

Blood and Bone

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The Gift of Darkness
The Dark

**V.M.
GIAMBANCO**
Blood
and
Bone

AN ALICE MADISON THRILLER

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For Gerald

Prologue

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Alice Madison, twelve years of age, listened out for sounds beyond the hammering of her heart. All was quiet. The rain tapped over the trees outside and the road that led to Friday Harbor was blessedly empty this time of day. Mrs Quint from next door would get up any minute now and feed her chickens and Alice had to decide quickly whether to rush and be out of the house before that blabbermouth was in her yard or delay until she had gone back into her kitchen and out of sight. It was hardly a choice: Alice wanted – needed – to get out of there as fast as her feet would carry her.

She took stock of her bedroom: everything wrecked, broken, smashed. Alice took a deep breath and grabbed her rucksack. She crammed in a few essentials and one book she couldn't bear to leave behind – *Treasure Island*, which her mother used to read to her – and managed to tie her sleeping bag in a tight bundle at the bottom of the bag.

Her eyes moved over the familiar surfaces, the familiar objects. She couldn't stay and, one way or the other, she wouldn't come

back: all her life up to that point would be held in that rucksack, and Alice had to travel light.

She stood on tiptoe and took down from a shelf a pink wooden box that had survived the onslaught. She emptied the beaded bracelets and the WWF badges with the mournful panda onto her unmade bed and lifted the fake bottom: three tight rolls of banknotes had been flattened, held together by elastic hairbands. She shoved them into her jeans back pocket and placed the box on her bedside table. Her Mickey Mouse clock told her it was 7.03 a.m. She picked up her baseball bat and her mitt – the ball went into a pocket of the rucksack – and surveyed her room. Time to go.

Alice tiptoed down the hall, stopping only to listen to her father's breathing and snoring lightly in his room. She closed the front door behind her and started down the side of the house, long steps, almost but not quite running. She was pleased she didn't have to push the creaking garage door open: her red bicycle was leaning as usual against the work table. She walked it up to the road, got on and pushed off.

Alice pulled down her faded blue baseball cap and the raindrops drummed on the visor. It would stop soon. The mist hung low but the heat of the coming day would burn through it by mid-morning. The last thing she heard as she turned the corner was Mrs Quint stepping into her yard and calling out to her chickens.

Alice pedaled under the soft rain. She still couldn't believe what had happened in the last few hours and her heart was beating like it wanted to burst out of her chest and get clear away from her.

The mist was heavy on the San Juan Valley Road and Alice stuck close to the ditch in case an unlikely car was to speed past. At that time of the day the road was deserted – lush green fields and patches of trees on both sides – but you never know. San Juan Island was

a tourist resort between Washington State and Vancouver Island; it was a stone's throw from Canadian waters and any traffic was probably guests of the bed and breakfasts scattered in the valley. The island counted roughly 10,000 permanent residents and in the summer months the number swelled to almost double. Alice had lived there for a little over a year – long enough to start making friends, camp out a lot in the mild evenings and watch her mother die only weeks after a late cancer diagnosis. Alice sped past the Turners' place. Her father was all she had left now. Except, that was not true either, not anymore.

There was a long stretch just before the Valley Road became Spring Street and Alice heard hooves in the paddock running alongside the bike; she stopped and whistled. The horse came out of the fog – a pale shape the same color as the sky – and it watched her, pawing the dirt a few feet away from the fence. The horse was curious and bored and had often trotted up to the edge of the enclosure to see who was walking past. Alice didn't ride but, as a child born in a big city – Los Angeles – and growing up in a variety of charmless urban zip codes, she was enchanted and delighted by horses. This one was as wary as they come but it recognized her as she cycled back and forth to school and always came to the fence; once it had let her pet the hard space between its dark eyes. It didn't come close today but regarded her cautiously. Suddenly, with hardly any sound on the damp grass, it twisted around and disappeared back into the mist.

Alice looked at the spot where it had stood then shook herself and got back on the bike: she seemed to remember that a ferry left Friday Harbor for Anacortes and the mainland a few minutes after 8 a.m. She would catch her breath, think and make a plan once she was on it, but all that mattered was getting to the harbor,

buying a ticket, and making sure the smallest possible number of people saw her. She had to get away from this island, from the one-story bungalow with her destroyed bedroom, and from her father.

As she got close to the town Alice passed a couple of cars driving in the opposite direction; the fields and the trees were replaced by an old-fashioned main street with wooden houses on both sides and a few neighborhoods stretching behind them. Alice slowed right down as she hit Spring Street: some coffee houses and diners were open for the breakfast crowd – or as close to a crowd as it ever got – and she didn't want to be noticed. With perfect timing her stomach started to grumble and she ignored it.

On the left she passed the Palace Movie Theater and tried not to think about the last time she had sat on the wooden seats, eating popcorn from a paper bag. It had been days and it felt like years. Mr Burrows who sold tickets and snacks from the booth also read the ferry announcements during the holidays and during term time was the caretaker of the Friday Harbor Middle School, which meant he *knew* Alice, the kid with the Nevada accent who had joined the class the previous year.

Alice looked left and right and kept pedaling. If she was extremely lucky Mr Burrows wouldn't be anywhere near the ferries this morning. She noticed a few groups of tourists walking towards the harbor and some car traffic joining the ferry holding lanes on East Street. The rain had turned to drizzle and she felt warm in her sweatshirt and jeans, perspiration trickling between her shoulder blades. She turned the corner and the ferry was there – massive and lumbering in the still waters, the loading-bay door already open.

Alice looked over her shoulder, not sure of what she expected to see. Not her father – she knew he would sleep until midday, as he

usually did after that kind of night. For everyone else she was just a little girl out for a bike ride.

Alice exhaled then and wiped her face with her hands. She was angry and scared, and even if the bicycle had stopped the ground felt unsteady under her feet. She saw the line of tourists waiting to buy walk-on tickets and watched them for a moment. An elderly couple, a single man, a family group of five with teenagers, a couple in their twenties. Alice watched and waited. She saw a young couple with bicycles and slipped into the queue right after them. When it was her turn she passed a ten-dollar bill under the glass partition and said: 'Anacortes.' The clerk – a man she didn't know – gave her her change and she quickly followed the young couple onto the pier, walked onto the ferry like they did, and locked her bicycle in a slot next to theirs. No one looked twice at the little girl. As the cars started to drive onto the ship Alice climbed the stairs to the passenger decks.

There was one more thing she needed to do before she could allow herself to sit down: she found a restroom, checked that no one was in the cubicles and locked the door. She had maybe a few minutes but hopefully it would be enough. She leant her rucksack on the sink and looked for the thing that had caught her eye as she had left her bedroom, and found it.

Alice stared in the mirror and she knew what she would see: a skinny twelve-year-old girl. Not a chance that she could pass for anyone older than that. Her father would wake up and see the switchblade knife buried two inches deep into his bedside table; he'd look at the destruction in her bedroom and he'd know that she had meant business. Nevertheless, he'd probably think she'd gone to one of her favorite hideouts and would not start looking for her until the afternoon, maybe even nightfall.

Alice took off her baseball cap, smoothed down her long straight hair and with her scissors she cut off everything below her ears. The fringe was easy and she cut it long – like Ronny Kopecki at school – the kind of fringe that falls almost past the eyes and teachers hate.

The locks fell into the sink, dark gold streaked by the sun; she scooped them up and threw them in the bin, then rinsed the sink for good measure. Alice looked into the mirror again. She was wearing a pale pink T-shirt under her hoodie. Well, shoot, that would have to go. She dug out her navy Mariners shirt and balled up the pink one at the bottom of her rucksack. Maybe, just maybe, if she kept her voice low and her answers short. The cut was not a bad job but no hairdressing prizes there. She didn't care about that: the important thing was to look different, perhaps to pass as a boy long enough to give her the slightest advantage over whoever was going to come after her. And somebody would, that she knew for sure.

Chapter 1

Present day

The nightclub sat a little off the main road, surrounded by trees on one side and a warehouse on the other. It was almost eleven and the parking lot was full. The music – a series of eighties classics – had found its way out of the squat building and low thumping pulsed in the chilly air.

Two men sat in a gray Mazda with the engine running and the heating turned up high. They had been parked for half an hour, waiting. They already knew when they drove there that the club would be closed for a private event – a bachelor party – and still they sat in their car, drinking and smoking in silence. The waiting felt almost as good as what was to come later; it gave their enterprise the guise of a hunt.

The club door opened, spilling orange light on the wet concrete with a blast of U2, and a woman walked out. One of the men wiped the condensation on the windshield with his sleeve to get a better look at her. His eyes tracked her long strides as she reached an SUV.

'Here we go,' he said and he pulled the handle to get out of the car.

Alice Madison felt the bite of the air, and it was a relief after the heavy warmth and the alcohol fumes inside. Her Land Rover Freelander was parked close by and she was rummaging in the back seat when she heard car doors opening and closing behind her and steps approaching.

'Hello there,' a man said.

Madison turned. 'Hello,' she replied. Two men stood a few yards away; she didn't recognize either of them.

'Club's closed,' the taller one said. 'Bachelor party.'

'Yes,' Madison replied, and knew instantly that they were not guests: they were two guys in their late twenties – only a handful of years younger than she was – who wanted to make conversation with a stranger in a parking lot and who would definitely blow a 0.1 if breathalyzed.

'Do you work in the club?' The man continued. 'I've been here before but I've never seen you, and I'd sure remember someone as cute as you.' He grinned and it was neither friendly nor pretty.

His friend giggled and darted a look at the lot. No one else was about. Madison clocked him doing it.

'No, I don't work here,' she said, politely, but that was all the chat they were going to get from her, and she closed the car door. The plastic bag in her hand was wrapped around a DVD case; she had found what she wanted and it was time to go back inside. The men stood between her and the club door.

'If you're not a waitress then you must be the *entertainment*,' the taller man said, and he looked her up and down. There was a nasty

slick behind the words and Madison smelled rank sweat and beer in the cold November air.

She took the measure of them: white, six feet tall or thereabouts, built and dressed like they did their running in gyms and their fighting on the Xbox. *Had they been drinking in their car, waiting for the right person to leave the club?*

‘Gentlemen, I heartily recommend that you ask the staff inside to call you a taxi to take you back wherever you’ve come from,’ she said and moved forward, but they blocked her path.

The shorter one opened his mouth and his voice was reedy and too high for someone his size. ‘I don’t think she likes you,’ he told his friend.

Madison sighed. ‘You’re having a really bad night, you just don’t know it yet. Go home, before you do something stupid.’

Their smiles went away. They were somewhere between tipsy and drunk and yet lucid enough to understand that for some reason the woman in front of them was neither charmed nor intimidated by their efforts.

This is going to go one of two ways. Madison squared up to them – hoping they were smarter than they looked but ready in case they were just as dumb as she thought.

‘We only wanted to make friends, you prissy little bitch,’ the tall one said quietly as he stepped forward.

Madison stood still. He had a few inches on her and clearly believed that it would be enough. *Enough for what?* Madison asked herself.

‘You’ve just done a show for the party, I think you should do one for us too,’ he continued.

Three people in a parking lot. Many cars but nobody else within earshot. Madison did not want to feel overconfident: there were two

of them and only one of her, and *cocky* is what gets you into trouble. She was dimly aware of the familiar weight around her ankle. ‘Have you done this before?’ she asked the one who seemed to be the leader. The small pulse of her anger was like a ping on a radar.

He blinked. ‘What?’

‘This. Have you ever approached women and hit on them and been a complete asshole?’

‘You have no idea—’

‘Is this what you do on a Friday night? Is this where you come and look for your next meaningful relationship?’

‘What?’

Madison tried to step on her temper, but it didn’t work. ‘I’ll speak more slowly for you. Is this the first time you’ve approached a woman in a nightclub parking lot? It isn’t, is it? Have you and Wonder Boy here ever managed to get one cornered? Have you ever actually managed to convince one to come back with you? What happened then?’

‘All we wanted was to be friendly and offer you some extra work. Would have paid you for it too. Do you think you’re too good for us?’

He was wide in the shoulders and the dark threat in his voice came easy to him. Madison could have ended it there and then; she could have told them her name and job title. All they had was bluster and the illusion of muscle and her words would have stopped them dead. She gazed from one to the other. She was not afraid, no. Next to her average work day they were merely an annoyance. Nevertheless, Madison considered, there they were, trying to chat her up and bully her at the same time. And so she did not speak; she breathed deeply, feeling a reckless calm that rested on her anger. She knew the taller one would move first.

‘Do you think you’re too good for us?’ he repeated.

'You have a chance to do the smart thing and walk away now,' she replied.

'Why would I want to do that?'

'Because when you look back on this evening you will feel either very smart or very foolish, depending on what you're going to do next. Quite frankly, I don't care either way, but it would save us both a lot of time if you called for a taxi and went home.'

Watch their hands.

'Shut up,' the tall man hissed and his right hand went for Madison's arm.

Snake fast she took hold of his wrist and with a quick twist she had it in a lock. The DVD dropped onto the ground. Her other hand went to the back of the man's neck and she grabbed him and pushed him down. Now his arm was extended painfully high behind him and the slightest pressure from Madison made him yelp.

The friend moved forward and her voice snapped him out of it. 'You move an inch and I break your friend's arm.'

He stopped.

'Happy now?' she asked them.

The shorter man shifted his weight, raised his hands and leant forward. 'Hey,' he said.

Madison pushed his friend's arm a little higher.

'Stop moving!' The taller one shouted to his pal with a yelp. 'Just fucking stop moving.'

The man froze where he was. This was new, this was not something they had planned for. His mouth hung open. Madison let them appreciate the situation for a moment then she let go of the man's neck and her hand went inside her blazer; her badge caught the light from the club's neon sign.

'Seattle Police Department. You, close your mouth and lie down

on the ground, hands behind your head. You too,' she addressed the taller man. 'I'm letting your arm go, mind you don't fall forward on your face. There you go. Easy. My name is Detective Alice Madison, SPD Homicide.'

The taller man shuffled forward, almost slipped and caught himself. He looked up at her and somehow his world had tilted on its axis. Madison saw it in his eyes: two minutes ago he was about to take a woman home for some Friday-night fun and now he was sprawled on the concrete staring at a detective's badge. Life was not fair.

'It's a cop's bachelor party,' she said. 'Every single car in this lot belongs to a cop.'

She wanted to say something like *you crashed the wrong party, guys*, but it felt crass. There was the real possibility that these two morons had coerced women to go back to their place and do God-knows-what. Some might have followed them because it was easier than getting into a fight if all they wanted was a lap dance. Was it though?

Madison had to call dispatch, get a patrol car over and give a statement. She was pleased that she was stone-cold sober.

It started to rain and big fat drops smacked on the ground.

'Stay right where you are, fellas,' she said; one of the waiters had come out for a breath of fresh air and she waved him over.

'If it's a bachelor party,' the shorter one muttered under his breath, 'what the hell are you doing there anyway?'

At the far end of the club wall, invisible in the shadows under the low hanging roof, Detective Chris Kelly stomped his cigarette into the ground. For a moment there things had gotten interesting; for a moment it looked like Madison might have been in trouble. It hadn't lasted long but it had been the highlight of his evening.

*

The patrol officers bundled the two men in the back of their blue-and-white and told Madison to give their regards to the groom. Their charges had been breathalyzed and had indeed blown a 0.1. White powder in the tiny clear plastic bag in the front pocket of the shorter man's jeans turned out to be cocaine – a minute amount, for sure, but possession of a controlled dangerous substance in Washington State would ensure they received more than a slap on the wrist.

Madison walked back inside; she was calm and yet the levity of the evening had gone and been replaced by a dull anger that had nowhere to go. Early Springsteen boomed from the speakers, there was not a stripper in sight and a local stand-up comedian had just entertained the guests with a routine on the daily life of a cop. The audience had loved it. She looked around the room: the groom, Homicide Detective Andrew Dunne, stood by the bar with the best man – his partner, Detective Kyle Spencer – and nodded to Madison when he saw her. His red hair stuck out in all directions, as usual, and his color was high; he spoke fast and laughed easily. She nodded back. Kyle Spencer was second-generation Japanese and in every way the polar opposite of Dunne, who was finally getting married in his late thirties. They wore suits but the ties had been lost sometime after the second Scotch.

When Madison had joined the unit two years earlier they had treated her as if she had always been part of the team; it had meant a lot in those days when she had so much to prove. *Two years*. Madison could hardly believe it. Two years that in her mind split neatly into the first six months and the following year and a half. She stopped that train of thought and headed for a table in the corner.

Detective Sergeant Kevin Brown, Madison's partner, was in his early fifties, ginger going gray, and looked about done with the day

and the party. Madison sat next to him on the banquette and he pointed at a fresh drink.

‘Done?’ he asked her.

She took a sip of the Coke he’d got for her and nodded. ‘One of them had a little blow in his pocket he’d forgotten about.’

‘What a shocker.’

‘I know, what with them being such great guys and all.’ Madison paused, feeling around the edges of her dark mood and not knowing what to do with it. ‘They are going to be checked against local complaints in case they’ve done it before. Harassed women, I mean.’

‘You okay?’

Brown had gone to her side the second he had heard. The two men stretched out on the concrete under the rain had seemed so very young to him. And Madison – who was standing over them – had looked angry enough to kick a bull on its birthday, like his father would say.

Madison shrugged.

‘Why didn’t you tell them?’ he said.

‘What?’ she replied, but she knew what he’d meant.

‘Why didn’t you tell them who you were the second they approached you?’

Madison took another sip. ‘Most women don’t have a badge they can hide behind. The next time they think about doing that again I want them to remember that I didn’t need the badge.’

Brown had seen Madison at full tilt in the best and the worst times of their last two years. He knew there was something more there, but he didn’t press her; when she wanted to get it off her chest she would. She was not *most women*, he wanted to say, but instead he clinked her glass with his cream soda.

Lieutenant Fynn – their shift commander – slipped heavily into the banquette seat next to Brown.

‘What time is it?’ he asked, getting himself heard above ‘Dancing in the Dark’. They had all been up since 3 a.m. for the arrest of a robbery/murder suspect and he was ready to go home.

As Fynn began a tale from Dunne’s days on patrol, Madison’s attention wandered. Andy knew so many people that his best man had to organize two different parties to fit everybody in. Madison had never met an officer in Seattle and King County who didn’t know Andy one way or the other, and most of them had stories to tell.

Tonight the club would see most of the festivities, including the screening of the DVD Madison had brought in – a merciless digest of Dunne’s life so far, cut by a pal in Public Affairs. In the early hours Spencer, Dunne and his brothers and cousins would travel east to a rented cabin to fish and quietly sleep off their massive hangovers. However, Madison was due at the precinct at 11 a.m. the following morning, which is why she had stuck to Coke. On Sunday, to complete the set, she would be at the bride’s bachelorette party – Stacey Roberts from Traffic – who had opted for a spa day at the Four Seasons. Madison had never been to a spa and she was glad she had not been asked to be a bridesmaid. She had known Stacey for years and they were friends – not the kind of friend you call at 4 a.m. if your car breaks down, but a friend nevertheless. Madison was glad she wouldn’t have to wear the heavy silk fuchsia dress; she was glad to be on the periphery of the celebration and not smack in the middle of it; glad to wish them all the future happiness they deserved and, most of all, glad to evade the questions about her own private life.

Fynn continued his tale and Madison’s eye caught Detective Chris Kelly talking with someone from Vice. Kelly had been watching

her and looked away when she'd turned. *Nothing new there*, she thought. There was something reassuring in the predictability of their relationship: they had detested each other from day one and the feeling had not slowly turned into a grudging respect for each other's skills and capabilities; in fact, over the months, it had hardened into a ball of loathing that colored each word and each exchange. The brief period they had partnered – while Brown was on medical leave – had only confirmed their opinions of each other.

The music cut off and Spencer took to a small stage with a mike. There were whoops and hollers as the film of Dunne's life started, and in the club's half-light Madison forgot all about Kelly and the men in the parking lot.

A little after 1 a.m. Madison left and drove home; she could still smell the club on her skin. It had stopped raining and she wound down the windows to let the cold air flow through. The evening had swung from joyous to nasty and back to a rowdy cheer that had left her wiped out and unsettled at the end of very long day. She drove automatically – for once without music – and every turn in the road was as familiar to her as if she had drawn it herself on the map.

Madison had lived in the same house since she was thirteen – except for the years in college in Chicago. It was her grandparents' home and it would always be her grandparents' home, even though they had both passed away. Three Oaks was a quiet, upper-middle-class suburb on the southwestern edge of Seattle, shaped by Puget Sound on one side and thickets of firs on the other; the crop of houses hid among the evergreens, and the backyards rolled into the water.

Madison let herself in and, tired as she was, she still could not go straight to bed. She crossed the living room and opened the

French doors to the deck. It was pitch black. She didn't need to see the landscape: the water at the end of the lawn was a whisper over the gravel beach and the trees to her right creaked and ticked in the breeze.

Madison was not looking forward to the meeting in the morning: she didn't want to think about it because she knew where her thoughts would run, where they always ran. She waited until she was chilled to her bones then turned away from the night and went inside.

In the darkness she unbuckled the ankle holster with her off-duty piece – a snub-nosed .38 – and slid it under the bed. She toed off her boots and stepped out of her jeans. Her clothes in a heap on the wooden floor, she slid under the comforter and felt the distant warmth of Aaron's body, stretched out on the other side of the bed. He slept soundly, peacefully, and Madison – awake and still under the heavy quilt – wished for some of the same.