



NCIS

NOVEL
THREE



BLOOD



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God,

I ask for you to watch over me as I go through my life with my children and my wife. There are times that they don't understand me, and there are even times I don't understand myself. But you have kept my love for them strong even in times of crisis and loss. I know that is one of the best blessings you've ever given me.

I would be a less compassionate husband, a less understanding father, and a much weaker man without knowing you. Thank you for everything you've done in my life. Please continue to bless my family, especially the two new babies added to the mix in June 2008. I only hope that you guide my children to love their children as much as I've learned to love the ones you gave me.

And thank you for being a father to me, for counseling and caring for me during times I didn't want to listen and thought I was smarter than you were. That's just the relationship fathers and sons have.

Mel



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Without Jan Stob and Karen Watson, the acquisitions team at Tyndale, and Jeremy Taylor, who edited me into a much cleaner form, though I had to coach him on a few Southernisms, this book—one of the most important I’ve written to date—wouldn’t be in your hands. People, thank you very much.



>> GYMNASIUM
>> CAMP LEJEUNE, NORTH CAROLINA
>> 1203 HOURS

“Did you come here to play basketball or wage war?”

Shelton McHenry, gunnery sergeant in the United States Marine Corps, shook the sweat out of his eyes and ignored the question. After long minutes of hard exertion, his breath echoed inside his head and chest. His throat burned. Despite the air-conditioning, the gym felt hot. He put his hands on his head and sucked in a deep breath of air. It didn't help. He still felt mean.

There was no other word for it. He wanted the workout provided by the game, but he wanted it for the physical confrontation rather than the exercise. He had hoped it would burn through the restless anger that rattled within him.

Normally when he got like this, he tried to stay away from other people. He would gather up Max, the black Labrador retriever that was his military canine partner, and go for a run along a secluded beach until he exhausted the emotion. Sometimes it took hours.

That anger had been part of him since he was a kid. He had never truly understood it, but he'd learned to master it—for the most part—a long time ago. But now and again, there were bad days when it got away from him. Usually those bad days were holidays.

Today was Father's Day. It was the worst of all of them. Even Christmas, a time when families got together, wasn't as bad as Father's Day. During the heady rush of Christmas—muted by the sheer effort and logistics of getting from one place to another after another, of making sure presents for his brother's kids were intact and wrapped and not forgotten, of preparing and consuming the endless supply of food—he could concentrate on something other than his father.

But not today. Never on Father's Day.

The anger was bad enough, but the thing that totally wrecked him and kicked his butt was the guilt. Even though he didn't know what to do, there was no escaping the fact that he should be doing something. He was supposed to be back home.

Usually he was stationed somewhere and could escape the guilt by making a quick phone call, offering up an apology, and losing himself back in the field. But after taking the MOS change to Naval Criminal Investigative Service, he was free on weekends unless the team was working a hot case.

At present, there were no hot cases on the horizon. There wasn't even follow-up to anything else they'd been working on. He'd had no excuse for not going. Don, his brother, had called a few days ago to find out if Shel was coming. Shel had told him no but had offered no reason. Don had been kind enough not to ask why. So Shel was stuck with the anger, guilt, and frustration.

"You hearing me, gunney?"

Shel restrained the anger a step before it got loose. Over on the sidelines of the gym, Max gave a tentative bark. The Labrador paced uneasily, and Shel knew the dog sensed his mood.

Dial it down, he told himself. *Just finish up here. Be glad you're able to work through it.*

He just wished it helped more.

"Yeah," Shel said. "I hear you."

"Good. 'Cause for a second there I thought you'd checked out on me." Remy Gautreau mopped his face with his shirt.

He was young and black, hard-bodied but lean, where Shel looked like he'd been put together with four-by-fours. Gang tattoos in blue ink showed on Remy's chest and abdomen when he'd lifted his shirt. Shel had noticed the tattoos before, but he hadn't asked about them. Even after working together for more than a year, it wasn't something soldiers talked about.

Before he'd entered the Navy and trained as a Navy SEAL, Remy Gautreau had been someone else. Most enlisted had. Then whatever

branch of military service they signed on for changed them into someone else. The past was shed as easily as a snake lost its skin. Men and women were given a different present for that time and usually ended up with a different future than they would have had.

But they don't take away the past, do they? Shel asked himself. *They just pretend it never happened.*

"Where you been?" Remy asked.

"Right here." Shel broke eye contact with the other man. He could lie out in the field when it was necessary, but he had trouble lying to friends. "Playing center."

Remy was part of the NCIS team that Shel was currently assigned to. His rank was chief petty officer. He wore bright orange knee-length basketball shorts and a white Tar Heels basketball jersey. Shel wore Marine-issue black shorts and a gray sweatshirt with the sleeves hacked off. Both men bore bullet and knife scars from previous battles.

The other huddle of players stood at their end of the basketball court. Other groups of men were waiting their turn.

Shel and Remy were playing iron man pickup basketball. The winning team got to stay on the court, but they had to keep winning. While they were getting more tired, each successive team rested up. Evading fatigue, learning to play four hard and let the fifth man rest on his feet, was a big part of staying on top. It was a lot like playing chess.

"You've been here," Remy agreed in a soft voice. "But this ain't where your head's been. You just been visiting this game."

"Guy's good, Remy. I'm doing my best."

The other team's center was Del Greene, a giant at six feet eight inches tall—four inches taller than Shel. But he was more slender than Shel, turned better in the tight corners, and could get up higher on the boards. Rebounding the ball after each shot was an immense struggle, but once in position Shel was hard to move. He'd come down with his fair share of rebounds.

Basketball wasn't Shel's game. He'd played it all through high school, but football was his chosen gladiator's field in the world of sports. He had played linebacker and had been offered a full-ride scholarship to a dozen different colleges. He had opted for the Marines instead. Anything to shake the dust of his father's cattle ranch from his boots. None of the colleges had been far enough away for what he had wanted at the time. After all those years of misunderstandings on the ranch, Shel had just wanted to be gone.

"You're doing great against that guy," Remy said. "Better than I thought you would. He's a better basketball player, but you're a better

thinker. You're shutting him down. Which is part of the problem. You're taking his game away from him and it's making him mad. Problem is, you got no finesse. He's wearing you like a cheap shirt. If we had a referee for this game, you'd already have been tossed for personal fouls."

"Yeah, well, he doesn't play like a homecoming queen himself." Shel wiped his mouth on his shirt. The material came away bloody. He had caught an elbow in the face last time that had split the inside of his cheek. "He's not afraid of dishing it out."

"Don't get me wrong. I didn't say that fool didn't have it coming, but I am saying that this isn't the time or the place for a grudge match." Remy wiped his face with his shirt again. "The last thing we need is for Will to have to come down and get us out of the hoosegow over a basketball game. He's already stressed over Father's Day because he's having to share his time with his kids' new stepfather."

Shel knew United States Navy Commander Will Coburn to be a fine man and officer. He had followed Will into several firefights during their years together on the NCIS team.

The marriage of Will's ex-wife was only months old. Everyone on the team knew that Will had taken the marriage in stride as best as he could, but the change was still a lot to deal with. Having his kids involved only made things worse. Before, Father's Day and Mother's Day had been mutually exclusive. This year the kids' mother had insisted that the day be shared between households.

One of the other players stepped forward. "Are we going to play ball? Or are you two just going to stand over there and hold hands?"

Shel felt that old smile—the one that didn't belong and didn't reflect anything that was going on inside him—curve his lips. That smile had gotten him into a lot of trouble with his daddy and had been a definite warning to his brother, Don.

The other team didn't have a clue.

"The way you guys are playing," Shel said as he stepped toward the other team, "I think we've got time to do both."

Behind him, Shel heard Remy curse.



>> 1229 HOURS

At the offensive goal, Shel worked hard to break free of the other player's defense. But every move he made, every step he took, Greene was on top of him. Shel knew basketball, but the other guy knew it better.

A small Hispanic guy named Melendez played point guard for Shel and Remy's team. He flipped the ball around the perimeter with quick, short passes back and forth to the wings. Unable to get a shot off, Remy and the other wing kept passing the ball back.

Shel knew they wanted to get the ball inside to him if they could. They needed the basket to tie up the game. They were too tired to go back down the court and end up two buckets behind.

Melendez snuck a quick pass by the guard and got the ball to Shel. With a fast spin, Shel turned and tried to put the ball up. But as soon as it left his fingers, Greene slapped the shot away. Thankfully Melendez managed to recover the loose ball.

"Don't you try to bring that trash in here," Greene taunted. "This is my house. Nobody comes into *my* house." Sweat dappled his dark features and his mocking smile showed white and clean. "You may be big, gunney, but you ain't big enough. You hear what I'm saying?"

Shel tried to ignore the mocking voice and the fact that Greene was now bumping up against him even harder than before. The man wasn't just taunting anymore. He was going for an all-out assault.

Melendez caught a screen from Remy and rolled out with the basketball before the other defensive player could pick him up. One of the key elements to their whole game was the fact that most of them had played ball before. Greene was a good player—maybe even a great player—but one man didn't make a team. Special forces training taught a man that.

Free and open, Melendez put up a twenty-foot jump shot. Shel rolled around Greene to get the inside position for the rebound. Greene had gone up in an effort to deflect the basketball. He was out of position when he came back down.

Shel timed his jump as the basketball ran around the ring and fell off. He went up and intercepted the ball cleanly. He was trying to bring the ball in close when Greene stepped around him and punched the basketball with a closed fist.

The blow knocked the ball back into Shel's face. It slammed against his nose and teeth hard enough to snap his head back. He tasted blood immediately and his eyes watered. The sudden onslaught of pain chipped away at the control that Shel had maintained. He turned instantly, and Greene stood ready and waiting. Two of the guys on his team fell in behind him.

"You don't want none of this," Greene crowed. "I promise you don't want none of this." He had his hands raised in front of him and stood in what Shel recognized as a martial arts stance.

Shel wasn't big on martial arts. Most of his hand-to-hand combat

ability had been picked up in the field and from men he had sparred with to increase his knowledge.

“You’re a big man,” Greene snarled, “but I’m badder.”

Despite the tension that had suddenly filled the gymnasium and the odds against him, Shel grinned. This was more along the lines of what he needed. He took a step forward.

Remy darted between them and put his hands up. “That’s it. Game’s over. We’re done here.”

“Then who wins the game?” another man asked.

“We win the game,” one of the men on Shel’s team said.

“Your big man fouled intentionally,” Melendez said. “That’s a forfeit in my book.”

“Good thing you ain’t keepin’ the book,” Greene said. He never broke eye contact with Shel. “Is that how you gonna call it, dawg? Gonna curl up like a little girl and cry? Or are you gonna man up and play ball?”

Remy turned to face the heckler. “Back off, clown. You don’t even know the trouble you’re trying to buy into.”

Greene was faster than Shel expected even after playing against the man. Before Remy could raise his hands to defend himself, Greene hit him in the face.

Driven by the blow, Remy staggered backward.