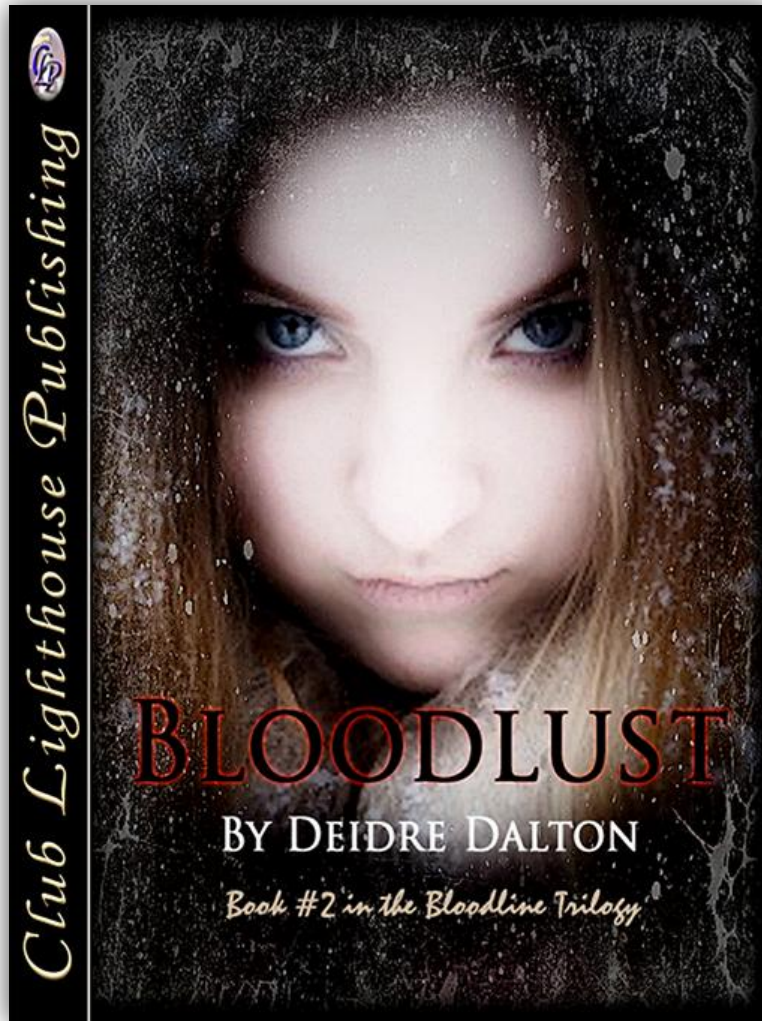


Excerpts from:

Bloodlust

By Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole)



Book #2 in the Bloodline Trilogy

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ABOUT "BLOODLUST"

Bloodlust by Deidre Dalton (*aka Deborah O'Toole*) is the second book in the *Bloodline Trilogy*. The novel was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in February 2021.

Noel and Pim's daughter Kate Grady has unusual powers which allow her to bend people to her will. At first she uses her gifts wisely, but then goes astray after falling in love with Kirk Lester. She finds herself honing her special powers to keep her place in Kirk's heart, no matter how evil or depraved life with him becomes.

Kate Grady comes from a happy home, never knowing fear or insecurity. Thanks to her extraordinary parents, Pim Grady and Noel Gatsby, her childhood is full of wonder and unconditional love.

However, she soon realizes she possesses special powers which allow her to bend others to her will. At first, she uses her newfound abilities wisely. She prevents a gang of bullies from raping and beating a young girl, and then makes them pay the ultimate price for their brutal acts.

Then Kate meets Kirk Lester. She is drawn to his smooth charm and compelling physical presence, quickly falling under his spell.

Kate changes overnight. She finds herself honing her special powers to keep her place in Kirk's heart, no matter how evil or depraved life with him becomes.

For more, go to:

<http://deidredalton.com/>

BLOODLUST:**Excerpt from Chapter Two**

KATE GRADY ALWAYS knew she was different from other people. She may have looked like a teenage girl, with long blonde hair and her mother's blue eyes, but inside she was poles apart from her classmates. She didn't stand out from the crowd because of her inner differences, quick intelligence or subtle powers of persuasion, but rather because of her unusual and haunting beauty.

Her father's long legs and mother's pale skin completed the physical package, which Kate took to new heights by using dark eyeliner, black lipstick and black nail polish. She imagined herself a novice Goth when she first started high school, even if her parents did not approve at first. By the time she finished her sophomore year she was bona fide Goth, a fact which her parents tolerated because her grades never slipped and she never got into any serious trouble.

Kate's main form of attire was black in all shades: deep, faded, speckled, riveted, or striped with gray. She favored satiny black blouses or tank tops, ankle-length skirts with billowy hems, black nylons or no stockings at all, and shabby combat boots which always seemed to be partially unlaced. Her black leather jacket was a prized possession – a birthday gift from her godmother and Noel's former boss, Madge Tilley – as was her skull-and-crossbones pewter ring, worn proudly on the middle finger of her right hand. Other favorite trinkets included blackheart ear-studs, a black leather pentagram wristband and a blood-red sacred heart pendant surrounded by a pewter frame with a clear glass teardrop, all suspended by a thin silver chain.

She was popular with her teachers because she was smart, excelling in every subject at school and rarely missing class. She was also respectful to their faces, a trait which did not go unnoticed by her select group of friends. "Why antagonize the establishment?" Kate reasoned by way of explanation. "In treating our teachers with deference and consistently scoring good grades, I defy their preconceived notions in relation to my appearance."

"That's easy for you to say," said her best friend Chloe Benedict as they walked down the main hallway at English High School. "You always get good grades, Katie. Me, on the other hand, it's a constant struggle and hardly worth the effort."

The two girls paused in front of their lockers, the army-green paint chipped and dented in several places. Kate smiled at her friend, attempting to encourage her with words. "I told you I'd help you, Chloe. Just say the word and we can setup tutoring sessions."

Chloe shook her head, the black fringes of her page-cut hair brushing across the collar of her leather jacket. "I don't think so." She shrugged, returning the smile. "I'm hopeless, as you well know."

Kate admired her friend's brilliant white teeth, the tiny pearls set against thin lips colored with light pink lipstick. Chloe was her partner in the Goth look, but she drew the

line at black lipstick. Her light blue eyes were feathered by thick lashes, her tiny body encased in black jeans and skull-and-crossbones tee-shirt. Her black leather jacket was identical to Kate's, who had given it to her the previous Christmas so they could match. Chloe's pixie-like face was framed with pageboy black hair, giving the impression that she was younger than her actual seventeen years.

"You are *not* hopeless," Kate said, trying to sound stern as she opened her locker. "With just a little work, you can certainly bring your grades up to snuff."

When she did not receive a snappy reply from Chloe, Kate turned to look at her friend. For one of the few times in her life, Chloe Benedict was speechless. She stared away from Kate, her mouth slightly agape and her eyes wide.

"What's wrong with you?" Kate asked her, slightly annoyed.

"Who the hell is that?" Chloe whispered, her voice whispery and filled with awe.

Kate turned around to follow Chloe's gaze. She paused, taken aback as the tall specimen of perfect human form walked down the hallway.

He seemed to be without a care in the world, effortlessly confident in his graceful moves and formidable appearance. His clothes were black – tight jeans and a tee-shirt – over which he wore a long, dark gray duster coat that reached to his ankles but above his rounded-toe black boots. His hair was the color of wheat, like a freshly-baked country biscuit, falling straight to his collar in a slightly dull sheen and tucked behind his ears. Kate's eyes were drawn to the unusual earring he wore, which was a tiny depiction of a silver dagger impaled through his left lobe with a red crystal blood drop dangling from the end. Her gaze travelled to his face. He was pale, yet the barest hint of darker stubble around his chin and over his upper lip seemed to join in concert with the coal black of his wide-set eyes. "*Looking pale and sickly is all the rage these days,*" Kate thought, somewhat critically. "*Yet it fits him and doesn't seem to lessen his machismo.*"

His male companion, who was non-descript and shorter of stature but dressed in similar fashion, walked to the side of him, just a slight fraction behind his long step. Both of them stared straight ahead, yet as they passed by Kate and Chloe in the hallway, the tall one turned his head to aim a quick glance at Kate.

She drew in her breath. He was staring straight at her, there was no mistaking it, but the contact was all too brief as he moved on. She caught a whiff of his scent as went by, a decidedly heady brew of cigarettes with a faint hint of Grey Flannel cologne.

Chloe tugged on her arm. "Who is he, Katie? Do you know him?"

"N-no," Katie responded with some difficulty, still breathless by her millisecond eye contact with him. "I have no idea who he is. A new student, maybe?"

Chloe nodded vigorously. "Yes, that must be it. I can't say much for his mangy-looking friend, but the tall one is absolutely stunning! Did you see the way he looked at you?"

"Did he? I didn't notice," Kate replied weakly.

"We have to find out who he is," Chloe muttered as she turned back and opened her

locker. She fished around for her history book. "If he's new, maybe he has some of the same classes as we do. Unless, of course, he's a senior. Does he look like a senior?" She found her history book. "A-ha!" She turned to Kate. "Okay, are you ready? We only have about a minute before the bell."

Kate followed Chloe the short distance down the hallway to their history class. She was wordless, still stunned by the appearance of the tall man in the duster coat. He wasn't really a man per se, especially if it proved true that he was a new student, but it didn't seem fitting to call him a boy. No one who looked and moved like he did could be anything but a man. He was striking and well-beyond the scope of students at English High, in a social and physical sphere all by himself.

After their history class got underway, Chloe went about trying to discover his identity. She whispered in the ear of a few of their classmates, or sent quick text messages to others she felt might be "in the know." Before the hour was over, Chloe nudged Kate from behind where they sat in the fourth row. Kate leaned her head back slightly.

"His name is Kirk Lester," Chloe said softly, almost triumphantly. "He transferred in from Burke High a few days ago."

Kate silently formed the name on her lips: *Kirk Lester*. The name was simple, yet unique. She tried to imagine the sound of his voice, but of course could not. She had never heard him speak. Would she ever hear him speak?

"He's a senior," Chloe continued quietly, although there was no mistaking the excitement in her tone. "I just knew it!"

"Miss Benedict," the stern voice of their history teacher, John Martino, boomed from the head of the room. "Is there something you'd like to share with the rest of the class?"

Chloe's face turned a deep shade of red. "No, Mr. Martino. Sorry."

Kate hid a smile, ducking her head to stare at the history book open on her desk.

Mr. Martino began talking again, this time about the particulars of the Civil War. Kate groaned inwardly. She was counting the seconds until the bell freed her from the tedious ramblings of Mr. Martino, who always waxed prophetic when it came to the Civil War. The man was truly obsessed, often ignoring other momentous events in American history in the process.

She forced herself to pay attention, however, as her quest to obtain good grades also extended to Mr. Martino's class. Every once in awhile her mind wandered back to Kirk Lester, replaying the moment in time when he glanced at her in the hallway. Their all-too-brief connection made her shiver inside - not from fear, but rather anticipation. She knew she could easily draw him in, but it was suddenly important to her that he show his interest by natural means. *The old-fashioned way*, as her mother would say.

She was bound to see Kirk again since they attended the same school, but she was uncertain it would ever amount to more than a casual passing in the halls. Why *should* there be anything more? He probably drew girls to him like bees to honey, what with all his confident swagger and pale good looks. Kate felt she was just another face among many,

doubting he would ever see her in a singular light. Yet some small, inner voice urged her to hope for more.

She couldn't help herself.

BLOODLUST:**Excerpt from Chapter Three**

THE CAFETERIA AT English High School was bright and airy, with large skylights overhead and leafy greenery winding its way around square columns and clinging to walls. Black-surfaced round tables filled most of the white floor space, although a roped-off buffet line and salad bar encompassed one corner. Other spots held soda and snack machines, along with a massive corkboard tacked with notices about school activities, extracurricular opportunities and tutoring offers.

Kate and Kirk stood in the buffet line together. She was very aware of his physical presence slightly behind her, the aroma of his Grey Flannel cologne filling her senses. She steeled herself to appear unaffected, showing great interest in the various food choices. She eyed the platter of individual pizza slices, opting for pepperoni with a side of green salad. Kirk chose a pre-made ham sandwich, setting their plates on a dark brown tray at the end of the line. His elbow brushed against her arm as he drew his wallet from his back pocket.

She felt as if the breath had been knocked out of her by the inadvertent contact. "I can pay for my own lunch," she murmured in protest.

"Please, allow me." His tone was polite but firm.

She shrugged, allowing him to act the gentleman. Who ever heard of such a thing, especially nowadays? Suddenly, she didn't have the temerity to deny him lest she reveal her own weakness brought upon by his nearness. Her inner thoughts and reactions were no longer making sense, even to her.

They sat at a table near one of the columns, where they had a semblance of privacy. Kate glanced around briefly and noticed other students casting curious, but quick, stares at them.

"I seem to draw attention no matter where I go," Kirk said wryly. "I'm not sure why."

Kate ignored his remark, looking down at her plate. "Where is your friend?" She wanted to know, for lack of anything better to say.

"He's cutting school, although you didn't hear me say that."

"Of course not," she replied, looking up to meet his eyes. She swallowed, feeling the dryness in her throat. "By the way, who is he? I've never him before, not until the other day."

"Really, Kate? You want to talk about my friend?" He sounded surprised, but took her question in stride.

"Sure. Why not?"

Kirk took a healthy bite of his ham sandwich, chewing as he watched her. After a few seconds, he said: "I met him a few years ago at Burke High. Despite what you may think, he's a good guy."

Kate felt a stab of annoyance. "I don't recall stating my opinion about your friend, one way or another."

"*Touché.*" He cocked his head slightly. "Calm down, Katie. I can feel your hackles rising from here. Most people, fellow students included, assume my friend is a criminal illiterate, that he belongs to a gang. Nothing could be further from the truth."

Kate took a quick bite of her pizza slice. "I'm listening."

"Ricchio," he said bluntly. "His name is Ando Ricchio."

"Ando?" she asked, curious.

"Yes. Ando is short for Antonio."

"Close-knit Italian," she observed casually. "Like I said, I've never seen or heard of him before the other day."

"Stands to reason, doesn't it?" Kirk said lightly. "You never heard of *me* before, either. Not until a few days ago." He paused. "And yes, Ando comes from a close-knit Italian family."

She blushed slightly. "I don't mean to be so nosy," she told him with some hesitation. "I'm just trying to get to know you."

"No problem," he replied shortly, his dark eyes unreadable.

"Why did you transfer to English High?" she queried, watching him as she chewed another bite of pizza.

"My father rented a new house in the area," he said, his tone of voice suddenly turning cold. "He was hired as a community organizer for Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development."

"Impressive," Kate noted. "Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

He shook his head. "Not anymore. My mother and little sister Kelly died in a car accident about five years ago."

She was immediately contrite. "I'm sorry, Kirk. I didn't mean to pry so deep."

He stared at her for a long moment, and then said softly: "That's the first time you said my name aloud."

She was startled. "Well, yes, I suppose you're right."

"I like it."

His words flustered her, but she didn't know what to say in return. She looked down at her food again.

"What about you?" he continued.

She glanced back at him, his regard giving her stomach an electric jolt. "Me?"

"What's your story?" he asked as he took another bite of his sandwich. His tone had lightened considerably, the coldness now gone.

She took a stab at her salad with her fork, lowering her eyes as she moved the lettuce around the bowl. "There's nothing unusual about my story. I'm an only child, Chloe Benedict is my best friend and unlike most kids my age, I get along very well with my parents." She gathered the courage to raise her eyes again. "I've lived in the same house on South Street my entire life. But then you knew that, didn't you?"

Kirk returned her stare without flinching. "I'm not going to apologize for standing in front of your house last night. I know you saw me."

"Why were you there?"

"Out of curiosity," he replied nonchalantly. "I wanted to see where you lived."

"But how did you know where I live?" she persisted.

He smiled at her, giving the barest wink. "You do realize Jamaica Plain issues phone books every year, right? It wasn't hard to guess which Grady family you belonged to."

"Oh," she said faintly, unable to ignore the slight alarm going off in her head. *Why would he go to such lengths just to see where she lived?*

"I'm not stalking you, if that's what you're thinking."

"Then why go to all the trouble?" Her voice trailed off as she met his eyes.

"I told you – I was curious." He pushed his plate away, the half-eaten ham sandwich ignored. He leaned forward slightly, lowering his voice as he continued. "Let's not play games, Katie. I liked you the minute I saw you in the hallway a few days ago. I had a sense you felt the same way, so I wanted to find a way to get to know you. Does it really matter how I went about getting your attention?"

She felt lighter of spirit at once. A smile crept its way onto her lips. "Fair enough." She set her fork on the table. "What do you like to do for fun?"

He returned her smile. "I have a variety of hobbies, actually, but I'm not sure you'd be interested in any of them."

"Try me," she urged.

"Music," he offered. "I like listening to music, all sorts of music. I like writing poetry. I play basketball with Ando on weekends."

"You write poetry?"

"Sometimes, but it's not flowery or pretty."

"I'd like to read it."

Kirk laughed. *She was mesmerized by the whiteness of his teeth, the beauty of his lips.* "I can quote you one now, if you'd like."

She brightened. "Please do."

"It's called *A Brief Moment*," he told her. Then he began the poem, his tone low and his eyes never leaving her face:

So you see.

This is me!

Free! Free!

They are.

Let it be

and they will

see.

A breath of

fresh air.

*After the dark
holes.
Inhale all of this
and pray for their
souls.*

Kate regarded Kirk across the table. "You're right," she admitted frankly. "It's not flowery or pretty, but it's good just the same. I'd love to hear more."

He grinned. "Thank you for that opening, Katie. How would you like to go out tonight? I can bring along my poems and let you read them."

"That was clever."

"I know."

"Where can we go to read poems?"

"The Ten Tables Restaurant on Centre Street," Kirk replied quickly. "We can have dinner and you can read my poems."

"I can't stay out too late," she warned him.

"No problem. I'll pick you up around six o'clock."

Kate smirked. "You do realize you'll have to meet my parents, don't you?"

He crossed his heart with his forefinger. "Don't worry, I'll be on my best behavior."

Kate wondered fleetingly what her parents would think about Kirk's dagger earring. Noel and Pim Grady were accustomed to their daughter's taste in clothes and accessories, so perhaps Kirk's unusual piece of jewelry wouldn't be too much of a jolt.

The five-minute warning bell sounded. Kirk and Kate stared at one another for a brief moment, both of them attempting to veil their inner thoughts – and they both knew it.

They rose from the table simultaneously, gathering their plates.

"See you tonight, then?" he asked softly.

"See you tonight."

BLOODLUST:**Excerpt from Chapter Four**

THE LESTER HOME was located on Chestnut Avenue, which was halfway between Jamaica Plain and Roxbury Crossing. The three-story, narrow blue-clapboard house was a scant distance off the street, with a short stoop leading to the front porch. While the Victorian row house was rather modest, it appeared well-kept. The small front yard was also well-tended. Kate could see several clusters of bluebells planted next to the entry steps, and all around the sides of the house. While most of the flowers had toned down for the season, random bluebell remnants could be seen in the fading light.

Somewhat nervous about meeting Kirk's father, and wanting to make a good impression, Kate toned down her typical Goth attire by wearing a simple black skirt, falling just above the knee, long black boots and a creamy white poet blouse.

Her first sight of Kendrick Lester came seconds after Kirk parked his car in front of the house. Kendrick opened the front door, smiling broadly as she and Kirk stepped onto the porch. As his eyes settled on her, Kate noticed the slight gap between his two front teeth. Kirk's father was tall and slender, his hair the same wheat-color as his son's although thinning on top. He also had the same pale skin, with watery blue eyes unlike Kirk and soft crinkles at the corners of his mouth.

"You must be Kate," he said genially, extending his hand. He had the barest hint of an English accent. "I'm Kirk's father, but please call me Ken."

Kate smiled, returning the handshake. Ken's skin was soft and pliant, as if he did very little physical labor with them. They were also somewhat clammy and cool to the touch. She felt an almost instantaneous distaste toward him, but managed to conceal it. "I'm happy to meet you," Kate said politely, withdrawing her hand slowly as not to draw attention to her inner revulsion.

Ken shot a glance at his son. "Come inside, the pair of you." He stepped aside as Kirk touched the small of Kate's back, guiding her through the front door.

Kate felt as if she had been transported back in time. While outwardly tidy, the décor of the house was decidedly from the 1970s. A sunken living room appeared to the right of the front hallway, which held green shag carpet with worn, brown leather furniture and chipped wood end tables. The hallway and living room had an aura of staleness, as if fresh air had not been allowed inside for years. Kate could also smell the faint aroma of food cooking – hamburger and beans, perhaps?

"Don't mind the look," Kirk whispered in her ear, his tone light. "My father is forever stuck in 1977, the year he left his native England to come to Massachusetts. The English are a quirky lot."

They followed Ken into the kitchen, which was separated from the living room by a long counter with tall, orange-cushioned barstools.

"I'm cooking my famous chili and cornbread," Ken announced as he stepped toward the electric stove. "It's not fancy, but its good eats."

"Sounds wonderful," Kate said quickly. "Can I help you with anything?"

"No, I've got it covered, but thanks anyway."

Kate glanced at Kirk, who had taken a barstool at the counter. She was surprised to see a slight smile on his face as he met her eyes. She had a sense he was relieved she and Ken were enjoying an easy repartee, as if a hurdle had somehow been crossed.

"You have a slight accent," Kate continued as she addressed Ken, but her eyes were still on Kirk. "My father is a former Londoner. Are you from England as well?"

Ken smiled from his position at the stove, appearing pleased Kate had noticed his inflection. "Very quick of you, Kate. I was born in Chester, England. I lived there until I was about twenty or thereabouts, at which time I decided to seek my future in America. Best move I ever made. I met my wife, Ann, at Northeastern University. She was studying at the College of Arts, Media and Design to obtain her masters in architecture, while I was there to get my Bachelor of Science degree in Human Services at the College of Social Sciences and Humanities. We were married shortly before graduation."

Kate returned his smile. "Kirk tells me you are the new community organizer for the JPND. That's quite an accomplishment."

Ken stirred the pot of chili as he replied, not looking at her. "My previous job was as administrator for East End Community Center in Cambridge, which helps kids from under-resourced families with academic achievement, and the often tricky transition from childhood to being a responsible adult. I worked there for many years. However, I'm probably most proud of my current job. My specialty is low income, single mothers with children. I'm able to help people in real time, and very often get to see the end results."

Kate kept her eyes on Kirk, thrilled to her core when he winked at her. She was engaging his father, and he was pleased about it.

"Kirk tells me he met you on his first day at English High," Ken said, glancing over his shoulder at her.

"Yes," Kate replied, her eyes still on Kirk. He smiled, his eyes unreadable but somehow filling her with warmth.

"Kirk wasn't happy about the transfer from Burke High to English," Ken continued. "But now Kirk doesn't seem to mind so much." He chuckled. "And I can see why. You are very beautiful, Kate."

She felt uncomfortable all of a sudden, made uneasy by Ken Lester's remark - however innocent - about her appearance. Even Kirk's reassuring repeat wink did not allay her disquiet.

"Thank you," she replied politely.

"Set some bowls on the table, will you Kirk?" Ken asked his son. "Dinner is almost ready."

"Sure thing, Dad."

Kate watched Kirk move around the kitchen with graceful familiarity, taking three glass bowls from a cupboard next to the sink, and bringing out three spoons from a drawer. He looked at her. "Want hot sauce with your chili?"

"Yes, please," Kate told him, smiling. The appreciative light in her blue eyes centered on him, and every move he made, and did not diminish as he went about mundane tasks. Everything he did captivated her, and held her attention. It did not occur to her to think twice about it.

Kirk placed the bowls and spoons on the kitchen table, and then came to stand next to her. He lowered his head and brushed his lips against her ear. "I just knew you were a spicy girl," he whispered.

Kate drew in her breath. The comment thrilled and slightly alarmed her at the same time. She wanted to hear Kirk say such things to her, but not in front of his father. She felt it should be private, just between them. She glanced toward the stove and saw Ken watching them, paused momentarily in his chore of stirring the pot of chili. His eyes had almost become hooded, observing her and his son intently, his mouth nearly slack.

She was thoroughly repulsed, and found it difficult to conceal her disgust. Why would Ken stare at her - or rather the interaction between her and Kirk - with such avid interest? There was something unwholesome about it, but she was unable to put her finger on the reason why. It was an instinctive red flag that she was trying to ignore for Kirk's sake, but she was unable to stop her mental retreat from the seemingly innocuous Ken Lester.

Kirk appeared to sense her withdrawal, verbally nudging his father to break the mood. "Let's dish up dinner, shall we?"

His son's comment broke the unknown spell Ken seemed to be under, as intended. He smiled affably, bringing the pot to the table and ladling steaming chili into the bowls, and then retrieved a glass dish of cornbread from the oven. Kate watched as he took a knife from a tan-colored butcher's block on the counter, deftly cutting the cornbread into squares. Her eyes focused on the knife momentarily, taking in the uniquely colored splotched handle and gray-black swirled blade. He brought the pan of cornbread to the table, smiling. "Dig in, and enjoy."

The threesome ate quietly, their spoons clacking against the glass bowls. Kate was sitting between Kirk and his father at the table, highly aware of Kirk's presence but avoiding eye contact with Ken.

His mood seemed unaffected. "Help yourself to more, there's plenty."

"None for me, thanks," Kate responded without looking at Ken. "The chili was delicious, and very filling."

"No room for dessert, huh?" Ken asked, flashing her a smile. "I brought home a carrot cake from Wegmans market."

"Maybe later," Kate told him, her glance going to Kirk.

He was staring at her intently, as if every word she uttered was of vast importance. She was suddenly assailed by his fierce sense of concentration on her. Rather than causing alarm, as it had done with his father, Kirk's regard of her filled her with an elation she found difficult to comprehend. But it was there, and it was resolute.

Forcing herself to address Ken, she reluctantly turned her eyes from Kirk and spoke. "Can I help you tidy the kitchen?"

Ken shook his head. "No, dearie. I'll take care of it. You two go ahead to the living room. I'll join you shortly."

Kirk and Kate repaired to the living room. He held her hand as they sat closely together on the couch.

"Thank you for being a good sport," he told her, keeping his tone low and even as sounds of Ken cleaning the kitchen came muted in the background.

Kate smiled. "Not a problem. Your father seems to be a nice man. You've met my parents, yes, but I'm sure they'll want to sit you down and grill you before too long."

He chuckled, squeezing her hand. "No worries. I think I can handle the third degree."

Their knees knocked together as they sat on the couch. It felt electric to Kate, the mere pressure from his flesh and bones making her catch her breath, almost as if in anticipation. He stared at her, their eyes meeting and holding. She knew, without words, that he felt the same way.

Ken chose that moment to join them, taking a chair across the coffee table so that he faced them. He took note of his son and Kate holding hands, seemingly unconcerned. "Tell me, Kate. What do your parents do for a living?"

Kate glanced at Ken, taking in his affable expression. He was just trying to make conversation, or giving the appearance of doing so. Yet there remained a nagging doubt in the back of her mind. The more time she spent in his company, however miniscule it was, increased her instinctive feeling that he was not genuine.

For Kirk's sake, she kept her voice light, hoping she convinced him all was well. "My mother runs her own employment agency, called Better Letters, and my father is a senior engineer at Nordic Petroleum."

Ken gave a low whistle. "Wow, that's impressive."

Kate watched Ken as he spoke, noticing his eyes slip to her bare knees, the skin exposed but separated by her black skirt and boots. It was a brief instant, so she wasn't sure if she imagined it. His gaze went between her knees, and he quickly licked his lips before returning his eyes to her face.

Kate's mouth was frozen into a smile. She did not know what to say, but her mind was running riot. Kirk's father - a respected community organizer for Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development - had looked upon her in sexual appreciation, and she knew it. How she came to the realization was a mystery, but she was certain of it. Kirk squeezed her hand again.

She glanced at Kirk, the smile still frozen on her face. He crooked his lips, running his tongue along the lower protrusion. *Like father, like son?*

Kate suddenly felt hot all over. Her skin was on fire, as if she had a fever, and it was spreading throughout her body. Her head was light, almost faint, and her eyes began to burn slightly. "*What is happening to me?*" she thought in a panic.

She saw Kirk watching her, but she couldn't speak. She wanted to ask him what was wrong, but she could not form the words.

It was then that Ken spoke again, his voice low and urgent, his dialog directed at Kirk.

"I want to eat her until she's dripping wet and oozing, and then I want to suck her dry while I pinch and bite her nipples. I want to stick my finger in her, and then have her lick me." He moaned loudly, leaning forward in his chair. "Oh God, Kirk, she's just too delectable for words, your darling little Kate. I want both of us to do her at the same time, with her on top of me and you taking her from behind. I want to see your big dick go in and out of her, and I want to see her pretty titties swinging in my face. Then I want her to sit on my face so I can lick her as you ram into her . . ."

"Dad . . ." Kirk's voice was hesitant. "Not with Kate, please. Not like the others."

"Especially with Kate," Ken's voice was thick. "Because she means so much to you."

"Exactly," Kirk's voice pleaded. "Which is why I want you to leave her alone."

Kate felt bile rising in her throat as father and son conversed, as if they were talking about the weather. A nasty taste of spicy chili and gritty cornbread filled the cavern of her mouth, and her eyes grew large as she realized there was no stopping it. She glanced at Kirk uncertainly, but he wasn't looking at her. He had let go of her hand, and was glaring at his father. She tried to say his name, to tell him she was going to be sick, but no words came. Instead, she leaned forward slightly and proceeded to vomit all over herself, and onto the floor.

Kirk instantly returned his attention to her, alarm flooding his features, his dark eyes regarding her with concern. "What's wrong, Katie? Oh God, Kate, are you okay?"

"Sick," she finally managed to whisper, shameful tears filling her eyes. "I'm sorry . . ."

"Let me help you," he insisted, scooting closer to her. "Let me take you upstairs and get you cleaned up."

Her eyes went to Ken Lester. He was staring at her, a faint look of disgust on his face.

"Sorry," she whispered again.

"Don't you worry about it," Ken's voice took on a concerned tone as his appalled regard faded. "It's okay, dearie. Perhaps my chili was a bit too spicy for your tummy."

Kirk helped her to her feet. She looked down at her creamy white poet shirt, now covered in rust-colored vomit. She winced.

The stairway, located near the front door, sloped at a steep angle to the second floor of the house. Kirk helped Kate up the stairs slowly, a firm grip on her elbow. They came to a landing, which led to a long, dark hallway. Kate turned and looked to the bottom of the

staircase. Ken stood there, hands in his trouser pockets as he stared at her, expressionless. She felt a shiver go up her spine, and then looked away from him.

Kirk flipped on a light switch on the wall, flooding the hallway with light. Kate noticed the hardwood floor, its dullness partially covered by a rug runner that was darkly floral in design. His bedroom was the first door to the right, next to which was a large bathroom. He led her inside, where Kate noticed the yellow painted walls, white bathtub and shower, and an off-white shower curtain. A pile of dirty clothes, mostly blue jeans, shirts and stockings, littered the floor.

Her head was clearing somewhat, but she still felt queasy. Kirk seemed to tower over her as he glanced down. She placed her small hand on his chest. "I'm sorry I threw up in your living room," she apologized tremulously. "It came over me all of a sudden. I'm not sure why or how it happened."

"Your welfare is my primary concern," he told her gently. "Let me take care of you, okay? First, take off your blouse so I can clean it."

Kate stared at him, uncertain.

Kirk rolled his eyes. "Katie, I'm not going to take advantage of you. I just want to clean your blouse. You can wear one of my old shirts while it dries."

He bent down and rummaged through the pile of clothes on the floor, a few seconds later producing a black tee-shirt with short sleeves. "I only wore this once," he said, handing it to her and turning his back.

She slipped out of her blouse, grimacing in distaste as a small mound of vomit fell to the floor. She donned his shirt quickly, pulling it over her head and smoothing her hair with one hand. The shirt was several sizes too large for her, but she felt a pleasant coziness in wearing a piece of Kirk's clothing. She liked the feel of it against her skin. It smelled like him - a faint hint of Gray Flannel and cigarettes - giving her a sudden lurch of desire for him in the pit of her stomach. She caught a glance of herself in the small, round mirror over the sink, and gasped aloud.

She was deathly white, a stark contrast against the black tee-shirt. Her eyeliner had smudged, creating a circular rim around both of her eyes, giving her a sunken - and somehow haunting - ghostly appearance.

Kirk turned to face her again, drawing in his breath. He stared at her. "You're beautiful," he said simply, as if in awe. He reached out and touched her face gently, brushing a stray blonde tendril away from her cheek.

She returned his stare, their gazes locking for several long moments. Then he seemed to shake himself, bending down to retrieve her poet shirt from the floor. He placed it on the bathtub, and then began running cold water over the fabric.

Kate watched him, a slight smile forming her lips. "How do you know to run cold water over clothes to remove stains?"

He glanced over his shoulder at her, a lopsided grin on his face. "It must be something I learned from my mother a long time ago, or maybe my grandmother taught

me." He shrugged. "My father isn't too proficient at laundry, so I usually end up washing our clothes every week."

"Where's your grandmother now?" Kate wanted to know.

"She died years ago," he replied as he swished her shirt around in the cold water. "She used to come over from England every year to visit us. She was a stern character for the most part, but she also had a quirky, humorous side. She liked to write poetry."

"She must be where you inherited your talent," Kate noted.

"Could be," he agreed, standing from the tub. "Her name was Elizabeth Lester. I still have some of her poetry notebooks in my bedroom."

"I'd like to see some of it."

"Maybe I'll show them to you one day."

Kate regarded Kirk with thoughtful eyes. "I'm not sure what caused me to get sick tonight, but I assure you it's not a regular thing with me."

"Dad's chili is a bit spicy. If you're not used to it like I am, it can pack a wallop."

"I feel better already," she admitted. "Thank you."

"Let's get your blouse rinsed and dried, and then I can take you home."

"Okay." She felt uncertain again. *Was he anxious to be rid of her?*

He seemed to know what she was thinking. "I'm not trying to get rid of you, Katie. You were just sick, for whatever reason, and you need to rest."

He rinsed her shirt in the bathtub, and then stepped into the hallway. He pulled open a double accordion door, revealing a white washer and dryer set. He threw her shirt into the dryer and turned it on.

"Your shirt should be dry in about twenty minutes," he told her. "In the meantime, would you like to see my room?"

"Sure. I'd like that."

Surprisingly, Kirk's bedroom was tidy and ordered. A double bed was neatly made, covered in a dark red comforter, which was surrounded by two end tables with lamps. A small desk with a chair adorned one corner of the room, a computer on its surface. The walls were nearly devoid, a closet door painted dark red dividing the otherwise white room. A lone portrait of a medieval knight astride a horse rested above his desk. The knight in the painting was wielding a sword, his fierce, dark eyes glaring from underneath his helmet.

"Nice picture," she noted.

"I like medieval stuff, along with certain styles of the old west," he informed her, flashing a grin. "Although I wouldn't be caught dead in a cowboy hat."

Kate laughed. "I can't picture you in one, either."

He stepped closer to her, placing his hands on her bare arms. Their eyes met, and Kate felt herself carried away by the electrified contact. He made her feel weightless in her own body, every nerve ending alive and reaching for fulfillment. It was as if she craved his touch, and only became truly alive when he complied.

But it did not render her senseless. Her brow creased with a jolting memory, clouding her eyes and causing her pause.

"What is it?" he asked her.

"Your father," she replied haltingly. "He said some strange things while we were in the living room."

Kirk appeared puzzled. "Strange things? Like what?" He shook his head. "All he did was ask you what your parents did for a living. Shortly thereafter, you puked."

Kate looked away from him. *He was lying to her.* She could feel it, instinctively. She knew what she heard his father say. Dirty, despicable things. For the first time, she felt herself draw away from Kirk. *Why was he lying to her?*

"You're probably right," she murmured. "I was feeling sick, not thinking straight."

"I'm sure, but you're better now."

Why wasn't he asking her what she thought she heard Ken say? It gave her more pause.

"I'm feeling light-headed again," she said quickly. "I think I should go home."

He stared at her, and she wondered - not for the first time - if he was reading her mind. "Whatever you say, Katie. Let me get your shirt from the dryer."

"Thank you."

Kirk gave her privacy to change her shirt, turning his back again as she pulled off his tee-shirt and slipped into her now-clean poet blouse.

They were quiet as they made their way down the stairs, Kirk holding her elbow as they began their descent. She saw Ken at the bottom of the stairway, watching them as they reached the first floor.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Kate's fine," Kirk told his father. "But I'm taking her home so she can get some rest."

Kate forced herself to look at Ken. "Thank you so much for dinner, and I'm sorry I ruined it by getting sick."

Ken stepped forward, placing his hand on Kate's arm. "Don't you worry about it, dearie. We're all good here. You just feel better, okay? And I look forward to seeing you again."

Kate fought the urge to physically remove his hand from her arm. She felt the skin at her temples tightening as she regarded his touch, her pupils dilating slightly as she became still, almost statuesque. Loathing for Ken Lester coursed through her mind and body. She knew if she didn't leave soon, she would no longer be able to hide it.

She was surprised when Ken suddenly removed the offending hand of his own volition, his eyes going round as he gazed at her. Was she imagining it, or had she seen a brief flash of fear in his face?

Kate gave Kirk's father a tight smile. "Until next time, then?"

"Yes," he replied, his eyes back on her face. "Take care, dearie."

"And you as well," she said softly.

BLOODLUST:**Excerpt from Chapter Eleven**

KATE SKIPPED HER study hall period on Thursday in order to leave school premises for a full hour at lunchtime. She walked the half-mile to Centre Street, where East Boston Savings Bank was located. The red-brick building resembled a moderate-sized house with white trim and tall windows, and it was where Kate had kept a savings account in her name since she was one year old. Her parents had opened the account after the death of Noel's mother, June Gatsby, who had left her daughter a \$100,000 life insurance policy.

Aside from using part of the money for June's burial expenses, and the odd furniture or appliance purchase here and there, Noel and Pim had not touched the money. They wanted it to be for Kate, to use for her college education and other related expenses. Kate rarely withdrew money from the account, and then only in small amounts to use for clothing, or special purchases for her parents on their birthdays and at Christmas. Otherwise, the bank account was the farthest thing from her mind. She wanted for nothing, so it rarely occurred to her that she had it to spend, if she so chose.

Kate didn't dare withdraw an overly-large sum of money for fear the bank might notify her parents, but she needed a good chunk to see her and Kirk through the next several months. She had no idea how much money Kirk was bringing with him. She regretted not discussing it with him in more depth, because now it was crunch time and she wasn't sure what to do.

She asked the teller to verify her balance after showing her the proper identification - her driver's license and bank card - which was something she hadn't done in a long while. She hid her surprise when she saw the balance on the teller's computer screen:

\$102,691.22.

Even with the paltry amounts spent by her parents and herself, such as June's burial, home-related expenses and gifts, interest had been accruing on the balance for nearly seventeen years. Still, she was stunned by the remaining money left at her disposal.

Kate smiled at the teller, a plumpish twenty-something woman in a navy skirt and white blouse, bearing the name tag "Jenny Palmentere."

"I'd like to make a withdrawal," Kate told the woman. "There's something very special I want to get my parents for Christmas, so I'm trying to keep this hush-hush. Can you help me?"

Jenny smiled in return, brushing her shoulder-length auburn hair from her shoulder. "Sure, I can help you. I see your account is also accessible by your parents." She paused. "Pim and Noel Grady are your parents, right?"

"Correct."

"How much money are you looking to withdraw?" the teller asked.

Kate blurted out an amount, a stab in the dark because she had no clue what to really ask for. "Ten thousand dollars." She felt the heat rising in her body, forcing her to

clutch her hands into fists, which remained unseen by the teller because of the counter separating them.

Jenny's dark-brown eyes went wide. "Oh," she said in a small voice. "I might have to get approval from my supervisor for that much."

Kate grew still, staring at the bank teller. She was new to the talent she had, of persuading people to her will, but it came back to her in that instant. It seemed to rear its head when she needed it, and she desperately needed it now. She felt her fingers clenching and unclenching, and saw Jenny begin to perspire slightly, looking uncomfortable as she shifted on her feet behind the counter.

"Surely we don't need your supervisor," Kate said slowly, her head tilted down slightly and her eyes focused on the teller. "You can, and you will, delay the reporting of this to my parents until Monday, right?" She smiled serenely. "It's Christmas, after all, and I want to get them a very special gift. I don't want them knowing about my account withdrawal until *after* they receive the present."

Jenny blinked, a look of confusion crossing her face. Kate clenched her hands again, feeling the heat radiate from her body. Jenny suddenly took a turn, as if the will being enforced upon her had finally taken affect.

"Certainly," Jenny murmured, her voice in monotone as she responded to Kate's intense stare. "I think it can be arranged."

"Good."

"How would you like the bills, Miss Grady?"

"In twenties, and hundreds." Kate smiled brightly. "Thank you, Jenny."

"You're very welcome."

After the teller counted out the bills, Kate opened her backpack and placed the money deep into the bottom, underneath her macroeconomics textbook. She felt the heat leaving her body as the projection completed its cycle. She glanced at Jenny, finding her with a fixed smile on her face, but with no alarm or realization evident in her eyes. To the bank teller, she had just completed any normal transaction with the average customer walking through the door. As it should be.

"I hope you have a Merry Christmas, Jenny," Kate said in parting. "And a happy new year."

"Same to you, Miss Grady. And have a nice day."

* * *

KATE RETIRED EARLY that night, on the pretense she had a book report to write for her literature and composition class, the subject matter being *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. Kate had already finished reading the book weeks ago for pleasure, but her teacher had not required a report about it. She had merely used it as a ruse.

In truth, she finished packing essentials into a large duffel bag: toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, assorted cosmetics and hair accessories, her comb and brush, along with a selection of clothes, shoes and scant jewelry: her skull-and-crossbones pewter ring, blackheart ear-studs, a black leather pentagram wristband and her blood-red sacred heart pendant. She pushed the packed duffel bag deep into her closet, placing several pairs of combat boots in front, with a long jacket draped down to block the view.

She then sat on the bed, jotting down all of her cell phone contacts in a small notebook. She might be tossing her phone soon, but Kate wanted to keep her contacts for any new device she and Kirk purchased. She toyed with deleting prospective college contacts, but decided to keep them. When all was said and done, she still wanted to attend college after completing high school, or the equivalent thereof. She had no intention of becoming a permanent drop-out and living her life in poverty and obscurity. She would return to school, and she would obtain her teaching degree. Of that, she was certain.

Next, she drew out a letter-sized piece of paper from her backpack, and took a box of security envelopes from her desk. Then she sat down at her writing desk, her face a mask of concentration as she penned a letter to her best friend.

Dear Chloe,

By the time you read this, I will be far away from here. Please understand this is what I want, and that I am not being forced against my will.

There will probably be heavy fallout after I'm gone, not just my parents but maybe the police as well. I want to apologize in advance for any heartache this may cause you, and I hope you forgive me someday. I've kept you in the dark about my plans for this very reason.

Please know that I'm happy, and I'm doing exactly what I want in order to obtain the life I want.

I hope we can resume our friendship when I return someday. It has always meant so much to me, but I will understand if you decide to have nothing more to do with me.

Please take care, Chloe, and remember me in your thoughts.

Love, Kate.

She folded the letter twice and slid it into a security envelope, and then sealed and addressed it. She would drop it in a mailbox before leaving in the morning. She set the envelope aside.

Kate then began to write a letter to her parents, which she would leave on her pillow just before leaving to meet Kirk in the morning. Her face and eyes were heavy with sadness as her pen flew across the page.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I'm sure you are angry and upset as you read this or, if not, you will be after finishing my words to you.

I have taken control of my own life. Whether you choose to accept it or not, I am a woman, no longer a child, and ready to forge out on my own. I would have rather stayed in Boston to be near you, but your restrictions made such a thing impossible for me.

Kirk and I will be together, which is the bottom line. We love each other unconditionally. It isn't a crush, or a fling, but a lifelong commitment of love. You can learn to accept it one day, or not. It's up to you.

I would prefer to remain part of your lives because I love you both very dearly. You will never know how grateful I am for the life you have given me, for the love and support you have shown me until now. However, Kirk is also an important part of that, and his presence in my life is non-negotiable. Without him, I cannot see a way of remaining part of your lives as a family unit.

Please don't worry overmuch. Kirk will take very good care of me. We will return to Boston during the summer of next year. At that time, it will be up to you if you want to remain part of my life or not.

Our choice has been made, so please don't waste too much time trying to find us. You will not succeed. We've told no one of our plans, including Chloe or even Kirk's father. They know nothing of our location, or the events that will lead up to it, so please don't put them on the rack for something they have no knowledge of.

I love you both so much.

Kate.

She folded the letter and placed it in an envelope, setting it aside.

Kate stood from her desk, slowly pushing the chair in. She looked around her room, taking in the familiarity and security of her surroundings. The slanted eaves, the creamy-white walls, dark Gothic posters, the pewter baby rattle given to her by Judge Edward Minot and his late wife Miriam at her christening, which was mounted over her double bed with a framed portrait of Pim, Noel, Kate as a baby and her late grandmother, June Gatsby. The bookshelf containing all of the books she loved so well, but might not ever see again. Her bedroom had been her peaceful sanctuary. She realized, with only a speck of regret, that tonight would probably be the last time she would ever spend in its environs as a single woman.

A small part of her knew she would miss her life as Pim and Noel Grady's daughter. She would miss her routine, school and her social life. But she was trading it for something far more important.

A life with Kirk Lester, of her own choosing. She felt entitled and capable of making her own decisions, and was willing to accept the consequences from this day forward.

The die was cast.

* * *

KEN LESTER SAT in his living room early Friday evening, sipping a cold beer as he waited for all hell to break loose. He was secure in the knowledge that Kirk and Kate were on their way to their destiny. He hadn't heard a word from his son yet, but by

prearrangement, contact would only be made via disposable cell phones and trusted intermediaries, determined well in advance.

The effort to get it all accomplished was considerable, costing Ken several of his serious, long-held favors. Helping his son was paramount, but it wasn't the only driving force behind his push to achieve the seemingly impossible.

He now had leverage over both Kirk and his Katie. He possessed a card to play when the mood struck him, which he predicted would occur after they returned to Boston following their wedding and extended hiatus. He would offer them shelter in his home, yet another boon. He would have Kate right where he wanted her - under his roof, and easier to manipulate.

And what was it about Kate Grady, he wondered - soon to be his daughter-in-law - that drew him so powerfully? Her beauty was a magnet, for sure, as was her obvious intelligence. Her role as Kirk's girlfriend to wife was another factor in Ken's mind. It was an alluring temptation into a taboo world he knew he could not resist.

Then there was her "special" gift, as described to him by Kirk. Ken could see benefitting from her abilities in the future if they proved to be real, and he was not one to allow an opportunity to pass him by without reaching out to take advantage.

Life was indeed just about to come up roses, of that he was certain. And Katie was the ultimate prize at the end of the rainbow, the proverbial rose amongst the thorns.

BLOODLUST:

Excerpt from Chapter Fifteen

KATE AWOKE A few hours later. She lay on her back in the bed, hearing the sounds of rain hitting the window pane, and Kirk's light snoring. It was quiet otherwise, lulling her into a sense of security.

She rose from the bed slowly, so as not to awaken her husband. She smiled to herself. Using the term "husband" was new to her, but she was fast growing accustomed to it, and found she rather liked it. She loved every minute of being married to Kirk Lester so far, adoring every second of every day as his wife.

Kate went to the dresser and pulled out a pair of black jeans and dark blue sweater shirt. She ran her hands through her long hair and, still in her stocking feet, made her way downstairs.

As she reached the bottom of the steps, she heard the cookery noises coming from the back of the cottage, as if someone was moving around pots and pans, so she went along the narrow hallway located next to the staircase. She inhaled deeply, her nose filling with the aromas of baking poultry and steaming green vegetables. She realized she was hungry again, so her step quickened.

Kate stood in the doorway of the kitchen, a half-smile coming to her face as she saw Maura facing an antique stove, stirring the steaming contents of a tall, silver pot. Kate gazed at the stove, not sure if he had seen anything like it ever before. It was white and black cast iron, with an overhanging hood element and flat stove surface. The word "Barstow" was etched on the rounded oven door in flowing Edwardian script, its handle a shiny silver. On either side of the stove was a copper storage tank, and a cast iron water heater. The appliance filled the kitchen with an almost uncomfortable warmth, but mingled with the smells of cooking food, was somehow irresistible.

She let her eyes take in the remainder of the cozy kitchen. The floor was a shiny, dark hardwood with colorful throw rugs scattered here and there. A large, round oak table adorned the middle of the room, the centerpiece being a bundle of dried autumn and winter flowers - including daisies, jasmine, pansies, English primrose and viola - surrounded by four chairs with cushions, done in dark red and white patterns for the season.

The back of the room had a long counter space, with a window above the deep double sink that overlooked the rear garden. One side of the room had more counter space and cupboards, with a white washer and dryer flush against the cabinets, which was alongside a small, white refrigerator. Kate shook her head, wondering why Maura had such a tiny fridge when all else was custom-sized.

To the left side of the room, covering the entire wall, were rows upon rows of small cubby holes with tiny sliding glass doors. Each cubby seemed to blend into the dark wood wall, recessed slightly to maximize the space. Kate could see white horizontal labels affixed

to the glass doors, with handwriting on each. To the side of the cubbies was a small, tin black box with a shimmering blue-white moon adorning the lid.

"You're admiring my herb and spice collection?" Maura's kind voice startled Kate from her quiet observations.

Kate blushed at being caught out, and then turned to Maura, who had come to stand next to her.

"Is that what the cubby holes are for?" Kate wanted to know. "I was wondering about that. The storage is so unique. Did you have it specially built?"

"This cottage is nearly two hundred years old," Maura replied. "When I bought it back in 1963, the cubby hole storage was already in place. The prior occupant was a practicing witch, and she kept all of her herb mixes here in the kitchen. I have to admit, I was fascinated and it was one of the main reasons I decided to buy the place. That, and it was so close to my flower shop."

"A witch used to live here?" Kate asked, surprise written on her face.

Maura nodded, a slight smile playing about her lips. "Yes, indeed. Her name was Marigold Meriwether. She was as old as the hills, and just a tiny little thing with long, flowing silver hair. She lived here with her four cats, and spent her time concocting herbal remedies for various medical conditions and spice mixtures for different times of life. I heard she used to have weekly meetings in the cottage for like-minded women - and some men - who were interested in the wiccan way of life. She lived to be over one hundred years old, I believe. She died right here in the cottage, sitting in her favorite chair in the living room." She waved her hand in the direction of the cubby wall. "I've been making my own herb and spice blends for years, since I was a young girl actually, so this set-up was absolutely perfect for me."

"It's very impressive," Kate stated. "And the history behind it is fascinating."

"Thank you." Maura stared at Kate. "Did you get enough rest, dearie?"

Kate nodded. "I'm good for now. Kirk was still sleeping, so I let him be."

"I'm working on dinner," Maura said as she returned to the stove. "We're having baked chicken and steamed green beans. It should be ready in about an hour."

"Can I help with anything?"

"No, dearie. I'm fine." She looked over her shoulder at Kate from her place by the stove. "Feel free to look over my collection some more, if you want."

"Thank you," Kate smiled. "I'm fascinated by it, but not sure why."

"My little cubbies are quite unique, I have to admit."

Kate returned her attention to the wall. She went over to the tin box and opened the lid, seeing a stack of empty cloth pouches, small in size, each with a gold-braided drawstring. "What are these for?" she asked, holding up one of the pouches so Maura could see it.

"I use those to keep my assembled herb and spice mixtures dry," Maura replied.

Kate placed the empty pouch back in to the box and closed the lid. Next, she mentally counted six rows of cubbies on the wall, with eleven cubby holes on each row. Using quick addition in her head, she figured it represented sixty-six cubbies in total. Up close, she saw that each cubby included a semi-frosted sliding door with a protruding handle and label, and inside the muted green-tinted bottles had corkscrew tops, each one also containing a handwritten label. She opened the first cubby on the third row at random, pulling out the small, corked bottle inside.

It contained ground and dried nettle leaves, according to the label.

"What do you use dried nettles for?" Kate asked aloud, highly curious.

"Ground nettle leaves are good for flushing away toxins in the body," Maura responded without turning from the stove. "I sometimes mix it with mandrake root, both of which can be boiled and served just like tea." She chuckled. "Call it crazy, but I've been told the combination is also good for driving out ghostly spirits from your house."

Kate laughed as she uncorked the bottle, taking a whiff of its contents. "It has a faint smell of mint." She winked. "Maybe the ghosts don't like the minty aroma."

"Yes," Maura agreed. "Nettles are also good for allergies and hay fever. When moistened, they can be used as a poultice and placed on the scalp to promote hair growth, or to calm itchy skin during eczema outbreaks. The fresh leaves can also be applied to rheumatic joints to obtain relief from the pain."

"Where do you get the herbs?" Kate asked in wonder as she re-corked the bottle and placed it back into its cubby.

"I grow my own, in the back garden. Once the weather improves, I can show you all of it. Most of them are lying dormant right now because we're in the winter season, but they grow quite plentiful during spring and summer every year, giving me a good supply all year long."

"This is an amazing collection," Kate observed as she turned to face Maura. "Do you use all of it for medicinal purposes?"

Maura shook her head. "I use some of them for cooking, but do admit to using most of them for . . . well, I'm embarrassed to say . . . but I use them for superstitious cure-alls and protections. Silly, isn't it?"

"Not at all," Kate disagreed. "I find it very interesting. How do you know which combinations of herbs and spices to use in producing the cure-alls?"

Using her forefinger, Maura tapped her temple. "It's all up here."

"You should write it down," Kate suggested. "You know, what herb or spice combination produces which result. I'd be glad to help you with it."

"Splendid," Maura said with obvious delight. "I've been meaning to organize it all for many years, but never got around to it. I would greatly appreciate the help."

With a slight smile on her face, Kate set the kitchen table for three, using plates from a cupboard near the sink. "Maybe I should wake Kirk now," she mused. "I'm sure he'll be famished after his long nap."

"You two will be as right as rain after a few days rest," Maura predicted as she removed the pan of baked chicken from the oven. "Young people always spring back quickly."

Kirk joined them presently, his sleepy eyes finding his wife and his face lighting at the sight of her. She went to him, kissing him and placing her arm around his waist. Maura watched them, her smile warm.

As they sat down to the meal, Kate asked more questions about Maura's herb and spice collection.

"When did you start keeping it?"

"As I told you, I've been keeping it together for years. It was something my mother had always done, so me and my sister Elizabeth - your grandmother, Kirk - just carried it on. So, I suppose, I've been doing it my entire life, essentially. Elizabeth lost interest after awhile, but I kept growing my collection and keeping it fresh. Today's display is the result of all those years of care, I'm proud to say."

"Fascinating," Kirk mumbled as he bit into a chicken drumstick.

Kate looked at Maura and rolled her eyes. The older woman chuckled, and then returned her attention to the meal.

Kate smiled as she continued eating. She felt drawn not only to Maura, but to her odd collection of cure-alls as well. Perhaps the first was understandable as Maura was a warm and caring person, so no mystery there, but the fascination for her collection was another thing entirely.

She chalked it down to delaying the inevitable. She knew her parents would be frantic with worry right now, and she didn't want to think about it, did not want to plague her consciousness with feelings of guilt. Part of her still believed the present situation was their fault, although now - with some distance between them - she understood why they had restricted her from seeing Kirk. In a nutshell, Pim and Noel Grady thought their daughter was too young to be seriously involved, and they had fearful reservations about Kirk's father based on dreams had by Noel and Madge Tilley.

In the moment, Kate was happy and content. She would face the underlying reasons for her presence in Chester at another time.

Not now, but later.

BLOODLUST:**Excerpt from Chapter Sixteen**

KATE FORCED HERSELF to stay in bed until nearly noon on New Year's Day. "*Let him stew a little longer,*" she thought grimly about her husband. Rifling through her meager wardrobe, she chose a pair of well-work blue jeans with frayed white holes in the knees, and a dark-blue cambric shirt with mid-section orange ribbing. She ran a brush through her unruly hair, and then bound it into a loose ponytail. She eschewed adding make-up to her face entirely, not in the mood to make a good impression on Kirk. His feeling or thoughts simply didn't matter to her at the moment, on this given day.

She found Kirk in the kitchen with Maura. He sat across the table from her, still dressed in his clothes from the night before, albeit rumpled. A half-eaten piece of toast was on a small plate in front of him, slightly pushed away, along with a cup of tea. He had one arm on the table, and the other bent at the elbow and resting in front of him. His head was lowered, but his eyes sought hers when she entered the kitchen.

Kate ignored him, instead going to the kettle on the stove to prepare herself a cup of tea. Then she turned around, tea cup in hand, and stood rather than sit with Kirk and Maura at the table. She sipped the hot brew carefully, blowing on the amber liquid, but keeping her eyes on the floor.

Maura snuck a furtive glance between Kirk and Kate, shaking her head slightly. "The Albion Inn is open today," she said at length. "What do you say we pop over there and have some lunch? Their fish and chips are decent, and their corned beef hash with gammon and pease pudding is the tops."

Kirk stared at Kate, although his head still lowered.

Kate took a leisurely sip of tea before responding. "I'm not hungry," she finally said flatly.

"You might be once you get there," Maura insisted with a smile. "C'mon, Katie. It'll be fun. My treat, okay?"

"Okay," Kate relented grudgingly. "I'll go."

"Splendid!" Maura beamed. She looked to Kirk across the table. "How about you, dearie? Ready for some old-fashioned English pub food?"

"Yes, I'm in." Kirk's tone was low, almost hard to hear. He did not raise his head.

"Good," Maura said as she rose from the table. "Give me a few minutes to freshen up, and then we can be on our way. I'm simply famished."

After she left the kitchen, Kirk and Kate maintained their positions - he at the table, she standing at the stove.

They stared at each other for several minutes. His eyes were sad, while hers were impassive.

Not a word needed to be spoken.

* * *

THE DAY WAS drizzly and cold, but made bearable by weak sunshine in the sky. The Albion was located on Park Street, only a few blocks away from Maura's cottage, so they made the walk quickly, and mostly in silence. There was little foot traffic today, although cars were plentiful on the road. People were going about their business, or enjoying the holiday that brought with it the new year.

The threesome - with Kirk and Kate on either side of Maura, now avoiding eye contact - took a right on Bridge Street, and then crossed over to Pepper Street. Halfway down, they stopped at the corner of Albion and Park streets. The entrance to the Albion Inn was wedged right onto the corner, the narrow sidewalk in front curling toward the city walls and the Chester Roman Gardens.

Entering the Albion Inn was akin to stepping back in time, reminiscent of the Victoria age. Curios, flags and posters from the World War I era littered the walls. Three rooms inside the inn included a vault, snug and lounge. The dining area was lit solely by gas candlelight, which was soothing to throbbing hangover eyes.

Maura, Kirk and Kate sat in a booth adjacent to the bar and near a high window, with Maura again in the middle. They hadn't been present for more than five minutes when a loud voice drew their attention.

Kate looked toward the bar. Her heart sank when she saw none other than Caden Clarke sitting with two young women. She glanced at Kirk, who was glowering in the man's direction.

"Don't you dare," Kate whispered fiercely across the table, sensing Kirk was about to rise from the booth and approach Caden. "Let me take care of this."

Kirk looked at her, and then nodded curtly.

"Take care of what?" Maura asked. "What's going on?"

"It's that little bugger from the Red Lion I told you about last night," Kate replied lightly. "He's over there, at the bar."

"Oh," Maura replied unhappily. "What are you going to do?"

Kirk snorted, a half-smile on his face. "Watch and see, Auntie."

Kate wasn't truly ready to expose Maura to what she could do, but what was the harm now? She trusted the older woman implicitly, and thankfully she didn't appear to scare easily.

Kate stared at Caden, her face becoming slightly flushed. She focused solely on him, the rest of the room disappearing into her subconscious. Since she no longer had to clench her hands in order to focus, it left her free to completely zero-in on her subject. She realized it was still a learning process to see how far she could stretch her abilities, but she was getting better at it. She felt more in control, which allowed her to push full force or draw back when she put her mind to it. She also realized Caden Clarke had done nothing wrong

and probably didn't deserve what she was about to do to him, yet it was preferable to Kirk creating a scene by confronting the young man.

She continued to stare at Caden, who was unaware of her and Kirk sitting in the booth with Maura. Kate tilted her head to one side. The movement seemed to neutralize the heat in her body, cooling the edges before it could spread out further. Another trick, just learned.

Maura watched Kate, her mouth slightly open. She could feel the heat emanating from the girl, suddenly tempered by the tilt of her head. The older woman swallowed nervously, her throat dry and scratchy. Her apprehension of the unknown was growing, inch by inch.

A nerve twitched in Kate's cheek as her focus on Caden intensified. Suddenly, he loosened the collar of his shirt, his face becoming flushed. He looked uncomfortable, turning his head slightly to the right. The two women sitting on either side of him - one blonde, the other a redhead - watched his movements. They did not appear at all concerned, in fact seemed bored in his company, taking glances at each other behind his back.

Then a look of shock formed on Caden's face. His eyes opened wide and his mouth went slack with panic. He gripped the sides of his stool, as if to anchor himself, but Kate willed him to do otherwise.

Kirk seemed unfazed, while Maura stared at Kate intently. It was as if the young girl was alone in the room, her concentration on Caden unbroken as life went on around her, unknown.

Caden suddenly stood up, his face pouring sweat and his mouth in a downturned line. "No, please!" he uttered, causing the two women next to him to rise from their chairs and step away. Then he looked down at himself, a look of horror mushrooming on his face. His tan khaki trousers were soaking wet in the crotch from urine, apparent to all who could see him.

He turned and hurried away in the direction of the men's room, never seeing Kate or Kirk nearby, or fully comprehending what had just happened to him.

"Good show, Katie," Kirk said proudly, gazing at his wife.

She snapped her fingers. "It was a piece of cake." She gave him a measured glance. "Keep that in mind, Mr. Lester."

"Oh, I will. Always have, in fact," came his cool reply.

Maura looked back and forth between the couple, her expression baffled. "What just happened? Did you cause that young man's little accident, Katie? If so, *how*, for the love of God?"

"God has nothing to do with it," Kirk said softly, his eyes still on Kate.

Kate sighed, reaching over to place her warm hands on top of Maura's cool digits. "There are some things about me maybe you should know. Be warned, though, it may seem fantastic, or lessen your opinion of me."

"I highly doubt that," Maura replied firmly. "Whatever just happened . . . Well, it was nothing if not amazing."

"That's my girl," Kirk interjected softly.

Kate ignored him. Instead, she leaned closer to Maura and lowered her voice. "What I'm about to tell you might sound unbelievable, utterly crazy even, but I swear to you it's all true. After I tell you, I'll understand if you want me to leave your home."

"Please go on," Maura insisted, her eyes and demeanor showing no fear of the unknown. "I'm listening."

BLOODLUST:**Excerpt from Chapter Twenty**

NOEL WAITED UNTIL the Saturday after her break-in at the Lester home before she scrutinized the photographs she had collected. She told Pim she was going over to Madge's house for a visit, and he absently acknowledged her departure. It was common for the two women to get together on weekends to chat and have a few glasses of wine, or in Madge's case, Sobieski vodka in a tumbler. Noel left Pim sitting in the living room, where he was reading the Saturday edition of the *Boston Globe*.

Madge was quick to make copies of the photographs Noel showed her, using the printer in her office above the garage, where she and Noel settled to talk about the find. It was nearly eleven in the morning, but Madge obliged with a glass of wine for Noel, and a tumbler of vodka for herself. Dither was sleeping comfortably in the leather recliner by Madge's desk, while Noel reposed in the facing windowsill.

Madge looked over the photos, seeing the list of names and the various poems written by Kirk and his grandmother, Elizabeth. "All of this is interesting," she acquiesced. "But how you went about getting it - rather reckless, don't you think? Breaking and entering is a serious crime, Noel. If you'd been caught . . ."

"But I wasn't caught," Noel said firmly. "The poems are rather dark, but may contain some hidden meanings if we examine them closely. The list of names, however, bear some closer scrutiny. If Ken helped his son and Kate to get away, he had to have some contacts along the way. I'm thinking this list might lead us to some of them, if not all."

"We should probably hand the list over to the police," Madge noted, as she stared at the photographs laid out flat on her desk. "But perhaps I should give it to one of my old contacts on the force, have it given the once over under the table, so to speak. We don't want our names involved, because then there will be questions about how we obtained the list in the first place."

"Agreed," Noel replied. "I wish there was a way we could hand it over directly to the detective assigned to Kate's case. What if I just gave it to him, with no explanation? I could say I received it from an anonymous source."

"That's an option," Madge responded.

Noel nodded. "Okay. In the meantime, what do you think about the poems? The one with Kate's name in the title seems a bit harmless, just Kirk declaring his love for my daughter. While the words are a bit intense, it doesn't appear to be over the top for a teenager experiencing his first love."

Madge pulled the photo of "My Katie" and began reading it aloud:

The day I saw her, the earth stood still.

Her eyes, hair and smile drew me in.

In meeting her, I lost all of my will.

For her, I would commit any sin.

*It was more than physical presence,
in mere mind's eye.
She radiates fulsome essence.
Bright star shooting from the sky.*

*My Katie, center of the universe for me.
Willpower and thought, all gone away.
My mind and soul for all I can see.
In all radiant light, be that as it may.*

*My Katie, love of my life.
As I exist and draw breath.
For her, I would endure any strife,
to exist in her world, until my own dying death.*

"He's actually quite good," Madge noted, her glance going to Noel. "What do you make of the words?"

Noel shrugged. "He's in love with my daughter, or thinks he is. I've never been one to read hidden meanings in poetry. I was hoping you could."

"He is consumed by her," Madge said softly, tapping her finger on the photograph. "He's obsessed. Kirk is envisioning an entire life with Katie, and cannot see going through it without her."

"That's what I was afraid of," Noel replied grimly.

"If we are going to be objective, you could see it as two teenagers in love," Madge pointed out. "It's a common angst suffered by most of us as we grow up."

"I'm being objective," Noel protested faintly, meeting her eyes. "But we both know better. It's *not* just two teenagers in love. There is evil lurking in the midst of it all. Whether it's Kirk or his damned father, remains to be seen." She pointed to Madge's desk: "How about reading another one of his poems? Try *Blood of My Father*. Maybe that will give us some insight into Ken, from Kirk's viewpoint."

Madge began reading:

*It spills and reeks, soaked to the floor.
Pools of liquid ruby red,
hidden by a drawn door.
For all who are gone and dead.*

*This blood is in my veins,
it runs rampant and true.
As thy father does ordain,
the knowing to trusted few.*

*Unbeknownst and bygone,
shall never see the light of day.
Forthwith and near every dawn,
under the seedbed plot they do lay.*

*Swaying bells in the summer breeze,
none too gentle for those gone under.
Nor will any likely feel an appease,
as life and limb are torn asunder.*

Noel gasped, setting her wine glass on the windowsill. "That one sent a chill down my spine."

"Mine too," Madge whispered, her eyes wide.

"Kirk *knows* what his father is up to and does nothing about it," Noel said strongly, her eyes flashing angrily. "This poem - it's like a roadmap to the steps Ken takes to hide his victim and/or victims. By the way, what the hell is a seedbed plot?"

"It's just the soil area that's prepared and where seeds are planted," Madge told her. "The terminology is used for vegetables and flowers, or whatever is being planted. It's also referred to as a seedbed patch."

Noel appeared puzzled. "Does that mean Ken has buried his victims under flower beds, or in a vegetable garden? It's wintertime, and hard to tell what he has planted around his house. All the shrubs are dead-looking and bare, with no life to them."

"They will sprout in the spring," Madge said. "That's the natural order of it, especially if he uses bulbs."

Noel paused, recalling the two crates she had spied in Ken's tool shed. "I saw two containers full of bluebell bulbs in his backyard shed," she said excitedly. "Do you suppose that's what he has planted around his house? And he's just waiting for spring to plant some more?"

"They can also be planted in late winter," Madge told her. "Typically, though, they are planted in mid-fall so they have time to grow for a spring bloom."

"Maybe the bulbs I saw are leftover from last autumn," Noel said thoughtfully, her expression turning uneasy. "But what does it mean? How many victims do you think he's trying to conceal in the earth, for God's sake?"

Madge shook her head. "Speaking of God, only he knows." She glanced down at the photographs on her desk. "Do you want me to read another?"

"Might as well," Noel replied dismally.

"This one's called *Screech & Moan*."

"Lovely," Noel muttered. She picked up her wine glass from the windowsill and took a deep swallow. "I'm ready."

Madge took a healthy swig of vodka from her tumbler, giving a loud gasp as she set it back on the desk. "So am I," she declared. And then she began reading.

*Through the rafters and floorboards I hear
the screech and moan of many.
Childhood full of loathing and fear,
for my thoughts, not even a half-penny.*

*The cries never stop, even in my dreams.
The screech and moan of many.
In our house, nothing is as it seems,
tainted hearts as black as ebony.*

*I pray nightly for it to cease,
the screech and moan of many.
Even thy mother he won't release,
as if that would matter to any.*

*In the quiet of a lull,
I still hear the screech and moan of many.
I cannot erase, extract or pull,
Not even in the darkest hour of agony.*

"Jesus," Noel whispered. "Kirk must have witnessed some of the goings-on when he was a child. And mention of his mother? I never thought about that."

"Didn't you tell me Ken's wife and daughter died in a car accident?" Madge asked.

"Yes, about five or six years ago. That's all I know about it."

"Do you think Ken tormented his wife, right in the house with the kids present?"

"I wouldn't put anything past that bastard," Noel replied in a bitter tone.

"Do you want me to read the last two poems?" Madge asked pointedly. "They aren't written by Kirk, but by Elizabeth Lester."

"Kate told me Kirk was inspired by his grandmother to write his own poetry."

Madge glanced at the pictures. "One of them is titled *Bluebells & Fuchsia*, and the other one is called *The Rot in the Wood*."

Noel rolled her eyes. "Give them a whirl."

"I'll do *Bluebells & Fuchsia* first," Madge said.

*The dark red path,
littered with blood and bloom
and arced with portents of death.
Never easy to assume.
Bluebells and fuchsia,
with hints of loom*

*and bits of minutia,
points at certain doom.*

*What is hidden,
will be revealed.*

*To unveil the forbidden,
no longer concealed.*

*Bluebells and fuchsia,
with hints of loom
and bits of minutia,
points at certain doom.*

*Bones and flesh,
forever rest
in the rotted mesh
at his behest.*

*Bluebells and fuchsia,
with hints of loom
and bits of minutia,
points at certain doom.*

"Cheery family, aren't they?" Noel asked sarcastically.

"Not even a bit," Madge shuddered.

"Let's finish this up," Noel told her tersely.

"This one is called *The Rot in the Wood*."

*On the fringes of something so foul,
creeping around the edges of all.*

*Hiding secrets in the earth's inner bowel.
Birds shrieking in the night, to enthrall.*

*Breathing life now rotted in the ground.
Once viable and full of joy,
now making not a sound.
No going back, no being coy.*

*Cracking thunder and lightning,
leading the way.
All the more frightening,
when illuminated by day.*

*Encroaching, swirling fog,
enveloping all in its path,
as if one giant cog,*

rolling back like a curl, spreading its wrath.

No secrets last forever.

The rot in the wood,

acting like a burning tether,

sending to hell as it could.

"God almighty," Madge breathed. "This woman was either very talented, or well beyond any sort of sanity."

"A crazy genius," Noel spoke up. "It's all good as far as the writing goes, but the content . . . it's twisted and sick. Perhaps it's hereditary."

"Are you going to show these poems to Pim?" Madge wanted to know.

"No, not yet." Noel hesitated. "I want to mull them over, maybe try to make some sense of them before I tell him."

Madge stared at her friend. "You realize you're going to have to tell Pim about all of this at some point, don't you?"

Noel sighed. "I know, but we've come to this mutual agreement not to discuss Katie until we get something concrete. He's literally destroyed inside, Madge, as if he is just going through the motions of living while she's gone. I feel the same way to a certain extent, but I'm driven more by anger at the moment. I'm not about to let things go. I want to get to the bottom of it, whether Pim wants to be part of it or not. It's just too painful to talk about between us, and it's as if by mutual agreement we don't, without even acknowledging her. To me, that's more painful than actually talking about her, dismissing the very mention of her name."

Madge appeared sad. "I'm sorry, Noel. Sorry for everything."

"Me, too, but I have a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach that it's not over, not by a long shot. I sense there is even more sickness and depravity just under the surface of Ken Lester and his life." She returned Madge's gaze, her voice near to a whisper. "We probably haven't seen the worst of it, not yet."

BLOODLUST:**Excerpt from Chapter Twenty-Three**

KATE WENT TO bed early for the next two nights, her evenings a repeated blur of odd imagery and hazy memory. She decided on that third morning to give herself a change of scenery, to get out of the house for a few hours.

It was a weekday, so both of her parents would be at work. Madge was retired and Chloe wouldn't be back at school yet, giving her two choices.

Kate made a wry face. She wasn't inclined to visit either one of them, not today. She wasn't in the mood for Madge's bubbly inquisitiveness, or awkward lurches of silence with Chloe.

Instead, she opted to walk to one of her old haunts, the Arborway 7-Eleven. She'd get herself a slurpee and a brownie, and take them back to Chestnut Avenue. Before leaving the house, she pre-prepped chicken pieces for dinner. She liberally coated the meat with herbs, including dried ginger, chamomile, lavender and orange rind, placing them in a glass casserole dish covered with foil in the refrigerator. The spice mixture was designed to calm the nerves of anyone who consumed the food, which she thought would be best for both Ken and Kirk. They both seemed tense lately, so perhaps the baked dinner would settle them, at least for one night.

The Arborway 7-Eleven wasn't busy in mid-afternoon when Kate finally entered the convenience store. A few patrons loitered near the slurpee machine and cold case, so she detoured to the snack aisle. After snagging a wrapped brownie, she went back to the main area of the store.

Chloe Benedict was just making her way from the back, wearing the prerequisite red shirt with a black strip and name tag, holding a dark blue cleaning cloth in one hand. Kate was surprised to see her, having no idea that Chloe worked at 7-Eleven now. Chloe saw Kate, appearing somewhat startled, giving her a half-hearted smile. "Kate," she said off-handedly. "Fancy seeing you here."

"When did you start working for 7-Eleven?" Kate asked as she stepped up to the counter.

"Since mid-May," Chloe replied. "I wanted to earn some extra money over the summer." She began wiping the counter with the cleaning cloth, lowering her eyes.

"Is Miguel still the manager?"

Chloe nodded. "Yep, he's my boss. He's trying to cut back on his hours, looking to retire soon, so he only comes in a few days a week now." She looked to Kate. "How's everything going with you?" She smiled again. "You look well."

Kate shrugged. "Thanks. I usually feel pretty good, but I haven't slept well the last few nights, nagged by bad dreams. So I decided to get out of the house."

Before Chloe could respond, another patron of the store came behind Kate, clearing his throat. Kate glanced over her shoulder, taking in the man's appearance. He was young,

perhaps in his mid-twenties, with long, stringy light brown hair, pale skin covered with angry red acne, and light blue eyes. He was wearing a Boston Red Sox baseball cap and a long-sleeved wind breaker. She smiled at him apologetically. "Sorry, you go ahead. I can wait."

In a flash, the man pulled a gun from the pocket of his wind breaker, and pointed it at Kate and Chloe. "Do as I say, and no one will get hurt." His voice was high-pitched and quick, giving Kate the impression this was his first robbery. The young man was terrified out of his mind, but willing to see it through to get what he wanted.

Chloe cried out in alarm, covering her mouth with her hands. Kate's mind shifted at once as she reached for her will. The man was not only threatening her and Chloe, he was endangering the baby she carried. Her response was instantaneous.

Within seconds, the man grew flushed. The hand holding the gun started to shake slightly as he stepped forward again, his voice coming ragged. "Get all the cash from the register and give it to me. *Now.*"

Kate closed her eyes, placing all of her focus on him. Her brain began to solidify, streaming her entire will into the man behind her, all without uttering a word aloud. "*Put the gun on the counter, step back and wait for the police.*"

He didn't move at first, as if struggling with his stance, but then he gave a choking sound. He moved to the counter and set the gun on its surface, quickly falling back four steps. His whole body was shivering, sweat pouring down his face, his eyes wide and unblinking.

"Call the police," Kate instructed Chloe in a monotone. "*Hurry.* I don't know how long I can hold him like this."

Chloe leapt to the telephone behind the counter, dialing the police in short order. "This is Chloe Benedict at the Arborway 7-Eleven. We just had an attempted robbery, but the suspect has been subdued. He was armed. Please hurry."

After she made the call, Chloe stared at Kate, her mouth slightly open. "How did you do that?"

Kate kept her focus on the young man, but she replied quickly. "I didn't do anything, Chloe. Perhaps he had a change of heart. The surveillance camera likely captured his every move. He has nowhere to run, and he probably just realized it."

Chloe nodded, her face uncertain.

And that was how it played out to the police. They took the young man into their custody minutes after their arrival, confiscating his gun and taking a copy of the security tape.

After the ruckus was over, more than an hour later, Chloe looked at Kate again. "Thank you."

"For what?" Kate responded lightly.

"For saving me, and not for the first time."

Kate shrugged. "I didn't do anything, Chloe. We just got lucky."

"Then what did you mean when you said you didn't know how long you could hold him?" Chloe asked.

"I think you're mistaken," Kate replied calmly. "Maybe you misunderstood me in the stress of the moment."

"I know what I heard," Chloe declared stubbornly. "It was like . . . just like that time you stopped those boys from raping me again under the bleachers. They ran from you, for God's sake, for no apparent reason."

Kate's eyes grew flinty. "Can't you just be grateful that I saved your ass both times?"

"I *am* grateful," Chloe sputtered. "I just don't understand . . . how you do it." She groped for words. "It's not natural, is it?"

"We simply got lucky," Kate repeated. "In the right place, at the right time."

Chloe paused, taking a deep breath. "Okay, whatever you say."

Kate smiled. "Good." She began walking toward the door, talking over her shoulder. "I have to get going. Let's do lunch sometime real soon, shall we?"

Chloe nodded, her eyes following Kate as she left the store.

BLOODLUST:**Excerpt from Chapter Twenty-Five**

PIM INSISTED THEY return to the Lester home at eight o'clock that evening, worried Kate hadn't called them yet. Her phone went unanswered, despite his repeated calls.

The house was dark when they arrived. Pim and Noel hurried to the front door. Pim reached out to knock, but it gave way instead, opening into a pitch black chasm. They stepped inside to the hallway. It was eerily quiet, only the sounds from distant traffic creating a ripple in the silence.

"Something is terribly wrong," Noel whispered to her husband.

"Let's check up and down," Pim replied in an equally hushed voice. "Damnit, we should have never left Kate alone here."

They began calling her name. Pim raced for the stairs to check the bedrooms, while Noel veered to the kitchen and basement door. She flipped on the light and hurried down the steps.

She could smell the blood before she reached the bottom. The area was hot and humid, seeming to make the odor more intense. With a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, she made her way to the arched doorway, holding her breath as she took in the horror in front of her eyes.

Kate was naked, splayed out on the grimy bed, her wrists and ankles tied to the four posts. Blood glistened fresh between her legs and on her thighs, oozing and staining the mattress underneath her. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was slack, but she appeared to be breathing.

Noel raced back to the bottom of the stairs, screaming for her husband. "'Pim, down here! I found her . . . we need an ambulance, and the police . . ."

She ran back to the alcove room, going to her daughter on the bed. She undid the restraints and began tapping Kate's cheeks with the palm of her hand, trying to rouse her. "Katie, wake up . . ."

She heard Pim stomping down the stairs, speaking into his cell phone as he descended. "Please, send an ambulance to 139 Chestnut Avenue in Jamaica Plain." He paused. "Okay, thank you."

Noel looked askance of him.

He shook his head. "An ambulance is already on the way. Someone called 911 and sent for one about ten minutes ago. It was an anonymous caller, the operator said."

Before Noel could respond, Kate's eyelids began to flutter. Her voice came weak and hoarse. "Mom? What happened? What's going on?" She suddenly cried out, clutching at her belly with her hands. "My baby! Oh God, the pain . . ."

Pim dropped to his knees at the side of the bed, taking Kate's hands in his. "Help is on the way, love. Just hang tight."

Noel found Kate's clothes on the floor. She attempted to dress her, but it was no use. Kate was bleeding heavily, and every movement seemed to cause her great pain.

"I'm going upstairs to find a blanket to cover her with," Noel told her husband. "I'll be right back."

She went to the second floor and found a semi-clean blanket on Kirk's bed. She noticed the closet was wide open and all of his clothes were missing, some of the hangers on the floor. "*They've flown the coop,*" Noel thought to herself. "*The bastards, both of them.*" As she descended the main stairway to the first floor, Noel heard an approaching siren in the distance. Hurrying back to the basement, she covered Kate with the blanket gently and told Pim the ambulance was coming.

He left the room to greet the paramedics and to direct them to the basement, while Noel took his place in holding Kate's hands. Her daughter was semi-awake but still bleeding, her moans of pain corresponding with attempted clutches to her belly. "I don't want to lose my baby," she cried as tears filled her eyes. "I can't lose it, I just *can't.*"

"You won't lose your baby," Noel told her firmly, squeezing her hand. "Help will be here any minute, and we'll get you to the hospital." She reached out with her other hand and caressed her daughter's brow gently. "Katie, what happened here? What did Ken and Kirk do to you?"

"I think they drugged me," Kate replied hazily. "I'm not sure, or I can't remember, but I couldn't use my mind to get them to stop. My power was gone. It felt like it was trapped behind a brick wall, and I couldn't use it."

"Where are Ken and Kirk now?" Noel pressed, her anger mounting. The fact that the two men had harmed her daughter and were now nowhere to be found made her blood boil, but she kept a brave face.

"They are running away," Kate said faintly as her eyes closed. "I heard Ken say they had to get out of here, that it was the end of the road for them." Between the loss of blood and after affects of whatever drug had been given to her, she was fast losing consciousness again.

Noel heard the heavy steps of Pim and the paramedics as they came down the stairs, bringing a gurney with them. Pim glanced at his wife, his eyes misted over with stress. "I called the police, too, specifically Detective Richards. He was just about to get a search warrant, he's just trying to find a judge to sign it."

"We need to go to the hospital with Kate," Noel said tersely, standing aside as two paramedics began to examine Kate. "Will the detective keep us informed?"

"He said he would."

The paramedics took Kate's vital signs and tried to staunch the flow of blood by placing a large gauze pad on her, and then applying pressure. They decided she was stable enough to move and lifted her to the waiting gurney. They attached an IV to her arm and began taking her up the stairs. She was still unconscious, but breathing normally.

"I'll follow in the car," Pim offered.

Noel's eyes were glistening with anger and fear. "Thank you, love. I want to stay close to her."

"Look after our girl," he replied quickly, his voice strangled with a myriad of emotions. Noel knew her husband was feeling the same anger, sadness, fear and hopelessness that she was experiencing. They embraced before she followed the paramedics out of the basement.

Noel had just climbed into the ambulance with Kate when three police cars arrived, lights flashing. She felt a sense of relief as she bent over Kate's form in the secure gurney, holding her hand as they sped away.

Noel's thoughts came clear and certain. *"The monster trail has reached its end, and Ken Lester - along with his son - will finally receive their comeuppance."*

* * *

NOEL TOLD THE attending physician in Brigham & Women's Hospital's emergency room that Kate had been given some kind of drug, so they ran blood tests first thing, waiting for the results.

Kate awakened, finally, again clutching her belly and moaning in pain. In an aside, the doctor told Noel that Kate was in the onset of early labor, and there were signs of sexual trauma with traces of semen from two different men. Once it had been determined Kate had been dosed with Toxica, well-known as a popular date-rape drug, they administered an injection of Terbutaline into her system to help slow her labor contractions, also in the hopes of stopping them altogether.

Although the possibility of Kate being raped while in the Lester household had always lurked in the back of Noel's mind, the confirmation of it sent her into a mental tailspin. What had Ken - or Kirk, for that matter - done to her daughter? What horrors had been visited upon her? They had resorted to drugging and raping her, even as she carried Kirk's unborn child?

That they disappeared after the deed was done also seemed to confirm their guilt, in Noel's mind. Her thoughts went back to her last contact with Shoji, and his statements that all was not well with Kate's coming child.

She chose her destiny the minute she decided Kirk Lester was the one for her. However, depending on the path she takes, the child she carries could turn out with serious issues of its own. If Kate chooses the wrong path from this point forward, it is imperative that you find a way to take the child from her, by any means necessary.

Noel wondered what could be done about it now. The baby, if it was to live, would be her own flesh and blood. Shoji had hinted the child might have to be taken away from Kate, flushed out of the Grady family as if it never existed for its own safety.

The correct path will give the child a good life. It will be untouched by evil. The wrong path, however, will alter its entire existence. The wrong path will lead the child to a life of vile

destruction, debauchery, and a cold-bloodedness, the likes of which have never been seen before.

You won't be able to keep the child. Please don't misunderstand. When Kate comes into contact with you after it's born . . . she can never have a lasting interaction with the child. It's as simple as that. If she does, the child will come away with certain impressions that will never be forgotten.

Now that the time had arrived, Noel was at a loss over what to do. She knew she should follow Shoji's advice, but how could she take the child from her daughter, and then give it away? She pushed the thought aside for the time being. She would concentrate on seeing her daughter recover from her ordeal, and deal with the consequences some other time.

Pim joined his wife at the hospital about an hour later. Kate had been moved to ICU, where she was resting comfortably and sleeping. After Noel updated Pim on their daughter's condition, he ushered her into the hallway for a private word.

"I talked to the police when they arrived at Lester's house," he said. "I told them what happened with Kate, as we know it. They were there with a search warrant. I saw a few of them go down into the basement, and Detective Richards went with a group to the backyard, carrying shovels and other equipment. The detective said he would keep me informed."

Noel let out a sigh of relief. "They'll find ample evidence, I'm sure of it, especially in the yard."

"The police have also issued a manhunt alert for Ken and Kirk," Pim continued, keeping his voice low so others milling in the hall didn't hear him. "The last trace of Kirk's cell phone was somewhere on I-93 heading out of Boston, but there the trail ends. The bulletin was also released in neighboring states." He glowered. "I want those two bastards nabbed, and right quick."

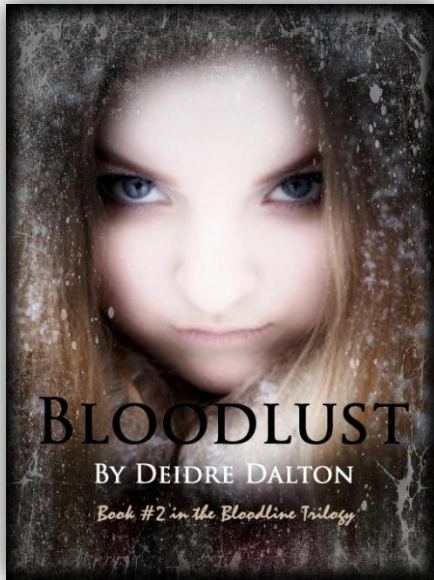
"I agree," Noel replied. "As soon as they're caught, we need to let the police and district attorney's office do their jobs while we focus on Kate. She's in a huge pickle right now. She could lose her baby, or it might be born premature, not to mention all of the physical and psychological damage she's probably suffered." Her face was a mask of pain. "The suffering, she did in silence . . ."

Pim drew Noel into his arms, stroking the back of her head. "She's safe now, love. She's with us, and that's where she's going to stay. We'll deal with everything that comes our way, as a family. I have every confidence the police will catch-up with Lester and put the matter to rest."

"It will take Kate a long time to get over what happened to her," Noel said sadly. "If she ever does."

"BLOODLUST" INFORMATION

Bloodlust by Deidre Dalton was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in 2021.



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•The poems *A Brief Moment*, *Blood of My Father*, *Bluebells & Fuchsia*, *My Katie*, *Screech & Moan* and *The Rot in the Wood* also appear in "Torn Bits & Pieces" (*Book of Poems*) by Deborah O'Toole. Used with permission.

EXTRAS:

***Bloodlust* @ Facebook:**

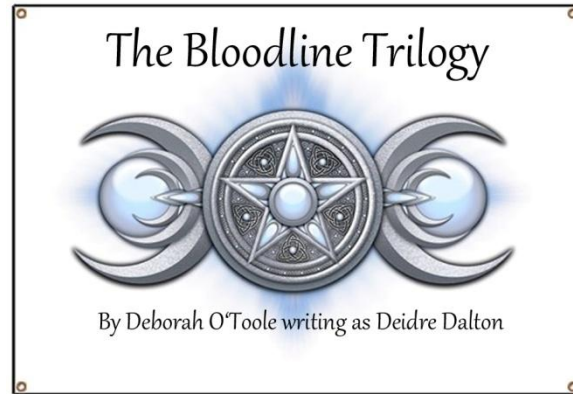
<https://www.facebook.com/bloodlinetrilogy/>

Bloodline Trilogy website:

<https://deborahotoole.com/bloodline/>

ABOUT THE BLOODLINE TRILOGY:

The *Bloodline Trilogy* by Deidre Dalton follows the uniquely magical yet ominous journey of three women through time.



<https://deborahotoole.com/bloodline/>

The trilogy begins with *Bloodfrost*, where Noel Gatsby's dreams take her away from the misery of her pain-wracked, disease-riddled body. The dreams become real when she awakens one morning to find herself completely healed, with the power of mind-reading and a newly-acquired sense of sight. However, she soon learns her miraculous cure comes at a price.

Noel's daughter Kate Grady learns she has unusual powers in *Bloodlust*, where she is able to bend people to her will. At first she uses her gifts wisely, but then goes astray after falling in love with Kirk Lester. She finds herself honing her special powers to keep her place in Kirk's heart, no matter how evil or depraved life with him becomes.

Meet Emma Beckett in *Blood & Soul*, final book of the *Bloodline Trilogy*. Emma is adopted into a loving home as an infant, never knowing the true circumstances of her birth. As a teenager, she discovers she has unique powers of healing. She soon realizes her abilities are an instrument of evil, begotten by a bloodthirsty monster . . .

For more, visit the official website for the *Bloodline Trilogy*:

<https://deborahotoole.com/bloodline/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Deidre Dalton is author of the *Bloodline Trilogy*, which follows the uniquely magical journey of three women through time. Books in the trilogy include *Bloodfrost*, *Bloodlust* and *Blood & Soul*.

She is also author of the *Collective Obsessions Saga*, which chronicles the extraordinary loves and intricate obsessions between two families sweeping a span of more than one hundred years, all set against the backdrop of a Gothic seaside mansion in Maine. Titles in the eight-part family saga include *The Advent*, *Quixotic Crossings*, *The Twain Shall Meet*, *Enthrallment*, *The Keeper's Journal*, *Hearts Desires*, *The Twilight* and *Megan's Legacy*.

Deidre is author and editor of the *Larkin Community Cookbook*, which is a compilation of recipes mentioned or prepared by characters in the *Collective Obsessions Saga*, and the electronic versions of *About Larkin* (companion guide to the *Collective Obsessions Saga*), and *The Private Journal of Colm Sullivan*.

Writing as Deborah O'Toole, Deidre is also author of the fiction titles *Celtic Remnants*, *Glinhaven*, *Mind Sweeper*, *The Crypt Artist*, a book of poetry known as *Torn Bits & Pieces*, and the *Short Tales Collection*.

For more, visit <https://deborahotoole.com/>.

Using the pseudonym Shenanchie O'Toole, she also writes for the cooking/recipe website Food Fare. She is writer and co-editor of twelve cookbooks, along with more than forty titles in the *Food Fare Culinary Collection*.

For more, visit <https://deborahotoole.com/FoodFare/>.

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For more, visit Deidre's website at: <http://deidredalton.com/>.



Deidre Dalton