it? Did she ever hurt you? Not really. Probably. Lots of ways. No.

He detoured to the bathroom to give himself a moment.

Returning to the table, he found that Karen had ordered him a glass of water and a shot of tequila. Her lips were curled inward as he sat down, and the first signs of anxiety were beginning on her face. Her eyebrows were raised, as if she had already asked all the questions in the world and expected some sort of answer soon. David stared back at her, his anger dwindling, but still defiantly silent.

“And the woman on the phone,” Karen prompted, not asking.

“I don’t really know,” he answered. “She said she wasn’t a lawyer, or anything, that she just wanted to talk to me next week in person and that she represented my mother. No—that’s not quite right—she said my mother had asked her to speak with me. She said she was a researcher, and that she interviewed my mother often. She didn’t say much on the phone. She’s coming here, supposedly whether I call her back or not, and wants to meet with me. But I,” David interrupted himself by downing the tequila shot. “I just don’t see how all that could be true. I don’t know how she got my number; even the lawyer didn’t have my work number. I’m not listed at the number anywhere. My mother has never—not since I was six years old—communicated or even tried to communicate with me. I don’t know why she would now, and doubt she would at all.”

“How do you know?” Karen asked.

“Who was the host of the original TV show *The Twilight Zone*?” the announcer asked.

“She just hasn’t, is all. Not once. We—my Uncle and me—might’ve never known if it wasn’t such a sensational story. Reporters found my Uncle after she was arrested. He sent them away and got a court order to prevent them from trying to interview me. Of course, then, I didn’t know. I think I knew something was up, but

really, I can't remember now. My Uncle, I think, still follows all of her trials and appeals and all that. Maybe just so I don't have to."

"So, you think the girl on the phone was lying."

David considered for a moment.

"At the time, I thought she might be real. But she can't be. It couldn't really have come from Michelle. Probably some ill-advised charity group just wants to talk to me, get me to start paying for her defense. My Uncle thinks she's probably out of her own money by now."

Karen finished her own margarita and emptied the pitcher into her glass. She was usually a talkative person, especially about food or her dogs or the most recent movie, sometimes to a fault.

"If you want to tell me more about it, you can," she said.

"Not just now," David told her.

Karen nodded. "May I tell you something?"

David shrugged.

"I think you should call her. The woman on the phone, I mean."

"Why should I? Why should I let someone drag me into that mess?"

Karen considered, turning her head to the side and looking at David out of one eye, something she did often without realizing. "Maybe she's what you said—some misguided person, crazy even. Maybe not. You have questions. At the very least, how she got your work number. If she has resources..." Karen shrugged, letting it hang. "Not knowing what she has to say doesn't make it not there—it doesn't make the mess go away or even keep you out of it. It just keeps you from seeing it or knowing about it. I

guess what I mean is the worst of it has already happened—happened a long time ago. Accepting that girl's invitation might give you some answers, or it might just be opening up an old wound, but from what you say, this may be your last chance to know what your mother has to say to you, or if she has anything to say to you. If you don't find out what it is, especially now that you know that there *may be* something, not knowing might drive you crazy. Knowing probably won't be easy, but not knowing is worse. But perhaps, that's just me."

She pushed her empty margarita glass toward the center of the table. Cheers went up here and there as the announcer gave the answer to a question David and Karen had missed altogether.

"Thank you," Karen said after a moment.

"For what?"

"For telling me. I knew there was something. I didn't think...I knew there was something."

"You're really glad I told you?" David asked incredulously.

"Yes. Are you?"

David was quiet. He had never felt more off balance.

"I hope you consider me a friend," Karen added, her voice quiet, hurt. "You don't need to ask me not to tell anyone, I won't. But if you ever want to talk about it, I'm here. And I still think you should call that woman."

Excerpted from *Blood & Copper*,

By Mary Elere

Forward

Dear Reader,

If you look for them, you can find people throughout history whose lives are so surreal, so fantastic that they cannot be easily believed. Whether they dazzle, stun, or horrify, they seem too large, too colorful to really have breathed, eaten, slept, married, worked, and counted how many days they were alive to see the sun go down. I admit that in my attempt to recreate such a life in these pages, I've managed nothing more than a whisper of a ghost. Erzsebet Bathory was a real-live human being, and alongside all those banalities, committed countless strange and horrible acts of cruelty and violence, and for many, many years with complete impunity. The details of these crimes, even the final number of her victims, are disputed. Many of the most revealing and accurate documents detailing Bathory's true lineage, and the transcripts of the hushed, unique trial have been hidden or partially lost. In writing her story, I've combined and abandoned characters, reversed dates, changed genders, and probably created other anachronisms by accident. I hope this does not lessen your interest or enjoyment.

If you would like to find for yourself where the real Erzsebet ends and my creation begins, there is a brief list of places to start in the first appendix.

Yours in words,

Mary

Excerpted from *Blood & Copper*

Prologue

Esced, Hungary. 1571

Erzsebet woke early, unpleasantly warm and wet. She screwed up her face, wondering if her father, in one of his midnight wanderings had found himself in her room and spilled warmed wine in her bed. It was not until she sat up and shook herself awake that she remembered it could not have been him, he had died last year. Her momentary, private mistake gave her more embarrassment than sadness. She threw off her bed clothes, and saw that her legs were covered with blood. Her stomach churned and she reached for her bedpan at the end of her bed. She held it with both arms and waited, but the churning subsided. She set the bedpan close at hand in case she would suddenly need it. She investigated herself, her nose scrunched.

It was a rare hot day in Esced, especially in her corner room over the kitchens. The blood had already taken on a heavy smell in the room, sour and coppery. When she stood up, a new flow seemed to gush from her, though she felt no pain. She held the bedpan between her legs until it slowed to a gentle seeping; it was only a moment. She was not completely ignorant of what was happening to her, but she had rather expected it to be painful. Not like a cut or burn, perhaps, but something. She felt queasy again and held her head against her bed post, which was cool and smooth. Anna, her mother and fervent protestant, had warned her she would have Eve's curse any time now, and that she should pray forgiveness for being born wicked and full of sin. She wondered briefly what her Aunt Klara, who had little patience for the Bible story, would have thought of this.

She pulled the linens off her bed and found the blood had soaked down to the flats. She ripped the linens in half, frowning as she did so. They were dyed an expensive, pale pink and she liked them. She folded a third of the linens up and pulled it up between her legs. She tied the corners around her hips until the final effect reminded her of baby's clothes. She walked slightly bowlegged, but it would stay on and allow her to dress. Majarova came in with Erzsebet's dress hung carefully over on arm. She stopped short when she saw Erzsebet awake and naked besides her improvised underclothes.

"Aren't you a clever little animal?" she asked in her exotic mixed dialect. Erzsebet had been slowly learning Majarova's *Roma* language, but once her mother had heard her say a few words to another servant, and she had slapped her hard and suddenly across her face. *I didn't give birth to a devil. You will not start speaking like one.*

Majarova swept aside Erzsebet's nightgown and held out her dress for her. "That will do you nicely for today, I think, but I'll leave you some cloths for tonight and tomorrow on your wash bin. I can't let you get at the curtains tomorrow. You bleed a lot for such a little one."

Majarova was the tallest woman Erzsebet had ever known. She wore her dark hair loose in wild curls, and the long colorful belt of a gypsy over her dress. She had been a traveler before she came to the fief and in her mother's service. On sight she was a personal favorite among many for Erzsebet. To be sure, Majarova's face and part of her neck floated above most crowds, but she was also a strangely beautiful woman, despite the darkness of her skin and hair. Only her eyes were pale, but even they were

darkly ringed. Erzsebet was also dimly aware of the subtle power Majarova must have, if only for the freedom to wear her clothes and hair the way she did.

Majarova finished with Erzsebet's laces and smoothed her hair into a bun at the nape of her neck, for the first time. Her eyes were smoky and piercing. "Since you are a woman now, I should teach you a womanly charm." Erzsebet nodded quickly and grinned with all her teeth. Majarova grabbed her chin. "Not a game." Erzsebet nodded more solemnly and went to the corner where a mislaid stone lay loose in its mortar. From behind it she took a small flat box and brought it back to Majarova, who opened it. The sides were of equal depth, one inlaid with a mirror, the other with polished obsidian. Majarova held it for her like her mother would hold the bible for her to read. "Take some of your blood on your longest finger," Majarova instructed, and motioned with her head toward the bedpan. "Draw a circle on the stone." Erzsebet did so, and felt the roughness in the stone intensely under the pad of her middle finger. "With your thumb put another circle in the center of the first, like an eye." Majarova held the box flat in front of her. "Relax your gaze. See the eye with your left eye and your reflection with the other. Make your busy mind go soft, and you will see the beauty of your future."

At first she could not do it, her eyes flicked from one to the other, but she could feel the blood rush to her face. She focused so intensely that she felt pressure from behind her eyes, as if her soul was impatient to see itself. Slowly, each eye settled in its place, and she saw a woman, perhaps twenty-five. She wore what she could tell from the bodice was a proper lady's gown, though the collar stood out so far it looked strange. A dark topaz broach held the collar together at the bust. She wore a maroon headdress, simple and close to the head but covered with a tight grid of pearls. Six strands of pearls

made a tight necklace around her long neck, and strings of pearls made up the lacings of her bodice. The woman did not glint with sharp reflected shards of light as her mother Anna did with her gems, but was iridescent in her pearls, a piece of stolen moonlight. Erzsebet loved the woman suddenly and thoroughly, and a delightfully hot sensation ran between her throat and her groin.

The box was shut suddenly and slid under the bed. Erzsebet stood blinking dumbly in the sunny brightness of the room. Someone had spoken to her. Her eyes met her mother at the door. Majorova yanked at her laces. "Just ready now. Madame." Majorova indulged her Countess with the French word now and again, and knew that she never noticed the falseness of the compliment.

Anna saw the bed clothes and the bed pan on the floor. She didn't see the smears of blood on her daughter's fingers. Anna sat on the stool in front of the wash bin. She waved Majorova out the door. Majorova took her time gathering the bedpan and the strips of sheet before leaving, more time than anyone else would have dared. Anna waited, as if politely.

Anna patted her skirt, and Erzsebet came and knelt on its hem.

"Say a prayer, Erzsebet. Eve's sin corrupts us all, especially us women. We expunge it through blood, but it is not enough. You must pray, repent, and know both God and Christ."

Erzsebet nodded and rested her forehead on her mother's knee. As her mother whispered the Lord's Prayer, *Pater noster, qui es in caelis*, above her head, she thought of pearls and blood.

International Philanthropist Pours Money into Local Schools, Research

Philip Truman

Stephen Greene travels the world in his work with The Greene Foundation, a nonprofit founded by him in the late 70s. For the past fifteen years, Greene and his foundation have built up support and research facilities all over the world, in efforts to “further our understanding of our own hearts and minds,” as declared in the Foundation’s mission statement. These facilities include medical clinics, crisis prevention centers, sleep clinics, libraries, and research labs of all shapes, sizes, and disciplines. There are facilities, owned and operated by the Foundation, on all seven continents, including two in Antarctica.

This powerhouse has now turned his attention more homeward, to our own Atlanta, where he lives at least four months out of the year with his family. Greene will be funding the opening of a new private school, one that will be implementing cutting edge theories on how we learn, remember, and grow as thinkers into its everyday curriculum.

The school’s primary function will be, of course, to teach its students. The student body will be made up of gifted students from all over the county, as well as local students who show promise for advanced learning, but struggle in traditional public schools. One of these students will be Mr. Greene’s own daughter, Ramona, whose own struggles with traditional educational institutions may have inspired Greene’s new project.

“Ramona is a brilliant, difficult child,” Ramona’s current private instructor, Charlotte Perkins, told us in a related interview. “She is highly intuitive and currently reads at a very advanced level for a child so young, but while she seems to understand complicated, sensitive subjects, she has trouble with things like math and handwriting. I told Mr. Greene that the real trouble is that I don’t know how to teach her.” Ms. Perkins will be included in the project,” Mr. Greene informed us. “Everyone has something to learn here.”

The secondary function of the school is what makes it unique in the country, and perhaps the world. The school will also be home to a research facility, for which Mr. Greene has already recruited top minds from all across the country: psychologists, mostly, but also specialists in cognitive sciences and neurosurgeons. The experts in these fields will observe the instructors and the students of all ages, and try to determine what strategies work best for what type of students. While the students’ education comes first, they will also be subjects of an ongoing research study. “In essence,” Mr. Greene said in his press conference on the subject, “we’re trying to learn more about how we learn, for the next generation.”

Many outspoken critics of Mr. Greene and his foundation have claimed that his efforts to fund this project are far from selfless, considering his own daughter will be one of the students/subjects. Others claim that it will further separate the haves from the have-nots and the gifted from the average, and that the research will have no bearing on average students. Mr. Greene refused to give us a response to the first accusation, but to the second he responded emphatically. “No, absolutely not. One unavoidable fallback to research is that it has to start somewhere. This is only the beginning. The more we

understand about how these children learn and think, the more we can cultivate advanced learning and thinking across the country, the planet.” Many critics remain unconvinced about the legitimacy of Greene’s project, but applications for the school have overwhelmed Greene’s charter staff.

Ignorance

Chicago, Illinois

August 2011

David called Ramona Greene back the next day, Wednesday afternoon. She answered her phone on the first ring, a pleasant and simple hello. David felt off balance from the first moment. It took a few moments for his automatic politeness to save him, and stated his name and told her he would meet her that weekend, as she had requested. Being a child of the age of the internet and *To Catch a Predator*, David automatically thought of crowded, well-lit places to suggest a meeting. He had a short list of places that he wanted to suggest scribbled on an all-purpose pad in front of him, but for some reason his eyes fell on his *Chicago Local* events calendar instead, and he ended up suggesting the Polish food and culture festival in Jefferson Park.

Ramona responded amicably, though her voice took on a shrill note that surprised her. The number she had given him was her personal cell phone, and she hadn't actually expected ever to hear from David again, and she was already planning her approach to break this news to his mother. In the back of her mind, she was almost disappointed. After his response the first time, she thought she had gotten off some hook that was so deep in her back she hardly had known it was there. Now, she had to go through with it.

“What part of the park should I meet you?” she asked.

David hesitated, trying to picture the park. He had carefully thought through what he was going to say, but now he was a blank.

“Perhaps by the president's statue? It's fairly central, if my memory serves.”

Ramona suggested after five seconds silence.

“Yes, yes. That will be fine. Saturday, perhaps about two?” He asked, happy to be back on script.

“What do you look like?” She winced.

“Not like much. I’m short and thin. Dark hair with square glasses. I’ll be on a bike, so I’ll have a helmet with me. You?”

“I’m tan, with medium brown hair that’s cut short.” She hesitated, searching for something else. “I’ll be wearing a necklace with a four-leaf clover dipped in gold.”

“Then with luck, I’ll find you.” David said. There was a moment’s breathy silence. “Oh God, I’m sorry about that.” David mumbled.

“No, it was a good one. I’ll see you Saturday then.”

“Yes. See you Saturday. About two.”

Listening, Ramona heard David’s frustrated exhale before he hung up. It was a few moments before she brought her own phone down, looking at it as if it were some new thing she had never seen before.

The actual website for the Greene Foundation, as David found Wednesday afternoon, as he was preparing to call Ramona, was extremely vague and simple. The home page had a solid green background, with a rotating set of pictures and clippings from various news sources that described the obscure, nonprofit organization. Above these read, in large white letters, the Foundation’s cryptic mission statement: “We strive to further the understanding of our own human hearts and minds.” Below the picture slideshow were two lonely links: News & Archives, Contributors. David had noticed there were no links to donation sites, PayPal and the like, but scrolling through the

contributor list, he decided he knew why. The list read like a Who's Who of Fortune 500, including individuals but more often listing sponsor corporations. They didn't lack funding, whatever it was they did.

The News and Archives link was a long list of media mentions, including an old magazine article that featured a large picture of Dr. Greene himself, holding his six-year-old daughter. The picture was black and white, but it was plain that Ramona had dark skin, eyes, and hair, while her father was pale, salt and peppered on top, with bright eyes. The article read like a fluff piece to David, mostly about the foundation backing research into education. The caption read *Philanthropist and Researcher Stephen Greene with daughter Ramona, age six*. That made her twenty-five now. The other articles were eclectic, covering everything from NASA to advancements in hypnosis and sleep therapy. There was no mention of Michelle Riley Shuster.

David leaned impatiently against the stone base of the statue of Jefferson. Always afraid of being late, he arrived early and had been there about half an hour but it still wasn't quite two. There were two other men leaning on the statue and looking about, waiting for someone. Around five till, a woman, thick waisted and with curly red hair, approached the statue with slow, unsure steps.

"Christina?" asked the man on David's right.

She nodded with a pleased smile. He was closer to forty than she was, barrel chested and tall. They hugged, awkwardly, with pelvises pushed away from each other. They walked aimlessly away.

The guy on David's left laughed, elbowing him in the arm. "Popular spot, I guess. You meeting someone too?"

David nodded. "Easy to spot place, I guess. Obvious choice."

"Which site did you use? The guy asked. "Match? eHarmony? Or Local?"

David groaned a little. "No site; it's not really a date. Just someone who knows my mother," he added without really knowing why.

The stranger laughed. "Old school, huh? Well, I guess it could work out for you. Good luck and all."

David winced. "You too."

A few minutes later, David spotted a girl with close cut chestnut hair and coffee with cream skin. Ramona wore a red, half sleeved sweater and tight jeans tucked into black boots. The sleeve on her left arm half covered a large, intricate tattoo. She was wearing the dainty necklace she had described. David left the statue to meet her on the sidewalk.

Ramona unconsciously bent one knee and juttred her hip out awkwardly, so she would not be so much taller than David. The flirtatious posture did nothing to deny the first-date look of their meeting. David stopped a little further away from Ramona than was natural, but this only made him look shy. He was achingly aware of the incorrect impression and wished they had met somewhere else, anywhere else.

"Did you find it ok?" David asked.

"Oh yes, I'm familiar with the area."

"Are you from here then?"

"No, just been here before."

That was all the small talk David could manage. He wasn't sure he was ready for this, at all, and the pretense of light-hearted friendliness in meeting Ramona was too much.

"I'll enjoy the sights more once we've...once I've heard you out." David scratched his brow, which hid his eyes as he spoke. This gesture was the only thing that made him resemble his Uncle, a learned family trait. Ramona, of course, didn't know this, but thought that she could have recognized him in the crowd despite the description and meeting place, that was how much he looked like Michelle. His hair was dark, yes, but his eyes were the color of a muddy river—blue green underneath a gauze of brown, just like his mother's. The rest of his face, gentle chin and petite features, were also Michelle's.

"Of course, I understand. Is there somewhere to sit nearby?" Ramona asked.

"Toward the food, I think."

They had to walk a few minutes, navigating through the crowd as it grew denser around the food and beer vendors. Ramona was grateful, because they couldn't talk in this crowd and it gave her moment to remember where she had decided to begin. They were able to snag a small picnic table as a trio of high-school age girls left it. One, a redhead with porcelain skin. Ramona looked at David to see if he noticed her, the girl that looked so much like Tracy, Michelle's sixth victim. He didn't look up, at the redhead or anyone. She wondered if he had ever seen their pictures, the victims. She wondered if he would like to. On a second thought, she supposed not.

They sat, and David looked up at her, jaw set and expectant. She hesitated.

“I looked up the Greene Foundation,” David said. “Your father must have a lot of eclectic interests.”

Ramona nodded. “He does and he doesn’t.”

“Vague must run in the family,” David retorted.

“I just mean that he wants to help people, in many different ways.”

“Of course. And how does this help people?”

Ramona’s face went slack.

David winced and held a hand out, stopping Ramona from answering. He hadn’t meant to start this way, to be antagonistic, but anytime his mother’s name was mentioned or he had to deal with anything involving her, his natural state was on guard, defensive.

“I’m sorry. Why don’t we just get down to it. Did she send you here?”

“I met your mother six months ago, just before her last appeal was denied. One of the Foundation’s projects is criminal psychology, my own field, and your mother agreed to be interviewed by my team as part of an on-going, long term study.” Ramona paused and pushed up the sleeves of her sweater, revealing the rest of her complicated tattoo, an open eye inside a psychedelic vortex of pinks and purples, like a cartoon illustration of a black hole. David couldn’t imagine that this girl had finished college yet. He tried to picture her with a research team, interviewing serial killers in prison and whatever else, but she seemed more suited for coffee shops and community theater.

“I’ve met with your mother many times. The sessions were always relatively private, and it was clear that what she said would be used for research purposes, but that if she told us of any additional crimes or illegal acts of any kind, that we would be compelled to tell the District Attorney.”

David sat back and crossed his arms, gritting his teeth.

“That, of course, is all standard.” Ramona continued, the pitch of her voice rising a bit, “And she never gave us any indication that there were any other crimes, other than the ones already known. Nothing she said to me so far has led to any legal consequences.”

“I don’t care,” David told her through his gritted teeth. “I don’t care how her legal consequences are affected by you or anyone. She’s a serial murderer and a stranger. I came to terms with that when I was sixteen, *ten years* after I last saw her. I’m not sure how her ‘legal consequences’ could be worse, and I’m not sure I want them to be any better. She deserves what the state is willing to give her. I don’t know why it was necessary for you to talk to me, but if it’s because you want me to become involved—in any way—with her ‘legal consequences’ you might as well walk away now. Last I checked, the state of Florida is satisfied with her first jury’s decision, and then so am I.”

Ramona stared, then sat back herself, unconsciously straightening up to her full length. “That’s not why I am here. What I should have said was this: that all of our conversations were only so that we could understand her a little better, not to influence her legal standing. In either direction.”

Ramona paused, inviting comment. “So you’re what, a profiler?” David asked.

“No. Profilers work with the law to catch murderers. We’re independent, but what we learn can help future profilers, hopefully. While the prison system, the lawyers, and the state all allow us access to her, we don’t have any bargaining power or influence other than that. As you can imagine, this can sometimes make it difficult to get cooperation from the prisoners.”

She paused, but David said nothing.

“We can’t make deals. We can’t get them better food or moved to a different prison or anything like that. It leaves us very little to bargain with. At first, your mother seemed fine just to talk, she didn’t make demands and she was the most cooperative subject we had ever dealt with. But that was at the before this last appeal. I think, for the first time, she is starting to believe they may actually execute her.”

Ramona paused, and looked up at David for sign that she had been too blunt. David scoffed. “She was sentenced fourteen years ago,” he said.

Ramona nodded. “Exactly. She never really thought they’d go through with it, it’s been so long. But now, I think it’s hitting her. Legally, I think she can technically still file for appeal, but on no grounds that would be considered. It has changed her, somewhat dramatically. For one, she became less willing to cooperate with me and our team, especially when she realized we couldn’t help her. Finally, she gave me an ultimatum. She would not participate—she would not speak at all—until I did something for her, and that was to come and see you.” There was a small upshot of flames to her left as someone stoked one of the barbeques. She jumped, whipping her head around. She had forgotten, for a moment, where she was. She had imagined that this conversation, like the ones with Michelle, was taking place in a clean, all-tile room, with two chairs, a table, bright lights.

“Is that it? Just to see me?” David prompted her.

“No. There are several things I’m supposed to tell you, ask you. First, when she was arrested, she had some money and a large piece of land outside Tallahassee with a small house on it. At the time, it wasn’t worth very much, a failed orchard. Her money

went quickly on legal counsel in the first year. But eventually, her lawyer arranged to sell half of her land, which had become valuable as Tallahassee grew and the area became the next potential suburb. They sold pieces of it, but one corner—the corner with the house on it, she refuses to sell. She wouldn't tell me why until now. She wants you to have it.” Ramona looked for recognition in David's face, but there was none, his face remained static.

“I don't want it,” David said. “What else?”

Ramona nodded and looked down at her hands, lying flat against the picnic table. “I thought as much, but she wants to try to convince you herself. In Florida. She said she's going to leave it to you, and if you do nothing, it will sit there until the state seizes it or whatever has to happen happens. Her lawyer is looking into that. That's the first reason she wants you to visit her, so she can try to convince you to take it.”

“For God's sake why? I'm surprised she even remember she had a son. Why would she want to see me to give me some little shack in...” David trailed off, something echoing in his head. “No. She wants me to have the house where she...where it all happened?”

“Yes,” Ramona said. “At least, part of it. There's nothing like that there now, of course.” She looked back down to her hands, her throat uncomfortably tight. This was somehow much harder than she thought it would be. She never thought she would find herself as Michelle's advocate, and she wasn't entirely sure how it had happened this way.

David shook his head violently enough for his glasses to slide down his nose. He took them off and cleaned them with his shirttail.

“No. Anything else?” David asked.

“The next part is a little difficult, because Michelle didn’t know how much you would know about it, then and now. From what she said about your Uncle, she thought you wouldn’t have known much then, but she didn’t know how curious you would have been as you got older. How much you read.”

David shrugged. “I’ve tried to avoid it. It wasn’t always possible.”

“You were twelve when she was arrested, right?”

“Yes, but I didn’t know about any of it until she had been convicted. Sentenced, actually. So, fourteen.”

Ramona looked stunned for the first time. It changed her face completely. With her dark eyes wide and her mouth slightly parted, she looked somehow older, more feminine.

“Really? I mean, how was it kept from you?”

“My Uncle didn’t want me to know. He did what he could to keep me from finding out, preventing lawyers and reporters from talking to me. I think it was expensive for him, because I remember him taking out a loan against his bar. We didn’t live in Florida, so after the initial wave of media, there wasn’t much on TV about it. I just didn’t know.”

“What made him tell you after she was sentenced?”

“He didn’t. Someone else told me.” David remembered hitting his Uncle in the chest that day, over and over, crying.

“I see. Did you go back and read about it?”

“Some. Not right away, but eventually I read back newspapers. Enough to satisfy myself that she was probably guilty. At some point I got this idea in my head she may have been framed or manipulated somehow, but it didn’t take much to dispel that idea. I stuck to newspapers, just enough to know what she’d done and what was going to happen to her. Some of it anyway. Newspapers have a way of hinting that they’re only telling you what’s fit to print, but that the whole picture is much worse. I know enough.” David paused, and suddenly the back of his throat tasted hot. “If she wants to see me so she can tell me all the details, I can’t...”

“No,” Ramona said. “At least, I don’t think so. What she wanted me to ask was whether you read the book. A lot of people did after her second trial.”

“What book? Has someone written her life story? No. I can’t say I have.”

Ramona looked even more surprised. “No, not about Michelle. Though I am sure there are several authors competing for what will be the definitive book about it. But no, I meant did you read *Blood & Copper*?”

“No, what...” David started and stopped. He remembered the book now, it had been really popular his last year of high school. “Wasn’t that some kind of pulp romance? It wasn’t really my thing. Why?”

“You really didn’t follow the case. It was central to her defense in her first appeal, trying to show she was incompetent to stand trial. It wasn’t a romance—historical fiction. It was about a Hungarian royal, a woman who killed other women named Erzsebet Bathory. It was vital to her case. Over a hundred copies were found among her things, and she imitated some parts of it, imitated Bathory.” Ramona

hesitated. "It may not have been elaborated on in the papers, because as you said, some of those details aren't fit to print."

"She really is crazy."

"That's harder to claim than you might think," Ramona answered quietly.

"I can't say much to that, but she's crazy to think I would read that book. And she's crazy to think I would come to visit her after all this time."

"I understand your reluctance, even if it seems otherwise," Ramona leaned forward. "But please think about it before you flat-out refuse. Coming to Florida, I mean. Let her tell you why she wants you to have the land, and maybe why she wants you to read the book, though she only asked me to ask if you had, she may not want you to at all. I won't ask you to come for her sake. If you hate her that won't do much good, but don't you want to know? For your own sake? You have some time to decide. Please, think about it before you write it off. Ask some friends, maybe, or your Uncle."

The crowd around them had thinned, the lunch rush over, but this just made David more aware of the other people in the park. He could now almost hear their individual voices, instead of a white noise of the crowd. He became aware of his face, tight and stiff. He wondered briefly what they must look like, sitting as they were. Ramona didn't look around, but kept her eyes on David, trying to read him. It reminded him of Karen a little, but Ramona's gaze felt like an intruder, uninvited.

"You're the second woman this week who says that I should want to *know*." He leaned forward and spoke quietly, nearly hissing. "Know what, exactly? Besides, whatever it is, I think that *you* just want to *know*. You couldn't give a shit about whether I do, or whether I *should*. You're just fucking curious. You don't care about helping me

come to terms with my murdering stranger of a mother, you just want to keep her participating in however it is you go about *researching a psychopath*.” He nearly spat his sarcasm.

Ramona didn't look taken aback by his sudden rudeness, his anger. Her face did change, though, became an open mask. She seemed much more comfortable with his anger than with his unsure responses before. She leaned forward, coming close to his face, her own face a practiced open expression. It was a learned skill, something she picked up from her father. It was utterly disarming, but not aggressive. It returned none of David's anger, nor became apologetic. It was not a poker face, either, but something more akin to an empty mirror.

“Yes. I am curious, it's part of my job and my nature. I always want to know why, and I think knowing why helps. I don't want to make things difficult for you, but if I were you, I'd want to know, just for myself. As for me, I've done what Michelle asked in trade for her participation. I never promised that I could make you come. It would probably help, if you did, but everything is not contingent on it.”

“Why do you want to know why? What good could it possibly do?” David asked, sitting back.

“To prevent it, of course. To help keep it from happening again.”

Tallahassee Librarian Kills 8 in 8 Months

Kelsey Timmerman

Monday, Michelle Riley Shuster, a quiet librarian living just outside Tallahassee, was arrested in connection with the disappearance of Courtney Donahue. Shuster was arrested based on tip from a anonymous source, who claimed to see Shuster leave a bar with Ms. Donahue on the night of her disappearance.

During a ten-hour interrogation, Shuster confessed to the murder of Ms. Donahue and seven other women: Shelly Patterson, Evangeline Ribaldi, Stephanie Gregorson, Kelly Michaels, Danielle Short, Tina McGee, and Tracy Phillips, all of whom were open missing persons cases from this year.

By Tuesday, the bodies of three of Shuster's alleged victims, Ms. Phillips, Michaels, and Ribaldi, were found according to Shuster's directions, thus confirming her confession. The bodies were found in marshlands with the help of the Monroe county Sheriff's Department and the Florida State Police. As of today, the search continues for the other victims.

TPD homicide investigator Danny Woods lead the interrogation. "I never thought I would have to take a confession like that," Det. Woods told us after the arraignment on Wednesday morning, "and I certainly hope I never have to take another one."

Each of the women named in Shuster's confession went missing on the last week of the month, each month starting last July. Det. Woods was not able to give further details of the confession, but a source from inside the department confirmed that the

pattern of disappearances was relevant to the murders and that there were other ritualistic elements to the brutal crimes, including mutilation and “blood-letting.”

Shuster worked as a librarian for the past six years, since moving here from Cherish, Mississippi, near the Louisiana border. Investigations have only just started, and some expect that more crimes, if not more bodies, will be uncovered in the process of digging through Shuster’s past.

Shuster was married in summer of 1984 and gave birth to a son in spring of that year. The location of her husband and son are currently unknown and under investigation.

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

September 1997

David shoved his bulky book bag into his locker. Uncle Trey had bought him the kind that rolls, supposedly because he thought he would like it. *For all your grown-up books and smart guy learnin' gear.* But really because David was so small, and now he had to walk to school. The bag was supported by a solid plastic frame that was almost too big to fit into his locker and would only fit at all at an awkward angle. Every day he had to shove the bag in and hold it there with one hand until he slammed the door shut with the other. It was practically impossible to do this inconspicuously.

He cursed, looking down at the two books in his hand. His first two classes were Advanced Geometry and Biology. He was a freshman, but they didn't have honors classes, so they stuck the advanced freshmen in with the sophomores, no matter how scrawny they were. The books in his hand were Biology and French. He cursed again and turned back to his locker. The lock was just barely below his eye level.

As was reopening his locker, preparing to catch his backpack as it would inevitably fall out, he heard a sudden rash of gasps and exclamations from down the hall. There was a group of Sophomores, several in his Geometry class, gathered in a tight semicircle, all reading from a single print out. Standing a little aside from the group was Bobby Grieson. He looked more smug than usual, an achievement.

“Gross!” One the girls exclaimed. “What the hell is blood-letting?”

David rolled his eyes back toward his combination. Bobby was always grossing the girls out with something or another. The week before he had found a dissected pig

fetus, splayed and held open in a plastic case, in one of the cabinets in Bio lab and swiped it to show the freshman girls at lunch. He told them it was an abortion.

“That’s totally fake,” said Jamison, another boy in his Geometry class. “You wrote that yourself, Bobby. I don’t buy it.”

“Naw, it’s real.” Bobby insisted. “My mom was talking on the phone to her friend who works with his Uncle. They were talking about it so I looked it up in the school library. There you go, right there.” He tapped the page.

“Bobby, if this is a joke it’s *way* too mean,” said the other girl, a tall, light-haired freshman who was also in sophomore classes.

“Listen to what I’m tellin’ you, Trina; this is totally legit. That little runt has *one fuckin’ freak show* of a mom.”

Trina looked past Bobby and spotted David, exchanging out his books. He wasn’t looking at them, but he was clearly in earshot. She punched Bobby in the shoulder and gestured with her head, which was way more obvious than pointing. David slammed his locker closed again.

Bobby looked back at her with a look that clearly said *What do I care?* but didn’t say anything else. A bell rang out, and they filed into the nearby classroom, David trailing behind them at a safe distance.

Geometry went past uneventfully. David paid just enough attention to get by, carefully drawing boxes for his comic. He drew a comic every day. He drew the boxes carefully in Geometry while he had a good excuse to have a ruler out, lightly drew figures in Biology, wrote the script in English, and finally inked over everything in US History, the class where he could devote the most attention to his comic. Almost nothing

to break the steady concentration he needed to ink and shade with the perfect balance of pressure and ease so that he didn't rip the paper or have to go over the line twice. Two weeks before he had snuck into the movie *Chasing Amy* with his 17 year old cousin Courtney, who fancied herself a bisexual revolutionary, and who also stayed with his Uncle Trey, a childless, gay bachelor who seemed to collect his delinquent siblings' kids. David's favorite character was Banky (he didn't actually care much for rest of the movie) and he nodded along with him fervently when he argued that inking was not the same as *tracing*, David was remembering this as he was carefully and lightly drawing the double-lined boxes, checking twice to make sure the gutters were straight and even.

The teacher, a lanky tall woman who was younger than any teacher David had ever had before and actually had a *tattoo*, told them to work on the homework quietly and that she would be back in a minute.

A few seconds after she disappeared into the hallway a dull buzz of whispering started, a minute later it was growing. The loudest of the whispers came from the back, where Bobby, Trina, and Jamison sat, and gradually become perfectly audible, even in the front row. David tried to tune them out as he continued to draw boxes. Maybe he'd try to do a two-pager today.

"...tellin you. Mother fucking psychopath. Shit like that runs in families."

"Do you think he's got some dead cats in his basement? They say they all start out like that," Jamison was asking Bobby.

"Yeah, I bet he does. I saw on *True Crimes* that they all wet the bed when they're kids too."

"Shut-up you guys," Trina hissed, though without much force.

“Dude,” Jamison continued, ignoring Trina, “remember that episode of *Law and Order* where it turned out that both the father and son were doing the kidnappings? Do you think they ever did one together?”

“Jesus, like take your kid to work day? Jesus Christ.”

They were quiet for a minute, and David felt a prickling at the back of his neck. He turned his head, trying to look like he was just shifting in his chair and cast a look behind him. It hadn't actually occurred to him that they were talking about him and his mother, but their sudden silence made him want to look back. He was startled to see that all three of them were staring back at him, hard enough to go straight on through.

After a long quiet moment, Trina said more quietly, “You guys don't know what you're talking about. Besides, Courtney told me he hasn't seen either of his parents since he was way little. He's just a kid.” She nearly spat this last bit, though she herself didn't sound thoroughly convinced, her voice a little shaky.

David sat up straight. His hands and feet felt suddenly numb, as if he had been sitting on them and they fell asleep. They could not possibly be talking about him, but David didn't know any other Courtney in school except his cousin. And he really hadn't seen either of his parents since he was little. He tried to look back at their conversation, trying to remember all that he had half-heard. No, he decided, they couldn't have been talking about him. He had been stupid to think they might have been, even for a second. He went back to the comic and the comfortable half-dream that he kept up around him most of the time.

It wasn't until the end of lunch time that Bobby plopped down next to him, yanking him violently out a reverie, trying to refine the simple plot for today's comic

page. Bobby looked back at his own table to make sure he had a proper audience. By now, a dozen or so kids were looking at them.

But when Bobby turned to look at David, and his face seemed to collapse. His mouth had been twisted into a vindictive smirk, but faced with David's blank and open gaze it fell slack, and for a moment he looked as though he had forgotten what he was going to say, or even maybe where he was. Then he drew his face back together. From his pocket, he unfolded a piece of paper that had deep creases in a crisscross over David's mother's face. He stared at the headline above her picture. *Tallahassee Librarian Confesses to Eight Local Murders*. He snatched it away and started reading the first few lines, trying to force back the hot bile that was rising in his throat. No words from the article itself made sense to him. His eyes kept slipping back to the picture, the headline, the picture.

Bobby had indeed forgotten what he was going to say, and stared as David slowly turned red at the neck and ears. Bobby was speechless, and suddenly frightened. He hadn't, even for a second, really thought that meek, little David could possibly be like the woman in the paper. He expected the shrill, small anger of a cornered kitten, familiar sputtering and shaking that made him laugh and feel tall and firmly on his feet. Now, as David rose from the bench, turning purple in the neck and shaking, he started to wonder. David turned to him and started working his mouth, as if he was screaming at him but couldn't find the breath.

Bobby shifted back from him, but David didn't come forward. He swayed and fainted. He fell face first into the corner of the table, breaking his glasses at the nose piece.

Almost as soon as the blackness had come over his vision like a camera shutter, light started to seep in again, blotchy and unfocused. He lay still on the cafeteria floor. Aches and pains in his right shoulder and just above the bridge of his nose sprang forward, fully formed and sharp. Davis squeezed his eyes shut again, wanting the soft, cottony feeling in his head back, but despite himself everything was quickly and surely becoming more clear, pronounced, and inarguable. He heard the footsteps around him and the table being moved away. A gruff voice was saying “go on to class, get going, now.” David didn’t stir, lying still on the floor until he felt adult hands grip him under the shoulders and pull him up to a sitting position. He tried not to open eyes but they betrayed him. Looking at him was Coach Claymore. He snapped in David’s face.

“Hey, hey” he said, trying to meet his eyes, “look at me. David, right? Are you ok?” David nodded and Coach clapped him twice on the shoulder. “let’s see if you can get up then, okay?”

David started to, wavered slightly, but made it to his feet. He looked around, but he couldn’t see well without his glasses. Coach sat down on the cafeteria bench and patted the seat next to him, for David to sit down. Most of the other students had filed out of the lunch room, and it was getting quiet.

“Take it easy, kid.” Coach said, and he bent down to get David’s glasses and other things. “I’m afraid you’ve broken your glasses,” he said as he handed the pieces to him. “Can you see without them or do we need to call your Mom?”

David didn’t answer. He looked down toward his hands and shrugged.

“Did someone push you?” Coach said, but his voice was suddenly distracted. He had picked up David’s pack from under the table and the paper from beside it. David

wondered dully how fast Bobby had left after he fainted and who had gone to get Coach Claymore. He looked up and watched as Coach read quickly through the paper. He couldn't make out his face very clearly, but he could hear as he whispered to himself, reading. David touched his head gingerly where he had hit it, testing the bruise forming there. Coach folded the paper and said, "I think we'd better go to the office. I bet Ms. Kneed will have aspirin in her desk that will help your head, for a start." David nodded and got up, not wavering anymore, but feeling clammy and cold all over.

He knew, now that his head had cleared, that what Bobby had shown him was a cruel lie, and he followed Coach Claymore thinking how stupid he had been to believe it so fully, so completely, even for just a minute. He didn't question where Bobby had gotten the picture of his mother, a familiar one because he had seen it before, in an envelope with his mother's name on it in with Uncle Trey's other pictures. He followed Coach Claymore and remembered the large, hideously overstated painting of a woodland cabin that hung behind the her desk, but nothing else about Principal Shipley came to mind. He scarcely saw her. Silently, he began to slowly formulate a story, scratching bits that didn't make sense or would make him look bad. Bobby had given him the picture, and of course, he had known it was a lie and...what? Did he stand up to take the picture to a teacher? That would sound okay to Principal Shipley, but if he told the same story to his Uncle, he would see right through it. It wasn't like him at all. So, he was standing up to go throw it away. And he slipped on something and hit his head. That would be ok. Keep it simple, don't elaborate, he told himself.

The offices were sectioned off by a glass door and several floor to ceiling glass windows, so Ms. Nall, the administrator, could see down the hall as she sat her desk. She

was on the phone when they came in and smiled apologetically at Coach Claymore. Coach indicated that David should wait in a chair and handed him his backpack, but kept the paper in his other hand. He pointed toward the Principal's office, and Ms. Nall gave him a little nod and mimed knocking, still on the phone saying occasionally, "I understand," "Of course," and "Naturally."

His back to the glass and the hallway, he could hear the slamming of lockers and the warning bell sounded. That meant it had been less than five minutes since Bobby showed him the picture, a realization that made David's head swim a little.

Ms. Nall had finished her one-sided conversation and was eyeing the top of David's head.

"What's your name?" Ms. Nall asked him, after a few moments.

"David."

"David what?"

"David Shuster."

Ms. Nall typed something in her computer and started to read, her head tilted back so she could see through her bright pink readers. Her phone buzzed and she picked it up.

"Yes, Ma'am?" she asked. "Yes, I've already got it up, you ready for it? Trey Shuster is listed, his Uncle...I'm sorry?" she hesitated, a little flustered, "Well, I don't know, it just says Uncle, should I ask him?" Another pause, her mouth a little open as she stared out into space. "No, I mean, yes, of course" and she recited his phone number. "That all? Do you want me to send him...okay." She hung up, with a little nod. "David, I'm afraid you'll have to wait a little while. Do you have some homework to do?"

He didn't, but he nodded anyway.

“Well, you should work on it then, there’s a table over there. Do you need a pencil?”

David shook his head and moved obediently, putting his backpack on the table between Ms. Nall and him so she couldn’t see exactly what he was working on, a long-ingrained habit. He got out his comic, but wasn’t very interested in it, and besides, he couldn’t see very well. He started to sketch Ms. Nall with his nose close to the page, but as he tried to draw her wire readers, they seemed to float in front of her small nose, fighting gravity. It started to give him a headache. He squinted at the clock often, and wondered how soon Uncle Trey could get there, and if they would have to try him a few times before he woke up to answer. Trey worked late in a bar, so he slept while Courtney and David were in school. Coach came out of Principal’s Shipley’s office, looking grim. David sat up, and made to put his notebook away.

“I have to go teach my next class, David. Your Uncle should be here soon. You probably won’t be going to any more of your classes today, so if you need something from your locker,” Coach hesitated. “Go now, and come straight back here.”

Sometimes, when David had a doctor’s appointment, Trey would purposefully schedule it for early in the day so David could have the afternoon off and they would see a matinee or go to the zoo when it wasn’t crowded. David doubted they’d do that today. David sighed, and cursed silently at Bobby. He started to wonder if Trey would believe his explanation. He always told him he had to keep his temper, not to rise to provocation, to ignore bullies and be the bigger man, always.

“When you scream and holler and turn red, you just give them the punch line to their joke,” Uncle Trey had said when David reacted badly to being pushed and called

names at recess, “It stops being funny to them when you stop reacting, and they look like the idiots they are. You see?” Trey had looked tired then, worried, and with dark circles under his eyes from a few too many days of interrupted sleep. But he smiled, and told him a story about a man who pretended to be deaf when someone tried to start a fight with him in the bar where he worked. “The guy hollered and hollered and hollered. Right in the guy’s ear. He slammed his fist on the table, spilling their drinks. And do you know what he did? He bought them both another round. He said ‘Everyone’s clumsy now and again.’” David had laughed at this, knowing that Trey had probably made at least part of it up to cheer him up, and so he’d stop sounding like a lecturing parent.

“Do you have things you need from your locker?” asked Ms. Nall. “If you do, you need to go ahead and go now.”

David nodded and went to his locker, at the end of the same hall, feeling Ms. Nall’s eyes follow him down and back.

After a long time, the glass door swung open and his uncle came in, and with three long strides, was kneeling in front of him. He wore his work jeans and button-up from the night before, and smelled vaguely of stale beer, mustard, and pizza dough. He put his hands on David’s knees and shook them gently back and forth.

“Well, you look okay, ‘cept all this mess,” Uncle Trey ruffled his hair until it stood up in all directions. “That’s better.” David shrugged.

“What happened? They said you fell?”

Trey handed David his old glasses, which were a little thinner and certainly uglier, but as he put them on he started to feel his headache begin to recede immediately.

David started to answer, but the door to Principal Shipley's office opened and she appeared, one hand holding the doorframe as she leaned in the main office.

“Mr. Shuster? May I speak with you for a moment?”

Uncle Trey turned, still on his haunches in front of David, “Just me?” he asked.

Principal Shipley nodded.

Trey turned back to David and appraised him. “Anything I need to know before I go in there?” he asked quietly.

David shook his head, avoiding his eyes and looking at Trey's hands, a thick, rubber watchband one wrist, a wide leather cuff on the other, as Trey pushed off from his knees to stand up.

Trey disappeared into the office. Ms. Nall clucked her tongue.

David put his notebook in his backpack and his pencil in his front shirt pocket, a habit copied from his uncle. He sat back and strained to hear their voices, but couldn't. At least, at first. For about ten minutes, according to the oversized, ridiculously slow clock on the wall behind Ms. Nall's desk, David couldn't hear anything besides Ms. Nall's scattered, slow typing and the ticking of the big clock. He was listening intently though, when he heard his Uncle's voice, raised slightly, come through the door. He couldn't understand what was said, but he recognized the tone clearly enough. He tensed all over and listened more carefully still. After another minute, he heard it again, a little louder, but still indistinguishable. Ms. Nall's typing stopped and she looked toward the door, eyebrows raised, when Principal Shipley's voice answered something in retort in even greater volume, but curt with clipped words that David could almost understand.

Soon, his Uncle was fully yelling, and Ms. Nall was standing up, preparing for some unknown thing. David could hear snatches now, all from his Uncle, “since he was six years old,” was the first thing he heard clearly and he gulped, and something started to press at him from behind his sternum, like a hard bubble growing larger. “I’ve kept him out of all of it...my responsibility...” As quickly as the tirade had started, it faded. Ms. Nall sat back down with a glance at David and another cluck of her tongue.

“Goodness sake,” she said under her breath.

David strained to hear more, but there was nothing audible again for several minutes. David’s throat seemed to never be fully satisfied in swallowing, and he stared at the shut door as if he would miss something if he blinked. He knew that Uncle Trey had never officially adopted him, but it had never seemed like it would be a problem. What if this stupid thing with Bobby and him knocking his stupid head on the table made them realize he wasn’t supposed to be living with Uncle Trey. He tried to calm himself, they wouldn’t take him away just because Uncle Trey never did any paperwork. His parents had left him; they wouldn’t go and find them and make them take him back. Besides, no one knew where his parents were. He *knew* that wasn’t how it worked, but he couldn’t convince the bubble in his chest or his rolling stomach.

After a long time, the door opened and Trey hesitated in the threshold, holding a folded paper in his hands. His face was pale and he looked very, very tired. The door open, David could hear him clearly.

“I’m very sorry for losing my temper,” he said, clutching the door handle. “David will see you on Monday. If he has any trouble, I’ll make sure we both hear about it.” He spoke quietly with just a slight edge.

Trey sighed and looked at David, folding the paper up smaller and putting it in his back pocket. “Let’s go, kid. Do you have everything you need?”

David nodded and followed Trey out of the office, having to double-time to keep up with his long strides. Once down the hall, Trey slowed down so David could more easily keep up with him, but he didn’t say anything.

“Why do I have to see Principal Shipley on Monday?” David asked.

“I didn’t mean it like that, really. I’m going to... You’re going to take the rest of the week off, but you’ll be back to school on Monday.”

“Am I suspended? But, why?” David asked, shocked.

“No, you’re not suspended. Let’s talk about it when we get home okay? It’ll be okay.”

On the drive home, Trey said, “It’ll be okay, really, I just need to think for a minute. And we’ll talk about it all when we get back to the house.”

They lived a little ways out from the city, in a house that Trey inherited from his mother when she died, around the time David was four or five. Most of the house was outdated, but Trey had been slowly replacing the wall paper and upgrading room by room for the past few years, so there always seemed to be one room that wasn’t much good for anything except keeping Trey busy on his off nights. It was a bit of a drive, and by the time they pulled up the narrow drive, David thought he might be sick. He followed Trey into the house. “I’ve got to make a call, real quick, go on to the living room and I’ll be there in a minute. You want anything from the kitchen?” Trey asked, heading right toward the kitchen.

David didn't answer, and listened as his uncle called the bar and told whoever answered to find someone to cover for him. He apologized for the short notice.

David sat on the couch, his backpack still on. He didn't feel like he should take it off for some reason, like he was probably not going to be staying very long. The familiar room suddenly felt stuffy, formal, like a stranger's.

Trey came into the living room with a Coke he hadn't asked for and put it in front of him.

"Okay, well," he started and clasped his hands together, elbows coming to rest on his knees as he sat on the coffee table across from him. His hands and knees bounced with uncharacteristic anxiety. "First, who gave you this?" He pulled out the paper from his pocket.

It was the print-out that Bobby had given him, now folded several more times and more crookedly, multiplying the creases over his mother's face.

"Bobby Grieson. At lunch."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing, I guess. He just handed it to me. He's a real jerk. I guess he thought it would be funny. I didn't yell, Trey, I swear. I was just standing up, and, well, I fell down as I was getting up. Tripped over my own feet I guess. Nothing happened really." He said all this very fast, trying to keep his voice from cracking as it did so often when he was anxious.

"Was he by himself?"

"Yeah, but, well, he came over from another table where there were other people. Why?"

“Do you think you could remember who they all were? Never mind, we can deal with that later. You said you didn’t say anything? What did you think?”

David wasn’t about to admit that he thought it was true at first. “Well, I thought it was a bullshit joke. I was trying not to be mad. I was going to go throw it away.” David tried to sit up straighter, so he was looking at his uncle at eye level.

“David, this isn’t a joke.” He tapped the page. “I hate that stupid little shit, sorry—you know you shouldn’t say words like that, by the way—I hate that you found out from some kid from school. I was trying to, well, I didn’t want to tell you about it yet.”

David looked at him, eyes wide. He picked up the paper again, reread it. Uncle Trey made as if to take it away from him, but changed his mind halfway. David looked up again.

“You mean, my mom, this is really her? Where is she now?”

Trey took a deep breath before starting.

“She’s in prison in Florida.”

This wasn’t a big shock to David. He knew that Trey was convinced that his father, at least, must be in jail by now, a gambler, drug-user, and occasional thief.

“Not for this,” David protested, pointing to the headline. *Tallahassee Librarian Kills 8.*

“Yes. For this.” Trey took the page, looked at it, and crumpled it up. “She was arrested early last year. I didn’t hear about it right away, but when they arraigned her, it was on the news.” Trey shook his head. “People called. Reporters, mostly, because once the police knew that neither of us had seen her, they backed off. But with the reporters, I

had to make them back off. I didn't want you growing up around all that. I still don't, but I should have told you before now. I'm sorry."

"How long will she be in prison? Forever?" David asked.

"We don't know yet. She's been convicted, but things like this, they take a long time. She'll appeal."

"Oh," David said, looking up, "then she might not have done it, you mean. She might have just," David trailed off, seeing Trey's face.

"No, David. Don't, don't start thinking like that. She is most likely guilty. The evidence..."

"What do you know?" David screamed. "You weren't there! You haven't gone to Florida anytime in the past year. What could you know? What if she didn't?" He was standing now, and Trey looked up at him, though David was so small, if had sat up straight they could be eye to eye. David's voice was cracking as he continued to scream at Trey. He started to hit at Trey, hitting him in the face and chest until Trey stood up and held him tightly around the wrists, letting David struggle, but not letting him hit him. David's screams eventually fell quiet, and he slowly stopped struggling, went limp. Trey dropped down again and held him. He sat hard on the floor and pushed David's face into his shirt, where wetness spread through the thin fabric.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY VAMPIRES

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Michelle Riley Shuster is currently sitting on Death Row in Florida for killing eight women in eight months. Shuster admitted in interviews that the story of Elizabeth Bathory was an inspiration to her, but her crimes may reveal something deeper than mere inspiration or fascination—is she just an obsessed fan? Or is she somehow the new embodiment of Bathory's fiery, immortal spirit?

The tamest bits of the crimes and life of Erzsebet are described in the 1990 novel *Blood & Copper* (available [here](#) on Amazon), thirty copies of which were found in Shuster's home at the time she was arrested. Many of them were missing pages, ripped out for an unknown reason. Some speculate that Shuster ate them as a ritual in order to take some part of the spirit Bathory within her. ...did it work?

Shuster certainly followed in Bathory's footsteps, killing a young, attractive girl every four weeks. While this was not confirmed during the trial, criminal psychologist and novelist Tracy Richards speculates in her book new book *Lady Killers: Women Serial Killers in America* that Shuster's pattern of kills was affected by her own menstrual cycle, making a kill in the third week of the cycle. Whatever the case may be, Michelle is certainly as obsessed with blood as Erzsebet was herself. When officers and detectives entered Michelle's home on April 28th, 1996, they were shocked at what they found. From the leaked official photos, you can see that Michelle was a very neat housekeeper and preferred an old fashioned southern style. A china cabinet in the living

room was the first indication that Michelle's wasn't an average home. Four large copper bowls that were filled with congealed blood of various ages were found in the cabinet, and another four mismatched containers of pewter, copper and glass were found neatly displayed on a shelf in the master bedroom. As Detective Woods testified in Shuster's initial trial, "The smell of blood hit us as soon we came in the main room."

The real horrors, however, weren't revealed until the officers made their way to the basement. The images ([found here—not for the weak stomachs](#)) that were shown at Shuster's initial trial reveal her killing room with all its macabre and twisted instruments of torture and killing, many of her own making or modification. Shuster had lived in the house for nearly 6 years, and had clearly used much of that time carefully preparing for her killing spree. From the ceiling hung chains and cuffs, some with remnants of skin and blood from her victims. Along one wall was display of sharp tools ranging from long needles to long, three-sided daggers. The most notable of all was a long table in the center of the room. According to testimony at her original trial, Shuster never revealed where she got the table, which was steel autopsy table of an outdated design. She, or possibly a currently unknown accomplice, had welded restraints for hands and feet, and had drilled holes in the channels on the edges. How each of the women were killed became abundantly clear with these discoveries.

Did Shuster's sudden bloodlust come from some psychological trauma? Or is she somehow channeling the dark spirit of the legendary, beautiful Blood Countess? Tell us what *you* think below. And don't forget to read our other profiles, and to subscribe for updates on Shuster's appeal and other modern vampire news.

Curiosity

Chicago, Illinois

August 2011

David considered his conscience clear. He had heard Ramona out, let her give him the message, or rather invitation, from his mother, so Ramona could continue her research. He'd even been nice to her, to some extent, keeping Karen's words in mind. Sunday and Monday he found himself looking forward to telling Karen about it, to hear her reactions to what had been said, to get her perspective. He couldn't really remember ever wanting another perspective besides his own before. Her reactions in their last conversation about it had surprised him, and what surprised him further was that she didn't hound him about it. The remainder of the previous week, she had been friendly and professional during work, giving no hint that they now shared a significant secret. For the first time, David took comfort in trusting Karen, believing her sincerity.

David didn't get much of an opportunity to talk to Karen, however, the next few days. Usually, Monday was the busiest day of his week, shipments piling up over the weekend for him to deal with and sort through. Of course, after the three day weekend, Tuesday was worse, and David's boss called him into his office for a time consuming pep talk first thing, so David couldn't even loiter by the front desk on his way in, as he usually would. He worked steadily, almost cheerfully, looking forward to La Cocina that night. It was late afternoon when Andy, a young recent graduate with messy blonde hair, clapped him on the back, startling him.

“Margarita Trivia, tonight? Am I right?” he blended the last words together into one word, *amirite*, and accompanied the whole thing with small dance involving pointed fingers. He was from North Carolina.

“Yeah, sure,” David said, his heart falling. He liked Andy the way he liked prime-time sitcoms. He was entertaining, but required little to no thought. David suspected that the ability to turn every conversation to one of light humor was more difficult and subtle talent than it seemed.

“Excellent. I’ve already got Chelsea in receiving down. I’m going to go see if Karen will grace us also. Do you need a ride?”

David shook his head, as he always did. “No thanks. I’ll see you there.”

Inwardly, David groaned. He wasn’t in the mood for Andy and Chelsea. Chelsea was smart and funny, but very competitive, at nearly everything. Andy was charming, but loud. This increased exponentially with alcohol.

David could hear the shift in tone the office took on when it was past 4:30. Slightly louder voices, chairs moving, coats being slipped on and drawers opening and closing as people cleared desks of debris. He finished up his work quickly, leaving a note of where to start in the morning. Leaving, he found Karen, jacket folded over her arm, waiting for him.

“How was your weekend?” Karen asked him.

David smiled. “Interesting, I guess.” He started to continue, but was cut off by Andy and Chelsea joining them.

“I hope you’re bringing you’re A-game tonight, David,” said Chelsea.

“Actually,” David said, then hesitated. He had forgotten to come up with an excuse. “I am not really feeling well, all of a sudden.” He addressed Chelsea, but saw, out of the corner of his eye, Andy considering him. Andy had a disconcerting gaze at times, friendly, but knowing. “I don’t want to be a downer. Tell me about it tomorrow though, right?” He waved his way out the glass doors and down the hall. He just caught a hurt look on Karen’s face before he was around the corner. He shrugged it off. He moved quickly and was able to catch the first bus out of the Loop, feeling like the sooner he got home the better. His disappointment caught up with him, anyway. It would have been worse, though, he reasoned, to have gone. He couldn’t imagine sitting there with Andy, whose careful attention could pick up on anything and lack of tact allowed him to point it out to the group at large. When Chelsea developed a red-faced crush on the broad shouldered, Spanish speaking delivery man, Andy had announced it at the company Chili cook-off. David’s social life in Chicago was primarily constructed by work, and the silly work events his well meaning boss continually arranged. He groaned inwardly, for the hundredth time, at the thought.

At home, he was restless. No channel or book or CD seemed able to hold his attention. He browsed eBay and other online stores for a replacement saddlebag and found nothing promising. By nine o’clock, he was on his couch, TV on and ignored, laptop in his lap, scrolling endlessly through pages of leather satchels he would never actually buy. In his lazy restlessness, he had constructed a nest of sorts around him—a plate of pizza crusts and three precarious beer bottles, a small stack of started and abandoned books, all old favorites, a series of remotes. He surfed aimlessly, an unwanted idea in the back of his mind growing stubbornly solid.

Finally, he submitted to it, and did something he had not done since he was fifteen. He wasn't familiar with Google then, but he had managed to find some informative sites on the old Apples in the school library.

Now, he searched his mother's name, but wasn't nearly prepared for what he got: 972,000 results. He started with the Wikipedia page, which had few more details than he knew already, with one notable exception. In a section labeled "victims," he found a simple chart.

Victims

Name	City	Age	Date of Disappearance
Courtney Donahue	Tallahassee, FL	23	March 7, 1996
Shelly Patterson	Perry, FL	27	April 11, 1996
Evangeline Ribaldi	Perry, FL	26	May 2, 1996
Stephanie Gregorson	Port St. Joe, FL	28	June 14, 1996
Kelly Michaels	Tallahassee, FL	29	July 8, 1996
Tracy Phillips	Pensacola, FL	24	August 4, 1996
Tina McGee	Tallahassee, FL	26	September 7, 1996
Danielle Short	Bainbridge, GA	30	October 10, 1996

David had never known the names of the women. He realized, with a sudden queasiness, that no one had ever asked him that, that no one's curiosity had ever extended far enough to learn the names, including his own. His stomach tightened as his read on.

On the first page of results, there were a half-dozen pages of news updates, court information, and vague short articles about Michelle's case. They contained few details, but reading through the lines, David got a sense of the fourteen year battle with the court that dragged on to ridiculous extremes. On one page, michelle.shuster.newslib.com, there were bullet point updates to her trials over the years. In 2004, her lawyer evidently

bought nearly six months of time by contesting one of the minor charges—larceny—claiming that a corpse’s blood and skin tissue cannot be considered property under the law. David closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the top of his couch. After a few minutes, he convinced himself he had misread and returned his gaze to the screen. But he hadn’t. He had come so far, so he continued to the second page of results, where the “unofficial” but more detailed pages began. He found two books written about her, self-published from the looks of them, and he skimmed the descriptions of each. One seemed to focus on the fact she was a woman—a notable rarity among serial killers and thus psychologically significant, at least according to the book’s author. The second, however, seemed to focus on the Detective, Danny Woods, who investigated the disappearances and was the first of many to interrogate Michelle. It was the second that David was more curious about. He wondered what type of man Danny Woods was, how old he was fourteen years ago, whether the arrest of Michelle was what made his career or broke it, whether he still thought about her, whether he was still in touch with the victims’ families, whether it was painful for him somehow, even though he caught her. He wondered despite himself, but wasn’t sure if he wanted to know any of the answers.

He jumped as his phone went off in his pocket. Contorting to retrieve it, he knocked the precariously balanced plate and bottles and sent them to the floor with a crash.

A text from Karen read “Feeling better?”

He bit his lip in frustration. Karen knew him better, of course. She knew he just didn’t feel like being around the others, but she rarely acknowledged things like that, if

ever. It gave him pause when she seemed to play along, and he found himself wishing she would call him on it once and a while. He responded, “Yeah, better. You win?”

He had scarcely set his phone down when it buzzed in reply.

“No. Not even close. Do you think you’ll feel up to breakfast tomorrow on the way in? Mother Mary’s by work?”

David resisted a childish impulse to refuse and told her he’d meet her a little before eight.

He was tired, he realized, but he went back to the search results anyway.

Stubborn against his own better instincts. The next site he opened because it highlighted the name of the book Ramona had mentioned—*Blood & Copper*. The site was cheaply designed, amateurish with a flashing border of red, dripping blood and headlined in Gothic lettering “Twenty-first Century Vampires.” Normally, he would have rolled his eyes. The site was mostly dedicated to the subject of *Blood & Copper*, Erzsebet (or Elizabeth, as the site alternately called her) Bathory. On the main page, however, was a link entitled “Michelle Riley Shuster—a reincarnated vampire?”

David felt more and more sick as he read through the page, clearly written by a person who hadn’t made up his mind whether or not he approved of Michelle or not. In places, it read like a horror novel, in others, a fan letter. The site claimed to have internal police information, even pictures, but David didn’t pursue it further. He knew better than to believe anything the site said, but he couldn’t dismiss it all. In his lies, and once a upon a time in his comics, he always knew where the real life inspiration stopped and the made-up parts started. What was exaggerated, what was twisted, what was simply reported as it happened, and what was pure fantasy—all this he felt had been under his

control. The more he read, and thought back to her, he couldn't even find the line between his own memory and what he sometimes imagined at night when he was a kid. Had she always had blonde hair like her picture, or was the vague memory of her with dark hair, like his own, real?

Deciding that the more he read, the less he knew, he put the computer aside and went to bed. He never really slept, but dreamed a little. Not of blood in copper canisters, or surgical tables, or victims and families left behind. It was nothing really, he had worse nightmares as a kid. He dreamed of being lost in a crowd of women with no-color hair and features that were impossible to hold firmly in the mind, even for a second.

Excerpted from *Blood & Copper*

Chapter One: The Engagement

Esced, 1571

Though she was not yet twelve, Erzsebet had the beginnings of a womanly shape. She had lived all her life in Castle Esced with her mother, Anna. Esced was a modest as castles went, and Erzsebet was well used to having her way around the place. Anna tried her best to control young Erzsebet, to keep her in her lessons, teach her the holy scriptures, and of course, groom her for a proper marriage that would relieve Anna of responsibility for the girl as soon as possible. Erzsebet, however, was doted on by her servants and teachers alike, and seemed to give her every allowance and leniency, despite Anna's constant admonitions and warnings. It was because of this that Anna found herself, on a late winter afternoon, searching the chill castle for her daughter. A courier had come and told her that her heathen sister-in-law, Klara, was coming to visit that very evening. Why anyone would travel anytime other than summer, Anna couldn't guess. Anna usually dined separately from her children, but she knew Klara would want Erzsebet, at least, to be present. She spoiled the beautiful Erzsebet the same as others, but Anna could not refuse or chastise Klara, no matter how impious her gifts and attentions were, how spoilt they made Erzsebet, too young and wild for anything but discipline.

Anna pulled her cloak in around her as she stepped into the open hall that surrounded their small courtyard. She had to squint against the white light reflected off the snow and ice. The court and the interior walls were obliterated by winter, only whiteness showed. Her eyes adjusted, and slowly she could see grayish details, borders

of stone, shadows from the drifts. Anna hoped this heavy fall was the last of the snow. Finally, below her in the courtyard, she spotted her strange daughter. She was often alone, unnaturally quiet, and her grey-blue eyes seemed, at once, unfocused yet they pierced. Though she was only a heap of clothes, her hood was ringed with red fox fur and that was enough to mark her as the youngest royal in the house. Erzsebet sat on a snow drift, her knees tucked up and staring into nothingness.

“Erzsebet!” Anna called to her, loathe to go down into the snow-filled courtyard more than to raise her voice.

If her mother’s voice startled her, Erzsebet showed no sign of it. She had been day-dreaming, remembering a vision shown to her a few months before. She recalled it often, holding onto the details, as if each imagined pearl were as worthy as one in her hand. She turned casually toward her mother. Anna called again and beckoned impatiently.

Anna had never mastered mothering, especially to her four daughters.

Erzsebet, however, was scarcely disobedient, at least not directly, and rose to follow her mother indoors. She allowed her mother to hustle her upstairs to change with no more than a vacant expression.

Majarova met Erzsebet in her chamber and smiled at her knowingly, seeing her dreaming face.

“Be careful now. Don’t get lost in it,” she gently warned.

Klara arrived shortly after nightfall, and as Anna had expected, wasted no time in seeking out her favorite niece. Klara fussed over her, examining her hair, nails and teeth,

whispering “such a beauty” to no one in particular. Erzsebet tolerated this attention because she liked her aunt for the same reason she liked Majorova—neither would lie to her, even when she was little. To Erzsebet, everything about her mother was falsehood, from her costume gems to the long, slightly bent rosary she wore at times. Majorova and Klara told Erzsebet stories, histories, and lessons that would run into each other and form something like truth. Majorova told her of generations of copper-makers and welders, the Kalderash legends that always seemed to revolve around that blessed ore. Klara told her fairy stories, of Mab, of the Greeks, and the various scandalous stories of how one Kingdom won over the other. Anna only read to her from her big, expensively bound bible, urging her to memorize the lines of Abraham and the ten commandments and all the savior’s miracles. To Erzsebet, the stories seemed disconnected and confused tales of people from deserts and gardens, places Erzsebet could conjure no image of in her mind. She gave one of her rare smiles to her aunt as Klara released her from inspection and took her place at the table.

After some platitudes were exchanged between Klara and Anna, Klara turned to Erzsebet. “I’ve brought some significant news,” Klara began, still addressing Anna. “Do you remember Orsoyla Nasady of Csejthe?”

Anna’s mouth twitched, but she caught it before it came a scowl. Orsoyla may be an obnoxious beast of a woman, but her station, husband, and certainly her castle were all respectable. “Yes, I remember her. She attended a wedding here, I believe.”

“Since you mention weddings,” continued Klara, her focus sharpening on Erzsebet. “Because her second son, Ferencz, is being made up into a proper General. It is said he has all the makings to be as bold as his father, perhaps even as bold as yours,

Erzsebet.” György, Erzsebet’s father, died of drink, and his own army considered him a fat joke. The sarcasm in Klara’s voice was imperceptible, but understood all the same.

“Is that so?” Anna said politely.

“Yes, he is to be seventeen soon, and Orsoyla lamented to me that he needs a proper betrothed before she can let him follow his father in protecting her lands, something that must happen quite soon, perhaps even next season. Orsoyla has high expectations and wants a new name in her household, so I offered ours. A Bathory always makes a proper General’s wife.”

Klara watched Erzsebet carefully as she said all this, and Erzsebet tried not to show her excitement. Csejthe was a proper castle, high up and overlooking a large fief. It was near a main road and had the pleasures of constant entertainment, travelers, and trade. It was the potential end to boredom. Also, it was a leagues away from her mother.

“I see. That was kind of you, Klara.” Anna failed to cover her own sarcasm as Klara had hers. “But is Orsoyla a Christian woman? I could not, in good conscience, send my youngest to live with a heathen or a blasphemer. She still has so much to learn.”

“You could and you would,” Klara corrected, “but you won’t have to. Csejthe and its fief have converted, only the church resides there now. Erzsebet couldn’t possibly escape God there. Sure, there are gypsies, but they are everywhere.”

Erzsebet tensed, sensing Majarova over her shoulder. As her attendant, she was nearly always there, and she took great offense in the word *gypsy*. *No Kalderash could have ever lived in a desert. No water, no mines, no trees. To even think of it is nonsense.*

Majarova, however, was too interested in what Klara was saying to prickle at the insult implying her people were from Egypt, a falsehood that followed her incessantly.

Majarova understood that Erzsebet would be leaving for Csejthe, sooner perhaps than even Klara realized, since she was now a woman. She could be engaged tomorrow, if they had flying horses to speed her there. Majarova would have to decide, soon, if she would follow her little Countess or run away along the journey so she wouldn't have to go so far from her own tribes. Even if they wouldn't have her amongst them, it was painful to think of putting such a distance between her and the families. It shouldn't have been a decision at all, should have been the Roma before all else, but she found herself enamored with the little beautiful thing. She had taught the girl magic charms, fortune telling, and the real names of the tribes that the lily Protestants called gypsy collectively. All secrets, but told as readily as she would have her own child. Sometimes, when Majarova woke in the early morning, she would be seized with a distrust of her own feelings and become frightened of the little girl that seemed to pull her on a string. She thought of this, even as she knew that she would not run away on the road.

Anna nodded, contemplatively. It needed no contemplation, really, but she resented Klara for taking up this responsibility.

“So what do you say, Bet?” Klara asked. “Do you have a strong objection to leaving Esced? Would you resent a marriage to a soldier in a bigger Castle? I trust there is no undying love you are harboring as secret?”

Erzsebet turned slightly to take a cue from Majarova, but she received none. Erzsebet smiled, though it was a bit belated. “Only for dear Réz,” she said, referring to her yearling pony. Klara laughed. Anna shifted her skirts around her, frowning into her lap. Erzsebet never said things for Anna's amusement the way she did with Klara; she wouldn't have known how, having never seen her mother amused by anything.

When she had regained her breath, Klara told her it would be a few months before the journey, and surely the pony could be trained in time. Erzsebet smiled, nodded. They ate the rest of the meal in relative silence, but inside Erzsebet was boiling with excitement.

It was just shy of four months before Anna would agree to start their journey, after pages of correspondence with Orsoyla back and forth. Anna wish she could have some excuse to send Erzsebet with Aunt Klara and stay at home herself, but there was none.

The ride to Cjesthe was the longest Erzsebet had ever undertaken, many times over. Majarova, an armed guard, and four horsemen followed the carriage, while Klara, Anna, and Erzsebet rode inside. Knowing her mother would check her luggage to see that it was neatly packed, Erzsebet made a secret place among her skirts for the looking box, something she refused to leave behind. The final leg of the journey took them up a steep incline, and Erzsebet had to hold herself stiffly to keep from pitching forward. Cjesthe appeared only once in her window, a stone monster perched on the peak of mountain.

Immediately upon climbing down from the carriage, Erzsebet found herself in an embrace, so suddenly she had not seen the face of the woman that held her. She had a significant bosom and thick, cold arms. Erzsebet held the box, hidden in her full skirts, away from the woman, hoping its sharp wooden corners wouldn't be felt.

“Orsolya,” Klara said, stepping down from the carriage, “Let the girl breathe.”

Erzsebet was released and was able to look up into the face of her future mother-in-law. She had a round red face, with sunken, wet eyes. She pushed at her nose with a handkerchief, which she must have done often, judging by the rough, sore look of her button nose. She was the strangest woman Erzsebet had ever seen, who had only known people to be thin with long faces and sloping noses. Anna was the last to emerge from the carriage. She was dressed as though she could not decide whether she was a nun or a queen. She wore a simple black shift, overlaid by a many stranded necklace of delicate gold chain. Her hair was pulled back in a strict bun, with a ruby pin stuck in the side.

“What a beautiful young woman, how much I have looked forward to your arrival.” Erzsebet performed a shallow little curtsy. Orsolya clapped with excitement. Her own mother only clapped to get the attention of a servant or stable hand. Orsolya moved between the two of them, putting a hand on the their backs and hurrying them up the entry stairs. The sun was setting, and it was getting rapidly cooler. Halfway up the stairs, Erzsebet passed under the shadow of the west tower, and she shivered, the cold coming up from inside her like nausea.

Cjesthe was older than her home in Esced, and grander. Anna looked out of place before the high walls, barricaded against invaders. The only windows in these outer walls were slits, just wide enough for a marksman to fit his bow through. Unlike Esced, Cjesthe had no steeple and no iron crosses at the doors. It was orderly, straight and tall and stone, but from another, wilder time. It had carried its wildness with it. Erzsebet thought for just a moment that she could smell copper in the chilled wind. She hoped Majarova did, too.

At the bottom of the long stone steps, a man stood, one hand resting on the hilt of a long heavy sword. His dark hair was short, cut above his ears and swept to the left from one ear to the other. His relaxed face wore a natural frown, and he was clean shaven.

As Erzsebet was led toward him, she realized he was younger than he looked, though he was still a young man of seventeen at least.

“Ferencz, this is Young Lady Bathory.”

Ferencz bowed, though he would have had to double over for it to be low enough to make him shorter than his eleven year old fiancé, as ahead of her age as he was. Erzsebet curtsied, her eye intent on his sword. He pushed it further behind him, as if he thought the sight of it would offend or scare her.

“Don’t they look handsome together?”

“Don’t be crude, Orsolya,” Klara said, much to Anna’s rare gratitude.

Standing straight again, Ferencz looked straight on at Erzsebet with no boyish shyness or false humility. While his expression was lax and did not change, Ferencz tried to imagine the child as she would look in a few years, with breasts, fuller lips, and hips that were naturally defined rather than imitated by the fullness of her skirts. She had pretty, iridescent skin, he noticed, but her eyes were still large and wide for her face, and her cheeks were still puffed like a child. He could find no hint of sex in the curve of her neck or in her thin arms. He sighed with a long exhale through his nose.

“Welcome to Cjesthe castle, Madame Bathory, Mademoiselle.” Ferencz spoke carefully, but with no ill syllables.

Erzsebet curtsied, also carefully, spreading her skirts evenly around her as she bent her knees. Looking on, Klara nodded approvingly.

Orsolya companionably took up Anna's arm and led her up the stairs, talking of the preparations for dinner and for Erzsebet's rooms.

Ferencz was left at the bottom of the stairs with Klara and Erzsebet. For the first time, he was unsure of the proper thing and showed it in his face. Klara smiled a bit at the young count's discomfort and put her right arm around Erzsebet's shoulders, extending her left elbow a bit and saving him the choice. Ferencz took the kindness and Klara's arm. The three of them followed Anna and Orsolya up the stairs in silence. Ferencz watched the stairs in front of him, careful to take small strides. Erzsebet allowed herself to be led by the shoulders, her chin high as she looked at the solid, gray stones so tall above her.

Ferencz and Orsolya gave a joint tour of what Orsolya called the "home parts:" the dining rooms, the drawing room, the ball room, and the courtyard gardens. The courtyard was oblong and unexpectedly large, with patches of carefully cultivated gardens and topiaries between stretches of shorn grass. They circled the courtyard under a covered walkway, punctuated by alternating columns and archways. Every second column supported a large oil sconce, and every one was burning brightly. Even though it was just past twilight, the courtyard was lit like the day, though the moving flames made the grasses and flowers seem to crawl and shiver.

Orsolya told Ferencz to check in with the kitchen and to accept the other guests as they arrived, while she and the other women were showed to their chambers and allowed to change for the banquet. Erzsebet's room was in a wing separate from where Anna and

Klara would sleep, the latter being only guests and Erzsebet a new tenant, but they all went together to Erzsebet's room to see what Orsolya had arranged. Erzsebet felt the first stirrings of excitement in her suite, which was three rooms deep from the hall. The first room was the largest. On one end was a fireplace large enough to burn someone alive in, surrounded on three sides with deep red couches with cherry wood frames. On the other end was a table with four yellow high-backed chairs, and a pupil's desk and shelves against the furthest wall. This last Anna examined longest, her hands lingering on book bindings and the sheaves of stark-white paper bound lightly with blue ribbon.

The second room was her bedroom, with an elegant bed that she may have been able to sleep side-ways in, covered in embroidered quilts. Two wardrobes flanked a vanity. A dressing screen blocked one corner, elaborately painted with flowers and knotted vines. The door to the last room was covered by a tapestry to keep out the cold in the winter, as it was the only room with windows. The room was instantly Erzsebet's favorite. There were three large windows overlooking the courtyard, and since it was on the third floor, Erzsebet could see all of it from end to end. As she looked then, she could see people beginning to gather and speak to one another, ladies in fine dresses on the arms of men in various uniforms and tailored coats. There was a settee covered with large pillows and deep, comfortable chairs set about. On one end a swing hung from the ceiling at an angle so that the person sitting there could look out all three windows at once, seeing the sky and the grounds, and the opposite wall of the castle. On a set of shelves were other books with more exciting titles than those in the parlor, and a silver-trimmed music box.

Anna watched from the doorway as her daughter examined each of these new treasures. She buried her hands into the few folds of her simple dress that she had worn for the ride, warming them on the coarse fabric.

Anna and Klara stayed with Orsoyla nearly a month. A naturally boisterous woman, Orsoyla showered them all with feasts and entertainments of every kind. Still, Anna was fiercely homesick well before they departed. It was nearly autumn when, as the sunlight came above the mountains to hit the entry steps, Erzsebet and Ferencz stood before a priest, who took Anna's hand in his left and Orsolya's in his right and chanted as if to a tune, "Epithalamion conjunquit Dominum Franciscum Nadsady et Dominam Helisabeth de Bathor." With that, Erzsebet was officially promised to the Nadsady line, and within the hour Anna left Cjesthe, leaving Erzsebet with Orsolya to begin her education.

Parents

Chicago

August 2011

David woke up in the dark early that morning. He didn't dare look at the clock, because returning to sleep was not a possibility. He didn't know how long it would be until his alarm went off, probably hours. He was still tired, but he held himself firmly awake, having fought to wake against the current of his dreams. In truth, he felt more exhausted than when he had gone to bed. But sleep wasn't a refuge anymore, so he kept awake.

To pass the time that seemed to stretch in the predawn dark, David tried to organize his thoughts, but they ran on in front of him, out of his control. He knew, or at least he figured, that he wouldn't feel right again until he made decisions, one way or another. But every time he tried to resolve himself, his imagination seemed to bound in other unprecedented directions. By the time he got out of his bed, still forty-five minutes before he needed to, his meditations had gained him nothing but nausea and an unsettling tightness across his chest.

He picked up his mess from the previous night and tried to gather himself for the day. There was no reason to feel panicked, very little in his life had actually changed, no reason at all to have trouble breathing or to suffer through work with an ache in his stomach. He told himself this over and over, but it did nothing to put him at ease. Though he was up ages early, he nearly missed his bus, only just remembering about breakfast with Karen.

Mother Mary's was, as always, packed. Karen was already sitting and doing a crossword at a tiny table near the window. Upon seeing her, David felt, for the first time in days, a moment of lightness. The restaurant was shadowy, but in the window Karen's face was brightly lit and her face was placid and thoughtful as she considered the puzzle. He took a deep breath and tried to hold on to it, taking advantage of the moment before it passed.

She didn't notice him until he had wound his way over to her and coughed lightly. She moved her purse which had saved him the seat next to her.

"Morning," she said, friendly but not chipper.

"Yeah," he agreed.

"I ordered for you, your usual." Karen told him.

"Thanks," David said and leaned over to help her with her crossword. The table was really too small for two, so he didn't have to lean very far. They worked on the puzzle together while they waited for their food, southern-style breakfast made northern by less butter and more exotic cheeses. David was slow and not very helpful, his tiredness showed.

"How did it go?" Karen asked finally, after he started his second coffee.

"I'm not really sure. It wasn't easy, but it wasn't as hard as it might have been, or as hard as I thought it would be."

Karen nodded, signaling him to continue.

But he didn't know how. He looked into his coffee and warmed his hands on it. He tried to remember all that was said at the park, and think of how he could characterize it. It suddenly seemed far too private to put into words, though he had imagined himself

telling her about it for days. He looked up at Karen's face, expecting to see impatience or maybe pity there. He saw only openness. She didn't press him, but still he felt frustrated. He was laconic by nature, but rarely had no words at all.

Finally, Karen prompted, "Do you feel good about it?"

David shouldn't have been surprised that that was what she wanted to know, not anymore, but he was. He laughed without any pleasure in it. "No, I really don't. I can't seem to make up my mind what to do about it, or to make up my mind to do nothing. It feels so arbitrary, hearing from her now. Though I guess I never stopped waiting for it." His throat tightened as he said this, as if his actual body was resistant to talking about *how he felt*.

Their breakfasts came and he told her about it, words coming to him that had not been there a moment before. It didn't take as long as he would have thought to tell everything that he and Ramona had said to each other. Karen took it all in with open eyes and didn't move to interrupt or ask questions. When he finished, he asked her haltingly, "So, what do you think?"

Karen considered for awhile. "I'm so sorry you have to go through this," she said.

David blinked at the implication. "So, you think I have to go through with it, then? That I owe her that visit, that I need to speak to her?"

Karen stammered, "No, I mean not necessarily, but I don't think you're ready to just forget about all this, do you?"

"What if I am? Would that be so terrible?"

For the first time, Karen looked astonished. “I don’t know,” she said, her voice rising a bit. “Not terrible, I mean it wouldn’t be wrong of you or anything, it just seems...impossible.”

“I don’t owe her *anything*.” David’s voice became terse, almost a hiss. He tried to lighten it. “She has never been my mother. She’s only ever been the reason I don’t have a mother. I’ve certainly never been her son. Why should I start now?”

Karen closed her eyes, holding her head to the side as if she had a headache forming.

“I only meant that, if it were me, I couldn’t just forget about it. Not at this point. It doesn’t feel over, like the end of the story. I would want to know before it was too late what she has to say, because after I would always wonder about it, even if I didn’t want to. It would drive me crazy not knowing.”

David sneered. “Well, clearly I’m not you. Because I’m not going to fucking Florida, if that’s what you want me to do.”

“I don’t,” Karen stammered again, her voice losing its usual steady assurance. “I’m just saying what I think. Like you asked me to. I didn’t do this to you. I want you to remember that.”

David nodded, but couldn’t quite dissolve his anger so quickly. He turned his eggs over his fork, pulling them apart into smaller pieces.

“I wish I hadn’t called that girl, Ramona fucking Greene. I wish you had never told me to call her. I wish I had never told you she was alive in the first place. I should have known better.” Even as he said it, he knew it was childish. But he wanted to be childish, he wanted no part of this anymore.

Karen's eyes grew wide. Her half eaten eggs lay forgotten, her French toast cold. "I was trying to be your friend, to be supportive. I didn't make you do anything."

David started to eat his breakfast again, saying nothing. He was quiet for awhile, but his eyes remained cold. Karen picked at her breakfast. She was hurt, but as she watched him eat sullenly, she softened toward him. She couldn't imagine what it would feel like, this choice. Not really. She was sure she couldn't stand not knowing, but she couldn't predict how it would affect her, her friends and her work and her life. She wondered if David remembered, then or at any point since this weekend, that her father had died last year. It hadn't been unexpected, cancer that started in his colon had taken him slowly but surely over seven years, but it had felt quick to her. David had actually been a great comfort to her then, the only friend she knew who had lost a parent, or so she thought. She knew David was oblivious to many things and remarkably sensitive to others, but she was often lost on which was which.

After a while, the tension seemed to have eased, and Karen made a concession to try and ease it further.

"I'm sorry that I upset you, David," she said quietly.

David looked at the window, considering a response. Karen hated his long silences, and they both knew it. In their two-year friendship, they scarcely had conflicts. They spoke of everything public: pop culture, books, movies both wonderful and horrible with equal enthusiasm. They debated, but since nothing they spoke of was closely personal, they laughed as they did so. Even when her father died, he simply sat with her.

Then, she had blessed his silences and his distance. Part of her was glad to see something more from him, after all this time. Part of her was disappointed.

David sat back, leaving his fork on the plate. It was time to signal for their checks, and he knew well enough that it shouldn't have been Karen apologizing. He shook his head. "I'm sorry; I'm not much good company this morning."

Karen nodded and ate a few last bites of her breakfast. David signaled in the air for their checks. Both were aware that the argument, or whatever it was, was not over. Karen stuffed the half-finished crossword in her purse.

The day was tiresome for them both. Though they never admitted it aloud, they both knew the reason they had become friends: they were both too smart for their jobs. For the most part, that made it all easier, work besides the point most of the time. That day was one of the exceptions. All the simple work, which had some simple satisfaction in it most days, like rolling pennies, felt like tedious punishment. Assigning shipments to trucks and trucks to drivers and drivers to routes. When Karen delivered David's few pieces of mail to his desk, he looked up to find her avoiding his gaze. When David brought reports to the front to be filed, Karen looked up to find him nearly pouting. He hesitated at her desk and then turned in to the copy room to file them himself. He saved this task because he couldn't imagine placing them on her desk as he usually would, thinking his presumption would add insult to the morning's injury. To Karen, it seemed the worst kind of snubbing. Karen was nearly always even tempered, and some mistook this for patience or calm or some kind of inner peace. What it really was was supreme self control. Though she went through the day in her usual, deliberate way with a small

smile, to herself she fretted over David's coldness and replayed the conversation in her head again and again, altering what she had said to see if it played out better in her mind. Even as she rewrote her lines, David's part did not become less hurtful or morose, and her fretful worrying became anger as the hours went by. She tried to write their next conversation in her head, considering how she would say that he had hurt her, and why it mattered that he of all people had hurt her. Pettily, she imagined herself reminding him of her father, but shrugged that away. By the end of the day, she was good and mad. David went home without speaking to her.

David's childish anger had dissipated before midmorning, and after that his silence was steamed on by pure embarrassment. He also relived the conversation of the breakfast, wincing as he remembered his own words. He had been looking forward, craving, even, to talking to Karen about that weekend and how it made him feel upside down even though it seemed nothing was really different, and yet for some reason he had ardently pushed her away and scowled at her questions. And he didn't know if he could ever give a satisfactory explanation, even to himself. He fretted most of the day and sulked out a couple of minutes before five without speaking to her. He was surprised when, two hours later, she appeared on the stoop of his apartment, cradling a pan of take-out lasagna and a bottle of cheap red blend stuck under her arm.

Karen smiled at him as he stammered. "I don't have to come in, but I remember this," she shrugged, indicating her arm load of food, "helped me a lot last year. It's not the same, but I thought I might return the favor."

David remembered, last year the day before Karen left for her father's funeral, he had picked up lasagna and wine so she wouldn't have to fix dinner for herself. It had been automatic, something he should do because it was right and she could use the favor. He remembered her surprise, and how he had apologized. *I'm sorry, I don't have to stay or anything. It just helps to not have to worry about dinner.* He had come in, and he and Karen sat together, and he listened to her, mostly without comment.

"Your father," he said, and then added in a quietly, "I had forgotten."

Karen shrugged and smiled with only one corner of her mouth. David, for only the second time in over a week, felt light enough to take real breaths, the band around his chest having let go for the moment. He took the pan from Karen and moved so she could pass him.

"I was a jerk this morning." David said.

"Yes, you were. But I forgot that crisis sometimes entitles a person to be a jerk," she said, helping herself to the corkscrew that hung from a nail in his kitchen. "For a little while," she added, looking at him from over the island that separated his kitchen from the living room. When Karen was around, he always become suddenly aware how small his apartment was, and the fact that it still looked like a college boy had just moved in, with an improvised TV stand and only half-attempts in the way of decoration or color.

Suddenly exhausted, David sat on a bar stool and laid his head on the island, his hands crossed under his forehead. He heard Karen moving familiarly around his kitchen, fetching plates and silverware and glasses. He didn't think he had ever done anything to deserve such a friend, but was infinitely grateful for her. He only looked up when he smelled the lasagna as she pulled the plastic top, opaque with steam, off the aluminum

pan. He leaned forward to smell it, and steam streaked his glasses in fog. It made his mouth salivate with such a suddenness he had to swallow hard. Karen shoed him back with a spatula from his drawer and carved out a 4 inch square and moved it delicately to a plate. It was a neat job, he noticed, he could never get lasagna to stay in a neat square from the pan to the plate, but Karen always managed things like that with a smooth nonchalance. She poured a tall glass of wine, twisting at the end so no errant drops ran down the sides. David noticed, all at once and with a shiver down his spine, that Karen was beautiful. Absolutely and down to her very fingers. He had never been blind to her nice features, but the revelation that she was beautiful, utterly stunning in fact, was like seeing the sailboat in an incomprehensible picture of blue and white squiggles. Startling, but undeniably there.

Karen finished her preparations and recovered the lasagna, vaguely aware by the end that David was staring at her. He had a practiced habit of looking people in the eye, but this was different. She felt him looking at her even when she looked down at her plate or had her back turned. She swallowed hard.

“This, and talking to you, helped me a lot last year, but you don’t have to talk to me if you don’t want to. I can’t imagine what you may feel right now, and I know it’s not the same, so if you want me to pretend it never happened, or that you never told me the truth, I can. I just want to be what you need right now. Sorry if I pushed a certain way on you this morning, it was unfair.” She nodded and finished lamely, “That’s all.” She had fought to keep her voice steady and not to betray how close she was to unexplained tears. David continued to stare, and for the first time she found it difficult to meet his dark eyes, though she couldn’t understand why.

“Thank you. Now if only I knew what I need,” David told her and smiled. “One of those forks will do for the immediate moment, but you can just hand it to me. No need to become the fork.” They both laughed, and it was exactly what he had needed.

They ate mostly in silence, but finally, when Karen started to pour him a second glass of wine, David started to talk. He told her what he had found on the internet, and how much of a spectacle it was, decorated like entertainment. He told her about how his mother made him an object of fear and disgust in high school and odd curiosity in college, and how it took him a long time to realize that they were sides of the same poisoned coin. He told her about how his Uncle had only ever told him the barest minimum of what he needed to know, and seemed to hide from it himself. Finally, as he put words to things that he had never once put words to, he said, “I never wanted to meet my mother, because I knew that if I did, it would be at least partly out of some morbid curiosity. Like rubberneckers passing a bad car accident. Except that I would never really be able to pass it, because meeting her would be admitting she’s where I came from. That I am a part of her.”

Karen was still standing opposite him, a now empty plate in front of her. In an attempt to keep herself from commenting, she had continued to eat while he spoke and had eaten more than she meant to. The more she heard, the more sick she felt. She remembered all the times she grimaced when she noticed one of her father’s traits or habits in herself, and how underneath that was the comforting feeling of roots, flawed but stable and real. She had never once thought that this is what David could fear, because the idea of his roots being alongside evil things like murder and torture was unthinkable. It wasn’t that he came from a poisonous place, couldn’t be. It was merely that he had

some unfortunate but essentially random connection with the whole thing that would haunt him like a bad accident or a recurring sickness until he faced it and sorted it out. It had to be like that, because she couldn't wrap her head around it any other way. But she tried to keep her tongue still inside her head, to remind herself that her protests may not be what he needed to hear more than his own fears articulated.

He was finished, and he looked up and met Karen's eyes. They stayed that way for a little while, until David realized she was purposefully remaining silent.

"I really do want to know what you think, Karen. Really. I'm sorry I reacted the way I did this morning, but I've wanted your perspective on this since it happened. That's why I told you. Please."

Karen exhaled through pursed lips. "I don't know. It's clearly more complicated than I, I didn't see, I didn't know," she started and then exhaled again. She had not had a stutter for a long time, but she could nearly feel it returning to her throat. Lines seemed to cross in her head and she couldn't think straight or form a sentence that would make sense, or that would do any good for David. She took another deep breath and pushed it out through pursed lips.

"It never occurred to me that you could ever be afraid that you and your mother could have anything more in common than a nose or some other irrelevant trait. I urged you to, to face this, not because it's part of who you are, but because it's an obstacle to the rest of your life." Karen spoke slowly, careful to keep her voice from shaking as she moved around the kitchen island to the stool where David sat. "I know you, and I know you well enough to say that you won't be ruined by this, you're too good. It will be hard, harder than I can guess, probably. But no matter what, you could never, ever be like her.

It's terrible that there is such a spectacle surrounding all that your mother did," Karen made a face, trying to keep herself from fidgeting, trying to meet David's dark eyes as he looked at her, open and listening. "I'd never realized how disgusting that kind of fascination can become, how utterly irreverent and irresponsible," her eyes dropped to her hands. She realized she would probably never look at scary movies and crime shows the same way again, and she felt a guilty twinge at her chest. "But facing this thing and dealing with it through the end isn't going to make you a part of it. Maybe it will even release you from it, somehow."

David reached for Karen, now only a step away, and took a hold of her wrist. She looked up as he pulled her to him, let go of her wrist in favor of her waist. She saw his eyes were shinier than usual, glazed with the beginning of tears. But he also smiled softly. David still sat on the stool, he thought if he moved or tried to stand his legs would betray him. He pulled her closer until he could rest his forehead lightly on her shoulder.

At first, Karen was so surprised and off guard at this embrace, she did nothing, letting him rest his head there without comment. In all the times they had been friends, she could scarcely remember ever being this *close*. A buzz, almost electric, filled her head and blocked coherent thought. She couldn't remember what she had just been saying. Slowly, she turned into his embrace and let her arms fall around his shoulders, though he was even shorter than usual on the stool.

Before either could see it coming, they kissed, long and light.

Excerpted from *Blood & Copper*

Chapter Four: Marime

Cjesthe, 1575

Ferencz only stayed at Castle Cjesthe six months after he and Erzsebet were wed, a small celebration coinciding with her fifteenth birthday. He came to her nightly in that time, taking full advantage of his marital rights, but could not stay away from his fields and his men for longer than that. The first night he was absent, Erzsebet was restless. It was like coming out of a dream. She went out into the night, because the moon was , and the air was still but cold. The moon was so big and bright it was the only light in the sky, the stars hid their dim faces in shame. She left her robe draped over her chair in her dreamlike eagerness to be out in the moonlight. It was not a passionate need, so much unlike the fire Ferencz lit in her. The moon was a different sort of seduction, as she knew well from her long discussions with Majorova. It was a seduction like pearls—undeniable but quiet, and not so easily shaken.

Erzsebet felt the cold of the night take root in her belly, as she only wore the cotton dress she slept in, tied under the bust with a plain bit of fine rope. She wandered along the eastern wall, trailing her fingers against the gray stone, invisible in shadow. She held herself still against the need to shake and shiver against the cold and let the cold sink deeper until she could feel it in her lungs with each slow breath. After a while, she thought the sensation must be like how it would feel to be impregnated by the moon. She tried to remember the Kalderash word for the moon's reflection in copper, for that's what she thought she would name such a child.

She was reaching the place where the wall would begin to turn to the north, bringing her slowly out of shadow, when she began to hear noises besides her own breathing. She stopped, still in shadow but only twenty paces or so from the road, and watched the road that came up from the fief to the south. Three men, the faces downturned, came up the hill. When they crested the hill, she could see the two larger men dragged a boy by either arm, his bare toes drawing two lines in the hill. They had just come close enough for her to see their dark faces when the smaller man regained consciousness and began to kick at them, pleading incoherently.

Down the valley from the Castle Cjeste, a group of *Roma* had taken root alongside a shallow place in the river. The travelers had been there a long time and had begun to outgrow their caravan. They had six large wagons, one of them modified for use as a make-shift stage when needed, and twelve horses, one of them about to foal. In the seven years since they had come to the valley, another small family had joined them and twenty-three children had been born, raising their number well past a hundred and fifty. It was a long time for the families to be still, and the eldest, who remembered moving with the seasons when they were younger, were restless and anxious. But it was a good place to be, since Orsoyla was friendlier to gypsies than any other lord or lady in Hungary as far as they knew, and because the township enjoyed music and was prosperous enough to pay for it.

The dragged man, who Erzsebet had first mistaken for a boy, was named *Pesha* because he was perhaps six inches shorter than the average *Roma*. All *Roma* men had wide noses and round faces, at least all the ones Erzsebet had ever seen, but on *Pesha*, his

thick, high cheeks made him look childish. He was not Kalderash, like Majarova's people, but the families were similar. Pesha's family were musicians and dancing performers, and usually traveled further and more often than the copper-makers, seeking out new courts to play for when the noble people became tired of their fast dances and colorful skirts. Pesha was not talented the way his sisters were, and worse still, was often confused. He could not keep up with the dances, couldn't count-steady in his head like his brothers. Pesha could barely keep a fire lit or straighten a wagon wheel. Though he was close to eighteen, he followed the family with the children.

He learned a bit as a dog would, and tried to avoid things that would make him be slapped or get harsh words or glares. He often failed in this. The week before, he tripped over his own bowed legs and broke the mandolin he had been carrying. Another time he accidentally set one of the wagons on fire, nearly trapping a young child inside. Those times, he knew what he had done, but not how to fix it. Other times, he couldn't understand what wrong he had committed, what he done that had harmed or embarrassed his family. He cried often, which only brought down more punishment upon him.

Tonight, before his brother and uncle had struck him unconscious and had started dragging him up toward the castle, Pesha had been sleeping in the wagon with his sisters, curled against them in the cold. In the night, he was woken by something very close to pain in his groin. Still mostly asleep, he tried to soothe himself, and at first it worked. In something like a dream and with no clear thought in his head, he had tried to undress his youngest sister next to him. She squirmed awake and screamed. When his uncle came, he pulled his sister out first, dragging her by her shoulder. He pushed her until she was waist deep in the stream they camped by. Next to her was a long stick stuck in the mud

tied with an orange ribbon, showing the place pregnant or menstruating women could bathe while they were *marime*. She looked aside into the rushing water and cried silently. She stood in the running water, numb after only a few seconds, while Pesha's uncle, brother, and father conferred. His father looked between Pesha, who sat in the dirt by the cart-wheel, and his daughter Sabina. His face twisted, making the deep wrinkles by his eyes curl downwards. He scarcely spoke to his daughter or any of the young women in the caravan, but he could scarcely ask the idiot boy to tell him what had happened, what he had been thinking of. In truth, he thought he knew, and a mix of pity and revulsion overtook him as his gaze shifted from child to child.

When his father spoke to him, Pesha could not speak, only stare up at him. Pesha had an unsettling habit of looking directly into the eyes of everyone he looked at, whether a man or woman, common or royal. He had already forgotten what had happened the way one would forget a dream, and could only shake his head at his father's angry questioning. His father then spoke to Sabina, still waist-deep in the river. Sabina told him and her brothers what had happened, her gaze locked on the fast moving water at her feet. She had never been addressed by so many men in her life, even her family. Her voice shook from terror and the bitter cold. Their father's judgment was quick, and later it would be judged as fair and merciful by all. His wife walked alongside the bank or the stream while Sabina waded against the current from the orange marker to the white one, about a hundred yards upstream where the water was clean. Her mother accepted her then at the shore and dressed her. She was brought back into the camp. Pesha was pronounced *marime* and told to leave. He cried out and grabbed at his father's legs, so his brother hit him in the soft spot at the back of the head.

At the top of the hill, the two taller men dropped Pesha on the road and spoke to him in turn in harsh, clipped voices.. Erzsebet watched from the shadow, not fully able to follow the men's quick speech. She did hear two things clearly, however, the name of Nasady and the Roma word *marime*.

It had been home, in Esced, and Majarova had been washing the back of Erzsebet's pale neck when she first heard the name of *marime*. Majarova had two pails of water, one of which she had tied a white piece of cloth to, the other, a yellow. She washed Erzsebet's neck with water from the white-marked pail. Anna came in to Erzsebet's room, inspecting casually.

"I see you still follow the traditions of *pai*" Anna remarked nodding to the buckets from the door.

"Yes, Countess. Always."

"I thought a *marime* could not touch water and call it clean. Though, if you read of the savior Christ, *his* waters would make you clean forever."

"I do not change the water because I am *marime*, but the water cannot change me either," Majarova responded.

"Yes, I suppose that is true." Anna said. "I pity you." Erzsebet could see in her face she meant it fully. A rare moment when her words and her face told the same truth. She nodded over her shoulder as she left the room again. Erzsebet marveled, having never known her mother to show anything but distaste and hatred for Majarova and all the other heathen servants. She felt herself flush, though the water had already lost most

of the heat from the fire. She twisted back to see if Majarova had been hurt by her mother's words, but Majarova had a quiet smile on her face.

"Majarova, what is *marime*?" Erzsebet asked.

"*Marime* means unclean, tainted. Perhaps even ruined."

"But you bathe, same as I."

"I have been called *marime* by my people because I let a man into me that was not my husband. My family has found me ruined by this, which is why they left me when they moved on," answered Majarova.

Erzsebet nodded, and chewed the inside of her cheek, a bad habit she wouldn't break until her husband would comment on it years later.

Erzsebet watched by the moonlight as the tallest of the men kicked the boy in the chest so he would stay where he had been thrown. The other man spat in the road at the boy's feet and they turned and left the way they had come. After a few moments the boy struggled to follow, but stumbled, disoriented and in pain from the blows. Erzsebet stepped away from the wall of the castle, moving for the first time since she had seen the three men. She was not sure whether she had meant to go toward the boy or back the way she had come, but the boy turned on the spot at the sound and fell in the dust and gravel of the road. From the ground the boy propped himself up only a couple inches, just so that his face was out of the dirt and looked up at her, drool spilling from his mouth unnoticed.

Erzsebet did not pity the boy as her mother pitied Majarova. She looked at him as if watching an unfamiliar animal, trying to guess at its next move. Not many young men,

as she saw now he was rather than the boy she had first thought, met her eye so readily. Certainly no gypsy or servant men had ever done so. When she finally moved, she took long unhurried strides toward him, bending as she went. The fine cotton of the night dress betrayed the shape of her legs, even in the moonlight, and Pesha felt the same stirrings in his stomach and groin that had woken him up only hours earlier. With a clumsy and childish gesture, he grabbed at the hem of her night dress, pulling it up over his head, still only inches from the ground. Erzsebet brought her leg up and then down again, her heel driving into his nose and breaking it. Pesha cried out only once then let go of her and rolled to his face. Blood and saliva mixed with the dust and made a dark maroon mud, and he coughed in it, but he would not raise his face to look at her again, even to ease his breathing. It caked on his face, clogging his broken nose and filling his mouth with the dry acidic taste of copper. His nose made a grinding noise as he pressed it against the ground. Erzsebet had taken several steps around him and watched Pesha cough and sputter on the ground for a long few moments. Turning to move away toward the back of the castle and the little clumps of houses for the servants, Erzsebet clucked her tongue and patted her hip. Pesha stole one look up and looked down again at the ground. Erzsebet clucked again, two clicks with her tongue in quick succession, the signal she learned to urge a horse forward without spurs.

Slowly and with moans of pain, Pesha rose to his feet. He kept his eyes downward, seeing only his feet.

“Come then,” Erzsebet said, and repeated the clucks of her tongue. She led him around to the back, pausing often because he moved so slowly. In the stables, she pointed at an empty stall. “You will sleep there tonight.”

Pesha made himself smaller and whimpered. He was frightened of horses.

“What’s your name?” she asked, quietly.

He told her, and she repeated the name, tasting it. It was proper, she thought.

“Pesha, if you do not sleep there tonight, I’ll send you to the woods, and send mounted hunters with foxes and dogs after you in the morning. I have no room for beasts that won’t do as they’re told.”

Pesha obeyed her, shaking but keeping his lips tight around his teeth. He lay in the straw of the empty stall, making as little noise as possible and hiding his face.

Erzsebet returned to the castle, entering in the front, startling a complacent watchman. She gave him instructions to leave the Gypsy boy where he was, and to send him to break fast with the young servants in the midmorning. The watchman squinted at her, confused, but assented. Erzsebet found herself strangely settled, and slept long and soundly.

Home
Baton Rouge
August 2011

David lay on his back in his childhood bed, his fingers laced over his chest and his feet crossed and perched on the foot board. He had been back in Baton Rouge for two days, but had not found the proper moment to speak frankly to his uncle, because of an unexpected visit from Trey's estranged boyfriend, Charlie. The view of the ceiling and tall window was at once familiar and disquietingly inverted. When he had slept in this room growing up, the bed faced the wall to his left, and the walls were a pale blue and were now a pale green. His Uncle had not, however, taken down the glow-in-the-dark star stickers that they had placed to mimic the constellations as best as they could. His bed was the same, as well as the dresser and nightstand. But the stiff, shiny comforter underneath him was a stranger, as well as the three bookshelves lining one wall that he assumed his Uncle had made. Always a man of projects, Trey's house never looked quite the same way twice.

He had taken to heart all that Karen had said, though he wasn't sure if he believed all of it just yet. But he also knew he needed to do *something*, so with Karen's help he took the next week off and took the Friday afternoon flight to Louisiana. He had let himself into his uncle's empty house and took a tour, noting the changes he had made over the past nine months since David had last been home. He was startled to find it wasn't as empty as he had assumed.

Charlie was a long time boyfriend of Trey's who had moved to New York three years prior, tired of the struggle in the old fashioned Baton Rouge. He had asked Trey to

come with him, but Trey's bar was finally taking off, and he had refused. David had come home then, too, ready to console Trey and to be a support to his Uncle, only to find him smiling and straight-backed. "Never mind," he had said then. "It would have worked out if it was meant to."

They both yelped when they saw each other, David dropping his bag in the hall and Charlie jumping back into the third bedroom comically, as if he was a teenager instead of a grown man. They laughed and shared an awkward but not insincere hug once the initial startle had left them. What followed was also awkward, because both offered to get the other something to drink, playing equal hosts in a house that wasn't quite theirs.

Finally Charlie pulled two beers from the fridge, and David poured them into frosted glasses from the oversized freezer.

"So, what brings you home this time of year?" Charlie asked, taking a long, anxious sip from his beer.

David smiled and shrugged. "Just came to surprise Trey," he took a sip of beer and laughed. It sounded almost genuine to his own ears, so he could only hope it rang true to Charlie. "Truthfully, I was getting a little burnt out at work. Needed a break, and I figured it was as good an excuse as any. I hear Billy's is doing well, and I haven't seen it since Trey switched up the menu and repainted the billiard room."

Charlie laughed. "Good thing you're here now then, I think he's getting bored with golf-course green and all the shrimp."

"Well you know Trey, he would repaint the sky if he had a tall enough ladder." David was echoing words he had heard Charlie say many times; it was one of Charlie's

favorite affectionate quips for Trey. David felt a pang of guilt as he looked for hurt or fondness on Charlie's face, looking for some hint. After several moments of silence, David asked, "So, are you here for the weekend?" He let other alternatives hang unasked.

Charlie nodded. "Yes, just the weekend. For now."

They finished their beers with awkward, stilted talk they both knew would make Trey laugh at them both. David wondered briefly, as Charlie asked him about his flight, if Charlie knew about Michelle. Finally he decided it was a 50/50 chance. Trey hated talking about Michelle, but he also never knew his Uncle to tell a direct lie, at least not about anything that mattered. Surely, in the years that he and Charlie had been together, he had asked where his brother and sister had run off to, leaving him with a nephew and a niece respectively. He knew Trey would have, at least at first, given a soft version, but if Charlie had pressed him on it, there was no telling. Charlie might know more about his mother than he did. The thought made him queasy. After they had finished their beers, Charlie offered to drive him over to the bar his Uncle owned and managed. David nearly protested, but it had already been his plan to go over to the bar at some point in the evening, so he accepted.

Billy's was nestled in a long strip of store fronts in a low brick building in a part of town that was mostly young people, college kids or unmarried professionals. The front window was tinged dark, ghostly red with white lights shining behind it, flickering as shadows criss-crossed inside. A large white decal was centered in the window, a silhouette of a goat playing a pan-flute. Opening the door, David breathed deep, taking the smells of lightly fried foods, draught beer, and all the other warm and familiar smells.

Trey may have been fond of remodeling one thing or another about once a year, but the bar never lost that essential cozy feeling that made it a slow but steady success.

Mike was behind the bar, a long time family friend that had been in his cousin Courtney's year all through high school. Mike was a favorite, mostly because of his kind silence when it came to David's mother. Mike spotted him almost immediately, and made as if to call out to him, but David put his finger to his lips and winked. Mike grinned and jerked a finger toward a tall door in the back marked simply "office." David waved a thanks and left Charlie to find a seat at the bar.

David knocked lightly on the office door and tried to compose his face into a genuine grin, because he was excited to see his Uncle and didn't want to ruin the weekend with his dark reason for coming. Trey opened the door with his elbow, not looking up from a pad where he was making a list, the phone held between his shoulder and ear. As an indistinct voice on the phone spoke, Trey grunted and checked things off his list. He still hadn't looked up, probably assuming David was one of his servers or Mike. Trey was a tall, lanky man who wore the grey patches above his sideburns better than most. His smile came easy, and he was a man that never lacked for energy or will power. This was sometimes exhausting for other people. Finally, Trey took the phone in his hand and said, "Yep, that's everything. Tuesday morning? I would really prefer Tuesday. Thanks." He set the phone down and put the pad in its place on the desk before turning saying, "Ok, so what's up?" He mouth hung open for a second upon seeing his nephew and then broke into his usual toothy smile that was only now putting lines at the corner of his eyes and across the peak of his forehead. Trey pulled David into

a fierce hug, ruffling his hair and patting him on the back. “Look at you. I hate this hair cut,” he said as he let him go and examined him.

David laughed. “Nice to see you too, jerk. It smells awesome here, by the way. I almost went to see Levi in the kitchen first so he could feed me.”

“You’d have been disappointed. Levi is on his honeymoon, Lisa’s on the line tonight.”

“Who’s Lisa? And Levi got married? Since when? Where was I?”

“Chicago.” Trey answered simply, without meanness. “Sorry I didn’t mention it, it was kind of a shot-gun sort of situation. He seems happy about it though. So what does bring you here?” Trey’s smile had been fading as they spoke, and he now looked at his nephew with a cocked expression of appraisal.

David shrugged. “Took my vacation early this year. Needed to have some time.”

Trey seemed to accept this, knowing his nephew would tell him more if he wanted to.

“I went by the house first,” David continued, happy to change the subject.

“Charlie brought me over. So when did *that* happen?”

“Oh nothing’s *happened*,” Trey scoffed. “He’s just visiting. For now.”

“That’s what he said,” David nodded. “Including the ‘for now.’”

“Come on,” Trey steered David back out into the bar, which even in the few minutes David had been the office had continued to fill and was now nearly packed.

“Lisa may not be the grill master Levi is, but her scampi is better than any on the coast.”

“That’s a tall boast,” David said, “I’ll have to test it.”

Trey sat with Charlie and David at the bar, jumping up every few minutes to problem solve or to help one of the busy servers. Used to this, he managed somehow to keep up with the interrupted flow of the conversation. The evening went on pleasantly. Mike asked lots of questions about Chicago, many of which David didn't know the answer to. David ate nearly everything that was brought to him, which was a little of everything. People whose names often escaped him greeted him and asked after the weather, his job, his flight. Trey periodically introduced him to new members of the staff, even brought a nervous petite woman from the kitchen who must have been Lisa. David and Charlie greeted her with applause and Charlie did a mock bow from his stool, waving his arm dramatically in front of him. Lisa flushed red, but returned the gesture with a mock curtsy, pulling out the corners of her smock like a dress before disappearing back through the swinging gray doors to the kitchen. It did wonders for David to see Billy's thriving so, and to see the light and pride on Trey's face as he worked, returned to the bar to sit, and bobbed back up again. The previous year he finally hired a manager he kept, and while Marie said hello to David and Charlie, she could not stay still long enough for continuous conversation until long after the dinner rush and the main drinking crowd had dispersed, leaving only scattered dates and regulars. They left together a couple of hours before closing, Trey leaving the final duties in Marie's capable hands. He said it was a luxury not to have to see every night to the end, but he checked his phone anxiously every few minutes.

The rest of the weekend passed much the same way, and it was late Sunday afternoon that found David lying in bed fully dressed, staring at the familiar but strange

ceiling. He had excused himself early from a dinner that Charlie had cooked, leaving them to their goodbyes and whatever other conversations they needed to have. He had sensed throughout the weekend that his presence, rather than an imposition, was an unexpected boon to the pair, giving them a third wheel so they could avoid possibly difficult questions and conversations. David was determined, though, not to let them go the whole visit without these, so he faked a headache and secluded himself in his old room.

It was past eight when Charlie left for the airport, cutting it fairly close. Trey came and knocked lightly on the door, opening it without waiting for an answer. David put his book aside and Trey sat on the end of his bed, leaning back the rest his head on the wall, hands laced for support.

“I see what you did there,” Trey said with a sideways smile.

“Did it work?” David asked.

“Yes and no,” Trey answered simply. “We’ll see.” He looked thoughtfully at the ceiling with David for a few moments before continuing. “But what I want to know is why anyone would ever leave a mild Chicago late summer to visit a near-boiling swamp. Spill, kid.”

David didn’t say anything for a few moments. “Has anyone contacted you lately? About Michelle?”

Trey turned to him and sat up. “No, not for months. She has a new lawyer, I guess, but you got that letter too, right? Not since then.”

“Last week, someone called me. A researcher named Ramona Greene...” David told him all that had happened, leaving out Karen and her influence. “I’ve realized that I

can't go on knowing as little as possible, because," he closed his eyes and put his hand over them, his fake headache beginning to emerge for real, "because it's like the boogie man or something. My imagination makes it worse. If I know, if I just find out and deal with it, maybe I can let it go." David was vaguely aware that he was echoing Karen's words, but that made them feel no less accurate.

"So have you decided to visit her?"

"No, not entirely. I'm sorry I didn't call you last week, before I met with Ramona, but I never thought I'd take it seriously. I looked some, online, but that was a mistake. There's so much, and so much of it has to be bullshit, you know, but I don't know how much. Where the line is. I thought, maybe, you could help me find it, tell me some about her and what happened so I can make up my mind." David faltered, suddenly realizing all that he was asking for. "I mean, if you can. If you can't talk about it, it's okay..."

"No, I can," Trey interrupted. He swallowed hard. "I always figured you'd ask at some point. That's something I never really got the knack of raising you and Courtney, when to do the hard talks. I guess I let you guys learn too much of it on your own." He looked at David, and his solemnity made his face look much older. David hated it, and wished he could take it back and never see Trey look old again. "So before this, you really never investigated on your own? Never read about it, never tried to find out about it?"

"Only once, a long time ago. I didn't find out much, just a few newspaper articles, really. After that, I avoided it. I thought that was the plan, don't think about it, what I don't know can't hurt me, it will all go away eventually."

Trey shook his head and curled his lips inward. “I’m sorry David. I was naïve to let you think that for so long, again I’m sorry.”

David could think of nothing to say, so sat up and said nothing. They sat there, both their hearts in their throats, for several minutes, unsure of where to proceed from there. Finally, Trey stood. “I’ll be right back,” he told David and patted his shoulder as he passed out of the room. When he came back, several minutes later, he carried a bottle of wine and two glasses expertly with one hand and a medium sized box tucked under his right arm. David accepted the open bottle, and poured them each a glass without comment. Trey put the box between them on the bed and faced him, hunched and cross-legged. David was reminded of how Trey would sit with him like that when he was sick, entertaining him by reading or playing a game. Trey took the glass that David poured for him, took a sip, and then set it on the floor next to the bed where it sat forgotten until the next morning when David knocked it over.

Trey opened the box between them. Inside was a jumble of papers, pictures, and three books. Trey was no neat freak, but the box was chaotic, unlike anything else in his house.

“I’m sure you’ve seen this picture,” Trey said, handing him a familiar newspaper article, cut and folded carelessly. His mother’s hair stuck out in pale wisps around a shadowed but still pretty face. “That picture was everywhere when it first happened. I may not have even recognized her if they hadn’t announced her name. When she lived around here, she was a brunette, and she was a good bit rounder in the face than she looks here.”

David nodded, then shook his head. “That’s familiar, but I can’t remember. When I think of her, this is what I think of I guess.” He set the picture aside. “What was she like, when she lived here? Did you have any idea?”

“Of course not, not of anything like this. She was very much like my brother, like your father. I can’t say I would have been surprised to find out she went to jail, but I would have never have thought for something like this.” Trey trailed off, thinking of when David was fourteen and had just found out what his mother had done. David had used similar words then, *not for something like this*. “She was a little wild, but not as much as David, your dad. They both were,” he searched for the proper word, “excitable. Everything was all or nothing all the time. Michelle was passionate about things, and I thought she may be just stable enough to keep your dad in one place, but of course when you do that much cocaine, no power or passion or beauty can keep you in one place very long.”

Trey stared into the box of papers, his blank eyes totally lost in remembering. David realized he was very close to the point of no return, that Trey had been saving up this story for a long time and if he wanted to stop him, to stay ignorant after all, he had better stop him now before the ball really got rolling. He kept his mouth shut, resolved.

“When she got pregnant with you, you became absolutely everything to her. More so than with other women, even. She was kind of obsessed with you—the prospect of you,” Trey paused and looked up at David apologetically. David waved for him to continue, meaning to hear it all if he was going to hear it. “She read baby books, like any woman expecting a baby, but she also read strange books, spiritual ones and new-agey crap that your father hated. She started being furious with him, all of the time. She kept

saying he'd be poison to her son, for some reason she knew, or guessed correctly I guess that you would be a boy, and at first, I thought she may be right. But I thought it was about the drugs and impromptu trips to New Orleans and Tunica that kept losing him jobs. He had settled down at first, when they found out about you, long enough to marry Michelle, but it didn't last long. It was a horrible time, for all of us, your grandfather dying, your Aunt Elizabeth starting to get sick, and your dad losing his mind twice a week. Finally, Michelle and I kind of ganged up on him. I thought we were trying to get him in rehab, but I think Michelle just wanted him gone. She was cruel to him, in a way, and he ran off the next day. He sent me a postcard a month later, and another a few months after that, but then I never heard from him again."

"Do you think she killed him?" David asked, interrupting.

Trey looked up, startled. "That's occurred to me once or twice. But, no, I don't think so, it doesn't feel true, and this was years before it all started happening." He looked down at the box again, and continued. "I didn't see you or Michelle for a year after you were born and then she got evicted and asked me for a place to stay. Courtney was staying here summers by then, and I was excited to meet you. She found her own place a few months later, she didn't like being dependent, but you stayed with me as often as you didn't, especially during the summer. Michelle worked in the library, and it was okay for a couple years, but then as you know Elizabeth died and Courtney came to stay with me full time." Trey halted here, his voice, which had been steady and almost deadpan suddenly broke. "You know that I never once resented you or your cousin, right? I was the oldest in my family so I got the house and with it more responsibility, but I loved you kids and was so grateful for you."

David was surprised to see Trey crying. This was what Trey was afraid of, he realized. Not that David would be scarred by all his mother did, but this. This had never once occurred to him. He said as much. “We always knew we were better off here and not just because you paid the bills on time and stayed in one place. Courtney knows it too, I promise.” Really he had no idea what Courtney knew, since she had moved to New York three days after turning twenty and hardly ever came back, but he was confident enough that that was nothing more than ordinary selfishness.

Trey smiled, some relief having that part be done clear on his face, but David guessed he would always be a little afraid of that, no matter what he promised. That was the way with real fear, David thought as Trey gathered himself back together. The genuine article was nearly always self directed and never completely went away.

With a deep breath, Trey continued. “Before she left, the only thing I can think of as different is that she seemed to be getting calmer. When she dropped you off or picked you up, she spoke less and more quietly than before, as if she had gone shy all of a sudden. To be honest, I assumed she had finally gotten on some sort of mood stabilizer. She seemed out of it, but less prone to extremes and she seemed to let go of some of her obsessions—collecting rocks, bird watching, various off the beaten path religions. Until one day, she never came to pick you up. I put you in school, asked her landlord about her, and then stopped looking.” He paused, and David said nothing. Most of this he knew, but he had never heard his Uncle tell it like this, directly and without euphemism. He waited, impatient but sensed pushing was the wrong thing to do.

Trey pulled more things out of the box, a folder stuffed with letters, and three heavy manila envelopes. “When it all happened,” Trey continued, using the phrase he

always used to refer to the time when Michelle was arrested and Trey was trying to protect David from everything, even the truth. “You were her only living family that she could find. Remember when I left you and Courtney with the Hendersons? It was supposed to be only a couple days, but it ended up being a week?”

David nodded. The Hendersons had a puppy, a novelty the first two days and a nuisance after.

“I had to go to Florida, to convince a judge that you shouldn’t be called to testify, that he should prevent both parties from trying to use you as part of their case, an injunction, I think the lawyer called it. This was at the beginning of the trial, only a month or two after she was initially arrested. It took longer than I thought, but it wasn’t actually difficult, because you hadn’t seen her for six years and you were a kid. The lawyer I hired wasn’t very good, but I think the judge had a son your age, so he may have been somewhat biased in our favor. I didn’t care, of course, I just didn’t want you to be dragged down to Florida and put through some long, drawn out trial for no real reason. I hope I was right to do that.” Trey didn’t look up for confirmation. “Her first defense lawyer was something else, a guy named Harold Judd. I have no idea how she afforded him, but I guess she had some money from somewhere, because he certainly bought her a lot of time, almost got her off once or twice, if I read between the lines of these correctly.” He held up the papers in his hands. “For some reason, he thought I wanted to be kept informed, so he kept insisting on sending me things. Motion briefs and trial updates,” he dropped the folder of various envelopes and papers on the bed, some spilling out on the ruffled sheets, “witness statements,” he dropped one of the manila envelopes on the folder, “even the transcript of her competency hearing,” he dropped the final

envelope, heavier than the last. He seemed glad to be rid of it. “I didn’t know what do with it, it felt wrong just to toss it, you might find it that way anyway, so I kept it in here,” he indicated the box. “I read some of it, mostly the trial updates, so that when it did come time to...came time to tell you I could answer the questions you would inevitably have. As it turned out, you didn’t have many.” Both were silent for a moment, remembering the still and tense days after David found out. David had scarcely come out of his room those days, hardly ate, and avoided looking up into his Uncle’s face.

Trey continued, speaking faster now as if by making it fast, he could make it go away faster, like ripping off a band-aid. David knew better now, that it wouldn’t go away at all, but he didn’t want to sit here with Trey speaking like this any longer than he had to, so he appreciated his attempts for speed and brevity.

“When Judd lost his second appeal, sometime around 2005 I think, Michelle replaced him with someone else and sort of started over. That guy didn’t send me anything, thank God for small favors, until he notified me he wasn’t going to represent her, you got that same letter. So for that time, I don’t know much and there might only be more of the same anyway. The book that that girl...”

“Ramona,” David prompted.

“Yes, the book that Ramona told you about,” he reached into the box again and drew out a thin red paperback. The front cover was familiar, though seeing it now dropped David’s heart into his stomach. In a oblong circle, a woman’s naked back was pictured with long and heavy rivulets of blood streaming down her pale skin. The woman’s back was utterly anonymous except for a few inches of blond hair that hung

over one shoulder, matted with blood at the ends. The title blazed above this image in metallic, raised print. *Blood & Copper*, and beneath it, *a novel by Mary Elere*. When David didn't reach for it, Trey let it fall to the bed with the other things.

"I am not sure why I bought it," Trey continued, "but after the first trial it was absolutely everywhere. Every book store in the country had it on display, even grocery stores carried it." David nodded, remembering. It had been popular.

"I asked for it once," David said suddenly. "You said no, that it was too old for me. I thought that was weird, since you never said that about anything else by the time I was fourteen."

"You probably could have handled it, you were always grown for your age," Trey laughed a little, "but I didn't want you to read it and like it and then find out why it was so popular."

David nodded. "Right. Of course."

Trey sighed and reached in the box again. "A publisher, I think, sent me this around the time you graduated college. Wanted a response or a comment, I think. I told them to fuck off." Trey dropped the second book, next to the now-empty box as if it might make him sick to hold on to. The title was blunt, and not nearly as compelling as the other. "Michelle Riley Shuster" it heralded in large black letters, and under that read "The true story of the killer librarian from Tallahassee." The cover was plain and somewhat poorly designed, with an off-center and blurry picture of prison bars as its only decoration. On the bottom it read "Advance Press Copy."

Trey sighed. “I read part of this one, I guess curiosity got the better of me. It says ‘true story’ but it’s all speculation and guesswork. Michelle never gave interviews to the press.”

David looked at the books and the piles of paper and felt his throat tighten. *What did I expect?* he wondered. He had been blind, willfully so, for so long, that he felt incapable of judging what he was looking at. It all looked so *banal*. Abandoned paperwork.

Trey sighed and with some effort put everything back into the small box and moved closer to his nephew, who he had often thought of as *son* in his most private of thoughts, shuffling the box aside. “I wish I could have kept this burden from you forever, but I am sorry that I was foolish enough to try. I don’t know,” Trey swallowed audibly and winced. He felt exhausted, more now even than after a long shift at work. As if this hour of conversation was really a tug of war with some immovable object, a mountain, that he had still tried to win with all his heart and strength. Though he was drained of everything, he still felt defeated and knew he would scarcely be able to sleep.

“I don’t know how much you feel you need to know, how much detail or whether you won’t feel done with it all until you look her in the eye. I guess you don’t really know, either, how could you? I wish I could help you more but I think,” Trey looked down at his lap, one hand still limp in his lap while the other trembled across David’s shoulders. “I think that would do more harm than good. I may have been doing more harm than good all this time, if this is making you feel this way now.”

David laid his head on Trey's shoulder, something he had not done since middle school. "I'm lost, I don't know what will make me feel better or put me past this. But I know it's not your fault."

Trey kissed the top of his head and squeezed him. He believed him and didn't believe him, but maybe this was how all parents felt about the troubles their kids must face, responsible, guilty, and proud all at once. "Do you want me to leave this with you or take it back? Maybe burn it in the back yard?"

David turned to the box, which looked small and insurmountable all at once. "Leave it, I don't know how much I'll look through, but leave it anyway. You don't want it anymore, right?"

It was Trey's turn to look at the box, which seemed to hold all of his failures and inadequacies, even though he knew better. "No, I don't want it. It's yours to decide now I guess." With that, he squeezed his nephew again and rose from the bed. "Do you want anything before I go to bed?"

David glanced at the clock, saw it was only just after nine, and shook his head.

Trey hesitated, then left the room, shutting the door behind him as had been his habit all David's life, even when David was very young and afraid of dark, lonely rooms.

Excerpted from *Blood & Copper*

Chapter Five: The First of Many

Cjesthe, 1576

Ferencz came briefly back from battle fronts and troops in the early Spring. Erzsebet found herself hot with excitement at his return, though she stood as straight as she could, smiled warmly but not like a child. She was sixteen, after all. They had been married a year and were no longer newly-weds or children. She waited for him in the hall with Orsoyla, though if she had been alone she might have run to him, ripping at her laces as she went.

He came up the steps, hair dampened from drizzles on the ride and a growl of impatience and weariness twisting at his mouth. As he came close to the ladies waiting, he gave them a single nod to share between them before moving on into the castle.

“He must be so tired from his long journey,” Orsoyla said with a mother’s swoon in her voice. “You two,” she gestured at two hand servants who were still hesitating in the hall, unsure of themselves. “Go and draw him a bath and whatever else he requires.” They quickly broke stance and followed the Count up the stairs two at a time. Orsoyla sighed. “It will be so good to have him home, even if only for a while. Won’t it be so, Bet?”

Erzsebet nodded absently, only half hearing what had been said to her. How could he treat her as if only another member of the house to be nodded at? Could his passion for her, so alive only eight months ago, have died so completely in his absence from her? She raised her chin a little, turning to follow Orsoyla slowly up the stairs. No, of course not. It was a game for them both. He knew she held herself back for his

mother's sake and propriety, and seeing this, decided to punish her a little with the like in kind. She smiled at the game and enjoyed the rise of heat that filled her chest and belly, a private fire all her own.

Orsoyla was continuing, "It is a pity that you did not quicken before he was called away, he could have been here for the birth around this time and that would have been a blessing of the highest order. His father was present to receive him, his first born, and I remember how wonderful the two of them looked together. You shouldn't be discouraged, though, my child." Orsoyla spoke as if to herself, not turning her head to face Erzsebet and gave no moment for her to respond. "It takes young girls, especially of your temperament, some time to grow a proper womb for a child. For myself, I was ripe by the time I was fifteen, but that was a mixed blessing to be sure. It is harrowing for a girl to start to bring up a child when her own education is not yet finished, though a delight it was to Ferencz's father and to my mother, god rest. Imagine, if you were with child, you would be only one in the whole castle, and the child would soon be the only infant. How spoiled it would be."

Orsoyla continued daydreaming aloud. Erzsebet could have corrected her, but she had learned better, living under her in the house the past years. She was not quick to anger, but it would have been futile to try to convince her of anything other than the idea already in her mind. Erzsebet could have become pregnant, but she willed it not be so. She had not been ready, though now she felt a secondary, cooler eagerness behind the fire that threatened to overtake her. This cooler eagerness seemed almost an afterthought, but she knew what it was and why it didn't melt away like all other desires. It was the cooling surety of her womb, preparing itself, and it wouldn't be displaced for anything.

Orsoyla broke her rambling to take her leave of Erzsebet, and she went off to the kitchens or somewhere to give instructions, a favored pastime, one she performed multiple times a day whether or not it was needed.

Erzsebet considered and then went up to her rooms, nearly convinced that she would find Ferencz there, waiting for her. He was not there, but her pet Pesha was, sitting cross-legged in her parlor and teasing a castle-cat by pulling a string out in front. She groaned at the sight of him. Orsoyla hated the leniency Erzsebet gave the young simpleton, but Erzsebet allowed him to go where he pleased most of the day. She did this partly because it irked her mother-in-law so, but mostly because she enjoyed him at play, like any pet. It was as pet, not servant, that she preferred to think of him. He would be useless in most tasks, anyway. Today, however, the sight of him vexed her as she wondered about her husband and what he may have made of him, seeing him behaving so familiarly in her chamber. She turned and went out again, determined to find him and ease some of the fire that continued to grow hotter inside her. She went down to his chambers, humbler than her own honored ones and on the interior of the castle for military advantage, though the thought of the Ottomans or the Turks making it as far as this made her laugh. She hurried, unable to help herself, her skirts fluttering above her ankles as she nearly flew down the stairs. She met one of the hand servants as he was coming up from the kitchens, a tray loaded with bread and white cheese and chilled wine. He winced as she broke in front of him, throwing open the door herself and letting it bang shut behind her. The second servant flushed red at the neck, seeing her, nearly spilling the water he drew away from the fire.

“Well?” Erzsebet prompted.

“Sire is undressing, Countess Bathory, preparing for his bath,” his face grew redder still.

Erzsebet moved further into the chamber, sweeping around the screen that separated the bath without announcing herself. The servant coughed loudly.

Ferencz looked up, startled, bare to his braies. Having already discarded his codpiece, he turned instinctively to the side, his arms crossed in front.

“Darling,” Erzsebet exclaimed and came forward.

Ferencz took a retreating step. “Come now Erzsebet. I’ve scarcely arrived and cannot greet you properly now.”

“I do not care,” Erzsebet shook her head and began to pull at the laces that held her skirts together at the bodice.

The door to the chamber creaked as the servant who was heating his bath water retreated as quickly as he could.

“I’ve missed you so, dear,” Erzsebet breathed, her skirts dropping carelessly to the floor. “Have you not missed me?”

“Of course, lady,” Ferencz stood straighter, but his voice took on a note of panic. “But I have ridden days without a bath. I would have my bath, my meal and my rest. I will see you at dinner, properly, and then we will see to our privacy in its due time. Can you not see that this is not timely?”

Erzsebet burned, but kept her face placid with all her will. “Of course, lord. Forgive my over eagerness, I’ve longed so.” She said these words carefully and slowly while raising her skirts to their proper place and tying them there. She focused on keeping her face pale and not letting the burning show by a flush in her face. “Have a

good afternoon's rest, love, and I will see you at dinner." She turned and left the chamber slowly, forcing herself not to hurry.

By the time she had returned to her own chambers, she was nearly as calmed as she pretended. So the game continued, she mused, sighing. She had already tired of it, and since she had already conceded, he would return in kind later, after dinner, he had as much as promised her so. She was remembering how changed his body had been, leaner and longer, when she nearly tripped over the cat, who lay asleep in her path. The animal screeched and she kicked at it as it fled through the closing door. Pesha, who had also stretched out to sleep on the floor, started as well and bowed his head.

"My apologies Countess, are you hurt?" she had trained him that well, at least. She hit his ear with a cupped hand, making it ring in a way she knew he hated more than anything.

"If you cannot keep even a castle-cat out from under me," Erzsebet hissed, "then you shall have nothing but castle-cat to eat until they are all gone. Understand?"

Pesha whimpered, but nodded. He was soft for the small animals, and Erzsebet knew it was because, like him, they were the likeliest to be trampled upon. She softened, and her voice returned to its normal tenor, soft and low and musical, like a horn in the distance. "Now, go fetch a seamstress, a good one, even if you have to wash your face and go down the road. Understand?"

Pesha bowed his head and scrambled out the door, nearly knocking his head on the door jamb as he passed. Erzsebet passed the time reading a book of songs in her swing, but quietly, she burned. It changed within her, the blaze, once pleasant, turning into something sour, like the curdle of milk. It was nearly an hour before Pesha returned,

nearly dragging a very young woman, arms filled with a bundle of fabrics, strips, and needle-boxes. She was younger even than Erzsebet herself, and very beautiful at that. Pale haired and light eyed, she stood stock still in the entrance to Erzsebet's chambers, breathing heavily from running, her full mouth hanging open slightly. Erzsebet sighed, "Are you a seamstress from the fief?"

The young girl looked terrified, unsure, but then shook her head. "Apprentice, my lady."

Pesha turned toward the girl and then back to Erzsebet, his face tight, and tried to look small. "You'll most likely do. Leave us," she waved Pesha out the door, while at the same time untying her skirt from her bodice again. In her earlier eagerness, she had made a rip on one of the hidden seams. She showed this to the girl, who looked relieved, and then confused and embarrassed, her arms wrapped around the bundle of miscellany that she had grabbed in her haste.

"Set that nonsense aside, there, and wash your hands in the basin before you start to work," Erzsebet instructed before returning to her bench.

In a far shorter time that Erzsebet had anticipated, the apprentice returned, holding the skirt up expertly, showing both the seam, and a trim and had been curling tucked back to straight with a few clever stitches. "Your Countess must be proud of such work," Erzsebet mused, not noticing that her compliment nearly overwhelmed the young girl. Erzsebet's eyes drifted to the fabrics the girl had lain carefully on the settee. She thought of the dinner, still hours away, and wondered. Her eyes came back to the young girl before her, some three inches shorter, but an early blossom, a full bosom before her and hips that filled her simple skirt easily. On a second glance, however, Erzsebet noticed the

dress was not as simple as she had first thought. Of a cheap fabric, yes, but delicately embroidered and hemmed to sit just so on the girl's shape.

“What did you bring, girl?” Erzsebet asked, motioning to the fabrics.

“Oh, it is nothing, my lady, only, the boy you sent seemed not to know what you would have wanted me for, so I brought whatever I could think of,” her voice and speech were common, but clear and honest. Erzsebet moved over the pile of fabrics, leaving the girl behind still holding the stiff and heavy skirt, her temporary confidence fleeing. The fabrics were beautiful, Erzsebet saw at once, patterned with lace and beaded designs. There was a spool of delicate edging, she also saw, and many of the pieces were already cut, preparing to be pieced together into a dress.

“How quickly could you make a dress of this for me?” Erzsebet asked, holding up a piece of burgundy fabric that was familiar, its lace overlay like something she once saw in a dream. She held up the spool of edging, which was heavy with pearls, “and with this? They are both so lovely.”

“Alone?” the girl stammered, “I've never worked alone on a gown for a real lady,” her mouth dropped open, words escaping her. She had never been so directly addressed by anyone other than her mother, who was now two years dead, and her Countess, who scarcely noticed her among her fifteen apprentices. “I am only an apprentice, my lady. If it should please, I could go fetch my Countess, and she would be happy to make you a gown, any kind you please, my lady.”

Erzsebet considered her, her head tilted, and turned back to the fabrics. “Who dyed this?” she asked, touching the deep and even burgundy.

“I did, my lady,” the girl answered.

“And who braided this?” Erzsebet held the edging, delicate strands of white rope interlaced with pearls.

“I did, my lady,” the girl answered quietly.

“Then I would have a dress from you, my child. How long?”

The girl thought hard. “Three days, my lady, perhaps two.”

“Three days? I can scarce believe that, you stitch so quick. With only this to do?”

“Oh no, my lady, I have many other duties and,” she broke off, realizing her mistake with horror.

“Your Countess has you do very much?”

“Yes, my lady,” the girl whispered.

“Does your Countess have many apprentices? Too many?”

“Yes, much too many, my lady, but I am grateful for the position and the instruction,” she spoke with a frank honesty and wide open eyes. She tried to remember her politeness, “my lady” and speaking slowly and with proper words, and that left her no room for anything than the utter truth.

“Perhaps we will relieve her of one, then. Write to her and tell her...” The look of panic on the girl’s face made Erzsebet smile. “Of course, you wouldn’t, no need for reading in a sewing room. I’ll write to her, you shall stay here, I am in need of a quick needle, as clumsy as I am.” She indicated the skirt, now lying aside on the settee. “Pesha should be outside, he’ll take you downstairs for now. If you have nothing else, no Countess’s work to do, I am sure you could make me that dress by this time tomorrow.”

The girl nodded, but did not move. She trembled slightly, not fully comprehending.

“You may go now,” Erzsebet prompted.

The girl turned, remembered herself at the last second, and turned back to curtsy clumsily and gathered the dress materials up carefully in her arms.

Erzsebet turned and made her own exit, going a room deeper into her chambers, leaving the girl to find her way out. She found herself grateful for the distraction, as now the angry burning in her stomach had faded, and was contented to return to her book until she was summoned for dinner. The relief from that blaze was so great it was a sharp and divine pleasure.

Orsoyla, as usual, took up most of the talk at dinner, but what concerned Erzsebet was how rarely her husband raised his head to meet her gaze, which hardly left his face. When he did meet her eye, he showed no marking of her interest and no memory of his promise. Her presence seemed to make no impact on him, as if she were a fixture or empty chair. The snub took her breath and she found herself swallowing air along with her unspoken words. After dinner, Ferencz announced his intention to meet with his group of soldiers he brought with him in the township below the castle. He spoke to Orsoyla, giving Erzsebet only his profile as he spoke.

“But you haven’t had even one full day of rest,” Orsoyla objected half-heartedly, but Ferencz was already on his feet.

“A meal so fine should be plenty enough for any man’s respite,” he said, with a formal, if shallow, bow. He had turned to go before another breath could be taken, and he strode from the room, giving more attention to the attendant standing statue still by the door than his still newly-wed wife. Erzsebet went to her bed burning and alone.

The cruel light from the mid-morning sun shone through her window, yet Erzsebet remained in bed, wishing for ease or for sleep. Neither had come all through the night, and she gritted her teeth against her own anger, tired of it now but unable to let go of it. Pesha had brought her breakfast as always, but seeing her temper and the flash in her eyes, he had left the tray and fled and would likely not return for as long as he could stay away.

The girl seamstress had no sleep either, for she worked carefully through the night in her small, candlelit room. She lost herself in this, her fingers prickled from her needle. She did not stop to wonder about the other apprentices she left behind, or her old Countess, but only the form taking shape under her hands. Only when the first lightness appeared at the far edge of the sky did she set the dress aside, now nearly completed, trimmed with the lace and pearl that the lady had so admired. She slept as if dead, not bothering to leave her stool, her head leaned back against the wall behind her.

By mid day, the girl had finally gathered enough courage to climb the stairs to Erzsebet's room, dress folded neatly over her outstretched arms. Erzsebet herself had finally risen from bed to eat, but her mood was dark. Still, she called for the girl to enter when she knocked, and, with very few words exchanged, stood on the short stool and allowed the girl to fit the dress to her slim frame. Erzsebet's face was impassive, unreadable, and she said next to nothing as the girl worked. The girl had never fitted anything other than a headless, nerveless mannequin and her hands shook. After nearly half an hour of steady work in silence, she stood on a taller stool to straighten and fix the shoulders, the neckline. She worked with her back to the fire so it shone over her shoulder, the light from the courtyard seemed not to reach far into Erzsebet's quarters.

The girl found she had to work sideways, her shoulder tilted away, out of the path of the firelight.

In a flash of a moment, she lost her balance. The girl never saw the needle sink a half inch into Erzsebet's shoulder as she grabbed thoughtlessly to regain the stool beneath her, but she heard the cry of agony and rage. Erzsebet, cutting off her cry in her throat, pushed the girl away from her with a sweep of her arm. The stool tilted, fell. The girl had not even time to swing her arms in wild attempt to fly before she crashed down. She landed from the shoulders up in the flames.

The girl's screams did not echo, but shattered through the air. As she flailed, her arms and dress began to burn as well. Erzsebet stepped down from the stool and pulled the girl, who weighed no more than a small dog it seemed, out of the fire and onto the great hearth rug. Pulling her new skirts high and out of the way of the flames, She kicked the edge of the rug over the girl, whose clothes were still smoldering. She knelt, and laid her arms, bare below the elbow, over the bulge in the carpet to help it smother the flames. The girl's screams fell to moans, then whimpers. This last, a thin high noise, set Erzsebet's teeth to edge and sent a hard tension down her neck and shoulders. Without a clear thought, Erzsebet clasped her hands together, fingers laced, raised her arms and brought her joined hands like a rock on the place where the girl's face should be. The whimpering stopped, and besides the flicker of the fire, everything was still for a long moment. Then Erzsebet could just see the mass under the carpet squirm so slightly, and the rise and fall, as if the rug itself had life. The door hissed as it pushed open and closed behind Pesha, but Erzsebet didn't notice. She watched the squirm of the rug as if entranced. She leaned over and pulled the edge of the rug back, and nearly choked on the

smell of burned hair that rose in an acrid cloud. The girl's face was haloed in curly wisps of ash mixed with tacky blood that flowed from her destroyed nose. Angry red boils sprang up before her eyes on the girl's neck and bosom. Erzsebet, her eyes wide with the sight, reached for the girl's face and turned it this way and that. The girl's eyes looked nowhere. She coughed suddenly and choked on the air. Startled, Erzsebet drew back, bringing her hand to her face. The smell of the blood, sweet and sour and metallic, was a relief from the stench of her burnt face and hair. The girl sputtered again. Her arms rose and fell. She tried to speak.

Pesha moaned behind her and Erzsebet turned to see him, unsurprised somehow. She folded the rug back over the girl's small form. After a long moment, she reached for the girl's face again, now pressing the rug into the shattered nose and mouth. At first, nothing, then the rug began to jump violently. No longer mindful of her new gown, Erzsebet raised her knee to the highest part of the bulge in the rug and pressed down with all her weight, keeping her hand pressed over the girl's face, not jerking from side to side. She turned, and spoke in a dark, low voice that seemed a stranger's.

“Her legs, Pesha. Be a good boy.”

With Pesha's help, Erzsebet was free to hold the girl's face tighter still, and found it easiest to let her arm be jerked with the frantic movement. The side to side squirming slowed and became irregular. A few final jerks, a shuddering twitch, then nothing.

Erzsebet exhaled, the relief immense. Her anger, rage taken away on that breath.

Excerpted from *Blood & Copper*

Chapter Seven: The Dog

Cjestehe, Late Winter of 1580

Ferencz was gone to war again, protecting the border to the East. Neither he nor Erzsebet knew she was finally pregnant, now nearly two months. He took most of the healthy men with him, fearing the strength of the opposing army. He left a small guard for Erzsebet, of course, and a small guard for the city. The winter had been especially mild, but Erzsebet had been growing steadily more bored and anxious as it wore on. These past years, she found herself preferring the times when her husband was gone to war, leaving her to her own devices, but with his advisors gone with him, some of the petty problems of serfs and merchants nearby fell to her judgment. One morning marked by a chilly western wind that made Erzsebet feel more than ever like a chained animal, a familiar soldier came to her, deeply bowing. As he had entered the hall, Erzsebet lifted her bosom and eyes, hoping to catch him for a diversion. The soldier shook his head only slightly and said in a formal, raised voice, “A merchant brings a complaint, Countess.”

Erzsebet sighed, and waved a hand forward. The soldier went and returned, escorting two people, an aging merchant in a fine green coat and middle aged woman, wearing a dress of the same fabric, though hers was torn in places and dirty along the hem. The woman held her head determinately down and her hands close, appearing as small as possible.

“Yes?”

The merchant kneeled dramatically, and swept his arm in a foppish, coastal fashion that gave Erzsebet some brief amusement. She stole a glance at the soldier, who was looking at the old man with a disgusted sneer.

“My name is Uvary, Countess. This is my dog of a wife, a whore who deserves nothing. She has committed adultery, disgracing our marriage which was blessed by God. I ask only that you do with her what you see fit; she should be expunged from here, made to vanish.”

Erzsebet appraised the woman, who still held her head down, her arms folded across her stomach, close. “Raise your head, woman.”

She obeyed, though it clearly pained her to do so. Her face was marred by a beating, her lip split and right eye swollen shut. It would probably never open again, as it looked somewhat healed already. Her nose seemed pushed askew.

“She was once beautiful, a prize amongst women,” the merchant said. “Her sin has made her ugly.”

“Why did you not kill her yourself?” Erzsebet asked.

The merchant looked up with a jerk from his prostrate bow, surprised at the question. He considered and spoke slowly. “I am an old man. This whore has taken much from me, but perhaps I have lived too long with her. I could not.”

“Go on then, leave her with me.” The merchant looked curious, but Erzsebet had not invited questions or volunteered a verdict. He bowed low again, his nose close to ground.

As he left, she waved for the soldier to follow his example.

When the men had left, the woman before her seemed to melt a little, becoming smaller. Erzsebet approached her, newly aware of a forming fascination, a familiar curiosity. Something in the way the woman cowered, so much like an old dog that lived the stables of Esced. She tried to remember the dog's name.

“What's your name?” she woman seemed to shake with terror. “Quit that quivering and tell me your name.”

“Uvary.” She responded, fighting to keep herself still with all of her will.

“Not your family name, idiot. Your name.”

A tremor escaped her control for just a moment before she won back control.

“Agnes.”

“That's not right,” Erzsebet said, searching her memory. “Something simpler. I'm not going to execute or sell you, woman, stop that shaking.”

With a final shudder, the woman seemed to calm. Her good eye flicked up to meet Erzsebet's for a moment and widened. Her eye was a deep brown that seemed mismatched to her hair and face, at once exotic and simple. “Fizcko,” Erzsebet whispered. “Your name is Fizcko.”

Fizcko nodded, grateful.

One day in spring, Countess took Fizcko along to visit her mother Anna in Esced. She had started to show, and wanted to give her mother the news while she could still travel and be back before her dear daughter, for she knew it would be, would be born. They took the road that went through the heart of the township nearby, and waves of people separated and bowed their heads, still as they could be, as the large black carriage

went by. Some scrambled to take down the strings of the ribbons and cloths that were hung up for sale, across the main road. Others were not so quick and their wares were trampled under the two mammoth horses. They could not see who was in the carriage, covered and curtained as it was, but any covered carriage was a rare and exotic enough sight to warrant kneeling and bowing their heads.

Once the carriage had gotten through to the other end of town, the carriage stopped and the door opened, and Fizcko emerged. She was profoundly aware how odd she must look to the dwindling people still staring at the carriage, and she bent her ugly face low enough to touch her chin to her collar bone. At first, she could not move forward. She was humiliated already, the black carriage taller than she was now that she was on the ground. The shift dress she wore was simple, of a good quality that held together, but with no cuffs or collar or hem. She could feel then the Countess's eyes from the shadow of the carriage, and the shame grew heavier in her feet and belly until she felt she was sinking into the soft ground. She could not even remember her task or what she was meant to say; the white hotness of embarrassment filled her whole head and she remained still as stone on the road next to the carriage.

Countess leaned forward enough so that her dress and hands came out of the shadow. "Go, Fizcko," she said gently. Fizcko looked over her shoulder a bit, to the soft pale hands clasped loosely over the silver silk dress. Grateful for her Countess's presence, Fizcko took the first few steps looking back over her shoulder, keeping the hands in view. She approached a covered work area on the very edge of the town, where three apprentice seamstresses worked on a quilt stretched on the table between them. Their hands were wrapped in several places with strips of fabric, whatever had been

available when it was needed. The quilt was a shabby production, the patches they were using fraying remains of hard-used clothing and sheets. They were thin and dirty, but their faces, while tired and bony, were still bright eyed and beautiful.

The youngest by about two years was the first to stop her work and look up at the approaching servant with uninhibited curiosity. She was dark-haired but had the palest eyes, of an icy blue. Seeing those eyes, Fizcko guessed this youngest would get the worst of it in the end. The other two were light-haired and possibly sisters, with similar round chins and long noses. The squat house behind them put off a scent of old, wet wood, and two tree limbs, complete with rotting bark, held up the sagging door. The road, an uncertain mix of stone and packed earth turned to mud a foot from the step.

Fizcko could not speak at first, and the bold young brunette saved her the trouble after only a few moments.

“Sorry, Miss, but if you are looking for the tailor’s, it’s on the other side. We’re only apprentices here, and we don’t have anything finished or worth selling.”

“She can see that, Sarah,” said one of the sisters, keeping her eyes lowered the work she continued. “We are in no need of charity, Miss. Please apologize for us to your master for interrupting your journey.”

“My Countess did not send me with anything to give,” Fizcko said carefully. The silent sister had stopped in her work when they had begun to speak, and Fizcko paused a moment to wait for the one who had spoken to follow the others’ example. The older sister paused finally and looked up without setting down her needle and keeping one finger on the edge of patch that she was working on. It was then that she saw the servant’s face for the first time and she forgot herself, staring openly at the woman’s

misshapen face. Fizcko withstood the stare placidly, though her teeth ground together, her tongue pushing furiously and painfully against her locked teeth. She remembered her Countess behind her in the carriage and nearly smiled.

“My Countess would like to help you, though not by charity. She has her own tailors and seamstresses, but they lack assistants enough to work as quickly as the Countess Bathory would like,” she looked at the three girls to see how this line was being received. The youngest with the icy eyes was sitting up straight, both eager and suspicious. The middle sister who had not yet spoken looked to the eldest, who sat still and stoic, her needle still in hand. “May I say, begging your pardon of course, that working in the castle for Countess would be better than working here.”

The youngest was now staring across the quilt at the older sister, who still held her needle, but was now looking uncertain. There was no choice in it, and that made the oldest of them nervous and unhappy. The youngest was nearly on her feet with excitement, suddenly full of energy as the young were still capable.

Fizcko sensed that questions might come soon, so she preempted them. “Countess requests that you come to the castle with us now. There will be no need to fetch your things right now, and you may ride with us. Countess is visiting her mother for today and tonight but will be returning to Cjeste tomorrow.” She then turned and began to walk steadily back to the carriage.

It was strange to the girls, but Sarah, the youngest at twelve with the dark hair, stood and followed first. The middle sister, Greta, deferred to the Darnivo, the eldest. The older was still for a few moments, but knew that there was no alternative to following the ugly servant. Greta had been on the verge of asking questions, but as the

servant walked away she realized it made little difference now. It was strange and dreamlike, stopping her work that she was so used to and walking from it. At least, she thought, Darnivo is with me.

As the three girls climbed awkwardly into the carriage, they all tried to sit on the seat opposite from Erzsebet next to Fizcko, and nearly fell over themselves trying to fit while keeping their dirty shoes and skirts far away from the Countess's silk dress. The three of them, thin as they were, could not fit on the narrow seat. Erzsebet reached out and took Darnivo's wrist gently with her fingertips. Darnivo, suddenly frightened, imagined that it was the strongest grip she had ever felt.

“That won't do, girl. Come sit over here with me, and give the others room to breathe.”

Erzsebet spoke gently but firmly, leaving no space to refuse or dissent. Darnivo nodded once deeply, for that was the closest she could manage to a bow in the suddenly cramped space and sat on the seat next to Erzsebet, cramming her shoulder as far into the side of the carriage as she could.

When they were settled, Erzsebet nodded to Fizcko, who tapped on the ceiling with her knuckles, and after a moment the carriage began to move with a jerk forward.

They rode in silence for a few minutes, mostly because the road was bumpy. Darnivo braced herself as hard as she could to avoid bumping into the Countess, but was unused to riding in an closed carriage where she couldn't see the bumps ahead.

Fizcko watched her Countess carefully. She was sitting with her pale, delicate hands still in her lap, though at some point she had extracted a long silver hat pin from her bag and was holding it casually between two fingers against her dress. The Countess

smiled warmly at Fizcko, but it did nothing to calm her, her own hands clasped tightly enough to drain all color from her fingers. Countess was never tense the way Fizcko was, never wound like a snake waiting for the moment.

Countess again reached and took up Darnivo's hand by the wrist. She manipulated it like a doll's until it was flat and palm up, raised in the air as if about to receive a palm reading. Countess examined the multicolored wrappings of her hands, tracing the frayed edges. The hat pin lay nearly invisible in her lap.

"Do you always prick yourself so often?" Countess asked the girl.

Sarah answered for her from the opposite seat, "Why yes, Countess. Especially quilting, as we were today. The needles that hold the patches are quite sharp and are hard to see." Sarah sat between Fizcko and the older of the pale sisters. Fizcko sat by the door of the carriage. As Sarah spoke, Greta nudged at her leg with her foot. She wished she would answer more simply and reverently, but Sarah continued to speak as she would to a teacher or her own mother.

"I'm afraid I prick myself more than anyone, Countess, for I am the youngest and can't remember where the needles are as well as my sisters. But I am also the fastest mender. I can make a torn seam look new off the mannequin faster than you'd ever think." Sarah winced a bit as the sister kicked her again and she fell silent, suddenly aware of her inappropriate bragging.

"You're sisters, then? Why, of course you are," Countess said.

The carriage ride was a bit smoother now that it had reached the path up the hill to the castle. They went up the winding path quickly, as the driver knew the way very well, and the rocky incline began to fall away on either side.

“Do you bleed much?” the Countess asked and Fizcko looked away from her face for the first time to watch the girls.

“My Pardon, Madame?” The older sister asked softly, hoping she remembered the correct pronunciation for the French word. Their father taught them a new little bit each time he returned with more fabrics, so they could impress the wealthier customers.

“When you prick your fingers, do you bleed much?” Erzsebet repeated.

The girls shook their heads slowly. “Not much, Countess,” Sarah answered quietly.

Fizcko watched as the Countess picked up the hat pin in her lap. It seemed to her as if it was an achingly slow, undeniably harmless movement.

Erzsebet raised the pin and jabbed the center of Darnivo’s raised palm. Darnivo cried out and tried to pull back her hand, but Erzsebet kept a firm hold on her wrist. Holding the pin up and away like a writing pen, Erzsebet pressed at the place with her middle finger, causing a small well of blood to form in the cup of Darnivo’s palm. It slowed quickly, and Erzsebet smeared the blood across her palm.

“Yes, I see,” she said with a satisfied smile. “Not much at all.” She bent Darnivo’s hand toward Fizcko and the other girls, as if to show them a fascinating effect. “When I was girl, I cut my hand on some scissors. The doctor told me that I was lucky because the hand does not bleed much. Not much at all.” She patted the girl’s hand, which had stopped bleeding but had a little black bubble at the puncture mark. She released the girl’s wrist and Darnivo let it fall slowly into her lap, still stunned and confused. She had been beaten, of course, before, and that was much worse than this. But something about the lady’s cool smile and iridescent eyes made her feel wary, like

encountering a wolf in the woods. With a loose scrap from one of her bandages she wiped at the smear of blood. The Countess was smiling gently and still holding the hat pin between her thumb and forefinger. The tip of the pin had a single drop of blood that was about to drip on to the Countess's silk gown.

“Madame,” Darnivo nearly whispered indicating the pin, “your dress.”

Erzsebet ignored her and leaned forward to the other seat, coming forward to the edge of her seat so that she could reach across to the other girl. Still smiling, she raised up Sarah's skirts, revealing pale, thin legs up to her mid thigh.

Sarah stammered, and pressed down on her lap with her hands, trying to prevent her dress from rising any further without actually touching the Countess.

The Countess sighed disapprovingly and shot a glance Fizcko, who was ready. Fizcko roughly forced Sarah's hands apart and to her sides so her Countess could raise the girls skirts to her hips.

“Madame, May I...?” Darnivo started, but trailed off, completely unsure what she meant to say. She shifted away from Sarah and the Countess and stared, dumbfounded, at Fizcko and the lady. As Fizcko held Sarah's hands away from her lap, the Countess pulled Sarah's legs apart, cooing as if to soothe a frightened animal. Sarah whined in discomfort and fear.

Fizcko was much stronger than the young girl, and bruises were already forming around her wrists, though the Countess's touch was more persuasive than forceful. The girls knees were apart, and she was more exposed than she had ever been since she had become a young woman, even in front of other women. The Countess ran her hands over the girl's pale skin. Her leg was skinny, her knee bony and child-like. The only meat to

speak of on her legs was the utmost part of her thigh, making her shape unquestionably feminine. It was this part that the Countess evidently sought, and she jabbed at Sarah's inner thigh with the hat pin.

Sarah wailed and cried out. The sharp pain was hot and sudden, though as blood became to flow in a thick red rivulet, a deeper, more foreign pain began to grow warm in her leg. Sarah looked down to see the Countess's hand pressing flat-palmed against the puncture, her own blood running out between the Countess's fingers and over her silver rings, turning them a shiny dark red. Her wailing quieted to a small, weak sob. The bleeding slowed, but as the Countess took her hand away Sarah could see the beginnings of a black bruise forming there, as blood pooled without an escape. The pain was worse than she would have thought possible.

"See?" Countess inquired of the other women over Sarah's sobs, "Much more." She showed her palm as evidence to each of the women. She came to the Darnivo last, who nodded at her. As she nodded, she remembered what she had thought by her hut, which seemed further away than it had ever been in her life, as if it never existed. There was no choice to speak of. She looked at her younger sister to see that Darnivo had her eyes tightly closed and was pressed as far as she could be into the far side of the carriage, biting her lips together so that she looked mouthless.

Fizcko released the girl's wrists, and Sarah pulled her dress down again. The pain deep in her leg felt like a hot rock that grew a bit with every shift of her leg. She felt punished, and tried to keep her mouth shut to muffle her crying and gasping breaths.

The Countess was wiping her hand on the hem of Sarah's dress as the carriage came to a slow stop. She smiled at Fizcko. "I trust you can show these girls downstairs,

dear Fizcko?" she said, and climbed out of the carriage. Darnivo and her sister helped Sarah down from the carriage. Sarah watched as the Countess headed away from them, heading around toward the stone steps to the Courtyard. Fizcko came around to them and began to steer them in the opposite direction. Before any had gotten very far, Sarah broke away from Fizcko's guiding hand and tried to run, limping as she down the rocky slope of the hill. Darnivo and her sister stood frozen by the carriage, watching as Sarah stumbled down the slope. Every few steps she would involuntarily cry out as her leg protested in pain.

Suddenly Darnivo stiffened as she felt the pin press gently into her tender side, not piercing the skin, but firmly pressing an indentation. As she looked up, she saw the Countess, looking upset for the first time since Darnivo had first seen her. She clasped her sister's hand desperately.

Erzsebet was not looking at either sister, but at Fizcko, who looked back at her with anxiously.

"Fetch her back, would you Fizcko? She is ever so pretty."

Fizcko turned and started down the hill. The girl Sarah had a surprising head start. The slope had few places that were level ground, but was mostly rounded rocks, some slick with moss and slime. Ahead of her, Sarah was more falling down the hill than running, sliding down each rock on her uninjured leg, heedless of loose rocks and slick, uneven surfaces. Fizcko proceeded more carefully, testing her footing on each new rock before settling her weight down on it.

Within a few minutes, she was sweating and filthy from the climb, but she could see Sarah, collapsed over a large rock, further down the slope. As she came closer, Sarah

pulled herself up again and started again down the hill. She looked up, back toward the castle and the carriage, but saw no one except the driver, watching her as he held the horses.

The Countess had not waited to see if Fizcko would catch the girl, but must have taken the other two girls inside. Fizcko knew she was leading them down into the basement that had a few abandoned cells and one rusted-soft rack that had been there since the Countess's great grandfather preferred to keep his captured war enemies close at hand.

Fizcko swallowed, hard. Countess was kinder to her than anyone else had ever been in her life, but she had not yet failed her in any way she could think of. She shook with the fear of what would happen if she did. It was more than a mortal fear—that would be the least of her losses.

Fizcko started off again down the hill, leaping from rock to rock like a goat. She paid no attention to her flapping, torn skirts. When she reached Sarah a few moments later, Sarah was dragging herself along the ground.

Fizcko seized Sarah by the hair and shoulder. Once caught, Sarah let herself be half-dragged back up the slope, supporting herself occasionally on her uninjured leg. She whimpered, the sweat and tears ran together on her face. When they reached the top of the hill, the carriage handler was leaving, going around the stables. He shook his head and mumbled. To him, Fizcko thought, the girl ran because she was young and stupid.

Fizcko led the girl downstairs, letting her fall the last few because neither of them could hold her weight any longer. Darnivo was alone in a cell, curled against the wall. She made no sound that Fizcko could hear.

The smell of the dungeon was almost overpowering, and Fizcko swayed on her feet and shook her head, trying to keep it from swimming. She no longer bothered holding on to Sarah, who hobbled in the cell on her own, embracing her sister. Sarah covered Darnivo as much as she could, as if she could shield them both from the place entirely with her body. Fizcko found the key where Countess said it would be, as she described the dungeon on their way to Esced from Cjesthe. She usually took Pesha when she traveled, who could carry more weight and had traveled between the fiefs before, but she took Fizcko instead on a whim. Countess had talked a great deal along the way, looking out the small, curtained window as she did. She rarely spoke so much to Fizcko, and to her relief she didn't ask for Fizcko to contribute any to the conversation. She described her childhood home, and gave a little of its history, including the original use for these dank, sour rooms. She was wistful, and light-spoken, as if imitating her childish voice to add to the description.

The first room of the dungeon was small, and the smell of old blood and sickness made bile rise in Fizcko's throat. It was cool though, and its solid square walls, so much like tombs for the damned who were kept there, were quiet and comforting to Fizcko. The door to the second room was shut, so Fizcko was not to follow Countess. She tied a torn bit a cloth around her face to mute the smell, and sat on the steps to wait. Thankfully, this time, the screams were nearly inaudible.

From the Office of Dr. Rachel Evans

Included below is a transcript of one of five interviews with defendant, M. R. Shuster, submitted here as primary support for my findings. In this case, it is my belief that this defendant is competent to stand trial, assist in her own defense, and is eligible to be tried for a capital crime.

The defendant is of average intelligence, is fully aware of her own surroundings and position, knows the possible consequences of her actions, and most significantly, knows that her actions were immoral and outside the law. Though she shows little remorse, she acknowledges that her actions caused the deaths of the victims, and understands fully what that means, including the impact on the surviving families. While constantly aware that what she says in interviews can be used against her, the defendant is polite and direct, often inappropriately blunt, with both the interview and her counsel, and she seems at times apathetic to her fate. However, her lack of affect does not translate to a lack of understanding or an incapacity for guilt.

October 29, 2003

All interviews were performed personally and took place at the Federal Correctional Institution in Tallahassee, Florida. All interviews were recorded and can be made available at the request of the court, but the following was the most significant in my findings. Interviewer is signified as RE, interviewee MS.

RE: Good afternoon Michelle, are you feeling better today?

MS: Yes, much better. Thank you for asking, dear.

RE: I'm glad. Are you ready to begin? Would you like some water?

MS: I'm ready. You wanted to ask me about Tracy last time. I'm sorry I was rude.

RE: That is a fine place to start. Why don't you tell me about the first time you saw Tracy?

MS: It was that night. She was beautiful and alone. She suited me.

RE: Could you tell me what you mean by that? That she suited you?

MS: She was the right size, and her skin was perfect. She stood out, and seemed to be ignoring everyone else. She looked like she was waiting for me. I was the only one who she would speak to.

RE: What did you say to each other?

MS: Nothing really. 'What are you reading' and 'is that wine good' and 'have you seen this or read that.' Just small talk. She seemed interested in my job at the library. She worked as a nurse I think. Is that right?

RE: No, I believe she was a student.

MS: Oh, right, a nursing student then. She was young, but she was wise too, so hard to tell.

RE: What was hard to tell?

MS: Her age. That's true in a lot of smart young women, they seem so young and untouched one minute, and the next they could seem like your mother. I guess that's where they get the phrase "wise beyond your years." Tracy was like that.

RE: What do you mean she seemed like your mother?

MS: I should have known better than to put it like that. It was a figure of speech. She was wise. She knew a lot about the world. How it really works. That's all.

RE: I see. What did you think about when you talked to her?

MS: It's hard to say, that was seven years ago.

RE: Guess, then. The best you can remember.

MS: About her, then. Just trying to be her mirror.

RE: Her mirror? Could you explain that further?

MS: You know, reflect back to her, get to know her.

RE: You mean you said what she wanted to hear?

MS: No, not like that. It wasn't like that at all. I wasn't some man trying to pick her up. I just wanted to be her mirror, show her what I saw her in her.

RE: I see. Why don't you tell me about later, when you left.

MS: She'd never read the book. I told her we should continue talking, that I had better drinks at home, and that she should borrow the book.

RE: Would the book be *Blood & Copper*?

MS: Of course.

RE: We spoke some about the book last week, but why did you want Tracy to borrow it?

MS: I wanted her to experience it. It's intense. Have you read it?

RE: I'm reading it now, actually.

MS: Where are you?

RE: Pal is being born.

MS: That's one of my favorites, reminds me of my son. He was early to the world, just like Pal.

RE: Do you see yourself as Elisabeth?

MS: Erzsebet.

RE: Of course, do you see yourself as her? Like the Countess?

MS: --no response—

RE: When you asked Tracy to come to your house, did you intend only to loan her the book, as you told her, or did you already have other plans?

MS: --no response—

RE: Why don't you just tell me what happened next, in your own words.

MS: She took me up on my offer, and we agreed just to go in my car.

RE: Was that your idea or hers?

MS: I don't really remember, we just agreed to do it that way.

RE: When did you decide to kill her?

MS: 'Decide' isn't the proper word.

RE: In your original confession, I see you admitted you planned it. If you planned it, at some point you must have decided.

MS: I was told that confession was excluded.

RE: From court proceedings, yes.

MS: As I said, 'decided' isn't the right word. I didn't decide. It was like I was following a path I was already on, and it was the next step. That's all.

RE: At the bar, did she want to call anyone? Tell someone where she was going?

MS: No.

RE: If she had, would that have changed your plans?

MS: Couldn't say. She didn't.

RE: But you knew that no one knew where she would be?

MS: Yes, you could say that, but I wasn't thinking of it that way.

RE: At what point did you start fantasizing about killing her?

MS: --no response—

RE: Michelle, I am afraid I'm going to have to insist on that one. At what point did you start fantasizing about killing her?

MS: Always.

RE: Since you first saw her?

MS: No, always.

RE: Ok. Let's talk about afterwards. How did you feel, immediately after?

MS: Tired.

RE: Did you feel no remorse?

MS: Not until later, right after I couldn't think. I just was.

RE: When did you start to feel remorse?

MS: --no answer—

RE: I may come back to that Michelle, but for now let's talk about the facts some more.
What did you do, immediately after?

MS: After she was dead or after I finished?

RE: Could you explain what you mean by that?

MS: Never mind. After I took a shower and rested a little while. Then I wrapped her
and drove her to the swamp.

RE: Why did you do these things?

MS: I didn't want blood in my car, and I thought she'd be found eventually in the swamp, just not too soon.

RE: Were you afraid of getting caught?

MS: Of course, though I didn't think of that much.

RE: What did you think about, if not getting caught?

MS: As I said earlier, I wanted to get to know her, be her mirror.

RE: And later? At your apartment?

MS: That's what I thought about.

RE: Okay. Michelle, I want to ask again, at what point did you begin to feel remorse?

Was it immediately after? While you wrapped her up? Days later?

MS: I don't know, I can't remember exactly.

RE: That's okay. When you began to feel remorse, what did you think about what you had done? What makes you feel badly about it?

MS: I am not sure I understand.

RE: Do you feel remorse now?

MS: Yes, of course.

RE: Why?

MS: Because I'm here.

Research

Baton Rouge

August 2011

David left his unsavory reading until the morning, going to bed at an unheard of early hour and sleeping soundly until nearly nine the next morning, when the smell of bacon woke him as pleasantly as anything ever could. Somehow, he had had pleasant, peaceful dreams, and waking in his childhood bed to the quiet but unmistakable sounds of his uncle moving around in the kitchen filled him with a happy contentment that soured slowly as he stirred, rubbed his eyes, and remembered.

The box, an ugly squat thing, lay on the floor at the end of the bed, the navy blue bed skirt tucked under by its corner. For the briefest moment, David was suddenly unwilling to swing his feet over the side of the bed and put them on the floor, as if afraid something from underneath would grab at him. He shook it off as a remnant of sleep. Still, he nearly launched himself from the bed instead of sitting and rising as he normally would.

In the kitchen, Trey had been busy. He always enjoyed making breakfast, the only meal most days where he could make it for himself or for him and David. There was delicious freedom in that, knowing he could make it as spicy as he could stand it, or substitute shallots for onion since it was only for one or two servings. He didn't have to make decisions according to the average tastes and the easiest preparations. This morning, however, the freedom had been a curse as he changed his mind repeatedly throughout the cooking. At first, he thought of a summer vegetable frittata to suit the season, but as the smell of the mixed vegetables sautéing in butter filled his kitchen, a

strong craving for sausage hit him. He had been cooking and changing his mind for nearly an hour before David finally came into the kitchen, still rubbing the heavy night's sleep from his face. David served himself coffee and sat heavily at the small table in the kitchen. A beeping signified that Trey's spicy sausage and cheddar biscuits were finished. David watched his uncle's back as it bounced from one counter to the other to the oven and back. He moved as if frantic, but his back was straight and his face placid, though his eyes flicked constantly around. David marveled at this as he often had before, wondering at his Uncle's effortlessly energy as he still struggled to bring his mind fully around to awake.

Trey set a laden plate of mismatched breakfast foods in front of him, a quarter slice of frittata, three slices thick pepper bacon, two sausage cheddar biscuits, and a cinnamon apple slice of French toast covered in a glaze of powdered sugar and orange juice.

David blinked at the plate and then looked up into Trey's face, now hovering over him looking bewildered.

"Sorry," he said and made to take the plate back, but David waved his hand away.

"I just need a fork. I love a challenge."

Trey smiled broadly, served himself and brought two forks and the coffee pot to the table.

They ate steadily and without conversation, as they often did when it was just the two of them. This time however, the silence had weight. While they made valiant, even stubborn, efforts, neither could clean their plates.

Finally, David asked simply, "Do you go in early today?"

Trey shrugged. “I don’t have to, but usually on Mondays I do some stuff in the office. Nothing that won’t hold until later or even tomorrow if you want to do something.”

“Don’t get behind on my behalf.”

“How many days did you take, anyway?” Trey asked.

“I took the full week. You know, just in case I decide to make another trip.”

“Right,” Trey said nodding. He cut off a bite of French toast, changed his mind and left it on the plate. “Was I supposed to talk you into it or talk you out of it?”

David laughed without much humor. “I wish I knew.”

Trey nodded. “Are you sure you don’t feel like doing anything? I could probably even squeeze in a noon movie. Sneak in some lunch in. Hamburgers, maybe even some chili-cheese fries, really buck the system!”

David gave his best smile, and tried to match it with his eyes. For a moment, it did make him feel lighter, as if the secret were to pretend hard enough to make it true. “I’m sure. I don’t really feel like going anywhere. You and Charlie wore me out this weekend. I’m just going to hang around here. Read maybe.”

“Ok, that will be good. Take it easy.”

They sat in silence for a while, poking at the food left on their plates and finishing coffee.

They cleaned the kitchen together, and Trey pattered from room to room, unable to keep still long. He left earlier than he had ever meant to, sensing David was waiting for some measure of privacy. David, however, was only waiting for his heavy breakfast

to settle. He felt a little better having decided at least on a course for the day, unpleasant as it would be. Returning to his room, he found the box smaller than he remembered. He laughed at himself, letting something grow so huge in his mind so quickly.

He took the box into the kitchen with him, and sat facing the sink and the window above it as he always did with his homework, letting himself be hypnotized by the shifting bars of light and dark made by the tree's branches just outside. He knew he worked best with something to distract him, something he would have to call his mind back from. He didn't know, though, at what point he decided that this was the best way to approach this particular project, like work, a long put-off chore that could only be passed with diligence and patience and a kitchen window.

It only took a few pages of the first thing he picked up, a report from some psychologist which was neatly placed in an addressed manila envelope but had no cover letter or explanation attached, that it would take a great deal more to understand this than it would a chapter of algebra or a thick, difficult book full of similar looking and impossible to pronounce Russian names. The comparison made him cringe, though he hadn't meant to make it.

David didn't know much more about the legal system than anyone, except that he knew how much longer the legal process took than most realized. The report looked typed, not printed, with some letters darker than others and perhaps even a little uneven. There was a stamp, illegible, on the top corner of each page. It was brief, a two-paragraph introduction and a transcript of part of a single interview, between his mother and some psychologist. He found himself a little surprised the name on the heading was

not Ramona Greene, but he supposed the interview was several years old now. That psychologist must have moved on to other crazies by now.

He found he couldn't read much at a time, feeling regular urges to rise and pace, before begrudgingly come back to his seat, finding nothing to distract him. The tempered voices he assigned to the psychologist and his mother as he read were equally foreign, fictional, strangers. He read, becoming fascinated by image of the room they must have occupied: white cinderblock yellowed with cigarettes, bars dissecting a large space into a half dozen cramped ones. Or was it glass they used now, or heavy gauge plastic with rows of holes for circulation. Or perhaps something altogether different, not at all like the movies. Certainly it would be uncomfortable, things would be bolted down and unmovable, with hard, easy-to-clean surfaces. The images made make him spring up, pushing his chair back. He would make a loop of the house, soft and comfortable and full of that home-but-not-quite-home feeling that all childhood homes developed after years passed. They often got throw pillows and blanket sets as presents, so nearly every seat had a matching set ready for any visitors. He went back to his seat, and started again. Then it was her face, badly bleached hair frizzing out around her temples, and again the thought set him on his lap of the house.

After the competency report, David flipped through the mess of other papers. They were in no discernible order, thrown into the box's single file folder haphazardly as they came, with no attempt at organization. It was primarily notice-letters from Michelle's first two lawyers. It wasn't long before he pushed the pile away and moved to the couch, pulling a folded fleece over his face and holding it there with the crook of his arm. He felt a familiar sinking feeling pull at him, reminding him a lot of how he felt the

year after he graduated college when he bummed around New Orleans, trying to hang on to something that was over. Self-pity and loneliness were easy, comfortably familiar notions. Self-pity in particular was a special trick of the mind, splitting it into two. One half is the sorry son of a bitch that makes everything seem impossible, and the other is the real one, trapped inside its pathetic counterpart. You pity the one half, and blame the other, as if it had nothing to do with the other, external and utterly uncontrollable. David moaned into the blanket, scolding himself before he could be tempted.

He knew there was nothing else for it, now he had started he had to see it through. Karen had been right about that much.

He swept himself up in a lurch, letting the fleece fall to the floor, and found his cell phone after some searching perched on the porcelain sink. He pressed the redial button, and closed his eyes while it rang, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“David?” Karen’s voice was in his ear, a sudden and beautiful confirmation of her existence.

“Hey, remind me what I’m doing here.”

Karen sighed softly, though she wasn’t exasperated. She found herself guiltily relieved.

“Because it may be your last opportunity to understand, if there is anything to understand, and because you’d always wonder about her if you don’t.”

“It’s all just a mess,” David said. “Trey has some stuff from her trial, but it’s not complete, and it’s all out of context and seems to make no sense at all.”

Karen hesitated. “I can’t imagine. Are you okay? Don’t make yourself crazy if it’s only because I...” she stopped abruptly, the rest of her thought caught in her throat.

“No, you’re right,” David answered her, “or at least you’re not wrong, and I won’t know until after.”

“Have you called that woman yet? Told her what you’ve decided?”

“No, not yet. I wanted to know *something* more when I spoke to her again. She seemed so...shocked how little I knew. I mean, I *should* know, right?”

“I think you should, yes.”

“Would you,” David hesitated, trying to measure the favor he was about to ask, “would you listen to some of it? I don’t know if it will help, but I’ve only just started to go through it, and it’s starting to be just words and words and words.”

“Of course I will,” she answered. She winced. She was happy to, she meant nearly everything she said, but what neither of them had mentioned for days bit at her. Selfish, she knew.

David read to her the competency report while she listened in a fretful silence. They both paced, David back and forth in his living room, Karen behind the first row of filing cabinets in the copy room of their office. The copier worked with a muted whirr and screech in the background, and finished its run well before David finished his reading.

Finally, he stopped and there was a long, quiet moment.

“That’s it, that’s all there was in the envelope. I don’t know if the doctor thought that was enough to make her point or if the rest didn’t make it into the mail. I don’t even know why Michelle’s lawyer sent it to him. Us.”

“I don’t know,” said Karen quietly. “It probably made a pretty big impact at the trial. The last part, at least.”

“I’m sure it did. Quite the spectacle. Intrigue and all that.”

“I don’t just mean that, though I’m sure...”

“I know you didn’t,” David interrupted. “I’m just trying to remember not to be taken in by it.”

Karen didn’t respond. She finally awoke to the silence in the room, the copier having finished its job. She wondered how long she’d been standing there.

“You have to go?” David asked, speaking a little too loud, overcompensating.

“No, not really, if you need to read me something else.”

David looked at the pile of papers, “No, you’ve got to get back to work. Thank you, though. Really.” He tried to let that final word stand for a great deal, even though it felt flat even as it left his mouth.

Excerpted from *Blood & Copper*

Chapter 12: Soldiers' Return

Cjesthe, 1598

After it all came down and the wall went up, the servants and stewards would say it had gotten quiet after Pal was born. That wasn't precisely true, but it seemed so in the shared memory of those who lived and worked in Cjesthe castle those twenty-three years Erzsebet was Countess, lady of the land and household. Pal's birth had been harder than most, brought Erzsebet nearly to death, coming early before Erzsebet's young frame was quite ready for him. It was also said that when it was over, though she had been screaming through the night, once she held her first-born son she was as beautiful as ever, face glowing and clear of any pain or worry or fear. This was a pronounced lie, and no one believed it, but it was often repeated.

Erzsebet sat alone in the courtyard, watching as additional lanterns were hung, flowers trimmed to show only the finest blooms, and clinging moss scrubbed from the walls with stiff brushes. She had insisted on many things, her first born turning eighteen was not something she would allow to pass without marking the day. But she was agitated, uncomfortable. She shifted often on the bench, and swallowed often against a stiff throat. She felt a familiar, quiet hotness growing in a hollow behind her breastbone. It had been so cool there lately, so gentle, that she thought it may have finally gone out, that fire, altogether. She grimaced at it like pain, but a small part of her relished it, like regaining feeling in a numb limb.

Pal and Ferencz returned together the day before, riding up to the castle without hurry, eating a soldier's cold meal on horseback. It had come to where Pal now had a

distaste for eating at a table, he was so accustomed to eating while moving, but his father assured him his tastes for hot foods and wines would come back quickly. They spoke comfortably and familiarly of the victories and the easy times ahead, how much easier was not yet known, but they speculated freely now that the troops were behind them for awhile. Ferencz's pride of his son was great, as it should be. Pal was broad-shouldered and tall with a quicker mind than his own, and Pal's faith in his father was as it should be. But there was no warmth between them as there once had been between Pal and his mother. Ferencz did not think on this much, as he thought very little of his wife at all, had not for many years. But even as the two men spoke, letting their horses wander up the hill as if the day would not move on without them, Pal thought on this, thought hard about his mother and returning, wifeless and childless, to his family home. The oldest child, but somehow the last to leave.

Pal thought about the first time he saw someone bled for his mother's amusement. He had been riding a horse alone for only a little while, so he couldn't have been more than ten. There may have been a time before this (she was scarcely secretive inside Cjesthe), but either he didn't remember or he hadn't understood. It was spring just coasting into summer, a hot day. Pal had been riding in the morning, but as the sun rose his hands were so slick with sweat that he couldn't firmly hold the reins, and he was not yet strong enough to direct the horse with his legs alone. The horse was the tamest and oldest in the stable, so it knew the way back and directed them both there without much prompting. Childishly, Pal slid off the horse with exaggerated slowness and sulked into the shade without helping Kenneth stable the mare, to show how hot and tired from the ride he was. Kenneth was an old horse hand with dark skin, and though he was always

faultlessly polite to the family, he ignored Pal's panting and dragging feet. After resting a bit in the shade of the tack room, Pal had decided to go and find Mother, perhaps nothing but whim. Pal rarely spent time indoors during the daylight hours, especially in the warm months. He usually only saw his mother twice a day. She would come into his bedroom in the morning to see that he was properly dressed and to ask about his studies or activities for the day. In evenings, they would eat together and Mother would read to him, or test him on what he was meant to study for that day. That morning she was angry and quiet. She said very little and asked him nothing.

When he reached the cooler upper rooms, he dragged his fingers along the sweating walls. Everything had taken on a wet, sour smell like that which rises from a well. Mother's rooms, at her insistence, all looked out over the courtyard from the third level. When he reached her hall, he wasn't sure which room she would be in, so he listened at each door. At the third door, he heard Fizcko's high, unpleasant voice and almost moved on. He had no desire to see Fizcko's scarred, sad face at all. Besides, she always looked at him as if he might suddenly bite her without word or provocation. She was nearly as tall as Mother, but she carried herself like a kicked dog, like several of his mother's favorites. He was moving away from the door when he heard her address Mother.

"Countess, please," she screeched.

Pal opened the door and was surprised that they weren't in the first chamber. As he passed over the threshold, he could hear them more clearly. Mother didn't respond to Fizcko's cry, which Pal realized was much louder than he had thought from behind the closed door. Pal realized with a bit of dismay that he was breaking a primary rule—he

was not to enter any room that was not his without express permission. His feet moved him further into the anteroom anyway. The room was one of his favorites because it had the biggest, most elaborate tapestries in the castle. It showed Pal's great grandfather Istvan mounted on a speckled mare, pushing back a flood of Turks as if only by the sheer power of his will. Where the Turks retreated, they left blood-stained footprints in the snow that eventually formed a sea of red at the right corner of the tapestry, signifying the far east. Pal's throat tightened, and he knew he should probably leave before he was noticed. He shouldn't be where he was, but that wasn't the only thing. All of his instincts were screaming to turn and run.

He crept past the anteroom to the next chamber, the door ajar a few inches. Pal put his face to the gap. Though it was hot outside, waves of fire heat assaulted his face from the inner chamber. Mother had a large fire burning in the fireplace, but also another in a heavy metal pit on the other side of the room, big enough to roast a pig in. The heat was immense, suffocating, even from his hiding place in the gap of the door. His mother reclined in her copper tub, which must have been pulled by the idiot Pesha to the center of the room. From her bare arms and shoulders, she was naked in the tub, bathing. His grandmother Anna often scolded his mother on her lack of modesty.

His mother turned in the tub, to face back into the room where he could not see. She said something, but Pal could only hear a bit of it. "Yes...from the leg." Pal could only see part of his mother's face from the gap in the door, but it was what held him there, stilled his legs and his heart. She was wide-eyed, and even in profile Pal could see her smile, which was a rare thing of terrible coldness. And yet, persuasive.

“Wait,” she barked, her voice clearly ringing out over the roaring flames. “Have it all ready. It will come very quickly, like rain at night.”

His mother’s back was almost to him, and the flames between him and Ficzko, so Pal opened the door another few inches, slowly, listening hard for any resistance in the iron hinges. The heat of the room flowed out even more, and almost instantly he was so covered in sweat that it made him shivery. His mother moved again and he froze, but she just leaned over, her hands grasping the back of the tub. Her back was arched, the flame light made churning patterns on her skin, pink from the heat. At times, each bump of her long spine was accented sharply, undulations of light and shadow like hills drawn on a map. Other times the fire would burst into new brilliance, the clear distinctions of her form would vanish and her back would look like a boiling red sea.

Pal had opened the door wide enough to take a cautious half step into the room. He could feel water trickling down his back, and the sharp coldness of it made him think of pointed nails. He could just see Ficzko’s bent figure, though her attention was thoroughly diverted from him. He was shocked to see that there were others in the room, Pesha, for one and another young woman he didn’t know. The strange woman was clearly a peasant, but not a servant that he recognized. Ficzko was speaking, but she was no longer shrieking, and Pal couldn’t hear her over the fire. Pal wondered for just a moment if the woman was one of the women his mother routinely rescued from convents and brothels. He did not yet understand the difference between the two, and his mother spoke as if there were none. The girls never stayed at the castle long.

Pesha was tending the fire with a poker, standing as far back from it as he could, while still holding onto the poker. He stood askance to the fire, trying to protect his eyes.

In the middle, it was nearly white with brightness. Fizcko was attending to the other woman, who sat in a high wooden chair, the kind that sat in front of the tall looms that sometimes filled the hall before his mother threw parties. Under her, Fizcko was placing a large earthenware pot, with curves like a vase. Pal wondered if they were going to soak the woman's feet, and wondered why his mother was having the woman bathed in her own chamber, instead of with the rest of the servants. *Maybe she has some disease.* She was sitting the chair dazed and still, her eyes dull even in the bright fire light. Her leg, which Fizcko moved aside in an awkward, unladylike way, was scraped and bruised up the thigh. She also had a few bruises on her face and scratches on her arms. Pal blushed as Fizcko pushed the woman's skirts out of the way, tearing them in the middle.

Pesha and Fizcko looked at each other, and then the strike came so suddenly that Pal had not actually seen the knife in Fizcko's hand until the blood was flowing quickly, *so quickly, like rain at night*, into the pot below her leg.

The girl did not cry out until Pesha, only a second or two after the strike, pushed a hot poker against the cut, sealing it with fire. Her scream, though it must have been made with all that was left in her, was so weak that Pal doubted it could be heard in the hallway, for he had closed the heavy oak door behind him.

Pal wondered, if the girl was so sick that so much blood had to be let, why his mother was in her presence at all. And why the operation was being held here, with "the idiot and the mule," as the other servants called Pesha and Fizcko, and not down in the town. Fizcko let go of the girl, and she fell from the chair, barely conscious.

Fizcko picked up the earthenware pot and brought it to his mother, who waited with her hands outstretched in the bath. Her hair, which was loose and straight, fell down

over her face, masking it from him. She dipped, with anticipatory slowness, both hands in the pot up to the elbow, and drew them out streaked red. Fizcko pulled her Countess's hair back and folded it away, as if preparing to wash her neck.

His mother lifted her arms up, letting the blood run in rivulets down toward her shoulders. She moved slowly and easily, like a practiced dancer. With a jerk, she brought her hands down, and her face, which had been blank and far off, turned dark. Her lip curled up in a sneer. She leaned her head forward and smelled one of her blood-soaked arms, her disgust suddenly plain on her face. She rose from the bath, and Fizcko and Pesha seemed to melt away into the far corners of the room. Pal could not see either of them anymore, and he should have shrunk back in case he was seen, but he could not help but watch as his mother stepped from the bath, water running off over her in sheets while the blood clung to her skin. Her body seemed to fall apart, and became disconnected, limbs held together only by magic and will. Her head lowered and her shoulders raised. From what Pal could see of her face, her mouth was partly open, showing teeth.

She approached the girl, who lay on her back, her eyes half closed and turned up into her head. She knelt down, straddling the figure of the peasant girl, seemingly unaware of her own nudity. She gripped the girl's hair, wrapping it around her fingers, and raised it up from the floor. She shook the girl's head until her eyes opened a little. With her free hand, she smeared the girl's face with blood.

“You smell like rotten fish on the inside,” his mother said. It was not loud, but somehow it cut through the sounds of the flames and reached him, cutting into him.

His mother pressed her hand against the woman's face and banged her head into the stone floor three times.

He ran, and saw no more.

It was not many months later that Pal joined his father on a hunt, proving strength and skill on a horse beyond his years. The next year, Ferencz took him to a soldier's camp. He'd scarcely been home since, and never longer than a month at a time. But now there was plenty and a veil of peace, so he and his father rode home. They did not hurry.

Guilty

Baton Rouge to Tallahassee

By Wednesday afternoon, David was at the airport, sitting in a laminate seat with a leather satchel that his Uncle had found somewhere and gave him as a for-nothing present. He propped his feet up on his rolling suitcase in front of him, just small enough to check, and tried desperately to be comfortable. They had dropped him off about two hours before his flight was scheduled, and now he still had quite a wait ahead of him.

His ticket was paid for by the Greene Foundation, first class. He was wishing now he had insisted more strongly, but the truth was he couldn't really afford two last-minute flights in a week, so he caved after only the second insisting.

Ramona, for her part, had been so shocked to hear from him that she could scarcely think of anything to say besides trivialities like taking care of the flight and the procedures for scheduling a visitation. She was on her way to the prison when he called her cell phone, the only number she had given him. Her reading of him, from the first call, was that if he would be agreeable at all it would be with a single person, not a committee. So she gave him her personal cell phone number, something she rarely gave out to anyone. She regretted it a little after his first call had startled her badly, but she knew now it had probably been the best strategy. When she hung up, she considered calling her father, but instead put the cell phone in the cup holder. Michelle was part of the first step in her project, a project that was sure to be long and drawn out. It was not an original idea, it was pretty standard, in fact, but it had never been done by an independent agency before. The aim of these studies had always been how to catch

killers faster, helping law enforcement identify patterns and significant details. Like studying and naming moves of a chess board: openings, gambits, traps. She reminded herself that they had a path to follow, she and her team knew what to do, and she would have to handle any curve balls herself, especially this early in the game. Because it wasn't a game. She shook her head to herself as she drove, setting her mouth into a grim non-expression as she pulled up to the prison entrance. She had her ID and papers ready, and thought distantly of how she would tell Michelle the news.

David gave up trying to be comfortable in the terminal as a man in a leather jacket chose the seat that shared a back with his and started tapping his boots. He got up and started to wander the airport, rolling his bag behind him and trying to stay out of the way of people in a hurry. He strolled through a book stand, scanning covers of magazines and paperbacks. His eyes landed on a copy of *Blood & Copper*, a newer edition than the one he had in his carry-on, just as a girl of about seventeen picked it up and turned it over to read the back. He didn't wait to see if she would buy it. It was only just barely one-thirty, but had just over an hour still before his plane would begin to board, so he pulled his suitcase to a nearby kiosk bar. He made a lame joke about not driving to the bartender, who smiled politely as he mixed a gin and tonic with two limes.

By the time he boarded the plane, his stomach was settled and his eyes only opened half-way, but he was no more likely to sleep on a flight than he ever was. He was not afraid of flying, but he could never sleep where strangers could look at him. He had never flown first class before, and found it somewhat disappointing. He watched out the window with his hands clasped until they were fully in the air. He closed his eyes, but

after only a few moments he knew it was hopeless, so he rummaged in his bag and pulled out *Blood & Copper*. He still hadn't completely decided whether or not to read it, but he had not brought any other books, so he supposed he made up his mind in his sleep. He had barely cracked to the first page when he felt a tap on his arm. The woman next to him was tall and square in the shoulders, with short, curled hair. She was old enough to still dress-up for flights, in a pale blue blouse complete with a small shiny broach over the right breast.

“May I ask what you're reading? I just love airplane books.”

David could think of no polite way to refuse, so he half-closed the book on his finger to show the cover.

“Oh, that's a great choice,” she showed her own book. It had a scared looking teenager looking back over her shoulder as she ran through the woods. It was thick and from the looks of it, was a large-print edition. “I love planes because it's the perfect excuse to have a cocktail in the middle of the day and read a trashy book, right?” she nudged his elbow with hers, leaning over the first-class arm cushions to do so. “My son flies me to Florida every other month to come see him and his new baby, so I spend a lot of time in airports, so might as well enjoy the trip, right?” She chuckled, a manly sound and nothing like a giggle. “That really is a good choice though, an old one, but still good. That's the only one she ever wrote, right?”

David shrugged.

“I'm pretty sure that's right,” she nodded, as if that was all the affirmation she needed. “I remember trying to find another one by her, I hoped she would cover other figures—Vlad the Impaler or King Henry or such—she was such a fun read. Not

historically accurate, of course, hardly any of them are these days, but that's why they call it fiction I guess. When I'm at home, I try to read things that are just a little bit classier, you know, I'm in three book clubs, if you can believe it, but I always save my guilty pleasures for planes. This," she tapped the cover of her book, "is *certainly* a guilty pleasure. I think it's mostly written for teenage girls, but I can pretend, can't I?" She chuckled again. David stared at her, watching her bounce and sway as she talked, as if her talking bounced and dislodged her in her seat. It was close to babbling, but David found himself smiling at her. There was something infectiously friendly about her that was utterly disarming. He usually hated when strangers tried to chat him up in boring places, like lines and airplanes, but the woman spoke to him like they were at a dinner party and had been seated next to one another. She was odd, to be sure, but he liked her almost instantly.

"Are you enjoying it so far? How far have you gotten?" the woman asked.

"Oh, I haven't even started," he showed that his finger was only on the first page.

"Oh! Well I'll shut up then! You're in for a treat, such a fun read!" She went back to book and appear to be lost immediately in it, her eyes moving quickly across the page, wide and eager.

David sighed a little, disappointed. He began to read. He read through the first two chapters, the chapters were short and skipped time between them, jumping from one scene to the next. Even so, it took him nearly half an hour. He was continuously distracted, wondering at every moment, *is this what fascinated her so much? Is this? Is this?* He quickly became frustrated and lowered the book to his lap, covering his eyes

with his hands and rubbing under his glasses. He felt another gentle tap on his arm. The woman had got his attention to show him the drink cart was coming, they were next.

“Does your head hurt?” the woman asked. “Mine used to when I read but it stopped when I started getting the oversized print. White wine, please,” she scarcely paused to turn to the attendant and turned back just as quickly. “I have a lighted magnifier in my bag if you need it. It would be a shame to waste perfectly good plane-reading time on a silly headache.”

“Gin and tonic, if you have it,” David ordered, and then turned back to the woman. “Oh no, it’s not that. Thank you, though.”

The attendant gave them their drinks and asked if they would like peanuts or pretzels. The woman ordered pretzels and he doubled it, giving his own bag to the woman when the attendant had moved on to the next row.

“You don’t want yours?” she asked.

“I’m good with this,” he said, and jiggled his glass. The plastic and the sparse ice made a disappointing, hollow sound. He considered for a moment, looking at his glass and back to the woman.

“You know, the truth is I’m behind. I’m supposed to have this book read before I get to Florida. I don’t suppose you could point me to some of the best parts, maybe fill in the basic story for me?”

The woman eyed him, with slightly narrowed eyes. “It’s not for some class, is it?”

“Oh no, it’s just that my moth—my mom really likes the book and wanted me to read it.” David swallowed, realizing that he was not actually lying, even though he felt all the signs of it.

The woman narrowed her eyes even further, then relaxed a little. “Oh well all right,” she held her hand out for the book. “You really should read it all the way through at some point though,” she chuckled. “I guess it was silly thinking it would be for a class, I don’t know what sort of class would assign it, unless...oh well never mind.” She opened to the table of contents and started flipping through, turning down pages occasionally.

“Unless?” David prompted.

“Well, there’s sort of a history behind this book, so they may use it in some psychology or criminology classes. Supposedly it made some woman crazy. You know how for a while people were all afraid of *Catcher in the Rye* because Charles Manson had a few dozen copies and quoted from it? It’s like that.” She wasn’t bouncing anymore, her attention split between what she was saying and picking out parts that David should read. “The book is about this Countess, she was a real woman, you see, in 1500s or something like that, and she was said to have killed all these women, tortured them, bathed in their blood, all that, like a real life vampire. So the book goes through her whole life, you could call it a psychological thriller, though it’s a little bit different. She gets away with it for a long time—something like twenty years, but in the book you see her devolve as she gets older until she’s too crazy to hide it and they wall her up in the tower for the rest of her life. I’m making it sound *so* dull, but it really is an interesting

read. I should pick it up again sometime. And you should definitely try to read it all the way through.”

“How did it make someone go crazy?” David asked. The question came out easily enough, casual sounding.

“Who knows, really, but there was this woman, I forget her name, who killed women and also had hundreds of copies of this book. She killed them the same way they are killed in the book, I think, draining the blood and such. I forget, it was so many years ago I think my son was still in school. There was some movement to get it pulled off the shelves, but of course that just made it more popular.” She handed the book back to him. “There you go, I’ve spoiled the ending for you and everything. But those are my favorite chapters at least.” She shook her head. “You’re just cheating yourself though.”

David nodded. “I know, I’ll read it all the way through sometime.” He sat back in his seat, took a long drag of his drink, finishing half of it. He opened the book to the first dog ear, about halfway through the short novel. He read continuously, faster now. Several times he had to consciously relax his jaw as it started to hurt. He was nearly finished with the last section when they landed.

“Well?” asked the woman as she moved into the aisle to get the bags from over head. David moved out as well to help her.

“It’s certainly something else,” he said. “Thanks so much for your help,” he added, handing her an attaché case.

“Of course,” she said, “just don’t tell your mother on me.”

“I won’t,” he promised.

Excerpted from *Blood & Copper*

Chapter 13: Fire Breaks

Cjeste, 1598

Erzsebet kept to herself most of the day her eldest son and husband were due home. She watched as they prepared the courtyard, watched the cooks knead and beat, watched as linens were taken down and up the stairs. She made everyone distinctly nervous. She was usually quiet, but even so, her silence that day seemed to fill all the spaces and steal voices.

Pal and Ferencz arrived late in the evening, and Erzsebet had dinner held for them, even as the candles had to be replaced. The hot feeling was growing inside her, tickling now at the back of her throat. She never knew the source of it, could not predict when it would come upon her or leave her be again. It did not feel unnatural.

Ferencz came into the hall ahead of his son. Erzsebet waited there alone, having dismissed the anxious servants sometime earlier. Pal followed behind, boots clipping each step with a noise like a slow heartbeat. Ferencz, jovial, gripped his wife's shoulders gently and appraised her.

"I see you waited, and I bet there are a dozen cooks keeping dinner warm for us, I should have known." He glanced over his shoulder at his son, and turned back saying, "You remind me of Mother. I'll go straight on, then." And he went, leaving Erzsebet to greet her son, which she did with open arms. She embraced him unabashedly, though he was now taller than she, and broader. A man by several years. She held him in much the same way Ferencz held her, gripping his shoulders in her hands and appraising his face

carefully. His full beard hid his mouth, and was several shades darker than the hair on his head. He met her eyes only briefly.

“Do your boots or belts hamper you? There is soup and meat, and it can wait another while if you need to ease your riding burdens first.”

He shook his head, took her arm lightly, breaking her gaze on his face.

“I’m more hungry than tired,” he said, though it was a lie.

It was Pal’s birthday the very next day, and visitors and distant family started to arrive early in the morning. There was to be eating and leisure all through the day, and dancing in the evening. The courtyard, where Erzsebet sat through most of the day, became intermittently crowded and would empty as parties broke apart and rejoined. Some were strangers, even to Erzsebet, though all were related by blood, marriage, or money.

In the early evening, the extra lanterns were lit behind multicolored glass, and many applauded. Soon, there would be musicians, gypsies of course, and then dancing. It was a proper celebration, and many came and told Erzsebet as the sky darkened. Ferencz often brought one or another person to her for special greetings, usually the richest or those who gave the most men. The night was not yet full dark, and the musicians had not yet begun to play when Ferencz brought a girl to her by the arm, gesturing to his son, standing alone and apart on the other side of the gardens to join them.

“Bet,” he addressed her more and more informally as the night progressed and his mood grew lighter, “would you believe that this creature here,” he held the girl’s hand

with an outstretched arm, presenting her like prize chattel, “is related to us? She is György’s cousin.”

The girl curtsied, in a practiced, formal way. She wasn’t a girl, Erzsebet saw then. Though she wore a maiden’s dress, she was no younger than seventeen. Her bosom was full and her hips rounded, filling her dress without help from a bustle. Pal arrived to join the party, standing full straight in his formal clothes. “Pal, son,” Ferencz pulled him closer, and joined his hand to the girl’s, “may I present my cousin’s cousin, Mabel. She has been studying in the Mediterranean for many years now, full of stories.” He bowed to the girl and extracted himself, leaving Pal holding the girl’s hand and thus her new escort. He timed it near perfectly, as the musicians began with a lively number, emerging from the dark overhang that surrounded the courtyard, between two of the brightest lanterns. Pal remembered his manners, bowed to the young lady, and moved with her toward the music. For it was in his honor, the dancing would be started by him, as long as he got to it in good time.

Ferencz turned and stood by his seated wife. Erzsebet wore a burgundy dress, an old favorite, with a new belt with many ornaments hanging from the hip. It was not the fashion, but almost gypsy like, and was a favorite of hers. Now, she entwined her fingers in the falling cords, pulling until her knuckles were white. She wound the longest around her wrist until she could feel the pulse struggle there.

“She is lovely, isn’t she? He also, a prize. I hope you know, wife, that he is the finest soldier I’ve ever known, my father counted in that number. But for that, I can say, only quietly, that I think that time is done for both of us. The need shall be much less now, and he can govern my messenger when it’s time. That is what I drink to tonight.”

He turned to his wife, giving her his real attention for the first time. “Shall I get you something? Aren’t you well?”

Erzsebet looked up at him, her head tilted. She could not remember last when he had asked her such a thing, but now she took no pleasure in it. She shook her head. “The wine is quite strong,” she told him quietly, “I had to excuse myself from conversation after one. I’m sure I’ll feel right again in a moment. If you brought soldiers home with you, you should bring them down now that the dancing has started.”

Ferencz bowed, “Quite right, I’m sure they would be enjoyed.” He took her hand from her lap and raised to his lips. “Thank you, dear Bet,” he said and left.

Erzsebet supposed he must be quite drunk already, and her eyes found Pal, in the center of a half dozen pairs. He was lovely, she thought, and even taller than his father. He had groomed well for the evening, trimming back his beard and brushing his light hair out of his face. Even in his most formal clothes he moved like a soldier, but still gentle and light while dancing. She watched him for a long time, the heat becoming so fierce, she was suddenly sure it must show on her face and in her eyes. A young servant brought her water with a bow, saying “Count Nasady bade me,” when she was met with a blank stare. Erzsebet took the water and held it numbly.

The musicians, fiddles and drums, played for more than an hour without pause. When they did pause, the leader promised a quick return, his voice raised to a boom over the boos and hisses at the silence. Laughter then, and the din of chatter rose to fill the void.

Pal bowed to his partner, the same girl as in the start of the dancing, and excused himself. Erzsebet rose, her mind nothing but a buzz of fire now. In a daze, she moved

through the crowd until she faced the lovely cousin of György. Mabel curtsied, and spoke with her head tilted in deference to Erzsebet's position. Erzsebet spoke niceties with no thoughts in her head, they came as automatically as water from a pump. She took the girl's arm and started a path around the edge of the courtyard, listening to the girl speak.

"The mountains in the south are so different from those here," she was saying, "they stand alone like titans against the sky." The girl was pleased with herself, treated to such courtesy by the Countess Bathory and her son. She spoke freely but carefully, remembering manners and best words and good speech. She followed as Erzsebet led her into the shadow of the overhang. The darkness was sudden, so bright was the courtyard lit by the lanterns. Here, the only light came from three nearly spent candles.

Erzsebet stopped then and faced the girl, who continued to speak for a moment before ending her thought abruptly. "Yes, Countess?" she inquired, looking at Erzsebet's shadowed face, seeing an expression wholly strange and new.

"My dear, this dress, I believe is inappropriate for you," Erzsebet pulled at the bodice with one finger. Mabel stood her ground, uncertain but trying to keep her balance.

"How so, my lady?"

"It's a girl's dress, a maiden's," Erzsebet replied.

"Yes, I am yet unmarried. In the south, it is custom to wear maiden's clothing until one is married. I know I am old to be a maiden. Pardon me, but I hoped to marry here, at home, and not on the coast where I studied. Is it not the custom here anymore?"

"It is possible to be neither married nor maiden," Erzsebet said.

The girl grew cold, though it was pleasant night. She thought she understood now the Countess's criticism and it made her flush from her neck to her ears. She bowed her head and curtsied, thinking desperately. Erzsebet continued to pull the bodice of her dress until it was loosened.

"Lady Countess, please, I assure that is not true. I am old enough for a woman, yes, but I am still maiden. I swear upon my home mountains." She knew at once she shouldn't have sworn, that swearing oaths so casually was a childish and vulgar thing, but she had no other words to promise with. She wanted desperately to bring up her hands and stop the countess, who was now ripping at her bodice with both hands. They were in the shadow, in a lonely corner of the courtyard and near no hallway. The crowd had begun to dance again, and they seemed at once so close and so unreachable. Before she could think what else to say or how she may prevent what was happening, the countess had stripped her of her dress and even her underclothes.

Erzsebet was hissing words to herself, no longer speaking in sense. The girl's body was much like her own when she was seventeen, and by then she had already given birth to a child. She was thick and firm and her skin smooth and tight. She was lovely, and Erzsebet hated her with all her boiling blood.

She stepped away when the girl was stripped naked, watching as she tried to huddle against the wall, crying.

"Please," Mabel whispered, too terrified to make any louder noise, lest someone notice.

Erzsebet was too far away to hear, too far away to even know her own thoughts or hear the words she spoke herself. She turned, and stepped back toward the courtyard.

Mabel made a move to pull her clothes back to her, but Erzsebet returned quickly, carrying the vase from one of the lanterns, still mostly full with oil, in one hand and the half-burned cloth in the other.

Mabel could scarcely understand what the Countess was saying, but she caught one word as it she repeated it, louder than the others. *Down.* She shrank down the wall, closing in on her nakedness. Erzsebet kicked her across the face, and she slumped down, stunned. The Countess kicked again and she was on her back, blood trickling from her nose. Erzsebet overturned the vase of lantern oil onto the girl's bare belly, thighs, breasts. The girl moaned as her head began to clear from the blows. Carefully, as if performing some delicate magic, Erzsebet laid the cloth over the place where Mabel's legs came together. She took one of the stubby candles from the place on the wall and touched the flame to the oil-soaked rag. The rag, and Mabel, blazed into flame so suddenly that Erzsebet fell back, pushing herself with her hands to keep her skirts from setting aflame. Whether it was the blaze or Mabel's scream, the whole attention of the party fell upon the scene at once. Mabel's shrieks continued, and she flailed against the flames and they crawled up her body, following the oil, burning steadily and stubbornly, immune to her thrashing.

A soldier, a stranger, tore a linen from a table, and came crashing through the bushes, knocking flowers aside. He threw the linen over the burning girl and pressed it to her with his whole frame, covering her completely from sight. Others came more slowly, two carrying lanterns to see what had caught on fire, who had burned. Several ladies came quickly to Erzsebet's side, helping her stand and trying to dust her off, asking if she were injured or where she had been burned. A few thought it had been she who shrieked

until the soldier stood up, pulling the bloodied linen away. Mabel's face was mostly untouched by fire, and though her eyes were open, it was impossible to see if she were living or dead or merely touched.

Pal was there, looking over the soldier's shoulder.

"It is Lady Mabel, Sir," the soldier said, straining to speak properly since his audience was so intent.

"Does she live?" Pal asked, kneeling.

Erzsebet watched as Pal put his ear close to the girl's mouth and nose, to feel the breath there. No one moved for twenty seconds. Pal grabbed at his man's shoulder and nodded, "She lives." He began to pull away at the cloth, and stopped, seeing underneath. He replaced the cloth. "She won't long. Please, help me take her." As gingerly as he could, he wrapped the girl and lifted her by the shoulders. The soldier was joined by another and the three of them lifted her. She awoke, screamed.

"Go! East hall!" Pal shouted over the wailing. As he passed, he saw his mother, now half surrounded by attendants. He saw the candle in her hands, held primly there like a fan or other womanly thing. He knew it would not stand this time.

In the hall, he and his men laid the girl down. She was once again unconscious, her eyes closed. The linen was drenched with blood. In the tight walls, burned flesh and blood mixed in the air, a sweet metallic smell that Pal remembered and it stole his breath. He knelt beside the girl, and felt for breath again. It was still there. His father appeared over his shoulder. Pal turned to him and pulled down the linen to show him. He looked up at his father, pallid. He could not keep his son's gaze and turned away. Pal stood and moved around to face his father.

“You know how this happened,” he said. It was not a question.

Ferencz looked at the girl as one soldier recovered her. Her nakedness was not a matter of modesty anymore, much of the flesh unrecognizable, but she bled in so many places. “Yes,” he said quietly.

“It cannot stand. She’s mad. Others will see mother and her candle and the girl’s clothes scattered on the ground. Her family is here.”

“Yes,” Ferencz said.

“Go then, you have but one moment to act first and save this castle, our land and our place. Go.” He had never before given his father an order, but it was obeyed without further comment.

Pal knelt again by the girl’s head, remarkably untouched by flame and still beautiful. His soldiers knelt nearby, waiting. Circles of blood widened and joined together, making the linen stick to her frame, revealing her shape underneath. Her eyes began to move slightly under her lids, and Pal knew she would be screaming again soon. He put his hand once more over the girl’s mouth and nose, but this time, feeling the air there, closed around it. His hand was large, like the rest of him, and made a suitable seal. She jerked only once.

Abyss

Tallahassee, Florida

August 2011

David was surprised to see Ramona herself waiting for him at the airport, and more surprised still that she drove him herself to the hotel they had arranged for him. After a more than necessary how-was-your-flight small talk that lasted until they were about two miles away from the airport, Ramona began to explain to him the procedures they would have to go through the next day, to gain entrance to the prison and the meeting with his mother. It was all set up, she said, she had spent the day before making sure of it, that all the right people would be expecting him.

At this, David asked his only question: "Including Michelle?"

"Yes," Ramona said. "Including Michelle. I was not sure I should, in case you changed your mind, but she had to know in order for all the paperwork to be done. She," Ramona swallowed here with a audible click, "is looking forward to it. She said so."

David nodded, numb.

Reaching the hotel, Ramona parked in the lot herself instead of giving her car over to the valet. "I'm staying here as well," she said in explanation, though David had not asked. "I took the liberty of making a reservation for two in the hotel's restaurant. I'd be happy to answer any questions you have, if it would make you more comfortable about tomorrow."

David considered for a moment. There were the practical issues: he was starving, did not know the city, and did not have much inclination to wander around trying to find a restaurant. Hotel restaurants were usually awful and overpriced, but it seemed the most

appealing option, and he supposed it would be rude to refuse and end up ordering in or worse, sitting at another table. He assented, saying he would deposit his bag in his room and join her.

The restaurant was not typical, neither was the rest of the hotel. The furniture and décor were ultra-modern, but in cool, muted earth tones. Much of the décor was minimalist and the whole place gave off the impression of *clean*, every surface just a hint of shine. The menu was adventurous, not at all the usual fare.

Ramona took deep breaths as they both looked over the menu in silence. She almost had to laugh at herself. This should be *easier* than talking to Michelle, a PhD board, or prison guards. But for her, it was infinitely more difficult. No guidelines, no sides, no roles. She had tried, at first, to be nothing but professional—neither cold nor warm, just performing a duty as well as she could, and that had gone badly. David had responded to her with *who do the fuck do you think you are?* She wouldn't know how to answer if he had actually expected one. She didn't know what was proper, except that nothing was. She wished, for the first time, that she was older. Sometimes, with age, you can fake propriety where none can exist.

David sat quietly, only wondering what he could possibly think to ask. He didn't really know enough to see the gaps. Finally, after they had ordered, he asked, "Is she still blonde?" He didn't preface the question, but he hadn't needed to.

"Not really," Ramona said. "They stopped giving her access to the chemicals to bleach her hair years ago. For awhile, she still found ways to do it. One way made her sick for awhile, she was in the infirmary for months; a hearing was delayed for it. since

she then, her roots have grown out.” She didn’t ask him why he wanted to know, it was probably none of her business.

“So she is a brunette, then, like me.”

“Yes.”

“Does she look like me?” David didn’t meet Ramona’s eyes as he asked these questions, preferring to stare into his water glass.

Ramona, though, stared openly at his face. The features there were at once familiar, so like Michelle’s, and yet utterly different. His skin, for one, was a healthy shade, not peaked or yellowed. Even the features that were nearly identical, especially his eyes, were changed if for no other reason than on David’s face they were attractive. Both David and his mother had features that could be expressive or blank, mysterious faces that promised openness and secrecy in equal measure. Ramona knew this was bordering on pure superstition, but she couldn’t help the impression faces made on her, and she also couldn’t deny that she was often right. In all the ways that Michelle’s face made her cold and curious, David made her feel young and open. And with both Shusters, she spent all of her energy showing nothing in her face, and still felt like a simple puzzle, solved as soon as seen.

“You have similar eyes,” is all she said.

He continued to ask questions much like that, not much related to murders or Erzsebet Bathory. Questions any grown man who couldn’t remember his mother might ask. He didn’t know if it would help, ease the shock or prepare him at all for the next day. Ramona gave him quick and simple answers. He didn’t look up much, but when he

did his eyes didn't focus on Ramona's face. Finally, he asked simply, "Is there anything else I should expect? Should I be careful?"

"You should always be careful," Ramona said, "and expect as little as possible."

This time, David found her eyes over the table.

"Always? Or just with serial murderers?"

"Better safe than sorry," Ramona answered. With that, David had exhausted his questions. He thought briefly of asking about the nature of her work, the foundation, etc., but thought better of it. It would only be social, but would only fill the silence.

The prison was much as David expected all prisons would be: concrete and wire on the outside, steel and tile on the inside. The visitor's entrance made no attempt to look different than the rest of the prison, to look friendlier to the public face. It was more colorful than he expected, though, stripes of colored tile and primary paint on the walls: blue, orange, red, green. He realized it was more system than décor, directing guards and prisoners by color to various wards and wings. Ramona had been faultlessly professional, walking him through security, even introducing him to particular guards she knew by name. He inferred that Ramona had pulled some strings to have the waiting period for his application waived, given the somewhat special circumstances. She was not overly friendly, but the guards deferred to her more than he suspected they would to others. It certainly helped the whole process, especially getting in the main doors.

She had driven them both, again, and talked all the way, telling him what to expect. They wouldn't take his shoes or anything, but he should leave his wallet in the car. He could take no more than fifty dollars into the prison, and there would be a small

food stand where he could purchase food if he stayed for longer than one hour. The maximum amount of time for the visit was four hours. It would be outside, and there might be other inmates and other visitors present, since Florida did not separate death row inmates until all appeals have been concluded and a date was set.

“Also,” she said, “Another inmate, a man, has had his execution date set today. Sometime next month, I think. He’s not one of mine.” Ramona said this without thinking, and didn’t see David’s sidelong glance at *one of mine*. “Whenever a date is set, protesters often follow. I haven’t seen any here myself, because no one has been executed while I’ve been working out of Tallahassee, so I don’t know how bad they get. If there are protesters, it may take more time getting in and out. Hopefully, it won’t be too bad.”

It could have been worse, David reasoned once they were inside, if Ramona wasn’t recognized by the guards. A small crowd of protesters, maybe thirty, crowded around the entrance. Four guards stood facing them, arms crossed, impassive. The tallest one, with a Magnum PI mustache in blonde, spotted Ramona and had motioned her through, David right behind her.

Now, there was just waiting. It was like the airport, David mused. You had to get there at least an hour early just in case they have to *really* search you, but mostly you ended up waiting at least forty-five minutes. He sat in a courtyard at a steel picnic table. There were about twenty tables, ten under an over-hang and ten scattered about in the sun. Other visitors were there, scattered among the tables at odd intervals. The only real noise was a single crying baby and the distracted *shhhhh* from the mother, that was constant but utterly ineffectual. It was like any other waiting area except that no one had

anything in their hands—no books or magazines or phones. That, and the sixteen-foot-high fences.

“It will probably be another fifteen minutes or so,” Ramona said. “When she comes out, I’ll introduce you, but after that it’s up to you. Would you like me to stay? I can always sit at an empty table.”

David considered. “Would it help your study to stay?”

“Yes, possibly, but maybe not. Can’t really know what helped and what was irrelevant until later, of course. It’s your decision; you don’t have to consider anything else.”

“Stay, then.” David said. It had never occurred to him that he could be alone with his mother—even as much as sitting alone at a table surrounded by other people sitting alone at tables.

“Okay. No problem.” Ramona told him.

Finally, there was a long tone, followed by three short tones. Two gates slid open on their tracks. Nothing happened at first, and then a final, lower tone sounded. Fifteen women in white, button-up shirts and blue canvas pants filed out. Some took long strides, looked around, and nearly ran to their visitors. Others moved slowly and took their time. David saw no one he thought could be his mother. She was the last to come out, and David was only sure when he saw she was clearly headed right for their table. Her hair was teased out, trying to make it fuller but only emphasizing that it was falling out. David wondered what she kept trying to put in her hair to make it blonde, and what had made it finally turn to a dirty-water grey. She was not quite old enough for it to have

happened naturally, not yet fifty. She looked very little like the woman in the photograph and in his memory. A small but ugly scar marked a place just above her collar bone. Her eyes were a little sunken, her mouth chapped and thin, all of her gaunt and a little unnaturally lean. This was not to say she looked sick or even ugly. She took even, steady, purposeful strides. She didn't look around or twitch, though nearly every other eye flicked to her at least once. She didn't command that attention with a raised chin, haughty look, or scowl. Her face was impassive, almost pleasant, as if she walked for her own purpose and worried nothing about others on the street. Her arms swung casually at her sides.

David found himself standing when she finally reached the table, his finger tips touching the steel surface lightly. Ramona rose a few moments after, though she had never felt the compulsion to before.

“Good morning, Ramona,” Michelle said, her face open and bright. “Will you kindly introduce me to my son?” She said this giving her full face to Ramona, and though the tenor and manner of her voice was gentle, David felt some background of sarcasm there.

Ramona, almost accustomed to Michelle's manner, obliged formally, as if it were always her plan to do so. “Michelle, this is your son, David Shuster. David, this is your mother, Michelle.”

Michelle turned to David and turned up the corners of her mouth. “I'll save you the decision of whether to hug or shake hands and just sit.” She did so, and after a moment, David and Ramona did too. Ramona and David on one side, Michelle on the other.

It was not until they were seated, as she looked him frankly in the face, that he saw his own features reflected there. He wondered if his widow's peak, like hers, would become more pronounced as he got older. He wondered if others saw his eyes as he saw hers—an unremarkable color at first glance, so unsettling in another.

"You look nothing like your father," Michelle opened with, as if reading his thoughts. "I thought you might, but it looks like you just take after me."

"People have said I look like Trey, but I've never seen it," David responded.

Michelle laughed, a short bark. "People say nonsense sometimes. Say things just to say them, no thought behind it at all."

David resisting nodding, never unaware for a moment where he was. He waited ten seconds. "I think that will do. Ramona said you wanted to see me, I'm here. You can start saying whatever it is you want to say to me."

Michelle smiled, this time a real smile that touched her eyes and made them spark a little bluer. "It's not business, Michael."

"My name is David," David interrupted.

"I suppose it is. It was the only battle with your father I ever lost. David Michael instead of Michael David."

"I thought he was gone by then," David said, his eyes squinted at her.

Michelle shrugged. "I guess he was. But I made the concession anyway." She shifted, uncrossing and re-crossing her legs, shifting from right over left to left over right. "I may have named you differently if I had really been alone, but I hadn't gotten free yet then."

“I don’t know what that means,” David said. He was frank, and kept his voice as steady as he could make it.

Michelle waved it away. “Like I said, people just say things.” She turned to Ramona for this first time and her smile changed, grew darker somehow. “Isn’t that right, Ramona?”

“Sure,” Ramona said. She returned the smile. “Some would lie as soon as speak.”

“Well, that’s not quite the same thing,” Michelle protested, again she waved it away. She broke eye contact with both of them and seemed almost instantly lost, her eyes looking through the fence and out over the grassy field beyond.

David waited another ten seconds before saying, “Michelle, Ramona also mentioned you wanted to give me a house. I don’t want it, so you should probably go ahead and sell it while you can still pay a lawyer.”

Michelle’s head snapped back at the sound of her name. “Since when do you call me ‘Michelle’?”

“I’ve always referred to you as Michelle. I don’t remember *calling* you anything.”

“You called me mother,” Michelle told him. “Never Mom, always mother, even when you had just started to speak. Always the formal little child.”

“Did you hear what I said? About the house?”

“Yes, yes,” she jerked her thumb at Ramona, “she told me. “I’m going to leave it to you anyway, as I told her. Lawyer said it wouldn’t work that way, but I’m wearing

him down. He'll figure it out. When you're ready, it will be there for you. It's on a hill, you can almost see all my land from it."

"I thought it wasn't your land anymore, sold off in pieces."

For just a moment, Michelle looked upset, then she waved her hand again, as if any unpleasant thought was as simple. "Oh, it's still my land. They will build their houses on it and shop and play and make things, but my house is on a hill, and I can almost see all my land."

She was so persuasive, so sure, that David almost nodded in agreement. He let it go. He would not take the house, and he had told her so. He was quiet a moment.

"I read the book," he said finally, "I read it on the plane on the way here."

Ramona sat up a little straighter at this, though she was now quite thoroughly ignored by both Shusters.

"Did you?" Michelle said, pleased. "What was your favorite part?"

David hesitated. "The end," he said simply, not elaborating.

Michelle's face darkened a little. "What a sad thing to say, the end. So dismissive. It's never about the end, you know, it's everything," she swept her hand across the table, moving it away from the other. Her eyes unfocused as she watched, as if she could see the whole expanse of literature and the world between her cupped palms.

"I always wanted to teach literature, did I ever tell you that?"

David could not remember Michelle telling him anything, but he just shook his head.

"Never quite worked out, somehow. The library here," she gestured at the expanse of wall behind her, "is terrible. No copies of the book at all, and only one copy

of the works of Shakespeare.” She leaned over, “and of course that’s made nearly illegible by all the dirty drawings in the margins and the pages torn out.”

David looked straight at her, and was surprised to find it wasn’t as hard as he thought it would be to do so. He measured her with each glance, but found she was always shifting and he could never really get a good idea of her. In a way, that told him more than anything else could.

Ramona watched them, trying not to miss anything: a flinch, a word, a gesture. Michelle re-clasped her hands in front of her, returning her son’s frank gaze. Ramona had no microphone, had not expected even to be allowed to listen. She found herself desperately trying to remember it all, as if she could ever make it home in time to transcribe it before it was gone in fog. They are both so subtle, she thought, almost *cagey*, or would be if either were aware of it. They reflected each other’s faces. It reminded her of the one drama class she took in college, an exercise where one partner made a face and the other tried to imitate it, like a mirror. It was supposed to teach the actors what they looked like to *other people*. This, though, was different, much more than a sheer imitation. Their faces were *blank*, nearly static. Two mirrors facing each other. Both mirrors, but the similarities stopped there.

There had been silence for more than twenty seconds; David was done prompting. Finally, Michelle said, “That’s why I had to leave you, you know, the end.”

David blinked. “I don’t know what that means,” he said.

“I knew that only you, my first born, my proud son, could stop me, reveal me. Just like Pal. I loved you for that, of course, but I had to let you go. I had to learn from it,” she opened her hands like a book.

David considered this for a long time, not looking away. Michelle closed her hands again.

“That doesn’t make sense,” he said, his face beginning to come alive at the corners, “*Blood & Copper* didn’t come out until 1990. I was seven then. You left me with Trey when I was six.” His face tensed and tightened, for the first time he showed the beginnings of real anger.

Michelle’s smooth brow furrowed, and lines formed all over her face, like wrinkled paper. Her thin mouth twisted, for a second became something not at all like a mouth. Her eyes went dead, slack, a muted grey that betrayed nothing of the colors they had a moment before. It was there, for a moment, a twisted and wrinkled mask of confusion and hatred. Then, as suddenly as it contracted, her face relaxed. It once more was as smooth as glass and passively open, frank.

“Of course it makes sense. You’ll see it someday. You’re still so young.”

“You didn’t even start killing people until years later. I was twelve.”

“Sure, of course,” Michelle said simply. Her face didn’t change again.

David opened his mouth again, wanting to argue, and then closed it again. He had nothing to argue with her. The sudden and simple certainty of that came over him and his own face went slack, though it was no longer the smooth, open reflection. His eyes, which showed anger a moment before, continued to betray him—the relief that was slow but undeniable.

“What else?” David asked.

Michelle looked confused, “What do you mean, son?”

“What else do you want to ask me, to know?”

Michelle thought; a soft expression came over her. “I guess, are you happy? Is your life good? Are you strong in it?”

Ramona stared, utterly astonished. *I guess*, she had said. Ramona had never known her to be anything but utterly full of confidence, as if her lines were fed to her by some far-seeing thing. What she said didn’t always make sense, but she never *guessed*, was never unsure. Ramona wondered if it was put on, though she doubted it. It may be the only truthful thing she had heard from the woman.

David also stared, though he was not as astonished. It seemed the obvious question, though impossible to answer. “I get along,” he said finally.

“Of course you do, so strong,” Michelle said quickly. She nodded, affirming her own conviction.

“Do you remember their names?” David asked suddenly.

Michelle’s eyes flicked to the side and returned to center slowly. “Yes, every one.”

David thought of the other questions he had thought of the night before, alone and sleepless in his hotel room. *Are you scared? Do you know what happened to my father? Do you regret it at all, or just that it caught up with you? Why did you blame that silly fucking book?* All just conversation points, really. Now, facing her, they seemed irrelevant. Nothing compared to knowing her, just long and fully enough to dispel all imaginary versions of her from his mind.

“I’m glad I came,” he said truthfully. “But I don’t have anything else worthwhile to say. If that’s it, I’ll go.”

Michelle opened her mouth, as if hoping words would be there, but there were none. She closed her mouth, curling her thin lips inward. Finally she said simply, “I guess that’s it.”

David rose from the picnic bench, and slid out. Michelle straightened, but did not stand.

Ramona hesitated. “David, if you don’t mind I’d like to take the opportunity to ask your mother a few questions.” She looked at Michelle and back at David. “Just more of the same, since I’m here. It shouldn’t be more than fifteen minutes, maybe twenty.”

David looked at Ramona for a moment with something close to pity. But he just said, “I’ll wait in the visitor’s entrance.”

He walked away from the table, his hands freed of his pockets and his chin neither high nor tucked. He let his arms swing easily. He wasn’t feeling entirely as casual as he made himself look, but he thought that real relief wasn’t far away. He could hear Ramona’s voice start behind him, but didn’t try to distinguish what she was saying. He knew what it would be, though. He thought she would try to draw it out, try to pull the evil out through Michelle’s eyes so she could get a real good look at it. Let that be her burden if she wants it, he thought.