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BLOOD SONG

Written by **Johana Gustawsson**
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BLOOD SONG

A Roy & Castells Thriller

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translated by David Warriner



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Falkenberg, Sweden
Friday, 2 December 2016, 10.00 pm

KERSTIN WISHED SHE COULD have stopped the hands of time ticking. Cling on for just a few more seconds, so she could hold back the monster. Hide it. Tame it, somehow. But she had no longer had a choice. It had been now or never. So she had taken Göran by the hand, thrown open the gates of hell and released her inner demons.

Now Göran was asleep, face down in the well of his pillow. None of the words exchanged after their dinner had stopped sleep from coming and his anger had ebbed away into the night. Set free from the day and numbed by fatigue, his whole body now rested soundly, in childlike surrender.

Kerstin took off her dressing gown and slipped into bed beside him. Placing a hand on her husband's greying chest, she kissed his shoulder, where it curved to meet his armpit, the sweet spot where she loved to lay her head. She wished she could slide her thigh across Göran's legs and quiver at the touch of the soft hairs and hard muscles. She longed to hold him until the grief fought its way to the surface and flooded over her. She was waiting for the tears to come. For them to trickle timidly, one held-back drip at a time, then suddenly well into a raging torrent that would sweep her away. She wanted to cough up all the sadness caught in her throat and spit it out. Feel the panic set in as she struggled to breathe. She wanted the sorrow to sweep her away. She wanted to drown in it.

Kerstin shivered and pulled the duvet up to her shoulders. She hated this never-ending darkness. Some days, the sun seemed to

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never rise at all, and only snow would break up the clouds. Without it the moon could never part the heavy blanket of the night. Their bedroom was above the living room, overlooking the sea. Every night, Kerstin savoured the moment when she would lie in bed, gazing out at the water. But the sea was never more resplendent than when it shimmered in the summertime. Now, on the cusp of winter, it shivered with goosebumps as the wind whipped the surface into whitecaps. Perhaps the snow wasn't far away, after all.

Earlier, as Kerstin had stepped out of the shower, Göran had asked her to sleep in the guest room; nowhere near him. He had then taken the cushions off the bed, folded the fur throw and placed them all on the chaise longue with the same calm, calculated movements as every other night, but this time avoiding her gaze. Kerstin had left the bedroom in her dressing gown, her damp hair dripping splotches onto the floorboards. She had closed the door behind her and waited as obediently as a dog told to sit outside. With her nose pressed to the door frame she had listened to the silence, and waited for stillness, before opening the door again and getting into bed beside her husband. She didn't know how to sleep any other way.

Suddenly, she felt a weight descend on her lower abdomen, as if a heavy rock were crushing her pelvis. That was where all her repressed anger tended to build up. According to her acupuncturist, it was a boundary thing – something to do with how she related to others. Whatever. Although perhaps there was some truth to that. She had to admit, she hadn't really known whether she'd been coming or going that evening. Kerstin massaged her belly in a circular motion, pressing with the tips of her fingers to smooth the edge off the pain.

The mattress heaved as Göran stirred and turned onto his side, staring out to sea, at anything but his wife. Kerstin reached for her husband's hand, intertwining their fingers, pressing her moist palm to his. Trying to catch his eye. She wanted to draw him closer, put in words what had happened. But Göran twisted out of her embrace as if she were a stranger he couldn't bear to be around. He threw off the duvet, sprang out of bed and left the room.

Kerstin opened her mouth and drew a deep breath of air; the atmosphere in their bedroom was stifling. Fire flared in her chest, and flames of rage and desperation licked their way up her throat. She clamped her hands over her mouth and screamed. Creases ravaged her face, but the tears never came, only dry sobs. Always the same arid anguish. Except this time, she warmed to it, snuggling up to it as if it were Göran's arms and she were finding solace in his embrace, taking refuge in his shadow. She let the grief wash over her.

Suddenly, hands grabbed her ankles, yanking her naked body off the bed. Her head cracked against the floorboards, and the pain felt like it was crushing her skull, shooting all the way down to her fingertips. She clawed desperately at the floorboards, but only succeeded in tearing her nails to shreds.

The panic felt like it was tearing her chest apart. As the blows pummelled her body from left to right, all she could do was stare wide-eyed at the ceiling as the searing pain gave way to sheer terror, which paralysed her lungs and her throat.

Louise, Louise, Louise, Louise.

Her sleeping daughter in the bedroom down the hall.

Grant Road, Harrow, London
Saturday, 3 December 2016, 1.00 am

JENNIFER MARSDEN'S FATHER had contacted the police at eight that night. Detective Chief Superintendent Jack Pearce's first reflex was to turn to Emily Roy. The profiler had interviewed the girl's parents, then her grandparents, who lived a few doors down the street, before moving on to the neighbours.

Emily looked to Aliénor Lindbergh for the go-ahead. Aliénor nodded. Emily rang the bell and retreated a few steps.

The door was opened almost right away by a thirty-something woman bundled up in a dressing gown, black hair pulled into a messy bun on top of her head.

'Martine Partridge?'

The young woman scratched at her cheek with blue false nails. 'Yeah…'

Aliénor registered Emily's smile. Took a mental picture of it. Tight-lipped, mouth turned up at the corners. Narrowed eyes, too.

'I'm Emily Roy. I work with the Metropolitan Police. This is my colleague, Aliénor Lindbergh.'

The woman looked down her nose at Aliénor, giving her the once-over. 'You recruitin' in primary schools these days then, are yer? This about young Jennifer, innit?'

Emily squinted at her. 'Sorry to bother you so late, Martine,' she continued. 'Is it all right if I call you Martine?'

'I prefer Marty.'

'Marty.'

'What's 'er name again – your colleague I mean? I didn't catch it.'

'Her name's Aliénor.'

'Alien-or? Well that don't exactly 'elp a girl get ahead in life, does it! They must've 'ad a field day wiv you at school, innit?'

Emily frowned.

Aliénor bit her tongue. That was the hardest thing, really: knowing when to say something and when to keep her mouth shut, even when the other person was expecting a reply. So much behaviour to decode all the time. To understand and integrate. A whole other language to learn.

'That's not from 'round 'ere, is it? *Alien-or*,' Marty went on. 'Where's that from, then?'

Emily gave a discreet nod.

Aliénor replicated Emily's smile: mouth turned up at the corners, narrowed eyes. 'It's French,' she said, trying not to let her smile falter.

'French? *Ooh la la!* You don't have a French accent, though. I'd never 'ave pegged you as a frog.'

'I'm not French; I'm Swedish.'

'Swedish? Why make fings easy, I s'pose…'

'When was the last time you saw Jennifer, Marty?' Emily interjected.

'This morning. She walks past 'ere to catch the 182 on 'er way to the 'igh school.' Marty slowly opened and closed her eyes like a lizard lazing in the sun.

Emily let the silence percolate between them for a moment. 'Would you mind if we continued our conversation inside?' she suddenly ventured.

Marty's eyes zeroed in on her sharp nails. She traced an index finger around the edges. 'Jones … My Jones needs 'is rest…'

'Jones? Is he your husband, Marty?'

'Yes,' she whispered, as if suddenly afraid she would wake him up.

'I'll be careful,' Emily replied, striding forwards.

Marty had no choice but to step aside and let her pass.

The profiler made her way through to the kitchen and took a

seat at the small, square table. The dirty dishes from what looked like dinner had not been cleared away. Marty stood on the other side of the table, as if she were waiting to be told what to do. Emily motioned for her to sit down.

Aliénor was still standing in the doorway, watching Marty fidget with the belt of her dressing gown.

'You didn't see her come home again this afternoon?' Emily prompted.

'What?'

'Jennifer. You didn't see her coming home from school this afternoon?'

'No.'

'Do you know the Marsden family well, Marty?'

'Not really … Just as a neighbour, y'know,' she replied, with shifty eyes.

'Jennifer never stopped in here on her way home from school, for a chat?'

The corners of Marty's mouth turned downwards. She smoothed her dressing gown with the back of her hand. 'Do you really fink I'd let a tramp like that set foot in 'ere? In my 'ouse? Under my bleedin' roof?'

Emily gave Aliénor a subtle glance. 'Do you mean Jennifer, Marty?' she replied, as Aliénor disappeared down the hallway.

'Yeah, Jen … Miss Marsden, yeah,' she spat, with a pout of disgust.

'Marty, could we have a word with Jones?'

The young woman shook her head like a stubborn child.

'Why not, Marty?'

'I don't want you to see 'im like that,' she replied, twisting the belt of her dressing gown around her index finger.

'What do you mean, *like that*?'

'The way 'e is … naked … not a stitch on 'im…'

'That's not a big deal, Marty. We can cover him up. So no one sees him.'

'Yeah … I s'pose…' Marty tilted her head to one side.

'Your colleague … I don't want 'er to come upstairs wiv us.'

'No, don't worry, Marty. We'll go upstairs just the two of us. My colleague will stay down here. Is that all right, Marty?'

'Yeah, 's all right … I s'pose that's all right.'

Two armed police officers suddenly burst into the kitchen, barking orders. Marty looked up at them in a daze. Then she did what she was told and got on her knees and lay face down on the kitchen floor with her arms and legs spread apart.

Emily went upstairs to join the two other officers, who were waiting for her in the bathroom doorway. There were half a dozen overturned candles wallowing in red puddles on the bathroom floor. A man was lying in the bathtub, his body immersed in the bloody water, right arm hanging over the side, head slumped over his chest. Jennifer also lay in the bath facing him, her throat slit.

Emily walked downstairs and out of the Partridge house. DCS Jack Pearce was waiting for her by a marked police car. Aliénor was crouched beside the car, hugging her knees into her chest, rocking back and forth.

'What's happened?' Emily asked Pearce.

Her superior gulped and moistened his lips. Hesitated for a second or two. Emily stiffened. In that short silence, she sensed the pain. The urgency. And the fear.

El Palomar, Spain
Tuesday, 21 December 1937, 10.00 pm

SOLE WAS ABOUT TO GET UP, but Teresa placed her hand on her shoulder. 'Please, just sit for a while, Sole. You're going to make me dizzy. You've been on your feet all evening!'

'Well, I'm not exactly going to let you do everything, am I?' Sole protested.

'I don't want to see you move out of that chair,' Teresa insisted.

'Your dinner was delicious, *mi Sole*,' said Paco, stretching his long arms above his head. '*Gracias, mi amor*, you've made it such a wonderful birthday.'

Sole smiled at him as she rubbed the big round belly stretching her woollen dress.

'I feel like there are two of them in here,' she wheezed, running the tips of her fingers around the contour.

'I think it's just the one, but a hefty one at that,' Teresa replied as she cleared the table. 'Just like his father. Have you seen the size of Paco?'

'You see, *mi Sole*, she agrees with me,' Paco said, draining his glass of Montitxelvo. The smooth dessert wine enveloped his mouth with its gentle sweetness as he clicked his tongue against his palate to savour every last drop.

Teresa piled the cutlery, plates and glasses into a big metal bowl.

'Are you sure you want to go to the *font* and do the dishes right now?' Sole asked her.

'*Sí*. Concha should be down there as well. We'll have a little gossip.'

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'The river must be as cold as ice, Tere. You won't feel your fingers! Why don't you wait until tomorrow?'

Teresa and her brother exchanged a knowing glance. It couldn't wait until tomorrow.

'I'll be done in no time, you'll see,' she argued as she hoisted the bowl up and balanced it on the top of her head. The dishes shifted and clanged against the sides, echoing the first knocks at the door, which were soon followed by a louder, more insistent banging.

Paco drew himself up to the full height and breadth of his stocky frame as he opened the door – and froze.

A group of Blueshirts, three of them, stood in the doorway.

Teresa gripped the handles on the bowl so she wouldn't lose her balance.

'Paco Morales Ramos, come with us!' the one in the middle barked, adjusting his hat before hooking his fingers over his belt, where the Astra 400 was waiting in its holster.

Sole stood and placed one hand on her belly and the other on her chair. A film of cold sweat was spreading across her neck and upper lip. She clenched her jaw so she wouldn't gnash her teeth.

Paco turned his palms upwards, spread his arms wide and forced a smile. 'What's all this about, *señores*?'

The man on the left reached out and clamped a hand around Paco's wrist.

'All right, all right,' Paco said.

'Soledad Melilla Santiago,' the one in the middle barked at Sole.

Not daring to say a word, Sole gripped the chair more tightly, as her belly began to contract intermittently.

'No, *I'm* Sole,' Teresa interjected.

'Is that so? *You're* Sole?' the militiaman smirked. He took a step forwards, leaned his face down towards hers and brushed his lips against her ear. 'Don't you dare insult *El Caudillo*, you dirty little *puta*,' he hissed. 'You think we don't do our homework, eh, before we come and round up the traitors of Spain? Think we don't know who's red, like your brother, and who's blue, like us? Do you think

we don't know that bastard of a Republican brother of yours knocked up his wife? And that your husband, *Teresa Morales Campos*, is with the Resistance?'

Teresa swallowed. 'My husband died six months ago, *señor*.'

'Are you sure about that, Tere? That your Tomeo's been dead for six months?'

She shivered. '*Sí*, *señor*.'

The man nodded and straightened himself up, but kept his eyes trained on her. He tugged at his sleeves to adjust his jacket, then stepped back to join his colleagues. 'Round up all three of them,' he calmly instructed.