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**Opening Extract from...**

# Crimson Lake

Written by Candice Fox

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# CRIMSON LAKE

## CANDICE FOX



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# PROLOGUE

I was having some seriously dark thoughts when I found Woman. The only company I'd had in a month was my gun, and they can start to talk to you after a while, guns, if you're alone with them long enough. The weapon watched me with its black eye as I rattled around the bare house, saw when I failed to unpack the boxes in the hallway day after day. It lay on its side and judged my drinking. Halfway down a bottle of Wild Turkey one night, I started asking the gun what its fucking solution to everything was if it was so smart. A gun has only one answer.

The night before I found Woman, there'd been another brick through the front window. It was the third since I'd arrived in Crimson Lake, and I hadn't bothered to patch it up this time. I'd looked at the glass for a while and then gone out to the back porch and taken up residence there as the sun began to set, watched it blinking red across the wetlands, dancing on

the grey sand. The house was falling apart anyway, which was why I rented it so cheap. The previous inhabitants had done a good job on the back porch, though. There was a nice strong rail and sturdy stairs, and the wire fence at the bottom of the yard that kept me safe from the crocs was intact.

The fence was also very familiar. I was used to looking at the world through diamond wire.

I'd sat there in the evenings wondering if the former residents had been hiding from something too, relishing in the predictability of nightfall as I did. The stickiness. The swell of insect life. The crocs beginning their barking in the dark, hidden, sliding in the wet and smelling me up here on the porch.

Between the vigilantes out the front and the crocs out the back I felt like I was in prison again, which wasn't so bad, because it was secure. I was free from the decision to run, because I couldn't run anymore from my crime. Then the gun reminded me, sitting beside me on the dry, cracked wood, that I still had an avenue out. I was just looking at the weapon and agreeing a little and swigging the last remnants of the bourbon when I heard the bird down near the fence.

I thought she was a swan at first. The sound coming out of her wasn't like anything I'd ever heard a bird make: a kind of coughing squeak, like she had a rock in her throat. I bumbled down the hill through the long grass and, incredibly, she approached me from the other side of the fence, so that I could see a mess of little grey chicks all swirling and scattering clumsily around her as she tried to walk. The goose seemed to rethink the approach and stumbled back, hissing and flapping one great white wing.

'Jesus Christ, are you nuts?' I asked.

I do that when I'm drunk. Talk to things. My gun. Birds. She was nuts though, clearly, waddling around wounded and plump on the banks of the croc-infested Cairns marshlands. I glanced out over the water and then opened the gate.

I'd never opened the gate before. When I'd moved into the rundown house thirty days earlier I'd asked the estate agent why the previous inhabitants had even installed one. Unless they had a boat, which it didn't appear they had, there was nothing out there in the water but certain death. He hadn't had an answer. I stepped out tentatively and my bare feet sank into the muddy sand, crab holes bubbling.

'Come here.' I waved at the bird, gripping the gate. The goose flapped and squeaked. Her babies gathered together, a terrified bundle of fluff. I looked out at the water again, seemed to spy a hundred black ripples that could have been croc eyes. The sun was down. It was their time now. 'Come here, you stupid bitch.'

I sucked in a gutful of air, rushed forward and lunged at the bird, missed, lunged again and gathered it upside down in a tangle of bones and limbs and claws and feathers. It snapped at my nose, ear, eyebrow, drew blood. The chicks scattered, reformed, clicking and squealing an infantile rendition of their mother's noise. I turned and threw the goose into my yard. The chicks followed, drawn along in a frantic row by some instinctive fishing line. I slammed the gate closed, ran up the yard and grabbed a towel that had been hanging on the verandah rail, leaving the gun sitting on the step.

On the way to the vet, the big bird and her chicks stuffed into a cardboard box, the squealing got to me. It was a heartbreaking distress siren. I yelled, 'Jesus, shut up, woman!'

I guess her name was Woman from that moment on.

In the sterile light of the vet's office, the bird seemed smaller somehow, peering from the bottom of the box at the man who had opened the door for me. She and the chicks were revealed united, a panting mound of crooked feathers in the dark. They were all silent now. I stood back so the vet couldn't smell my breath, but from the disdain on his face as he'd watched my hack parking job and my bare sandy feet coming up the drive I was fairly sure he had me pegged. I folded my arms and tried not to take up too much of his tiny examination room with my hulk. The vet didn't seem to have recognised me yet, so I took a chance and spoke up as he lifted the struggling Woman out of the box, wincing as she snapped at his collar.

'She can't walk on that foot there,' I said.

'Yep. Looks fractured. This wing too.'

I watched as he folded the goose into her natural shape, reassembling the barely contained terror-mess that she was until her feet were beneath her thick, round frame and her wings lay flat against her sides. The bird looked around the room, black eyes big and wild. The vet squeezed her gently all over, lifted her tail and looked at her fluffy rear.

'So I'll just leave her with you, I guess?' I clapped in summation, startling the bird.

'Well, that's up to you, Mr . . .?'

'Collins,' I lied.

'That's up to you, Mr Collins, but you're aware we don't have the resources for unpaid treatment here?'

'Uh, no. I wasn't aware.'

'No, we can't treat this animal without compensation.'

I scratched my head. 'I found her, though.'

'Yes,' the vet agreed.

'Well, I mean, she's not mine. Doesn't belong to me.'

'You've said.' The vet nodded.

'So that's not my goose.' I pointed to Woman, tried to tighten up my slurred speech in case that was why I was being misunderstood. 'Neither are they.' I pointed at the chicks. 'They're . . . dumped, I suppose. Abandoned. Don't you people rescue abandoned animals?'

'We people?'

'Vets.'

He gave me a long stare. 'This is not a native Australian goose. This is an Anser. A domesticated goose. It's an introduced species in this country. I'm afraid a wildlife rescue wouldn't treat it either.'

'Well, what will you do with her?' I asked. 'If I just leave her here with you?'

The vet stared again. I blinked under the fluorescent lights. Their gentle humming filled the room like gas.

'Christ,' I said. 'Well, okay. This is a business, I s'pose. You can't just go around rescuing everything for free.' I took out my wallet and flipped through the red and blue notes there. 'How much is it to fix a broken goose?'

'It's a lot, Mr Collins,' the vet said, squeezing Woman again around the base of her long, lean neck.

Seven hundred dollars later I drove home trembling and sick and the new owner of a family of domestic geese. It wasn't the fact that I now had exactly fifty-nine dollars to my name that gave me the shakes. The vet had noticed the name on my

credit card was Conkaffey, not Collins. It's an unusual name. People don't forget it. And it had only been a month since it was all over the national news. I'd watched his face harden. Watched the lines around his mouth deepen, and then his eyes begin to lift. I grabbed the box of birds and left before I could see the look on his face.

I was sick of that look.

I didn't know Sean was there until his shadow fell over me. I jolted, grabbed my gun. I'd fallen asleep in my usual place on the porch, spread out against the wall on an old blanket. For a moment I thought an attack was coming.

'This is a sorry sight,' my lawyer said. The morning light was already blazing behind him.

'You look like an angel,' I said.

'What are you doing sleeping out here?'

'It's glorious,' I groaned, stretched. It was true. The hot nights on the porch behind the mosquito netting were like a dream. The roll of distant thunder. Kids laughing, lighting fires on the faraway bank. The old blanket was about as thick as the mattress I'd had in segregation.

Sean looked around for a chair on which to place his expensively fabricked backside. When he didn't see one he went to the step, put the coffees he'd been carrying and the bag on his elbow on the wood and started brushing off a spot. Even in the Cairns humidity there was some silk in his ensemble, as always. I sat up and joined him, scratched my scalp awake. I'd placed Woman and her young in the cardboard box turned on its side in a corner of the porch, a door made out of a towel. The big goose hissed at the sound of us from behind the towel and Sean whipped around.

'Don't tell me –'

'It's a goose,' I said. '*Anser domesticus*.'

'Oh, I thought it was a snake.' The lawyer gripped at his tie, flattened and consoled it with strokes. 'What the hell have you got a goose for?'

'Geese, actually. It's a long story.'

'They always are with you.'

'What are you doing up here? When did you get here?'

'Yesterday. I'm heading to Cairns, so I thought I'd stop by. Got a sexual assault defendant who's jumped bail. I'm going to try to talk him back down. Everybody flees north.'

'If you've got to hide, it's better to do it where it's warm.'

'Right.' Sean looked at me. 'Look, good news, Ted. Not only have I brought my favourite client a delightful care-package, but as of this morning your assets are officially defrosted.'

The white-haired man handed me a plastic bag of goodies. Inside were a couple of paperbacks and some food items. I didn't have the heart to tell him about my fridgeless state. There was an envelope of forms as thick as a dictionary in the bag. He took one of the coffees and handed it to me. It smelled good, but it wasn't hot. There wasn't anything at all within twenty minutes' drive of the house, certainly nowhere that made coffee. It didn't matter. The scary forms and the cold coffee couldn't possibly dampen my joy at seeing Sean. There were about twenty-one million people in Australia who believed I was guilty of my crime. And one silk-clad solicitor who didn't.

'I imagine there's something in that envelope from Kelly,' I said.

'Adjustments to the divorce settlement. Again. Semantic stuff. She's stalling.'

'It's almost as though she wants to stay married to me.'

'No. She just wants to watch you wriggle.'

I sipped the coffee and looked at the marshlands. It was flat as glass out there, the mountains on the other side blue in the morning haze.

'Any sign of . . .?' I cleared my throat.

'No, Ted. No custody inclusions. But she doesn't have to rush, she can do that any time.'

I stroked my face. 'Maybe I'll grow a beard,' I said.

We considered the horizon.

'Well, look at you. I'm proud of you,' Sean said suddenly. 'You're a single, handsome, thirty-nine-year-old man starting all over again with a rental house and a few too many pets. You're not really that much worse off than a lot of guys out there.'

I snorted. 'You're delusional.'

'Serious. This is your opportunity for a do-over. A clean slate.'

I sighed. He wasn't convincing either of us.

'So are they guard geese?' he asked, changing the subject.

I had to think for a moment what he meant.

'The Nazis used geese to guard their concentration camps,' he explained.

'That so?'

'Can I take a look?'

I waved. He approached the box cautiously, squatted and lifted the towel with manicured fingers. He wore houndstooth socks. Probably alpaca. I heard Woman squeal from the gloomy depths. Sean laughed.

'Wowsers,' he said.

'All still alive?' I asked.

'Looks like it.' Sean glanced at me. 'You looking for work?'

'Not yet. Too soon.'

The little geese pipped and shuffled around in the box. Claws on cardboard. He left them alone.

'Would you do me a favour?' Sean said.

'Probably.'

'Would you check out a girl in town named Amanda Pharrell?'

'Would I *check out a girl?*' I looked at him, incredulous.

'A woman,' Sean sighed and gave me an apologetic smile. 'Will you pay a visit to a woman in town?'

'Who is she?'

'Just a woman.' Sean shrugged.

'What do I want to visit her for?'

'You're full of questions. Stop asking questions. Just do what I tell you. She'll be good for you, that's all. Not to date. Just to meet.'

'So it's not romantic in any way.'

'No,' Sean said.

'Then what the hell is it?'

'Jesus, Ted,' he laughed, before repeating an adage he'd used many times during my trial prep. 'I'm your lawyer. Don't ask me why. Just *do* it.'

I made no commitment.

We sat for a while talking about what he was doing in Cairns and how long he'd stay. Sean was sweating through his linen trousers. His poreless nose was burned already by the sneaky tropical sun, slowly cooking the unwary Sydney man through the wet air. I'd managed a nut-brown tan just trudging around the property for a month, walking to the nearest shops to

buy Wild Turkey. I hoped I'd fit in eventually. That I'd grow safely unrecognisable from the man who had graced the cover of the *Telegraph* for weeks at a time, the broad-shouldered ghoul in a suit hanging his head outside the courthouse, pale from jail. A beard might do it, I thought. And time. I'd need plenty of time.

Here's what I remember. And it's a lie. It's a composite memory, built from things I actually remember, stuff I heard during my trial, what I read in the paper and things whispered to me in my jail cell while I was on remand. Some bits and pieces I'm sure come from my nightmares – it's possible that the storm wasn't so foreboding, or her eyes so big and pretty. But the memory of those fatal moments is impossibly clear. More fabrication than history. The narrative is woven from many colourful strings. It cannot be snapped now, even if small fibres over the years will part and coil away. I believe it. Even if I know it isn't true.

She was standing by the side of the road, exactly in line with the road barrier markers, which weren't that much shorter than her. She was thirteen. She looked ten. The girl was so pale, and her hair was so doused in flaming afternoon sunlight coming through the clouds that she almost became one of those markers; a white sentry beside the isolated highway, still as stone. I didn't see her at first. I saw the bus stop and the well-worn tracks of the great vehicles in the dry mud. I slowed, turned off the highway and pulled in to the bus stop area, parking my car somewhere between ten and fifteen metres from the girl.

A blue Hyundai Getz drove past on the highway going south,

carrying Marilyn Hope, 37, and her daughter Sally, 14. They would testify to witnessing my car pull off the highway 'suddenly' and park 'close' to the girl. It was 12.47 pm. Sally Hope testified to the exact time I pulled off the road because she glanced at the clock in the car as they went by, and she remembered calculating that they had thirteen minutes to get to her dance lesson.

I got out of the car and spotted the pale girl standing there for the first time. She was looking at me, her pink Pokémon backpack sitting on the ground beside her.

My first thought was: *Where did she come from?*

My second thought was: *Fix the noise.*

The fishing rod had been tapping against the back window of my Corolla. I opened the back left-hand door of the car, climbed halfway in, and pulled the rod and the tackle box towards me across the seat so that the handle of the fishing rod slid down into the gap behind the front passenger seat, pulling the tip of the rod away from the window.

A red Commodore drove past on the highway going north, carrying Gary Fisher, 51. Gary was the third witness. He would testify to seeing my car parked by the girl, the back passenger-side door open. The door closest to the girl.

I spotted my car insurance renewal notice, open and crumpled, in the mess of papers and takeaway containers on the floor behind the driver's seat. I picked up the pale green paper and examined it, still half-in, half-out of the door.

Truck driver Michael Lee-Reynolds, 48, drove past on the highway going south. Witness number four. He'd back up Gary's claim of seeing me parked by the girl, the back passenger door open. A tall, broad-shouldered man fitting my description, halfway in, halfway out of the back seat.

I leaned out of the vehicle, righted myself, and tucked the insurance notice into the pocket of my jeans. I looked at the girl. She was still watching me. A light rain had begun to fall and it was caught by the gentle breeze, tiny droplets misting all around her in the sunlight like tiny golden insects. She kicked the dirt with her shoe and played with the belt loops of her jeans, then turned away. She was a thin girl. That's about all I would genuinely remember about her, all I would tell the police I remembered in my initial interrogations. She'd been thin, bony, and white. The rest of my recollections of the girl who would ruin my life I would fill in from photographs at the trial. I'd see her big teeth in 'before the attack' pictures. The way her nose crinkled when she smiled.

I stood beside the highway on that terrible day and glanced at the dark purple horizon beyond the trees as I closed the car door.

'Some pretty heavy rain coming,' I said.

A red Kia drove past going south, carrying sisters Jessica and Diana Harper, 34 and 36 respectively. Witnesses five and six testified that they'd seen me talking to the girl. They were unable to agree whether my back left door was open or shut. It was 12.49 pm.

'Yeah,' the girl said.

'Your bus coming soon?' I asked.

'In a minute,' she said and smiled. Crinkled her nose. Or maybe she didn't. I don't know anymore.

'All right,' I said. Two more cars full of witnesses drove past, uncertain, between them, if when I waved at the girl it was with my right hand, palm flat, facing towards her, in a 'goodbye' type of gesture, or if in fact I was beckoning her, left hand up, palm open and turned towards me, in a 'come

here' type gesture. Testimony about the exact nature of the 'goodbye'/'come here' gesture would last three days.

All of them would agree, in the end, that I made some sort of gesture while I was standing by the back passenger door of my car. The door closest to the girl.

I walked around the front of my car, got into the driver's seat, started it, and drove away. I didn't look back.

At 12.52 pm, the girl's bus drove past. The exact time would be recorded on the vehicle's GPS. The Pokémon backpack was on the ground, the driver and passengers all agreed.

But there was no girl.

Claire Bingley was abducted from the bus stop at Mount Annan, on the edge of the highway, that Sunday afternoon. She was driven to a patch of bush about five minutes away along dusty back roads dividing cattle farms and vacant lots. In the dark of the woods, she was beaten, brutally raped and then strangled until she lost consciousness. Her attacker must have thought she was dead. But with the unexplainable tenacity and physical resilience possessed by some children, the girl, against all odds, didn't die. Claire lay in the dark listening to the sounds of the bush around her for several hours, terrified that her attacker was nearby. Night fell and then the horizon lit again. The girl wandered out of the bush and walked in a zombie-like daze to the highway, reappearing some ten kilometres south of where she'd vanished. It was about six o'clock the next morning. Claire had been missing for seventeen hours.

An old man driving to Razorback to help his son move house spotted her crouched at the roadside, nude. Her face

was so bloody he'd thought at first she was wearing a red mask. Her throat was so damaged she couldn't explain what had happened to her.

Social media, by this time, was well into a frenzy that had begun the previous evening, about three hours after the girl disappeared. The eight o'clock news updates picked it up, right between *The Project* and *MasterChef*. The whole country saw it. Her parents whipped up the panic until it was on all news networks, and a quickly designed missing poster of Claire was shared online eight hundred thousand times, in places as far away as San Francisco. Claire had been abducted. They knew it. The disappearance was totally uncharacteristic of their daughter. Claire's parents knew in their hearts that something terrible had happened. They were right.

The first time a suspect was ever mentioned was in the comments section of one of the social media posts. Under a picture of Claire, plastered with pleas to share the image of the missing child around, one of the drivers who had been on the highway that day wrote 'I think I saw the guy.'

That guy was me.