

FLESH AND BLOOD

by

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The murder of an innocent young woman draws Homicide Detective Taylor O’Ryan into the most dangerous investigation of her career. Taylor finds herself attracted to wealthy developer and suspect Nick Carrera. She fights the temptation, knowing it could jeopardize the career she’s worked so hard to build. As the murderer claims more lives and Taylor closes in, he sets his sights on her. Now solving the case isn’t just a matter of justice. It’s a matter of life or death.

Dedication

To my sisters Yvonne, Kathleen and Kay. Each of you has enriched my life in so many different ways.

Prologue

July 4—Twenty nine years ago, South Bay, Florida

She was young and strong, but her body couldn't take much more. Victoria Clark knew she was going to die tonight. She actually prayed for death for it had to be easier.

She tensed, preparing for the onslaught of pain again. It would start out weak and slow then increase in speed and intensity like a runaway train that couldn't be stopped. She curled up in a ball on the small twin bed soaked with her sweat and screamed until her voice cracked.

Slowly, the pain receded, releasing her body from its viselike grip. Victoria whimpered and carefully extended her legs, afraid any movement would bring back another episode.

Two fans oscillated, blowing hot stagnant air around the small room. There was no relief from the pain or the heat.

An ancient-looking woman dressed all in white wiped the girl's brow with a cool wet cloth.

Victoria grabbed her bony wrist tightly. "Please, please

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give me something,” she sobbed. “I can’t take this anymore. I just can’t do it. Please, help me. Please.”

Compassion flickered in the old tired eyes for just a moment, but a voice on the other side of the small room intervened, and Victoria knew she’d never get the painkillers she so desperately needed.

Her mother’s pinched face came into view above the bed. “You’re paying for your sin, girl. You lay with a man and God will see to it that you pay for your sins. Just as Eve sinned, so have you.”

Ruth Clark looked down upon her daughter, blue eyes feverishly bright, and opened the well-worn leather-bound Bible she’d been gripping tightly. “*“I will multiply your pains in childbearing, you shall give birth to your children in pain.”*”

She snapped the book shut, her eyes filled with scorn. “Who is the sinner to question God’s will? You will bear this child in pain as God decreed.”

But her shrill voice fell on deaf ears for another contraction was coming. Victoria curled into a fetal position, buried her head in the pillow and screamed.

She begged again for painkillers even though she knew she’d never get them. She begged to go to a hospital, but no one would take her. Her child would be born in this dingy room on church grounds without a doctor’s assistance. Her mother had seen to it.

The contractions were so close together now she didn’t have time to catch her breath and she felt the first urge to push.

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Victoria rolled onto her back and pulled her legs up. The need to push was overwhelming and there was nothing in the world that was going to stop it.

“Hold on, hold on. Don’t push yet,” the midwife ordered.

“I have to,” Victoria screamed, sitting up. “I can’t stop it. It’s doing it by itself.”

She pushed for what seemed like an eternity and finally in one last Herculean effort, the baby slipped free.

“It’s a girl,” the midwife said as she took the baby to a small changing table in the corner of the room.

Victoria fell back on the bed, trying to catch her breath. Tears intermingled with beads of sweat on her face. The excruciating pain that had wracked her body for the last twenty hours was miraculously gone.

She heard her baby wail and watched as the midwife cleared her nose and throat. The woman wrapped the baby tight and then placed the little bundle in Victoria’s arms.

Awed, Victoria kissed the top of the baby’s head, stroked the soft hair lightly, and smiled at the wrinkled face with eyes shut tight. “You’re so beautiful,” she whispered. “Thank you, God. Thank you.”

In that moment, Victoria knew the small squirming bundle she held close to her heart was worth all the pain and suffering she’d endured.

Ruth Clark sat on the other side of the room watching, shaking her head in disapproval.

* * * *

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Victoria nursed and delighted in her baby over the next few days, amazed by the miracle she'd created. This little life had changed everything. Even the small windowless room seemed brighter because of the baby.

She made plans; plans someone more mature would have known were impossible. But at sixteen she knew little of the harsh realities of life and her dreams were those of a child.

She had no one to help her. The father of her baby was a college student who'd begged her to get an abortion and, when she wouldn't, wasn't strong enough to stand by her.

But she still thought she could make a life for herself and her baby. She'd get a job and raise her daughter in joy and love, not in the discipline and fear she'd known.

However frightened she'd been in the early stages of pregnancy, she now had a clear vision of her future, and she wanted to get started on it as soon as possible.

She'd secretly saved money she'd earned working after school at the little cafe back home in Georgia and her Aunt Edith—*the sinner*—as her mother liked to call her, had slipped a thousand dollars into her pocket before she and her mother left for Florida.

She'd hidden the money in the leather cover of her Bible. The Book had been her constant companion in the last few months, not because she found solace in the words, for she hadn't in a long time, but because it held her future.

* * * *

Three days after her daughter was born Victoria woke to find her mother packing clothes and the room ominously quiet.

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“Where’s Christina?” She got out of bed and checked the empty bassinet, confusion knitting her brow. Even the little blanket she’d knitted for the baby during the last weeks of pregnancy was gone.

“The baby will be raised by a good Christian family,” her mother said, continuing to pack clothes in an old worn suitcase, refusing to look at her daughter.

Victoria’s heart sank and fear licked at her insides. She grabbed her mother’s arm. “What? What do you mean?”

The older woman finally looked at Victoria and her eyes were unforgiving. “Your father and I decided the child would be placed for adoption. It’s the best thing for her. You’re only sixteen. Not fit to raise a child.”

Victoria felt as if the wind had been knocked from her. “You took my baby and just gave her away?” Her voice was barely a whisper. “How could you do that? She’s mine, not yours. You had no right.”

Victoria’s head snapped back as Ruth Clark’s hand connected with her cheek.

“Don’t you talk to me that way, girl. I have *every* right. Your father’s a great man, loved by his flock. We had to send you away so no one would know your shame, and we will not bring your bastard into our home.”

The young girl reached up and gingerly touched the stinging skin. “My bastard?” she asked incredulous. “How can you call her that? She’s beautiful.” Victoria’s eyes filled. “How could you do this? There’s no shame in that beautiful baby. Any shame is yours.”

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Her mother's open hand came fast and reddened Victoria's other cheek. "You've never known your place. Always questioning when you should've kept quiet. Never obeying. Your father and I tried to raise you right, but you were nothing but trouble from the very beginning, and now you're nothing but a whore."

"Even Jesus loved the sinner, Mother," Victoria said, the first tears sliding down her face. "But you can't, and I'm your own daughter."

"Don't speak of Jesus to me. You've yet to repent your sins and until you do, they will not be forgiven."

"The only One who counts has already forgiven me."

Ruth Clark grabbed her daughter and shook her like a rag doll. "You will burn in hell for your sins."

Victoria looked into her mother's feverish eyes and for the first time really saw Ruth Clark. It was one of those defining moments in life when the truth becomes startling clear, almost a revelation, and the all-encompassing fear she'd had of the woman since childhood fell away.

Now, all she could see was a miserable human being who enjoyed inflicting fear and pain in the name of God. And that knowledge gave her strength.

Victoria gripped her mother's arms tightly. "Who did you give my baby to? I want her back."

Ruth Clark shook her head, satisfaction crossing her sharp features. "She's gone, Victoria. You'll never find her. You'll never get her back."

Chapter 1

July 4, Present Day, Palm Beach, Florida

She swallowed the smooth scotch and felt the fire course down her throat into her stomach. She only drank once a year, so she knew it wouldn't take much to shut out the ache that gripped her heart each Fourth of July.

Victoria Clark looked out of the floor-to-ceiling windows at the bevy of small boats and yachts bobbing on the deep blue Intracoastal Waterway between Palm Beach and West Palm Beach. Their owners and guests were celebrating the fourth, waiting for dusk and the magnificent fireworks display that would follow.

Each year it was the same. And each year on this night she would drink until she was numb, knowing that somewhere her daughter was celebrating her birthday.

She'd stayed in Palm Beach County because it was the last place she'd seen Christina. All those years ago she had the hope of finding her little girl. Now, her life was here.

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Victoria turned from the window and took in her sumptuous surroundings. This was her favorite room in the small mansion she'd built for herself on Palm Beach.

The mahogany bookshelves held her precious books, the gleaming wood floors were accented with hand-made, one-of-a-kind rugs she'd commissioned, the couch and loveseat were made of the softest and finest leather, and the oils and watercolors decorating the walls were originals with hefty price tags.

She'd surrounded herself with elegance. The best money could buy. And all of it had brought beauty into her life. But none of it could fill the emptiness inside her. She'd give away every dollar she'd ever earned to have her daughter back.

She swallowed the rest of the scotch and went over to the wet bar to pour herself another. Somewhere her daughter was celebrating her twenty-ninth birthday.

She'd missed them all, and every year, instead of getting easier the ache seemed to lodge deeper into her heart. As busy as her life was, the pain never really went away.

It hovered there on the periphery and could with alarming speed rush to the forefront with little warning, rendering her helpless. Sometimes all it took was seeing a baby with its mother.

She downed more of the fiery liquid and winced. Whoever said time heals all wounds had never lost a child.

A chill ran down her spine and she tried to rub the warmth back into her arms. She looked longingly at the stone fireplace, but knew lighting it in July wasn't the

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most practical thing to do.

She'd have to turn the air-conditioner down low and then the fire would still make the room uncomfortable because of the ninety-degree temperatures outside.

Wearily Victoria sat on the overstuffed couch, rested her head against the soft leather cushions, and shut her eyes.

It all seemed as if it had happened just yesterday. The years had gone by so quickly. *Twenty-nine* years.

She'd missed everything. Her baby's first smile, first tooth, first words, first steps, first day of school. It had all been stolen from her. Just as her mother had promised, she'd never been able to find her child.

Ruth Clark had gone back to Georgia, but Victoria stayed in West Palm Beach to search for her baby. Every road had led her to a dead end. Her child had disappeared without a trace. There were no original or amended birth certificates, no adoption consent forms, not one scrap of paper had been filed.

When she could find no record of the birth she went to the police, but it did little good. They needed proof a crime had been committed and she had none. It ended up being her word against her parents'.

Her upstanding, religious mother and father had lied, telling police there had been no child. Victoria was a runaway, a drug addict, and they hadn't seen her for months. Of course, the old woman at the church told the police she didn't know Victoria.

Desperate, Victoria had gone back to Georgia and begged

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her mother to tell her where the baby was. But it had been a futile attempt and she'd been turned away.

At first she didn't understand how it was possible that there were no records, but it didn't take long for her to learn it was all too easy.

It just took an unscrupulous doctor to falsify the birth certificate, listing someone else's names as the birth parents and falsifying the consent forms. He could sell the baby for tens of thousands of dollars and no one would be the wiser.

Because of the false birth certificate there was no paper trail to follow, no clues, nothing. The sale could never be traced. And the guilty parties never punished.

When Victoria finally had enough money, she had hired the best private detective money could buy, and even Robert McKnight couldn't find a trace.

She'd learned from him that thousands of children were sold this way all over the world through black market adoptions. Her daughter might not even know she'd been adopted.

Victoria drained the glass, willing the scotch to hurry and do its job. She rose to get another. It still felt as if her heart were in a vice.

She put more ice in the glass and had begun to fill it again when the door to her study opened. She looked up to see the man in her life standing in the doorway.

"I thought I told you I wanted to be alone tonight." There was ice in her tone as she placed the bottle back on the bar.

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“You did.” Robert McKnight shut the door behind him and walked toward her.

Normally, she would be pleased to see him. They’d shared so much together over the years. He was one of the best things in her life. But she was annoyed he hadn’t respected her wishes to be alone tonight. He, more than anyone, knew what this night meant to her.

“How many of those have you had?” He gestured toward the scotch in her hand.

“Not nearly enough.”

He nodded and leaned against the bar. “Well, if you’re going to drink yourself into a stupor, pour *me* two fingers please.”

She looked into his intense blue eyes, eyes she’d learned to love over the years, eyes that held sympathy for her tonight—sympathy she didn’t want.

“I don’t need a drinking partner.” She swirled the scotch in her glass. “I want to be alone. You know that.”

Ignoring her, he took the bottle and poured himself the scotch. “I’ve decided you don’t need to be alone tonight.” He turned from the bar. “We’ve been together, what, Vicki, twelve years? I practically live here. I have a closet full of clothes in your bedroom. I sleep in your bed most nights.”

He gave her a quick smile before sitting on the couch and resting his feet on the coffee table.

“I need to be alone,” she said.

He shook his head. “Not anymore. We do this together.”

She slammed her glass on the bar, scotch sloshing over

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the rim. “You weren’t there twenty-nine years ago, and I don’t want you here tonight.”

His voice was sharp. “I wish to hell I would’ve been, Victoria. You’d have your daughter with you.” Frustrated, he ran a hand through dark hair just beginning to gray. His voice softened. “I can’t change the past for you. I would if I could. But I can be here now, and you’re going to have to accept that.”

She turned away from him and looked back out at the boats, their decks full of smiling people celebrating with food and drink.

“Why won’t you just leave me alone?” she asked, her voice weary. “This is my night to mourn, Robert. Just let me be.”

He put down his drink and came up behind her slowly. He slipped his arms around her waist and held her tight. “I can’t leave you like this any more.” His voice was rough with emotion. “For once, let me be there for you. I know I can’t take the pain away, but let me be strong for you, let me take care of you tonight.”

She felt the first tear slip down her cheek and then another.