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# BLOOD OF BELLADONNA

A Novel

JL Rehman



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COVER DESIGNED BY J L REHMAN

Manufactured in the United States of America

ISBN-978-1-607710059

Ebook version available at:  
<http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/8059>

[www.partnersincrimepublishers.com](http://www.partnersincrimepublishers.com)

## BLOOD OF BELLADONNA

A lot of things can be expected to show up on a back porch out in the middle of nowhere, but Roy never dreamed of this one. Spread out on his stomach, Eddie's covered in blood and dirt, passed out on the door mat. Roy can't seem to do anything but stare down at the top of Eddie's bald spot.

Eddie must have sensed Roy standing there because his head pulls up off the mat like a turtle out of its shell and he squints up at Roy through his right eye, the left caked with bloody mud.

"Hey, Roy, how ya doin'?"

"What are you doin', Eddie?"

"I don't know, Roy. Think I must have gotten drunk and pissed someone off. Kicked my ass. Don't feel so good."

Roy steps out onto the porch and helps Eddie sit up. "Don't you remember what happened?"

"My head hurts, Roy."

"Yeah, bet it does."

"You gotta help me clean up before Ma finds out."

"Don't worry none about Bella, Eddie. You got bigger problems."

Roy half carries Eddie into the bathroom, sets him on the crapper, turns on the shower, thinking of what to do. Thinks about taking him out back again and shooting him a second time, but then realizes Bella's gone and there really isn't much point in putting Eddie through that again.

Helping Eddie strip off his clothes, Roy sets him in the tub, mud and blood swirling down the open drain. Roy pulls out a jug of liquid laundry detergent from the cabinet and pours it on hunched-over Eddie, the steam swirling thick in the shower until it's hard to breathe.

Eddie moans, "What the hell happened, Roy?"

"Why you askin' me? " Throws a wash rag at Eddie, "Here, wash yourself."

"Weren't we in the backyard? I think—"

Roy adjusts the shower head. "Don't try so hard, Eddie, you'll hurt your brain."

"Ma, Ma got her another one and I, I, I brought her to you. Wasn't that it?"

"Guess so." Roy turns off the shower and hands Eddie a towel.

Eddie sits naked in the tub, steam fading against the fiberglass shower surround. It's like he doesn't want to get out and is happy just sitting there. He pulls the towel around his shoulders hugging his knees.

"It's all kind of fuzzy. We had a good day. I think we had a good day. Ma took care of the girl real quick like and I was thinkin' we'd get to bed early after all. Maybe 'cause Ma wasn't so into it this time, and I'm thinkin' I brought the girl to you, Roy. Isn't that right?"

"Shit, Eddie. What do you want me to say?" Roy can see why Eddie's sitting in the tub and not lying dead in the grave like he's supposed to. Damn bullet just grazed the left side of his forehead, slitting the skin open along the skull just past the ear. No real damage. Just a lot of blood. Bad shot is what that is, Roy thinks.

Eddie slowly looks up at Roy. "You shoot me in the head, Roy?"

“That what you remember?”

“Called me an asshole. I remember that. Then you shot me in the head.” Eddie’s hand gently creeps along the bullet graze. “I think you did.”

“Hell, Eddie. Guess I snapped. Saw you draggin’ that poor girl through the woods and you actin’ like it’s a real bother and you bitchin’ like before about your damn gold chain.”

“Paid a lot of money for it, Roy! Hard to get the bloody shit out when it dries between the little links like that. And it wasn’t my idea to catch ’em and haul ’em back to the house for our damn crazy assed Ma.” Eddie pulls out of the tub and sits exhausted on the crapper. “You act like it’s all my fault.”

“I know it wasn’t your fault and I am sorry for tryin’ to kill ya, Eddie, but a man can take just so much, ya know?”

“I can understand that.” Eddie looks up at Roy, “Please don’t shoot me in the head again, okay?”

“Not unless it’s a really good reason, Eddie.”

Eddie nods like everything’s taken care of and he’s back whole again. Except for the ugly wound on his head. Bella’s gonna drill him about it and if she finds out Roy did it, they’ll both go in *the bunker*.

“Ma’s gonna put us in *the bunker*, Roy. She’s gonna be real mad.”

“Well, Eddie, that’s the other thing. I sorta shot her, too.”

“You shot Ma!” Eddie jumps up off the crapper, “What the hell, Roy! She’s gonna get us for sure now.”

“I’m goin’ out and check, but I’m pretty certain she’s not coming back.”

“After all that voodoo shit she was into, Roy, she’s liable to creep out of the grave and kill us both. Hell, I did. You sure she’s *dead*?” Eddie yells disappearing into his room.

Roy’s wondering why it’s going so smooth, Eddie not being all that upset and he reconsiders the idea of putting him down again. It could be over just that quick, he’d be free, but some voice in the back of his brain impresses how he’s gotten a second chance for not really killing Eddie and he might take it as a sign to let things be.

Eddie comes out later fully dressed, fresh blood leaking from his wound. “I’m missin’ an earring, Roy. Think you blew it off.”

“Not likely. Probably came out when you dragged out of the hole. It’s in there somewhere. Come on. Maybe we’ll find it now the sun’s up.”

## §

Eddie and Roy stand looking down in the grave. Easy to see where Eddie crawled out. Bella’s arm’s sticking out, a pretty Fossil watch she’d probably taken from one of her victims glistening in the bright sun.

“How we gonna know she’s dead, Roy?” Eddie’s got his hand plastered to his wound to keep blood from leaking into his eye.

Roy kneels down and carefully checks for Bella’s pulse.

“Don’t feel nothing. She’s dead all right. I’ll cover her up better.”

“Was gonna fish for my earring. Now I don’t care.”

Roy tamps down the soft earth with his boot and scatters brush over it. Leans on the shovel and asks Eddie, “You want to say some words?”

“What, like a prayer?”

“Yeah.”

“Little late for that, don’t you think?”

“Maybe. Think we should say somethin’ though.”

Eddie shrugs and they lower their heads.

“Dear God, take care of Ma, but my advice is, don’t turn your back on her. Amen.”

Roy heads back to the house. “Come on, let’s get your head taped up and pack you a bag.”

Eddie flicks blood off his hand. “Where we going?”

“Think we need to find Ricky. Cop came by said he was missing.”

“Thought he’s still in prison?”

“Out now. We gotta find him.”

“He’s gonna kill us when he finds out you killed Ma.”

Roy spins on his heel and grabs Eddie by the throat. “You’re not gonna tell anyone what happened here, you hear me! Not one word, Eddie. Not one.”

Eddie’s eyes are wide and bloodshot, the left lightly bruised and swollen from the impact of the bullet. “All right, Roy. Chill! I won’t tell anyone.”

“Maybe I *should* just shoot you. You always were a little blabbermouth.”

“No, no, I will. I’ll keep it up, Roy. You say to shut up, I shut up.”

Roy can tell from the fear in Eddie’s eyes he’s got him under control. For now. But it’d be easier dealing with killing him now than in some other town in God-knows-where.

“See to it, Eddie. We gotta find Ricky and find out what’s goin’ on. Ma would have wanted it that way.”

§

South on I-95, Roy’s behind the wheel and Eddie’s sick and pale behind his forearm in the passenger seat. Hasn’t said a word in two hours and for Eddie, that’s a bad deal. Blood continues to drain from the side of his head into one of Bella’s ancient 1970’s Kotex—the necessary added assemblage of elastic belt missing—now held together with masking tape wrapped around Eddie’s head. Roy, glancing from the road to Eddie’s head, begins to wonder if he’d misread the wound.

“Hey, Eddie, how ya doing, Buddy?”

Eddie remains silent in the semi-fetal position against the car door. Roy pushes Eddie’s shoulder. “Wake up.”

“My head hurts, man,” Eddie mumbles against his arm.

“Yeah, I bet.” Roy catches a rest stop sign and glides into the crawl lane behind an eighteen wheeler. He tucks the Pontiac into a space and cuts the engine, the motor ticking a steady beat under the hood.

“Lean on over here and let me take a look at it.” Roy lifts the edge of the Kotex away exposing a swollen bruise steadily bleeding. Looking at it now in sunlight, Roy sees that the bullet entered just under the skin, exited and re-entered again. *No exit.*

“Shit, Eddie, looks like the bullet’s still in there.”

Eddie re-animates and sits up checking his head in the rearview. “Damn!” Eddie whines, feels around above his ear, “Gotta hole in my head, Roy! That mean the bullet’s still in there?”

“Looks like it, but don’t panic.” Roy sticks the tape back on. “It didn’t kill you out right, so you’re probably not gonna die.”

“How do you know that? You a bullet expert, Roy? I don’t remember you going to school and gettin’ a fuckin’ bullet degree. Shit, I got a hole in my head. How deep do you think it went?”

“Hard to say, Eddie. You’d need an x-ray to tell for sure.” Roy pulls the keys and opens the door.

“Where you going?”

“Get a drink and see if I can find you some aspirin. Take a nap. You want anything?”

“Water,” Eddie says squinting up at him with a swollen left eye.

§

Roy isn’t gone long, and he comes back with a bottled water, canned soda, and a foil pack of Advil and finds Eddie curled against the passenger door again, his jacket pulled over his head to block out the light.

“Take a few of these,” he tells Eddie ripping the foil. Eddie shifts, but not really sitting up, and grabs the bottled water, foil pack and retreats back under the jacket.

Roy backs out of the space and heads south again on I-75.

§

Gainesville is full of pretty college girls and the place is thick with them this time of year. That gets Roy thinking about Bella and her lying in a grave in her own backyard on top of her last pretty moon-stop sacrifice. Roy does feel bad for having killed her, but thinking back he knows it was the only way. But he mourns her in his own way, though not shedding a tear. The second he feels sorry for doing it, he thinks of the hell she put them through and then he’s not so sorry after all.

“You should see ’em, Eddie. They’re everywhere. In cars, on the sidewalk, stuffed in every store we pass. Get up.” Roy thinks of this as a good way to snap Eddie out of his headache funk because nothing gets Eddie snapped to business better than chicks.

Eddie’s still fetal in the seat.

Roy pulls the jacket down and right off notices the Kotex is swollen with blood and leaking onto Eddie’s shirt. Panic stings Roy’s chest and he knows the kid needs real medical attention. Also knows real medical attention means cops. It’s the law. Any bullet wound gets reported to the cops. They’d want to know how Eddie got shot, and he could make up a plausible story, but Eddie’s a wild card in all this and Roy doesn’t trust him not to shoot his mouth off about Bella in a moment of weakness or half sedation.

“Shit, this sucks,” Roy says.

Traffic crawls through downtown, congested with free freaking teens away from home for the first time in their lives, living from one keg party to the next. Again, Roy

imagines what Bella would have done in a place like this. A killing a week, he thinks. She wouldn't be able to help herself.

Along the miles of strip malls, a vinyl banner catches his eye, advertising: GATOR DRUGS GRAND OPENING—FREE TRAUMATIC WOUND DRESSING.

It's all he needs to see. He hangs a hard right into the parking lot, parks in the fire lane, and helps Eddie out.

It has that *new store* smell—a concoction of industrial adhesives, paint solvents, and popcorn. It's hard to manage Eddie, he's more or less out of it and somewhere in the back of Roy's mind he seems to recollect that drifting in and out means a concussion. Can't let him sleep. He pats Eddie's cheek and grabs his chin pointing him in the direction of sorority girls lined in the makeup aisle. "Look here. They're everywhere. Wake up or you'll miss it."

Eddie's eyes, or at least the good one, rolls from the back of his head and tries to focus. "I got a real bad headache, Roy."

"I know, Eddie. Might have a concussion, so stay awake."

"What for?"

"Might not wake up again."

"What else you gonna do to me, Roy?"

"Nothin', Eddie. We can get help here. Just keep your mouth shut and let me do all the talking."

Eddie doesn't say anything and Roy thinks it's because he's more or less out of it anyway which might work out in the long run. Patrons in the store catch sight of them lurching down the aisle and look skittish and confused. Three college girls standing by the make-up counter cover their mouths and laugh, pointing manicured fingers in Eddie's direction.

Guy behind the counter's fat and jolly, sports a beard, has a wicked stainless steel hook for a left hand—Santa after an ugly sled accident—moonlighting as a pharmacist in the off season. That's Roy's first impression looking up at him, donned in a white lab coat with the name Bert embroidered on the left chest. Roy's hoping he is Santa or at least "Santa like" because he's gonna need all the help he can get.

"Excuse me, but your sign out front says you offer free wound dressing. My brother Eddie here, say hi Eddie, has a bit of a problem on his head. Can you fix him up?"

Old Bert peers over the glasses perched on the end of his nose, first at Roy then Eddie, back to Roy. "What happened to him?"

"You know, it's a long story and we're in kind of a hurry," Roy tries explaining, glances around the place and is suddenly aware that every person in the store has stopped shopping to watch him and Eddie. "If you could just clean him up and put on a real dressing, we'd sure appreciate it."

By then a pharmacist associate—could be from India—has come up because of the strange quiet in the store as if the patrons are animals at a water hole getting wind of a nearby predator lurking in the weeds. Associate's head weaves back and forth studying every inch of Eddie's face, Roy half expecting him to pick up the phone and call the cops.

Bert turns slightly, lifts his hook, some kind of signal to the associate to do something, Roy thinks, not sure what.

“Free with purchase.” Old Bert drops that little fact on Roy like a turd.

“That sign true or is it some kind of scam to get people in here so’s they’ll spend money? Doesn’t say with purchase.”

It sounds aggressive, Roy realizes it the second the word *purchase* passes his lips, and that makes him aggravated and nervous. Eddie starts to re-animate and his head pops up and focuses on blurry Bert.

“Dude, it’s Santa.” Eddie sounds a little drunk even though he hasn’t had a drop in three days and that can’t be good. Bullet’s probably wobbling around in his brain shorting things out, Roy thinks.

“Says with purchase! Look underneath the big words. And we don’t treat wounds. We offer the supplies for them, heavy gauze, tape, Betadine. We’re not doctors. Your brother looks like he might need to go to the emergency room. Hospital’s not far,” Bert squints, points his hook towards the door and a little to the right.

Roy sweeps a pack of gum from its box and slaps it on the counter. “We’ll take it. And you’re right. I’ll take him to the hospital. So can I have the free stuff?”

“He shot me in the head,” Eddie says. Smiles when he says it and that confuses the hell out of the pharmacist. Not like it’s the first time some damn idiot’s dragged a friend into a drug store with a suspicious story. This is, after all, a college town and kids do stupid things.

Bert’s right eyebrow arches in that, *I don’t believe a word of it, but I don’t want to get involved* look. Makes Roy happy because he’s sure any minute the dude from India’s going for the phone, and at that exact moment, that’s just what happens. His dark little hand is creeping for the phone and Roy can already imagine the conversation.

“*Can I get it NOW!*” Roy yells. Eddie’s getting harder to hold up and he’s praying he can get him back to the car before he passes out on the new terrazzo floor, and they call EMS and the cops, and then the questions, *interrogation*, and he’s sure Eddie will spill his guts just to sleep.

“That’ll be a dollar seven,” Bert says.

Roy pulls two bucks from his rear pocket and slaps it on the counter. “Keep the change.”

India guy backs away from the phone and collects a bag with GATOR DRUG logo in orange against the crisp white paper and hands one over to Roy.

“Thanks. Have a great day,” Roy says, hiking Eddie up for a better grip and turning for the door. By now, everyone in the store has grouped behind them. Makes Roy think of the zombies in the *Dawn of the Dead* movie. He pushes his way through the small crowd and shoves Eddie in the car, slams the door.

Roy’s not wasting time getting out of town in case ol’ Bert decides maybe he should call the cops because he suddenly remembered the injured guy said he was shot in the head, and Roy prays no one thought enough to take down the tag number. Once he finds Ricky, he won’t have to deal with all this on his own, and at eighty miles an hour southbound, Roy rolls the window down and screams. Just to clear his head.