



## Salty Like Blood

By Harry Kraus

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### Chapter 1

Rachel and I tumbled into the tall grass at the bottom of the hill, having survived yet another Daddy-just-one-more sled ride from the edge of our front porch. I collapsed on my back, trying to find oxygen between gasps of laughter, and looked up at the summer sky. My daughter, with limbs sprawled in a wide X and her head against my foot, shouted her delight toward the house. "We did it! We made it!"

Seconds before, airborne and soaring toward record distance, Rachel reached for an octave above the normal human voice range, squealing a note that rang on in my head, and I suspected invited half the neighborhood's canine population to play. I laughed and put my fingers in my ears, rolling them in an exaggerated twist as if she'd deafened me.

She moved to lay her head upon my chest and quieted herself there, listening to my racing heart.

I stroked her hair, inhaled the scent of mown grass, and nestled my head back into the tickle of green.

"Is it okay?" she asked.

"It's okay."

"It's too fast," she said, raising herself up and pushing a bony elbow into my gut.

"Oh, so now you're the doctor."

She smiled. "Someday," she said. "For now, you're the doctor."

"Don't worry. I'm okay." I scowled at my seven-year-old. "Really."

We rested together, staring at the sky full of clouds of hippopotami, horses, rockets -- whatever Rachel imagined. Mostly I gasped and oohed. In a moment I found myself blinking away tears, overwhelmed with the enormity of it all.

It was so ordinary. A summer Saturday morning without an agenda. It's hard for me to describe beyond the sense I had of emerging, as if I'd been submerged for so long, and now, just to play and laugh and roll in the grass seemed a joy that would burst my heart. I smiled, taking it in, gulping in ordinary life as if I'd never have a chance again.

As Rachel chatted on with her running commentary of sky castles, fiery dragons, and fairies, other images drifted through my mind, pictures of painful chapters that set my current joy into sharp contrast. Traveling with Joanne through the dark tunnel of postpartum depression. My mother's battle with cancer. Memories of an intensive care unit visit while I was the too-young patient, watching my own heart monitor and wondering if life would be cut short.

Joanne's voice swept me into the here and now. "What's going on?"

I looked up to see her standing on the covered porch, eyeing a bottle of vegetable oil that was set on the white railing.

Rachel lifted her head, her blond hair dotted with grass seed. "We're sledding, Mommy."

Joanne's hands rested firmly on her hips. "It's July, David." She picked up the bottle. "And I've been looking for this." She was serious, but her eyes betrayed her attempt at scolding me. Her happiness at my delight in our little Rachel couldn't be spoiled by my summer antics.

I exchanged a mischievous glance with Rachel. She betrayed me in a heartbeat. "It was Daddy's idea."

"Women!" I said, grabbing my daughter by the waist and swinging her around in a circle. "You always stick together!"

As I trudged up the hill with Rachel folded around my back, I grunted exaggerated puffs. "You're getting so big."

I set her on the top step and kissed her forehead. She started pulling away. "Wait." I picked at the seeds in her hair. "You'll need to brush this out."

She opted for the shake-it-out method. "I'm a rock star."

I smiled. My star. For Joanne and me, Rachel had been the glue that helped us stick together through a valley of misery.

Joanne reappeared, carrying lemonade in tall, sweaty glasses. She handed me one and kissed me. She had thin lips to go with sharp, elegant features, dark eyes alight with mystery, and hair the color of caramel. She could have been a model before big lips became the rage.

I'd been to hell and back with Joanne, but the last six months, I'd sensed a real change in her. She seemed settled, somehow. Content. More romantic toward me -- the way she had been back in my medical school days. Our relationship, once teetering on the precipice of divorce, was now solidly a safe distance from the edge. I'd seen significant pieces of my life's puzzle fall together in the last few years. When the marriage one finally clicked into place, everything else brightened with it. It was as if I'd been living my life in black-and-white and someone just invented color.

I kissed her back, trying to discern her mood. There seemed a surface calm, but I sensed a deeper stirring. I'd become a champion at reading her. I knew the quiet of her bitterness, the bubbly way she prattled on when she felt guilty, and the aloofness that dared me to pursue her into bed. For a moment our eyes met. It was only a flash, but in that instant, I felt the foreboding that threatened my wonderful ordinary-life euphoria.

I took her hand. "What's up?"

She lowered her voice, but even at that volume, sharp irritation cut at the edges of her words, clipping them into little fragments. "Your father."

I raised my eyebrows in question.

"His neighbor called."

I waited for more, but it seemed the silence only uncapped her annoyance. In a moment she was on the verge of tears.

"He always does this. Every time we have plans, he has a crisis."

*Plans. The practice was dining at the country club tonight.*

I started to protest, but she interrupted, pushing her finger against my lips. "You know they're going to announce that you've made partner."

I smiled. *Partner.* A year early. Just reward for the practice's highest revenue producer nine months in a row. Another puzzle piece in my wonderful life about to connect.

"Which neighbor?"

"That Somali family," she said, flipping her hand in the air. "A woman. She has an accent. She said his place is a wreck. He's ill." She seemed to hesitate before adding. "He's asking for you."

It was my father's way. The crab fisherman wouldn't pick up the phone and let me know he needed me. He sent word around the block and expected me to show. "Define 'ill.'"

Joanne imitated the neighbor's accent. "Mister Gus isn't eating. He toilets in the bedroom."

I groaned. Whatever the neighbor meant, I knew it couldn't be good. I walked into the house to my study and picked up the phone. I was listening to the endless ringing on the other end when Joanne entered. "Not a good sign," I said. "He doesn't pick up."

"What are we going to do?"

I looked at my wife. Petite. Strong. And so able to read my thoughts.

She threw up her hands. "We're going to the shore," she said. "Just like that."

I nodded. I was predictable. Family first. We had to go.

She glared at me. I read the silence, loud and clear. *That's why I love you...and hate you.*

"I'll call Jim. The practice will understand."

Joanne shook her head. "This is your night, David. The moment you've been waiting for. And you throw it away because of family."

I couldn't say anything. She had me pegged.

"I'll see if Kristine will take Rachel for the weekend."

"Let's take her with us."

Joanne's face hardened. "With us? That place is so..." -- she paused, apparently mulling over adjective options -- "crusty."

It was the gentlest description of several other options that came to mind.

"We'll take care of the crisis and stay at that seaside bed and breakfast. It will be fun. A chance for her to see her grandfather." I let a hopeful smile tease at the corners of my lips. "Even if he is crusty, he does adore her."

Joanne sighed in resignation. "Yes, he does." She tipped her glass against mine. "As long as we don't have to sleep there," she said, shivering as if that thought was horrifying. She gave me a don't-even-try-to-cross-me look. "You're driving."

I walked out onto the porch and into the humidity we Virginians call summer. As I called for Rachel, I followed the border of the house, my prize lawn soft beneath my bare feet. From her perch on the back deck, my daughter ambushed me with open arms.

"Can we sled some more?"

I looked at the blue sky and my *Southern Living* home, and I pushed aside a fleeting presence. A ripple beneath the calm.

I'd been through too many hard times to trust the peace. *Nothing this great can last forever.*

"We're going to Grandpa Conners'," I said, trying my best to sound excited.

Rachel wrinkled her nose. To her, the shore meant stinky crabs and everything smelling fishy.

I poked her nose with a finger. "You're too much like your mother."

She poked me back. "You're too much like your father."

A sudden breeze lifted Rachel's hair against my face. I stopped, looking east. In the distance, a small thundercloud hung over the horizon. *Not today. I don't want to travel the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel in the rain.*

My daughter squeezed my neck, bringing a smile to my face and pushing my anxieties aside. I nestled my face into her hair, trying to find an earlobe. She giggled, and everything seemed right again.

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