

THE RED FOG

Nicole Tanner

www.nicoletanner.com

Copyright © 2009 by Nicole Tanner

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, or the facilitation thereof, including information storage and retrieval systems, without the permission in writing from the author, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review. Any members of educational institutions wishing to photocopy part or all of the work for classroom use, or publishers who would like to obtain permission to include the work in an anthology, should send their inquiries electronically to nicole@nicoletanner.com.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Published in the United States of America

ISBN 10: 1-4421-4111-5
EAN 13: 978-1-4421-4111-7

www.nicoletanner.com

The steering wheel felt like ice. The hard, gray leather stung my skin, but I held on anyway, appreciating the solid form in my fingers. I let the cold stiffen my hands and turn them, first red and then white. I stared at the ring on my right hand – a single black onyx with a tiny ruby on either side, shrouded in gold. My mother had presented it to me on my thirteenth birthday – kind of like an initiation into womanhood, although an initiation into the womanhood she had experienced would have been the last thing she had wanted for me.

That was just three months before she died. She wrapped the tiny package in shiny, red wrapping paper with a gold ribbon criss-crossing the box and ending in a big bow right on top. Excitement filled my whole being. I knew from the shape of the box it was going to be jewelry and I had never had a nice piece of jewelry in my life up until then. We just couldn't afford it. But this birthday was special. At least that's what she had told me.

“At thirteen, everything changes. The little girl eyes melt away and you start to see things differently,” she had said, staring out into the distance, her blue eyes looking empty as a tiny puddle after a fresh rain and her face showing visible signs of age despite her never-ending efforts to conceal it. She always stared away when she said things like that, almost like she was seeing one moment in her life when she could have done something to make everything different, to make everything all right, reliving in her mind the choices she had made, toying with fate. She was definitely remembering something. Even at thirteen I could tell

that, but I had no idea what it was and why it had such a tremendous impact on her. Often I would ask her what was wrong. She would simply turn and throw me a forced smile and tell me nothing while brushing my thick black curls off my shoulders and looking over my face like it was a work of art.

“I think you deserve a very special present this year,” she had said. So when I saw the package, I knew she had come through. She never really let me down ... until she left for good, that is. And even though I know it wasn't her fault, I couldn't help being mad at her for deserting me, for leaving me alone. She had been the one consistency in my life. I could always count on her eyes to give me approval or judgment for any of my actions, and her hands to comfort when nothing else could remove the pain. She was everything to me. There was nothing in world I loved or cherished more than her, and losing her was more devastating than you could ever imagine.

I ripped off the paper as quickly as I could and found a black velvet box inside. That first glimpse of the ring stunned me. I couldn't believe my father would have let her spend that much money on me.

“That ring has meaning,” she had said. She stood in the doorway of my bedroom with the light from the hallway encasing her figure in a yellow glow that made her blonde hair seem almost non-existent. She smiled, then sat down next to me on my bed and put her arm around my shoulder, while her long thin fingers played with my hair. “I like to think of red as the color of life. Our blood is red and it's our life force. That's why there are rubies on either side of that onyx – because despair is always surrounded by life and sometimes that's all that keeps us going.”

I didn't understand what she meant at that time, but it sounded pretty, like the poems we read in English class, the ones that gave me a weird chilled feeling when I heard them out loud. I kissed her on the cheek and put the ring on my finger and it had stayed there ever since.

That moment has been precious to me. It was the last really personal moment we would share, sitting together on my bed, the weight of her arm around my shoulder while the tiny ring enraptured me. I guess I had come to think of my ring as the only connection with her that still existed, a lifeless replacement for the woman who had given me life.

I could see the skin on my hands start to turn from white to blue from the cold, but the ring stayed the same – never changing, so unlike life.

I waited for my old silver '87 Plymouth Duster to warm up enough so that it would actually move when I pressed the gas. It was the end of November and bitter cold – the kind of dry cold that's even worse than the cold that comes with snow, the kind that bites at your face like an overzealous kitten when you walk outside. I think it may have even

been too cold to snow – too cold for any kind of precipitation. I really should have been staying in my way-too-small, but wonderfully warm apartment, and working on the history of renaissance art paper that was due on Monday, but I was hungry, and ramen noodles just weren't going to cut it.

My teeth chattered involuntarily and I finally let go of the steering wheel and rubbed my hands together to keep them from going numb, all the while watching the heat gauge on the dashboard. The little orange needle wasn't past the quarter mark yet and barely seemed to be rising. It would be at least a few more minutes before the car would be warm enough to make it two feet without stalling.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, shivering as I let it out. I pulled my black leather jacket tighter around myself and rocked back and forth.

“Come on, you stupid piece of crap,” I muttered aloud, my breath a mist that disappeared almost instantly, and the little needle did seem to rise a little faster – or maybe it was just my imagination overdoing it. I lost my patience and decided to give it a try. I moved the gearshift back into reverse. The car sputtered and shook, but it kept running. I was on my way.

The streets were unusually empty for a very early Sunday, even though it was 2 a.m. and the temperature was pushing zero. I mean, this was a college town, and for most people, Saturday night hadn't ended yet. At this time, I would often see big guys with baseball caps and baggy jeans that hung halfway off their asses, walking home some blonde chicks that had gotten too drunk at a frat party. Of course, those guys had things in mind other than just walking the inebriated beauties home. And those beauties were always slutty enough to let them do it. I guess I should initiate you immediately into my frame of mind and my opinions on certain things. Those kinds of people annoy the shit out of me. They always have. I was never a cheerleader, never a member of any organized group in particular. Those people despise differences and non-conformity and I have always been both, living on the outskirts, never quite fitting in with anyone or anybody except a very few people who were just as strange and complex as I was.

But none of these annoying people made an appearance that night, at least not that I saw. Maybe it was too cold even for the partiers. There weren't very many cars either, but that was fine with me. I hated to drive in the dark with the headlights of oncoming cars blinding me every two seconds. I had the streets to myself and I liked the emptiness and the darkness along with the loud murmur of my car's motor and the feel of the pedal under my foot. I felt peace like I rarely experienced it and I

savored every second.

The only light anywhere came from the weak street lamps, which cast a pale glow on the dry, gray pavement that looked as though it might crack from the cold. The glows came in neat little circles every 500 feet or so and they were comforting as I made my way down the street. My stomach gave a low rumble and a rush of nausea passed over me the way it always did when I had waited too long to eat. I had spent hours in front of my canvas, trying to paint with some sort of inspiration, to grasp that passion that was escaping me. I hadn't really painted much of anything, but instead stared at the textures in the white of the canvas as if they held the secret and were just keeping it from me.

Professor Donnelly had been right even though I had gotten defensive when she told me about it.

"You're holding back, Deana. You have to let it flow out of you," she said in response to my last project – a pitiful attempt at an unhappy couple. I tried to express the pain of what it feels like when you know you don't love someone anymore, but I failed miserably. I knew it, but having her know it as well was just about the most devastating development in my painting career to date. But I hadn't told her I was upset. She was my favorite teacher, and the truth is, I knew she was right. There was something missing from my paintings – something I needed to find before I could ever feel satisfied or liberated.

Very few cars dotted the grocery store parking lot. Good. The last thing I wanted after that peaceful drive was to plow through brightly-lit aisles, dodging tons of other people. I pulled into a spot right next to the wide automatic glass doors and turned off the car. It trembled before releasing a sigh and then going silent.

The cold shocked me once again as I got out of the car, and a brisk wind whipped around my face, blowing pieces of my hair in my eyes.

I folded my arms across my chest and practically ran up to the grocery store door. Unfortunately, the store, like all grocery stores, didn't feel that much warmer on the inside than it did outside, so I headed straight to the back and grabbed a large pre-made Italian sub, a big bag of potato chips, and a six-pack of Dr. Pepper before rushing back up to the front. I had to wait at the cash register for at least five minutes until a bubble-gum chewing teenager finally put down her Cosmo and noticed me standing there. She was quite obviously one of those people I couldn't stand, and irritation started to take its grip on me as I realized that my nearly perfect trip to the store was now doomed to be ruined by having to deal with a dimwit.

"Sorry 'bout that," she said in a voice that didn't sound natural while her big hoop earrings swung back and forth as she bobbed her head. I

smiled. In any other circumstance, I would have said something sarcastic, but I was hungry and cold and just wanted to go home. I shoved the money at her and stood, tapping my foot as she took her sweet old time putting my purchase into a plastic bag, blowing big pink bubbles out of her mouth the entire time.

I rushed out of the store, hoping to be able to get the car started again before it had a chance to cool down too much. Success. The little needle had barely dropped. I started it up and headed back home.

The traffic lights were against me, as they always are whenever you really want to get somewhere. I probably could have run right through them all. There were no other cars around and no one to see, but I stopped when they were red anyhow.

About three blocks away from my street I noticed someone walking on the sidewalk, coming up toward the corner. Probably a drunken frat boy trying to find where on the street he had parked his car after a party. I looked down at my ring for a moment, not thinking anything of it, and then back up at the light, the boy gradually appearing in the corner of my vision.

That's when I realized it was him.

I felt sick. It felt not only like I was going to throw up, but that my breath had gotten lodged somewhere between my mouth and my lungs. I would have recognized him anywhere, with his dirty blonde hair and short, scruffy beard that looked like the result of hygienic laziness. Obviously drunk, it appeared he had dropped something. He squatted down and patted his hands along the sidewalk, swearing to himself the entire time. At last I saw him pick up a small shiny object and then start to head out into the crosswalk in front of me.

At first he paid no attention to me, but then he stopped in front of my car and squinted his pale blue eyes. I don't know what emotions rushed through my body, whether I was scared or angry, but they paralyzed me. I forced myself to swallow, trying to get the oxygen down to my lungs where it belonged. I tried to make myself look down at my ring, my treasured ring, my object of focus in times of crisis, but I couldn't. I couldn't take my eyes off him, in his gray T-shirt with a small hole near the bottom and mud-caked jeans.

Inevitably, he recognized me, the thing I had been dreading. His thick pale lips spread into a menacing grin, revealing those all-too-perfect teeth. He laughed a little bit as he just stood there and raised the shiny thing he had dropped on the sidewalk a minute ago up into the air. I knew what it was before it even entered my view. A switchblade – the same one I had seen all too close – the one with the black leather handle and little silver studs. At that moment, like a snapshot thrown in my face,

I remembered what my green eyes looked like reflected in that blade and what he had looked like hovering over me, grimacing in pleasure, smelling of alcohol, feeling like hell to me.

He twirled the blade around, tossing it over and through his fingers, still smiling and leaning to the side, putting his weight on one foot. My lungs still refused to work properly, and I opened my mouth in an attempt to successfully breathe. He looked right at my eyes and ran his tongue over his lips. His smile grew wider. Then my vision started to cloud, started to take on a reddish tint, like the light of a lamp with a red scarf draped over it. I suppose it could have been from the blood rushing to my head because of my difficulty breathing, but I've come to believe now it was much more than just that.

And then it happened.

I slammed my foot down on the gas and plowed into him.

His body flew forward a ways, I'm not really sure how far. It's amazing how limp and weak the human body can seem when hundreds of pounds of metal hit it. He looked as if his bones had suddenly disappeared, leaving his appendages to flail in every direction imaginable. His upper body lurched forward for a second and I saw his eyes closer, not more than a foot from my windshield, full of shock in their radiant blue, then the inertia grabbed him and flung him onto the pavement.

I stopped the car immediately after hitting him and stared at his body, lying in the street ahead of me on his back, his face toward the stars. At that point, I probably could have told anyone that he had threatened to do to me what he'd done before, that it was in self-defense, and no one probably would have questioned me. But that night, something changed in me forever. I looked at his body through the red haze, saw that his chest still moving and the rage took over.

I drove my foot down on the pedal again and ran right over him. I stopped once I felt the back of the car lower after the rear tires had gone over the hump of his body. I sat for a minute as my conscious self began to fight through the fog and comprehend what I just did. I still felt like I couldn't breathe and my heart was thudding against my breastbone. I shot a quick glance into my rearview mirror, but I couldn't see anything over the back of the car. I didn't really want to do it, but I knew I had to. I got out of the car and walked back to face him – or what was left of him.

In any other circumstance, seeing a mangled body on the street would have sickened me to the point where vomiting would have been inevitable, but a weird numbness consumed my entire body, except for the horrified beating in my chest. I didn't seem to feel any physical

sensation at all, not even the cold wind as it whipped through my jacket and tossed my hair into the air. I looked down at him and knew without a doubt that he was dead. One of my tires had gone right over his skull.

I just kept staring. Not so much at the torn-up body, but at the pool of blood that slowly grew larger, spreading itself out in all directions from the splintered, pulpy bone that had once been the crown of his head, but was now mashed together with his brain. The blood crept out, covering only centimeters of pavement in its thick crimson clutches every few seconds. The dim light of the street lamp hit it and gave it an iridescent quality. It's funny how you can sometimes find beauty in the most hideous places, and this blood was beautiful, unlike any color I had seen before, rich and vibrant, yet dark and weighted all at the same time. I continued to stare at the blood, as it also flowed gently out of his opened lips and down over the bridge of his nose beneath the one eye that was still intact and wide open, staring back at me.

Then I felt something, a shiver, a sense, like someone was watching me and it wasn't my victim lying crushed in the street. The thudding in my chest grew worse. I was scared to look up, scared I had been caught and that my life as I had known it would be coming to an end. I slowly raised my head, so that my bangs would cover my eyes, but what I saw probably scared me more than the fact that I had just killed someone.

I saw my mother. She stood very calmly on the sidewalk across the street in front of a two-story, aluminum-sided, white house with all the windows boarded up. She wore a big, brown, cable-knit sweater and a long flowing denim skirt with little pink and white tulips embroidered along the bottom. She looked at me with her arms hanging relaxed and her hands clasped in front her. Her blue eyes shimmered like they always did in life, or maybe even a little more, and her long kinky blonde hair blew all around her face in the wind. Her pale skin looked flawless and seemed to almost glow in the darkness of the night.

"Mom," I said. She didn't say anything – she just looked at me and then down at the body and then back at me again. The first pangs of guilt began assault my mind. That the one person who had seen what I had done was my mother horrified me, but her face remained expressionless. She didn't seem to be angry or sad or anything. She just looked at me. And then she was gone. I must have blinked my eyes when it happened because she didn't fade into nothingness. She just disappeared. I looked all around me, but I stood there alone, well, except for my victim. I looked back down and noticed his blood approaching my worn shoes, so I hopped up onto the sidewalk to avoid it.

Torn and confused at that moment, even though my lungs had started to function, three parts of myself argued furiously within my brain. I

didn't know quite what to do. Part of me, a very familiar somewhat frightened part, the part that spawned my pounding heart, wanted to call an ambulance, but what good would that do? He was clearly dead. Another part of me, I guess my conscience, wanted to drive to the police station and confess the whole thing. After all, it was the right thing to do, and besides, the punishment probably wouldn't be half as bad as I could imagine. I could probably even plead temporary insanity. I pictured a female judge in glasses looking at me with sympathetic eyes as I told her something just came over me and I did it. I didn't mean to. Really I didn't. But then I heard the word "guilty" over and over in my head because that's what I was – guilty.

And then what seemed like the most rational thought occurred to me. No one had seen what I had done. I could just drive away, go home and eat my sandwich and potato chips like nothing had ever happened. And without anymore thought at all, that's what I decided to do.

I started to walk back up to the car, but I noticed his switchblade lying on the sidewalk, glistening in the light of the street lamp. It must have been flung from his hand when I hit him the first time. I bent down and picked it up, holding it in both hands and studying its every detail. I noticed it had his name engraved in the silver on the bottom of the handle and one of the silver studs was missing out of the black leather. I folded the blade back down within itself and put it in my jacket pocket.

I walked around to the driver's side of the car and took one last look at him, lying broken and dead in the street – a victim of one of his victims. And then I drove home.