

Blood Red Blonde

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Everyone saw Dorsey Kincaid get in DeShawn Martin's sputtering Cougar and ride out of the Senior Lot at lunchtime. She wore her cheerleading outfit—a pleated blue-and-white skirt and a red vest with "Go Eagles" emblazoned diagonally down the front. The autumn sun made her hair shine as DeShawn opened the door for her. Some of the girls exchanged smirks, a few of the boys' jaws dropped, a couple faculty members frowned, but no one said anything nasty. As they drove off down Weeping Willow Road, no one made racist remarks. That started when they didn't come back.

Security guard Rodney Rills burst into the office of counselor Jeff Crane.

"Got a file on DeShawn Martin?" He stood in front of Jeff's desk, which was awash with stacks of papers and books. On the shelf behind Jeff, a betta swam in a small tank with murky water.

"Rod, you know my files are confidential."

"Haven't you heard?"

Jeff shook his head.

Rod caught him up.

"So I need to know what kind of trouble this DeShawn has been in," he concluded.

Jeff rested his elbows on a pile of files and looked up at Rod. "Why is it," he mused, "a black kid at our school has to be either a star athlete or a disciplinary problem?"

"Usually both," Rod corrected.

Jeff sat back in his chair, shying from Rod's prejudice as though it were a foul odor. He knew that a depressingly low number of the black males who attended Willow Bank High graduated. In fact, now that he thought about it, many just seemed to give up; stop coming to class one day, never to be heard from again.

Rod sat down in the padded leather chair across from Jeff's desk and used his sleeve to polish the badge that was displayed on his shirt pocket. Jeff answered with his own series of fidgets, cinching his tie, then tugging on his collar.

Finally, Jeff gave in and spoke.

"A disciplinary record," he offered, "I suppose I could share with you, but he hasn't got one."

"He comes in here."

"Not because he got into trouble. Not a single demerit. And straight A's on top of that."

Rod let his badge alone and frowned in silence. Jeff wasn't sure if it was the idea of a black kid doing well or that of a kid coming to counseling by choice that threw Rod for a loop. Jeff leaned forward and in his best off-the-record and honest voice added, "What DeShawn and I are working on doesn't lead me to believe he would be a threat to Dorsey."

"Good, but let's go by his house."

Jeff sat back a minute and thought. "Why not?"

DeShawn's sessions had taken a turn for the better recently: he had a boyfriend.

Jeff also thought that Dorsey's sessions held promise: she had not cried the last time she had seen him.

The first time, a year ago maybe, she had bawled her blonde head off, but that was because she was in trouble—she and a group of friends were caught drinking beer in the cemetery and wound up ticketed for both minor in possession and trespassing. She'd walked into his office dressed in a white T-shirt and dark corduroy shorts, one white sock a couple inches higher on her calf than the other. She'd sat in the chair, looked at him for a minute, and then covered her face with her hands and sobbed, tears spilling down her forearms.

No one was home at the two-bedroom, ranch-style house on Pair Street in the older section of town where DeShawn lived with his parents.

"They both work," Jeff said.

Rod snooped around back but found nothing. "Don't you need a warrant?" Jeff asked, and they both laughed.

Rod talked on his cell phone, leaning an elbow on the roof of his blue Ford. Jeff stood by the bumper, thinking again about Dorsey crying in his office—he could see the tears between her small fingers, the chipped pink polish on her nails, and tears trickling through the wisps of blonde on her forearms.

Rodney's phone beeped off. "Case closed, for us anyway," he said. Jeff rested a foot on the bumper and looked toward him. "They just got her dad. He said she's home."

"Good," Jeff said.

"It's up to Papa now. He better put some leather to her or he's going to wind up with a mulatto grand-brat."

"I doubt DeShawn and Dorsey had much of an amorous afternoon."

"No, but he at least tried to get in her pants."

"I think you're projecting."

"Damn right ... what?"

Jeff was smirking.

"You just watch out," Rodney came back, "I'll get a court order for your files."

Rodney wheeled the Ford in by the gym entrance where all the coaches park, and Jeff saw a small bunch of football players heading out toward a wind-raked practice field.

"Hey," he said, "there's a JV game today."

"Didn't think you paid much attention."

"Dorsey cheers for the JV squad."

"Okay, say I drive out by the stadium, just to see that she looks okay?"

Jeff nodded but said, "Really, it'd be interesting to see if her father lays down the law or if it's business as usual. I know her parents are working on setting good boundaries."

Rodney asked Jeff to go along, but he declined. Jeff felt bad about doing so: Rodney only really enjoyed playing detective when there was someone watching. Jeff did, however, ask him to call whether she was there or not.

As soon as he got back into his office, Jeff flung open his filing cabinet and hunted for the file on Dorsey. He had made up the line about her parents—he knew nothing about them. He had struggled, in fact, all the way back to the school to remember just what Dorsey and he were working on.

"If you want things to change, I'm here to help." He must have said that. After all, he always said that. Then she cried and tears ran down her arms. That was all he could remember, but he also knew that her eyes were bird's-egg blue, which meant that she must have looked at him when she was talking. Most of the kids only stared down at their Nikes as they endured their sessions, but she must have gazed over his cluttered desk at him: how else would he be able to picture her eyes?

He finally located her file in the D's and whipped it open on top of DeShawn's, which he had left sitting on his desk. A tingling shock rippled through him as he stared down at it.

He always kept sparse notes, but all the sheets on Dorsey were completely blank, only the initial referral in her folder. He dug through the filing cabinet again, but it was no use—the right folder was in front of him. He stared at the empty pages and then spent the next hour fabricating entries that were abstract enough to fit any teen: working on anger toward parents, working on anger toward peers, working on anger toward self.

When he'd filled enough pages for a year's worth of twice-a-month sessions, he flipped back through to check for inconsistencies, but the ink blurred into an elaborate Rorschach smudge. He shut his eyes for a few seconds and tried again. Only the word "love" came into focus—which he didn't even recall writing—so he slapped the file shut. He pulled off his tie, tossed it on the shelf behind him, and walked out of the office. The halls were deserted as he went through the west wing, thinking all the while that he would head home to the bottle of Johnny Walker he had stashed under the kitchen sink and forget all about her.

As he reached the faculty parking lot, he glanced toward the towering stone sculpture of an eagle, next to which Rodney parked each afternoon to observe the after-school exodus. DeShawn's Cougar idled there.

He approached, and the driver slid over to the passenger side. When he peered in the window, Dorsey motioned him to get in.

He sat down behind the wheel and looked at her. A few leaves were caught in her disheveled hair that, nonetheless, shone gold in the sinking sun. She was still in her cheerleading uniform, but dark streaks dirtied her vest. He looked down to see red dots splattered over her pale legs and white socks, one higher on her calf than the other.

He remembered that he had said, "If you want things to change, I'm here to help,"

Her reply had been: "Things will change, and you will help. Eventually." She had rolled the last word and punctuated it with a wink. That had been at the end of their first session.

He had never seen her cry.

Now, she smiled at him and said, "I'm ready for things to change."

She motioned, and he put the car into gear. They maneuvered out of the lot and pulled onto Weeping Willow Road, a ragged two-lane that led out to the stadium.

As the Cougar snaked along, he turned toward her and started to ask where they were going. When she looked at him, her blue eyes flaring, the image slapped in his mind, whirred there as though by slide projector: Dorsey in the leather chair across from his desk. She had slipped out of her loafers and had her sock feet up, a hand resting on her shining knees, her head tilted slightly back as she bared a set of fangs. He had said nothing. She had closed her mouth and then smiled, revealing normal, if crooked, incisors, that added to a completely pretty set of teeth.

"Cool trick, huh?" she had said.

After they passed the stadium where the game was still going on, they continued for several miles, passing long blankets of farmland until Jeff was sure they would hit the highway—but he did not ask where they were going.

Suddenly she pointed, and he swung off onto a barely discernable set of tire tracks that were likely once a road for pasture access. They sank down into a wooded stretch that probably flanked Willow Creek.

The Cougar bounced along until she reached out and tapped the dash with her hand, and he parked before a dense patch of brush.

"Take the keys," she whispered.

He got out, and she was already standing at the rear of the car as dusk settled about them. The breeze pulled one of the leaves from her hair and blew it off into the bushes. He stepped next to her, and she pointed down at the trunk.

He opened it.

Pools of blood surrounded DeShawn's severed head and that of another black boy.

Dorsey walked off toward the woods. "Snag those for me, dude," she called back.

Jeff reached down in to the enclave of buzzing flies. His hands slid over the stringy remnants of DeShawn's neck and caught hold of his ears. He fumbled with the other head, finally securing one beneath each arm.

He followed Dorsey as she marched into the brush down an invisible trail. They tore on, with no sound of creek or sight of man, until they crashed through the thicket into a circular clearing the size of an infield. "Just drop them anywhere," Dorsey commanded.

He extended his arms, and the heads smacked to the ground.

She walked straight to the opposite side and came forth carrying another head, again that of a young black male, dried in decay with both eyes eaten out. She stopped at the center of the circle, as if getting her bearings, then paced deliberately five steps in one direction where she, ceremonially, placed the head.

She repeated this two more times, pulling heads in even more advanced stages of decomposition from somewhere in the brush beyond. She finally picked up DeShawn's head from Jeff's feet and paced it to its place. She came back for the other, and then said, "Ready, Freddy?"

Jeff stood staring at the heads that now stared at one another from their vantage points along the perimeter of the clearing. Dorsey walked toward him. She winked and said, "See why we call it black magic?"

She pushed him out of the clearing and into the grove where she remained standing, just on the edge of the circle. She unbuttoned her vest, slid it off, and then removed her undershirt and athletic bra. Her breasts were baseball-sized and pale. She kicked off her shoes, pulled off her socks, and dropped her skirt. All of her clothes were flung toward Jeff into the bushes before she returned to the center of the circle.

She raised her arms just as the sun sank, and the woods around fell silent and dim. It seemed like color and sound had been sucked toward her and collapsed. A gray haze that could have been smoke enveloped the circle, and Jeff was blind. He heard one final sound, a wisp like a stifled inhalation, before the air began clearing.

He rushed forward. She was gone and the five heads were piles of ashes.

He ran into the woods as night fell.

He may have turned a few circles until he heard a car. He made his way back to the road, not far from the Cougar with its gaping trunk. Another car had pulled in behind it, and someone with a flashlight was walking around.

Jeff came forward until the light hit his eyes.

"Easy, Jeff, easy."

It was Rod. He took Jeff by the arm.

"The whole sheriff's department will be here in a second. You got that long to tell an old friend what went down."

"She is the devil," Jeff said.

"Dorsey?"

"Yeah."

"So you killed her. Had to, right?"

"What?"

Rod shined the light into the trunk. Dorsey's naked body was twisted into a ball.

The wind sprang up, stirring the treetops, and a cold gust encircled Jeff's face. A voice whispered in his ear: "Cool trick, huh?"

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