

BLOOD BLOSSOM

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PRIME TYPE, LLC
Los Angeles, California

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Published by Prime Type, LLC
Los Angeles, CA

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Cover photos by inigocia/shutterstock.com, SoumenNath/shutterstock.com,
and www.gettyimages.com

Graphic Designer, Alan M. Pranke, www.amp13.com

Cover Art Direction/Design by Matt O'Leary, www.fastpencil.com

Edited by Lorraine Fico-White, Magnifico Manuscripts, LLC,
www.magnificomanuscripts.com

Page Design/Layout by Prime Type, LLC

First edition by CreateSpace/Amazon.

ISBN-13: 978-1499796278

BISAC: Fiction / General

Library of Congress Control Number 2014911227

Printed in the United States of America

First and foremost, I thank Jesus Christ, my personal Lord and Savior, who helped to make my dream a reality.

Thank you, Kent and Gil, for your invaluable input.

Dedicated to the memory of my beloved grandmother.

Miss you much . . .

P R O L O G U E

She sat in the driver's seat of her shiny, candy-apple red, 2014 Mazda Miata convertible with the top down.

The car had been parked on the southbound shoulder of Colfax Avenue, north of Ventura Boulevard near the feet of the hills of Studio City. The Los Angeles River dribbled by a few yards to her right. Directly across the street from where she sat were several charming, two-level, storybook-style houses with large, ornate windows and a chimney on each rooftop. The Miata's engine purred idly and all four orange-yellow hazard lights blinked.

The sun warmed the top of her head and highlighted her golden strands of blond hair, which had been cropped below her earlobes. Sporadic cars passed by her along the quiet, narrow, two-lane street. A crow cawed as it flew overhead.

She looked through a pair of binoculars at a large, white two-story house perched on the side of the hill above, south of Ventura Boulevard. The house looked north with a 180° panoramic view of the San Fernando Valley. She surmised it must have an expansive view. Her intense, steely blue eyes focused their dire attention on only the white house. She pointedly disregarded the rolling, sloping, grassy terrain around it. Instead, she noticed the trees, the brush and shrubs, and

the well-maintained grounds laid out with colorful flower gardens around the perimeter of the estate.

She drove up the hill to a higher elevation where could see the entire property below. More flowers graced the back of the house near a swimming pool and around a gazebo beyond the pool. Two marble statues of a Greco-Roman man and woman in differing poses flanked either side of the veranda, and a few small porcelain knick-knacks were strewn in between. A large outdoor water fountain stood in the middle of the semi-circular drive at the front of the house, and some terracotta pottery with five-foot-tall topiaries sat on either side of the front door.

“So, that’s *her* story,” she said to herself. Her lips formed a frightful sneer. She adjusted her position in the driver’s seat to make herself more comfortable. “Ain’t that nice? Well, we’ll see about *that*, won’t we?”

A light breeze wafted by and tousled several strands of her hair. A small brown bird chirped from a nearby tree, then flew away.

She wondered about the wretched wench who’d lived in that beautiful home on the side of the hill all those years.

Twenty-two years of my sorry-assed life, she thought. Just ticks me off. Really makes my blood boil. Tears welled in her eyes. Now, don’t start feeling sorry for yourself again, damn it! She continued to stare at the house. *Just watch. Everything’ll change. From now on, it’s my story.*

She sat for a few more moments, her eyes locked at the view of the house as she ardently scrutinized it. She abruptly hurled the binoculars into the passenger’s seat with a huff. They bounced off the seat, bumped against the closed door of the glove compartment, then fell to the charcoal-gray carpeted floor with a soft thump.

She put the convertible in gear, slammed her foot on the pedal, and tore away from the curb.

CHAPTER 1

Vivian Hutchins, a slender woman with shoulder-length, light-brown hair, hazel eyes, and a creamy complexion, stood and gazed at Forest Lawn Memorial Park, a cemetery located in Glendale, about eight miles east of her residence.

Her grandmother, Desirée Hutchins, her father, Charles Hutchins, and her husband, Rob Peterson, were all buried in the Whispering Pines section of the sprawling cemetery. A fourth relative also lay in the ground there, but that individual's grave happened to be fifty yards away from the others. Vivian didn't want to think about this particular person. Instead, she thought about her younger brother and baby sister.

Twenty-two years is a long time, she thought. I should've looked for them after I had come back seven years ago. Instead, I feel as if I've wasted all those years waiting for them, hoping for word from either of them. I'm forty-four and before I know it, I'll be fifty, then sixty, then . . .

Vivian felt melancholic as she stood on the flagstone veranda alongside a patio table with its hunter-green parasol closed. She breathed in the cool, mid-morning spring air with its sweet aroma of freshly-cut grass and a tinge of night-blooming jasmine which still lingered from the evening before. A gentle breeze made her

shiver, and she pulled her yellow-and-white cardigan tighter. She momentarily closed her eyes, then looked in the direction of the cemetery once again.

It's nothing but a constant reminder of. . .

She couldn't finish the sentence. She'd thought it many times before and now wondered, *Why think such thoughts again?* It only made her feel worse. She had previously said that she would not think about what had happened, when the unfortunate events had occurred. But, perversely, she continued to dwell on it time and again. When she would catch these thoughts invading her mind, she'd try to quash them—sometimes with success, sometimes without.

Just don't think about it again, she thought. Be grateful for what you have had these past several years. Be grateful for what you have now.

Many times, Vivian admitted to herself that she had always appreciated the things she had, including this house that commanded a panoramic view from the Santa Monica Mountains. The mountains act as a barrier between the San Fernando Valley to the north and the greater Los Angeles Basin to the south.

It would have helped to know where they had gone, Vivian thought.

She sipped hot chamomile tea and briefly turned from looking at the cemetery. She wiped a tear from her eye. Then she glanced again at the well-manicured green hills of Forest Lawn, with the white colonial-style building near its entrance. She inhaled the bittersweet air and let out a weary sigh.



Shortly after a light lunch, Vivian went upstairs to the master suite on the second floor. She walked over to a trio of large, floor-to-ceiling, sliding closet doors, and crouched on her haunches and opened the middle section.

I shouldn't have done without it for so long, she thought. After all, busy hands are happy hands and idle hands are the devil's workshop.

She withdrew from the semi-dark confines of the closet an ivory-colored embroidery bag with large wooden loop handles at the top. She pushed aside spools of colored thread and skeins of yarn plus packages of various needles for sewing, cross-stitching, and needlepoint. There were several pre-printed canvases, one of which had two oversized long-stemmed roses, its petals with shades of reds and pinks, and its long stems and leaves with hues of greens highlighted with soft tinges of yellow. A pre-printed inscription above the roses, to be stitched in black, read *Bless This House*.

“Where is that . . . thing?” Vivian said as she looked in the bag.

It should've been in here, along with everything else, she thought. Well, guess it's my payback for neglecting my needlepoint work for so long.

She looked deeper in the closet and pushed aside boxes. She stood and looked at the shelf above the rack of hangers where her clothes hung. There was nothing, but more timeworn cardboard boxes of various sizes and shapes.

She grabbed her sewing kit at one end of the shelf. Something fell and slapped the wooden surface of the shelf. She glanced in the direction from where the sound came and shrugged her shoulders. Giving her undivided attention to the sewing kit, she opened it and glanced inside.

“No, that’s not it,” Vivian said to herself.

She lifted the sewing kit, and before setting it back on the shelf, saw the thing she had been looking for—a thick, ten-inch wooden hoop. She pulled it off the shelf and while putting it in the bag, fleetingly thought, *I wonder what fell up there?*

As she went to put the sewing kit back on the shelf, she noticed the edge of a black, wooden picture frame.

So, that’s what fell, she thought.

She used her fingertips to grasp the picture frame and slide it toward the edge of the shelf. She brought it down to eye level and gazed at the portrait which stared back at her.

An eight-by-ten black-and-white glossy of a beautiful, twenty-year-old woman looked back at Vivian. The woman in the picture had a Betty Grable type of look, sweet and cherubic, with a subtle smile. Her hair was light blond and styled from the 1960s era. Light, shadow, and makeup were exquisite. An autograph had been written in cursive script with a black felt-tip marker in the lower right-hand corner: *Rose Hutchins, 1966.*

CHAPTER 2

Mrs. Julia S. Windom relaxed in a vintage claw-foot bathtub. She savored the warm water and the sweet aroma of the bath oils. Sudsy bubbles modestly covered her nakedness. Several cream-colored, unscented candles of various heights and girths adorned the edge of the tub along the tiled wall. Each flame fluttered and undulated in a leisurely manner.

All this unnecessary anxiety is beginning to get unbearable, Julia thought as she lathered her hands and fingers with a bar of moisturizing soap. *The sooner I can get some things out of the way and over with, the better. I just want to get to Belize as soon as possible.*

“Iris!” she said. The bathroom door had been ajar and she heard her personal assistant/secretary skitter down the hall.

“Yes, Mrs. Windom?” Iris said as she stood outside the doorframe. She pushed open the door a little. Julia’s back was to the door. She wore a white terry-cloth towel neatly wrapped around her head in a twist and scrubbed her long treacherous-looking deep-red fingernails.

“*Nails of death,*” Julia’s husband, Jack Windom, once had called them. How she had hated it when he’d said that. Likewise when he’d snippily remarked about her middle initial S for “selfishness.”

“Have the reservations been made yet?” Julia asked.

“Yes, Mrs. Windom,” Iris said. “We report to the ticket counter first thing tomorrow morning at six o’clock. Our flight from Paris to Belize leaves Charles de Gaulle Airport at approximately eight o’clock our time. I have the necessary information down for you, flight number and all.”

“Good enough. Where is Jack, by the way?”

“He’s still at the meeting with Mr. Reginald. He said he’d be here some time later.”

“Be sure to let Peter and Dolph know. You may go now.” Julia dismissed Iris with a flippant wave of her hand.

It appeared Julia to know that this would be her final night in Paris. She told herself she would never return to Paris for any reason, whether it be business or pleasure.

Better yet, she thought, make that I shall never return to this wretched place again. That is a promise. Thank goodness for Belize . . . and Antigua. As for Jack, he is not worth the powder to blow him up. After all, I am worth more than my weight in gold. All in all, the bottom line is, it is going to be the end of him.

She picked up a white loofah and gently scrubbed her shoulder as she worked her way down to her forearm.



At the Paris branch of World Ecological Corporation, ten-foot-high windows along the length of the entire office took in the views of the city at night, which glittered and sparkled like gems. Black walls with shades of gray and streaks of silver defined the large conference room on the twentieth floor. Thin squiggly lines of white and gold accented the walls, which gave it a futuristic appearance. Voices of two businessmen who spoke in hushed tones under dim recessed lighting intermingled with the hum of the air conditioning.

“As CEO and financier for World Ecological Corporation,” Jack Windom said to Mr. Reginald, “I can see why the likes of my wife wallow in greed and strive for more material wealth. It’s very apparent why she married me all those years ago.” Jack paced quietly on the black-and-white lacquered marble floor.

“You’ve talked about this before, Jack,” Mr. Reginald said. “Why are you bringing this up again?” He sat comfortably in a black leather executive chair and leaned back from the buffed, glass-topped conference table. He crossed his legs and clasped his hands together.

“Well, I’m merely suggesting that I know what my wife may be up to this time,” Jack said. “She’s a grabby-assy, money-hungry, power mongrel who doesn’t

know when to quit. I intend to put a stop to this nonsense before it goes any further, and I would need your help.”

“How do you propose, sir?”

Jack walked over to a wall with an ornate built-in bar, which had tempered glass shelves and overhead lighting. “Well, for one, you’ve got the law on your side,” he said as he pulled a bottle of cognac from the shelf and poured some into a brandy glass. “Being my corporate attorney and right-hand man, you know the loops, the ins and outs. I’m looking to create some business and financial setbacks for her.”

“You’re looking for a way out from under her.”

“Very perceptive, aren’t you?” Jack gulped the cognac and refilled the glass. “She knows a lot of people and then some. She has a little too much of everything: money, properties, stocks, bonds, hedge funds, CDs, an IRA, jewels, residuals from the films she’s made, and so forth. I’m afraid she’s become more affluent than me. All in all, I want what’s rightfully mine. I know a divorce won’t do. Somehow, I’ll figure out a way to make sure she’s completely out . . . of the picture.”

He poured himself another glass of cognac and downed it.

CHAPTER 3

The Miata rounded the semi-circular driveway and stopped by the front door. The glove compartment popped open and a .38 caliber gun was retrieved. The silver barrel gleamed in the sunlight. The chamber was flipped open, then snapped shut. The gun was placed in a small, black, beaded handbag.

“You had better be home,” the woman said. “I’m gonna get ya good, ya wretched wench. See if I don’t.”

She stepped out of the car and stood for a moment as she glanced at the house’s exterior through a pair of shades. One hand shielded her eyes from the sun’s glare. She closed the door with force and walked to the front door. She pressed the doorbell and heard chimes from within. Faint footsteps approached the door and the deadbolt clicked open.

It delighted the woman to see the surprised look on Vivian’s face when she opened the door.

How could anyone not be surprised? the woman thought as she suppressed a smile. She knew the advantages of being young, as well as being sinfully slender. She had always known it helped to be attractive with her blond hair, blue eyes and perfect, unblemished complexion. She inwardly enjoyed the fact that the cool pair of shades perched on the bridge of her well-chiseled nose gave her features

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