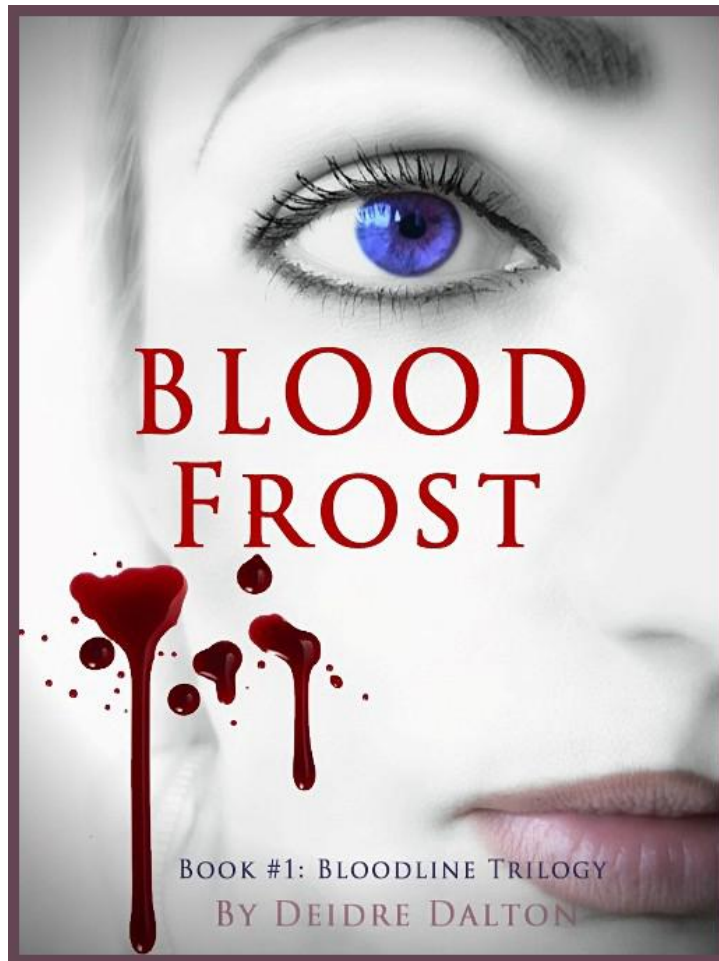


Excerpts from:

Bloodfrost

By Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole)



Book #1 in the Bloodline Trilogy

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ABOUT "BLOODFROST"

Bloodfrost by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is the first book in the *Bloodline Trilogy*. The novel was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in December 2019.

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 cured. However, she soon learns her miraculous recovery comes at a price.

Old before her time and afflicted with a myriad of medical problems, Noel Gatsby retreats into her "wishful-thinking" dreams every night. Desperate to escape the circumstances of her life, she imagines a world where all of her pain and suffering stops, to be replaced by the vigorous health of her youth. Yet each morning she awakens to the misery of her real existence, consumed by pain and depression.

Then one night her dreams come true. Noel is transported to another world, where healing hands work their magic on her tired body. She awakens without pain, filled with an exuberance and joy she never thought to experience again. She is completely healed, with traits unbeknownst to her before: the power of mind-reading and an acute sense of sight.

Her unique affinity with the handsome Pim Grady gives her hope for the future, although their blossoming love is tempered by knowledge of their shared and secretive dreams.

Noel soon learns her miraculous recovery comes at a price . . .

For more, go to:

<http://deidredalton.com/>

**BLOODFROST:
Excerpt from Chapter One**

NOEL GATSBY HAD THE same dream every night. Without fail, she saw herself floating above her body, strangely weightless, just before she drifted into a group of misty clouds. She never remembered the ensuing journey or the return, but she knew she came back replenished and without pain. The awakening was a hopeful endeavor, her body teeming with a new energy that seemed to fill every pore and blood vessel. It was only when she moved her muscles that she realized it was just a fanciful dream. Within a few seconds her reality came crashing back down to earth with resolute misery, once again riddled with pain and insidious disease.

Heaving a great sigh, she moved slowly to get out of bed. Nature was calling, yet another unsavory body function she could not ignore for long. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself into a sitting position. She felt the mechanical screw in her left hip grinding and popping, in turn pulling on the muscles in her lower back. She gritted her teeth together, causing another juncture of pain by virtue of her swollen gums and their caverns of decay.

"Please make it stop," she whispered into the room.

Even in the worst depths of pain, she never considered saying "Please *God*, make it stop." Her belief in the almighty was shaky at best, and for a myriad of reasons. If there was a God, she reasoned, why didn't he give her a break? She long ago dismissed the pious adage that "God only gives you as much as you can handle." As far as she was concerned she had endured more than her fair share of suffering, so God must be on hiatus or maybe not exist at all. It was the reason she stopped attending mass at St. Theresa's Parish Church years ago. God didn't seem to have the time to listen to prayers made by the poor and suffering, so why bother anymore?

Noel shifted her legs sideways, an ugly grimace creating deep lines across her features. She rested her feet on the floor, giving herself a momentary respite before inviting another wave of pain.

The room was cold, like a block of ice underneath her bare feet. Her legs and back ached with a familiar surge, travelling up her spine and into her shoulders. She moved her head back and forth, feeling the pinch of awry nerves. She grabbed her robe from the end of bed, shrugging into the shabby blue cotton. There was no point in starting the day with a self-pity party, she decided. "*Upward and onward*," she intoned silently, refusing to give way to her plight. At least, *not today*. Tomorrow would likely be another story, despite her wishful-thinking dreams.

She shuffled to the bedroom window, which overlooked Wren Street. She pulled back the drab sheer curtains and peered outside. It was drizzling rain, the sky in her view as gray as her drapes and just as gloomy. She heard the bells from St. Theresa's Church in the distance, signaling the start of early morning mass. She saw people on the street, going about their daily business without giving a second thought to the painful process of walking. She glanced across the street to a twin apartment building, six stories high like her own. The tract of row houses along Wren Street had been converted into flats years ago, each with a stoop and bowed first-floor window. She knew they were all nearly identical, dark gray stone with an unwashed feel and turned to seed, which prompted another sigh

from her throat.

"Noel," she heard her mother's voice calling from the next room. "Noel, are you awake?"

She brushed the hair from her face, annoyed by the stubborn gray tendrils that refused to obey. "Coming mother," she called in return.

The living room was perhaps the most depressing area of the apartment Noel shared with her elderly mother. The old walls were rippled with water damage, allowing the cold to permeate the floors. Noel drew the robe tight across her body, knowing the gesture was futile. Even scant furnishings appeared drab and desperate in the room, over-stuffed but still touched by the cold.

June Gatsby sat in her wheelchair in the center of the room. Her short hair was already combed, and the maroon-colored robe predictably matched a pair of slippers almost hidden by the hem. Her hands rested in her lap, clutching each other in an attempt to garner heat.

When she saw her daughter enter the room, she waved one hand in the air. "You *must* speak to the caretaker," she declared. "He simply has to fix the heater, Noel. *Today*. I'm freezing to death, more so than usual." She shook her head. "We're not animals living in the wild, for God's sake."

Noel regarded her mother with concealed pity. June had her own medical issues to be sure, but in the last few months she had also shown signs of memory loss. Noel wasn't certain if the forgetfulness was an early encroachment of Alzheimer's disease or dementia, or if June chose to live in denial as a way of dealing with their desperate situation.

"The heater was fixed last week," Noel reminded her mother gently.

"Then why is it so damnably cold in here?" June demanded irritably.

"I've told you before," Noel replied. "It's too expensive to run the heater night and day. We have to make do with spurts here and there."

June looked confused. "What do you mean, it's *too* expensive? What are you doing with my social security check every month, Noel?"

Noel walked into the small galley kitchen that abutted the living room. She plugged in the drip coffee pot, which gurgled on its last leg. She kept her voice even as she spoke. "I don't even *see* your social security checks. They are deposited directly into your bank account, which pays for your medications and helps contribute to the rent and food."

"It's bad enough we don't have a telephone," June snapped. "We have to live without heat as well? It's only November, Noel. We have months of winter yet to go."

"What do you want for breakfast, mother?" Noel asked, ignoring June's remarks in hopes she would forget them.

"Spaghettios," June responded without hesitation. "I want the kind with little hotdogs this time."

"Coming up," Noel said, accustomed to her mother's requests for anything related to spaghetti. It was June's favorite meal, and despite her daily doses never seemed to tire of it.

After she settled her mother with a bowl of Spaghettios, Noel returned to her bedroom to dress. It was a chore just to lift her legs into a pair of pants. She sat on the bed, wincing as she pulled faded black jeans over her hips. She donned a worn but clean blue sweater-shirt, decorated with a lopsided group of reindeer. Her clothes had seen better days. However, at the moment, fashion was on the bottom of her priority list.

She brushed her long hair quickly, gathering the thin ends in a pony tail. She went

back into the living room, her cane making a thumping noise on the floor. June was still enjoying her bowl of Spaghettios, so Noel continued to the kitchen. She poured herself a cup of coffee and sipped the hot brew tentatively. She would make-do without breakfast today, which seemed a moot point as she wasn't hungry.

"I have to go out this morning," Noel said over the rim of her coffee cup. "Will you be okay alone for a few hours?"

June snorted, taking another spoonful of Spaghettios. "Of course I will, Noel. I've been fending for myself longer than you have." She dabbed a torn strip of paper towel to her mouth. "Where are you going?"

"I have an appointment with the welfare office," Noel replied. "Remember? I applied for assistance after Carl died. I need some sort of health coverage in order to get my hip fixed, and to find out what else is wrong with me."

June stared at her daughter, a blank look in her eyes. "Carl died? Noel, why didn't you tell me?"

"I *did* tell you, mother. He had a stroke and . . ."

June shook her head vigorously. "You most certainly did *not* tell me. Don't you think I'd remember if my own son-in-law died?"

Noel tried to remain patient. "Okay, mother. Calm down. I'm telling you now. Carl died almost six months ago. He was having chemotherapy treatment for cancer and suddenly went into cardiac arrest. He died just minutes before I could make it to the hospital to see him."

June appeared stricken. "Oh my God. Carl was such a kind and decent man. Tell me, did you go to his funeral? If so, why wasn't I invited?"

"There was no funeral, mother. Carl was cremated. His brother George has the ashes."

"Why don't you have them? You were Carl's wife."

"We stopped living together years ago. Our marriage was basically in name only, even though we were good friends."

June nodded. "That's right, now I remember." She glanced at her daughter. "No great romance there, huh?"

"Never was, but I have no regrets. Carl was like a brother to me, my best friend in good times and bad."

June's face darkened. "My husband wasn't *my* best friend. Or was he?"

"Your husband was a bastard," Noel snapped, eyes flashing.

June's hand went to her throat, startled by her daughter's words. "Noel, *please*. You know I don't like that sort of language."

"Then let's not discuss your dead husband," Noel replied shortly.

"Whatever you say," June murmured vaguely.

Noel turned to face the kitchen sink, rinsing her coffee cup with quick, jerky motions. Mention of her father always made her irrational and beyond irritable. Burning hatred of Samuel Gatsby was a constant in her life, even though he had been dead for more than a decade.

Her lips curled in disgust every time she thought about him. He had been a miserable, sour bastard who hid his true self from outsiders, and was a voracious drunk to boot. He verbally abused her mother for years, driving June to an emotional instability that endured to the present day. It was only after his death that Noel realized her father

possessed multiple sociopathic traits, living under the radar for the most part because of his deceptive persona in front of others. It still angered her that he never answered for his despicable behavior while on earth.

BLOODFROST:

Excerpt from Chapter Four

ALVIN CARTER HAD RESIDED on Wren Street his entire life. The West Roxbury neighborhood contained an assortment of 18th-century row houses transformed into apartment buildings, many of which were well past their prime with sagging foundations, creaky floors and steps, thinly-warped window panes and dank basements.

The younger of two boys, Alvin was raised by his white mother and a frequently absent black father. It was only later he learned his parents never married. By the time he entered his teens, Alvin's father had left the scene permanently. Shortly thereafter, his older brother Tomas died of a drug overdose, leaving Alvin and his mother alone. He went on to become a taxicab driver, spending most of his adult life living with his mother in the same flat. He enjoyed an all-too brief marriage in his youth, his wife leaving him for another man barely two years into the union.

After Alvin's mother died some years ago, he was surprised to learn she had taken out a modest insurance policy with him as the sole beneficiary. It wasn't a fortune by any means, but it was enough for Alvin to purchase the family flat outright – rather than paying rent every month – and to live comfortably for the rest of his life. He retired early, spending his days reading science fiction books – specifically titles by Ray Bradbury and Stephen Donaldson – and keeping an eye on the neighborhood. He was content, never striving for anything more.

Every morning, Alvin watched people from his stoop as they passed by. Even after he suffered and recovered from a sudden heart attack six months ago, he made the effort to take the air and observe his neighbors.

He always noticed when something – or *someone* – was different. He knew when the mailman dyed his silver hair to blond, when city workers replaced orbs in streetlamps, when his elderly neighbor Mrs. Sims bought a new walker or changed the curtains in her living room, when door-to-door salesmen prowled the pavement, or when the convenience store up the street updated their window advertising.

So Alvin was bound to notice the marked differences in Noel Gatsby and Pim Grady, especially Noel. He didn't know the pair personally, but he observed Noel walking sans her cane the first day she emerged without it. She even *looked* younger, the ugly grimace of pain seemingly erased from her features overnight.

Alvin saw Noel and Pim coming his way mid-morning as he sat on his stoop. He fully expected them to keep walking by, but instead they stopped at the bottom of the stairs. He smiled affably, waving his hand slightly. "Good morning," he said, looking at them briefly. Then he turned his head, assuming they would go on their way.

"Good morning, Mr. Carter," Noel replied quietly. "Can we have a moment of your time?"

Alvin returned his gaze to her, surprised. He found his voice. "Please, call me Alvin. What can I do for you?"

Pim stared at the old man, hesitating slightly. "We'd like to talk to you privately, if you don't mind."

Alvin gestured to the stoop. "Ain't this private enough? No one can hear us." He furrowed his brow, regarding Pim sternly. "What's this all about, anyway? If you've got

complaints about someone living in my building, you'll have to contact the super. I might own my apartment, but I sure as hell don't own the building."

Noel shook her head, appearing dismayed. "No, it's nothing like that. We haven't come to lodge a complaint, Alvin. We just need to talk to you." She paused, meeting his quizzical eyes. "It's rather sensitive, however, and we'd rather no one else overhears what we have to say."

"Here's as good a place as any," he said stubbornly, although he was slightly alarmed by her words. "It's too damned cold for open windows, so no one in my building will overhear us. If someone walks by, just quit talking until they pass on."

Pim grew visibly impatient. He shoved his hands in his trouser pockets in a hasty gesture, glancing toward Noel. "We'd like to know if you've had any strange dreams lately."

"Dreams?" Alvin echoed. "What do you mean?"

"We know you had a heart attack some months back," Noel interjected quickly. "You appeared to recover somewhat, but your movements were noticeably slower. Now you seem to be fit as a fiddle – as Pim so elegantly phrased it – without any apparent side effects. Your full recovery seems to follow in the same vein as ours." She lowered her voice. "Surely you've noticed that Pim and I seem fitter these days, just like yourself?"

Alvin shrugged, although a cold fear suddenly invaded his body. "I'm not sure I know what you're talking about. What does my health – or yours, for that matter – have to do with my dreams?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," Pim spoke in a serious tone.

The old man appeared mystified. "I still don't understand. What do dreams have to do with recovering from my heart attack? I took my doc's advice, frankly. Got some exercise and started eating better." He glanced at them. "Sure, I noticed the two of you seem better these days. I'm happy for you, actually. You must be doing *something* right, and maybe your own doctors performed a few miracles of their own."

Pim nudged Noel slightly. "*If he had a dream about being cured, he sure as hell doesn't remember it,*" he spoke to her through thought.

Noel ignored him. "You don't recall having dreams in which you were cured?"

Alvin curled his lip, annoyed with her persistence. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

She was instantly apologetic. "Sorry to bother you, Mr. Carter...*Alvin*. I'm so glad you're feeling better these days."

He nodded curtly. "Same to you." He turned his head again, hoping the gesture would signal his dismissal of them.

Pim grabbed Noel's hand, leading her away from the old man's stoop. They continued along the sidewalk, toward the Wren Street Coffee Clack. Pim waited until they were several feet away from Alvin before he spoke. "That was a waste of time," he said ruefully. "I think we scared the poor fellow near the end."

"If he had a dream, he doesn't remember it because he didn't wake-up during the healing process." She turned her head to look at him. "We can't be the only two people in the world who've been healed by Shoji and Hoshi."

"I agree," he replied. "But we can't very well go around asking everyone we see, now can we? We'll be sent off to the booby hatch in no time."

Noel sighed. "You're right."

"Let's just enjoy ourselves, shall we?" Pim asked, more sharply than he intended.

She glanced at him again. "Are you mad at me?"

He returned her gaze. "No."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded without looking at her.

Noel was immediately contrite. She could sense Pim's distress, his desire to please her and yet the need to enjoy his newfound health as well. She knew, without asking him, that he feared it would disappear despite Shoji and Hoshi's assurances to the contrary.

She smiled softly. "Let's get some coffee and just enjoy the day, shall we?"

Pim stopped on the sidewalk, staring at her in surprise. "Do you mean it?"

"With all my heart."

He looked relieved, a broad grin brightening his features. "Thank you," he whispered. He took her hand as they resumed walking, his step definitely lighter.

Noel felt great comfort in his hand, the pleasant warmth radiating along her arm. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze, his eyes meeting hers sideways as they walked.

* * *

ALVIN CARTER WATCHED AS Noel and Pim walked away. In all the years he'd sat on his stoop, he had never exchanged more than ten words with either of them. Pim was the friendlier of the two, waving and yelling "Hello" every time he happened to walk by. In the past, Noel barely nodded to him in recognition while she struggled along the sidewalk with her cane.

But today was different. There was now a lightness of being surrounding both Noel and Pim, something they obviously felt the need to share with him. Their vague questions about dreams and cures unnerved Alvin to say the least, as if they were trying to take him to the fringes of the unknown or better-left unknown. He had no desire to probe the reasons behind his somewhat miraculous recovery from a heart attack, chalking it down to good medical care and his own resilience – nothing more, nothing less.

He had no clear memory of having a dream in which his recovery was accelerated, but a nagging sense of déjà vu came over him when Noel asked him questions about his health and the possibility of related dreams. It was familiar, yet still somehow foreign, to him. However, he did not want to press his luck by questioning his good health.

That decided, Alvin rose from the stoop. He'd seen enough of the neighborhood – and his neighbors – for one morning. The urge to spend the remainder of the day lost in his books - thereby transporting himself to a world other than his own if only for a brief time – was suddenly very appealing to him.

And deep in his bones, he knew it would be safer.

BLOODFROST:

Excerpt from Chapter Six

MADGE TILLEY UNLOCKED THE front door of her small house on Dane Street in Boston. Located between the Arnold Arboretum and Jamaica Pond in Jamaica Plain, the two-story house was one of her prized possessions, obtained in her divorce settlement twenty years ago. It was older home, built in the 1930s, with a red-brick façade and attached garage. The roof gathered in points, the A-frames reflecting over the front door and attic window on top. A small room over the garage served as her home office, connected to the house by a door on the second-floor hallway. Mature trees towered over the short driveway and miniscule front yard, which was enclosed by a three-foot chain link fence and gate.

Dither greeted Madge inside the front door, rubbing against her legs and meowing loudly. The six-year-old tomcat was a mix of Siamese and Himalayan breeds. His tail was gray-colored, while the rest of his body was white with definite markings of gray in his face, ears and feet. His eyes were a light blue, their round irises turning dark only when he was angry. When Dither was happy and content, his eyes often crossed as he gazed at her lovingly.

Madge reached down to scratch Dither behind the ears, using her foot to close the front door behind her. She set her slim briefcase, purse and car keys on the entry table, and then kicked off her shoes. Dither followed her along the highly-polished hardwood floor toward the kitchen, where Madge flipped on the overhead light.

Her kitchen was a gourmet delight, although she rarely did any cooking. The marble countertops were swirled with brown and cream colors, reminding Madge of a hot fudge sundae. The dark-wood cabinets with slim brass handles were full of stylish china, glasses and cookware, also rarely used. The stainless steel refrigerator had two sides, one with an ice-maker in the door and a roomy freezer. She used the freezer side more often, stocking it with frozen dinners, desserts, pizzas and an ever-present bottle of Sobieski vodka.

"Let's get you fed first," Madge told Dither, who by now had jumped onto the counter near the sink. He stared at her intently, his body frozen like a statue as he waited for his dinner. Madge took an opened cat food can from the fridge, popping off the plastic lid. "It's the same as breakfast," she warned the purring feline with affection. "I'm not forking over an entire can of food for breakfast *and* dinner, so you'll have to make do with halves and a bowl of crunchies to see you through."

Dither meowed loudly, finally moving from his perch to the edge of the countertop. He paced back and forth, pausing occasionally to watch her as she spooned moist cat food into his neon-purple bowl. She set the bowl on the counter, patting him lightly on the rump as he dug in.

Her beloved cat taken care of for the moment, Madge grabbed a short glass from the cupboard next to the fridge. She poured herself a healthy measure of vodka, sipping the liquid gratefully as she made her way out of the kitchen.

The office loft over the garage was her true haven. Untouched by the cleaning service that came in once a week, the comfortable space always gave her tranquility after a long day. Along one wall, bookshelves overflowed with legal volumes and romance novels in no particular order. A tiny, 13-inch television set was crammed onto one of the shelves,

doing double duty as a bookend. A worn leather recliner in the corner had a footstool and overhanging lamp for reading. Her small desk faced the only window in the room, which overlooked the driveway. It was piled high with file folders and other papers, much like her desk at work, with a spot swept clean in the middle for her laptop computer. As with her professional office, she knew the relevance of every note or folder and could locate it on a moment's notice.

Madge turned on the television and then sat behind her desk, vodka in hand. She glanced at the TV screen, barely taking note of the local evening news. She liked the background sound more than anything else, which made her feel she wasn't alone. Leaning over, she opened one of the desk drawers and removed her journal. It was a nicely-bound affair, covered in creased red leather with a golden tassel to mark her place. She bought the blank journals in bulk from a stationary store in West Roxbury, who kept them on hand for her.

She opened the journal as she took another sip of vodka, admiring the gold-lined pages on white velum. As much as she relied on computers for her work and business efficiency, she preferred keeping her private journals by hand. She didn't want them somehow flittered to the internet by a mistaken key stroke for the entire world to see. Madge fished a pen from the middle drawer of her desk, intending to carry on where she left off from the night before.

First, she drained the vodka from her glass and leaned back in her desk chair. Closing her eyes, she allowed herself to pass gas loudly. She smiled, leaning forward again. "*Yet another benefit to living alone,*" she thought happily. "*I can burp, fart or run around naked and not have to worry about the judgment of others.*"

Sighing, Madge slipped on her black-rimmed glasses and began to write in the journal:

Hired a new secretary today. Her name is Noel Gatsby. She has the same face as the woman in my dreams, the same voice, and the same mannerisms. It's like I saw her coming before she arrived. There was no question that I'd hire her. Lucky for me, she has the skills needed for the job.

Madge paused, thinking how insane her observations might seem to someone discovering her journals. They were filled with accounts of her dreams and ensuing observations, which she began documenting nearly one year ago. She flipped the journal back a few pages, re-reading her entry from two weeks previous:

Had the strangest dream last night. An attractive woman in her late thirties came to my office for a job interview, wearing a pair of pleated black slacks, white blouse and off-black blazer. I could tell the clothes were a bit worn, but they were clean and well taken care of. The woman was of medium build, with dark brown-gray hair pulled up into a French-braid bun. Her eyes were blue, and very alert. She came into my inner office for a chat, and I decided to hire her then and there.

Madge recalled that first dream about Noel vividly, although at the time she was rather puzzled by it. She hadn't advertised for a position in her office because her longtime secretary had been firmly entrenched for more than ten years, giving no signs she was about to abandon ship. When the middle-aged Carol Moore gave one-day notice two weeks

later, Madge had been floored. Carol was apologetic, citing her mother's sudden illness as the reason for her departure. As Carol's mother lived in faraway Phoenix, Madge couldn't very well hold a grudge against her otherwise faithful secretary.

Dither entered the room, ignoring Madge as he jumped to the leather recliner to wash his face after dinner. She watched her tomcat fondly, his right paw moving in rhythmic strokes over his face and mouth as he cleaned himself.

"Enjoy your dinner, did you?" she asked him aloud. "Was it up to snuff?"

Dither glanced at her briefly, with little interest, and then resumed his careful ritual of grooming.

Madge returned to her journal, flipping the pages back to her current entry.

It's not like me to hire someone off the cuff like I did with Noel today. I know my decision was somewhat based on my dream, but I also think she will be great asset to my office. Unlike typically flighty twenty-year-olds, Noel is stable and experienced. She's not likely to spend endless time mooning over boys and clothes. There is also something else about her that I can't quite put my finger on, something that draws me to her. I have a strong feeling we will become more than just boss and employee as time moves on; that we will become great friends someday.

Madge closed the journal, removing her glasses and standing from the desk. She yawned, glancing toward Dither again. He was curled up on the leather recliner, sound asleep. Smiling to herself, Madge left the room, empty glass in hand. She made her way to the kitchen, where she poured herself another healthy measure of vodka. She kept the ice-cold bottle of Sobieski away from her home office, knowing she would be tempted to imbibe more if the bottle was within easy reach.

After rooting around in the refrigerator, she assembled a small platter of sliced hard salami, stacked saltine crackers, a handful of Kalamata olives and a generous mound of crumbled feta cheese. It wasn't the healthiest of late-night dinners, but it would suffice for now. She made space on the platter for her glass, and then carried the lot back to her home office.

Dither lifted his head and sniffed the air when she returned, his nose twitching slightly.

Madge laughed at him as she sat behind the desk. "Yes, dear Dither," she said. "I know you hate my aromatic food. Did you ever think that's why I eat such things? So you won't try to snatch morsels from my mouth?"

The tomcat yawned, revealing his long, pointy teeth. Within seconds, he lowered his head and went back to sleep.

Madge leaned back in her office chair, balancing the food platter on her lap. She popped olives into her mouth as she absently watched the local news on television. Her eyes occasionally wandered to the closed journal on her desk. She shook her head, sighing as she bit into a slice of hard salami.

Her drive to keep journals about her dreams was still a mystery to her. The obsession in documenting her vivid flashes – which often came to fruition afterward – began nearly a year ago as she was recovering from chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer. The diagnosis had initially sent her into an emotional tailspin, but with her usual

common sense she realized it was her own fault. She had been a heavy smoker for years, so what else could she expect?

After several months of chemotherapy – during which she remained working, no matter how sick she felt – her doctor advised a complete mastectomy, also informing her that the cancer had spread to her lymph nodes and lungs. Devastated but refusing to show it, Madge numbly agreed to her doctor's recommendations. What else could she do? Curl into a ball and die? No, that was not for her. She would fight to the bitter end, if that's what it took.

The night before her mastectomy surgery, Madge lay prone in her hospital bed. She was alone, with intermittent visits by the attending nurse to check on her vitals. She stared at the stark white ceiling of her room for a long time, resisting the urge to fall asleep. She was terrified. At the age of forty-nine, she lived a life many women only dreamed of. She was a successful and well-respected attorney, making more money than she ever thought possible. She had a decent home and was generally happy with the flow of her life to date. Her brief marriage two decades ago was a mere blip on the radar, mattering little in the scheme of things. It had been a mistake from the get-go, but it was all water under the bridge now. Her true love was the law. She was consumed by her work, happy to be in the thick of a new case. Most men were unable to handle her professional devotion and strength of character, feeling slighted even in the newest stages of a romance. She gave up having relationships long ago, realizing she didn't need a man to be a complete person. She worked hard and played hard, and was truly happy with her life.

Cancer was not on her agenda, but here it was anyway, staring her in the face. She spent the night before her scheduled surgery alone with a thousand thoughts racing through her mind, not sure what the future might hold. It was nearly dawn when she finally dozed, only to awaken a half hour later. She felt strangely rested and alert. The pain, nausea and accompanying lethargy had left her body. She felt clean and whole, as if her entire being had been purified while she dozed. Was it the pain medication making her feel that way? Was she drug-induced delusional? Had she retreated into complete denial, or was it real?

Madge had perfect recall of the incident. She sat up in bed and rang the nurse, demanding to see her doctor. "Something happened in the night," she said excitedly, even though she knew it sounded like she was babbling. "Please, delay the surgery until I've had a chance to speak to Dr. Kopeck. I need to talk to him right away. Please, *hurry*."

Twenty minutes later, Dr. Kopeck appeared in the doorway of her hospital room. He was tall and balding, with thick glasses perched on his bulbous nose. Madge trusted him implicitly, but she needed to tell him how she felt. She was certain something about her condition had changed during the night, and she wanted him to perform the necessary tests before undertaking any surgery.

Dr. Kopeck had listened to her speak, nodding his head now and then as she described how she felt. She saw the look of understanding mixed with sympathy in his eyes, and it annoyed her. "Look," she said evenly. "I'm the patient, and you're the doctor. *I get that*. But I'm telling you, something changed during the night. What harm can it do to run some tests, or delay the surgery a few days? If it's the cost you're worried about, don't concern yourself. Whatever the insurance company doesn't cover, I will pay in full. And you know I'm good for it."

"I just hate to see you get your hopes up," he told her soberly. "Dealing with cancer is as much an emotional struggle as it is physical."

"Please, Dr. Kopeck. Trust me on this, will you? If the tests come back positive, just like they did before, I'll shut my mouth and go through with the surgery." She pleaded with him using her emotionally charged eyes, and he finally capitulated.

Two days later, Madge's tests came back free and clear. Dr. Kopeck was dumbfounded. He came to her hospital room, chart in hand. "The tumors are gone," he told her, his eyes wide with amazement. "I've never seen anything like it. The mass is gone from your breast, and the shadows in your lungs are no longer there. I don't understand it. It's just not medically possible . . ." He shook his head. "But I can't deny what I see. Just to make sure, I'd like to re-run the tests one more time. Do you mind?"

"Of course I don't mind," she replied happily. "And don't feel bad, Dr. Kopeck. Perhaps the initial tests were wrong – you know, maybe someone made a mistake in the lab and mixed up my results with someone else's. Who knows? After you gave me the initial diagnosis, perhaps my mind took over and convinced my body it was sick. We're all human, aren't we? Entitled to mistakes now and then? Especially when they turn out for the better?"

The second set of tests came back clean as well, so Madge was in the clear. She had dodged the proverbial life-ending bullet and had been given a second chance. After awhile, she convinced herself the scare had indeed been a lab mistake, and nothing more.

The dreams began shortly after her stay in the hospital. At first they were harmless. She dreamt of her secretary Carol bringing cookies to the office, and the next day – sure enough – Carol brought cookies to the office. In another dream, Madge saw Dither catching a mouse in the backyard and then trotting through the house with the dead rodent hanging from his mouth, proud of his kill and wanting to show her. The next morning Dither did *exactly that*, much to her disgust.

Then the dreams began to take a more serious turn. Madge dreamed of winning a specific case, and weeks later she did. She saw future clients in her dreams as well, and lo and behold, they walked through her office door within days. She had a rather disturbing dream about a client, a single mother, being beaten by her estranged husband the day before their scheduled appearance in divorce court. Rather than explain her dream to the client – and therefore rendering her position as an attorney less than credible – Madge invited the woman and her children to her home on Dane Street for dinner the night before the court date, plying the young lady with vodka until she was tipsy and forced to sleep over. Madge was convinced she saved the day, especially when the divorce was granted without incident.

She started to keep journals in order to detail her dreams, often wondering what strange cosmic occurrence had led to her sudden glimpses into the future. Had she been blessed with second sight after being spared the ravages of cancer? Or had she possessed the gift all along, only lying dormant until now? Whatever caused her visions, she was determined to put them to good use and – above all – pay close attention to their portents.

Madge knew there was a purpose to Noel's appearance in her dreams, now materializing in real time. With her typical practicality, Madge realized that fate had a way of playing itself out one way or another.

BLOODFROST:

Excerpt from Chapter Eight

TRUE TO HER WORD, Madge arrived at the Wren Street apartment building behind the wheel of her midnight-blue Taurus on Christmas Eve afternoon. Pim helped June downstairs, folding her wheelchair into the trunk after she got into the car. They had already decided to open gifts at Madge's house after dinner, so Pim also stored a large cardboard box full of presents in the trunk, which fit nicely atop the wheelchair.

Noel thought her mother looked especially pretty for the outing. June wore pleated gray slacks with a pink-and-gray-striped blouse, a tiny silver rosary hanging from her neck. Alvin Carter had taken pains with his appearance as well, wearing black trousers and a dark-maroon pullover sweater.

Madge nudged Noel before they got into the car. "Your mother and Mr. Carter look cute together, don't they? Just like an old married couple."

"My thoughts exactly," Noel replied with a smile. "They are just about the same age, so hopefully they'll have a lot to talk about."

Noel was enchanted by the sight of Madge's house on Dane Street. Madge made the effort ("I hired someone to do it," she told Noel later) to arrange a string of cheerful Christmas lights on the eaves of her house with a large green wreath hanging on the front door. Dither greeted them as they trooped inside, curious about the new visitors. He took an instant shine to June, jumping onto her lap as she sat in her wheelchair.

"Dither!" Madge said sternly.

June laughed. "No, it's okay. I love cats, and I don't mind Dither making himself at home on my lap. He's nice and warm, and quite comforting." She stroked the feline gently, which prompted him to gaze up at her adoringly, his loud purrs sounding in the entryway.

Noel wheeled her mother into the living room, which was also decorated for the season. Garlands were draped over the white fireplace mantle with red candles, and a large poinsettia rested on the coffee table. A Christmas tree with lights blinked in one corner. The room, while not overly large, was comfortable and inviting. Two brown leather couches faced each other over the rounded coffee table, all set upon a hardwood floor. The walls were covered with cream-colored and ivy-green wallpaper, offset by dark brown draperies and a window seat with throw cushions overlooking the front yard.

"You went to a lot of trouble to decorate your house," June noted. "It's lovely."

Madge waved her hand. "Not a bit of it. The tree is fake, one of those fancy synthetic jobs I bought many years ago. All I had to do was drag it from the attic, give it a good dusting, and *voila!* It does the trick, though, because everyone thinks it's real." She gave a quick smile. "I hardly ever use this room, which is why it's so neat and tidy."

Pim began placing gifts under the tree from the cardboard box, while Alvin settled on one of the couches.

"Would anyone like a drink?" Madge asked. "Wine, perhaps?"

Noel's gaze went to Pim as he stood by the Christmas tree. He met her eyes and grinned. "I think Pim would like a quick gin and tonic first," she told Madge.

"Coming right up. Can you give me a hand, Noel?"

Noel followed her boss to the kitchen, which she found to be more than impressive. "Wow," she said aloud. "Your kitchen is beautiful, Madge. It's bigger than our flat back on Wren Street."

Madge chuckled as she opened one side of the stainless steel refrigerator. "The house is one of the gifts from my divorce settlement years ago. I had the kitchen re-done last summer, although I hardly ever use it. Today is a special occasion, but it's still quite a novel experience for me to do any cooking. Let's just say I have very little in the way of natural culinary instinct."

"What can I help you with?"

"Let's pour drinks and then get the ham started."

After Noel served wine to Alvin and June, and a tall gin and tonic to a grateful Pim, she returned to the kitchen to help Madge. "Dither is still making himself at home on my mother's lap," Noel laughed. "Funny, I've never thought of Mom as a cat lover but she seems to be enchanted by him."

"Dither can be cranky when the mood suits him," Madge said as she handed Noel a glass of red wine. "He can be sweet and loving one minute, and in the next he'll dash off in a fit of pique."

The two women began studding a large ham with cloves, and then pinned pineapple rings to the skin with toothpicks. Madge placed the baking dish in the oven, setting the timer for two hours. "I'll give everyone a few minutes to down their drinks, and then we can throw some hors d'oeuvres at them. I bought a platter of shrimp with cocktail sauce we can serve. Do you think that will tide them over until dinner?"

"I'm sure it will."

Madge leaned her hip against the counter, wine glass in hand. "Your Pim is quite the looker," she observed. "Tall, handsome, polite, single . . . almost perfect."

Noel blushed. "I think so, but then I'm hardly objective."

"And he has that bloody fantastic English accent to boot. Very alluring. Tell me, are there wedding bells in your future?"

"We haven't really talked about it yet," Noel replied, taking a quick sip of her wine. She wasn't ready to tell *anyone* they were making plans. Not yet.

"You two look good together, just like your mother and Mr. Carter. You and Pim are still young enough to have kids, too."

Noel nearly choked on her next sip of wine. "Good God!" she exclaimed. "Having a child is the farthest thing from my mind, Madge. I can't see bringing a child into the world and then taking it home to Wren Street."

"You're working and Pim's working," Madge reasoned. "Both of you are getting back on your feet quite admirably. What's to stop you from buying a house someday soon?"

"Nothing, I suppose."

"Well, there you are."

Noel was thoughtful. Although getting married was a new discussion between her and Pim, unbeknownst to Madge, the idea of having children had never occurred to her. With all the deep thinking she'd done in the last several weeks, having a baby – even if it was with Pim – was not at the top of her priority list. Madge's comments gave Noel pause. Was it too late? Would she be pushing her new yet extraordinary luck too far by wanting to have it all?

"Time to baste the ham," Madge announced, turning her back on Noel to open the oven door. "Then we can join the others with our shrimp platter and fresh drinks."

When they entered the living room a few minutes later, Noel sought Pim with her eyes. He was still sitting next to Alvin on the couch, an empty glass in his hand. He stared at her, a slight smile on his face. "*Your mind is full,*" he thought-spoke to her. "*Children? Why are you thinking about children?*"

"*Madge says we make a cute couple,*" Noel thought as she set the tray of shrimp and cocktail sauce on the coffee table. "*She asked if we were planning to get married someday, and then mentioned we were both still young enough to have children. Crazy, huh?*"

"*Not so crazy. We aren't doing anything to stop it, are we?*" He grinned, thrusting his empty glass to her. "*Besides, I think we make a cute couple, too. Just imagine the little rug-rats we could produce. Practice, practice, practice...*"

Noel laughed out loud before she could stop herself. Madge glanced at her quizzically. "Did I miss something?" she asked.

Noel recovered nicely. "No, it's just Pim. He shoved his empty glass at me, and it struck me funny. He knows very well I'm not the type to be at his beck and call, or worship at his feet for that matter."

Madge snorted, a smile on her face. "It's better if he learns that now, rather than later."

"Point taken," Pim said teasingly, his warm eyes still on Noel.

Dinner was a festive affair. Madge's dining room, adjacent to the kitchen, was small but traditional in design. Dark red walls met white wainscoting and baseboards, with yellow and pink gingham curtains open to the only window in the room. A modest chandelier shed light on the six-seat oak dining table, with a darker wood sideboard off to the side. Pim helped by carrying in the large platter of ham, already sliced, while Madge and Noel followed with a bowl of steamed green beans and a casserole dish full of scalloped potatoes.

Noel noticed her mother and Alvin chatting animatedly, almost oblivious to everyone else around them. Dither was still perched on June's lap, now sitting up and watching the food on the table with great interest.

"Tell me if Dither becomes a bother," Madge said as she observed her cat staring intently at the platter of ham. "He'll make a nuisance out of himself if you let him."

"Oh no," June protested. "It's Christmas for Dither, too. I'm enjoying his company."

Near the end of the meal, Pim sliced apple pie for everyone while Noel dropped scoops of vanilla ice cream on arranged dessert plates.

"I have a confession to make," Madge said from her place at the head of the table. "Noel and I prepared the ham, but the rest of the food came from Boston Market just this morning. Naughty of me, huh?"

Alvin laughed. "The meal was delicious nonetheless. Thank you for a wonderful dinner, Madge and Noel, and thank you for inviting me."

"It was my pleasure," Madge beamed.

Later, they returned to the living room to exchange gifts. Dither remained on June's lap, washing his face with contentment after receiving his fair share of ham.

Noel volunteered to distribute the gifts, beginning with Madge. "You go first since you're the hostess," Noel told her with a smile. She piled four gaily-wrapped gifts at Madge's feet as she sat on the couch nearest the fireplace, a fresh glass of wine in her hand.

When Madge revealed the gift basket, her face lit with pleasure. "Thank you, Noel. It's lovely." She was equally moved by presents from Pim (a box of Sea Salt Turtle chocolates), a gift certificate to Café Porto Bello from June, and a tin of Yorkshire Gold teabags from Alvin.

June was delighted with a golden-colored shawl from Pim, and a boxed video set of *As Time Goes By* from Noel. "I'll buy a VCR when I get my next paycheck," Noel promised her mother.

Pim gave Noel a small, decorative wall clock, which contained a backdrop of sepia-colored magnolias with butterflies. "Nothing bright and sunny for my girl," he joked. Her gift to him was a silver filigree waistcoat with a black Bastian shirt. "You can wear it to work and look elegant but not overdressed," she told him. He kissed her on the lips in thanks, not caring that the others were watching them.

Madge excused herself for a moment. She returned to the living room carrying a large tray containing four miniature bonsai trees as gifts. "Each one has instructions for care," she told them. "I tried keeping a bonsai once, but ended up killing it. I wasn't sure if it was from my lack of care, or from Dither taking vicious swipes at the poor thing. Hopefully, the four of you will have better luck."

Alvin had brought his present from Noel to the dinner party, so now he opened it with great care. His eyes grew wide when he saw the mantle figurine with bells. He was speechless for several seconds while Noel held her breath. Would he be offended? Would the gift remind him of their first uncomfortable conversation, just a few weeks ago?

She heard Pim's thoughts. "*Oh dear, Noel. I'm not sure if he likes it . . .*"

Suddenly, Alvin grinned. "I love it. And I know the perfect place for it in my apartment."

"Where?" June asked, curious.

"I'll put it right on top of my television in the living room. It's perfect for the holidays." He glanced at Noel. "Thank you."

Noel exhaled quietly, relieved the moment had passed. "You're very welcome." She smiled when she heard Pim's next thought: "*As I live and breathe . . .*"

Noel was highly moved by the gift-giving. It wasn't the gifts themselves, but rather the individual thought behind them and the realization that this time last year such an event would not have been even remotely possible. All of them had much to be grateful for.

They finished early enough for Madge to drive them home, although she invited them to spend the night.

"I have to get home," June said firmly. "I need to take my medication, unfortunately." She patted Dither on the head gently. The feline awoke, looking up at his new friend with sleepy eyes.

"You'll have to come again soon," Madge insisted with a hint of humor. "Otherwise, there will be no living with Dither."

BLOODFROST:

Excerpt from Chapter Nine

NOEL AND PIM APPLIED for their marriage license the first week of January, and then patiently bided their time during the three-day waiting period. Madge went full-steam ahead with wedding preparations, also coaxing Judge Minot to do the honors.

There was no time – or money – for proper wedding attire or fancy rings, so Noel and Pim made do with clothes off-the-rack from Filene's Bargain Basement on Washington Street. Noel found a floor-length ivory-chiffon dress for just under \$100, with long sleeves, spaghetti straps, Basque-style waist and a zipper-back. She couldn't afford new dresses for her mother and Madge, so the two women got together and paid for their own simple ensembles – a white blouse and gray skirt for Madge, and a one-piece faux satin pink dress for June.

Noel and Pim met with Judge Edward Minot before the wedding, which was scheduled for January 11th. Madge took the couple to Judge Minot's home in Beacon Hill one Saturday morning, which was an area of Boston that Noel was not overly familiar with. Located north of Boston Common, Beacon Hill was one of the most elite neighborhoods in the city. The judge's house on Louisburg Square was flanked by pink-bricked townhomes and fronted with a cobblestone sidewalk.

"Why did Judge Minot agree to perform our wedding ceremony?" Noel asked Madge as they parked. "He doesn't know us from Tom, Dick or Harry."

"He knows *me* quite well. And I've talked about you."

"Why?" Noel was bewildered.

"Because I think the world of you, Noel. You deserve to be happy and you deserve the best, as far as I'm concerned. I wish I could give you Buckingham Palace for your wedding, but my foyer will have to do." She laughed. "Judge Minot might come off as a bit stern and cranky, but he is the salt of the earth with a salty sense of humor to match."

"But why does he want to meet us before the ceremony?" Noel persisted.

"To make sure all the paperwork is in order," Madge replied quickly. "Plus, he likes to have a brief chat with couples before they get married, sort of like a priest counseling the romantically inclined members of his flock. I also wanted you to have a look inside his house. It's quite amazing, and something I hope to aspire to someday."

Noel heard Pim's thoughts as he sat next to her in the back seat of Madge's Taurus. Even in silence, his tone suggested he was slightly reproofing. "*Noel, please. Madge is going out of her way to make our wedding special. Don't give her the third degree. So what if she wants us to meet the judge? Go with the flow and put a smile on your face!*"

Noel glanced at him sideways. "*Are we a bit tetchy this morning?*" she thought sharply.

Pim didn't respond. Instead, he reached over and squeezed her hand with affection.

Madge was right about one thing. The inside of Judge Minot's house was amazing. A uniformed housekeeper opened the double-glassed doors, ushering them into a grand entryway. The ceiling was high and airy, with an amber globe chandelier adorning the top. The walls were done in light cream and dark brown accents, the floor a shiny mixture of sienna and blond woods forming uniform stripes. While not overly ostentatious, the home was old-world elegant and bespoke of meticulous care.

"Hi Dolores," Madge greeted the housekeeper by name. "The judge is expecting us." She turned to Pim and Noel. "These are my friends Noel Gatsby and Pim Grady. They are the lucky couple Judge Minot has agreed to marry in a few days time."

Slightly plump with dark-and-gray pageboy hair, Dolores smiled at Madge. "Good to see you, Miss Tilley," she said, nodding politely toward Noel and Pim. "Judge Minot is waiting for you in the den. Please follow me."

They walked down a short corridor to the left of the entryway, the floors just as shiny and well-tended. Judge Minot's den was as elegant as the foyer, but with a marked masculine appeal. Where outside the room was light and airy, the den was rich with dark paneling, floor-to-ceiling bookcases, a tan-colored leather sofa, a tall cabinet with a television set, a green-felt covered poker table in one corner, and a large antique desk. A crackling fire burned in the grate, which was surrounded by a massive carved mantle and topped with a seascape portrait. The painting was an impressive rendition of Boston Harbor at sunset as seen in the eyes of artist Fitz Hugh Lane, the foggy waters teeming with old clipper ships.

A small, older man emerged from behind the desk, which almost seemed to swallow him whole until he came forward. Despite his diminutive size, the man's stern countenance was emphasized by deep frown lines on either side of his mouth and spider web crinkles on his forehead. White, thinning hair was carefully slicked back to the nape of his neck, where it met evenly with the whiteness of his dress-shirt collar. His watery blue eyes gazed at them through thick, bi-focal spectacles, which were rimmed with a silver frame.

He held out his hand, a thin patchwork of blue veins and wrinkles, gripping Madge's fingers in a form of greeting. "Lovely to see you again so soon, Madge," his voice came deep and rumbling, another characteristic that belied his size. "Please introduce me to your friends."

Noel found herself staring at the old man, unable to help herself. Despite his size, watery eyes and obvious maturity, he exuded a glow of good health. Rather than pale and waxy as was typical of someone his age, his skin - while wrinkled - was slightly tan. He appeared well-rested and refreshed.

"This is Noel Gatsby and Pim Grady," Madge was saying. "Noel is my secretary, and Pim works as an engineer for Nordic Petroleum. Noel and Pim, this is Judge Edward Minot, my dear friend and frequent boss in the courtroom. He sits on the bench for Boston Municipal Court, where he hears many of the family law cases I represent."

"We're honored to meet you," Pim said affably, shaking hands with the judge.

Judge Minot's eyes went to Noel, who was still staring at him with barely veiled curiosity if not surprise. Although Madge or Pim couldn't hear his thoughts eking through the air, Noel could. She never expected to be able to read anyone else but Pim, so the words trickling from the old man kept her transfixed.

"*You...can...hear me?*" he was stunned. The quick thoughts sped between the judge's mind to hers, but the signal was rather weak. It was as if they were being transmitted from an echo chamber or from a great distance away.

"*Yes, I can hear you. How is that?*"

"*Assuming...you've met...Shoji,*" was his disjointed but hasty reply.

Noel's mouth gaped open slightly, her eyes narrowing as she regarded him.

"Noel?" Madge said, touching her arm. "Is something wrong?"

Noel recovered herself instantly. She flashed a smile at Madge. "No, not at all." Over Madge's shoulder, she saw Pim's face and puzzled stare aimed in her direction. Noel turned to face the old man again, extending her hand. "Thank you for inviting us into your beautiful home, Judge Minot."

He nodded graciously. "Madge speaks highly of both you and Mr. Grady. It's my pleasure to assist you with your marriage plans."

Madge laughed. "That's my cue to skedaddle," she explained with humor. "Judge Minot prefers to speak with couples privately before he marries them."

"Miriam is waiting for you in the kitchen with tea," the old man told Madge with a smile. He looked at Noel. "You'll meet my wife later, of course."

After Madge left the den, closing the door behind her, Noel and Pim took seats in two comfortable leather chairs facing Judge Minot's large desk. He resumed his place behind the desk, which had an imposing backdrop window overlooking Louisburg Square.

"It's not a requirement that you speak to me before I perform your marriage ceremony," the judge began, keeping his watery blue eyes on Noel. "To be honest, I don't marry many people anymore. I usually do it just for friends and family." He smiled thinly. "Since Madge is a dear friend, I'm glad to be of service. I like to get to know couples before I read the vows, which is a personal preference more than anything else. Marriage is an important step, never to be taken lightly - even for those past the youthful stage of life."

"This will be a second marriage for both of us," Pim offered. "I was divorced a long time ago in England, while Noel's first husband passed away last year."

"Before which we were separated for a long period," Noel added quickly.

"And neither of us has any children," Pim continued.

"How long have you known each another?" Judge Minot asked thoughtfully.

"Years," Pim replied frankly. "We've lived in the same apartment building for about a decade." He glanced at Noel, his eyes warm. "We were just acquaintances for a very long time, but it has developed into much more than that."

As Pim talked, Noel focused on the judge. She blocked Pim from reading her mind, putting her thoughts in a protected recess of her brain where she could control output and receiving. The ability still stymied her, unable to fathom how she was capable of such a unique yet powerful talent. The skill seemed to be growing stronger rather than weakening, as Shoji told her it might.

"*What happened to you?*" Noel directed her thoughts to the judge. "*If you know about Shoji, then you must have awakened during your healing process. What was your particular brand of suffering?*"

Judge Minot shifted his gaze to Pim, as if listening to the handsome Englishman speak with great interest. However, his thoughts went to Noel. "*Had...inoperable...brain tumor...two years ago. Almost died. When I came to after seizure, no trace of...tumor remained. Doctor flabbergasted. I recall seeing Shoji in a dream...could read certain people's minds afterward. Can't read minds like...used to. My...ability is slowly eroding...but health still fine...*"

His thoughts came to her faintly, some of the words lost or muffled in transmission. It reminded Noel of being on a cell phone and having the connection fade in and out. "*Are we crazy or is this really happening?*" Noel mused silently.

"*Really happening, not crazy...does Pim know?*"

"*He can only read my mind, and me his. Now I can read yours, too.*"

"Need to talk more about this....later...when no one else...around..."

Noel spoke aloud. "After Pim and I are married, we're going to share his apartment with my mother. Hopefully, in time, we'll be able to buy a small house together."

"Yes," Pim joined her. "The future looks bright, indeed."

"I've joined dozens of couples in marriage over the years," Judge Minot admitted. "Granted, it's not the reason I'm a judge nor is it an official part of my duties with the Municipal Court. I preside over family law cases every day, some which end in unspeakable tragedy while others have happy endings. I think my desire to see couples off to a good start stems from that. Having a short chat with me is not a prerequisite to getting married, of course, but in my own way I like to make sure two people are compatible before I perform their wedding ceremony. I guess I've learned to trust my instincts about people after witnessing so much drama in my courtroom."

"And what's your verdict about me and Noel?" Pim asked expectantly.

The judge smiled broadly. "There's no question about it, Mr. Grady. The two of you are like two peas in a pod. I sense a great deal of love and respect between you, and something much deeper. Soul mates, if you will. Call me a crazy old man, but the connection you have with Noel seems to go as deep as your soul."

Pim exhaled quietly, as if relieved that Judge Minot approved of them. "Thank you. We knew that before we came here, naturally, but it's reassuring that you can see it, too."

Before Noel could add her own comment, Madge and an elderly woman came into the den. "Enough serious talk," the woman said. "It's time for a nice cup of tea, Edward, and I'm sure your guests are ready for some refreshment by now."

Madge laughed. "The boss lady has spoken, Judge Minot."

He grinned. "Yes, it's a little-known secret that my wife rules the roost at home. I'm a mere puppet in the domestic scheme of things."

Miriam Minot was as small and compact as her husband, with short, wavy white hair and light brown eyes. She wore a long-sleeved pink dress which fell to just below her knees, the waist cinched with a gray belt. She was tiny, almost doll-like, but with a force of personality that seemed to fill the air around her. She was easy to like.

Noel and Pim enjoyed a leisurely tea with Madge and their hosts, seated in front of the fireplace in the judge's den. Miriam provided tiny cucumber sandwiches – with the crusts cut off, no less – and round shortbread cookies with powdered sugar sprinkled on top.

When it was time to leave, Noel felt as if she had known Judge Minot and Miriam forever. Despite his stern appearance, the judge was a kind old soul deep in his heart, and his wife was simply charming. On the way home, Madge told Noel and Pim that the couple had never been able to have children of their own. "So they get involved in charities that have to do with kids, especially the Children's Hospital and *Horizons for Homeless Children*. They donate a lot of their time and money to worthwhile causes."

"Just another reason to like them," Pim said from the back seat. He glanced to Noel, who sat quietly next to him. "I felt an immediate kinship with Judge Minot, although I'm not sure why. He comes off a bit severe at first, as you told us he would, but underneath all that he's a kind, decent man. Tell me, Madge, what's he like when he's presiding in court? Does he scare the hell out of defendants and attorneys alike?"

Madge chuckled. "Judge Minot has the reputation of being no-nonsense, but he's fair in all cases. Every time I've come before him, he based his decisions on the facts without

prejudice. He's quite a remarkable man, and I dread the day he retires. I know you might find this hard to believe, but he turned eighty-three last October."

"Is he planning to retire?" Pim wanted to know.

"He mentions it now and then, but has no concrete plans to step down. There's no need for him to do so, really. He's as sharp as a tack."

After Madge dropped them off on Wren Street, Noel and Pim went to his apartment on the first floor. They were almost finished with rearranging the small flat to accommodate June after the wedding, turning the small storage room into a bedroom for her. They had already painted the walls, waxed the floor and scrubbed the tiny window, which overlooked the alleyway between their apartment building and the next row house. They continued tinkering with the room after they returned from Judge Minot's home, intent on hanging a set of beige-colored blinds over the window.

Pim stood on a small stepstool, using a screwdriver to secure the hanging mounts. Without looking at Noel, he said: "Okay - *out with it*. You were blocking me while we were with the judge. What's going on?"

Noel was sheepish. "You caught that, huh?"

"Of *course* I caught it. You might be able to block me, Noel, but you can't hide the fact that you're doing it in the first place. Ditto for me."

Noel sighed. "I don't know if the judge will mind me telling you, but here it goes. Judge Minot had an inoperable brain tumor a few years ago, and he almost died."

"How did you know that?"

"He told me. Or rather, he told me in his thoughts..."

Pim stood down from the stepstool, screwdriver still in hand. "You can read his mind?" he asked, stunned. "How did *that* happen?"

"He had a seizure in the hospital related to his brain tumor," she explained. "When he came to, he recalled seeing Shoji in a dream. It was then his doctor discovered that all traces of the brain tumor had disappeared. Then Judge Minot realized he could read certain people's minds."

"Who? What people?"

"He didn't have a chance to tell me," Noel replied. "But there is something different about his mind-reading abilities. They are - how shall I say it? - *fading away*. I could hear his words, but it was like they were coming from a great distance, and sometimes they were filled with static. Is that what's going to happen to us? After a few years we'll no longer be able to read each other's thoughts?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Pim replied. "But if all goes according to what Shoji and Hoshi told us, extra-sensory abilities which are side effects of the healing process *do* go away in time. I suppose that's what we can expect, too." He shook his head. "It's a small world, isn't it? We're told coming awake during the cure is a rare thing, yet here are three of us in the space of two months."

"Four," Noel corrected him.

"Four?"

"Don't forget Alvin Carter," she said. "I know you don't fully agree with me, but I think something happened to him he's not telling us about. Or it happened and he doesn't remember."

"The jury is still out on that one."

Noel shrugged. "Time will tell, but mark my words."

Pim climbed the stepstool again, returning to his task. "Who do you suppose the judge can read, aside from you?"

"That's a story for another day," she responded in a practical tone. "There's not much time between now and our wedding, so further chitchat with the judge will have to wait." Noel laughed. "Wouldn't it be something if he could read people's minds in court? He'd know from the get-go who was guilty and who was innocent, wouldn't he?"

"There's something not entirely moral about *that* scenario."

"If he gets to the truth, what difference does it make?"

Rather than answer her, Pim hung the blinds. "There. How does that look?"

"It's lovely, Pim. Thank you."

"I just want June to be comfortable while we're stuck here," he said. "Hopefully, it won't be for much longer."

Noel looped her arm through his. "Speaking of my mother, maybe we should go and check on her. When we left, she and Alvin were deep into a game of *Hearts*. You don't think they're still at it, do you?"

Pim chuckled. "Or maybe they've fallen into bed . . ."

She pinched his arm. "*Really*, Pim."

"You're never too old for a romp in the hay," he teased her. "No one – not even your sainted mother and old man Carter – are as staid and proper as they would like us to believe."

"Do you know something that I don't?"

"No. I just know men." He grinned. "I could be on my deathbed and I'd still want to throw you down and have my way with you."

"Thanks for the warning," she said dryly, but with a smile. "Be that as it may, shall we go upstairs and check on them anyway?"

"Lead the way, love."

BLOODFROST:
Excerpt from Chapter Eleven

THE MORNING OF FRIDAY, August 13th, dawned hot and humid. Noel awoke early, a dull pain in her lower back making sleep impossible. The heat was already oppressive, forcing her to fling the blanket from her body. She sat upright in the bed, and then gasped. The sheet underneath her was soaking wet.

"Pim," she shook her sleeping husband urgently. "I think my water broke."

He raised his head, looking at her in alarm. "It's time?"

"The bed is soaking wet and my back hurts, so yes I think it's time." Noel didn't intend to sound peevish, but the pain in her lower body was accelerating rapidly.

"Steady, Noel. I'm here to help."

Pim assisted her out of the damp nightgown and into a pair of gray sweat pants with a white tee-shirt. "You stay here while I call for a taxicab," he instructed.

"Call Dr. Mintz and Madge, too."

"I know the drill."

Dr. Mintz met them at Faulkner Hospital on Centre Street, with Madge following shortly thereafter. Noel was placed in a small room on the third floor, where she was dressed in a hospital gown and given a cup of ice cubes. Pim sat next to the bed, holding his wife's hand.

Noel sighed with relief as another wave of pain subsided. Rivulets of perspiration covered her face in a damp sheen. "At least it's cool in here," she said. "I can't believe how hot it is outside, and so early in the morning. We'd all melt away if the hospital didn't have central air conditioning."

At that moment, Pim and Noel felt a low rumble shake the walls of her room. It was as if the entire hospital building trembled briefly, and then shuddered to a halt. The lights went out and the cooling flow of air from the vent over the bed stopped abruptly.

"Oh please *no*," Noel groaned. "Take *anything* away but the central air."

Pim stood from his chair. "Let me go find out what's going on."

Before he could leave, Dr. Mintz entered the room trailed by a nurse. "Not to worry, folks. Boston just had a brown-out. Our power is only off momentarily. The generators should kick-in any second." He pointed to a corner in Noel's room, telling the nurse: "Put the fan over there."

Noel watched as the nurse positioned a tall, oscillating fan in the corner. "When the generators come on we still have to conserve power," Dr. Mintz explained. "That means doing without air conditioning."

Before she could respond, another contraction took over Noel's body in a rush. She gripped the sides of the bed, clenching her teeth in pain. At that instant, the lights went back on and the fan started rotating in the corner.

Dr. Mintz came to the bed, taking Noel's wrist to read her pulse. "How far apart are the contractions?" he asked her.

She looked at Pim. "Three or four minutes, maybe?"

Pim nodded. "About three minutes, doctor. Are we getting close?"

"Most definitely," he replied. "I'll be back shortly, and then we can get started."

Madge came into the room after Dr. Mintz and the nurse left. She went directly to the bed, peering down at Noel with concern. "How are you feeling, sweetie?" she asked.

"It hurts," Noel admitted frankly. "But I'm more annoyed by the god damned heat than anything else. That stupid fan in the corner is only blowing hot air around the room."

"Wouldn't you know it - Boston has a brown-out the same day you give birth," Madge said sympathetically. "From what I heard on the news, our power grid couldn't handle everyone blasting their air conditioners all at the same time. By the end of the day, we're sure to have some cases of heat-inspired road rage, don't you think?"

Noel's pain subsided once again. "What about the office? Did you get someone to answer the phones?"

"I called in a temp before I came to the hospital," Madge told her. "Not to worry, Noel. I don't have any cases scheduled for court today, so I'll be nearby for the duration."

"Thank you, Madge. I'm so glad you're here."

"Judge Minot and his wife are outside in the waiting room, too. I phoned and told them you were in labor, and they insisted on coming over."

"That's very kind," Pim said. "I should go and thank him." He leaned over and gave Noel a quick kiss on the cheek. "I'll be right back."

Madge dragged a chair to the other side of Noel's bed, sitting down and crossing her legs. "Miriam wants to throw a baptism party for the baby when the time comes. She knows you two want to have the child christened at St. Theresa's, and she'd like to have a modest shin-dig at her house afterward."

"She doesn't have to go to any trouble . . ." Noel began to protest.

"In case you haven't noticed, the judge and his wife have taken a real shine to you. They aren't pushy sorts, but I know they would be more than happy to celebrate the birth of your child. Don't forget, they *are* childless. I'd go with the flow if I were you."

"What are you saying?"

"Let them be generous if they want to be, Noel. It makes them happy. Besides, it can only be good for the baby, right?"

Pim returned to the room with Judge Minot and his wife in tow. The judge's words were almost immediate, meant for Noel's mind alone. "*Not in...too much...pain...are you?*"

"*No more than expected,*" she thought, looking into the old man's eyes. "*But I'm fine. Please don't worry.*"

"*Hard...not...to,*" he smiled.

Miriam stood at the foot of the bed. "My God, it's awfully hot in here. Can't we do something about that?"

"Not until the brown-out is over," Madge informed her.

"Where's your mother, Noel?" Judge Minot asked. "I didn't see her in the waiting room."

"We decided it would be best if she stayed at the apartment," Pim answered for his wife. "June has such trouble getting around, and she didn't want to be in the way. Mr. Carter agreed to bring her over in a taxi once the baby is born."

"We can pick her up when the time comes," the judge offered.

"That's very kind, but . . ."

"It's no trouble at all," Miriam assured Pim. "We'd be happy to bring June over, and Mr. Carter too, if he wants to come along."

Another wave of pain cycled through Noel's lower body. She squeezed Pim's hand, who murmured soothingly in her ear. "Not much longer, love. Just think, in a few hours time you'll be holding our little Kate in your arms." He ran an ice cube across her clammy forehead, trailing it down to her cheeks and jaw.

"That feels good," she said gratefully. "More, please."

Dr. Mintz reentered the room, his tone brusque. "Okay, folks. Visiting time is over. Everyone but Mr. Grady needs to leave."

The next few hours were slow and agonizing for Noel. The pain ripping through her body increased with frequency and duration, the heat making her feel as if she was a turkey baking in an oven. At one point, she became confused and frightened. In her mind, she saw flames licking up the walls of her hospital room, reaching the ceiling in slow-motion curls.

"Do you see the fire?" she mumbled, directing her question to no one in particular.

"There's no fire, Noel," Pim tried to console her. "Your skin is hot, love, and the room is hot, but there is no fire."

"But I see the flames," she insisted stubbornly.

"Doctor?" Pim asked, concern in his voice.

"She's just having a mild hallucination," Noel heard Dr. Mintz say. "We put a bit of Demerol and Meptazinol in her IV, just enough to take the edge off her pain. That, combined with the heat, has made her slightly delirious. It's nothing to worry about, Mr. Grady."

Noel felt herself go in and out of conscious thought. Whenever she opened her eyes, she saw flames snaking up the wall, so she quickly closed them again. She held onto Pim's hand tightly, afraid to let go.

"I'm right here," he whispered in her ear. "I'm not leaving you."

Her head lolled back and forth on the pillow, which was now stained and soaked with her own sweat. The heat was simply unbearable, made worse by the relentless flames in the room. Why didn't they catch everything else on fire? What kind of flame simply curled up a wall but did little else? Or was the fire another omen?

"But we did all the right things," she cried out, her eyes still closed. "We went to church, we prayed . . . we've made plans to be the best parents on earth . . . we'll be loving parents, you'll see . . . what else can we possibly do to stave off such horrible evil?"

"Noel," Pim's frantic thoughts broke through her jumbled mind. *"Everything is going to be okay. Please, believe me. Think about our beautiful daughter . . . think about good things . . . don't conjure up hellacious images in your head. You can do it, love. Think about our darling Kate; think about taking her home to the little room you created for her. She's ready to meet us, Noel. She's ready to come into the world and meet her parents."*

"I believe you," she whispered out loud, opening her eyes to stare at her husband. "She won't be sour and tainted, will she?"

Pim shook his head. "No, she won't be sour and tainted. She'll be perfect, Noel. Our little Kate will be perfect."

Trust in his words filled Noel with relief. She closed her eyes again, squeezing his hand as another wave of pain bore down on her. It was the last thing she remembered for quite awhile.

BLOODFROST:

Excerpt from Chapter Thirteen

THE NIGHT BEFORE NOEL and Pim were scheduled to move into their new home, Judge Minot and Miriam spent a quiet evening at their townhouse on Louisburg Square. They ate a leisurely dinner of lamb chops with mint and bundled green beans, after which they retired to the judge's den with healthy snifters of brandy.

Miriam sat on the tan-colored leather sofa, using the remote control to turn on the television, settling in to watch a rerun episode of *M*A*S*H*. The judge sat behind the desk and buried his head in a copy of one of his favorite books, a collector's folio edition of *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, occasionally surfacing to take a sip of brandy.

Being a long-married couple, Edward and Miriam Minot were comfortable with lengthy periods of silence. They knew each other's foibles and strong points, appreciating and respecting both. Miriam was his soul mate, pure and simple, and he was her knight in shining armor. Their love and affection went far beyond the physical, long ago transcending the lust and recklessness of youth.

After the television program ended, Miriam drained her snifter of brandy. She glanced toward her husband, who was still engrossed in his book. "Are you going to be long?" she asked.

His eyes rose over the rim of the book. "Probably another hour or so. Why? Are you going to bed?"

She nodded. "I'm tuckered out. Tomorrow is going to be a long day, so I want to get some rest."

"I'll join you shortly," he promised.

Miriam knew better. Once Edward became involved in reading he lost all track of time. She smiled tolerantly as she rose from the sofa. "Don't stay up too late, mind you."

He had already returned his focus to the book. "Yes darling," he replied absently, without looking up.

Their bedroom was on the second floor of the townhouse, which contained a small balcony overlooking the cobblestone sidewalk on Louisburg Square. It was a warm night, so Miriam opened the French doors to allow fresh air into the room.

Done in light cream and dark brown accents, similar to the entryway of the house, the bedroom was spacious with two walk-in closets, a sitting area, and a large bathroom which included a roman tub, wide shower, long double-sink counter and a mirrored dressing table.

Miriam changed into a white silk nightgown and robe, washing up before she left the bathroom. As she bent her head over the sink to splash water on her face, she suddenly felt light-headed. Placing her hands on the counter, she braced herself in hopes the dizziness would pass.

"*Must be the brandy,*" she thought vaguely. "*But I don't feel drunk.*"

She went into the bedroom, staggering slightly. She sat on the end of the bed, sinking gratefully into the mattress. For a few brief seconds she felt the dizziness subside, but then it came back stronger than before. She looked around the room, her gaze unfocused and her thoughts disorientated. *Was she having a stroke?* No, it couldn't be. She felt no pain anywhere on her body.

It was then she heard a small voice in the back of her mind, a surreal tiny croaking that reminded her of the munchkin-talk heard in *The Wizard of Oz*. Surely, she was hallucinating . . .

"Call me naughty Katie and see what it gets you . . ."

Miriam opened her mouth to scream, but she was unable to form a sound. She looked to the floor. She vaguely realized if she dropped to her knees and crawled, she could reach the second floor landing and call for Edward. But he wouldn't hear her, would he? She was mute, suddenly struck taciturn by the munchkin voice in her head.

"Call me naughty Katie and see what it gets you..."

She tried to get to her feet, pushing her hands into the bed to gain momentum. In slow motion - or so she thought - she came to a standing position, her legs wobbly underneath her. She took a few steps. She meant to head in the direction of the bedroom door, but her unwilling shuffle took her toward the open French doors and balcony instead.

"No," she thought in a panic. *"I don't want to go there."*

But she couldn't will herself to turn around. Her legs refused to obey, seeming to have a life of their own. Then the voice in her head became louder.

"Call me naughty Katie and see what it gets you . . ."

Before she knew it, Miriam found herself standing on the balcony. It was almost as if her free will was frozen – she desperately wanted to retreat, but her mind and limbs simply would not allow her to do so.

It was dark on the balcony, the light from gas street lamps appearing like little fireflies a million miles away. There weren't many people walking around this time of night, although Miriam saw a man walking his dog as he went along Louisburg Square toward Pinckney Street.

She shuffled to the edge of the balcony, grasping the iron rail. She wanted to cry out, to scream for help in the hopes someone might hear her, even the man walking his dog. Again, her mouth opened in grotesque anguish but no sound came forth.

"Call me naughty Katie and see what it gets you..."

Miriam leaned over the rail, looking down upon the dimly-lit cobblestone sidewalk below. She had the sudden urge to lie down, to curl up into a ball and go to sleep. Her arms and legs were weak, her entire body exhausted by the sheer effort to stand upright.

It would be so easy now. Just a few more steps and she could finally rest, and silence the mocking voice in her head.

"Call me naughty Katie and see what it gets you . . ."

ALVIN WAS ALONE IN his flat the night before Noel and Pim planned to move to their new house. He sat in his favorite recliner, drinking a cup of tea and reading his well-worn copy of *To Your Scattered Bodies Go* by Philip José Farmer.

He gave a big yawn around eleven o'clock, setting aside his book and rubbing his eyes. He should go to bed and rest for tomorrow, for what was sure to be a busy and exhausting day.

Alvin started to push himself from the recliner, but fell back when he suddenly grew dizzy. Closing his eyes, he tried to shake the feeling. He wasn't sick, just extra-tired after a

long day. He also felt a slight headache coming on, unusual for him even when he did a lot of reading.

He opened his eyes and tried to get out of the recliner again. The dizziness became worse, causing him to rest his head against the back of the chair. *What was the matter with him?* He hadn't had a drop of alcohol, nor did any of his medications typically cause lightheadedness. *Was it something he ate?* No, a grilled cheese sandwich with tomato soup didn't fit the dizzy bill.

Suddenly, he felt as if a great deal of pressure was being applied to his brain. It was like someone was holding his head in a literal vice-grip. His thoughts became jumbled, nonsensical meanderings mixed with the sounds of a tiny voice. The voice was high-pitched, almost squeaky, making him wince in pain.

"Call me naughty Katie and see what it gets you . . ."

Alvin felt a shot of fear ripple through his body. Was he going crazy, hearing a voice in his head other than his own? And why on earth was the voice invoking Kate's name?

He finally managed to stand, his legs like rubber underneath him. He fully intended to go to his room and climb into bed, but his feet had other ideas. He shuffled along the floor, unwilling to say the least, as his legs took him in the direction of the living room window which overlooked Wren Street.

"Call me naughty Katie and see what it gets you . . ."

Alvin brought his hands up to his face, pushing at his temples. His thoughts ran wild. *"Katie . . . Katie . . . Why Katie? Why are you doing this to me? Katie, is that you?"*

He staggered forward, still holding his head. Moaning, he almost tripped and fell against the window but managed to steady himself in time. He stood, framed in the window, looking down upon Wren Street.

"Is this it for me?" he thought dumbly. *"Am I going to die? Right here, right now, right on this spot?"*

The voice in his head mocked him again.

"Call me naughty Katie and see what it gets you..."

"Shut up!" Alvin screamed, gripping his skull tighter. "Get out of my mind!"

He thought he heard a tiny giggle, but he wasn't sure. He looked around wildly, half expecting to see little Kate Grady standing in his apartment. But of course she wasn't there. He was hallucinating - or, worse yet, he was going stark, raving mad.

"Mother," he gasped out. "Can you hear me? June? Please help me. June, please help me." He gripped his head even tighter, hoping to drive the mocking voice from his mind.

Another moan escaped his lips as he closed his eyes, praying for God to save him. *"Oh Lord, get me out of this and I'll be your obedient servant for life."*

"Call me naughty Katie and see what it gets you . . ."

The faceless voice grew louder, as if deriding his holy pleas for help. It was then he knew he was lost. His savior had forsaken him in his hour of need.

Alvin Carter took one final step toward the window, his last thoughts pummeled by shattering glass.

* * *

KATE WAS EXTRA-LIVELY the night before the big move. She zipped through her parent's apartment with confident speed and very few tumbles, her mobile skills seeming

to grow better by the hour. She ran along the back of the couch, toward the kitchen and bedroom, and then back again. All the while, she gurgle-giggled and waved her hands in the air, as if she was running a marathon race in first place.

Pim pounded on the front door of the flat when he returned home from work. "I don't have a key anymore," he grumbled when June opened the door for him. "I took it off my key ring yesterday when I gave it to the landlord. How stupid is that?"

June laughed at him. "It's perfectly normal under the circumstances. It'll be the last time you'll be coming home to *this* place." She pushed the door to close it, wheeling away to follow Pim into the living room. The door failed to latch, but she didn't notice.

Pim picked up Kate, who was bubbly and excited to see her father. He kissed her on the cheek, bringing a big smile to her face.

"Noel is in the bedroom," June told him. "She's packing her last box."

Pim set his daughter on the floor. "Can you watch Kate just a few minutes longer? I'm dying to greet my wife in proper fashion after a long and tiring day at work."

"I'll be happy to."

After Pim disappeared into the bedroom, June maneuvered her wheelchair to the kitchen. She opened the small refrigerator to grab a can of soda, popping the cap to take a generous sip. Using one hand, she wheeled in the direction of the living room. She stopped short when she saw the front door wide open. Her eyes darted around the room, looking for Kate, but she was gone.

"Oh my God," June muttered, setting her soda can on the coffee table. She wheeled quickly to the front door, hoping to see Kate in the vestibule. Just as she cleared the door frame, she heard the muffled sound of breaking glass from outside. While never one to champion the dubious work of vandals, this time she hoped the noises came from neighborhood hooligans rather than her precious granddaughter in a pickle.

Still fearing the worst, June glided swiftly into the vestibule. At first, she couldn't see anything in the murky corridor. As her eyes adjusted, she spied Kate standing by the elevator, to the right of the old metal door that led to the upper floors of the apartment building, and down to the basement where the laundry room was located. The door was slightly ajar, which raised a surge of panic in June. The steep stairs leading to the basement were cold, hard and unforgiving. If Kate were to fall down the stairs, she could be seriously hurt or worse, killed.

"Kate!" June cried frantically. "*Naughty*, Katie. Come here at once!"

The child turned her head to look at June, her eyes round and sad. Her mouth dipped into a frown as she slid her finger between her gums, her lower lip quivering.

"Kate!" June repeated angrily. "Come here at once - *now!*" She patted her leg roughly, as if summoning a dog to her feet.

June heard the sound of the telephone ringing inside the apartment as she wheeled herself forward, bringing her closer to Kate by the elevator. The effort made her dizzy. She could feel the blood rushing to her head, which caused a light-headedness that was unusual for her.

"Kate," she gasped weakly, reaching out her hand. "Please come to granny."

But Kate didn't move. She continued to stare at June, her eyes wide and sad, one finger still pushed into her downturned mouth.

June paused, faintness overwhelming her. She lowered her head, hoping to stave off the debilitating waves of dizziness. She couldn't pass out now - not in her wheelchair, and not before she got Kate back inside the apartment safe and sound.

"Call me naughty Katie and see what it gets you . . ."

June's head snapped to attention, her shocked gaze going to Kate. Did her granddaughter just speak out loud? *No, it was impossible.* The little voice in her head *couldn't* be Kate. The munchkin-like tone was surreal - a phenomenal deed even the above-average Kate Grady would be unable to articulate.

"Mother? Kate?" She heard Noel calling for them from inside the apartment. "Where are you?"

June's eyes misted over. At that moment she felt utterly alone. Unfathomably instinctive, she knew she didn't have much time left in the world. *"I never got to tell Noel how much I love her, or how proud of her I am."* She looked to Kate again, who stood stock-still by the elevator, watching quietly, with her finger in her mouth.

"Call me naughty Katie and see what it gets you . . ."

* * *

WHEN THE TELEPHONE RANG, both Noel and Pim came out of their bedroom. Noel never expected to see the front door wide open, or to find her mother and daughter missing at the same time.

Noel raced for the door, a sick feeling of dread gnawing at the pit of her stomach. She reached the vestibule with lightning speed, Pim fast on her heels, pausing as she looked for signs of her baby.

She saw Kate sitting on the floor in front of the elevator. She had her finger in her mouth, her lips twisted into a lopsided grin, as if she was clenching her jaw. Her eyes were open and wide, not in fear or frustration, but rather in child-like, astonished awe. She was making her gurgly-giggle noises, but they were quiet and intermittent, almost forced.

"What the hell is going on?" Pim ground out furiously, although relief was evident in his tone when he saw Kate by the elevator. "What's Kate doing out here? And where is your mother?"

Noel's eyes darted to the open metal door leading to the basement and upper levels of the building. "Mother?" Noel called out, panic in her voice. "Mother?"

The vestibule was forbiddingly hushed, apart from Kate's sporadic gurgly-giggles. Outside, Noel and Pim could hear the approaching sounds of sirens - fire or ambulance, it was hard to tell - and the muffled voices of people on the street. Just then, the telephone began ringing in their apartment again.

It seemed like they had been standing in the vestibule for several minutes rather than a mere few seconds. In a flash, Noel scurried to her daughter while Pim headed for the open door to the basement.

Noel held Kate in her arms, inspecting her daughter for any signs of injury. She appeared to be without a scratch, happy now that Noel was holding her close. The smile returned to her face, the finger came out of her mouth, and her legs started kicking.

"Noel," Pim's voice was quietly urgent but grave as he returned to the vestibule through the metal door.

She looked at her husband. She saw the somber expression on his face and knew something was terribly wrong.

"*What is it?*" she thought fearfully.

"*June . . . Your mother is in a heap at the bottom of the stairs in the basement.*"

Noel did not want to accept the finality in his mind transmission. "*Then why aren't you helping her?*"

"*Her neck . . . I think her neck is broken. She's gone, Noel. I'm so very sorry.*" He came to her, putting his arm around her waist and peering into her face with concern.

Noel went numb. How could this be happening? Her mother was dead, *just like that?* Not even thirty minutes ago Noel had greeted June when she returned home from work, and now she was gone in an instant . . . *just like that?*

She held Kate to her tightly. "What in the hell happened?" she whispered out loud. "How could . . ."

"*I'm guessing Kate got out of the flat somehow while we were in the bedroom,*" he responded in thought. "*June must have gone after her. How she took a tumble down the stairs, I don't know.*"

"It's unreal, it can't be happening," Noel said aloud, a sob catching in her throat.

The telephone began ringing in their apartment again, the shrill sound echoing in the vestibule and mingling with Kate's gurgly-giggles, just as a uniformed police officer entered through the front door of the building.

"Sorry to bother you folks," he said politely. "But do either one of you know an elderly man by the name of Alvin Carter?"

"BLOODFROST" INFORMATION

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EXTRAS:

***Bloodfrost* @ Facebook:**

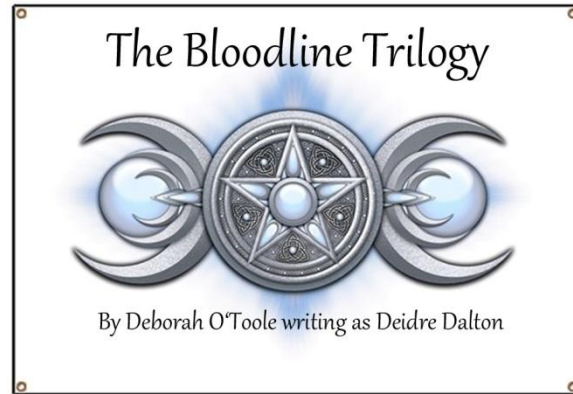
<https://www.facebook.com/bloodlinetrilogy/>

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 gift wisely, but then goes astray after falling in love with the diabolical Kirk Lester, whom she follows down an ugly path of debauchery and evil.

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

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

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

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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

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

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

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

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