

Blood Will Tell

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Sasha

ONE MOMENT, SHE WAS LIFTING THE GUY UP FROM A STUMBLE. THE NEXT, THEY WERE belly to belly, despite the five-inch difference in their heights and her barely-there baby bump. She was so startled it took her a moment to realize her feet had left the ground.

“Hey!”

In seconds, years of her family’s lectures against solitary walks through Sheffield Park finally sank in. Instinctively, Sasha Tolman already had her hands up and was pushing against the wacko’s chest. Her next impulse was to nail him in the shin with her steel-toed, blood-red DocMartyns. Instead, she froze a moment as something sharp poke against her belly button, left bare by the black net, long-sleeved shirt she wore over a cut-off black tank that stopped at her midriff.

“Hell, no!” she screamed, pushing and shoving to beat all. She wasn’t a petite flower. With each blow and kick her assailant grunted. His grip loosened, but did not release, so she brought out the secret weapon. In a move learned through necessity in endless tussles with her big brother, she reared back as far as she was able, thanks to the solid support of the guy’s hold on her, and slammed her head forward, zapping him right between the eyes.

Yeah, she got dropped, but hey, years of practice had her landing on her feet in a crouch and quickly backing away. This guy had nothing on Logan – her brother still would have kept at least a partial hold of her – but she wasn’t lowering her guard. Her eyes never left him as she carefully put distance between them. He was on the short size and thin and pale. Beneath a fall of lank blond hair his eyes were puzzled and dazed, as one would expect after a head-butting, but they were also hungry, and they never left her belly. The look he gave her sent a ripple down her back as every nerve jumped. Sasha’s muscles tensed a bit more and her hand crept

protectively over her belly and the baby inside. She encountered a bit of stickiness and growled.

She looked down at the guy's middle; at best expecting some sort of blade—how she thought he'd held it, given the bear-hug grip he'd had on her, she didn't know—at worse, a sadistically pierced belly-button. Whatever she actually saw defied explanation. He was wearing a beat-up flannel shirt with the last three buttons undone. Pushing out through the gap was something dark that glistened faintly in the twilight. Too big to be a piercing, it also clearly wasn't a blade...of metal or flesh. It wasn't even anything she could put a name to.

Before she saw more than that a glimpse, someone stalked up from behind her. She screamed and stumbled back, cursing herself for not expecting the guy might have friends out here with him. Her gaze dropped to the ground for no more than an instant, scanning for a rock or branch to use as a weapon. There were none within reach. By the time she looked back up the dark-haired man was past her, sparing her not even a look.

He snapped something at her attacker, something she didn't understand, and then shoved him around until the guy's line-of-sight was broken. A second shove sent the blond stumbling the way he'd come such a short time before. Sasha was left standing alone on the path, stunned and confused, and not a little pissed off.

"Hey!" she yelled after them. (Don't ask what she was thinking, as she scarcely knew herself.)

The new guy growled at the one he was herding away before shooting her a glance over his shoulder. His eyes traveled from her face, to her belly, and back again. The look he gave her warned her not to be a fool. She agreed, actually, and had no idea what she'd hoped to accomplish by calling out. Still without a word, he nodded his head in the opposite direction, toward the path that would take her back home. Dazed and trembling, she turned, first stumbling along the path, and then running.

Sasha had to restrain herself from slamming through her parents' front door. As much as she had to make sure she and the little one were okay, there was no way she would risk the family descending. If she had any positive luck this morning, her parents would still be asleep. She couldn't handle their concern or their reproach right now.

Forcing herself to open the door as slowly and quietly as possible, she closed it behind her with the barest *snick* before edging up the stairs to her room. She even walked on the bottom of the balustrade at points to avoid

the creaky steps. (The house was so old there was no way to skip over them all.) Finally she made it to her room. The one she grew up in. The one she fled to when...no, she couldn't think of that now, particularly not when her child might have been harmed. Slipping into her sanctuary, she went right to the full-length mirror that had been hanging there ever since she'd gotten her first (and only) powder-blue ballerina tutu at the age of four.

As she stared at herself in the cheap, aged glass a twisted giggle fought its way clear to open air. There she stood in all her goth glory: alabaster skin, black lipstick and heavy eyeliner, signature black clothes. The tips of her hair were a shade of burgundy Lady Clairol had never imagined, but the roots were ever-lengthening ebony strands. (Not actually intentional, but ever since she'd gotten the baby news, her bimestrial dates with a bottle of dye had been put on hold.) If she'd seen herself looking like this when she was four she would have whimpered and hid behind Logan, no doubt about it. The thought faded away, though, as she noticed the trickle of smeared blood that trailed from her belly button to the waistband of her long, black, silver-buckled sheath skirt. She swallowed a moan and tried to get a closer look, but thanks to the overhead light, her body cast a shadow across the mirror. A curse bounced off the back of her clenched teeth.

The bathroom! She dashed across the hall, no longer caring about quiet. The door slammed behind her and she punched the lock without even looking. Before she realized she'd even climbed up, she found herself perched on top of the counter with the bright light over the mirror shining full on her abdomen. Her cheeks felt tight and she had to blink before she could focus, but she finally saw enough.

A scratch. Only a scratch.

She trembled. The reflection in the mirror blurred. Her head went to a bit of fuzz as her hand came up to cradle her bump. The sob was out before she even felt it coming and, too quickly for her to catch herself, her knees slid off the edge of the counter.

Pounding on the door. Or was it in her head? She barely felt the impact as she hit the floor, but without a doubt, she couldn't ignore the rising tide as her gut protested.

"Sash?! Sasha, open the door!" Logan's words sounded no louder than a whisper to her as she pulled herself closer to the toilet bowl just in time.

"Button!" her brother cried out.

She hadn't heard that name in so long. It didn't even remotely suit her any more. *Logan must really be freaked out*, she thought. Great. What was he

doing here this early, anyway? Daddy must have a project planned for today. Great. Just great.

Sasha groaned and really did try and reach the door. Really. Her body just wouldn't listen.

Silence suddenly returned. That should have warned her. She wasn't up to thinking about it, though. Done with retching, she released her grip on the bowl and let herself slide to the floor, her body instinctively curling in on itself. She only wished she could block out the sweet-sour smell as easily.

There was a *pop*, then cool air brushed over her forehead, chilling the sweat she hadn't noticed forming. She shivered, and then jerked with a start. Adrenaline displaced the lethargy but before full panic could set in, her gaze met Logan's. Her brother stood there in the doorway, breathing heavy and still wearing his coat, concern clear on his face. He had jimmed the lock with the wire hanger dangling from his hand.

"Oh, Sasha," he murmured. Her breath quavered in response and she let her eyes drift closed again. Her family didn't know. Or they hadn't, until now. But Logan was fourteen years older than her and a father several times over. She'd caught the realization in his eyes as he saw her curled up on the floor. The pong of morning sickness surely clinched it. That was the real reason she took her crack-of-dawn walks; she'd tossed her cookies behind most of the bushes in the park by now. Not very classy, but it kept the secret from her family just a little longer.

Tears streamed down her cheeks once more. She hadn't the energy to stop them. It was bad enough her family worried over how she was taking her husband Jeremy's death, now to add a coming child to the picture would ensure they wouldn't let up on her for even a second.

There was a *ting* as the wire hanger fell to the ground and she sensed Logan moving over her. The roar of the toilet flushing inches from her head jangled her thoughts, only to be replaced with the gentler, more distant rush of the spigot running. And yet she was still startled as a moist cloth cooled her skin, wiping away the tear tracks and the spittle. Silent tears fell faster as she felt closer to her brother than she had since her pre-teen years. He half-cradled her a moment before starting to lift her up. Then she heard him gasp. Her defenses went up like a force field, cutting off the closeness. She tensed. There was no doubt what was coming next.

"What did you do!"

She shivered at the thought of her almost-mugging. (That's what she told herself it was...it was easier to function that way.) Her brother felt the

tremor, or she'd taken too long to answer. Either way, he took away her chance.

"Mom!" Logan called out. Sasha found the energy to smack him. The washcloth dropped to her belly and she flinched. She tried to push him away, but he kept rubbing at the dried blood.

"Back off! It's just a scratch!" she snarled as she snatched the washcloth out of his hand. Jumping to her feet, she shoved past her brother and headed for her room.

