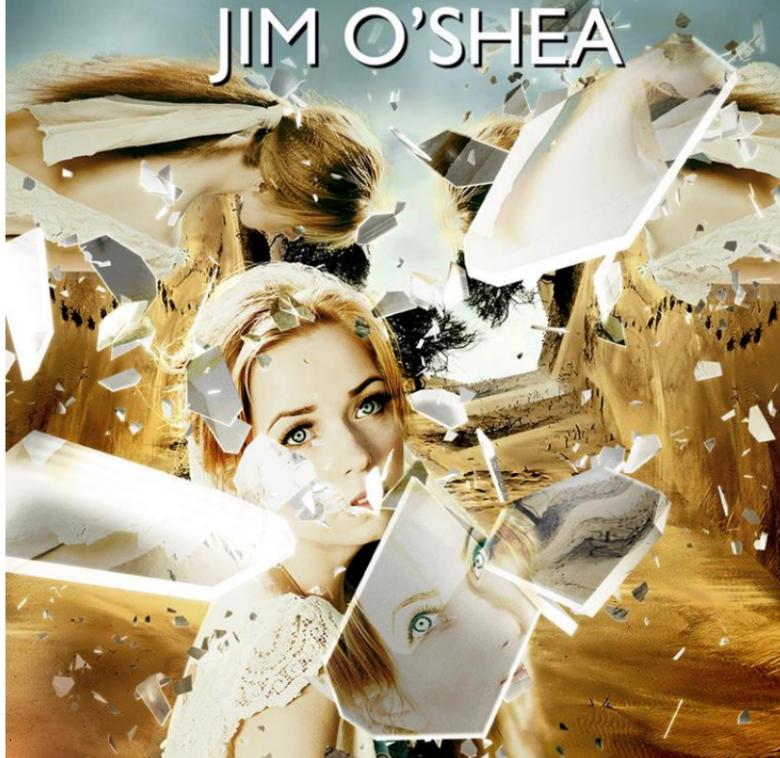


EITHER SHE'S CRAZY OR HER DEAD TWIN  
IS TRYING TO KILL HER.

# BLOOD SISTERS

JIM O'SHEA



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**Blood Sisters**  
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## *Dedication*

To my wife, family, and friends for all of their  
dedication and support.





*"I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,  
in secret, between the shadow and the soul."*

*Pablo Neruda*

# 1

The man hung limp, cuffed hands dangling from an eyebolt screwed into the floor joist overhead. His skin looked cold and waxy, and the dirt below his swollen feet was stained dark from the crimson stream dripping from his toes. A kitchen knife marked the source of the flow, its handle protruding from the man's chest.

His chin lifted barely off his chest and he appeared to be trying to speak when his eyes closed for what would be the last time. At that precise moment, a door slammed in the floor above, signaling his wife's return home from work.

There remained work to do.

## 2

*About two months later...*

'THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH!'

The bizarre image flooded Libby's field of vision, and she pressed her nose against the side window of her father's SUV. The large letters, scrawled in blood-red paint on an old dairy barn, must be new. She passed the spot every morning during her commute into Salt Lake City and would have noticed.

Right as they passed the barn, a ring sounded from the vehicle's speakers, and soothing gospel music faded into the monotone road noise outside the SUV.

Her father glanced at the dashboard display. "It's a newer member of the congregation," he said. "Mind if I pick up?"

Libby squeezed his shoulder. "Gotta feed the flock, Dad."

"Nicholas Meeker," he said, after clicking the phone button on the steering wheel.

"Pastor Meeker? It's Jack Thompson from The Crossing. I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"Not at all, Jack. Marilyn and I are on our way home from dinner in the city with our daughter. It's her thirtieth birthday today."

"Oh, sure!" Thompson's tone lightened. "The pretty, red-haired woman in your family photo posted

in the vestibule at church. It's quite a coincidence, Pastor Meeker, but I believe I saw your daughter earlier today at a sidewalk café in downtown Salt Lake."

Libby grabbed the side of the passenger seat and pulled herself forward.

"Dad has you on speaker, Mr. Thompson, but it wasn't me you saw in Salt Lake. I was in Boise on a business trip all day."

"Amazing," Thompson said. "It could have been your twin sister."

Libby froze, instantly transported back to Naples, Italy. She was standing on the dock watching the U.S.S. Girardeau sail south to join the Atlantic fleet with her twin sister Melissa aboard, while savoring memories of the brief shore leave they'd been able to share.

Then it happened.

A sharp flash of light from the side of the Girardeau was followed seconds later by the concussive blow of an explosion that knocked Libby to the ground. Her imagination took over from there, generating visions of dismembered limbs floating in dark red sea water. Although her memories remained remarkably vivid for a long time after the tragedy, they had faded somewhat in recent months—until an innocent remark from a stranger opened the eyes of a dead woman. Somewhere tires churned up gravel and the disturbing scene evaporated. Libby's body lurched forward slightly, and the seat belt tugged on her shoulder as her father pulled the SUV onto the road's shoulder.

A nervous voice broke the silence.

"Did I lose you, Pastor Meeker?"

"No..." Her father's voice cracked noticeably. "If

it's not an emergency, Jack, may I call you back in the morning?"

As her father ended the call, Libby stared at her reflection in the SUV's window and realized she wasn't alone in the back seat. For the briefest of moments, a petite young woman with long red hair, green eyes, and pale skin sat next to her. A woman who used to be as close to Libby as her next breath.

Her mother squeezed between the bucket seats and put her hand on Libby's knee. Her lips moved, but no sound emerged.

Libby lightly touched her arm and nodded in response to the look of concern. She'd never been able to tell her parents why Melissa's death still impacted her as much as it did. It wasn't the horrific memories, or the fact that the passage of time had failed to heal her wounds. It was something else altogether; something she couldn't explain—something or *someone* that refused to let her go.

Libby stared out the window the rest of the way home. Everything was a dull gray blur until her front door opened. The living room light turned on by itself, and a cacophony of voices inside screamed "Surprise". A sea of smiling faces crowded her small living room, all singing *Happy Birthday* in various keys. She let out a deep breath and tried to muster a smile but failed. *Great.*

Aisha Barry slid between two of Libby's co-workers, and rushed up wearing an ear-to-ear grin. Her best friend wrapped both arms around her, and the frown shadowing Libby's face gave way to her first genuine smile of the day.

Libby spent a little one-on-one time with nearly everyone at the party, including her doting manager,

Ryan Florich, before slipping unnoticed out the front door. She stood on her covered porch with a glass of red wine and looked in on the festivities.

Her father worked the room as any self-respecting pastor would, accompanied by his loyal companion, Norm—Libby's miniature schnauzer. Sixty-eight, and looking every day of it, Nicholas Meeker's face was still handsome despite deep creases across his forehead and chin.

Her mother, Marilyn, on the other hand, had seen far better days. The silken black hair of her youth was now a lumpy gray, smiles never seemed to reach her eyes, and empty words sounded rehearsed more often than not.

Libby offset a deep breath of frigid air with a gulp of wine, slipped inside her front door, and made a beeline toward Aisha. She was surrounded by men, as usual. And why not? Her figure had the curves of a violin, skin the color of rich mocha, and large piercing eyes as dark as any black diamond.

"Here she is, the birthday girl herself," Aisha said. "How about we sing you an encore, Libby? Louder this time."

"Thanks, but no thanks." Libby felt her face flush and allowed her gaze to settle on the space between her feet. "I think once will do."

"Excuse us, boys," Aisha said. "Girl time." She grabbed Libby by the elbow and led her upstairs to the spare bedroom. After pushing the door halfway open, Aisha pulled Libby inside and clicked on the overhead light. Norm padded in before she could close the door. "What's wrong?"

Libby picked up the old dog and held him like a baby with his front paws slung over her shoulders. He

never seemed to mind. "I'm fine," she said, but then her eyes teared up and before she knew it, she'd recounted the sad, silly story. "The man was new at Dad's church. He didn't know any better." She buried her nose in Norm's soft fur.

"I also heard your mom dumped on you during dinner again," Aisha said. "My dad said your dad came *this* close to swearing." Aisha held her thumb and index finger less than an inch apart. "Hell may not have frozen over, but it definitely got a few degrees colder down there."

"She doesn't know any better either, Azzi. I just wish I could have a relationship with her that isn't..."

Aisha began to say something but stopped—something she rarely did. When she did speak, her words were soft and deliberate. "Maybe if you spent a little more one-on-one time with her it would help, honey? Do something *she* likes to do."

"You're saying I should take up painting?"

"Definitely not. But maybe you could steer her toward something a little less depressing than that nonsense she keeps doing over and over."

Libby waved the idea away, while at the same time visualizing the series of macabre images her mother began painting several months ago—all featuring a mysterious figure in black standing in the yard outside her parents' bedroom window. Each one nearly identical. Each one totally disturbing.

"Or get her into something new, like this." Aisha walked to a small glass-topped nightstand between twin beds and flipped on a gooseneck lamp, shedding light on a jigsaw puzzle. All four sides of the small rectangle were assembled, but the entire middle was empty except for a single piece sitting alone.

Libby froze.

“Didn’t know you were into jigsaw puzzles,” Aisha said, “but it might be a great way to get your mom off those ghastly paintings and spend some quality time together. Could you see yourself working on this with Marilyn?”

Libby slumped down on the far edge of one of the beds and stared at the puzzle, pausing long enough to swallow the lump in her throat. “Aisha,” she whispered, “I’ve never seen this before.”

### 3

A black cat found prowling the crime scene was in the custody of a policewoman, its piercing green eyes carefully observing several officers scouring the small Farmington, Utah apartment.

Detective Troy D. Hunter of the Salt Lake City Police Department slipped a latex glove over his left hand, knelt over the body, and pulled back a white plastic sheet covering the woman's face. Strands of unkempt hair partially covered dead eyes, and hands stained red with blood lay clutched on her chest.

A blue-clad Farmington police officer shoved a foam cup in his face. "Gruesome, huh?"

Hunter sucked down most of the lukewarm coffee in one gulp, as if it somehow had the power to wake him from his latest nightmare. He popped two chalky tablets into his mouth, swallowed them along with the last of the coffee, and refocused on a young female corpse with red hair and a pretty face. Gray yoga outfit. Black tennis shoes.

Diane Schrupp, according to the responding officer.

He took multiple photos, including what appeared to be a single stab wound to the chest, before surveying the murder scene itself. He absorbed everything, refusing to ignore seemingly meaningless details, no

matter how much of his life they'd consume over the coming days and weeks. The devil would be firmly rooted in those details, as they were with all murders.

The victim's apartment showed no signs of forced entry, but indications of a life and death struggle were everywhere. The entry foyer was littered with smashed picture frames and shattered knick-knacks, the only notable exception a delicate china coffee cup tucked safely inside a small alcove in the wall. Like a single house left standing in a subdivision devastated by a tornado, it had witnessed yet somehow survived the violent encounter.

The walls were accented with stains that made the maroon paint a shade darker, and post-mortem evidence from pooled blood combined with an abnormal amount of fluid beneath the victim's skin pointed toward her having been dead over twenty-four hours.

Hunter turned toward the officer who had brought him coffee.

The young man appeared to be studying his shoes, shifting nervously from one leg to another. His name badge read GRAVATTE.

"Officer Gravatte." Hunter's tone was sharp.

"Yes, sir."

"Where's the Medical Examiner?"

"I'm not sure, sir. I—"

"Has the scene been dusted yet?"

The young man shook his head. Then his mouth opened into a feeble grin. "We were waiting for you, sir."

Hunter sighed. "Get the forensics team in here now and, if they haven't already, alert Dr. Jonas."

"Yes, sir."

"I also need you to corral as many officers as you can to start knocking on doors in the building."

"It's one o'clock in the morning, Detective."

Hunter exhaled. "I know what time it is, but this must be done now. We need to know if anyone saw or heard *anything*."

The young officer hurried off without saying a word. The work needed to be done, and finding witnesses sooner was far better than later. In a perfect world, they would wait until everyone was up and had downed at least one cup of coffee, but this was far from a perfect world.

An hour later, uniformed officers were combing the apartment building while Hunter stood outside under the remnants of rumbling storm clouds. While he leaned against a black and white sedan with FARMINGTON POLICE plastered on the doors in large block letters, massaging his temples, he could sense dozens of eyes on him from the surrounding buildings. He doubted the quiet Salt Lake City suburb had ever experienced a crime like this.

He looked up to the third story window and his mind's eye returned to Diane Schrupp's apartment. The crime scene had spoken to him in many voices, although none in a language his brain could comprehend—at least not yet. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something was different about this one, and whatever it was seemed to touch his very soul.

## 4

Stockton, Utah was the type of town Libby envisioned when she conjured up idyllic images of small town America. A handful of streets lined with trees and a wide assortment of homes, some wrapped with covered porches, and most accented by meticulously manicured lawns. Main Street ran through the middle of it all and included a barbershop with a candy cane pole that no longer rotated, an old gas station with a working garage, and a former one-room schoolhouse that was now Delmonte's General Store.

The Oquirrh Mountain range provided the backdrop to the east, with the west side of town dominated by the tall spiral peak of The Crossing Evangelical Church of Stockton. Nicholas Meeker—Pastor.

The morning after her thirtieth birthday party, Libby sat staring out the window of her father's office as the shadow of The Crossing's steeple began its daily creep across their backyard. A log cracked and hissed in the hearth, while a ghost-like snow devil from the season's first dusting raced across the dead grass before dissolving.

Nicholas Meeker looked up from his desk when thunder rumbled overhead.

"Mom always said thunder was the sound of angels bowling," Libby said softly, as her mind drifted back to the fairy tales her mother used to tell her and Melissa when they were little girls. Rarely the bowling angel or beautiful princess variety, most of Marilyn Meeker's stories were ancient Choctaw legends passed down through generations—featuring mischievous trolls, frightening curses, and vengeful spirits.

Her father pushed back from the antique mahogany desk and returned his favorite pipe to the clay holder Libby and Melissa had made him when they were no more than six or seven years old, bringing an unexpected smile to her face. Although he hadn't smoked in years, he'd never lost the satisfaction of having the intricately carved alabaster clenched between his teeth.

"Your mother claims she saw your sister again, honey." He leaned back in his chair and steeped fingers as if in prayer. "Insists she was wide awake."

Libby bit her lower lip. "Where, this time?"

"In the kitchen."

He laid his hand on the familiar, leather-bound Bible on his desk, as if it held answers to his wife's latest mental challenge.

Libby reached out and took his other hand. "Mom's bi-polar, clinically depressed, has early stages of dementia, and never got past Melissa's death, Dad. Do the math."

Her father's face twisted into a familiar half-grin, one that had nothing to do with humor.

"You devoted your life to her," Libby said. "You'd never admit it, but I know your decision to move to The Crossing was only because it's a much smaller church. You couldn't handle the larger congregation in

Tooele City and Mom at the same time.”

Her father began to speak, but instead turned his attention back to the thick book. He ran a wrinkled finger along the cracked leather while his lips moved silently. Then he spoke. “I’m not sure how long I can keep this up. I can’t perform my pastoral duties with your mom in the condition she’s been in lately. I’m tired all the time.”

“Are you taking your heart meds every day?”

Her father nodded without looking at her.

“Dad?”

“I take them every day and I make sure your mother does too.”

“Good,” Libby said. “What does Doctor Feit say?”

“He recommends taking away her car keys and putting safeguards in place like door alarms and extra locks. I’ve also had several nice ladies at the church offer to help.”

Libby laid both of her hands on the desk. “I know you, Dad. There’s something else you’re not telling me.”

He turned toward the lone window in his office.

“What do you know that I don’t?” Libby waited in silence as her father fiddled with his watch stem pretending to adjust the time. He seemed to be debating something in his head. When he finally turned back to face her, his face had a reddish hue.

“Your mother wrestled her demons for over forty years, honey. And I think she kind of gave up when Melissa died. I didn’t want to burden you, just wanted you to be aware since...” He exhaled as his shoulders slumped.

“Since?”

“I’m sure part of her recent problems are being

exacerbated by the upcoming anniversary." Her father sighed. "It's hard to believe Melissa has been gone almost a year." He pulled reading glasses off his nose and tossed them on the desk. "Still, I sense something else going on now—something behind your mother's eyes that wasn't there before."

Libby cradled herself deeper in the overstuffed leather chair and, despite all her mental objections, once again envisioned the carnage that took place over ten months ago and six thousand miles away. The violent explosion of gray metal and cold sea, visions of Melissa's dress white pants with their knife-sharp creases floating in bloody salt water—images against which all the anti-depressants in the world were defenseless. Libby shook her head. *Enough*. "Has she stopped with the paintings yet?"

Nicholas shook his head. "She probably has twenty by now." He swiped at the corners of both eyes with the back of his hand. "Sorry, honey. I shouldn't be burdening you with this. I should lean more on my faith."

"Faith isn't helping *anything*, Dad," Libby said. "Melissa is dead, and Mom is flipping out. We're on our own." Her voice had risen too loud and too fast, and the look on her father's face caused her heart to sink in her chest. Pastor and father Nicholas Meeker was not only the finest man she knew, but also the only one who was blessed, or perhaps cursed, with the gift of an unshakable faith. "I'm sorry, Dad," she said quietly.

"That's OK, Shorty."

He hadn't used that nickname in years, and hearing it only caused her throat to tighten and her heart to race more than it already was. She reached out

for his weathered hands. "She's still insisting it's not me?"

Her father shook his head. "She was wearing the Navy whites," he said softly.

*Of course.* Libby nodded her head. *The uniform her mother had been so proud of.* "And she's only seeing Mel inside the house?"

Her father nodded so imperceptibly that Libby almost missed it.

"Does she think it's a ghost?"

"No such thing," he said without hesitation. "Your mother knows we die once according to Scripture, and souls of the deceased do not linger in this world. Superstitions like that are stains on our faith, Libby."

She sighed. "So, Mom's insisting Mel survived?"

"She keeps repeating the fact that Melissa's remains where never..." Nicholas gulped and tipped his head back so far he was staring at the ceiling. "They never verified it was your sister's body."

"DNA testing is only used when necessary," Libby said. "For gosh sakes, Dad, her dog tags were still on the body."

"What was *left* of..." Nicholas's voice cracked and faded, and a single tear chartered an erratic course through the stubble on his face.

"You're not buying into Mom's theory too, are you?"

He lowered his head and shook it slowly from side to side.

"The Navy's report was very clear, Dad," Libby said. "The propellant they stored in the Girardeau's gun turrets dated back to the Korean War. Their tests proved it could ignite if not handled properly and the report said the warhead in the sixteen-inch gun was