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BLOOD GAME

IRIS JOHANSEN

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BLOOD GAME

ONE

THE WOMAN WAS FRUITFUL.

She had given to him, and he must give back.

Kevin Jelak arranged her naked body carefully on the grass. He brushed her long blond hair back from her face and closed her blue eyes, which were staring straight up at the sky. But he could do nothing about the twisted horror that was frozen on her face. She hadn't understood the honor he was doing her. Well, what could you expect? Nancy Jo Norris was only nineteen, and she didn't know what nightmares could attack a woman, the nightmares from which he'd saved her. He preferred to honor older, more experienced women, but the fever had been upon him, and he'd had to compromise.

The fever. You didn't realize how fortunate you were, Nancy Jo. I might have driven right past you if the torment hadn't been so intense and if I hadn't been forced to confine myself to such a small corner of the world.

The corner of the world that contained Eve Duncan. Wonderful, strong, tortured Eve Duncan. Eve knew about the nightmares. She had lived through them. She might pretend that she wanted life, but deep in her heart of hearts she only wanted the release he could give her. The release he must give her. He had known that she would be his final move in the game. But she had destroyed his prime source, and it was his duty to take the time and effort to single her out for attention right away.

He looked up at the crescent moon, sharp as a scythe in the night sky. "Eve, do you hear me?" he whispered. "Do you feel me?" Then he closed his eyes and tried to form a picture of Eve in his mind. Short red-brown hair, thin, strong body, intelligent face brimming with character. "You're not going to be easy. But I promise I will persevere."

In the meantime, he had this lesser woman, this Nancy Jo Norris, to do final honor.

He took the golden goblet that he had cupped between her folded hands on her breasts. "You're released, Nancy Jo. Take flight." He bent and kissed her lingeringly on the lips. She was already turning cool as her soul departed. "Have you forgiven me yet? Do you realize the gift I've given you?"

They were the questions he asked every time but to no avail. He must be patient. Someday, one of them would give him that reassurance.

Perhaps Eve Duncan . . .

One final duty that was always pure pleasure.

"Nancy Jo Norris." He lifted the goblet to his lips, his gaze

once more on the night sky and the cold, sharp sliver of moon. “Gift to Gift.”

He drained the goblet.

THE CRESCENT MOON WAS bright and cold, tossing its icy glitter over the sleeping fields that bordered the highway leading toward the Atlanta airport.

Cold? Why had that word suddenly occurred to her, Eve wondered. She was on her way to pick up her adopted daughter, Jane, arriving from Paris, and until a few minutes ago she had been filled with warmth and excitement.

She was being foolish. She was still filled with that same love and excitement. This chill was only because it was the middle of the night and probably a carryover from the last few days Joe and she had spent in the swamp tracking down that monster, Henry Kistle. It had been a nightmare period when the serial killer had taken a little girl hostage to lure Eve to come after him. She could do nothing else when he had lied to her and told her that he was the one who had killed her little girl, Bonnie, all those years ago. The nightmare had taken on gigantic proportions when they discovered the island on which dozens of murdered children had been buried. Yes, that was enough to chill anyone to the bone.

Together with the realization that Joe Quinn was growing farther and farther away from her every minute she continued to search for the body of her murdered daughter, Bonnie. All

the years of love and living together that might be coming to an end because she couldn't bear not to continue to try to bring her Bonnie home. Years ago, her child had been kidnapped and presumed murdered. When they later discovered that Ralph Fraser, who had confessed and been executed for multiple murders, was not the killer, she had started on the search to find the man who had taken her daughter.

And Joe had been with her through it all, giving her support and love. First as an FBI agent, then with the ATLDP, but always right beside her. He'd been there to pull her out of the depths of depression, give her encouragement when she'd decided to go back to school and become a forensic sculptor to help bring closure to other parents of children who had been lost. He had been her lover, her friend, her protector.

Until this last year, when he had grown weary and frustrated at the constant threat to Eve. That last danger from Henry Kistle might have been the final straw.

Don't think about it. Think about seeing Jane and the fact that Joe had not walked away from her yet. He'd been fine when she'd left home this morning. Maybe she could work out the—

Her cell phone rang. Jane.

"I'm on my way," she said when she picked up. "Was your flight early? I thought I had another thirty minutes."

"You probably have a hell of a lot more time than that," Jane said. "I'm in Charlotte, North Carolina. My plane had a mechanical problem and landed here. They're trying to put us on another flight. It looks like a two- or three-hour delay."

“Damn. Well, I’ll come out and wait anyway.”

“You will not. Go back home. I’ll call you when I’m ready to board the flight.”

Eve thought about it. “You’re probably right. I should be able to get back in plenty of time to meet you at baggage claim.”

“Sorry. I didn’t want to put you to this trouble. I know how exhausted you must be. Not a very good start for my visit.”

“Any way I can get you is a good start.”

“Is Joe with you?”

“No, I left him in bed. He was even more exhausted than I was. He was at the precinct last night trying to put names to those dead children we found in the swamp.”

She was silent a moment. “But your Bonnie wasn’t one of them?”

“No.” She couldn’t speak for a moment as she remembered the agony of that realization. “Lord, I was praying that I’d find her, Jane.”

“I know. That’s why I hopped on that plane to come home. I know you have Joe, but I want to be there for you.”

“Yes, I have Joe.” She had to get off the phone until she could regain full control. Jane could always read her. “And I’m going to be happy as a clam to have you home. Call me.” She hung up.

She hoped she had Joe. Dear God, life without Joe would be empty and without texture or substance, as cold as that moon shining above her.

Coldness, again. She couldn’t shake it off.

She got off the exit and turned around. She would go home

to the lake cottage and Joe. She would hold him and let his strength pour into her. Then maybe, after a little while, the chill would go away.

THE LIGHTS WERE ON IN THE kitchen, Eve noticed as she drove up to the cottage. Joe must not have been able to go back to sleep after she'd left. He was probably having coffee and waiting for her to bring Jane home.

But he wasn't in the kitchen, although the coffeemaker was on. Cups, saucers, and creamer had been set on the table in readiness. He wasn't in the bedroom either.

What the hell?

Then she heard him coming up the porch steps.

A moment later he came into the house. He was wearing his brown robe and slippers, and his hair was ruffled. She had bought the robe last Christmas because she always loved him in brown. It made his dark hair appear almost caramel-colored and his eyes a shimmering tea color. Everyone was usually only aware of the toughness that he radiated, and that was still there, but the hardness seemed to be softened by the rich color.

She smiled. "Where have you been? I was wondering what happened to you. I saw that the coffee was—" She stopped, her eyes widening as she saw his face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said curtly. "I went for a walk in the woods."

"At this hour? Dressed like that?"

“Why not? I couldn’t sleep.” He went to the coffeemaker and poured a cup of coffee. “There’s no law against it. I guarantee it. Who should know better than a cop?”

His tone was almost brutally sharp, and he was avoiding looking at her. But he was too late; she had already caught that first glimpse of his expression. Joe was seldom pale, but his color wasn’t good now. The skin looked as if it was pulled taut over his cheekbones, and his brown eyes were glittering and appeared a little wild. Wild? Joe was never wild. He could be violent and reckless, but it was always under control.

“Why couldn’t you sleep?”

“How the hell do I know? Maybe I was dreaming of those murdered kids on that island in the swamp. That’s what my life has been about, hasn’t it? Murdered kids.” He took a swallow of coffee. “Or maybe just one murdered kid. Your kid. From the moment I met you, it’s been all about Bonnie. It’s enough to drive anyone nuts.”

She stiffened in shock. It was true, their lives had revolved around Bonnie’s death and disappearance all these years, but his harshness came as a blow. She supposed it shouldn’t have hurt since she’d been aware that Joe was nearing the end of his patience. He’d given all his strength and knowledge to try to give her what she needed, and having her constantly in jeopardy was tearing him apart. “You’re right, of course. No one knows better than I do what I put you through. You have a perfect right to want to escape from me and the situation.”

He suddenly whirled on her. “I don’t want to escape you,” he

said fiercely. "You're the only woman I've ever loved. From the first time I saw you, I knew that I had to stay with you. When the FBI sent me down to Atlanta to investigate your Bonnie's disappearance and probable death, who the hell would guess that I wouldn't be able to leave you. You'd lost a sweet seven-year-old little girl who meant the world to you. You were fragile and tragic and yet so damn strong that it blew me away. I wanted to fight all your dragons and give you whatever you wanted."

"You have," she said unevenly. "Only it's been a one-way street. I haven't fought any dragons for you. You deserve someone who will do that."

"Screw it. I knew what I was getting into when we came together." His eyes were blazing in his taut face. "But I haven't been able to kill your dragon, and I started wondering tonight if it's going to devour me."

"Tonight?" He had not been like this when she had left him to go to the airport. She had been aware of a slight withdrawal, but his attitude now was full of violence and explosive tension. She could almost feel the disturbance whirling around him. "Did something happen while I was gone?"

"Of course not. I told you I just went for a walk." He set his cup down on the counter and turned away. "And I'm tired of being cross-examined. I'm fine. Drop it, Eve."

"So fine that you haven't asked why Jane wasn't with me when I came back."

He looked back at her. "Is she okay?"

"Yes, her plane had a mechanical problem and had to land in Charlotte. She'll call me when she's ready to board again."

“That’s good. I’m going to shower, then make some phone calls and go into work early. I have paperwork to do.”

“Don’t you dare leave this room,” Eve said fiercely. “Something’s wrong. I know it, dammit. Tell me.”

“If there’s something wrong, I can handle it by myself. I can fight my own dragons.” Joe’s words were jerky as he strode toward the door. “I don’t need help.”

“Joe, for God’s sake, *talk* to me.”

He didn’t answer. She watched the bedroom door shut behind him. He was closing her out, mentally as well as physically.

She felt the pain soaring through her. She had known trouble was on the horizon, but she had thought she’d have time to try to work her way through it. What the hell had happened to escalate the situation?

Her cell phone rang. Jane.

She took a few seconds to pull herself together before she answered the call. “I wasn’t expecting to hear from you so soon.”

“They managed to fix the other plane. I’m boarding now. Do you want me to get a rental car?”

“Don’t be silly. I’m on my way. I’ll meet you at baggage claim.”

Jane was silent for a moment. “You sound funny. Are you okay?”

“Sure. I’ll be even better when I see you. Bye.” She hung up.

Trust Jane to read her mood even long-distance. She hesitated as she cast a glance at the closed bedroom door. No, she wouldn’t go in and tell Joe she was leaving for the airport. The closing of that door had been firm and final. She would give him

time and hope that those dragons he was talking about would slink away into the darkness.

She left the house and ran down the porch steps to the car. But her eyes were stinging with tears, and she had to wait a moment before she pulled out of the driveway. Her hands clenched on the steering wheel as she stared blindly out into the darkness.

Joe's pain was all about Bonnie and Eve's obsession with finding her daughter's murderer. The hunt that had gone on for years. It was hurting him. She couldn't expect him to have empathy. He had never had a child. They had taken Jane from foster homes when she was ten, and by that time, Jane had been wise beyond her years. She had become their friend, not their child. Joe had never had the wonderful experiences that Eve had known of raising a little girl. That was why he would never understand why Eve couldn't let it go.

Because the memory of Bonnie would never let go. That night before Bonnie was taken was as fresh tonight as if it had happened yesterday.

Bonnie running into Eve's bedroom in her yellow pajamas with the orange clowns all over them. Her wild red curls were bouncing, and her face was lit with her luminous smile.

"Mama, Lindsey says her mother is going to let her wear her Goofy T-shirt to the park tomorrow for the school picnic. Can I wear my Bugs Bunny T-shirt?"

Eve looked up from her English Lit book open on the desk in front of her. "It's not can, it's may, baby. And yes, you may wear Bugs tomorrow." She smiled. "We wouldn't want Lindsey to put you in the shade."

"I wouldn't care. She's my friend. You said we always had to want the best for our friends."

"Yes, we do. Now run along to bed."

Bonnie didn't move. "I know you're studying for your test, but could you read me a story?" She added coaxingly, "I thought maybe a very, very, short one?"

"Your grandmother loves to read you stories, baby."

Bonnie came closer and whispered, "I love Grandma. But it's always special when you read it to me. Just a short one . . ."

Eve glanced at her Lit book. She'd be up until after midnight as it was studying for that exam. She looked at Bonnie's pleading face. Oh, to hell with it. Bonnie was the reason Eve was working for her degree anyway. She was the reason for every action Eve took in life. Why cheat either one of them? "Run and choose a storybook." She pushed her textbook aside and stood up. "And it doesn't have to be a short one."

Bonnie's expression could have lit up Times Square. "No, I promise . . ." She ran out of the room. She was back in seconds with a Dr. Seuss book. "This will be quick, and I like the rhymes."

Eve sat down in the blue-padded rocking chair that she'd used since Bonnie was a newborn. "Climb up. I like Dr. Seuss too."

"I know you do." Bonnie scrambled up in her lap and cuddled close. "But since it's such a short book, can—may I have my song too?"

“I think that’s a reasonable request,” Eve said solemnly. The two of them had their little traditions, and every night since she was a toddler, Bonnie had loved to share a song with Eve. Eve would sing the first line, and Bonnie would sing the next. “What’s it to be tonight?”

“All the Pretty Little Horses.’” She turned around on Eve’s lap and hugged her with all her might. “I love you, Mama.”

Eve’s arms closed around her. Bonnie’s riot of curls was soft and fragrant against her cheek, and her small body was endearingly vital and sturdy against Eve. Lord, she was lucky. “I love you, too, Bonnie.”

Bonnie let her go and flopped back around to cuddle in the curve of her arm. “You start, Mama.”

“Hushabye, don’t you cry,” Eve sang softly.

Bonnie’s thin little voice chimed. “Go to sleep, little baby.”

The moment was so precious, so dear. Eve’s arms held Bonnie closer and she could feel the tightening of her throat as she sang. “When you wake, you shall have . . .”

Bonnie’s voice was only a wisp of sound. “All the pretty little horses . . .”

EVE’S HEAD SANK DOWN TO rest on the steering wheel. Get a grip. She couldn’t sit here and wallow in the past. So her life right now seemed to be going down the tubes. She had to go on. She had to deal with the problem with Joe. She had to pick up Jane from the airport.

She lifted her head and started the car.

And she had to try to block out that bittersweet memory that was still echoing in her mind and heart.

All the pretty little horses . . .

“DAMMIT, I’VE MISSED YOU so much.” Eve gave Jane a hug before releasing her. “How dare you look as beautiful as if you’d spent the night at a spa. After that international trip, you should be haggard and rumped. I always am.”

“I’m rumped, but I got a new haircut in Paris that makes it look fashionable.” She glanced at the revolving baggage carousel. “I think I see my duffel. I’ll be right back.” She sprinted toward it.

So much energy, Eve thought. Jane was the complete package: beauty, talent, and a loving nature that didn’t preclude a streak of pure iron. She had graduated from college only two years ago and was already making her name as an artist in the galleries of the U.S. and Europe. It had been a blessing that Eve and Joe had been able to take Jane into their home when she was a street kid. She had enriched their lives then and now. It was a shining—

Her cell phone rang. Joe? she thought as she pulled her phone out of her handbag. Let it be Joe.

Megan Blair. She smothered her disappointment. It had to be important. Yet she still was wary to take the call. Megan’s psychic gifts were undoubtedly genuine, but Eve had wanted to

distance herself for a while. And why on earth was she calling at this hour of the morning?

“Eve, are you okay?” Megan Blair’s voice vibrated with urgency as Eve picked up the call. “Dear God, I’m sorry. I didn’t know that—Is everything all right with you?”

“What are you talking about?” Eve glanced at Jane, who was pulling her black duffel off the carousel. “Everything’s fine. I’m just picking Jane up at the airport. She flew in from Paris tonight.”

“Good. Someone’s with you. Tell her not to leave you.”

“I’ll tell her no such thing. Why should I?”

“It’s this damn facilitator thing. I thought you were safe. I was unconscious, so I thought the emotion wouldn’t trigger anything.”

“You’re not making yourself clear, Megan.”

“I’ll try to slow down.” She took a deep breath. “Remember I told you that I had this other gift. Gift? No, that’s not the word. So far it’s been mostly a curse. Anyway, when I’m experiencing extreme emotion, it’s dangerous for me to touch anyone.”

“Yes, I noticed you treated everyone as if they had the plague.”

“It’s because I facilitate. Whatever latent psychic gift the person I touch possesses becomes active. Mind reading, healing, finding . . . whatever. But that sudden freeing of the psychic talent can be too much for some minds.”

“Madness. Yes, you told me all that. But you also said I didn’t have to worry because you were in a coma when I touched you in the swamp.”

“But it just occurred to me that I was still aware of those dead children that were buried on that island even then. That means that the coma wasn’t deep enough. At least, I don’t think it was. I just don’t *know*.”

“Shh. You’re upset for nothing, Megan.”

“Don’t tell me that.” Megan was silent a moment. “Look, I know you probably didn’t believe me when I told you about this weird facilitator stuff. You accept that I can hear echoes of what happened to those murdered children in the place where they were killed because you were there, you saw me going through it. But the other is too bizarre for you. Well, it’s bizarre to me too. But I’m not going to let anyone be hurt by it if I can help it. I touched you. I held your hands. That’s all it takes sometimes. Lord, I don’t want to hurt you, Eve.”

Jane was coming toward her, pulling her duffel bag, her brows lifted inquiringly.

“I’m not hurt,” Eve said. “Nothing is going to happen to me, Megan.”

“I hope not. But if anything strange does happen, don’t be afraid. We’ll work through it together.”

“I don’t think we’re going to have to work through it. I feel perfectly normal, Megan. Besides, you said the danger period had long passed by the time I left you at the hospital.”

“But that was before I realized that my emotional response was still active even though I was in that coma. The effect may have been delayed. Tell Jane to stay with you anyway. Just in case. Will you do that for me?”

“I’m not going to have her holding my hand, Megan. I’ll be

fine. If there's a problem, I promise to call you. Just try to relax."

"No way. Dammit, I know this all sounds crazy to you. Hell, it is crazy. But I can't let go until I know for sure that you've not been affected. I'll check back later." Megan hung up.

"What was that all about?" Jane asked. "You sounded very soothing. And why should I have to be holding your hand, Eve?"

"You shouldn't, that's the point." Eve turned and walked with her toward the exit. "I'm fine."

"And why doesn't Megan Blair think you're fine? She should know. She's a doctor, isn't she?"

Eve nodded. "ER. But she's not practicing right now."

"Too busy with this voodoo stuff?"

Voodoo. Yes, that was what Eve had thought when she had first met Megan. She had believed all psychic powers were crap and everyone who claimed to have them charlatans. But she had seen too much in that swamp while they were chasing that killer, Henry Kistle, to discount anything that Megan told her.

Except that last facilitator revelation. Eve still couldn't quite accept that possibility as reality. It was too bizarre, as Megan had said.

"I guess you could call it voodoo. But Megan isn't . . . I respect her, Jane."

"Then I apologize for being flip. Heaven knows, I realize that there's more out there than we can see or touch. It's just that someone like Megan Blair is outside my realm of experience. Where's your car parked?"

“Short-term lot.” She started across the street. “I brought the Jeep. I was expecting more luggage, or maybe a canvas or two.”

“No, I left everything in Paris. I’ll go back, or they can send it to me.” Jane’s brow was furrowed. “Why did Megan think I should hold your hand? You told me Kistle was dead. There’s no threat from him, right?”

“Right.” Jane wasn’t going to let it go, Eve thought. She was in protective mode, or she wouldn’t have flown here from Paris just to be with Eve. “And there’s no threat, period. Megan is just having second thoughts about something.”

“What?”

Tell her, but keep it light. “She thinks I may go off my rocker.” Eve made a face. “Or become a voodoo priestess myself.”

“Not likely.”

“That’s what I told her.”

“Why would she say something like that?”

Okay, just explain and then drop it. “I told you that Megan has certain . . . talents.”

Jane nodded. “She can hear the dead under certain circumstances or, at least, echoes of what happened to them. Pretty creepy.” She paused. “And hard for me to believe. Though I can see that you might be open to it.”

Because Jane knew that the memory of Bonnie was still a major part of Eve’s life. “It was difficult for me too. I thought Megan was like one of those psychic phonies who victimized me right after Bonnie disappeared all those years ago. It took a lot for me to admit to myself that Megan was the real thing.

But I was with her when she located the grave of a little boy in the woods in Illinois. I saw her go into deep shock in the swamp here in Georgia trying to help us find Kistle and those children he'd killed."

Jane's lips quirked. "I imagine 'real' is rather an ambivalent term in cases like this. And did Megan's dead friends tell her that you had to be looked after?"

"No." She made a face. "It seems Megan has another talent. She said that she releases . . ." She shrugged. "She said that she's sort of a facilitator, that if she touches someone while she's in an emotionally charged state, it could trigger the release of latent psychic powers in the person she touches. According to her, some people can't accept that release. They go bonkers."

"Now that's bizarre."

"'Bizarre' seems to be the word for the night," Eve said as she unlocked the Jeep. "Megan used it, I used it. Now you, Jane. Megan said that she understood how I'd fight accepting this facilitator effect. She's absolutely right." She slipped into the driver's seat. "Particularly since I seem to be a candidate for it, and I'm not feeling in the least bonkers. Nor am I sensing any splendid new mental powers."

"You don't need any more mental powers," Jane said as she got into the passenger seat. "You're probably the foremost forensic sculptor in the world. And you're the smartest woman I know."

"I'm not bad in the IQ department, but I can't say the same for my emotional acumen. I don't seem to learn from my mistakes."

“You’re smart enough to hold on to Joe,” Jane said. “That strikes me as positively brilliant.”

“I’ve been lucky . . . so far.” Her smile faded. “I have you, and I have Joe. And neither one of you is inclined to kick me out of your lives. That’s pretty wonderful.”

Jane was silent for a moment. “How are you and Joe getting along?”

She had known that question would be asked. “As well as can be expected considering that I have an obsession that dominates our lives.” She looked away from Jane. “We really needed that Henry Kistle be Bonnie’s murderer as well as the killer of all those other children on the island. Joe is . . . tired of it all. Who can blame him? Certainly not I.” She smiled determinedly as she backed out of the parking place. “But he’ll be glad to see you. You’re like a fresh breeze every time you whisk into our lives.”

“And how is your work going?”

“I just finished up a forensic sculpting job a few days ago. Joe said I may have to work on the skulls of one or two of the children we found buried on the island in the Okefenokee Swamp if we can’t get an ID. I’ll do whatever it takes to bring them home.”

Jane nodded. “Since you couldn’t bring your Bonnie home.”

“I still have hope. In fact, I have two more names that may pan out. Paul Black. Kevin Jelak. I’ll have to follow up as soon as I learn more about them.” She could see Jane gazing at her in wonder, and she smiled crookedly. “Yes, I know that I just got through dealing with Henry Kistle. But he wasn’t the right one.

He couldn't help me bring my Bonnie home. So I have to go on. You see? I *am* obsessed."

"Maybe." Jane's hand covered hers on the steering wheel. "But it's one I can understand. It's a beloved obsession, Eve."

Eve was touched. "Good heavens, that sounds like a movie."

Jane chuckled. "And I embarrassed you. Sorry. I must have picked up a few melodramatic flourishes in Paris."

"You didn't embarrass me." Jane could say anything she wanted to Eve. She was just glad to have her here beside her. As a successful artist, Jane's life was busy these days and, as Eve had said, she whisked in and out of her life, leaving only lingering affection and wonderful memories. Eve wouldn't have it any other way. The last thing she wanted was to interfere in Jane's life or hold her back.

And she couldn't pull her down into the darkness that seemed to be approaching Eve right now. So push away the darkness, try to keep the conversation light. "But tell me about some of the other things you picked up in Paris. Anyone tall, sexy, and interesting?"