

Mother's Blood

A Novel Based on a True Story

Written by
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CHAPTER 1

Shore Pointe City

Wednesday Night
October 3, 1990

Perfect house. Perfect family. Perfect mother. Perfect pain.

The perfect house just sat there, blocks of light reflecting from the windows onto the ground and against the bushes. Where others saw a cloak of fascination, Janine knew of the shroud that wound over and around to hold the perfect family secret inside. Inside, inside . . . the windows reflected all truth, protected the vulnerable inside, as the body's flesh protected the growing womb.

The perfect mother was not perfect.

Her breath hitched in her throat. She left the car engine running and slipped silently to the southeast corner and then around the house, unseen in spite of her lanky 5'9" frame. She moved fluidly. The drab security guard's uniform swallowed light, blending with shadows. The shadows offered her a sense of legitimacy. She protected from within shadows, guarded at the edge of lighted warehouses, neon glimmering stores. She laughed, swallowing the sound; then, shaking the humor from her body, she calmed her sense of urgency, and eased onto the porch.

Janine's eyes brimmed with tears. The lights from the room fractured into prisms of pink, blue and green, a glittering kaleidoscope filtered through the water on her lashes. Focusing through the glare of the lights, she watched her mother's figure form. She was seated on the couch, watching television while her hands flew in her lap. Knitting.

Perfect. Just perfect. Janine leaned against the window and blocked the glare with her right hand. Her left hand swiped against her eyes, clearing her vision.

On the television screen, the newscaster seated at the huge desk nodded with understanding. Janine pulled her fingers from the glass and pressed her hands together, squeezing out the numbness. She formed a pistol with her thumb and index finger. She watched her mother lean forward, closer to the sound and light of the television.

"Stupid, stupid woman." Janine's words flowed from her mouth. "When along comes one, mother of none."

Her stomach knotted, low and intense, sending echoes through her. The memory that she thought would never leave was now back, and this time . . . yes, this time. It was for real.

Janine traced invisible letters silently above the glass of the window. C. "She's mine now." A low, nasal whistle accompanied the H. "Yessirree, mine." R. I. S. "All mine." T. Then the final A, and Janine stood back, admiring her invisible art.

"She's my baby, Christa. My baby now."

"Hurry up, hon. If we don't get a move on, we'll be late." Lori twirled a lock of hair into a curl on top of the little girl's head, winding it along the side of her tiara. "Oh, my, but you do make a beautiful little princess. Just wait until they see you onstage, my prima ballerina." She smiled and hugged the child, careful not to crush her pink tutu, and opened the car door. "In you go, Katie." Then leaned over to reach for the seatbelt.

"Please, mommy. It'll get all crushed."

Lori hesitated, smiled. "All right, just this once, I'll let you get away with it."

Katie smiled, a sweet angel clad in pink gauze, and adjusted

the skirts of her tutu on the car seat. Then laughed as her mother reached to turn the key in the ignition.

“What’s so funny?”

“I promise not to tell daddy if you don’t.”

Katie tried to hold her own laughter back with a frown, but it just didn’t work. She started to reach over to ruffle her daughter’s hair, but Katie shied toward the door.

“Mommy!”

“Sorry, just being a mother. I can’t help it.”

Katie seemed to accept this, then blurted, “Is Janine coming?”

“She has to work tonight, sweetie.”

“Why does she need a dumb old job?” Katie folded her arms, a pout blossoming.

“Honey, she’s doing her job when she’s at our house.”

“But she won’t see me in the show.”

“That’s why there’s video cameras, honey.” Lori glanced at the time/weather clock glowing in front of the bank. “Sh . . . oot, we’re going to have to hurry. Hang on, baby, I’m going to have to fly to get us there in time.”

Lori swung her white Mustang onto the highway ramp and flowed along with the traffic. She wove, moving from lane to lane, anxiety pushing her foot against the accelerator.

Then Bang! The car bumped, jounced, and swerved to the side where the tire had blown out. “Dear God . . .” She reached to grab Katie. Lori just about had her, until another bang, and jolt, this time from the rear. She saw the flash of a mustard-colored pick-up truck; the driver still trying to control his own vehicle swerved to miss them.

The Mustang spun, the headlights and taillights revolving. The rear end landed on the embankment; the front blocked the center lane. Katie flew forward. Her head hit the back of the driver’s seat, knocking her tiara off. She landed in a pink heap on the floor, stunned.

Eyes wide, Lori jumped from the car and ran to the center lane, waving her arms, forcing cars to stop. “Help me, please help me . . .”

Patrolman Frank Trent rolled down the window. The air smelled autumn sweet, of coming cold and frost not yet here, and an illegal leaf fire burning in someone's yard. He smiled as he pulled around the ramp and onto the highway. Time to blow the smell of leaf smoke from his cruiser with a bit of speed.

The ramp was filled, as was the highway. Trent began his mind tic. A tic was what he called his own form of mind training. He'd developed it for himself as an exercise and a source of strength to keep him totally in the present moment. Twenty-four. Twenty-five. Twenty-six. He counted the rust spots, each the size of a quarter, eating away at the metal on the back door of the white moving van stopped dead in front of him. His focus shut his mind off as he sat in his patrol car side by side with other motorists stranded on the highway. He reached for his transceiver, just as Maggie's voice crackled.

"Traffic alert, I-696 Exit 28"

Trent was just about to hit his lights and siren when a dark blue Lincoln sped past, driving on the embankment. He sat bolt upright, and turned on his flashers. He forced his steering wheel as far as he could and snaked around the two cars in front of him. The tires dug into the soft grass as Trent fought the wheel, straining to catch a glimpse of the Lincoln that had blinked out of sight.

Then he heard a loud whump, and the ground seemed to shake. He slowed his car, the hair prickling on the back of his neck.

The Lincoln, tilted sideways and seemingly melded with the rear end of a white Mustang, stood steaming and broken on the embankment. A small group of people were whispering among themselves, their expressions grim, their glances wandering into the back of the Mustang.

Trent radioed for help. They might need the jaws of life to pull the car apart and free the rear seat passenger. Then he started out of his car.

Blood ran from the half crushed rear door of the Mustang and puddled on the ground where a woman knelt. Low moans

came from her open mouth. Her arm stretched along the floor of the car. She tugged a handful of blood-soaked pink gauze toward herself, her moans building. The small form on the floor didn't move.

"Move back, move back! I've got an ambulance on the way," Trent commanded. The ashen faces around him stared back with blank expressions. One man shook his head and turned away, tears running down his cheeks. A priest stood beside the sobbing woman. He held a rosary in his shaking hands. He prayed.

"The prayer of the faith will save the sick person and the Lord will raise them up. If they have committed any sins, their sins will be forgiven them." The priest administered the liturgy of anointing, prior to giving the Last Rites.

Trent pushed him aside. The Lincoln had crushed in the rear door of the Mustang, but Trent climbed into the front seat. He reached over the seat and slid his arms around the small blood-covered form on the floor behind it, then pulled the child into his arms. He opened his mouth and enclosed the lower part of the little girl's face, breathing for her, pushing his breath into her lungs. He laid her on the ground and began CPR, then stared into the face of the priest. The man's prayers babbled, his words a high-pitched drone, his features twisted. Trent continued with CPR, although he felt death beneath his hands.

"Dear God, help me," Trent said, his whispered prayer added to the priest's drone.

The ambulance wailed its siren and wove its way up the embankment.

"You'll go with her in the ambulance," Trent said, lifting the woman from the ground and pulling her away from the child as the team took over CPR from him. "The hospital is expecting you. A team of doctors will be on stand-by."

The woman looked lost, her expression blank, as she stared at Trent. He wasn't certain she understood his words. Then her gaze turned on the priest bent over her daughter. Her face turned red, and her hands curled into claws. "Monster," she said in a choked whisper.

Trent drew her away from the car and toward the ambulance.

He left her with a paramedic and joined the group around the child.

“Move aside, please, folks. Let them do their job.” He spread his arms to guide them away. “Where is the driver of this Lincoln?”

The priest straightened. “I’m so sorry.”

“You? You’re . . .”

The priest nodded, and turned toward Trent. “So very sorry . . .” His words smelled of whiskey, his breath rank.

Trent’s nose wrinkled with disgust. “You’re under arrest for reckless driving and driving under the influence.”

“I was late . . .”

Then a deep rage rose within Trent’s chest. “You killed that little girl.” It was the first time he’d taken liberties with the reading of the criminal’s rights. “Hand over your driver’s license.”

“I don’t have one.” The priest hung his head, his face twisted with emotion. “It’s suspended.”

Trent’s arms bulged with the effort to keep from breaking the man’s wrists as he twisted the handcuffs on, tighter than necessary.

“Hurts,” mumbled the priest.

“Good,” Trent muttered, wishing the drive to the station was more than two miles.

The man blubbered in the back, interspersing an occasional “sorry” with slurred Latin.

“They say confession is good for the soul . . .”

The priest cleared his throat. He met Trent’s eyes in the rear-view mirror. “I can’t break my vows. Do you have any idea what that means? I break my vows, I burn.” His tears spilled, blasted from his eyes. His nose began to run and he tried to wipe it on his sleeve.

“If that little girl—” Now Trent broke off. “You’re probably going to burn anyway.” He started to say *father*, but the word caught in his throat.

“I love her. Can’t touch her, can’t kiss her, can’t . . . make love to her . . .” He moaned. “But I can drink.”

Trent took his eyes from the man. He felt dirty, as if he were

a peeping Tom who had just watched an obscene act. He listened to the priest moan about lost love and cry, while a little girl lay dead in pink gauze. He remembered the taste of her lips, her blood on his tongue, and he pulled his sunglasses down to hide his own tears.

Her mother seemed to be searching for something on the table. Janine moved out of sight, pressing her back to the shutters. It would never do to be seen. She tiptoed down the steps and stood in front of the house, examining each window, each nail hammered into every board. Her eyes searched as if they were sentries brought into service by special forces. Yes, special forces. She would prevail, as always. Slowly, she walked along the right side of the house. She noted the white car parked in the driveway, hidden from the neighbor's view. It sat close to the house, nearly in the backyard. Janine made a mental note of how far back it was parked.

No one noticed her.

"I win again, Mother." Her voice, high pitched, tension warped as tight as the spring of an old watch, squealed from her mouth. Her hand shot up to silence herself. She scurried back into her car and turned the heat up full blast before driving, but waited until she was a few houses away before she turned on her lights.

She stopped at the stop sign. Seconds passed. Janine stared, her eyes locked on the night. Her hand slammed down on the steering wheel. "It says stop, not stay!" Her voice still squealed in the higher decibels. "Stop and go on!" She eased the car forward, sped down the street, and turned right onto Jefferson.

Green's Boatyard beckoned through an approaching fog.

The narrow, mile-long entrance to the boatyard tested her courage and her driving ability. Fog covered the road, a milky-deep foam to hide dangers, traps to pull her down into the cold water. With the window rolled down, she could navigate through the fog. Again, she succeeded. As always. Water lapped against the steel sea wall. The air smelled of seaweed and fish with an under scent of mildew and stagnant water.

She passed the Quonset that served as the boat shed, wove

through the fallen trees alongside the derelict boats lining the water's edge. Her high beams hit the branches of a storm-torn tree and startled the Lake Erie fishing herons nested within them. Like pale ghosts, the white forms rose up into the fog and disappeared.

At the water's edge, Janine sat lulled by the soft sounds and thick dark. Her eyelids fluttered, closed, then opened again. This place, her protected place, hid her from her enemies. She had claimed it. It belonged to her.

"Never find me here," she said to the mental image of her brother ten years earlier. "Dad said, 'get out,' drove me out of my own home, he did. Did you think I didn't know you were following me?" She giggled, a high-pitched titter with no humor behind it. "But I got away from you, I did. You couldn't keep up with me. I lost you at the red light, turned down the first driveway I found, waited until you drove past, then turned around and came here. Stayed here all night." She yawned, leaned back on the car seat. "Stayed here, safe, all night. The gulls warned me in the morning, when it was time to leave. The gulls are my friends. My only real friends."

Janine opened the car door and stepped out. She found a large stone near the front tire, just the right size for throwing, and tossed it with all of her strength into the heron's nest. The squawks made her laugh and a rain of soft white down drifted from the broken branches, along with egg shells and larger feathers. The star light picked white-cap waves out of the darkness further out on the lake, while across the canal, the headlights of an oncoming car warned her she wouldn't be alone for long.

"I should have known better than to come here again at the same time of night. They're watching me, from the trees and in the fog. They see me. But they can't get me this time, no, not this time . . ." She scuttled back into her car, put her hands on her stomach. "Not this time, they won't. You're not going to take this one away from me"

On her way back to her parents' house, she saw another heron and tried to run it down. The silly bird fluttered off the road, then flew away. She hid her car at the apartment complex parking

lot three houses away from her mother's house, and walked down the street for another look. The lights were out, the rooms dark. She frowned, sat on the steps and shivered in the cold. Before leaving, she tried the handle to the beige wooden front door. Locked.

Janine drove home to her trailer.

Silver shining in the moonlight, the dog leash wrapped around her door handle and looped across the wooden porch rails leading up the stairs to her trailer caused Janine to fumble and drop her purse. She thrust the key home, twisting it in the bicycle lock, and pulled the chain free, then pushed through the door. It wasn't locked.

Her eyes scanned from right to left as she entered the trailer, checking for an intruder. Inch by inch, she searched the tiny building until she ended, satisfied, in the kitchen. Kitchen. For a moment, the image of her mother's kitchen, large and warm and inviting, almost overpowered her. The mini-room Janine called a kitchen could be crossed in two steps. She could reach the stove while standing at the sink across the room, and the refrigerator at the same time. Every inch of wall not occupied by appliances held cabinets, although the plates and glasses were rarely used.

She poured herself a glass of tequila and bolted half of it down. Her entire body shuddered, an electric blast from the alcohol's sting. For a moment, her eyes watered and her breath caught. She shook her head, cleared her throat, and carried her drink down the narrow hallway into the back bedroom.

The tiny room mocked her with its emptiness. On the dingy, yellowed wall above her dresser, the mirror sent sparkles of light in anticipation of her face reflected in its depths. She approached it, eyes down, and looked no higher than the dresser top. There, she dumped the contents of her purse. Bits of fluff and paper floated to the floor. Her pills . . . the medicine bottle rattled with the few remaining pills. Janine swallowed them, washed down with another gulp of tequila. Her keys tangled with a few coins and clattered across the fake wood, then settled against the mirror's base. They tapped the glass, insistent. She had to look.

Inside the mirror, beside her own reflection, Janine saw her

mother. Mother's face glowed. Her lips curled back in a smile. Her eyes stared, cold and empty. Dead. Dead as they would be. "Damn locks," Janine said, and turned from the mirror.

She stripped off her uniform and tossed it into the hamper, then turned to the mirror again to stare at her naked body. Beautiful. A beautiful, untouched, perfect weapon against her mother, and the most wondrous home for Christa. Untouched for years, her body was almost virgin again. "I'll make it fast and right. Soon. Christa is coming soon."

Her gaze shot to the dresser top and two lipsticks, one pink, the other red. With the red, she scrawled a huge X on the mirror to cross out her mother's face. "You will never monkey my baby again . . ." She lined her lips, then carefully chose a pair of silky underpants and a lace-trimmed bra. She pulled a V-necked sweater dress over her head in a shade of blue to enhance her eyes. Her mother owned the same dress. It hugged her body, stroked her skin with gentle fingers. The tingle spread through her and her head snapped toward the mirror to see if her mother still watched her.

"The music will tell me when Katherine will be gone."

Janine locked the trailer with looped chains, around and about the door handle and the wooden posts, and left.

"Now, that's strange . . . second time this week," Captain Ed said, watching the headlights across the water. "Wonder who decided it's good sport to circle Green's Boatyard in the dark?" He chuckled and decided it had to be teenagers. "Sportin' in a different way, eh?" He snorted, remembering his own teen years. "Too bad I can't go back in time, at least a little bit, and fix it so Margo's not mad at me anymore."

He shook his head, remembering the crash as his measuring tape hit Margo's insulated wineglass with its five-inch stem and deep eggplant coloring. A gift from a favorite bartender at the yacht club, Margo took the glass with her every time she went there. He sighed. Margo threatened to grind the glass into tiny pieces and put them in his mashed potatoes. "Could be worse," he said, laughing.

With pleasure, he watched the Moonshadow, his sixty-foot ferrocement topsail ketch, come into view. She weighed in at thirty-four tons and her masts raked aft like a Skipjack ready to mine oysters. She had been built in an apple orchard in Windsor and cured in a steam tent for 28 days and nights. She was probably the finest concrete boat ever built.

He stopped at the pay phone and called the police, informing them of the trespassers. Once, okay, could be a fluke. But twice—that made him a little nervous, courtin’ teens or not. In any case, he didn’t want someone to drive off into the canal or get hurt among the old ruins at the shipyard. Trouble, any way you looked at it.

Trent heard the call over his radio and headed toward Green’s to check it out. At sundown, Green’s became a void in the night, one of the city’s few eyesores. It was just a matter of time before something would be done with the land, but in the meantime, it looked like the perfect place for a movie thriller—a chain saw murder, or drowned ghosts—something like that, even a creature from the black lake. He laughed.

The only light came from the Moonshadow, misty and elusive in the fog. A chill ran down his spine. He shook it off and played his searchlight around the area. Nothing out of the ordinary except a shattered heron’s nest lined with dirty white feathers in the middle of the road. A bird skittered into the shadows and disappeared.

On any other night the Moonshadow lived up to its name, floating in reflected starlight. Trent remembered the last time he sailed on her at the annual blessing of the fleet. As fleet chaplain for the yacht club, he enjoyed the pleasure of blessing each boat. In his mind’s ear, Trent could still hear the lone guitar sending out the sweet chords of “The Wreck of the Edmond Fitzgerald,” written for the twenty-nine sailors who lay dead in Lake Superior. He shook off the memory as he passed the vast metal Quonset hut, and reported in that all was quiet.

Trent rubbed the muscles at the back of his neck. Tight, slightly painful, caused by a rough night, and now he slid into overtime.

He yawned and considered the rest of the week. Evenings and nights everyday except Friday, when he had to get up early to take the day shift. He grinned. A tenth anniversary celebration was reason for a trade. Dinner with Susan, then party with friends . . . Trent looked forward to it with pleasure, although he would have preferred a quieter night.

He rotated his head, first left shoulder, then right, then back and around again. He tried not to bring his work home with him. He saw the tick, the way others went off from thinking about the job too much. Hell, just the thought of that little girl earlier today, just the memory of her face as he bent over . . . Trent shuddered and shuffled the thought to the back of his mind. Susan waited for him, slept with the police scanner on every night. He knew she loved him, just as he loved her. Their marriage was his rock, his anchor.

Heading east on Jefferson, a red car pulled out of the marina and nearly broadsided him. Trent braked hard and pulled his car into the next driveway. He could see three people in the red car as it backed toward him. Two heads in the front seat bent down and popped up again.

“You nearly hit that cop car,” Di yelled inside the car, verging on hysteria.

“I did? Well, where is he?”

“He’s pulling up next to us,” Margo said from the backseat.

“Tell him you dropped a cigarette.”

“You tell him. I don’t want to talk to him.”

Trent rolled down his window. Di and Margo rolled down theirs as well.

“She dropped her cigarette, sir.” The driver held up a lit cigarette.

The girls rolled up the windows. Trent motioned for the windows to come down again.

Trent frowned. “Has anybody in that car been drinking?” he asked.

“Not a drop.”

When the young women rolled up their windows, Trent could

still hear the driver say, “Well now, don’t you think we should tell him the truth? It’s not like he’s stupid. Maybe he’d like to try my new drink I invented. White Zinfandel with a lemon to kill the taste. It’s really good. Stop with the windows already.”

“No! Don’t talk to him.” Di was furious.

“We don’t need this.”

Trent regarded the girls. There was nothing he could do. They were parked on private property. He knew them from the yacht club, knew them as nice girls, but he didn’t want to let them off the hook quite yet. If he played with them a bit, he might be able to scare them into staying off the street. He motioned for the windows to come down again.

“Are you sure no one’s been drinking? I want to see the driver of the car.”

“Hey,” she leaned forward and smiled. “That’s me.”

Di punched her in the arm.

“Ouch!” She glowered at her friend, then turned a smile toward Trent.

Trent fought back a laugh, and smiled in return. All three had been drinking. Their faces were flushed. The driver, though lit, came across as unrestrained, happy, and honest. Her passenger made eye contact, a leader guiding her charges. The back seat passenger appeared cool, reserved, but in control.

“Are you sure you just dropped a cigarette?” he asked.

“Oh, yes. It was a lit cigarette, sir.”

His radio sputtered a crackle of static, startling Trent. “Okay, I want you to go straight home, hear me?”

“Oh, thank you,” the driver said, her voice a soft dove’s coo.

They watched as Trent raced away.

“You are the worst driver I have ever seen,” Margo said.

“Nothing happened. I just saved you from having to go to Cedar Pointe for an amusement ride, didn’t I? He liked us.”

When they arrived at Pier Port restaurant, Margo took the car keys.

“Hey, they’re all yours.”