

Crying Blood

by

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Chapter 1

It was one in the morning when she made the county line and the blue lights appeared behind her. This was not good timing. Amelia Calhoun took the gun from her side harness, unsnapped the compartment from beneath the passenger seat and slid it inside. As she pulled over, she unhooked the holster's strap then pulled the buckle free, depositing the harness into the backseat.

The murder probably hadn't been reported yet. She couldn't risk finding out with an unregistered weapon still warm from the round she'd sent between Steven Nagasaki's bewildered brown eyes. She pulled over to the side of the interstate out of South Carolina and waited for the cop to approach.

It was a male. She could feel it when he opened the car door. Then she saw his brown hair and boyish face, fresh from whatever school he'd attended. His body was underdeveloped with a Barney Fife skinny inexperience that made her smile.

For fun, she glanced into the rearview mirror. Her face was flushed. The excitement of the kill usually brought edges of color to her pale features. She ran her fingers through her red hair tinted in nearly brown shades, giving it the essence of a fading fire. She hoped her attractive qualities would make this stop brief.

"Good evening, Miss." The officer peered inside her window. He kept one arm above the door of the Lexus. His chest was puffed out and his voice sounded strained in

his attempt to lower it to more manly tones. “What brings you along my interstate?” With that, he offered a smile that reminded Amelia of a loser’s attempt for a date.

“I was just heading to Virginia to meet up with some friends.” Amelia smiled, flashing emerald eyes as she reached the edge of her window with her driver’s license and registration. At that moment, she saw the blood on her hand. *Damn it*, she’d been sloppy. It would be her luck to be busted by some young wannabe still wet behind the ears punk. He’d be promoted, while her life would be over if they traced the dozen or so murders to her. Then again, her counterparts would have her eliminated, just like they had her father.

“Was it Virginia Beach you were going to, or the North Carolina line?”

“The beach.” She winced and pulled her hand up just as he flashed his light inside going over her and the interior. Under the circular glow, she found more drops of blood. It had been a close kill. Mr. Nagasaki had been reaching for a towel from the steamy shower stall when she’d grabbed his hand and sent a bullet into his brain. It’s amazing how fast a human can react. She’d fired the moment his head was free of the curtain. He hadn’t struggled, not even pulled back. His features were locked in eternal surprise as blood sprayed from the hole between his eyes.

“What’s that? Are you okay, ma’am?” He flashed the light over her again.

“I just had a small accident.” She held her hand up to show him the larger concentration and hoped he would believe a wound existed beneath the red splatters. “I guess the springs under these seats are sharp. I must’ve done it getting my purse out.” She pouted. “Why exactly did you pull me over?”

“Your taillight is out, not to mention, you were speeding just a little through that straight away.” He leered at her, shifting his weight toward her car.

“I didn’t notice. It’s so late, I was just hoping to make a few more miles before I had to stop.” She offered him another smile, one filled with flirtation. Amelia let her fingers touch his hand as she took her license away. He trembled slightly from her touch, always a good sign.

“Maybe I should escort you to the hospital to have your hand looked at.” He brought the circle of light over her again. It didn’t stay on the blood drops, but lingered around her breasts.

“That won’t be necessary. Maybe you could recommend a nice hotel. I’m so tired.”

He hitched up his pants and looked down the highway as if gaining his bearings. “I believe there is a nice hotel about two exits down. You’ll see the sign.” He put his arm on her shoulder. “Would you like me to follow you there?”

“I wouldn’t want to keep you from your job,” she replied softly but noticed a change in his demeanor. His back stiffened and his hands fell to his hips. “If you’d like to check on me later, that would be fine,” she quickly added to change his demeanor.

His lips arched in a smile. “I’d like that. I get off around eleven. Maybe I could swing by and check on you then.” He touched the door of her car. His fingers were playful as they slid across the edge, near her window, before he brought his hand to his side.

A repulsed chill went over her body. “You have my name. Just ask the desk what room I’m in.”

“Maybe I’ll do that.”

“Good. I’ll see you later then.”

He nodded and tilted his hat back. With a slow strut, he went back to his car. She didn’t wait for him to pull away. She went ahead, merging into a pack of cars. Sure enough, baby Bubba’s headlights joined her on the road, tailgating to ease in behind her vehicle.

Perhaps she’d been too flirtatious.

Amelia saw the sign for the Quality Inn and took the exit. He followed. She didn’t want to check into a hotel that she couldn’t stay at simply for the purpose of losing a love lorn cop. She didn’t need the time loss. Never mind the fact that checking in for a minute would leave a trail for any pursuers.

The parking lot held a few cars. She pulled into the lot and found a spot in the back. She needed something that he couldn’t see from the road. It would buy her more time.

Sure enough, the cop pulled in the lot and stopped near her car. She got out and hurried toward the office before he reached her. He beeped once. Geez this guy was desperate. She turned and waved to him. With his date secured, he got back onto the interstate. When his taillights were out of sight, she got back in her car and followed the scenic route through Gaylord Town.

Her head and legs ached. She’d crouched in her last kill’s bushes for nearly an hour before the time was right. Hits drained her anyway. There was the tedium of preparing for the kill. Every detail had to be figured into the perfect moment. The

adrenalin built during each phase: the planning, the stalking, the entrance and the kill. When it was over and her heart stopped its mad race, she was spent.

A friend of hers, Devin, had once referred to it as a sexual high. She thought it an odd comparison, but to some, it must feel like that. To her, it was a quest to fulfill another mission and make her family happy. Another chance to earn an approving nod.

At one time, she had found it exciting, tasting the moment when she'd enter the house and find her victim unaware their last moments on earth had arrived. A flash, sometimes a half-scream and it was over. The rush was gone and she'd report back in to her stepfather/brother/boss Nick.

It was hard to keep life and death in perspective. She had a deep spiritual side that chastised her every time a call came in. Her job wasn't like working at the bank. It wasn't like she could turn in a two week notice, so she concentrated on the positives. There was the money and a terrific feeling of being above everything, the law, human beings, everything. In the end, it all boiled down to doing what she knew and this was what she'd been trained to do since childhood.

After a hit, she liked to rest at a small beach front cottage she had at the outer banks of North Carolina. It was far away from the tourist areas with soft sand and the sound of the ocean. Solitude was usually the most important thing to her, but this trip felt different. She wanted a little company.

The only man she could call wasn't the one she wanted to speak to. She didn't really have a serious boyfriend. The last man she cared about was a business associate, who thought of her as one of the boys. His name was Devin, a handsome, brilliant companion. They shared so much, but not a single kiss. It was times like these, alone on

the open road, when she thought about him. He wasn't the dating kind, so she called someone else, her safety net.

She picked up her cell phone and dialed Joey. A moment later, a very sleepy, slightly confused man answered the phone. "What?"

"It's me." She already regretted calling him, but her life of isolation was eating at her brain. "How about spending the next week with me at the beach?" She spoke in gentle seductive tones. "I think we could both use a vacation."

"Like I'm just going to drop everything and come running to you when the mood hits." He huffed loudly. "Bite me."

"I always knew you were the kinky type." She pulled over into a deserted parking lot and rubbed her eyes. It was at least a six hour drive yet and she was exhausted. "You can look at this two ways, either you're whipped, or you're such a man that I have to have you. The choice is yours, unless you really don't want to see me."

"I'll catch a plane tomorrow." He hung up without another word.

She turned off her phone and got out to stretch her legs. The few streetlights above illuminated the splatters on her clothes. There could be no more close calls. She opened the trunk and got into her black suitcase. First, she doused her hands with vinegar, rubbing the skin and nails with a brush until they turned a harsh pink. She cleaned her arms with the same vinegar solution to remove the powder remnants. Next, she unzipped the main compartment. On top was lingerie, a black bra, size thirty-four C, with a matching lace thong. Beneath that, was a pair of jeans, her favorites with wear in all the right places. She pulled them out, along with a red sweater.

There in the parking lot, she stripped off the garments of her crime. Her naked body was a pale contrast in the dark night and black asphalt. The streetlights added a glow, as if it were a performance and any minute the curtain would drop.

Her clothes were wadded, bagged and thrown into the trunk. Then she wiped her face with a rag from her bag. Mascara came off in streaks, muting out the red spots that had been there. Another swipe removed all traces of make-up.

She hoisted the jeans over her hips and zipped them. The red sweater clung to her skin as she pulled it down. Her shoes were tossed into the trunk, along with everything else. She wouldn't need them. Here, she could catch an hour of sleep. The next surface her feet would touch would be the moist sand of the beach. She curled her toes at the thought.

“Cool waves, wind and sand.”

She missed it there. It was the opposite of her city apartment in New York. The trees were small but thick. The ocean whipped at the dune in front of her house, rolling foaming mounds onto the sand. Small brown sand crabs would scurry along, diving into their holes.

The people were different too. New York was rushed, wanting to fit thirty hours into a single day. At Hatteras, people appreciated time. They said hello to strangers and tried to connect everyone to a community. Food took a little longer to get. The locals loved to tell visitors about the history or the newest gossip. It was a good trade.

Not all of the Outer Banks were as friendly. Developments ate large sections of the beach with rentals stacked in lines exposing realtor adds. The people weren't locals anymore, but scavengers looking for opportunity or for escape.

Her section hadn't been molested yet. In fact, her section was poor. There were no mansions with pools in the back and the ocean in the front. The people were real and that's what she loved about them.

She reclined her seat and looked at the stars through the glass. Maybe she could retire soon. Nick might allow it. She could open one of those T-shirt shops along the strip next to the Home Cookin' Diner. She might even throw her gun into the ocean. Let the sand and salt water eradicate her sins while they rusted out the damn little pistol.

Maybe she could find a nice guy, not just a man for when she was lonely, but a serious relationship. Not another gun for hire. Maybe she'd find someone who looked like Devin, but had a simple steady job. She couldn't imagine Devin with a simple job. He was powerful and enigmatic. Not someone ready to settle down to a beach lifestyle.

Someone good or good for her had to exist. She laughed a little at the notion. It would be nice to be in someone's arms, someone who loved her. Better yet, someone who didn't care about her past.

What a bedroom confession that would be. Oh, by the way, I've killed people in their homes for money. She was sure there weren't any men with reformed assassins on their want lists. It wasn't exactly good wife and mother qualifications. With her luck, she'd fall head over heels for a police officer or an FBI agent.

The idea made her laugh. Something pure, like love, had no place in her life. Her adopted family had seen to that. Still, when she settled into sleep, it was a divine thought.

"Prince Charming, where are you tonight? Are you looking for me?" She laughed again. "Sleeping Beauty has a trunk load of evidence and a guy she left dead in the shower."

Chapter 2

It was afternoon by the time Amelia saw her first glimpse of the ocean, rising like a blue universe choosing to be separate from the rock and soil above the water line. It could come up and take the land if it wanted to. She knew and respected the ocean's brutality.

Waves formed in the distance, tumbling down into white froth and rumbling onto the beaches. The sun was high, but the wind held a bitter cold, turning the small vegetation sideways. She braced herself, even before she opened the door. The cold cut through her, chilling her soul as the smell of salt infiltrated her senses.

She breathed deeply, letting the smell, the wind and the atmosphere flow through her and wash away the life she'd left behind. It had been so long since she'd been home, too long. The city had almost taken her this time.

The grass that surrounded her home, the small patch that existed mixed with sand, was mowed. An elderly man by the name of Jimmy took care of that for her. The two trees in the front lumbered too close to the power lines, and the shrubs looked more like tattered mongrels. It wasn't Jimmy's fault. He did well for an eighty-year-old man. Every month, she mailed him a hundred dollars. It wasn't much, but sometimes it was all that kept him from starving.

Her bare feet touched the first stone step that crept up from the driveway and to the tiny section of grass and her gray home. Slat wood covered the outside of her house, weathered from years of abuse. A stormy sky made its outline invisible as it rose above the ocean.

The steps were cold, making her shiver. She began an awkward trot up the bank to where the wooden steps began. There were seventeen steps from the first section to the porch. Despite the height from the water, the front section had been built on stilts. So far, the little beach house had withstood half a dozen hurricane threats and countless tropics.

The locals claimed this area was blessed and storms turned away. Amelia suspected the geography had more to do with it. The hard reef to the south and the shape of barrier islands to the north reduced flooding by breaking waves before shore. Some sections weren't as lucky, being rebuilt many times. The thought of being blessed made buying the property a little easier though. Something in her life should be blessed.

She nearly bought a place at Bodie, mistakenly thinking it was a hard O. The pronunciation was body, named so for the dead bodies that would wash onto the shores. Not a place to get away from murder, even if the bodies had stopped their assault on dry land. The idea made the place haunted and she didn't need that.

All she knew for sure was her home offered peace. The ghosts didn't disturb her here. There was no sound of her father's voice calling out. There was no sound of gunfire and at last, there was no blood. Somehow, the ocean always washed her clean, if that were possible.

She had her keys out before her hand ever touched the door. The old screen screeched its welcome as she pushed it aside and clicked the rusty metal lock. The wind helped open the front door. It had been too long.

Darkness filled her vision as her eyes tried to adjust. She turned on the overhead light by the door and felt the strength drain from her body. Damn, she was tired. The hit had been a hard one and the trip harder. It was time to rest.

She closed the door and locked it behind her. The next stop was her bedroom, her bed. This was where she felt comfort. She was home, lost in the beige flowers creeping across a white field that was her bedspread.

Somehow, the sheets still smelled fresh and her thoughts drifted. She was little again. The smell brought her back to the warm feeling of the clothes when she'd pull them from the dryer. Dad helped. They'd gather up the dirties, throw them in the wash, and wait until they'd come out of the dryer. Dad would wrap one of his big shirts around her. It was warm and soft. They'd sit together for hours, with her on his lap, and watch television on an old set that barely worked. Those were the happier times, the times before Dad bought new televisions, clothes, even a new car.

That's when the calls started. Another special project from their benefactor would be telephoned in. That's when she started hating that damn cop uniform. It no longer gave her a sense of pride to see her father in blue. The shiny buttons lost their fascination. He'd become a hypocrite, or so Susie Miller had said. It took her two days to find out what it meant then she beat the crap out of Susie, even though she knew it was true. Daddy stopped being proud of what he did. He traded it in for being proud of what he owned.

She reached beneath the covers and pulled the last of her clothes off. They landed in a crumpled wad by the door.

It was too late to help him and too much to think about. Still, he managed to slide into her sleepy thoughts, corrupting her sacred place. As sleep drifted in, she was no longer feeling the cool sheets against bare skin. She was twelve, in her favorite pair of jeans with the knees worn out of them, hiding behind the chair while the gunman slipped out the fire escape window. She was crying, lost, alone as her dead father's open eyes stared at her.

* * * *

“Are you sure?” The Italian man with a square jaw line and pronounced nose set the receiver down. His furrowed brow carried more than worries, it showed fear. “I need to know where Amelia is hiding.”

A younger man sat on the corner of the desk with a grin on his face. “I told you it sounded like her work.” He laughed, exposing large white teeth. “Nick, don't be so upset. It's not like she's family.”

“Shut up, Carl.” Nick looked at the much younger man. How could two brothers be so different? Lifetimes separated them. He had children older than this twit. If only Father had kept his pants on. Momma's children never acted like this.

Amelia wasn't family. She was Irish for goodness sake, but sometimes, blood didn't make family. He'd watched that little girl grow up and develop acute brutality under his direction.

He could still see her as a little girl, standing in the doorway pointing a thirty-eight caliber at Father. Her hair hadn't been combed, her clothes torn and dirty. Even in a

mansion pointing a pistol at the most powerful man in the city, she wasn't afraid. She'd had nothing to lose.

He'd come up behind her, but couldn't bring himself to take out the little girl. Her vengeance was justified. Look what they'd done to her father. Oh sure, in the meeting it hadn't sounded so terrible, just another dirty cop whose time had come. Committing the act changed everything. It was the last time he'd personally choreographed a hit.

A guy named Harold had pulled the trigger. They'd gone up the fire escape like common street thugs. Inside, they'd watched while Amelia's father read her a story. He'd gotten up to put her to bed when they snuck inside. He'd come back and died on the living room floor. It was worse than a single life ending. Amelia had no mother. He saw the little girl come out of her bedroom while he held the curtain back for Harold. She'd crept behind the chair and looked at her father on the floor. They had destroyed a little girl's world. It seemed someone needed to pay for it.

His dad saved himself from being shot by talking her out of it. It was the wild thing about their organization. Most politicians weren't bought with money. It was Dad's silver tongue that created allies, even in a little girl who knew why her father had died.

"I'm just saying that she doesn't leave us any choice. She's asking for it. It's not like she's your brother." He smiled. "We have to put family, then business. Crazy females have no place."

"Leave me now. Your attitude isn't helping." Nick looked at the chunky gold bracelet on his wrist instead of his brother. Things would be easier if Carl had fucked up. A hit would be called and everyone would've seen him as a strong leader. Carl could die in the street like a mongrel.

For a moment, he smiled, imagining Carl in the fetal position left in a ditch along a dirt road. He always imagined Amelia handling the hit. She might even pop him on the toilet. His naked smelly ass exposed for all to see.

“I didn’t mean anything.” Carl’s gaze fell to the floor as he left.

“A hit.” He didn’t want Amelia to fall. “I have some calls to make.” Nick spoke to the closing door.

Amelia wouldn’t have done an unauthorized hit. She was unemotional about business. It was amazing she was a woman. Twenty years ago, a woman would never have been used on delicate assignments. She hadn’t missed yet.

“Sally,” Nick hit the intercom button, “where’s Joey?”

“I’ll find out. Sir, there was a question about rescheduling your luncheon tomorrow. Not all the members you requested could attend. Paul from The Rastic Corporation is having legal troubles and cannot make it until later in the week.”

“Fine. Contact everyone and put something together. First, find Joey for me.”

Business was hard these days. Back in his grandfather’s day, business consisted of protection, gambling and women. These weren’t always profitable ventures. It was his father that started dealing drugs. It wasn’t the street crap like coke. Their dealings were in pharmaceuticals and price fixing. It was great. Science would come up with some new crap. Their marketing group would start an ad campaign and before you knew it, every whiney ass hypochondriac was seeing their doctor for the goods. Muscle was rarely needed, unless a test had to go in a certain direction or people tried to prosecute over unforeseeable problems.

Amelia's latest assignment had been a Japanese company who had undercut the price agreement. Competition was bad with drugs. A pill that cost ten cents to make and sold at ten dollars a piece left a lot of room for all to make money. When some punk group appeared selling these things at five dollars a piece, something had to give.

"Sir," Sally's voice came over the speaker, "Joey went out of town for a few days. Nobody knows what city."

"Thank you."

Amelia had been humping this guy for several months. It was a secret, mostly due to the fact Joey was Carl's only son. Carl hated Amelia. Carl hated anyone who was smarter. He was a hateful man.

Nick dialed Amelia's house. Only two people had the number to her beach getaway. He let it ring five times then a sleepy sounding Amelia picked up the phone. At first, she sounded like that little girl they'd watched through the window. Sometimes, he felt like they had committed two murders that night. Her childhood had died on the floor with her father.

* * * *

"What?" Amelia felt the remnants of her dream fade into oblivion. If this was Joey canceling, she'd cut off his dick.

"It's me." He cleared his throat. "What do you know about a hit that went down around one this morning?"

It wasn't like Nick to call. That blowhard usually left hits to written notes. Fear of the Feds wiretapping kept calls to a minimal. "The Nagasaki hit went fine, but if you must know, it happened closer to nine." She sounded arrogant, hell, she felt arrogant.

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