
BLOOD RUNES
PART 2
THE THIRD FACE
DETECTIVE
CHERYL MILLS

Blood Runes Part 2 – The Third Face

Chapter One: The Man Who Forgot

The first time Detective Lucian Vale saw the dead woman, he recognised the rune before he recognised the blood. The room stank of wet plaster, old pennies and something sweetly rotten underneath it all.

Three sharp strokes had been painted across the white wall above her body, intersecting in a shape he had devoted years to studying in crime scene photographs, old case files, and the nightmares that had followed him since childhood. The symbol meant transformation, or so his mother's victims had been told by the person who killed them. Lucian crouched next to the body, the smell of damp earth and copper filling his nose.

The woman lay with her hands folded across her chest, her face turned towards the ceiling as though she were listening to something the rest of the world could not hear. There was something almost tranquil about her expression, as if death had arrived not as an ending but as a secret she had finally been allowed to keep.

That was what disturbed him most.

"Same signature, identical to the original Rune Killer," said Detective Inspector Morgan, standing behind him. "Except this time, whoever did it has gone to considerable trouble to make sure we notice."

Lucian stared at the symbol.

His mother had been imprisoned for eleven years, convicted of a series of murders so precisely constructed that investigators had previously questioned whether one person could possibly have committed them all. His father had been sentenced four months later. Neither had been executed. Both remained alive behind reinforced glass and locked steel, their names still uttered with disgust and fascination. Their crimes had made them two of the most notorious killers in the country, and the state had decided that a lifetime in darkness was a fitting place to leave them.

Together, the newspapers had called them the Devil Couple.

Their son had been given another name at birth, one masked beneath sealed adoption records and the protective lies of social workers who believed a child could be saved by keeping the truth from him.

Lucian had grown up in foster homes, learning early that asking too many questions made adults uncomfortable. He had been clever, quiet and unnervingly observant, with a memory for faces and details that sometimes seemed less like a gift than a punishment.

He had become a detective because he wanted to find the truth. He had never considered that the truth might be something he could not survive.

"Detective?"

Morgan's voice pulled him back.

Lucian realised he had been staring at the dead woman's hands.

There was blood beneath his fingernails.

He rubbed his thumb across the edge of his index finger, then looked down again. The blood was fresh, dark and unmistakable.

He had no idea how it had got there.

“Are you all right?” Morgan asked.

“Fine.”

The lie came easily.

It always had.

That evening, Lucian returned to his flat and found a thin red thread lying across his doormat. It was wet, though the corridor was dry, and it had been tied into a small loop, the same careful knot he remembered from the drawings that had appeared in his childhood notebooks. He could almost smell the iron essence of blood on it.

He had never shown those drawings to anyone.

He picked up the thread with a tissue and dropped it into the bin.

Then he locked the door, checked the windows and stood for a long time in the silent hallway.

From somewhere inside the flat came a slight scratching sound.

Lucian followed it into his bedroom.

His bedside mirror was covered in writing. The room had grown so cold that his breath smoked in front of him, and something behind the wall tapped slowly, like a fingernail tapping from inside a coffin.

Not written on the glass but traced through the condensation that had gathered across its surface, although the room was cold and the heating had been switched off for hours.

Three words stared back at him.

HE IS AWAKE.

Lucian stumbled backwards.

The glass clouded over, and for one impossible second, his reflection remained perfectly still while he moved.

Then it smiled.

He turned away, gasping, and when he looked again, the mirror was empty of everything except his own frightened face.

He did not sleep that night.

At 3:17 a.m., he awakened on the kitchen floor with a bloodied hand and no memory of getting out of bed.

A notebook lay on the table beside him.

Its first page contained a drawing of the rune from the crime scene.

Beneath it, in handwriting he recognised as his own, were four words.

THE FIRST WAS MERCY.

Chapter Two: The Devil's Son

The second body was found three days later in an abandoned chapel, where the damp had blackened the saints' faces, and the air tasted of ash.

Unlike the first victim, the man had not been arranged peacefully. His death had been staged as a grotesque performance, surrounded by scorched symbols and overturned candles. Someone had recreated the theatrical violence of Lucian's father with an attention to detail which made even the most experienced officers uneasy.

Morgan stood close to him in the cold morning air.

“Two killers,” she said. “Two signatures. One investigation.”

“Or one person who wants us to think there are two.”

“That's what worries me.”

Lucian looked towards the altar.

Someone had engraved a name into the wood.

VALE.

His surname.

The room appeared to tilt. An unusual pressure built behind his eyes, followed by a whisper that sounded so close he felt breath against his ear.

You know this place.

He spun around.

Nobody stood behind him.

“Lucian?” Morgan asked.

He forced himself to look at her. “I need to see the original case files.”

“You've been reading them for days.”

“Then I'll read them again.”

That afternoon, he entered the secure archive where the evidence from his parents' murders was stored. He had devoted years to avoiding the details of their crimes, telling himself that understanding them would not change the fact that they had been monsters. Now he needed to know everything.

His mother's photographs were the first to appear on the screen. The elegant arrangement of her victims, the symbols, the strange objects left at the scenes. In several images, the blood had dried almost black. In the photographs, she looked serene, a woman convinced she was carrying out a sacred duty, not taking lives.

His father's evidence was different. Brutal. Chaotic. Designed to provoke horror. The photographs appeared to contain the violence inside them; Lucian found himself glancing over his shoulder as though the dead might have followed him into the archive. Yet when Lucian placed the photographs side by side, something caught his attention.

A small detail repeated across both sets of crimes.

A single red thread.

It had been found at several scenes but never identified as significant. Investigators had dismissed it as contamination, an incidental trace of the victims' clothing or the killer's movements.

Lucian enlarged the photographs.

The thread was tied in precisely the same knot.

He felt suddenly cold.

A memory rose from somewhere deep inside him; a dark room, a woman's hands, the smell of smoke. A voice singing softly while someone drew a red line across his palm.

Blood remembers what the mind forgets.

Lucian shut his eyes.

When he opened them, he was standing in the archive's narrow corridor.

He did not remember leaving his desk.

His phone revealed that forty-seven minutes had passed.

A new message had arrived from an unknown number.

YOU HAVE YOUR MOTHER'S EYES.

A second message appeared.

YOUR FATHER'S HANDS.

Then a photograph.

It showed Lucian asleep at his kitchen table, his head resting on his folded arms. The notebook lay open next to him.

The picture had been taken from inside his flat.

He called Morgan immediately.

“I need a team at my address.”

“What has happened?”

“Someone's been inside my home.”

“Have you got evidence?”

Lucian looked at the photograph again.

Something reflected in the dark window behind him.

A figure standing over his sleeping body.

Its face was hidden in shadow.

“I think,” he said in a whisper, “someone is trying to make me remember.”

Chapter Three: The Parents

The prison visit was not part of the investigation.

Lucian told himself he was there because his mother might recognise the symbols. Because his father might know who was imitating his crimes. Because any information, however unpleasant, could save another life.

He did not tell Morgan that he had dreamt of his mother every night since the first murder. She appeared in his dreams exactly as she looked in the old prison photographs, composed, beautiful and utterly certain of herself. The years behind bars had not softened her eyes; if anything, they had made them colder.

His mother sat behind the glass with her hands folded precisely on the table.

For several seconds, neither of them spoke.

Then she smiled.

“My boy.”

Lucian felt something inside him twist.

“You don't get to call me that.”

“Of course I do. I carried you before the world decided what you should become.”

“You don't know anything about me.”

Her smile faded into something gentler, which was somehow worse.

“I know you've started losing time.”

Lucian became motionless.

“I know you wake in places you don't remember visiting. I know there are pictures you cannot explain, and that sometimes you hear a voice whispering your name when you are alone.”

He stared at her.

“How could you possibly know that?”

“Because I know what it is to be frightened of your own mind.”

For the first time, he saw something that resembled tenderness in her expression.

It made him want to hate her more.

“Did you kill those people?” he asked.

“Which people?”

“The woman with the rune. The man in the chapel.”

His mother angled her head.

“Do you believe I can reach through prison walls?”

“I believe you know more than you're telling me.”

“Perhaps you should ask yourself why you recognise the things you see at those crime scenes.”

He rose abruptly.

“You're trying to manipulate me.”

“I'm trying to help you.”

“You murdered innocent people.”

“Yes,” she replied calmly. “And I loved you before you were born. Both things can be true.”

He left before she could say anything else.

His father was waiting in the interview room two days later, smiling as though the years had been kind to him.

Unlike his mother, he made no attempt to appear gentle.

“So,” he said, leaning forward, “the little detective has come home.”

“I need information about the murders.”

“Do you?”

“Someone is copying your crimes.”

His father's eyes brightened.

“Someone with taste, then.”

“People are dying.”

“People have always died.”

Lucian clenched his fists beneath the table.

“Do you know who is doing this?”

His father looked at him, and the smile slowly faded.

“No.”

It was the first answer Lucian believed.

“But I know why they're doing it.”

“Tell me.”

“Because they want you to understand that you belong to us.”

Lucian felt his stomach tighten.

“I'm nothing like you.”

His father laughed softly.

“You think goodness is something you inherit? That a kind family could have made you pure? Your mother will tell you that you're chosen. I will tell you that you're born. Neither of us cares what you believe, as long as you keep looking.”

“Looking for what?”

His father bent closer to the glass.

“The third face.”

Lucian froze.

“What does that mean?”

His father reclined back, his expression almost proud.

“Ask the mirror, son.”

Chapter Four: The Third Face

The evidence against Lucian began with a missing hour.

Then another.

A witness placed him near the chapel on the night of the second murder. Security footage recorded a man wearing his coat entering the building shortly before midnight. His fingerprints appeared on an object recovered from the scene.

Lucian insisted the evidence had been planted.

Morgan believed him or at least wanted to.

But when investigators searched his flat, they found a secret compartment beneath an unstable floorboard.

Inside were photographs of the victims, maps of the crime scenes, red thread, and pages of rune drawings in Lucian's handwriting.

There were also audio recordings.

In the first, he could be heard speaking in his sleep.

In the second, his speech was clear and deliberate.

“Two bodies for the mother. Two for the father. Then the third will be complete.”

Morgan listened to it twice.

“Lucian, what does that mean?”

“I don't know.”

“Are you sure?”

He looked at her.

For the first time in his life, he had no answer.

The investigation was suspended. They revoked his access and assigned an officer to accompany him while they reviewed the evidence. He was told to take leave.

That night, Lucian sat in front of his bedroom mirror.

He had covered it with a sheet, but he could still feel something watching from beneath the fabric.

He pulled the sheet away.

His reflection glared back at him.

“Who are you?” he whispered.

The reflection did not move.

Then, slowly, it raised its right hand.

Lucian's own hand remained on his knee.

A terrible silence filled the room.

The reflected figure pressed its hand against the inside of the glass.

Its mouth opened.

“You wanted to know whether evil was inherited,” it said.

Lucian could not breathe.

“You wanted to prove that love could save you, that good people could raise a child and erase the blood that came before him.”

The voice sounded like his own, but colder.

“Your mother gave you the symbols. Your father gave you the rage. You gave yourself the excuse.”

“No.”

“You killed them.”

“No!”

The mirror shuddered.

“You just don't remember.”

Lucian stumbled backwards, knocking down the bedside table. The light flickered, and when it steadied, the reflection was his own again.

He called Morgan and told her everything.

He told her about the blackouts, the notebook, the voices and the messages. He told her that he was frightened he had killed people without knowing it.

He expected her to arrest him.

Instead, she listened.

Then she said, “Lucian, someone has been feeding you information from inside the investigation. The photographs, the messages, the evidence. Whoever is doing this knows your history and knows how to make you doubt yourself.”

“What if the evidence is true?”

“Then we determine the truth. We don't decide you're guilty because you're afraid you might be.”

For the first time in days, he felt the ground beneath him.

They began again, this time following the red thread.

It led them to a series of anonymous online accounts, all created years earlier and all devoted to the Devil Couple. The accounts contained copies of old crime-scene photographs, fragments of court transcripts and references to details that had never been released publicly.

One account had posted a message just hours before the first murder.

THE BLOODLINE WILL WAKE.

Its owner had left a single clue, a photograph of an old foster home.

Lucian recognised the building immediately.

It was the place where he had spent his first six years.

And someone had recently been there.

Chapter Five: The Child Who Survived

The house had remained empty for years, but it did not feel abandoned. It appeared as though it had been holding its breath, waiting for Lucian to come back.

Its windows were boarded, the garden engulfed by weeds, and the front door leaned open as though somebody had left in a hurry.

Inside, the air smelled of damp plaster, old wood, and a faint sourness that made the back of Lucian's throat tighten.

Lucian walked slowly through the corridor, memories stirring around him like dust.

A staircase.

A yellow wall.

A small bedroom with a painted moon above the bed.

He remembered sitting beneath that moon while a social worker told him he was a special little boy who had lost his parents before he could know them.

He remembered asking whether they had loved him.

She had hesitated.

Then she had said yes.

In the bedroom, a wooden box rested on the floor.

Inside held a collection of drawings, photographs and old documents.

The first photograph showed a young woman holding a newborn child. Her face was turned away from the camera, but a silver ring on her finger bore the same rune found at the murder scenes.

Beneath it was a letter.

You will never know what we saved you from.

Lucian unfolded the remaining pages with quivering hands.

The social worker who arranged his placement had written the letter. She had died several years earlier, but her words had survived.

She wrote that someone had been contacting the agency for years, requesting information about the child born to the Devil Couple. At first, the requests had seemed like the work of journalists. Later, they had become threats.

Someone believed the boy was destined to continue his parents' work.

Someone wanted to find him.

And someone had known where he was all along.

A sound came from the hallway.

Lucian turned.

A man stood in the doorway, his face concealed beneath the shadow of a hood.

“You've taken your time,” the stranger stated.

“Who are you?”

“Someone who understands your family better than you do.”

“Did you kill those people?”

The man smiled.

“Some of them.”

“Did you plant the evidence in my flat?”

“I gave you the opportunity to discover yourself.”

“You used me.”

“I showed you what you were capable of.”

Lucian reached for his phone, but the stranger raised a hand.

“Don't bother. Your colleague is on her way, isn't she? She'll find the room, the drawings, the blood. Everything arranged exactly as you fear it should be.”

“You're the third killer.”

“No,” the man said. “I'm the one who brought the third face into the light.”

He stepped forward.

“I was there when your parents were convicted. I watched the world turn them into monsters, then pretend the story ended when they were imprisoned. But their story never ended, Lucian. It was only waiting for you.”

Lucian stared at him.

“Why me?”

“Because you are the answer to the question everyone asked, and nobody could solve. Are monsters born, or are they made?”

The stranger reached into his coat and produced a small knife.

“I wanted to see whether the blood would speak.”

Lucian felt the old pressure behind his eyes.

The whisper returned.

Finish it.

For a moment, he could see exactly what the stranger wanted him to do. He could imagine the movement, the violence, the terrible relief of silencing the voice which had followed him for so long.

His hands began to shake.

The stranger noticed.

“There you are,” he uttered. “I knew you would come.”

Lucian looked at the knife.

Then at the man.

And understood, finally, that the stranger had never needed to control his mind.

He had only needed to make Lucian believe he had no control at all.

“No,” Lucian said.

The word was quiet, but it changed something.

He stepped away from the knife.

“You don't get to tell me what I am.”

The stranger lunged.

They collided with the bedroom wall. Lucian fought to keep the blade away from his body, feeling its edge cut into his sleeve. He could hear footsteps on the stairs, Morgan shouting his name.

The stranger's hold loosened for one second.

It was enough.

Lucian twisted away and sent the knife skidding across the floor. When the officers burst into the room, the stranger was pinned beneath him, struggling and screaming that Lucian remained no different from his parents.

Lucian released him and stepped back.

He did not strike him again.

He did not finish what the voice inside him had demanded.

For the first time, he remembered every second.

Chapter Six: Blood Inheritance

The stranger's name was Daniel Wren. He wore the expression of a man who had spent so long worshipping cruelty that he had mistaken it for truth.

He had been obsessed with the Devil Couple for more than twenty years, collecting their letters, studying their crimes and convincing himself that their son was destined to become something extraordinary.

He had committed the murders to force Lucian into confronting his origins. He had planted evidence, sent messages and exploited every moment of uncertainty, turning each blackout into another locked room inside Lucian's mind.

But Daniel had not committed all the murders.

Some of the evidence against Lucian proved to be real.

The notebooks were his. The drawings were his. The blood beneath his fingernails had come from the victims.

Under questioning, Lucian began to recover fragments of the missing hours. He remembered waking in unfamiliar places. He remembered the voices. He remembered the overwhelming certainty that he was being guided towards something he could neither name nor escape.

He did not know whether the voices were the product of a mind breaking beneath unbearable pressure, a condition he had inherited, or something he could never explain. He knew only that he had done terrible things. And that he could not undo them by pretending they had not happened.

When Morgan asked whether he wanted a lawyer, Lucian nodded.

Then he told her everything he could remember.

The investigation would take months. There would be questions about his responsibility, his mental state and the extent to which Daniel had manipulated him. There would be examinations, interviews and difficult truths that no court could make simple. The victims' families would have to sit through every detail. Their grief would be entered into

evidence, catalogued and read aloud beneath bright lights, as if pain could be made orderly by putting it on paper.

Before the formal proceedings began, Lucian requested permission to visit the prison where both his parents were still held.

He knew it was impossible to speak to them now.

Still, he wanted to see the place where their story had been locked away.

He stood outside the gates beneath a colourless sky, listening to the wind move through the trees.

For years, he had imagined his parents as two shadows following him through life. He had feared that every kindness he offered was an act, every friendship a deception, every moment of anger proof that the darkness possessed at last found its way to the surface.

Now he understood that fear would become its own kind of prison.

His mother had believed he would inherit her gift.

His father had believed he would inherit his cruelty.

Daniel had believed he would become the perfect continuation of their crimes.

All three had wanted to decide his future for him.

Lucian took a folded piece of paper from his pocket. It bore a drawing of the rune that had begun the investigation.

He looked at it for a long time.

Then he tore it in half.

He could not change the blood in his veins, or the people who had brought him into the world. He could not pretend that the victims did not exist, or that the lives he took could be restored.

But he could stop hiding.

He could face what he had done.

And he could refuse to let another person use his fear as a weapon.

As he turned towards the waiting car, his phone vibrated.

A message had arrived from an unknown number.

There were no words, only a photograph.

It showed a small boy standing in a bedroom beneath a painted moon.

Lucian recognised the room.

His childhood bedroom.

The photograph had been taken from the doorway, and the boy was looking directly at the camera.

On the wall behind him, someone had drawn a rune in red.

Lucian fixed his eyes on the screen until it went dark.

Then, from farther beyond the prison gates, he heard a woman's voice.

Soft.

Familiar.

Almost loving.

You were supposed to become us.

He closed his eyes.

For a moment, he was a frightened child again, waiting for someone to tell him who he was.

Then he opened them.

“No,” he whispered.

“I became me.”

The wind rose, scattering dead leaves across the road.

In the black glass of the car window, his reflection watched him walk away.

And just before the door closed, it smiled.