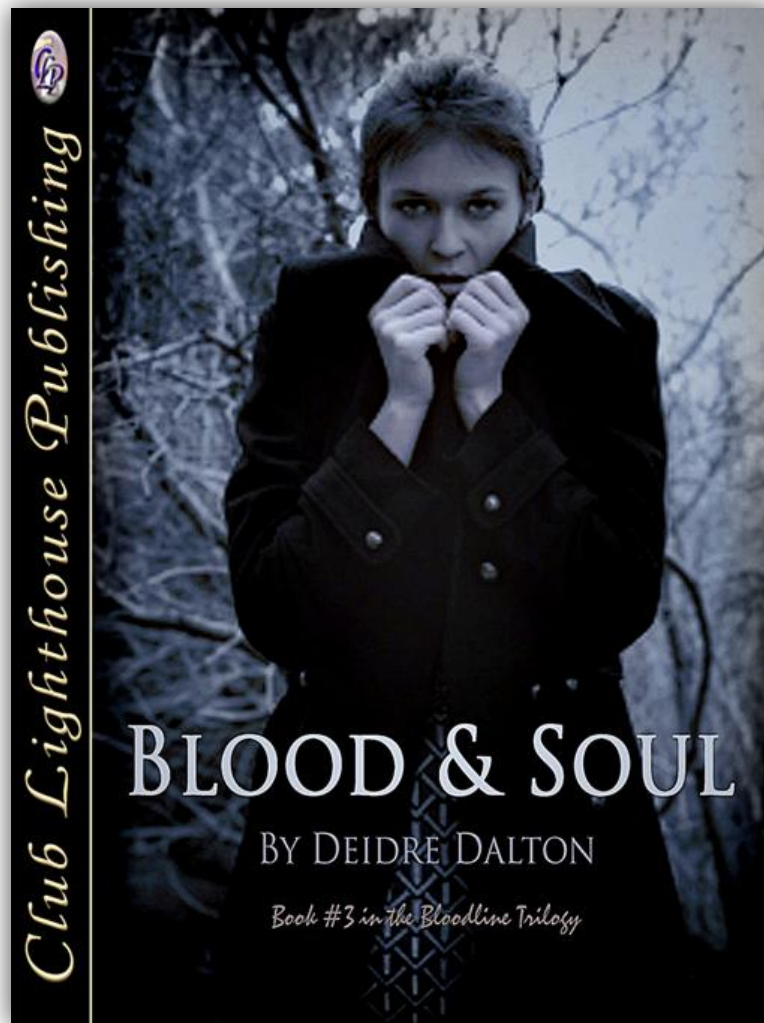


Excerpts from:

BLOOD & SOUL

By Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole)

** MAY CONTAIN SPOILERS **



Book #3 in the Bloodline Trilogy

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ABOUT "BLOOD & SOUL"

Blood & Soul by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is the third book in the *Bloodline Trilogy*. The novel was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in June 2022.

Emma Beckett is adopted into a loving home as an infant, never knowing the true circumstances of her birth. As a child, she discovers she has unique powers of healing yet eventually realizes her abilities could be an instrument of evil, begotten by a bloodthirsty monster.

Emma Beckett has an idyllic childhood in the small Northern California town of Mendocino, only child of Cabral and Darcy Beckett. Tall and palely blonde, unlike her small, dark-haired parents, Emma occasionally wonders if she was adopted. However, the unconditional love of her parents was the one aspect of her upbringing she never lost faith in, not even when the darkness of her true past threatened to overtake her.

As a child, she discovers she has the power to heal by touch. At first, her skills are limited to healing animals, but when she cures her cancer-stricken mother she realizes her unique talent could be used to help others. The realization also leads Emma on a journey to unearth her heritage. No matter how painful it becomes, she is determined to learn the truth about her bloodline.

The quest may finally give her the answers she seeks, although horrific revelations about the past make her fearful of her own destiny.

For more, go to:

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

BLOOD & SOUL:**Excerpt from the Prologue (*Visions of Emma*)**

DREAMS HAD ONCE been a bane of existence for Noel Grady, signifying portents of the future with puzzling symbols and vivid tableaux. Over time, the disturbing flashes had grown less frequent, becoming fleeting bits of *déjà vu* which rarely followed her waking hours.

She was in her seventy-fourth year when the dreams returned. They came slowly at first, brief glimpses of odd images that disappeared almost as soon as they appeared. Then they became more frequent, consistent in content and hauntingly familiar.

The girl in Noel's new dream was young, probably in her mid-to-late teens. She was tall and slender with short, wheat-colored hair. Her face was somewhat blurred in the dream, apart from startling blue eyes that seemed to rotate like orbs, no matter which direction she turned her head. She was walking along a forest path, which was surrounded by pine trees. It was shaded and difficult to see, but Noel could make out the girl's quick and purposeful stride. She was being followed by several wild animals - a squirrel, four ducks, a pair of raccoons and a ginger-colored Maine coon cat - all of whom were at her heels.

In the dream, a strong wind suddenly whipped into a frenzy, forcing the girl to increase her speed. The sky grew darker, making the vision in Noel's mind even more difficult to discern. The wind swirled around the girl and her animal companions, a misty, wreath-like fog snaking around their collective bodies.

Then, suddenly, all of them came to a clearing. It was nighttime, the surrounding area an ink-black space but for a crescent moon shining brightly in the sky. Noel thought the display in itself seemed to be pure science fiction, yet there it was in her dream. A huge, silver-yellow quarter moon in the middle.

The young girl stood in the clearing, now devoid of high winds, staring at the crescent moon. The wildlife following her on the path now formed around her in a circle, also staring up at the sky.

Noel's view switched to the young girl's face, similar in sensation to seeing a video or camera close-up. She stared back into the phantom lens, her facial features now clear and defined. Noel was momentarily startled, seeing in the face a stunning likeness to her son-in-law Kirk Lester, with her daughter Kate's blue eyes.

And then the girl spoke three simple words: "It is time."

She turned her head away to stare up at the crescent moon again, this time pointing a finger into the sky. The dream began to slowly fade in Noel's mind, like a program on television gradually fading to black.

Noel exhaled loudly, her eyes opening in the semi-darkness of her bedroom. The dream had not left her frightened as visions from her past had done, but rather she felt a

peaceful calm, as if knowing the dream would somehow, somewhere - and *soon* - come to fruition.

With a slight smile, Noel closed her eyes and fell into a dreamless sleep.

* * *

NOEL AND PIM Grady had been married for thirty-six years, content with each other's company, even in retirement. One day was much like the next for them, their routine formed from habits long-ingrained in both of them.

They sat in their breakfast nook, methodically eating sliced cantaloupe and buttered toast. The sun was bright, streaming in through the window. Pim's silver cane, which he used to get around at the age of eighty-five, was propped against the wall behind him. His silver hair, once blond, fell thick to his neckline. Despite the frailness of his physical body, his mind and dark eyes were as alert as ever.

Noel, too, had weathered time fairly well. Her long, silver mane was tied into a loose pony tail, her slightly-lined face devoid of much make-up. Her blue eyes were much like the ones she saw in her dream about the girl, only vaguely hooded now.

She sipped her coffee as she regarded her husband of more than three decades. He was as handsome as ever, in her eyes. Pim was her soul-mate - her best friend through good times as well as bad.

Theirs was a unique pairing, made possible by a shared experience virtually unheard of in the real world, much less the surreal realm they had found themselves in so many years ago. Noel had been Noel Gatsby then, living with her mother in a rundown apartment house on Wren Street in Jamaica Plain, Boston. Pim Grady had been the building's superintendent, but had been forced to give up his job as a senior engineer at Nordic Petroleum because of a slipped disc in his back. Noel suffered from several physical afflictions of her own, including pinched nerves along her back and neck, heart disease, cancer and a botched hip replacement that caused every waking moment to be filled with agonizing pain.

Then, one day, both of them underwent a seemingly magical transformation, their ills disappearing overnight as if perpetuated by a some miraculous entity. It was only later, when they compared notes, that they realized they had experienced a similar "cure" given to them by two mysterious Asian creatures - Hoshi and Shoji - that only appeared to them in their dreams. Side effects from their cures was the mutual ability to read each other's minds, along with Noel's troubling dreams that often gave glimpses of the future, heavily laced with mysterious symbolism.

Their only child, daughter Kate, was born mere months after their wedding, and seemed to also possess a special ability that enabled her to bend people to her will. While Kate had a normal childhood, her romantic obsession with Kirk Lester had resulted in the birth of a child, who was given away as a form of protection, and a fame that was associated

with Kirk's murderous father, Kendrick Lester, whose ill notoriety was garnered by being known as the Bluebell Serial Killer. Even though he had been sentenced to life in prison, Kendrick's unsavory fame had followed Kate and Kirk to the present day. After serving ten years for complicity in his father's crimes, Kirk had re-joined Kate in the real world, albeit heavily shadowed by grisly events from the past. They lived in Beacon Hill now, where Kate kept them comfortably well-off with her books on medicinal herbs, spices and recipes. They resided at a townhouse left to Kate by her late godfather, Judge Edward Minot, which shed its own eerie ambience on their erstwhile notoriety.

"I had that dream again last night," Noel stated as she stared across the table at her husband. "Except there was one difference this time."

Pim gazed at her. "Oh, dear. A young girl in the woods, being followed by animals? What's different now?"

"She came to a clearing after being in the forest," Noel replied, keeping her eyes on Pim. "There was a crescent moon in the sky, and I saw her face this time." She took a deep breath. "She looks like Kirk, with Kate's blue eyes. Or *my* blue eyes, for that matter. It was Emma."

Pim's eyes narrowed. He instantly relayed his thoughts to his wife. "*You saw our granddaughter.*"

"Yes," she answered him without speaking.

The long-married couple often transmitted their thoughts to each other. It wasn't from fear of being overheard as they lived alone, but rather a sense of comfortable habit. They could carry on complete conversations for hours, without uttering a word.

"Anything else?" Pim asked aloud.

"Yes," Noel admitted. "At the end of the dream, she said: *It is time.*"

"She would be about seventeen years old now," Pim observed.

Noel nodded. "The girl in my dream seemed to be of such an age."

Pim cleared his throat. "What do you think she meant when she said *It is time*?"

"Perhaps it's time we met her in person," Noel responded softly.

"You should check with Madge, ask her if she had a similar dream."

"She's coming for dinner tonight," Noel said. "We can talk to her about it."

Madge Tilley was Noel's former employer, a retired attorney who was also a dear friend and Kate's godmother. Madge had also experienced a "cure" many years ago. Her resulting side effect was to see glimpses of future events, which she preferred to call "visions" rather than dreams.

Pim smiled. "To actually meet our granddaughter again, after all this time." His eyes clouded over. "We can't tell Kate about it, not yet."

"I know," Noel replied sadly. "And we might have a long wait. I had the dream, true, but we don't have any idea when the meeting will occur, although I have a feeling it will be soon."

"Me too," he agreed. "I can feel it in my bones."

"Getting e-mails and photos of our granddaughter from Cabral and Darcy Beckett was all well and good over the years, but I would rather meet her in person."

"It's something I want to do before I die," Pim transmitted his thought to her.

"Don't talk like that," she chided him gently. "You have years to go yet."

"It is my most fervent hope, love."

BLOOD & SOUL:**Excerpt from Chapter One (*The Healer*)**

EMMA BECKETT LOVED walking on the well-worn path to Frolic Cove Beach, enjoying the crisp sound of dry pine needles underneath her feet and the far-off clamor of croaking loons and crashing waves. It was a trail she was quite familiar with, which began in the backyard of her parents' cottage on the outskirts of Mendocino and wound its way through a small forest to the Atlantic Ocean.

She had learned to walk on the same path, just shy of her first birthday, nearly four years ago. Her parents took treks every early morning and evening, getting their quota of exercise for the day. Cabral and Darcy Beckett thrived in the natural environment, as did their daughter.

One morning in late September, just a month before her fifth birthday on Halloween, Emma got ahead of her parents on the path to the sea, delighting in the cooler air of autumn as she stomped on the pine needles with glee.

"She's a quick one," Cabral noted, and not for the first time. "It's those long legs of hers."

Darcy beamed. "She's one of a kind, our Emma."

Their daughter was unusually tall for her age, slender with colt-like legs and a tiny waist. Her hair, which she kept short, was the color of wheat, falling in naturally curly tendrils around her face. Her fair, unblemished skin was complimented by cornflower blue eyes. In contrast, her parents were of medium to small stature with black hair. Cabral possessed green eyes while Darcy had warm, chestnut brown orbs.

"Not too far ahead, Em," Cabral called out to his daughter as they walked on the path. "Stay where we can see you."

Emma waved her hand over her head without looking back at her parents. She suddenly came to a stop, where she stared into a pink-and-gold heather bush on the left side of the path. She knelt down, touching the ground in front of her.

"What's she doing?" Darcy asked in curiosity.

"She's being a child," Cabral replied with a smile. "Every little thing, and every single day, are new adventures for her."

As they drew closer, Cabral and Darcy saw that Emma was looking down at a squirrel, who lay prone on its side on the ground, a large gash in one of its front legs.

Emma looked over her shoulder at her parents, worry written on her face. "He's hurt," she told them plaintively. "His leg has a boo-boo."

"Emma," Cabral spoke sternly. "Get away from that animal. It could be rabid."

"Can't," she replied succinctly. She reached out and touched the squirrel, laying the palm of her hand on the injured leg.

"Emma, no!" Darcy cried out.

Cabral spring forward, scooping his daughter into his arms. He was ready to begin chastising her, but paused when he saw her face. She was smiling, her cornflower eyes alight with a sense of happiness.

Darcy joined them, grabbing Emma's hands and looking them over. "You shouldn't have done that, Em. The squirrel is small and cute, I know, but some of them might carry diseases."

"But I made him better," Emma insisted. "Look and see."

Cabral and Darcy looked down at the creature, noting it was a typical ground squirrel with a long, broad-plumed tail. It was smoky grey in color, with rusty cinnamon highlights and a white underside. The animal was now moving, standing upright and making chattering noises as he gazed at Emma in Cabral's arms. The gash on his leg had all but disappeared, made evident when he held his tiny paws in front of his mouth. With one last chatter, the squirrel dashed off into the woods.

"His name is Chaz," Emma announced airily. "And he'll be back tomorrow."

Cabral and Darcy glanced at one another over Emma's head as she relaxed contentedly in her father's arms.

"Did you see it?" Cabral asked softly.

Darcy nodded. "I saw the gash on its leg, same as you. And then it was gone."

"Maybe our eyes are playing tricks on us," he offered hopefully.

"Could be," she agreed. "I haven't had my coffee yet, so it is a distinct possibility."

Cabral set Emma back on the ground, where she placed her feet one at a time. "Are you ready to go to the beach?"

Emma nodded vigorously. "Yep. I'll see Chaz tomorrow." She began skipping ahead of them again, stomping on the pine needles with renewed enthusiasm.

Cabral and Darcy held hands as they followed her, smiling and enjoying the full morning with relish.

Life was perfect.

* * *

EMMA HAD ALWAYS been a lover of animals. The seemed to be collectively drawn to her, whether they be wild or domestic. It was as if the creatures sensed her kindness and unconditional love, confident in the knowledge - albeit instinctively - that she would never harm them.

Chaz did indeed come around the next day, appearing in Emma's casement window sill. Her bedroom was on the second floor of the Beckett cottage, the large, wood-framed window overlooking the backyard and a vast array of encroaching pine trees and other greenery, while the Pacific Ocean shimmered off in the distance. The room itself was light and airy, the walls painted cream and white, and the ceiling adorned with glow-in-the-dark ceiling appliques that depicted stars and triple moon symbols. The stars winked subtly

when the room was dark, the triple moons seeming to glow around their outer edges. A cherry wood vanity table was placed in line with the center of the window, a small smoky-glass lamp positioned on the surface. Emma's bed was a double sheer yellow canopy, with lacy, fringed pillows and stuffed animals scattered to all corners.

The layout made it easy for Chaz to reach Emma's bedroom window. He simply scurried up the pine tree right against the cottage, leapt to the scalloped eave and made his way directly to the window.

Emma awakened to the sun bathing her face, as was often the case. She yawned and stretched her arms above her head. She turned her head to look at the window, and then squealed with delight when she saw Chaz peering in, his tiny paws on the glass. Leaping out of bed, she sped to the casement and flung open the right-side pane.

"Chaz!" She breathed. "I'm so glad to see you!"

He chattered to her in greeting, and then darted through the open window. He came to a stop on her vanity table, staring up at her as he resumed chattering. Emma reached out and stroked the top of his head gently, using her forefinger.

"Are you hungry?" Emma asked him, as if she was addressing a person. In her mind, she saw no difference. "We have nutty granola downstairs. I'll be right back."

She knew her parents were still sleeping. The cottage was quiet as she made her way down the end-curved stairs, clutching at the wood balustrade as she neared the bottom. She hurried to the kitchen, her ankle-length Mickey Mouse cotton nightgown trailing behind her as her bare feet slapped against the hardwood floors.

The kitchen was large, with dark marble counters and black, shiny appliances, and a roomy pantry with lined shelves. After grabbing a granola bar from a cupboard near the refrigerator, Emma went back toward the stairs. As she passed through the living room, she spied the family ginger cat, Jinji, a Maine coon with a perpetually grumpy look despite his gentle nature. He lay in sleepy repose on a couch, only giving the young girl a cursory glance.

Once she was back upstairs in her bedroom, Emma ripped open the granola bar and sprinkled bits of it on the vanity table. Chaz gathered several pieces and stuffed them into his cheeks, pausing to eat a few of them on occasion. Emma watched him, fascinated by his adept movements and instinctive need to sequester food for later consumption.

Jinji strolled into the room, jumping gracefully onto Emma's bed. The cat was still, but alert, as he stared at Chaz on the vanity table. Jinji did not go into crouching mode for an attack, but rather regarded the squirrel with piqued curiosity.

Emma glanced at Jinji. "You won't hurt Chaz, will you?"

Jinji meowed loudly, staring at Emma but not moving. His gaze returned to Chaz.

Emma stood watching Chaz as he ate. "We should all be able to live together in the same house," she reasoned with childish certainty. "But I don't think mommy and daddy will like it."

Chaz began chattering again, while Jinji finally moved from his still position. He meowed and rubbed against Emma's body as she stood near the foot of the bed. Emma smiled contentedly, scratching Jinji behind his ears.

"Em?" Darcy's horrified voice broke the tender spell. "What are you doing?"

Emma turned to look at her mother, who stood in the bedroom doorway, dressed in her purple terrycloth robe, her hair tousled from sleep.

"I told you Chaz would be back," Emma replied airily. "He was hungry, so I gave him a granola bar."

Darcy stepped closer, a look of concern on her face. "But not in your room, Em. He can't stay in your room."

"Jinji does," Emma responded matter-of-factly. "Why can't Chaz?"

"Chaz is a wild animal," Darcy pointed out, her daughter's logic causing her to smile. "Jinji isn't wild. He's been vaccinated."

"But I made Chaz better," Emma insisted stubbornly. "He doesn't have germs or boo-boos anymore. He's not sick, and he won't hurt me."

Darcy sighed. How could she argue with the sound reasoning of a child? Emma was merely stating what she knew to be the truth. In her mind, she had indeed "cured" Chaz. And, to be honest, how could Darcy protest the declaration? The squirrel *had* been injured the day before, but was now apparently in tip-top shape after being touched by Emma. While not caring to delve into the implications of it - it was simply too fantastic, and had to be a coincidence - Darcy accepted her daughter's conclusion.

To Darcy's surprise, Cabral was accepting of Chaz's presence in Emma's room. The squirrel showed no signs of leaving, so he helped his daughter create a bed for the animal - an old shoebox lined with a well-worn but soft kitchen towel - placing it on the vanity table with a small bowl of water.

By the end of the day, Chaz was also using Jinji's litter box when the need arose. The cat did not seem bothered in the least, and in fact took to grooming the small creature after Chaz settled down for the night.

The little Beckett family was growing.

BLOOD & SOUL:

Excerpt from Chapter Two (*Power Flourish*)

BOTH SHAWN AND Emma attended the Mendocino K8 School, eschewing summers when they walked and played on Frolic Cove Beach. Shawn was one grade ahead of Emma, his nine-month advantage over her placing him in a different class. Yet he was ever watchful over her, making sure she was never bullied or teased by any of her classmates. However, Emma made friends easily. She enjoyed school and learning, acing all of her subjects.

The school was an impressive spread located on Little Lake Road, which snaked parallel to the town itself and the Pacific Ocean. The blue-roofed and cream-walled buildings appeared distinctly modern, despite having been constructed in 1980. The outdoor areas were a mixture of ocean-themed murals, green grass and concrete walking areas, with benches and tables used by students during good weather. The recreational fields were situated at the rear of the school, facing the ocean.

The rounded playground at Mendocino K8 was large, paved with black asphalt and littered with swings, slides and several tetherball posts with yellow balls. During recess time, Emma liked nothing better than to swing, watching Shawn as he played tetherball with a classmate.

One of their fellow students, Calvin Hayes, was known to don shorts and run laps around the playground during recess, come rain or shine. Even though he was only ten years old, Calvin was passionate about running. He was a tall boy with sandy-colored hair, freckled skin and blue eyes. His imposing height often drew all eyes to his stunning physique, even at such a tender age.

One mid-morning, as Calvin rounded a corner near the swing set, he slipped on a patch of wet grass and tumbled to the asphalt, his left knee hitting first and then dragging on the hard ground.

Emma jumped from the swing, darting toward the fallen runner. He had rolled over on his back, his heavily scraped knee on full display with blood oozing from an angry red gash. Emma saw the tears in Calvin's eyes as he tried to hold back cries of pain.

She sat on the ground next to him, reaching out to touch his knee with her bare hand. He gazed at her in wonder, curious as to what she was doing.

Shawn and a classmate had stopped their tetherball game, coming to stand nearby. Shawn smiled when he realized what Emma was doing. She was healing Calvin's wounded knee, just like she had restored health to wild animals.

Less than a minute later, Emma and Calvin rose from the asphalt. Shawn saw the abrasion was gone from Calvin's knee, as if it had never happened. Yet he was hardly shocked by the sight. It was merely a by-product of being close to Emma. He was inordinately proud of her magical abilities, even if he could not explain them.

"How did you do that?" Calvin asked harshly, a note of fear in his voice. He cocked his head slightly. "What kind of freak are you?"

She was stunned, and hurt. She had healed Calvin, yet he was calling her a freak. She didn't understand. "I was just trying to help you," she stammered. "Didn't I make it better?"

"Freak," he reiterated cruelly as he reached over and pushed her to the ground forcefully.

"Hey! "Shawn shouted angrily as he rushed to Emma's side. "What in the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Your little girl is a freak," Calvin shouted in return. "She doesn't belong around normal people. She doesn't belong at this school."

Shawn advanced toward Calvin, his blue eyes flashing with rage. Before Calvin could step back, Shawn shoved him to the ground.

Calvin quickly sprung to his feet and shoved Shawn in return, who maintained his balance even as he tottered precariously. "That's enough," Shawn snarled. He hauled off and punched Calvin in the face, leveling him to the ground again.

Calvin put his hands to his face, momentarily stunned. He rose slowly, still holding his face. "You're going to pay for that," he said in a quavering voice. "I'm going to get you in so much trouble, Baskerville." Then he turned on his heel and ran off toward the school.

Shawn helped Emma to her feet. She looked at him with wide eyes. "Are we going to get in trouble, Shawn?" She asked him fearfully.

He shook his head. "You didn't do anything wrong, Em, but I might get into trouble for hitting Calvin. I don't care, he deserved it. Don't worry, it'll all blow over."

"Are you sure?"

"All is well and good, Em," he assured her.

But he had a feeling it wasn't.

* * *

AFTER THE INCIDENT with Calvin Hayes on the K-8 playground, Emma thought about the word "freak." Calvin had been intent on relaying it to her with a forceful - if not fearful - jab. She realized it wasn't a good label - he obviously hadn't been paying her any compliments. But she *wasn't* a freak. Or was she?

Helping to heal animals came to her as naturally as breathing. Now, apparently, her skill had expanded to humans. Emma did not think her inborn "gift" was anything out of the ordinary. It was part of who she was. How could it to be a bad thing? It didn't make her a freak certainly - or did it? She knew of no other children - or adults, for that matter - who could do what she did on a regular basis. It was unique to her, and no one else. *So, perhaps she was a freak after all . . .*

Emma glanced at Shawn as they waited to be ushered into the principal's office. Calvin had lost no time in reporting his version of events to the principal, who quickly summoned Shawn and Emma to his office.

The waiting area was behind the main counter in the administrative office of the school. The carpets were brown and threadbare, the walls adorned with historical portraits depicting the school's history. The chairs were hard and uncomfortable, without arm rests, and faced the door to the principal's inner sanctum.

"Why did Calvin call me a freak?" Emma asked Shawn suddenly.

"Because he's an idiot," he muttered darkly in reply. "Don't pay him any mind, Em."

"But there has to be a reason he called me a freak," she insisted stubbornly. "It sure flew out of his mouth fast enough."

He turned his head to look at her. "Maybe he felt like a wuss because a girl - namely *you* - helped him when he went down. I hate to break it to him, but he was a wuss long before you helped him. He was born that way, I'm sure. He knows he's mentally weak and hates that about himself. So he lashed out at you, whom he sees as weaker than himself because you're a girl, and you're younger than him."

Emma sighed. "Maybe I shouldn't help anyone ever again."

"Don't you dare change," Shawn told her sternly. "You're fine as you are. Be yourself, Em, and to hell with what other people say or think."

"I'll try," she murmured, looking down at her feet. Her white tennies were scuffed, and one shoelace was untied. Her feet were firmly planted on the floor, easy for her - even at her age - because of her height and coltish legs.

"Are we in big trouble?" She ventured after a moment of silence between them.

He shrugged. "I am, for sure, because I gave Calvin the smack in the face he deserved. But you didn't do anything wrong, Em."

"Do you think they called our parents?"

"Probably," he replied. "My mother won't be too upset, though, especially when I tell her what happened. She'll be on my side."

"Gwen is cool," Emma smiled.

He grinned. "That she is."

* * *

EDGAR WITTSTOCK HAD been principal of the Mendocino K-8 School for nearly thirty years. He prided himself on the school's stellar reputation, feeling he deserved credit for most of it. He preferred the institution to be run like a well-oiled machine, with himself at the helm, and wanted no guff from the students, teaching staff or cafeteria and maintenance workers.

Aside from a few ruffles over three decades - a small fire in the boy's restroom back in 1990, and the cafeteria staff walking off the job in 1996 when they were passed over for

raises - K-8 had consistently run in smooth fashion. The small blaze in the boy's room had resulted in fire training drills for all students and staff, and the temporary cafeteria debacle had been weathered when Edgar's wife, Janine, had pitched in to cook and serve lunch to the students. The cafeteria staff eventually returned, without the raises they had sought.

Edgar's office was small, only slightly cluttered as neatness and organization were two of his top priorities. His mind had been a tad scattered of late as he was suffering from a three-month term of gastrological distress, which he treated with frequent swallows of the thick, chalky Mylanta liquid medication for acid indigestion. Of medium height with stocky legs, grayish-brown hair and brown eyes, he felt he was healthy enough for a man approaching sixty-three years of age. Although his belly had grown larger over time, he minded his diet - for the most part - and did a lot of walking. He neither smoked nor drank, although he had been tempted on occasion. *Everything in moderation* was his motto.

He sat at his desk, gazing at the contents in the file for Shawn Baskerville. K-8 was small enough that he knew just about everyone by sight. Shawn had always been an exemplary student, getting good grades and never causing trouble. The fact that he was now involved in a playground set-to raised no great alarm in Edgar. He knew the boy to be intelligent, never showing signs of unrest or violence. However, Shawn was also a growing boy. Perhaps, as he grew older, a different personality would emerge.

Still, Edgar wanted the facts before passing judgment and issuing subsequent punishment, if any.

* * *

GWEN ARRIVED AT K-8 with Cabral and Darcy, the three of them having been notified that Principal Wittstock wanted to see them. The principal's secretary, Karen Kimball, had assured them Shawn and Emma were okay, but an incident had occurred on the playground which needed to be addressed.

"Shawn is not a troublemaker," Gwen said under her breath as the threesome walked down the main hall at K-8. Class was in, so the hall was empty, echoing with their footsteps in the otherwise unusual silence.

"Ed's secretary didn't give us details about what happened," Cabral said. "But to be called to the school . . . it can't be good."

"Both Shawn and Em are level-headed children," Darcy insisted. "It can't be that bad."

"I hope you're right."

Darcy glanced at her husband sharply. "We're talking about Shawn and Emma, Cabral. You know them as well as I do."

Gwen walked ahead of the couple as they neared the principal's office. She opened the main door and stepped inside, quickly followed by Cabral and Darcy. Their first view was of Karen Kimball, who was Principal Wittstock's long-time secretary. She was standing

behind a long, oak counter, secured by a low gate on the right side. Karen kept her long, white hair in a neat bun, her sallow expression rarely conveying any mood but sternness. Gwen, Cabral and Darcy remembered her from their own days at K-8, and not much had changed.

Gwen spotted Shawn and Emma sitting in the waiting area just beyond the gate. Both children saw their parents, offering wan smiles.

"What's going on here?" Gwen asked Karen directly.

"Principal Wittstock will fill you in," Karen replied, not a tic of emotion in her voice. "I'll let him know you're here." She reached for a phone on the counter - a relic from the 1980s, Gwen guessed, displaying multiple lines on a single console - punching in a two-digit number as she held the receiver to her ear. "Mr. Wittstock, the parents have arrived." She listened and then nodded. "Yes. Mrs. Baskerville, and Mr. and Mrs. Beckett."

After she hung up the phone, Karen pressed a buzzer under the counter, and the gate automatically opened. "Principal Wittstock will see you now."

Emma ran to her parents, hugging them fiercely. "Shawn didn't do anything bad," she told them tremulously. "But Calvin Hayes did. He called me a freak and pushed me down."

"Ssshhh," Darcy soothed her daughter as she touched the top of Emma's head. "We'll get to the bottom of it."

Principal Wittstock opened his office door and greeted the parents. "Come on in," he spoke genially. He glanced at the children. "All of you."

They went into the small office, Principal Wittstock closing the door behind them. He walked around to his office chair and sat down, while Gwen, Cabral, Darcy and Emma took the four chairs which faced the desk. Shawn remained standing, a stoic expression on his face.

"A minor incident took place on the playground earlier today," Principal Wittstock began. "It involved Shawn, Emma and another student named Calvin Hayes. I've already spoken to Calvin about his version of events." He glanced at Shawn and Emma. "Now, I'd like to hear yours."

"Calvin was running and fell," Shawn spoke up. "Emma tried to help him . . ."

"Calvin called me a freak and pushed me down," Emma interrupted angrily. "Shawn was just trying to protect me."

Shawn glanced at Emma briefly, and then resumed speaking. "Calvin pushed Emma down rather hard. I thought it was uncalled for, so I shoved him back. Then he shoved me, and I smacked him in the face. He got angry, said he would get me in trouble, and then ran off." Shawn stared at the principal. "Like the coward he is."

Principal Wittstock pondered Shawn's words for a moment before speaking. "Calvin claims you hit him without provocation."

"He's lying," Shawn responded firmly.

The principal looked to Emma. "Calvin fell, and you were trying to help him?"

Emma nodded vigorously. "Yes. He scraped his knee on the pavement. I was trying to help him when he blew up and called me a freak."

"He forgot to mention that," Principal Wittstock said wryly.

"We're telling the truth," Shawn stated flatly. "When Calvin pushed Em like that, I wasn't sure if he intended to do her more harm, so I shoved him in return."

The principal nodded. "It sounds plausible to me. Calvin has a history of . . ." He paused. "Spirited shenanigans, as it were. I tend to believe your version of events. I'm just thankful it didn't escalate further." He closed the file on his desk, his eyes going to the parents. "Sorry to drag all of you down here, but I'd rather be safe than sorry."

"Of course," Gwen spoke. "Thank you."

"I'm just glad it wasn't serious," Darcy spoke up, glancing at her daughter.

Emma was no longer paying attention to the conversation as she sat still in her chair, watching Principal Wittstock. She suddenly seemed fascinated by his shiny forehead, which was beaded in slight perspiration. He absently reached for a turquoise-colored plastic bottle on his desk, unscrewing the top and leaning his head back to take a healthy swig. He grimaced as he set the bottle back down.

Emma saw a white chalky substance ringing the principal's lips as he used his tongue to erase it. With an inner clarity, she understood Principal Wittstock was hurting. Her first - and most natural - instinct was to help him.

"Is your tummy sore?" Emma asked softly, her eyes on the older man.

He glanced at her in surprise. "What did you say, child?"

"Is your tummy sore?" Emma repeated.

He reddened slightly. "Well, to be honest, yes. The upset tummy comes and goes." He pointed to the bottle on his desk. "That stuff helps - Mylanta is a godsend - as does staying away from spicy food."

Gwen, Cabral and Darcy watched with wide eyes as Emma rose and walked around Principal Wittstock's desk to face him. Shawn yawned. Emma's actions were old hat for him.

Emma lay her hand on the principal's rotund stomach as he sat in his chair. He jerked slightly from her touch, startled that the child was putting her hand on him. He felt an almost instant warmth spread throughout his stomach, tempering and then quickly extinguishing the painful flames in his belly.

With a smile, Emma removed her hand and returned to her seat.

Principal Wittstock stared at the girl, dumbfounded. The hot pain in his gut was gone, replaced by a soothing warmth. He swallowed, unsure what had just transpired. It had to be a coincidence - her touching him and the pain disappearing - but somehow he knew any real explanation would defy logic. *Best to leave sleeping dogs lie*, he reasoned to himself.

"Our Em would make a splendid nurse, wouldn't she?" Darcy said with a smile, her eyes trained on Emma in the chair next to her. "She seems to have a gentle touch, a way with people."

The principal nodded dumbly, his gaze still on Emma.

"Since we've cleared things up, are we free to go now?" Gwen asked pointedly.

Principal Wittstock broke his gaze from Emma. "Yes, of course. And thank you for coming."

Gwen looked to Shawn. "You and Em go back to class, while we go back to work. We'll talk more tonight."

The principal stayed in his seat after the children and adults departed from his office, his mouth slightly agape. He stayed that way for several minutes, disjointed thoughts going through his mind.

He eventually stood from his desk, licking his lips nervously. His stomach was calm and, more importantly, pain-free. It was a fluke, he insisted to himself. The Mylanta had finally done its job, as simple as that. His "cure" had nothing to do with Emma Beckett and her so-called gentle touch. She was a mere child, after all.

Temporarily satisfied with the explanation, Principal Wittstock sat back down at his desk and returned to the business of running a school. After about an hour, he instinctively reached for the bottle of Mylanta.

He gave a short laugh as he threw the bottle in his trash can.

BLOOD & SOUL:**Excerpt from Chapter Three (*Touch of Loss*)**

EMMA HAD NEVER met anyone she didn't like, at least not in her young life so far. She liked people - and animals - in general, never having a reason to feel otherwise.

So it shocked her when she immediately disliked Mia Gianna, one of Shawn's classmates from Mendocino High School. Mia was part of a large, Italian family in the village, where her father owned a popular restaurant. Emma recalled seeing Mia a few years ago, when she and her parents had dinner at the "Mia Bella" eatery one Saturday evening. Mia - the only girl amongst six brothers - worked as a waitress at the restaurant during the summer tourist season. Back then, Mia had been pimply and pudgy, with frizzy blonde hair and a flushed face. She was quiet, rarely saying a word unless someone spoke to her first. Emma felt sorry for the girl, but did not think much about it after dinner with her parents.

A few years later, Shawn announced he and Mia were going on a date in his second year of high school. All of sixteen, Shawn had grown taller, his voice had deepened and his natural handsomeness had matured. Emma could spot the black whiskers on his chin, which he usually shaved off quickly. He was becoming a man, and the transformation had begun to fascinate Emma. Her best friend also happened to be the best looking boy in school.

Emma was astounded when Shawn told her he was going on a date with Mia, never thinking he was the type to like someone like her. He could have his pick of girls, so why was he settling for the pimply and pudgy Mia Gianna? Almost at once, Emma felt ashamed by her thoughts - "someone like Mia" - yet the notion of Shawn taking Mia on a date still seemed far-fetched to her.

Emma and Shawn were lounging on the beach one Saturday afternoon when he told her about his upcoming date, mentioning it casually. "We're going to have dinner at the Fiddleheads Cafe, and then see a movie. *Suburban Gothic* is playing at the Coast Cinema."

"You and Mia?" Emma asked, her tone incredulous as she stared at him.

"Yes," Shawn replied, returning her stare.

"Well," Emma hesitated, her words coming awkwardly. "She doesn't seem to be your type."

"What's my *type*, Em?" Shawn wanted to know, his brow furrowing.

"Don't get me wrong," she replied quickly. "Mia is just . . . kind of heavy and zitty."

Shawn threw back his head and laughed. "When was the last time you saw Mia?"

She shrugged. "A few years ago, I think. I went to Mia Bella for dinner with my parents, and she was the waitress."

Shawn lay back, propping himself on his elbows. "Well, for your information, Mia is no longer pudgy - and what did you call it? - ah yes, *zitty*. She lost a bunch of weight and her skin cleared up. She's turned into quite a beauty, actually."

"Oh," Emma responded in a small voice.

His eyes were twinkling. "Are you jealous, Em?"

She glared at him. "Why would I be jealous?"

"That's what I want to know," he countered.

"I am *not* jealous." She refused to look at him.

"You don't have to worry, Em," he told her in a soothing tone. "You'll always be my best friend, no matter what." His eyes softened. "We'll be besties even if we live across the world from each other someday, and even when we're old and decrepit."

She met his eyes. "Do you mean it?"

He nodded. "Always, Em. *Always*."

* * *

EMMA MIGHT HAVE let it rest after their conversation, but on the day of Shawn's date with the newly-alluring Mia, Shawn brought her to meet his mother, and then strolled over to the Beckett cottage to find Emma. She wasn't at home, and was nowhere in sight on the property.

Unbeknownst to anyone, Emma had climbed her favorite pine tree in the backyard, a bottle of coke in her hoodie pocket, with Chaz following her. Once she reached her comfortable branch perch, she opened the bottle of coke using the natural niche in the trunk, and then took a long swallow. She had seen Shawn and Mia walking over from the Baskerville property, but she had no desire to meet Shawn's date. She thought herself safe from discovery in the tree, with Chaz twitching his nose at her side.

Shawn and Mia came to stand in the backyard. Emma took the opportunity to take in Mia's appearance from her lofty position in the pine tree, her face forming a sour expression.

It was true. Mia had blossomed into a young beauty. Gone was the pudgy frame and pimples of a painfully shy teenager, to be replaced by a stunning blonde with green eyes and a creamy complexion. She wore a short, pastel skirt with a white, silky blouse, which showed off her generous breasts to advantage. Emma frowned. She thought Mia wore too much make-up. It made her look like a tramp.

"Can we go now?" Mia asked Shawn as they stood on the grass. Emma could hear her clearly.

"I wanted you to meet Emma," Shawn fretted.

"I met your mother," Mia reminded him crossly. "Isn't that enough? Can we go now?"

Shawn paused, staring at Mia in surprise. "I didn't realize it was such a hardship for you to meet my mother."

"It wasn't a hardship," Mia replied impatiently. "But I'd really like to get going now."

"Sure, Mia. Sure."

Emma heard the tone of Shawn's voice, and instinctively realized he was disappointed. She knew him as well as she knew herself, and she felt his unhappiness.

She guzzled the remaining soda in the coke bottle, and then leaned forward slightly on her haunches. Shawn deserved better than the plastic princess - whose voice had an annoying, whiny twinge - and Emma wanted to make sure he didn't settle for less.

She raised her hand, her fingers wrapped around the mouth of the bottle, and then let it go. A split second later she heard Shawn and Mia cry out simultaneously.

Emma pushed aside a low-hanging pine branch and looked down. Her eyes widened with dismay when she saw Shawn lying flat on the ground, his hand grasping his temple, which appeared to be bloody. The coke bottle had rolled a few feet away, on its side in the grass.

Mia stood there, motionless, a shocked expression on her face.

Emma leapt down from the tree, her graceful legs landing soundly on the lawn. Chaz sped down the tree trunk after her, and then scurried away. Emma went to Shawn, kneeling next to him as he met her eyes and groaned in pain.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," Emma told him tearfully. "I just meant to startle you." She leaned closer to his face and whispered in his ear so only he could hear. "I'll fix you, Shawn. Don't worry. It'll be like it never happened."

"Who are you?" Mia demanded harshly, finally finding her voice as her hostile gaze settled on Emma. "And why did you drop a coke bottle on my boyfriend's head?"

Emma ignored her, instead reaching out to move Shawn's hand from his bloodied temple. She placed her own hand on the gash. She closed her eyes as she lowered her head, as if in prayer.

Shawn had witnessed Emma heal all sorts of creatures - animals mostly, but her skills had long ago graduated to the human realm. He could feel the warm, healing energy pulse into his head through her hand. It was a soothing sensation, making him calm and relaxed as she touched him. She was literally fixing him, erasing all impact and trace of the wound on his temple.

A few minutes later, she removed her hand and sat back on her heels as she regarded him. He reached up to touch his temple - there was no wound, no blood, no pain. He met her eyes again, which conveyed his wonder and appreciation for her act. She smiled timidly, returning his stare with warm regard.

"What just happened?" Mia asked as she looked down at Shawn and Emma.

"Nothing you would ever understand," Shawn replied softly, his eyes still on Emma.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mia wanted to know, her mouth turned down in an unhappy line.

"Just let it go," Shawn responded tersely as he rose to his feet. "I'll take you home, Mia. I'm not up for a date tonight."

"Don't bother," Mia returned angrily. "I'd rather walk." She turned on her heel and strode away, making her way quickly to Crestwood Drive.

Emma rose to her feet, still staring at Shawn.

"That date was over before it started," he told her wryly.

"I'm sorry."

"No you're not. But I'm not sorry, either."

"Why?"

Shawn grinned. "I don't think Mia and I would be well-suited. Plus, I've always got my mind on another girl."

"Who?" Emma's lips formed the word but no sound came.

"My best friend, Emma Beckett."

She blushed. "Oh."

He reached over and took her hand. "Thank you for fixing me."

"You're welcome, but it was the least I could do."

"Your gift . . . it's amazing and seems to be getting stronger."

"Yes," she acknowledged. "I can feel it."

Shawn regarded her quietly for a minute, and then smiled. "It's a good thing, Em. It's all well and good."

"I agree."

He tugged her hand. "Since my evening is now free, would you care to take a walk on the beach?"

She brightened. "I'd love to."

As they strolled toward the path leading to the beach, Emma looked over her shoulder toward the backyard. Her eyes fell on the miscreant coke bottle, now lying empty on its side in the green grass.

"I meant to hit Mia," Emma thought passively as she looked away with a small smile. "Not Shawn. Either way, I got rid of her and that suits me just fine."

BLOOD & SOUL:

Excerpt from Chapter Four (*Touch of Love*)

SHAWN WASN'T EXACTLY sure when his feelings for Emma changed from platonic friendship to romantic love, but he knew the transformation had occurred gradually as she bloomed from adolescence into the glow of young womanhood.

Their tender youth had been filled with rollicking play, Emma keeping up with him for the most part. She was quietly dogged, even as a girl. They were akin to brother and sister, who also happened to be the best of friends - even when they had mild disagreements. Romantic notions had never entered his head, at least not in the early days, and not until Emma began to physically develop past childhood.

But it wasn't just physical.

Shawn knew her so well, recognizing her inherent inner beauty. It was simply a natural part of her, merely adding to her outer beauty. She was the perfect woman, and a flawless human being. Her wondrous healing powers aside, she was the complete package in his eyes.

He fought the feelings in his mind for a long time, dismissing them as hormone-driven urges brought on by his own maturation. He was eventually forced to accept reality as his feelings only intensified with time. He was in love with Emma, and probably always had been. Yet he sat on the fence about telling her, unsure of her reaction. Despite her hints of jealousy over Mia Gianna, Shawn sensed Emma had felt threatened by the other girl, perhaps fearing their solid friendship would alter because of it. He did not want to create an awkward uneasiness between them by revealing his love for her, so he kept silent about it for a long time. He was unable to detect if she felt differently about him as they grew older. While he knew her as well as he knew himself, her mind was often difficult to read.

She was Emma, pure and simple. And he couldn't help but love her.

* * *

EMMA COULDN'T SLEEP the night they buried Jinji next to Chaz under the pine tree in the backyard. She was heartbroken, but resigned to a life without her pets. They had both been well-loved during their lifetimes, cherished by her from the time she met them, yet the sadness persisted. She tried to conjure happy memories - of which there were many - but she still could not fall asleep.

She groaned as she glanced at the digital clock on her bed stand. It was three-thirty in the morning, but she saw no point in fighting it any longer. She thought of Shawn, wondering if he was asleep, or awake as she was.

Emma rose from her bed and donned a pair of pink shorts with a black tee-shirt. Rather than traipse through the house and possibly awaken her parents, she climbed down the pine tree just outside her bedroom window.

She dashed across the back lawn in the pale moonlight, knowing her way to the Baskerville cottage in the dark. Having made the trek so many times, she was surefooted all the way.

Emma was disappointed to see Shawn's bungalow in darkness. The structure, which was located behind the main cottage, had become his "private room" of sorts since his sixteenth birthday, when Gwen allowed him the freedom to live in semi-privacy. The bungalow has once been his father's study, and included one bedroom, a kitchenette, a bathroom with a shower, and a stamp-sized living room with an old, overstuffed camel-colored couch.

Not to be deterred by the darkness, Emma found the spare key Shawn always kept under a potted Great Burnet, its tall branching stems blooming with tightly set blood-red bottlebrushes. She unlocked the front door and slipped inside quietly after replacing the key.

She had spent many happy hours with Shawn inside the bungalow. They had played endless video games and watched movies together, making microwave popcorn in the tiny kitchen or having artichoke and cheese brick-oven pizza delivered from Cafe Beaujolais in the village.

Emma headed for the bedroom, which was just off the living room. A small shaft of moonlight allowed her to see Shawn sleeping on his stomach, dressed in only his dark red jockey shorts. The weather was warm, so he had fallen asleep with the window open over his bed. She smiled in the dark when she heard his light snoring.

"Shawn?" She whispered.

He did not stir, his snores still coming soft and continuous. She slipped into the bed next to him, drawing the sheet to her shoulders. Facing away from him, she snuggled into the mattress as she felt his body heat reach her. She closed her eyes in an attempt to fall asleep. She would have preferred to find Shawn awake so they could talk, but she settled for the dark and quiet as she felt her eyes grow heavy.

Within a few minutes, she felt Shawn move behind her, as if he was stretching his legs. She was going to apologize for waking him, but he suddenly began to kiss the back of her neck gently. The feather touch of his lips created a tingle down her spine, rendering her speechless.

"Emma," he said in her ear, his voice soft and seeming to drift on the breeze coming through the window over their heads. "Oh God, Emma . . ."

Shawn had never kissed her like he was doing now. Emma felt as if her body had become electrified, his touch sending waves of pleasure coursing through her. She also felt his desire growing against her back. She was somehow humbled that he wanted her like a man wants a woman. She had always wondered if he would ever make a move in romantic fashion toward her, and now the moment was here.

She rolled over quickly so that she was facing him. Her vision had adjusted to the moonlight, giving her the ability to see his blue eyes regarding her seriously. She reached out and caressed his face.

Suddenly, Shawn seemed uncertain. "Emma . . . do you want me like I want you?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes, Shawn. I've wanted you that way for a long time."

He groaned. "If I had known that, this would have happened before now."

"Spilt milk," she told him.

He brought her closer in the circle of his arms, his lips finding hers in a deep, moist kiss. She felt as if she was melting in his embrace, the warmth from their body heat fusing them into a state of dreamy rapture.

He half-sat as he removed her t-shirt, kissing her at the same time. He unhooked her bra from the front and began running his hands over the firm mounds of her flesh. Emma moaned deep in her throat, enthralled by the pleasurable sensations slamming through her body.

Shawn shifted his attention to her lower body, pulling her silky underwear down her legs and beyond her feet. She was completely naked in his bed, yet she felt no shyness or trepidation. Being in his arms felt natural, and right.

He stopped kissing her. "Your turn now," he murmured.

She was puzzled at first, but then realized he wanted her to remove his one piece of clothing. She lifted herself to her knees, pulling the bed sheet from his body. She found the waistband of his jockey shorts and slid them from his body, then tossed them to the floor. She lay on top of him, taking his jaw line in her hands to kiss him.

Emma felt his desire rising even more against her. He had his hands all over her body now, so she responded in kind. She touched his hardened member, marveling at its warmth and smoothness. He began moaning, his returning kiss becoming more forceful.

They stopped briefly to catch their collective breaths, the sounds of their labored breathing seeming loud in the room.

"I'll never knowingly hurt you, Em," Shawn said quietly.

"I know."

"But the first time might hurt."

"I know that, too. Girls in school talk about boys all the time. While I don't talk about it with them, I listen to what they say."

He chuckled. "You're so adorable, Em, and you don't even know it."

"Are we going to just keep chatting?" She asked, humor in her tone. "Wouldn't you rather be doing something else?"

He pushed her onto her back and straddled her. She felt his hands on her hips for a moment, and then one hand went to her center. He probed inside her wetness with his index finger, slowly moving in and out of her. She instinctively moved her hips to match his rhythm.

"How do you feel?" He asked her.

"Wonderful," she replied. "And ready for more." She reached up and ran her hands across his chest. "Can I ask you something first?"

He nodded.

"Have you ever done this with anyone else before?"

He hesitated, but then spoke truthfully. "About a year ago, I went to a party in Ukiah with some of my friends, where drinking was involved. I ended up in bed with a girl at the party."

"Do you still see her?"

He shook his head. "No. I haven't seen her since then, and there has been no other contact. To be honest, I don't even know her last name."

"What was her first name?" Emma pressed.

"Alice. That's all I know."

She touched his lips with her fingertip. "I love you, Shawn Baskerville. Always have."

"I love you, Emma Beckett. Always have, and always will."

Shawn leaned down and began kissing her again. She wrapped her arms around his neck as if to bring him even closer, if possible. Their tongues met and melded, twisted together by an urgent surge of passion.

He entered her slowly at first, not wanting to scare or hurt her, but she moved against him with unabashed eagerness. She wanted it to happen, more than anything else in her life before.

Shawn suddenly plunged into her all the way, which brought a startled gasp from Emma. He rested inside of her for a long minute, but then she began the returning rhythm on her own. He lost himself in her as they became one, the passing time having little meaning to either of them as they pleased each other, over and over.

As Emma had told Shawn, she'd heard about sex from other girls at school. They had sometimes made it sound like a dirty and shameful deed, something to ridicule on occasion, but it was the exact opposite for her. With each thrust, she felt herself reaching a peak that brought her closer to Shawn, exactly where she wanted to be. They were in sync as one, as they were in all other aspects of their lives. It was a complete and whole identity in their shared expression of love.

After their ultimate and mutual climax was reached, Shawn and Emma collapsed on the bed, laying on their backs. They were both breathless, their bodies and minds drowning in awe and wonder.

"I never knew . . ." She finally said softly. "I never knew such a thing could exist as it is with us."

"It does exist with me and you," he responded. "Somehow, I doubt it will ever change."

"I know it won't." She turned her head to look at him. "How is it that we both know it, and with such certainty?"

He reached over and caressed her face. "We were meant to be, Em. I've felt it from day one. I just knew we were destined to spend our lives together."

"I like the sound of that," she said dreamily.

"So do I."

They joined together again, this time moving slower as they tried to prolong their mutual pleasure.

It was nearing dawn when Emma finally left the bungalow, the sun rising over the calm sea waters, promising another beautiful day in Northern California. She dressed hurriedly while Shawn donned a pair of denim cut-off shorts.

"I'll walk you back," he said, unwilling to part with her.

"Better not," she returned. "With my luck, Mom will be up early, looking out the kitchen window as I sneak back into the house."

"Our parents are going to find out sooner or later," he replied stubbornly.

"Later would be better," she told him. "I don't want them to catch us being sneaky. I'd rather tell them face-to-face."

"When?"

"Soon." Emma was reluctant to tell her parents about her new intimacy with Shawn, mainly because she feared Cabral and Darcy would be shocked to discover their daughter sleeping with her best friend right under their noses. She had enough respect for them to broach the subject gradually so they could grow accustomed to the idea.

"I get it," Shawn said, sounding relieved.

She pulled him into her arms. "Thank you, Shawn. See you later?"

"Most definitely," he replied. Then he grinned. "And later tonight, if you please. Come back to the bungalow after our parents have gone to sleep."

She kissed him. "Oh, yes. Most definitely."

BLOOD & SOUL:**Excerpt from Chapter Six (*Foray into Truth*)**

KATE LESTER GRIPPED the cell phone to her ear, her knuckles turning white. She was silent as she listened to her mother speak in quick tones, relaying information she had never thought to receive. Her mouth went dry as her mother continued to talk.

When it finally came her turn to speak, Kate's voice came crackled and unsteady. "Let me talk to Kirk, Mom. I'll see what he has to say about it. If he's agreeable, then I suppose we need to arrange a meeting."

Noel hesitated on the other end of the line. "Are you okay with this?"

"I'm a bit stunned," Kate admitted. "But we all knew this day might come. And here it is."

"You don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with," Noel insisted. "But I, for one, would love to meet Emma."

"Emma," Kate whispered. "The baby was a girl."

"Yes, darling. I've seen her pictures. She's stunning, really. I see a lot of Kirk in her."

Kate swallowed. "Let me talk to Kirk and I'll get back to you," she finally replied, anxious to end the call.

"Take your time, darling," Noel said with a hint of sympathy. "This is a momentous decision any way you slice it."

"I'll call you back in a little bit." Kate disconnected the line, setting the phone on the kitchen counter in front of her. Her head was swimming with glee mixed with a dread reluctance, her breath coming in short rasps. *Her daughter wanted to meet her.* After all the years of guilt and wondering, the child was nearly a woman and curious about her background, which was only natural, but was she ready to accept it? Was Kirk?

"Only way to find out is to ask him," Kate muttered to herself darkly as she made her way to the back door of the kitchen. He was out in the garden, reading and writing poetry, and smoking endless cigarettes. It was his favorite pastime when he wasn't at work. Since Kate was busy doing her own thing, she could not begrudge him, even though their relationship had grown steadily distant in recent years. It wasn't as if they had fallen out of love, but rather the familiarity between them had reached a comfortable stage that neither of them was unhappy with.

The day had not yet become warm, although shade from the weeping cedar trees kept the garden area temperate for the most part. The cobblestone flooring on the porch was red brick, edged by green grass and various rose bushes. A view of the Charles River was just beyond the tree line, its coolness conveyed by a light breeze. It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon, and she knew she was just about to spoil it for him.

Kirk's decade in prison had aged him prematurely, creating lines and creases around his eyes, cheeks and mouth. His once wheat-colored hair now had more grey than golden, but despite the encroaching signs of maturity, he was still breathtakingly

handsome. He looked up when she came into the garden, his dark eyes showing slight annoyance at being interrupted.

"We need to talk," she told him quickly. "It's important."

With a sigh, he placed the book on the black wrought-iron table in front of him. Kate glanced down and saw he'd been browsing through *The Flowers of Evil* by Charles Baudelaire, one of his favorite poets. He also enjoyed Dante Alighieri, Matsuo Basho, Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Frost, Phyllis Wheatley and Sir Thomas Wyatt, often reading snippets aloud to her when they went to bed at night.

Kate sat across from him, placing her hands on the table. "My mother just called," she said, watching his face. "Our daughter initiated contact with her, and wants to meet us."

Kirk gasped audibly, returning his wife's stare with a stunned expression.

"I realize it comes as a shock," Kate continued. "But we knew this day might come eventually." She leaned back in her chair. "How do you feel about it?"

"Our daughter," he said slowly as he took a drag from his cigarette. "*Our daughter.*"

"Yes," Kate responded with a touch of impatience. "Our daughter."

He flashed a sheepish look at her. "Sorry, Katie. I'm a bit stunned, really. Just trying to take it in. I never knew if we had a boy or a girl before now." He crushed out his cigarette in a silver ashtray resting on the table. "What does your gut tell you? Do you want to meet her? Or do you want to leave things as they are?"

She sighed. "She has reached out, Kirk. We can't very well turn her away. She's probably already discovered the sorted history that makes up her ancestry. She likely googled it." A look of pain came into her eyes. "As I said, we knew this day might come. Yet, how do we explain giving up our own child to the child herself? Lay out the truth of the situation at the time, sure, but will she accept them as valid enough reasons to give her away?"

"She is almost eighteen years old," Kirk pointed out. "Nearly an adult. Surely she will listen to reason."

Kate sighed again. "What do you want to do? Should we agree to a meeting?"

He stared at her sadly. "You know how guilty I felt for not being there when you gave birth, but it couldn't be helped at the time."

"I know," she spoke softly with a slight smile. "Don't worry about that chapter of our lives. It's all water under the bridge."

Even when she smiled, there was an infinite air of sadness about Kate, a heaviness of heart always present. It had lessened somewhat in time, yet Kirk could still feel it. He had learned to live with the poignancy a long time ago, but had been ridden with guilt because of it. He was the root cause of her heartache. If it hadn't been for him and Ken Lester, Kate could have kept their child in the first place.

Kirk pursed his lips, keeping eye contact with his wife. She watched him closely in return, trying to gauge his frame of mind, but was unable to. "*If Mom was here, she could tell me exactly what he was thinking,*" Kate thought briefly.

Kirk spoke at length. "Let's do it, Katie. Let's meet our daughter. What real harm can it do?"

"No telling at this point," she murmured.

"I'll do it if you're game. Don't you want to see how our child turned out?"

"Yes," Kate replied thoughtfully. "But not at the expense of the life we've made for ourselves. I'd rather not invite drama and resentment, even from our own child."

"How did she find out she was adopted?"

"Mom said Darcy told her she sought her birth certificate to get a passport for a school trip to France."

Kirk nodded. "Makes sense. Being your daughter, she's probably as smart as a whip."

Kate felt her mood lighten. "And if she looks like you, she's got to be model gorgeous."

Coal dark eyes met blue ones. The couple smiled warmly at each other, each of them infused with a jolt of unconditional love.

She knew the decision had been made.

* * *

KIRK WATCHED HIS wife as she made her way back into the house, while he remained seated at the table in the garden. He admired the graceful swing of Kate's hips, and the movement of her blonde curls as the breeze gently wafted them across the span of her lower back. She was coming up to her thirty-seventh birthday in a few months time, but the years had been extremely kind to her. Her allure seemed to increase rather than decline as she matured. Her face was perhaps thinner, but the sharpened angles of her cheekbones merely added to her eye-catching beauty.

He lit another cigarette, his gaze going to the book of poetry on the table as Kate disappeared from his view. While it had been his intention to make reparation to his wife for the horrors of their early life together and his subsequent imprisonment, he understood with an agonizing veracity that he had continued to fail her. His decade-long stint as an inmate had seen to that. He had been repeatedly raped while in prison, abused by larger and stronger men. By the time he was released into the real world again, the years of abuse had taken their toll. He found himself to be impotent, and no amount of doctor or specialist consultations or medications had rectified the condition. It deeply pained him, causing a great amount of guilt and misery that he did well to hide from Kate. He had a feeling she knew the depths of his despair nonetheless, although she never spoke of it. For all intents and purposes, theirs was a marriage in name only. They were the best of friends in a sense. The love they shared continued to burn between them, but it was doomed to remain unfulfilled.

To that end, Kirk was desperate to give Kate anything else she desired. He had no real interest in meeting their only child after all these years. Deep in his heart, he felt it best

to leave the situation alone, to keep the emotional wounds closed. Yet he knew Kate needed to meet the child, her own guilt for giving her away having tormented her since the day the deed was done.

A daughter. They had a daughter. And she wanted to meet them.

Kirk sighed as he crushed out his cigarette in the ashtray. He reached for *The Flowers of Evil* and returned to his reading spot in the book. The birds chirped and the breeze washed over him as he once again lost himself in the works of Baudelaire.

BLOODLUST:**Excerpt from Seven (*First Encounters*)**

THE TRIPLE MOON Auto Repair shop front was comprised of a dark-green facade, with the company name stenciled in tall gold letters over the large picture window facing West Cedar Street. The store itself only covered a small area, with a long counter and cash register, and several rows of miscellaneous auto parts and accessories on display. The repair zone was located through a door behind the cash register, stretching as far as the eye could see to a set of tall garage doors that opened onto an alley.

A typical day would have cars hoisted into the air on tall auto lifts, most of them of the expensive variety: Aston Martin, Bentley, BMW, Bugatti, Cadillac, Ferrari, Lamborghini, Lincoln, Mercedes, Porsche, Range Rover and Rolls Royce, among others.

Kirk employed more than twenty mechanics, most of whom worked from Monday through Saturday. Triple Moon Auto Repair was not open for business on Sundays and major holidays, although Kirk had been known to help longtime customers regardless if they found themselves in a pinch when the shop was supposed to be closed.

Emma found the shop without too much difficulty, thanks to the map Kate had printed for her. She stared at the building, pausing as she read the lettering. She mouthed the words to herself: "*Triple Moon Auto Repair. How interesting.*" She entered the store, map in hand, and proceeded to the back. A young man, not much older than herself, stood behind the counter. He had thin, dark brown hair and eyes, and was wearing the auto shop uniform of black trousers and a coal grey shirt, the name "Mick" stitched in gold thread over the right breast pocket.

"Can I help you?" he asked politely, his eyes widening as she drew closer.

Emma gave him a smile. "I hope so. My name is Emma Beckett, and I'm here to see Kirk Lester."

"Do you have an appointment?"

Emma shook her head. "No, he wasn't expecting me. But if you tell him I'm here, I'm sure he'll see me."

Mick paused, keeping his eyes on her face. "If you don't mind me asking, are you a relative of Kirk's?" He looked sheepish. "I mean, you bear a stunning resemblance to him."

"Yes, I'm a relative."

He nodded. "Sure, that's what I thought. Give me a minute, and I'll go find Kirk in the shop." The young man turned and quickly disappeared through the door behind the counter.

Emma glanced around the store as she waited. The floor was hard but highly polished, auto parts and accessories hanging from small hooks and lined neatly in rows. She saw all manner of belts, hoses, fasteners, filters, hardware, and chemicals: plastic oil canisters, windshield wiper fluid, WD-40, along with a large variety of air fresheners.

She heard the door behind the counter open. She turned to see Kirk approaching her, wiping his hands on a dark green shop towel. He wore the same uniform as Mick, only with his name "Kirk" above the breast pocket.

"Hi," she said quickly. "I didn't mean to barge in unannounced, but I wanted to see where you worked."

He regarded her, a puzzled expression on his face. At first, she thought he was going to dismiss her, but then his features softened. "Nothing to see, really," he replied casually. "Just a bunch of cars on hoists, with men working underneath them."

"I'd still like to see it."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself. Follow me, and I'll give you the grand tour."

She trailed him through the door, immediately assailed by a blast of cool air, and the mingling aromas of grease, oil and human sweat.

"It can get hellishly hot in here," Kirk offered in explanation when he saw her wrinkled nose. "I keep several swamp coolers on the roof, which also helps circulate any exhaust in the air."

"You seem to do a brisk business," Emma noted as she gazed at more than a dozen cars up on hoists, two rows back on the sides of the shop. "And they look like fancy cars."

Kirk flashed her a brief smile. "We keep busy all year round. The elite of Beacon Hill like their cars fixed quick. We do a pick-up and delivery service as well, so they don't have to traipse to the shop."

"What kind of car do you and Kate drive?" Emma asked, curious.

"I have a Camaro, while Katie drives a Camry."

"I belong to the sierra club at school," Emma said as they began walking down the aisle between hoists. "I never learned to drive. I always take my bike everywhere."

"That would probably suffice in a small town like Mendocino," he told her with a nod. "But Boston is a big city. Having a car is pretty much a necessity here, unless one takes public transport."

Emma suddenly became aware that she and Kirk, while talking about trifles as they walked along together, were being closely observed by several employees of the shop. Kirk didn't seem to notice, his stride long yet slow. He had a confident air, a tranquility that seemed to come naturally. She wondered if there was something deeper, hidden just underneath the surface, that made her biological father tick.

One man in particular, with his name "Salvatore" displayed above the right breast pocket of his shirt, seemed spellbound by the sight of father and daughter moving along together. He was holding a long, heavy wrench, which had gone somewhat slack as he watched them, his mouth slightly agape. He was older, perhaps in his forties, with a pencil-thin mustache and receding black hair.

Just as Emma and Kirk were to pass by Salvatore, he let the wrench slip from his hands. It fell with a resounding thud on the top of his left foot, causing him to cry out in sharp pain and drop to his knees.

Kirk darted toward the fallen man, Emma quickly on his heels. Salvatore was sitting now, both his hands covering his left foot, his face pinched with pain. "I think I broke it," he moaned, his heavy Italian accent making his words barely comprehensible.

Kirk kneeled down next to the man, touching his shoulder. "Sal, can we get your shoe off to take a look?"

"I don't know," he replied reluctantly. "It's throbbing like fire, and I think I feel something piercing the skin."

"Let me try, Sal," Kirk said gently.

The man nodded. "Okay, but go easy, will you?"

Kirk untied the laces on the black canvas shoes slowly, reaching down to hold the heel so he could pull the shoe outward and off. Emma watched in consternation, wincing slightly as she saw the pain written on Salvatore's face.

Kirk drew off the shoe after a few minutes, eliciting several deep moans from Salvatore. He then peeled off the dark-colored ankle stockings, setting it with the shoe turned on its side on the concrete.

Emma stared at the man's bruised and bloodied foot, detecting the bone from his big toe joint sticking out through his skin.

"Oh my God," Salvatore said, horrified as he looked down at his foot.

"We'll get it taken care of," Kirk told him. "Let's get you to Mass General hospital, Sal, and get it fixed up. I'll cover the cost since it happened while you were on the job."

"Wait," Emma spoke up as she kneeled down next to Salvatore. "Let me have a closer look."

Salvatore looked askance at her, but said nothing. She held his gaze to draw his attention away from his foot as she placed her hand gently on the protruding bone. "It'll be okay," she said in a soothing tone. "It's not as bad as it looks."

"Emma," Kirk spoke softly. "What do you think you're doing?"

She gave him a brief glance. "Trust me," she whispered, and then turned her attention back to Salvatore.

A group of mechanics had gathered around the scene, watching as Emma knelt over their co-worker. Kirk noticed them, pointing his finger at Mick. "Go and get a clean cloth soaked in warm water. Hurry."

Mick scurried off to the rear of the shop, but soon returned with a dampened dark green shop towel. Emma had already relaxed her stance and removed her hand from Salvatore's foot. She reached for the towel, so Mick thrust it into her hands.

She gently wiped away traces of blood on Salvatore's foot. His eyes grew wider as he watched her. The warm wash had revealed smooth skin all over the top of his foot, the protruding bone no longer evident. Apart from a slight reddening around his big toe joint, his foot looked normal.

Salvatore gasped loudly, pulling his foot away from Emma. "*Il Malocchio*," he cried out, terror in his eyes as he pulled himself to his feet. He grabbed his shoe and stocking, and quickly ran to the door leading into the store, slamming it behind him.

Kirk had heard enough of Salvatore's Italian utterances over time to understand what the man had relayed. He had said to Emma, plain and simple: "*The evil eye*."

"What the hell just happened?" Kirk wondered aloud, his eyes going to Emma.

She shrugged lightly, pulling herself upright. "It wasn't as bad as it looked once I washed the blood off. Salvatore will be fine."

Kirk stared at her, his mind suddenly in a whirl. Emma had healed Sal's broken bone right in front of his eyes. There was no doubt about it. He felt an encroaching fear run along his spine. Emma was his daughter, true, but she was also Kate's daughter, and Noel's granddaughter. Did Emma have a special gift of her own through the bloodline, somehow filtered and mutated through Noel and Kate? As fantastic as it sounded, it was the only plausible explanation to what he had just witnessed.

He rose to his feet, gesturing to the mechanics who were still standing around, most of them wearing dumbfounded expressions on their faces. "Okay, guys," he said sternly. "Back to work."

The men shuffled to their hoist stations. The shop had grown eerily quiet as the drama had unfolded, but began filling with noise again after a long minute.

Kirk turned to Emma. "Thank you for helping Sal. You're right, it must have looked worse than it really was."

She nodded. "What did he say to me just before he ran off? I didn't understand it."

Kirk hesitated. "Sal is a superstitious Italian, full of weird sayings."

"I get that, but what did he say?"

"*Il Malocchio* is an Italian phrase meaning the evil eye."

Emma drew in her breath. "Why would he say that to me?"

"He thought his foot was broke, and you seemed to fix it just by touching him. It probably seemed other-worldly to him."

She nodded slowly. "That makes sense, I guess." She raised her head and looked Kirk in the eye. "I was just trying to help."

"And you did," he assured her. "Thank you."

Emma smiled thinly. "Well, I've taken enough of your time. I'll go back to the house. See you tonight?"

"I'll be there," he replied, returning her smile.

Kirk watched as she made her way to the store door. Then he turned back to the shop, where he saw the mechanics watching her departure as well.

"Back to work," he growled. "That's my daughter you're ogling."

The men hastily returned to their work, casting furtive glances at Kirk as he returned to his own hoist station. He ignored them, concentrating on the underbelly of a silver Porsche over his head instead.

* * *

WHEN HE GOT home later that afternoon, Kirk headed straight upstairs to take a shower and change his clothes. Kate followed him, telling her husband about her day with Emma, Shawn, Noel and Pim. "We had lunch at The Grotto," she said as she watched Kirk strip off his dirty work shirt.

"Sounds like fun," Kirk said absently, bending over to remove his trousers. "My day was quite interesting as well."

Kate sat on the edge of the bed. "Emma wanted to see where you worked, so I gave her a map to the place. How did it go?"

"It went fine, until Emma healed old Sal's broken foot."

"Broken foot?" Kate repeated, mystified. "When did Sal break his foot?"

Kirk snorted. "Well, apparently he didn't. That's the thing."

Kate shook her head. "You're not making sense, darling."

"I was showing Emma around the shop," Kirk continued as he paused at the foot of the bed. "Sal dropped a rather large wrench right onto his foot, and he went down in pain. I took off his shoes and sock, and there it was. The bone near his big toe joint was sticking out from his skin. Before I could do anything, Emma stepped in and placed her hand on Sal's foot. This went on for about a minute. When she moved her hand away and washed his foot with a towel, the bone was no longer sticking out from his foot. It's like the break never happened." He gazed down at his wife. "What do you make of that?"

Kate looked shocked. "I'm not sure. It sounds . . . unbelievable, to be honest."

"Really?" He asked, exasperation edging his tone. "You of all people find it unbelievable, Katie? This coming from a woman who can bend minds, and with a mother who can read them?"

Kate swallowed. "I guess it's possible, but how?"

Kirk turned and walked to their closet, where he drew out a pair of clean black trousers and a fawn-colored pullover. "The nearest thing I can figure is, Emma somehow inherited something from you and Noel. You know, the bloodline filtering down through generations might somehow be mutated with a different gift. There is no rational explanation for it, of course, and no one would ever believe us, naturally, but there it is."

Kate stared at him. She had gone pale, her eyes fearful as she spoke to him. "I wouldn't wish what I have on *anyone*, let alone my own daughter. To think she might possess something because of me, and Mom, it's just unthinkable."

"You don't have a choice in the matter," Kirk replied laconically. "Besides, having the power to heal isn't such a bad thing. Don't you agree?"

"It's not that," Kate protested. "It's the burden of it, don't you see? The power to heal is all fine, but carrying the weight of such a skill for a lifetime will crush her, especially if people were to find out about it."

"We'll just have to make sure no one finds out about it, then."

"I wonder if Cabral and Darcy realize Emma has the power to heal?"

"They must have an inkling," Kirk responded. "They raised her. Surely they noticed something over the years."

"Should we ask Emma about it?"

Kirk shrugged. "I'd say no, only because I think she should bring it up first. If she wants to talk about it, then we can listen to her and offer our support."

"How can we offer our support? These gifts . . . are solitary afflictions. There is no way to alleviate the pressure of having it."

"We can listen to her, comfort her. Beyond that, I have no idea."

Kate studied her husband. "How do you feel about her being here? Meeting her?"

Kirk sighed as he made his way to the bathroom. He paused in the doorway to look back at Kate, who was still sitting on the bed. "I wasn't too excited about it at first, frankly. Why stir up a hornet's nest? But now that I've met her, I'm glad we agreed to it. She's a good girl, Katie. And she has a good head on her shoulders. Now . . . well, I'm actually proud to be her father. She turned out splendidly, with much of the credit going to Cabral and Darcy. Still, we made her, you and I. That counts for something, doesn't it?" With a wink, he turned and went into the bathroom. A minute later, Kate heard the shower running.

She remained seated on the bed, a slight smile curving her lips. It was true. Emma was the best part of them, and nothing could ever change it.

BLOODLUST:**Excerpt from Chapter Nine (*Growing Bonds*)**

AFTER DINNER, EMMA approached Kirk in the den, where he was sitting on the tan sofa, staring pensively into the cold fireplace. He had a tulip glass filled with cognac in his hand, the base of the crystal resting on his thigh. He turned his attention to her when she came to stand in front of him, his eyes now questioning, if not apprehensive.

"Can I join you?" She asked him softly.

He waved his free hand to the empty place next to him. "Be my guest."

She sat down, gracefully crossing her legs. Kirk noted - not for the first time - that they were long, just like his, tonight encased in dark brown dress slacks. Her light-green long-sleeved shirt was tucked into the waistband, emphasizing her slender and lithe appearance.

"Kate told me you were agreeable to me visiting your old home," Emma began. "Are you sure you're all right with it?"

Kirk moved his eyes to the glass resting on his thigh. "It's not so much that I'm agreeable, Emma. It's natural to want to see where you were born, so I wouldn't deny you that. The house . . ." He paused, groping for words. "The house contains many of my old demons, a horrible baggage I wouldn't wish on anyone." He sighed. "You don't know the half of it just from reading news accounts and sensationalized books about my father, and me."

Emma stared at him while he took a large sip of his cognac. "If you feel so strongly about it, I won't go."

He shook his head. "No, go and see it. That way you'll get it out of your system, and perhaps be satisfied."

"Can I ask you a another question?"

He glanced at her quickly, and then looked away. "Sure, go ahead."

"Why don't you sell the house? Or simply have it destroyed?"

He took several minutes in answering, taking a few more sips of his cognac before speaking. His voice was so quiet she had to lean forward slightly to hear him.

"Despite all the horror visited upon so many women, the entire community, and even my Katie, I can't bring myself to sell it. I don't expect anyone to really understand, but it is my father's house, technically speaking. As evil and loathsome as he became, he is still my father. He hates me now, of course, which for some strange reason doesn't bother me. I don't know whether it's a warped sense of loyalty to him that keeps me from selling the house, or if it's a matter of having a place to go if things in my life go sour. I never used to be this way, not until I spent ten years behind bars. It can change a man, alter his personality and perception until it in no way resembles what he once was. I'm speaking about myself, of course, so pardon the third person analogy. I'm not the man I once was, and probably never will be again. Somehow, in some way, having that house tethered to me is just

punishment for all of my own sins." He turned to look at her again. "Am I making any sense?"

Emma nodded slowly. "Yes, you are. I think I understand. You feel as if you haven't been punished enough for your transgressions. You attach yourself to enough misery so you can feel as if you are making further reparation."

He gave her a small, somewhat sad smile. "Exactly."

"But Kate loves you," Emma persisted. "She waited for you to be free so you could continue your lives together."

"Kate is my salvation," he replied solemnly. "God knows why she chose me to love, or why she continues to do so. I wake up every day and thank the powers that be for her, if there is such a thing. I would simply die without her. Yet . . ." He hesitated. "Sometimes I think she would be better off without me. I have brought her more heartache than joy over the years, so I'm amazed she has stood by me as she has."

Emma was quiet for a long moment, thinking about what Kirk had just told her. That her biological parents loved one another was glaringly evident, despite their past difficulties. Theirs was an unconditional love that transcended time and circumstances. She supposed it was very romantic in a way, while at the same time it was bittersweet. The abiding love they shared was nonetheless interwoven with a deep sadness that was also worn on their sleeves.

"Do you remember the first time you saw Kate?" Emma asked, wanting to continue their intimate discussion. She was communicating with her father and she didn't want it to end, even though the subject matter was uneasy for him.

Kirk smiled widely, revealing his teeth. "I'll never forget the first time I saw Katie. I was walking down the hall at English High School, and she was standing by her locker. She literally took my breath away, but being the ridiculous macho man I was, pretended I didn't notice her at first. Yet I knew, in that instant, that I would love her until the day I died. Whether she had anything to do with me or not, I'd go to my grave loving her. It was quite a revelation for a teenage boy, let me tell you. Immature and brash though I was at the time, I still knew Katie was for me in the blink of an eye."

"As it was for her?" Emma wanted to know.

"Maybe not at first, but it didn't take long once we started going out."

Emma smiled. "I've found such a love in Shawn."

Kirk glanced at her as he took another sip of cognac. "He's been right in front of you your whole life."

"I love him." Emma returned Kirk's regard, a small smile forming on her lips. "Shawn and I have been connected for a long time, so I don't know if I can view it objectively. Yet I know I love him, and want to spend my life with him."

"You're young, Emma," he stated calmly. "There's no need to rush into anything. Let nature take its course. I'm sure it will come out all right in the end."

Impulsively, Emma leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you," she told him.

Kirk grinned, hoping to bring levity into his tone. He winked at her as he replied wryly: "What are father's for?"

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, Kirk changed his mind about going to the Lester home on Chestnut Avenue. Instead of escaping to work, as he originally planned to do, he decided to accompany Kate, Emma and Shawn to the house.

"Are you sure?" Kate asked him doubtfully as they stood in their bedroom getting dressed.

"Yes," he replied strongly as he slipped on a pair of dark loafers while sitting on the made bed. "I thought about it all night. Maybe if I go inside and look around, I can finally put my demons to rest."

"Or you might have an adverse reaction and become more down than usual," Kate pointed out practically.

"I'll never know until I try," Kirk responded simply.

She gave him a tense smile. "Emma has brought something out in you, hasn't she?"

"Such as?"

Kate came to sit next to him on the bed. "Her serenity, her utter tranquility of being has had an impact on you. It's as if she represents hope for the future."

"Well, she does, doesn't she?" He countered. "She has her whole life in front of her, and hasn't been jaded by what humanity has to offer as of yet. It does make me feel hopeful, Katie. If I can confront what has been eating away at me all these years, maybe I can finally lay it to rest."

"Then what?" Kate wanted to know. "Sell the house? Or raze it?"

"I'm of a mind to have it torn down," he replied. "I thought about that last night, too. Why keep it there? It's nothing more than a ghoulish tourist attraction, reminding everyone about the atrocities committed by my father, and me."

Kate sighed. "I've told you so many times, darling. What happened in the past is solely the fault of your father. You were a child when your mother and sister were killed, and then he took over parenting duties. How could you fight it?"

He shrugged. "We can agree to disagree. I had choices, and I made the wrong ones." He reached over to place his hand on top of hers on the bed. "We could have the house razed, and then a garden planted in the memory of my father's victims. But *no* bluebell bushes," he finished with emphasis.

She attempted a smile. "It sounds like a splendid idea, darling. A fitting end to the history of the house. Perhaps, over time, people will forget if it's turned into a memorial garden."

"I'm sure of it."

BLOODLUST:**Excerpt from Chapter Twelve (*Visit with the Devil*)**

THE SPRAWLING COMPOUND known as the Massachusetts Correctional Institution (MCI) astounded Emma. Her first sight of the large, white structure, along with its several adjacent buildings and guard towers, caused her eyes to widen in surprise. It was a massive display of strength, and intimidation. Her eyes followed the barbed wire spires lining the top of the fence line, which coiled around the entire area.

She and Shawn were in the back seat of a taxi cab, which they had hailed at Louisburg Square early that morning. The thirty-five-mile trip took nearly an hour by the time the cab pulled in front of the main gate. A uniformed officer stepped from the guard shack and approached the driver's side door of the taxi. The cabbie rolled down the window.

"Do you have an appointment?" The officer asked as he peered into the backseat.

The cabbie gestured to Emma and Shawn with a wave of his hand. "These two do."

The officer leaned over from his waist in order to get a better look at the back seat occupants.

"Superintendent Masterson is expecting us," Emma told him calmly. "I'm Emma Beckett, and this is Shawn Baskerville."

The officer nodded. "Of course. The superintendent informed me of your visit. You'll have to walk from here, though. The taxi is not cleared to proceed, but the distance is not far."

Emma and Shawn alighted from the cab, paying the driver. They followed the officer to a smaller gate next to the guard shack. He opened it and pointed forward. "Follow the path about twenty-five yards and you'll see the door. I'm sure Superintendent Masterson is waiting for you. He told me you'd be arriving this morning."

Emma thanked him, and then she and Shawn began walking along the well-worn path. He reached for her hand, holding on tightly. A man emerged from the door just as they reached it.

"Miss Beckett?" He questioned in a deep voice.

Emma smiled. "Yes, and this is my friend, Shawn Baskerville."

"Very good," the man replied. "I'm Superintendent Masterson. Once we get inside, I'll need to see your identification and you'll have to complete some paperwork. We will also have to take photographs of you for the visitor badges. All standard procedure for a visit here."

Emma nodded, and then watched the Superintendent as they entered the building. He was tall and painfully thin, and looked to be nearing retirement age. His hair, surprisingly dark and windblown, fell just below his jaw line. He wore a dark suit and tie, which only seemed to emphasize his pale gauntness. In Emma's mind, he gave the impression of being an undertaker rather than the superintendent of a large prison.

Then she noticed the cool - yet somehow cloying - air as they moved inside the prison. A long hallway led from the entryway, with several doors on both sides of the hall, all closed. Superintendent Masterson stopped at the third door on the right and ushered them in.

The room contained a few tables, a camera stand with a white backdrop, and a fingerprint tray off to the side. The superintendent motioned for them to sit at the table nearest the door, pushing two small stacks of paper and pens toward them as he gave instructions. "Get started on these while I fetch a sergeant, who will prepare your visitor badges. I'll be right back."

Emma and Shawn sat down, both of them taking a look at the forms.

"Good Lord," Shawn said in a low tone. "Ten pages of questions. It's worse than filling out an employment application. Name, address, birth date, birthplace, parents names, social security number, race, education, references, the usual *have you ever been convicted of a felony?* question, purpose of the visit and, finally, room for a signature."

"We've got nothing to hide," Emma told him as she began filling out the form. "We'll be done in a jiffy."

They had nearly completed the forms when Superintendent Masterson returned with a female officer dressed in black slacks and a blue dress shirt. She was tall, with short dark hair and a creamy complexion.

"This is Sergeant Boyer," the superintendent said. "She'll fingerprint you, take copies of your identification, and then take your pictures. The photo will be used to make your visitor badges, but will be destroyed after the visit is complete. Once all that's done, we can be on our way to Ten Block to meet the prisoner Lester."

"Does he know we're here?" Emma asked.

Superintendent Masterson shook his head. "No. He just knows he has two visitors, but has no idea who you are yet."

"Good," Shawn muttered. "The less he knows, the better."

The superintendent pursed his lips. "I quite agree with you, Mr. Baskerville. Lester is an unsavory character, to say the least. He is the worst of the worst. Please don't worry, however. He will be shackled the entire time you are with him, and there will be guards present."

Finally, after Emma and Shawn were given visitor badges with their photos intact, they exited the room with Superintendent Masterson and made their way along the hall again.

Emma swallowed nervously. *The time had come.*

She was ready to meet her grandfather.

* * *

KEN LESTER HAD aged considerably in the last nineteen years, but he still bore the unmistakable Lester resemblance. The long time in prison had hardened him, yet his mind still worked clearly, and maliciously. Moldering evil still pulsed strongly in his black heart.

Shackled at the waist, wrists and ankles, he shuffled down a hallway, accompanied by two armed officers. He knew them, of course, even though they treated him with a barely-veiled contempt. He understood that while they hated him, they also feared him, despite his rather frail and aged appearance.

He was curious about who was visiting him today. No one had come to see him in several years, not even the brainless women who imagined themselves in love with him. He still received letters on occasion, but not as many as he used to. His cult following had dwindled over the past decade. It was disappointing, but something he soon shrugged off in typical, derisive fashion.

The visiting room had not changed much over time, he noted, even though he hadn't seen it in years. It was reached through a long hallway in Ten Block, located near the portal to the rest of the prison. The windowless room was approximately the size of four standard jail cells, bars included. There was a large table - bolted to the cement floor - with four chairs. A glassy mirror overlooking the room was, in fact, a one-way window whereby visits could be observed and heard in an adjacent space.

The officers attached Ken's shackles to the table once he sat down, ensuring he could not make a move in any direction. Then they stood nearby, expressionless and silent, as the waiting began.

When Ken saw a young woman enter the cell, his first thought was she must be a long-lost Lester relative. She had the look of a Lester all right; tall and lithe with wheat-colored hair. It was more than that, though. She resembled Kirk in a haunting way, which caused him a brief moment of consternation.

Then his eyes darted to the young man with her. He appeared to be a light-skinned African-American with blue eyes. Those light eyes were directed at him, where Ken detected an obvious flow of hostility. The young man was angry without speaking, that much was clear, and it piqued his interest as to why.

Ken finally found his voice. "Who the hell are you two?" He barked, allowing the aggression in his voice to be the first nuance they heard from him. "I don't know either one of you. Let me guess." He snorted. "You're reporters, looking to interview me."

The girl regarded him coolly as she took a seat. "No, we're not reporters. My name is Emma Beckett, and this is my friend, Shawn Baskerville." She paused briefly before continuing. "My biological parents are Kate Grady and Kirk Lester."

For one of the few times in his life, Ken was speechless. But not for long.

"So," he sneered. "You're the little whelp Katie gave away all those years ago. I should have known. You look exactly like my idiot son." He chuckled. "Tell me, are you as feather-brained as he is?"

Emma's voice came cold as Shawn clenched his jaw muscles. "Kirk is not like you at all, if that's what you're referring to. He's not a depraved killer or a non-human specimen such as yourself."

Ken laughed. "Do you honestly think I give a damn?" He shook his head. "Why did you come here? I care as much about you as I do my worthless son. I can see you are cut from the same cloth."

"I wanted to reassure myself that I'm nothing like you," Emma retorted. "You answered my question the minute you opened your mouth."

Ken shrugged as best he could in shackles. "Makes no never mind to me." His eyes went to Shawn, who was glowering at him. "Who's your half-breed friend here? Will he be joining the family soon?"

"If I ever have the honor of joining Emma's family, you'll be the last one to know about it," Shawn said, his tone seething.

Ken threw back his head and laughed heartily. "Again - what's it to me? I don't give a rat's ass about any of it. The two of you are losers, just like my son and his prissy Katie." He glared at them. "She was a great piece of ass, by the way. Are you sure I'm not your father, instead of Kirk?" His eyes were glittering with malice as he waited for her reaction.

Emma felt a wrench in her heart. Could it be possible? Could this loathsome monster be her father, instead of Kirk? *No, it couldn't be.* Surely Kate would have told her if there were any doubts . . .

"He's lying," Shawn said harshly. He turned to look at Emma. "Do the math, Em. You were conceived while Kate and Kirk were in England, remember? This lowlife was nowhere near England at that time."

Emma felt relief wash over her as her eyes expressed gratitude to Shawn.

Ken snickered, his face an ugly mask of hatred. "Had you going for a minute there, though. Didn't I?"

"What made you the way you are?" Emma asked calmly, ignoring his snide remark. "Did your father do something to you when you were young? Something terrible that made an indelible impression on you, that scarred you for life?"

Ken snorted. "My father - your great-great grandfather, Richard - was a milquetoast, a real panty-waist. He was nothing to me. On the other hand, my mother - the late, great Elizabeth McInerney Lester - ruled the roost. She pretty much let me do as I pleased."

"Elizabeth was a poet," Emma stated. "Like Kirk."

"Poetry is a complete waste of time if you ask me," Ken replied as he rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "A bunch of mincing words that mean absolutely nothing to anyone."

"Were you jealous of their talent?" Shawn spoke up, a look of contempt on his face. "Their creative abilities must have bothered you. It far outshone anything you could possibly do."

Ken chuckled. "Oh, but there you are dead wrong, son. No one - and I mean *no one* - has the special kind of ability that I have. The ability of deciding who lives and, more

importantly, who dies. Elizabeth would never dream of it. In fact, she was repulsed by me. Yet she kept my secrets to her dying day. And Kirk," he waved his hand dismissively. "Never possessed my set of skills. He was just a pathetic wannabe."

Emma stared at her grandfather, disgusted by him yet compelled to hear more. Her mind filled with a thought, an improbability at best. *"I can heal animals and people of their physical injuries, but can I rectify a mental affliction as well? Or can I even possibly heal a person filled with so much poisonous hate and evil? Do I even care enough to try?"* She did not know her grandfather, but she could feel the malevolence in him just as sure as she was sitting there, regarding him.

Shawn turned his head to look at Emma. "I think we're wasting our time here. Are you ready to go?"

She shook her head. "Not just yet. Give me a few more minutes, will you?"

Shawn sighed impatiently, but gave her a short nod of acquiescence.

Emma returned her focus to Ken. "Have you ever been treated by a doctor for your mental disorder?"

"Mental disorder?" He repeated angrily. "I don't have a mental disorder." He shrugged. "Sure, they've set doctors on me over the years to try and drag something out of me that doesn't exist, but it never worked. I like myself the way I am."

"How could you possibly?" She countered.

Ken lowered his head slightly, his glaring eyes trained on her face. "Look, little girl, I didn't ask you to come here. Frankly, I'd rather not know you at all. You remind me too much of Kirk, who was such a huge disappointment to me, and still is. Why don't you just go home and diddle your boyfriend here, and leave me alone."

Emma closed her eyes briefly. Should she try to salvage what little humanity might be lurking in her grandfather, or let it be? Without warning, she opened her eyes and quickly reached across the table. When she touched the top of Ken's hand, he jerked slightly, startled by the contact.

"Get your hand off me," he snarled, but then paused. He returned Emma's stare, momentarily speechless.

Emma felt the warmth flowing from her into Ken, but it wasn't like it had been with other people. Something was wrong. The heat was not fluid. It refused to transmit. It was as if it was being blocked by a force within Ken, not allowing a free transfer or accepting passage. He might not be aware of what was happening - the healing attempt or the blockage thereof - but it was real, and she could feel it.

It was blowing back on her, the pressure growing by the second. It felt like a molten stream fighting back at her, a shiny black blood of pulsation refused entry by her subject. She was aware of her hand, and then her body, growing warmer until it became unbearable for her. With an audible gasp she drew back, taking her hand away and leaning back into her chair with a loud exhale of air.

"Em?" Shawn asked in alarm. "Are you okay?"

She glanced at him and nodded. "I'll be fine in a minute."

Ken gazed at her with a mixture of anger and fear. "What the hell were you trying to do?" He demanded.

She returned his stare but said nothing.

Recognition suddenly dawned in his eyes. "You're like your mother, aren't you? She tried her will-bending shit on me once, but never again. Nothing persuades me, not even the hokey, witchy stuff." He leered across the table at her. "Tell me, little girl, what's your particular specialty, eh? Are you a will-bender like your whore mother? Or do you have a special talent of your own?"

Emma stood from the table abruptly. "I've seen and heard enough. You sicken me. I was going to ask you how you could kill all those women . . . but now I don't want to know. It's obvious to me as to why . . . you are sub-human, a sociopath, incapable of feeling compassion or love. It's as natural to you as breathing. You are the true personification of evil." She paused, her smile triumphant. "And I am nothing like you."

Shawn stood to join her, grabbing Emma's hand.

"Keep your eyes on her," Ken taunted Shawn. "She could very well be like me and not realize it yet. She might turn on you at a moment's notice. You'll never see it coming."

Shawn ignored him, nodding to one of the guards. "We're ready to leave," he indicated.

"Give my love to Kirk and his precious Katie," Ken chortled as the guard slid open the cell room door. "I have fond memories of the night both Kirk and I had our way with Katie. In fact, we did her good the night you were born, Emma. Quite a family history we have, eh?" Then he laughed loudly, the uproarious sound seeming to fill the entire cell.

Emma couldn't leave fast enough.

BLOOD & SOUL:**Excerpt from Chapter Fourteen (*Dispossessed*)**

MUCH LATER, AFTER guests had departed the Minot townhouse following a catered menu of salads, finger foods and beverages, Kate sat quietly in the den with her family and Madge. She gingerly sipped a tulip glass of Courvoisier cognac.

She made a face as she looked into the amber liquid. "I never could stand this stuff." She sighed, her glance going to Emma. "How long can you stay?"

"As long as you need me to," Emma replied firmly.

Kate smiled wanly. "I'll be okay, so please don't worry." Her eyes watered. "I never thought to lose my husband and father in such awful ways, but life goes on regardless. A piece of my heart will always be missing, and getting over their deaths will be the hardest things I've ever done, but I cannot let it destroy me."

"Take all the time you need to heal," Noel advised her daughter gently. "There isn't any rush."

"And we're all here if you need us," Madge said. "Whenever you need us."

"You'll never be alone, love," Noel agreed. "You are surrounded by love and support."

"Thank you for that," Kate said softly, blinking her eyes. "As I'm here for you."

That night, as she lay in bed, Kate's mind tossed about like a wild sea. She was bereft and grief-stricken, yes, but also angry. How could Kirk choose to end his life with her, just like that? The last straw seemed to have been the letters Ken Lester had sent him. What had caused Kirk to finally open and read them?

Kate had read the letters, sickened by their content. Which particularly nasty comment or phrase had driven the nail home for Kirk? She would never know for sure, but suspected it was Ken's last letter to Kirk, where he went on about meeting Emma.

Captain Kelly had also returned Kirk's last poems to her. Deciding she wanted to read them now, she turned on the lamp beside the bed and withdrew the two sheets of paper from the bedside table.

Taking a deep breath, she began to read.

Heart in Dusk

*Dormant now, for a decade or less.
My full heart waited in the pearly dusk,
to reach out for a long, slow caress.
Before my soul turns to dust.*

*Steadfast and true, are you.
Never deserved by me,
not even when we were new.
In your mind, I wish I could see.*

*Years of languish, deep and alone.
To take my place beside you,
from now to the end, I will atone.
For your love and forgiveness, and hatred, too.*

*Beating in the pearly dusk.
Waiting, hoping and humble.
So much more than whimsical lust,
as I walk toward you and stumble.*

*Dusky heart for you, Katie dear,
my pure and mindful seer.
All my thoughts are clear,
never again any fear.*

He was declaring his love for her in his own, unique way. Tears were streaming down her face, but she read on. She heard Kirk's voice in her head as if he were actually speaking the words to her.

Throes of Madness

*In the throes of madness,
twisting and turning.
Filled with inexplicable sadness,
insides wildly churning.*

*All effort is in vain,
hope is useless and sour.
Truly insane,
rising by the hour.*

*Think of me as before,
not as I am now.
I am nearly ashore,
floundering with each and every vow.*

*Love is but a sigh,
scattered in fray.
In my mind's eye,
you shine as I fade away.*

Kate lay on her back in the bed, the sheets of paper on her chest. The last poem was his final farewell to her, so eloquently put as usual. He was telling her that he didn't have the strength to go on, no matter how much he loved her. The last lines of the second poem were letting her know that she would shine on even after he was gone.

"Damn you, Kirk Lester," she choked out through her tears. "Damn you, and damn your father." She was also angry about Kirk giving up the chance to be a permanent fixture in Emma's life. He had tossed it away, just like he tossed away their marriage. It was a complete waste, pure and simple.

Kate turned her head on the pillow and closed her eyes, the poems rising and falling on her chest with every breath.

* * *

THE GUARD STARED at Ken Lester as he sat on the bed in his prison cell. Miguel Pinilla had worked at the Massachusetts Correctional Institution in Walpole for early twenty years, most of which had been spent eyeballing prisoners in solitary confinement. He loathed Ken Lester, often taunting the serial killer with offhand remarks about his manhood or family, but nothing seemed to penetrate his evil shell.

Miguel stood in front of the cell door on the day of Kirk Lester's funeral. Ken had no inkling that his son was dead as he never read local or national news, preferring his solitary confinement over the harsh realities of the world.

The guard didn't open the cell door, but rather spoke to prisoner 561113, as he was officially known, through the bars.

"I've some news for you."

Ken glanced in his direction, a look of disinterest on his face. The former serial killer had aged badly, his once wheaten hair now wispy and white, small bits clinging to his sunken cheekbones and papery skin. "What news do you have for me?" Ken asked, his tone bored.

"Your son is dead." Miguel made the statement bluntly, hoping for a reaction from the despicable man in the cell.

Ken went still, but his facial expression remained the same. At length, he turned his head to stare at the wall opposite the bed. "What's it to me?" He finally asked, his voice cold.

"I heard tell from a source that your boy offed himself," Miguel continued with barely veiled glee. "He hung himself, and his wife found him."

"They've always been a pair of losers," Ken returned, his voiced laced with disgust.

"If anyone is a loser, it's *you*," Miguel's voice was adamant. "Remember, it's *you* sitting in the prison cell, not them."

Ken looked at the guard again. "Anything else you'd care to impart? I'm tired of your company, frankly."

Miguel slipped a newspaper clipping under the last rung of the cell door. It slid across the floor towards Ken.

"Enjoy," the guard grinned, and then moved away.

Ken waited a few minutes before he rose to retrieve the clipping. He glanced at it impassively. It was Kirk's obituary, featuring a recent photograph.

He stared at the image. Kirk, who had resembled him in the physical but not psychological sense, was now gone from the face of the earth at the age of thirty-seven.

Ken felt no great sense of loss, no paternal anguish or regret over the loss of his son. His anger at what he perceived to be Kirk's disloyalty remained firmly lodged in his heart. It was something he couldn't forgive, not even in death.

He sat back down on his bed, allowing the obituary to flutter to the ground, disregarded.

BLOOD & SOUL:**Excerpt from the Epilogue (*Blood Comes Full Circle*)**

NOEL WAS OVER the moon when Emma told her she and Shawn were expecting a baby around Christmastime, but part of her worried about the eventual outcome. She was highly aware that a raft of "special powers" had gone from her, to Kate and, finally, to Emma. Would Emma's child be afflicted with a powerful gift that would make it stand apart from the rest? Or would the child be born normal, without the burden of an unfathomable ability?

Perhaps the genetic strain passing from generation to generation had weakened, Noel reasoned hopefully. Maybe the years had dwindled the surge of magic, rendering it feeble or nonexistent. Yet there was no way to be sure until the child was born and began to grow. If the child were to possess a power, what could it possibly entail? A combination of mind-reading, will-bending and healing, or something altogether new and unique to the child? Worse yet, would the child inherit an inkling of Ken Lester and become a monster in due course? Time would reveal the truth, but Noel was unsure if she could wait that long for answers.

Shoji would know, she decided. However, it was not as if she could summon the celestial being at will.

The evening after Emma informed them she was expecting, Noel went to bed early. She had no regrets about selling the Grady home on South Street several months ago to move in with Kate at the Minot townhouse. She had finally convinced Madge to do the same, so the older woman was now in the process of selling her home on Dane Street in order to move into the townhouse with Tommy-Boy.

Noel thoroughly adored her spacious bedroom on the second floor of the elegant dwelling. Styled in cream and periwinkle colors, the floor was lain with thick carpet and adorned with oaken end tables and chairs. The queen-sized bed overlooked a large window facing the back garden. She had her own bathroom en-suite, also done in creamy blue design. Kate had installed a large, flat-screen television in the room after Noel moved in, which she enjoyed watching at night while in bed.

After washing her face and applying copious amounts of cream, she carefully brushed her hair, which had thinned considerably over the past year as she had started twisting the strands and picking them off of her clothes. It was a nervous habit she had developed after Pim died.

She donned a long blue nightgown, and then slipped into bed. She did not turn on the television tonight, instead staring up at the ceiling as she contemplated Shoji. The last time Noel had interacted with the ethereal entity had been just prior to Pim and Kirk's deaths, not so long ago. She wasn't sure if he would materialize now, but perhaps he would make an appearance if she thought about him as she went to sleep. It was worth a try. She wanted answers - sooner rather than later.

Resting her hands on her chest and closing her eyes, Noel filled her head with the stark image of Shoji and fell into a deep sleep.

* * *

SHOJI DID NOT come to Noel in her dreams, but his sidekick Hoshi did. She wasn't sure how she knew it was Hoshi appearing in front of her, but instinct told her the apparition was he. It was surreal seeing the stoic Hoshi, who was similar to Shoji in appearance but with a marked difference. Hoshi had a rougher edge, not seeming to be content with the celestial life even though his facial expression rarely changed. He was decidedly Asian, with stark white skin against jet black hair, which was straight and shiny, cut precisely to jaw-length. He had albino white eyes, the center iris' narrow and ice-blue in color. His lips were thin and an unappetizing shade of grey, the deep frown seeming to be a permanent affliction. This was the creature who had healed Pim all those years ago, all for naught as her husband was now dead and gone from her.

"Why are you here?" She groused, her mind still in a fuzzy state of sleep. "Where is Shoji?" In her mind, she was still prone in bed as Hoshi stood over her.

"Shoji cannot come to you anymore," Hoshi relied flatly in thought, his lips unmoving. *"So he sent me instead."*

"Why can't he see me anymore?"

Hoshi did not answer, his downturned lips seeming to take on a deeper frown. He merely stared at her with his eerie, other-worldly eyes.

"Was he fired from his healing job?" Noel asked with a short, bitter laugh.

"He has joined the powers that be." Hoshi's statement of mind was simple, but he did not elaborate further.

Noel waved her hand. "Whatever. I need some answers to a few questions. Can you help me?"

"I will try."

"My granddaughter just told us she is expecting a baby," Noel continued. "I need to know - will the child be possessed with any powers?"

"Powers?"

Noel sighed impatiently. "I'm sure you know our history. If not, let me refresh you. When I was healed, I was left with mind-reading abilities. My daughter grew to have a will-bending aptitude, and my granddaughter has the wherewithal to heal injured animals and people. Will Emma's child be born with a power of its own, or will it be normal?"

Hoshi regarded her silently for a full minute, as if contemplating an answer. Then he spoke to her mind, slowly and carefully. *"The powers, as you call them, have come full circle with the three generations of women. I'm sure, by now, that you are aware of the nature of the triple goddess."*

"Yes, of course. Also known as Maiden, Mother, and Crone."

Hoshi nodded. *"Correct. The powers end with the triple cycle."*

"How do you know for sure?"

"It has been written and decided."

"By whom?" Noel pressed.

"The powers that be," Hoshi replied simply.

"Of which Shoji is now a part of?"

He nodded again.

"You are telling me my great-grandchild will be born normal?"

"Yes." Hoshi paused, hesitating briefly as if he wanted to say more, but then he pressed his lips together in silence.

"You're holding something back," Noel accused him. "Please, I need to know everything."

"The child will be a boy," Hoshi responded. *"A male child breaks the triple goddess cycle."*

Noel felt a flash of relief. She stared at Hoshi for a long moment, another thought suddenly occurring to her. She raised herself on her elbows as she spoke again. "In this so-called triple cycle, I lost my husband, as you well know. Kate also lost her husband, much too soon. Emma lost people dear to her. Will the same fate befall Shawn Baskerville, my granddaughter's husband? Or will he be allowed to have a long and happy life with Emma and however many children they may have?"

"You ask too much."

"I want answers," Noel returned angrily. "Check with your boss Shoji. Tell him I will do anything to get at the truth, even if it means annoying the two of you for the rest of my natural life."

Hoshi closed his eyes. His frown went deeper, if possible.

Noel wondered if Hoshi was communicating with Shoji on a surreal celestial plane. Was he getting permission to reveal everything to her, or to leave her hanging? To only show partial truths, or the full future blast?

Hoshi opened his eyes after several minutes, regarding her stoically. *"Against my better judgment, Shoji has agreed you should know certain facts. He wants you to have peace of mind so you no longer have need of us."*

"I'm listening," Noel said eagerly.

"Your granddaughter and her husband will have a long and happy life together," Hoshi told her in thought. *"Their son will be normal, with no lingering impact from your side of the family."*

"Will he inherit anything from the Lester side of the family?" Noel questioned. "The notion of such a thing is more worrying than anything else, including any special powers."

"You are referring to the serial killer?"

Noel nodded. "Please tell me Emma's child will not take after him."

"*The unborn child will be the great-grandson of the serial killer,*" Hoshi responded passively.

"Yes, I know that. I'm worried about it. Will my great-grandson be anything like him? Will he inherit any of the evil traits?"

"*He will be unique, unlike any other, but he will not be evil.*"

"What do you mean - *unlike any other?*"

"*He will make his mark on your world.*" Hoshi lowered his head slightly. "*Ask me no more. I have told you everything allowed.*"

Noel gave a deep sigh of relief. "Thank you. Tell Shoji I'm grateful, and I will not bother either one of you again."

"*He will be eternally gratified to hear it,*" Hoshi stated flatly.

Noel stared at him. "I do have one more question, but it's silly. Not consequential, really, but I'm curious about it."

"*Curious about what?*"

"At one point in time, were you and Shoji human beings?"

He nodded.

"What time are you from?"

He paused, hesitating as if receiving further communication from the powers that be, namely Shoji. Then he returned his gaze to her. "*We were born in a leap year during the Meiji era in Shakotan, Japan. Shoji and I are first cousins, born only thirteen minutes apart.*"

"What brought about your fates?" Noel asked, her curiosity getting the better of her. "Did you die young, or does being on a celestial plane render you ageless?"

Hoshi suddenly appeared uneasy. He went quiet for a few minutes, as if receiving another message from the other-world. Then he finally spoke. "*That is all I can tell you about us, but Shoji wants you to know that all of the ills that left you to go into others all those years ago has now been sated.*"

"That's a good thing, right?"

Hoshi nodded slightly. "*But there is more. Shoji feels you deserve to know about it. Someday, in the distant future, you will join us in the celestial plane and undertake your own calling. You have earned this through your own actions while on earth.*"

Noel gasped aloud. She had not expected to hear she would join Shoji after her eventual death, whenever that might be. How could Shoji possibly know such a thing? "*Because he is now part of the powers that be,*" she answered her own question. She wasn't sure how she felt about it, but now was not the time to ponder the surprising news. If, after death, awareness and life continued on another plane, who was she to question it now?

"*And your husband will be waiting for you,*" Hoshi told her in thought.

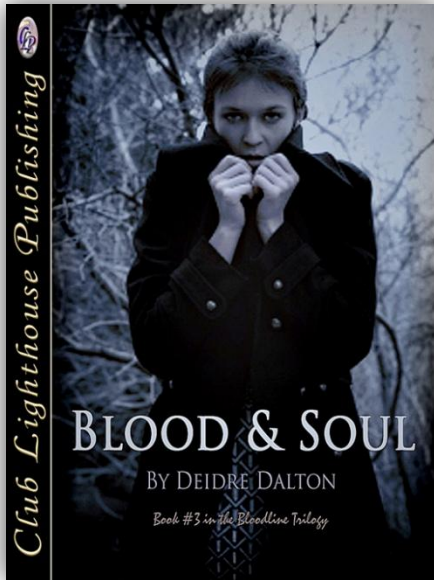
Before she could go into a round of frantic questions, Hoshi reached over and ran his hand over her eyes. "*Go back to sleep,*" he intoned. "*The day will come and you will be reunited with your husband. That's all you need to know for now.*"

Noel fell back into a deep sleep, a beatific smile pasted on her face.

Hoshi disappeared, merging slowly into the air as if he had never been there in the first place.

"BLOODLUST" INFORMATION

Bloodlust by Deidre Dalton was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in June 2022.



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•The included poems *Color Me Woe*, *Heart in Dusk* and *Throes of Madness* 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 child, she discovers she has unique powers of healing. She eventually realizes her abilities could be 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 165 years, most of which are set against the backdrop of a Gothic seaside mansion in Maine. Titles in the ten-part family saga include *Hearts in Sorrow*, *The Advent*, *Quixotic Crossings*, *The Twain Shall Meet*, *Enthrallment*, *The Keeper's Journal*, *Hearts Desires*, *The Twilight*, *Megan's Legacy* and *Limb of Iniquity*.

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 under her real name of Deborah O'Toole, Deidre is also author of the fiction titles *Celtic Remnants*, *The Crypt Artist*, *Glinhaven*, *In the Shadow of the King*, *Mind Sweeper*, 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 thirteen cookbooks, along with more than forty titles in the *Food Fare Culinary Collection*.

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

Deidre is a native of Greenwich, Connecticut. She has also lived in San Francisco, Tucson, Reno and Spokane, among other US cities.

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Deidre Dalton