

## **PRECIOUS BLOOD**

SHE WAS COLD.

A light rain mixed with snowflakes was falling on a bone-chilling Friday evening, and there she was in the middle of midtown Manhattan, right outside Penn Station, searching for some damn lawyer's office, wearing nothing but a green satin Christmas dress over a pair of black patent leather shoes.

And her heartbeat, Jesus, it was still pounding away, the adrenaline lighting up her cheeks like she had just put away a shot of whiskey.

She knew they would probably find her any minute, so she dug into her Louis Vitton handbag and found an address she had scribbled down in a panic roughly two hours before. The man was a solo practitioner located somewhere on Twenty-Eighth Street, recommended by a friend who warned that even though his place was a shithole, she shouldn't worry, he was one of the best.

With the line for cabs about fifty deep, Colleen Barnette shot a nervous look over her shoulder and headed south down Seventh. When she finally locating the building, Colleen understood immediately what the friend had meant by shithole. The hallway there was lined with a cheap linoleum tile floor with a walking pattern worn down the center, black smoke rings around the air vents, and grey metal door frames set against a pale off-white plaster wall. Plus there was the stench of mold, coming from God knows where. Colleen's universe these days did not include linoleum and mold odors, and certainly were not what she was used to seeing at law firms over the last seven years.

Her husband's eight-hundred lawyer firm, Foster Crawford & Briggs, occupied its own building on Park Avenue and made millionaires of its partners, including her Roger. The hallways were lined with plush carpets and expensive artwork wrapped in mahogany frames, with fresh-cut flowers streaming out of

beautiful crystal vases, which seemed to be everywhere. And you couldn't smell mold, that was for sure.

But right now Colleen could care less about the hallway – she needed to find this attorney, and find him quick.

As she turned a corner, Colleen finally came to an office door that had the name “Jacob I. Bernstein, Esq.,” etched into the frosted glass that filled the metal door frame. Below the name it read “Family Law, Divorces, Custody,” and when Colleen read those words, the realization suddenly hit her, like a frying pan to the back of the head, that she was now completely free of her Roger. That a life without him as a relatively young woman, in her thirties, with plenty of time to reverse the abject numbness she felt as a wife to this man was now within her reach. A life where she was truly free of him and their Greenwich home and their Vale ski chalet and their Bermuda condominium and all the rest of the phony bullshit that she simply couldn't stand a minute longer. One in which she could be Colleen Flanagan again, and raise her two children with some measure of dignity.

She knew it would come some day, her leaving Roger, but how and under what circumstances, well, that was a different story. She never in her wildest dreams believed it would end the way it did.

Colleen was sobbing now in front of the Bernstein law firm, wiping soggy black mascara from her face with a handkerchief, when she looked up and saw a short, bald man walking down the hall carrying a beat-up brown attaché case. He wore a light grey polyester suit over a pair of running sneakers and was chewing on what looked like a gyro wrapped in aluminum foil.

“Excuse me,” the man garbled. “Can I . . . uh . . . help you with anything?”

Colleen finished wiping her face and tucked the handkerchief back into her handbag. She looked again at the office door of Jacob Bernstein, divorce lawyer, and then back at the man.

“Actually,” she said with resolve, “yes, you can.”

THE DAY HAD started like all the others really, with Roger leaving for the office before six a.m. On a normal day, Roger would slap the alarm and dress in silence, sneaking out the door to the Greenwich train station without her knowing he even left. Sometime around midnight he’d crawl back into the house, and the next day she wouldn’t even be sure if he came home. The only evidence was the rumpled covers on his side of the bed.

When they first got married, and Colleen thought that the endless office hours would only be temporary, they would talk on the phone once or twice a day. But that ended years ago. Now they never spoke during the week, and she rarely even knew where he was. A few weeks earlier she called the office on a Thursday afternoon – she owed a payment to the Greenwich Country Day School and couldn’t find the checkbook – and got his secretary, a lady in her early sixties named Lorraine Alexander. Colleen asked for Roger and got dead silence on the other end of the phone.

“Mrs. Barnette,” Lorraine finally said, bewildered. “Roger flew to Chicago on Monday morning. He returns tomorrow afternoon. Should I fax his itinerary?” Colleen never even knew he was gone.

And that right there was their life. Weekdays at the office, weekends on the golf course or with his head buried in some wine magazine looking for the latest bottle to add to his precious collection. Never asking so much as a question about what she and the kids did every day. And for her part, Colleen felt completely and utterly alone. It had been months since she saw or spoke to any of her siblings, and almost a year since her sister Maureen, the closest to her in age, had visited from Long Island.

“Nice digs, Colls,” Maureen had said at the time, walking through her palatial colonial. “So where’s Thurston Howell the Third, workin’ or some shit?” He was, or so he had told Colleen. She hadn’t seen him in a week.

This morning, however, Roger shook her.

“Hey hon, you awake?” he asked, adjusting his necktie. She wasn’t though, not until the shove. She remembered pretending to still be asleep, hoping he would simply leave. But he insisted, and then he shook her again, twice checking his watch.

“Hey, hon, I gotta hop,” he said, louder this time. “Just a reminder about the function tonight at the Briggs’, okay?”

And that was another thing, his constant use of those two words, “hon” and “function.” The first he pronounced not like a term of endearment, short for honey, but like the word Hun, as in Attila the Hun. *Hey, Hun, just a reminder about. . .* to Colleen it couldn’t be more cold and careless and I-don’t-give-a shit. Hon. Just the sound of it made her. . . he might as well call her whosamajigger, or what’s-her-face.

And that other friggin’ word, *function*. Everything at that goddamn firm was a function. Office parties, business retreats, cocktail hours, they were all *functions*. Tonight, the annual Firm Holiday party – another *function*. For Christ’s sake. Maybe the firm puts that word in inter-office memos or something, but who the hell speaks like that to his wife in regular conversation, she wanted to know. *Just a reminder about the function tonight. . .* jackass.

And just as the word *jackass* was bouncing around inside her head, her fists with a tight grip on the bedsheets, there it was again, that terrible pressure beginning to build. Because every time she heard either word, or even just to hear him speak these days, Colleen would feel a tremendous buildup of fury grow inside her that she wanted desperately to release. It took the form of an unrelenting pressure, building, building, building, a hot rush of anger that seemed to be pulled

from deep within her soul, like a river of boiling blood, raging uncontrolled through her entire being and into the front part of her skull, where it would come crashing against the inside part of her mouth, and then stop, fighting like all hell to get out in the form of a screaming explosion of curses and kicks and punches – right in his goddamn face.

And all the while that awful pressure would just build and build. Why couldn't she say anything? Why? That held-back, behind-the-skull rage would actually give her a blinding headache that felt like someone had bashed her with a hammer, making her eyebrows knot up like a pair of shoelaces, so much so that she would actually close her eyes and begin to rub the bridge of her nose with both her middle fingers, repeating to herself *tell him, tell him, TELL HIM*.

“Whaaat now,” Roger said, throwing his hands up. “You’re doing that thing with your eyebrows again. Jesus, I told you six times about this function.”

Oh how she desperately wanted to fire back a quick screw-off or leave-me-alone or something – anything – to relieve the terrible pressure. But she said nothing. For whatever reason, that rage never found its way past the inside of Colleen’s skull, not ever. And the more she held it back, the more that terrible pressure would build and build, fighting to be free . . .

“We both really gotta be there, okay hon?” Colleen began rubbing her nose again...

*You’re doing that thing with your eyebrows...*

The river of boiling blood...

*Told you six times...*

The eyebrows knotting up...

*We both really gotta be there...*

The pressure, building and building.

“Okay, hon?!”

Roger looked at his watch again.

“Yeah, Roger, fine,” she managed, pulling the sheet over her head.

“Fine,” he said, and he was out the door.

COLLEEN FLANAGAN MET Roger Barnette at a Dartmouth College Varsity Rugby match in October 1989, during the first semester of Colleen’s sophomore year. A misty rain was falling, and Colleen and three friends stood huddled together on the sidelines wrapped in nylon running jackets and baseball caps. They each sipped from a plastic cup of St. Paulie Girl beer, poured from a keg that sat in the grass behind them, watching the rugby players roll through the mud.

A moment later a group of male students came rumbling down a hill that led from the dormitories, laughing and shoving one another. They noticed the keg and immediately began pumping the metal tap that protruded from the top. One of the students then separated from the group and headed toward Colleen and her friends. He was wearing Docksider moccasins under a pair of kakhi shorts, with his boxer short underwear slipping below the bottom hem. He had on a Varsity Crew jacket and a Boston Red Sox baseball cap, holding an umbrella in one hand and a cup of beer in the other.

“Hello ladies!” he bellowed, shoving himself between them. “My name is Roger Barnette and these derelicts here,” he was motioning toward the keg, “are my friends, believe it or not. You guys look wet, so I brought you my umbrella.”

As the game dragged into the second half, Roger and Colleen’s friends drifted away until the two of them stood alone on the sidelines, Roger holding the umbrella over her, letting the drizzle soak him to the bone. When the game ended, Roger let her keep the umbrella on the condition that she promise to return it the next day. Soon the two were spending almost all their free time together, and when Roger graduated and started Harvard Law School the following

Fall, she spent nearly every weekend making the two-hour drive from Hanover to Cambridge.

About four months into their courtship, Roger invited Colleen to a weekend at his parent's house in Darien, Connecticut. They made the drive in Colleen's 1982 Ford Pinto, a chocolate brown rust bucket Colleen inherited from her older brother Mike, who ran a landscaping business out in Massapequa, Long Island, where she grew up.

When the two arrived at Roger's house, Colleen set her eyes upon a massive estate spread out over forty-three acres, complete with a separate guest cottage and horse stable. Colleen simply couldn't believe her eyes. As it turned out, Roger's father was a successful investment banker and his mother was old-line Connecticut money, but Roger had never said a word.

"Roger!" she had gasped as the Pinto chugged through the iron gates that fronted the estate. "You live here?"

"Uh, yeah," he muttered back, his head buried in a newspaper. "Something wrong?"

As Colleen strolled the Barnette grounds that afternoon, a sinking feeling overcame her, because as quiet as Roger had been about his upbringing, Colleen had been equally silent about her own. Roger had no idea that Colleen grew up with eight other siblings in a three-bedroom ranch, one of which Colleen shared with five of her sisters, barracks-style with three sets of bunks shoved against the walls, or that her father was a member of the Local 1456 ironworker's union, never having gotten out of the tenth grade. He had no clue her mother taught math at a Catholic elementary school, slaving away every day for paltry wages. She never mentioned any of this, and he simply never asked where she was from.

So while Roger and his younger sister Madison were busy with riding lessons and junior golf tournaments at the Darien Country Club, Colleen dressed in the same school uniform and hopped a bus every day to Precious Blood Elementary,

a Catholic school her father paid for in barter by assisting the parish priests with weekend custodial duties.

Colleen wondered what he thought about her high school years, whether she boarded at some prep school, as he had, and how he would react to the sheer mayhem of her home, with countless brothers and sisters and friends moving in and out, grabbing at pizza slices and screaming stories over one another.

At Roger's house you could hear your voice echoing off of distant walls. What would he think of her home?

ROUGHLY THIRTEEN HOURS after Roger grumbled "fine" and headed out the door to catch his train to New York, Colleen mustered the strength to dress herself and eventually arrived at the home of J. Hartwell Briggs, the Firm's most senior partner. The house was a huge white wooden box that sat on six acres of rolling hills in Scarsdale, with stone pillars out front that made the thing look like the goddamned White House. The usual collection of Jaguars, Mercedes and BMWs sat outside on the circular driveway, and a small army of valets in red jackets ran about the grounds parking cars. Colleen had arranged with Roger that she would meet him there at seven o'clock, and Colleen pulled in now at seven-forty five, bringing her Lincoln Navigator to a stop by the valet stand.

"Will you be long, ma'am?" asked a young valet in a Spanish accent.

"No sir," Colleen responded softly. "Would you mind leaving it close?"

"Yes, ma'am. We'll have it ready for you."

Colleen was wearing a green satin Christmas dress over a pair of black patent leather shoes, an outfit that took her almost three hours to get into, waking up as she did at almost four in the afternoon. She had arranged for the kids to go right from school to a friend's house for a sleepover, and there was simply no reason to get up.

Colleen left the Navigator with the valet and entered the Briggs' home through a huge marble foyer centered by a winding staircase. Then she went through the kitchen onto the manicured grounds of the massive backyard. The place was packed with countless partners and associates of FC&B, the men in tuxedos and the women in evening gowns, all standing together in circles under an enormous thirty-foot high white tent kept toasty warm by a dozen generator-powered heaters.

Colleen walked past several tuxedo circles to a small bar on the far side of the tent area. The buzz of conversation hummed away as a Nat King Cole Christmas classic played softly on outdoor speakers. Colleen ordered herself a white wine, which another man in a tuxedo served to her in a glass wine goblet. Then she turned and searched the crowd for Roger.

Over the last seven years, since her wedding day, Colleen had been to countless of these events and each time she left them wondering what the point of her attendance had been. Roger rarely spoke to her at these things, and unless he introduced her to someone, she typically spoke to no one else either. She had met several other wives of partners over the years, but there never seemed to be the same ones present who she had met the time before, and this particular day was no exception. As Colleen scanned the room, she recognized not a single face, and she stood there alone for nearly ten minutes without anyone approaching her, taking small sips from her wine goblet, before she finally spotted Roger standing in a circle at roughly the center of the tent, next to a small table that contained a tray of hors d'oeuvres.

As Colleen moved through the crowd toward her husband, she suddenly felt a heaviness descend into the depths of her chest, which immediately brought forth a heat flash that rose up her back and settled in her face. At first she thought it was the wine, but in an instant she knew, because this was how they all started. They would come just like this one, without any notice or forewarning, precipitated by God knows what, in a tidal wave of fear, panic, heat flashes and

heavy breathing, with a suffocating anxiety whose cause simply could not be identified. Maybe it was this place, the depth of her loneliness, her fear of whether the kids were alright, who knew really, but as soon as she recognized it she did what she always did, which was stop and take several deep breaths, wipe her forehead with a small white handkerchief, and then pop two tablets of Adivan, a drug that helped her settle down in times just as this one.

She could control this feeling, Colleen would tell herself, and she whispered those exact words to herself as soon as she had downed the tablets and snapped her purse closed. Then she continued moving through the crowd, telling herself she would be out of this place within the half hour, finally reaching Roger and his circle of colleagues, which consisted of six junior associates probably a year or two out of law school, all standing there like hungry puppies obediently allowing Roger to regale them with yet another one of his war stories.

Colleen approached and stood next to Roger without saying a word. Finally, after a minute, she nudged him.

“Hey, hon, there you are,” he said aloud, opening a spot for her in the circle. “Everyone, this is my wife Colleen...”

As Roger circled the group with his introductions, Colleen felt that heaviness in her chest again, and she took a deep breath through her nose, which she quickly attempted to mask with a sip from her wine goblet. She could hear Roger’s voice making the rounds but could not make out a single word, and in an instant that throbbing pain came launching back into her skull. Her eyebrows quickly knotted up again, as they always did, and she grabbed the bridge of her nose, squeezing it quickly but then letting go, cognizant that all eyes were on her.

When Roger finished the introductions, he let go a nervous laugh and turned toward his wife.

“Hon, you okay?” he asked.

*That goddamn word again. Do you really give a shit if I’m okay?*

“I’m fine, Roger,” Colleen said, forcing a smile. “Nice to meet all of you.”

And with that, Roger turned immediately back to the group, picking up exactly where he left off before Colleen approached. He had his left hand tucked into his pocket and a wine goblet in his right, making sweeping gestures as he emphasized the points to his story.

“So anyway,” he continued, “we are at *the closing* when some crony from Gilcrest Enterprises comes barging into the conference room with a big envelope in his hands. Turns out it’s a competing offer at sixty-three bucks a share, twelve bucks higher than the buyout group. So Clark Festoon, the President of the company, reads the damn thing and then turns to me and says, ‘Now what?’ And of course I’m like, you gotta be shittin’ me! I mean, are you kidding me?”

And the group was not sure if he was, because the six of them let go a nervous laugh of their own, one that Colleen had heard so many times before from Roger’s dutiful underlings. Colleen wished that once – just once – one of these shoe lickers would yell out “who gives a shit!” but they never did, not at this Firm. They stood and listened and smiled, pretending to be enthralled by him, this man who was her husband.

As Roger droned on, Colleen’s heart began racing, the heat flash rising up her spine again. And then that awful pressure...

“So I grab Festoon,” Roger continued, “and I haul him out of the conference room to my office. . .”

*Tell him to stop. Tell him, tell him ...*

“ . . .and in fifteen minutes I convince him that the Gilcrest offer was total bullshit. . .”

*You’re doing that thing with your eyebrows again...*

The river of boiling blood...

*Told you six times about this function...*

The eyebrows knotting up again...

“...that their debt structure was a mess...”

The pressure building...

*We both really gotta be there...*

Hon... function... jackass.

“...and finally, we close the deal at fifty-one, just like...”

*Tell him...tell him...TELL HIM!*

“Hey, Mister Barnette!”

Suddenly a female associate named Stacy Cohen mercifully called Roger’s name and immediately drew the attention of the group. She was wearing a black evening gown with a pair of shiny white pearls across her chest, her hair pulled back in a tight bun.

“So tell us,” she asked Roger with a smile, “what do you do when you’re not closing billion dollar deals?”

And on cue, the group let go that nervous laugh again and turned back toward Roger, who was laughing himself this time, a self-deprecating giggle he let go with a bow of his head, meant to suggest that partners at this firm had little time for interests outside of closing billion dollar deals. Roger turned to Colleen and put his hand on her back.

“Well, do you want to field that one, hon?!”

And with that the group laughed heartily, all turning and looking at one another and nodding, as far as Colleen could tell, at the sheer wonderment of how this amazing man could close deals of Festoon-type magnitude and still be so goddamned funny at the same time.

Colleen pinched the bridge of her nose again as another heat flash singed her cheeks.

*Field that one Hon...*

The pressure, building, building, building...

“Actually,” Roger continued, as the laughs subsided, “my wife and I have two beautiful children, my son Prewitt and my daughter Paige. And they are quite a handful, wouldn’t you say, hon?”

*Wouldn't you say, hon . . . make him stop . . . TELL HIM!*

“That is so funny!” offered Cohen. “You know, my sister just had a baby daughter named Paige Marie. What’s your daughter’s middle name?”

*The river of boiling blood. . .*

*TELL HIM! . . .TELL HIM!*

“Well,” stumbled Roger, “my son’s middle name isss . . . Anderson . . . Prewitt Anderson. And my daughter’s middle name is . . . uh . . . my daughter Paige’s middle name is . . . aw Jeez . . . you know . . . it’s . . . uhhh...”

And just as Roger looked down at his shoes, it became embarrassingly clear to everyone in the circle that Roger Barnette either did not know or could not remember his own daughter’s middle name, and as he craned his neck skyward, racking his brain, the entire circle could see the eyes of his wife widening in utter disbelief, accompanied not by any look of surprise, but with a profound and visibly angry contempt. Her eyebrows were knotted again, but this time her face turned an almost deep purple, and in an instant those ever-present obstacles that had once prevented Colleen Barnette from unleashing that river of boiling blood, from confronting her Roger, well, they all collapsed so abruptly now, and she let go with a fury that surprised even her.

“YOU BASTARD!” she shrieked, in a voice so piercing it could be heard from one side of the tent to the other. She was leaning forward now and staring directly into his eyes, her nose no more than a foot from his, with a deep red blush penetrating into the pores of her face. “YOU DON’T KNOW YOUR OWN DAUGHTER’S NAME?! HER FUCKING MIDDLE NAME?!”

Colleen’s voice echoed sharply over the soft tones of the pumped holiday music and drew audible gasps from the crowd. She took a step toward

Roger, who backtracked a few paces with a look of abject horror strewn across his face, acutely aware that the eyes of all his colleagues were now on this red-faced woman in the green dress, his wife for God's sake. And now she was swinging her wine goblet at Roger, who continued his paces backward.

“Colleen, hon, take it easy!” Roger pleaded.

“DON'T YOU CALL ME THAT!”

“Okay, just quiet down, will you please?!”

“NO I WON'T QUIET DOWN!! I'VE HAD IT WITH YOU! DO YOU HEAR ME?!”

“Yes, I do, now just relax!” Roger pleaded, still pacing backward.

Colleen was now pacing step for step with him, taking huge swings of the wine goblet at him. As she neared the small hors d'oeuvres table, she swung the wine goblet hard against it, spraying small shards of glass onto the lawn. She faced him again and swallowed hard, jabbing the broken goblet stem as she stepped forward.

“NO, YOU RELAX, ROGER!” she screamed, swinging the goblet stem again. “YOU RELAX!”

“Colleen, please!”

“HOW could you not know YOUR OWN DAUGHTER'S NAME?! ANSWER ME! Answer ... me ... NOW!”

And with that Roger suddenly lunged forward, grabbing Colleen by the left wrist.

“Now stop it!” he yelled, and as soon as he released those words, Roger Barnette, the son of the investment banker from Darien, Connecticut, a mere thirty-four years old, must have seen what was coming, because his eyes widened for just a mere fraction of a second and then, almost as quickly, lowered into their sockets as a look of resignation descended upon them, as if Roger had accepted his fate. Colleen felt his flesh upon her arm, a touch that was now so alien to her, and she instinctively swung her right hand toward him, not realizing that she still held the

stem of the shattered wine glass, attempting merely to push him backwards and to rid herself of his grip.

As Roger leaned slightly to his left, Colleen plunged the razored edge of the goblet directly into his throat, forcing it deeply into his neck.

“AAAGH!” he garbled, and in an instant Roger was down with both hands to his throat, a sea of tuxedos and evening gowns now circling him, screaming and grabbing white towels and packing them onto his neck as he began to shake uncontrollably, his eyes as wide as saucers. The towels quickly became soaked in red as countless people ran frantically toward the house and back again, flipping open cell phones to call 911.

And as the crowd moved frantically back and forth, and the front of Roger’s tuxedo shirt turned crimson with his blood that was now spreading over the grass next to him, Colleen stood silently in the middle of it all, her hands at her sides, looking down at her husband, not saying a word. A strange calmness came upon her, and as quickly as those feelings had appeared when she arrived here – that tidal wave of fear, that panic, those heat flashes and heavy breathing – they just as quickly disappeared now, in a heartbeat, vanishing into thin air.

Gone, just like that, in an instant.

Colleen flipped the broken wine glass onto the ground and walked calmly out the door.

ABOUT TWO HOURS later, Colleen Barnette stood outside the office of a Manhattan lawyer named Jacob Bernstein, whose practice expertise – “Family Law, Divorces, Custody” – was etched into the frosted glass of his doorway. Colleen was wiping her face with a handkerchief as a small man approached eating a gyro and carrying a briefcase. The man noticed that Colleen was crying and asked if he could help her.

“Actually, yes you can,” Colleen said, pulling a business card from her handbag. “Can you direct me to the office of a Mr. Joseph Maltese?”

“Oh, Maltese, yes,” the man said, pointing. “He’s right around the corner.”

A moment later Colleen was walking through another metal door with etched glass that read “Joseph C. Maltese, Jr., Criminal Law,” and before long she sat across from the man in a silver fold-out armchair, the kind Colleen remembered as a girl at Sunday Mass at Precious Blood Church, so many years ago.

“So what can I help you with today, Mrs. Barnette?” asked Maltese, flipping open the pages of a yellow legal pad. “Your friend said it was an emergency.”

Colleen cleared her throat and took a deep breath.

“Yes,” she said firmly, adjusting herself in the chair. “You see, I think I may have murdered my husband.”

THE END

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