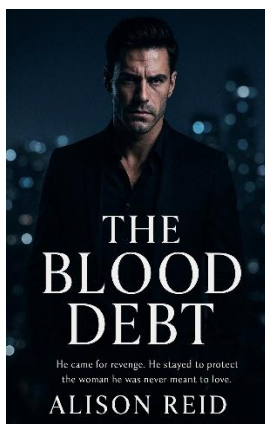


The Blood Debt

by Alison Reid



As the office door clicked shut behind Gary Harris, Alec turned to the floor-to-ceiling windows, gazing out over the city of Sydney. The harbour shimmered in the morning light, ferries cutting through the water, skyscrapers rising like glass sentinels. His reflection stared back at him—tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired, eyes the colour of deep espresso, almost black, honed to a calculating edge. Handsome, undeniably—but he had never met a woman who had held his attention for longer than a few days. He didn't think he was built for permanence.

He studied himself in the glass, the lines at his jaw and mouth telling stories he would never share, eyes cold, alert. He looked like a man who could command a room—or silence it.

His reflection lingered, then his mind drifted—inevitable, like tide pulling at the shore—to his younger brother, Ryan. Shorter, lighter-haired, with hazel eyes and a laugh that arrived before his smile. They had been close in a way that made ordinary sibling rivalries feel trivial—an easy, dangerous loyalty that had shaped both of them.

Now Ryan was gone. For almost two years he had been missing from Alec's life.

He hadn't seen him in the year before his death. Alec had been on assignment—another dangerous mission, another place where daylight meant exposure and silence was the only currency that mattered. He had returned to a life that had kept moving without him: paperwork closed, condolences filed, the public story tidy and final. He had been told in a phone call that Ryan was dead. He had missed the funeral.

Two years. Two years that had blurred together—dust, desert heat, the relentless thrum of danger—years that had carved him into someone who moved through the world with low, constant readiness. Returning home had been like stepping into a photograph whose edges had been burned away. The official line called it a simple car accident. The file was neat, the signatures in place, the conclusions stamped and archived. But neat files could be lies wrapped in paper. Alec knew that as surely as he knew the weight of a rifle in his hands.

Ryan's face haunted him more than any fire. Not just the image of him lying still, but the small things that broke him—an unfinished joke, a half-sent text, the way his voice used to carry when he called. Every time Alec closed his eyes, a hollow, lifeless stare played behind his lids like a loop he couldn't stop.

And now, when a name he had seen only in glossy society pages flicked across his desk—Catherine Grant—something colder than grief tightened in his chest. Fury flared behind his composure. The magazine photos showed a beautiful woman composed to perfection: poised smiles, charity galas, embroidered gowns, always on her father's arm. Alec had imagined a daughter shaped by a ruthless man—polished, controlled, distant. He resented the image before he had ever met her.

He exhaled slowly, measured, tension coiling beneath his ribs. Catherine Grant was a ghost he had never expected to touch—let alone protect. And yet

here she was, threaded through his life once again because a man had walked into his office begging Alec to keep her safe.

It set his teeth on edge.

Protection wasn't his goal. Truth was. And revenge still smouldered like an ember beneath the surface of his skin.

Alec had never believed Ryan's death was merely a tragic accident. Neat. Clean. Unquestioned. Uncontested. Nothing about it had ever felt right.

Derek's best friend—a detective, Ryan's best friend since school and the only man Alec trusted with the darker corners of the truth—had shared whispered confidences: injuries that didn't match an ordinary crash, a witness who had vanished as if swallowed by the earth, paperwork looping in subtle, deliberate circles back to the same name.

Catherine's.

And then the details lodged like splinters beneath his skin. She had identified the body—because Alec had been unreachable, their parents long gone. She had paid for the funeral—every cent—quietly, without recognition, without telling anyone. And at the graveside, Derek had said, she and he were the only ones there. No press. No family. No spectacle. Just Catherine, pale and silent, standing over Ryan's coffin.

“She looked guilty,” Derek had said.

Alec had clung to that. He had needed to.

So, he waited. Patient. Restrained. A hunter biding time. He would pry the truth loose when the opportunity came. He would get close, close enough to see what she was hiding, close enough to expose what had been buried.

And now her name sat on his desk like a lit fuse.

If getting close was the way in, he would go—no matter what it revealed.

If Catherine Grant thought she was untouchable, Alec thought, she had never met a man who carried his kind of grief, his kind of fury, his kind of resolve.

He let that thought settle in his chest as he stared at the glimmering sprawl of Sydney—cold, ordered, glittering. And for the first time since his brother's death, he felt an aim that belonged entirely to him.

A mission born of blood. And debt.

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