

Blood Sisters

The third novel in the Cass Diamond series

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Published by Wild Dingo Press
Melbourne, Australia
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www.wilddingopress.com.au

First published by Wild Dingo Press 2019
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Designer: Debra Billson
Editor: Katia Ariel
Print in Australia by Griffin Press

De Costa, Caroline, 1947-
Blood Sisters/Caroline de Costa.



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

ISBN: 9780648066385 (paperback)
ISBN: 9780648349808 (ebook: pdf)
ISBN: 9780648349815 (ebook: epub)

For Fionnuala Cook, with thanks for everything.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I could not have researched and written *Blood Sisters* without the help of many people. For advice about detecting and police procedure I am most grateful to Detective Senior Sergeant Ed Kinbacher and Detective Senior Sergeant Glenn Horan—all faults in this area are my own. Dear friends Annie Chance, Jane Patrick and Michele Moore read and critiqued the initial drafts. Katia Ariel has been a wonderful and conscientious editor and Catherine Lewis an extremely supportive publisher. Dr Nina Mendoza, Rose Flores and Arieta Costalis, and others who prefer not to be named, have been very helpful with details of the Philippines, Filipino culture, and Tagalog language. Dr Alan Cheng revealed a life outside medicine that includes K-Pop, in which he is most knowledgeable; there is also a young woman who I will not name, but must acknowledge for initially introducing me to K-Pop and South Korean youth culture. Len Reilly gave me detailed information about taekwondo. I thank them all.

I would also like to acknowledge the many smart, beautiful, kind and hardworking Aboriginal women I have had the pleasure and privilege of working with, teaching, and friendship with over the past thirty-eight years. While no single woman has been the basis for the creation of Cass Diamond, their many positive qualities have collectively contributed to her (fictional) existence.

I would like to acknowledge the peoples who are the Traditional Custodians of the Land on which the city of Cairns now stands, and of the surrounding land and seas, and to pay my respects to Elders, past, present and emerging.

Caroline de Costa
Cairns, Far North Queensland, 2019

Disclaimer

Blood Sisters is a work of fiction; all characters are the product of the author's imagination and not based on any person living or dead. Likewise, institutions including the hospital and police headquarters are fictitious. However, the city of Cairns and the wider region of Far North Queensland do exist, and I urge readers not yet familiar with our beautiful part of the world to visit.

PROLOGUE

QUEZON PROVINCE, THE PHILIPPINES,

NOVEMBER 2004

She was ten when the flood came. The day her mother said they must run, leave everything behind in their little house in the valley, and climb the hill to get away from the mud.

It had rained, it seemed, forever, and fierce winds had whipped away the boards that *Tatay* had hammered onto their roof of palm thatch, before he'd gone to Batangas to look for work. The whole of the *barangay* was transformed into a sea of mud in which their soggy huts seemed to float. Dorrie's legs and those of her mother and little brothers had layers of mud caked on them, a new layer for every time they went out to try to collect enough clean water to drink and cook with. The mud turned white on their legs and smelt bad but their floor was bare earth and it was impossible to find a dry place to stand to wash.

The bridge from their village to the main road had been swept away. Planks had been laid across the river but her mother said it was too dangerous to go there, and she hoped *Tatay* wouldn't try to walk across to see how they were. Water with branches and rubbish roared past: sometimes the bloated corpse of a pig or chicken, children's schoolbooks, half a chair, women's underwear. All brought down from the villages higher up the mountain.

That day her mother had lit the kerosene stove in the gloom of early morning. The rain and low-lying cloud made it seem dark all day in the house. Her mother had cooked rice for them all and put a fried egg with it for the little boys. It was curiously silent in the *barangay*. Everyone was inside because of the rain instead of outdoors preparing food or doing their washing or going to market, laughing and talking.

The family had just finished their breakfast when the silence was shattered. 'Run!' was what she remembered. '*Pagdaḡa!* Run! Fast! The mud is coming!'

Her mother leapt up and looked out the door. 'Quick, Dorrie, quick!' she cried. 'Bring Ronny.' She scooped up seven-year-old Ernesto and grabbed her daughter's hand.

Outside, they could hear an increasing roar. Looking up through the rain and mist, Dorrie saw a black shape approaching, growing larger and larger. Was it coming down the hill? It was too dark and wet to tell.

People were pouring out of the *barangay* into the laneway around them.

'Go across the river downstream!' some called.

'No, no time! Go up the river and cross higher up. We'll go up the other side of the valley!'

Her mother hesitated. Then she said: 'We should go up the river. When we cross, the ground will be higher. Come on, fast now!'

Half-pulling, half-lifting her five-year-old brother, who was screaming with fear, Dorrie followed her mother. People were tumbling over each other and pushing against her in their haste. She was falling behind.

'Ronny, Ronny, come on!' With each step the children sank to their ankles in the mud, and had to pull hard to get their feet out.

Eventually they reached the outskirts of their compound where some men were putting tree trunks across the broken bridge and laying planks on top. People were calmer here, taking their turn to cross. She caught up with her mother and Ernesto.

'Come on, *Até*,' a man said to her mother. 'Your turn. You, then the little boys. I'll come behind them. Then your daughter can come.'

'You hear?' her mother said. 'Just wait your turn, and we'll be on the other side when you get there.'

It all happened so quickly. She watched her mother start to cross, holding Ernesto behind her. Ronny was behind him, and the man holding him behind again. Then, right in the middle of the crossing, Ronny lost his balance and started to fall. The man tried to grab him, but a palm trunk rolled beneath them and they both fell into the racing water below. At the same time, her mother turned, and seeing Ronny staggering, reached back to catch him. Losing her footing, her mother and Ernesto fell on top of Ronny and the helping man, and the current swept all four of them away.

On the bank people screamed, some men began to run down the side of the river. Horrified, Dorrie wanted to scream out, *Nanay, nanay!* But the words wouldn't come.

There was a small house with a veranda further downstream; a man climbed on the veranda and shouted at her mother to try to get to him. '*Até!*' he cried. 'Aunty, hold on!' But as Dorrie watched, the whole veranda collapsed into the stream, taking the man with it. The others who had been running stopped. It was useless, and their own families were waiting for them back near the crossing.

What she remembered next was a woman from another village who had known her mother, taking her by the hand. The woman's name was Maria Angela.

'You have to try to cross, Dorrie,' Maria Angela told her. 'Otherwise you will die too. You can go in front of me but don't hold onto me; if you fall, I can't save you.'

She must have crossed to the other side, because she hadn't fallen into the water, and Maria Angela had taken her hand again and led her up the hill, climbing on boulders and through bushes that scratched her and tore her dress. She never had any memory of that crossing. She did remember looking back and seeing the wall of mud coming across the whole village, covering

her home and all the houses around it, and all the people left inside them. Some families standing near the river tried to escape by jumping into the water, but immediately they disappeared under a mixture of mud and roaring water.

‘Don’t look!’ Maria Angela insisted, pulling her higher up the hill.

They’d spent all that day on the hill watching the floodwaters swirl just fifty metres below. Late in the afternoon an army helicopter flew overhead, dropping some plastic sheeting, bread and bottles of water. Maria Angela and the people with her made a sort of hut between the boulders with the plastic sheeting where they all huddled together. They gave her some of the bread and water, but they said they needed to keep back some of it because no one knew when they would be rescued. When Dorrie wanted to pee she had to go outside in the rain and squat behind a boulder. But then one of the men followed her out there and started to speak to her, so she quickly ran back inside. Maria Angela saw this, and pushed the man roughly, saying something in a low voice.

‘Tell me when you want to go to pee next time, and I’ll come with you,’ Maria Angela said.

In the evening of the next day soldiers came. They threw cables across the river and brought their own bridge of chains and planks that they placed across the river lower down. After that, they drove slowly up the other side in a little truck with big wheels. In twos and threes the villagers were taken down and away. Maria Angela took Dorrie to a village on the main road to Manila Metro where there were tents and workers with red crosses on their shirts. They gave her a big bowl of hot adobo chicken stew, which was the best thing she had ever tasted in her whole life. But her stomach was so knotted from eating nothing but bread for three days and wondering where her mother and brothers were, that she immediately vomited it all up.

Next day Maria Angela took her to her own village, to the spot where the market had been. There was a tarpaulin over the beams of the roof, and a very bad smell.

Another man who looked to Dorrie like a policeman but was, maybe, a soldier talked with Maria Angela then pulled back a blue plastic sheet on the ground. Underneath was Dorrie's mother, her face swollen and grey, her neck twisted in a strange way, her clothes pulled away from her body, purple bruises on her chest. Beside her mother was a dead man whom Maria Angela said was Dorrie's Uncle Enriques; but he smelled so bad she couldn't look at him. No one knew where Dorrie's brothers were.

'We have more than five hundred children missing,' said the policeman. She remembered hearing that.

The Red Cross workers buried all the bodies close together, and the village priest said Mass over the grave. That same priest tried to find her father in Batangas, but with no luck.

Maria Angela explained that she was sorry, but she did not have enough money to keep Dorrie with her and would have to send her to her only remaining relative. That was her cousin Marcellina, who was living in Angeles City. So Dorrie was put in a jeepney with a package of food from the Red Cross and Marcellina's address in a purse that Maria Angela gave her. The purse had a picture of a kitten on it; Dorrie knew she would keep that purse with her all her life. She had one change of clothes with her in a plastic bag. She had been told these had been given to her by people in Australia, and she wondered why people would give away their clothes to her.

The jeepney bounced over rutted mud tracks to the main road, the passengers jam-packed *kapit-tuko*—squashed together like the geckos that had clung to the walls of their house before the mud came. Chickens in baskets squawked and small children squealed as they turned onto the highway towards Batangas. In the town the driver took her to the bus depot, and a man

from the Red Cross put her on the bus for Manila Metro, where she had never been in her life. All around her in the city was a seething mass of cars, trucks, buses belching smoke, jeepneys and tricycles, people shouting and running. She held on tightly to her kitten purse. Somehow somebody must have put her on the next bus. Dorrie would always remember that when they got to Angeles the driver put her into a *put put* for the ride to where Marcellina worked—Jack’s Bar on Fields Avenue. Marcie was waiting outside for her when she arrived.

‘It’s good you’ve got your cousin to look out for you,’ the *put put* driver said to her, as he dropped her off. He lowered his voice when he spoke to Marcie. ‘Poor kid.’

Marcie looked very glamorous; she wore black stockings that looked like a fishing net and a shiny black dress, she had very long eyelashes and very bright lipstick. She hugged Dorrie for a long time, then she took her hand and led her into the bar. The television was on in the front room and Dorrie learned that between 28 and 30 November, Typhoon Winnie had swept right across the Philippines, killing 893 people and injuring 648.

They didn’t say anything at all about her mother.

1

CAIRNS

TUESDAY 21ST AUGUST 2013

The thing that surprised Scarlett the most, when she thought about it later, was that at first her Tuesday night shift at the Palmlands Motel was no different from any other night she'd worked. There'd been no warning. No suggestion of what was going to happen. No *omens*.

Scarlett worked Tuesdays and Thursdays at Palmlands, from five to ten. She'd had the job for six months now. The hours were good, the pay was good for a nearly seventeen-year-old, and Jan gave her a free dinner, too. Sitting in reception checking people in, handing out keys, answering the phone; it wasn't hard and she met some nice people. Plus, it was going to look great on her CV. After nine it was often so quiet she could do her homework or play on her iPad. And her mum didn't mind picking her up and letting her drive home, if she wasn't working a night shift herself. Scarlett was saving for her own car, for when she got her P plates.

But her mum might change her mind about Scarlett working at Palmlands now. Even if it turned out not to be murder.

Only one room—Number 20, in the far corner of the top floor of the small motel—was vacant when, soon after nine o'clock, a car pulled into the driveway in front of Reception. Scarlett was sitting at the desk with her headphones on, watching Gangnam Style on YouTube and jiggling along with Psy as he galloped around the screen of her iPad. *Op op op oppa*, sang Scarlett. The video was on its way to scoring a billion hits, and Scarlett was responsible for a good number of them.

Scarlett's second major life plan, after buying her car, was to spend a gap year teaching English in South Korea; Seoul must be the coolest place on the planet.

As the car came to a stop, she hastily pulled off the headphones and closed the iPad. A youngish couple with a tired-looking, cross toddler got out. A baby was asleep in a capsule on the back seat.

'We saw your Vacancy sign,' said the man. 'We're looking for a room for three or four nights.'

'No problem,' Scarlett answered. 'Welcome to Cairns. We have a Tuesday-night special. Top floor, kind of a view to the mountains in the morning, queen-sized bed. Would you like a cot for the little boy? There's no extra charge.'

'Yes, please,' the man replied, producing his credit card. 'Jo,' he said to his partner, 'do you want to get Tom's things and go straight up to settle him? I'll bring the rest up in a moment. Isabel's sound asleep there; she can stay in the car till we're sorted out, then I can bring her up.'

'If you'll just sign here,' Scarlett said to him, 'I'll get the cot and take it up. It's not heavy—it's one of those folding ones.'

She switched the phone onto voicemail—Jan was very particular about that—found the cot and followed Jo and the little boy across the courtyard and up the stairs.

'Have you had a long journey today?' she asked Jo.

'All the way from Rocky,' was the reply. 'We've got family there. We're thinking of moving north ourselves, from Melbourne. We're just looking around here. Luke—that's my partner—he's going to see if he can find work in the mines somewhere. Out of Mackay maybe.'

She picked up Tom as she climbed the stairs. He was half-asleep, and his mother was looking back at Scarlett as she spoke. Scarlett had both arms around the cot. They reached the landing.

'It's just down there to the right,' Scarlett said. 'Number 20. It's away from the road so it should be quiet for you.'

That was when Jo screamed. Screamed and almost dropped Tom. But his protests were drowned in the chaos that followed as doors opened up and down the corridor and guests cautiously peered out.

Which was when Scarlett saw that from under the door of Room 19, and onto the white tiles of the motel's corridor, flowed a river of blood.

Detectives Cass Diamond and Drew Borgese were nearing the end of their shift when the call came through. They were needed immediately, said Di from switch. At the Palmlands Motel on the highway at Earlville.

'The generals say the paramedics are there. A woman's been stabbed, I think. Anyway, there's a lot of blood. They're taking the woman to ED ASAP. Circumstances very suspicious, by the sound of it.'

'Looks like we're doing overtime,' Drew said to Cass. 'Let's go. I'll drive.'

It was a seven-minute trip to Earlville. A small crowd was gathered outside the motel when they got there. It never took long for bad news to travel, Cass thought. Inside Reception, a young woman, sitting with a baby and a toddler, hastily pointed them upstairs. An ambulance stood in the motel's courtyard, lights flashing and rear door open. One paramedic was about to close that door; through it Cass and Drew could see the second paramedic bending over a woman on a stretcher, a woman with long black hair, her face covered with an oxygen mask.

'She's going fast,' said the first paramedic, slamming the door. 'We're heading straight to ED. Your lot are upstairs.' He leapt into the driver's seat and the ambulance swept out of the yard as the crowd silently parted.

Cass and Drew followed the trail of bloodied footprints left by the paramedics, across the yard and up the concrete stairs,

then along a tiled corridor to Room 19, where they stopped. A young man with close-cropped dark hair, who Cass immediately marked as an ex-soldier, was doing a good job of keeping spectators at bay. Inside the room uniformed generals were securing the scene for the forensics team.

‘Never,’ Drew would say later that night to Cass, ‘have I seen so much blood come from one person. And quite a small person, at that.’

On the bed, the sheets, pillows and quilt were covered with blood and more blood had pooled on the floor beside the bed. Small bloody footprints led from the bed into the bathroom. Blood was all over the toilet and basin, and one long stream had flowed from the toilet out across the floor of the bedroom and under the door.

‘What’s happened here?’ Cass asked.

‘We don’t really know, Detective,’ replied a young constable named Swift, whom Cass hadn’t met before. ‘At first the paramedics thought she’d been stabbed. But there was no obvious wound. And there’s no sign of any weapon. She looked just about dead as they took her away; seems like she was still bleeding.’

‘She was alone here? Nobody with her? No one from another room?’

‘Yeah, no, no one, it seems. The manager—Jan—is just down the corridor calming people down. She thinks the woman’s a sex worker; she’s been here before. Gave the name of Maria—Maria Ramos.’

Cass looked at Drew. ‘Shall I go to ED?’ she asked. ‘Sounds like we may have a body on our hands.’

‘Yeah,’ he said, handing her the car keys. ‘I’ll get a lift back with one of these guys. Let me know what’s happening. We’ll meet back at the office. Hopefully before midnight.’

Dr Susie Ortega led Detective Cass Diamond into a small windowless interview room in the Emergency Department of the hospital, closing the door behind them. To Cass, the doctor appeared on the verge of tears.

‘Who is she, do you know?’ Susie asked immediately.

‘That’s what we’re trying to find out,’ Cass replied. ‘All we know about her so far is that she’s a young Asian woman. Who might be a sex worker. I’ve just been talking to my colleague, Drew Borgese. He’s over at the motel now with our tech and forensic people. He said he’d never seen so much blood spilled from one person in twelve years with the Force.’

‘Yes,’ said Susie, ‘she simply bled to death. When the paramedics first saw her they thought she must have been stabbed. Understandably. But then, they couldn’t see a wound. They managed to get an IV in and bring her here. But she just bled out and her heart stopped in the ambulance just after they left the motel. They couldn’t get her going again, sadly. So, she was dead on arrival.’

‘Can you explain to me what you think happened?’ asked Cass.

‘Well, she’ll have to go for autopsy,’ said Susie, ‘being DOA, but it looks as if she was bleeding from the vagina or rectum—the paramedics weren’t sure when they called ED from the ambulance. I was called down because I’m a gynaecologist, but she was dead by the time I arrived. I haven’t examined her, since she’ll be having the autopsy anyway, but there was no obvious external injury, although the pathologist may find some object pushed into the vagina or rectum. A knife or a broken bottle.’

Cass shivered. ‘Urrgh,’ she said.

Susie looked sympathetic.

‘Yes,’ she agreed, ‘it sounds horrible. But if she was a sex worker and died at the hands of a client, that’s what I’d be thinking. Ask your officers over at the motel to look out for something sharp.’

'The manager said she'd taken a room there a few times before,' Cass said, 'and checked in under the name Maria Ramos. Which is possibly not her real name. We haven't yet established if she met anyone there this evening.'

'From the look of her,' Susie said, 'I'd say she's from the Philippines. And well, she might be 18. Just.'

'The autopsy, will that be soon?' Cass asked.

'Yes, though if we don't know who she is and have difficulty getting consent it may be delayed.'

'Drew's working on identifying her right now' Cass said. 'and talking to witnesses. I understand that the people who found her were a schoolgirl who works evenings at Reception and a family who'd just arrived from interstate. So, they may not know much or be available until tomorrow. We'd also like a statement from you, maybe tomorrow?'

'That's fine,' said Susie. 'I'll give you my mobile number so you can call me direct. And if you find any relatives or friends who want to talk to me, you can give it to them too.'

'Thanks for your help,' said Cass. 'I'll be in touch, and it'll be me who comes back for the autopsy.'

She took out her phone and rapidly texted Drew: *on my way back—look for something sharp maybe knife that might have caused vaginal injuries*. Tucking her phone and notebook into her jacket pocket, she made her way across the courtyard of the Emergency Department, a trim, dark-skinned woman in her mid-thirties, conservatively dressed as her job demanded, in a white shirt, black skirt and pumps.

Driving back to CIB headquarters in Sheridan Street, Cass began going through the case in her mind. A woman from the Philippines, on her own in a motel. Bleeding to death. No friends with her. A sad and lonely death. Prostitution was legal in Queensland, for women working singly and not soliciting in public. So it was perfectly legal for sex workers to take clients to motels. The local papers were full of advertisements for their

services. A lot more than in the big cities where Cass had worked. She'd been surprised by this. Did this woman work on her own, if she was in fact a sex worker? Had she come to Australia on her own? Did she have a valid visa? Did she know enough English to place her own advertisements, or had someone been doing that for her? Both pimping and syndicates were illegal, and the state's Prostitution Enforcement Taskforce took a keen interest in such activities.

Until she knew the answers to all these questions Cass would keep an open mind on how this woman had died.

As she parked the car her phone pinged. She looked down. A message from Drew:

No knife but a pair of kitchen scissors covered in blood in the bed, with forensics now.