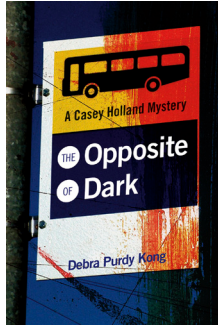


an excerpt from



THE **Opposite** OF **Dark**

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TOUCHWOODEDITIONS.COM

One



WHEN BENNY LEE hit the M3 bus's brakes for the third time in a minute, tension rippled through Casey's lower back. Usually relaxed and patient, old Benny was slipping. Maybe she would, too, if this was her first day back driving a bus in tedious, noon-hour congestion after six months on nights. Vancouver might be beautiful, but the traffic would always be horrible. With any luck, she'd nail the pervert sharing her seat before Benny put her in traction.

Casey unfastened the buttons on her tight leather jacket and took a deep breath. She exhaled slowly through her nose, like the yoga video had instructed. The exercise was supposed to release tension. Fat chance.

The suspect pressed his thigh against hers. His gray suit, crewcut, and square glasses portrayed respectability, yet his flushed, middle-aged face and wandering hand suggested something else.

His hand crept closer to her thigh. He always chose the right side of the bus, always picked an aisle seat near the exit, and always made his move as the bus approached its next stop. Lately, he'd grown reckless by staying on the M3 instead of switching routes like he used to.

Fingers spidered closer to her leg. Casey watched Benny drive. As arranged, she would speed dial Benny's cell number just before she was ready to nab the guy. Victims had reported that the suspect didn't carry a weapon, so Benny would keep the doors shut until she'd cuffed him. The problem with this plan was the passenger distracting Benny with loud complaints about dirty seats and rude passengers.

The M3 approached Commercial and Broadway, and the suspect's thigh nudged Casey's a little harder. She removed her cell phone from her pocket. Adrenalin raced through her as she watched pedestrians head for the SkyTrain entrance at the intersection's southeast corner. The light turned green and the bus eased forward. Sweet, override

aftershave nauseated her. Oh crap, the jerk was panting. Fingertips crept toward the garter peeking below her miniskirt. Casey hit speed dial, then shoved the phone in her pocket. The suspect moaned. Benny eased the bus to the stop as the pervert squeezed her left thigh.

“Right!” Casey grabbed his wrist and flashed her ID badge. “MPT security. Your party’s over, dude.”

The man jerked his arm free. A moment later, he was out and running. Benny had missed the signal.

“Benny, make the call!” Casey rushed down metal-riveted steps and onto the sidewalk crowded with people waiting to enter the bus.

Running north on Commercial Drive, the suspect smacked into pedestrians. Even in stilettos, Casey gained on him. She’d spent too much time practising to let criminals get away. The sidewalk became an overpass and chances for escape diminished. Below them, rail tracks ran along a steep ravine. Casey heard the whirl of an approaching SkyTrain.

The suspect tried to barge through a group of teens, allowing Casey to close the gap. She leapt and tackled him. They hit the ground and rolled into a chain-link fence. Straddling his back, she clamped the cuffs on him and said, “I’m making a citizen’s arrest for sexual assault.”

“You can’t do that!”

“Section 494 of the Criminal Code says I can.” Casey caught her breath as she removed a card tucked behind her security license. “Under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, it’s my duty to inform you that you have the right to retain counsel without delay.”

By the time she’d finished reading everything on the card, people had started to gather.

“Do you understand?” Casey asked him. “Do you want to call a lawyer?”

“I want you to get my wallet and get the hell off me, bitch!”

Casey spotted an open wallet near the suspect’s face. Wary of accusations of theft, she said, “I’ll watch it till the police arrive.”

“I’ll sue you, you whore.”

“Wrong profession. As I said, I’m with Mainland Public Transport security.”

Maybe she should sue him for a new pair of stockings. Reasonably priced fishnet was almost impossible to find. Casey glanced at the gaping hole on her shin and then popped a stick of gum in her mouth. Chewing always slowed the adrenalin.

“You’d better find my glasses too,” the suspect said.

They were wedged among weeds and grimy candy wrappers at the fence, but Casey opted to stay where she was. She noticed the family photo in the guy’s wallet: three young kids, the suspect, and a plump brunette. Casey shook her head. What kind of family man spent his lunch hours squeezing women’s thighs on buses? How pathetic was that?

Benny hurried up to her. “Sorry, Casey. You okay?”

“Yeah, fine.”

“I called the cops and Stan wants you back at the office. Some detective’s on his way to see you. Looks like your week’s off to a hell of a start.”

Casey popped a bubble. She’d handed the authorities a fair number of delinquents over recent weeks, so police chats were becoming routine.

The Vancouver police arrived at Commercial Drive later than expected. Forty-five minutes passed before she bounded up Mainland’s two flights of stairs and into the security department. It’d take at least another half hour to write her report.

As she greeted the security department’s admin assistant, Amy, Casey spotted a new chair next to Stan’s door.

“Does Stan know it’s pink?” Casey asked.

“It’s not pink, it’s dusty rose, or so the catalogue says.” Amy lifted the bifocals from the chain around her neck and took a closer look while she tried not to smile.

Casey grinned. “I’d emphasize the dusty part.”

“I thought I heard your voice,” Stan said, emerging from his office.

Oh lord, her supervisor was having yet another fashion disaster day. Hard as Casey tried, she couldn’t convince Stan that checkered sports jackets and striped shirts didn’t work for most human beings. She and his wife had nearly given up trying.

“So you caught the pervert single-handedly,” he said.

Based on Stan’s disapproving tone and the way he crossed his arms over his chest, Casey knew what was coming.

“What happened to observe and report? Since when do my officers put themselves in danger?”

“But he wasn’t armed and I experienced the crime firsthand, excuse the pun.” She flashed a smile, but Stan didn’t look amused.

“Tackling someone is hardly non-violent intervention, Casey. I thought I told you that use of force isn’t part of the game plan anymore.”

Casey sighed. It was hard to keep up with, let alone apply, all the changes and restrictions Mainland had imposed since she first trained in security. And why was Stan being such a hard-ass when she’d caught the guy?

He lowered his arms. “Write up your report after you see our guests.” He nodded toward the door.

“Guests? Benny said a detective wanted to see me.”

“There are two of them.”

She noticed the way Stan’s lips pressed together until they almost disappeared between his gray beard and moustache. His lips always vanished when he was tense. “What’s up?”

His gaze didn’t quite meet hers. “You’ll see.”

Hmm. The last time Stan avoided eye contact and tensed up like that was two years ago, when she’d told him she was divorcing Greg. He never had coped with crying women too well.

“Tomorrow you can start on the purse snatchings you’ve been bugging me for,” he said. “Drop by for details whenever. I’m going to grab some lunch.”

Leaning close to the door, Casey heard male voices. She strutted inside. It took three seconds to realize that her black leather mini-skirt, torn stockings, and stilettos were making a bad impression.

The older man, stiff and solemn in his brown suit, stared at her spiky hair while the younger guy glanced at her D cups. Understandable. The girls were barely contained in the tank top under her jacket.

On the other side of the door, Stan yelled, “I ain’t sitting in a friggin’ pink chair!”

Casey smiled as she nodded to the officers. “I’m Casey Holland.”

“Detective Lalonde with the West Vancouver Police Department,” the older man said, displaying his shield. “This is Corporal Krueger.”

West Van police? What were they doing out of their jurisdiction? As Krueger shook Casey’s hand, his long thick moustache twitched.

“While we waited for you, Mr. Cordaseto told us a bit about MPT,” Lalonde said. “I’d forgotten that the government’s pilot project became privately funded. I thought it was still at least partly subsidized.”

“Funding ran out, but the government insists on fewer cars on the road, so investors bought it twelve years ago, for a good tax break, apparently. Mainland fills the void in the suburbs and shares the load with TransLink buses on busier routes.”

“I understand you’ve worked here ten years?”

Why were they interested in her background? “Yes—five as a driver and five in security.”

“And you’re a civilian doing police work?” Krueger asked.

Casey didn’t appreciate the disdain in his voice. “It’s not much different than loss prevention work in retail, except we’re mobile, and, as you guys know, it’s too expensive to have police riding buses all day nabbing vandals and creeps. Most of the people we catch commit petty crimes and end up with fines, probation, or community service.”

“The suspect you pursued today sounded dangerous.”

“Not really. He squeezes thighs and runs away,” she replied. “If he was armed or more aggressive, the police would be involved.”

“Do you like this work?” Krueger asked.

“It’s more interesting than being a driver, unless you count the time a guy pulled a knife on me. After that, I went into security to learn how to protect myself and others.”

She was proud of the gutsy reputation she’d earned among Mainland’s staff, even from old-fashioned farts who thought women didn’t belong in security.

Lalonde said, “Few people would choose security work after an experience like that.”

Casey shrugged. “Had to face my fears.”

“You work alone?” Krueger asked.

“Pretty much. We have only one other full-time person, plus Stan. There are three more part-timers who work other jobs.”

“There’s that much of a demand?” Lalonde asked.

“On and off. It usually starts with passenger complaints.” She watched Krueger remove a notepad and pen from his pocket. “So, how can I help you guys?”

Lalonde glanced at his partner. “A fifty-five-year-old Caucasian male, whom we believe is Marcus Adam Holland, was killed between 8:00 and 10:00 PM yesterday evening.” He paused. “Are you his daughter?”

“What?” She frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Are you related to Marcus Adam Holland?”

“I’m his daughter, yes.”

“When did you last see him, Miss Holland?”

“Three years ago, on March eleventh, in a casket. He’s buried at Cedar Ridge Cemetery, Detective.”

Lalonde and Krueger exchanged unreadable looks until Krueger scribbled something down.

“How did the man you buried die?” Lalonde asked.

“My *father* died from botulism.”

“This body hasn’t been dead three years,” he replied. “His wallet contained a valid driver’s license and credit cards, several to jewelry stores.”

Eeriness crept up Casey’s spine. Dad had given her a piece of jewelry every birthday.

“I never did get his wallet and passport back. Assumed they were stolen. But I have a death certificate. Maybe someone at Vital Statistics screwed up.”

Casey didn’t like the way these guys looked at her. What was it? Pity? Skepticism? Ambivalence? She sauntered behind Stan’s old mahogany desk. “Can you give me a clearer description of the victim?”

Lalonde turned to Krueger who flipped through his notepad. “Green eyes, blond hair, graying at the temples, one point eight meters tall.” Krueger looked up. “Five feet eleven inches.”

Casey wasn’t aware she’d been gripping Stan’s chair until her fingers began to ache. A wallet and similar appearance didn’t prove Dad had been alive these past three years.

“Did you see the body?” she asked.

Lalonde nodded.

“Did you notice a small white scar by his left eyebrow?” She didn’t like this second exchange of looks between Lalonde and Krueger. Why weren’t they answering? “How, exactly, was the man killed?” As Lalonde glanced out the window overlooking the yard, Casey’s patience withered. “If it’s him, then I’m family, so don’t I have a right to know?” Still no response. “Come on, guys, I’m used to working with the police; this conversation doesn’t go beyond this room if you don’t want it to.”

Lalonde finally said, “The victim was struck repeatedly about the head with a sharp heavy object.”

She pushed the grisly image from her mind. “Where did it happen?”

“In his house on Marine Drive in West Vancouver.”

The eerie sensation wound around her neck and began to squeeze. “Dad didn’t own a place there.”

He’d dreamed of it, though; an ocean view house on pricey real estate. But he hadn’t had the bucks. So, what was dream and what was reality? Casey slumped into Stan’s old Naugahyde chair.

“An anonymous caller tipped us off about the body around midnight,” Lalonde said.

“Male or female?”

“Male. Could you provide a list of your father’s relatives, friends, business associates, and other acquaintances?”

“It’d be three years old.” Casey rested her elbows on the desk. “If he was alive, don’t you think I’d know?”

“Some people deliberately disappear to start over,” Lalonde replied.

“Do these people stay in the same city and provide a body for burial?” Predictably, all she got was more silence. Was she annoying

them as much as they were annoying her? Too bad. She wasn't the one with the identity problem.

"Miss Holland, we'd like you to come to the morgue," Lalonde said. "The coroner can't start the autopsy until you've identi—"

"I know." She met Lalonde's gaze. "I want to see the body up close. Not on some monitor or in a snapshot or whatever they do down there. Face-to-face, okay?"

Lalonde watched her. "The wounds to his head are extensive."

"All right." She could take it. Had to. Wimping out in front of these guys would be humiliating.

"Mr. Cordaseto told us you could take the afternoon off, so I'd like to do this now."

"Fine." It took some effort to get to her feet. "Dad and I were close, Detective. He was a proud and honest man. He wouldn't have deceived me like that." She couldn't think. "Any idea why the man was killed?"

"There was cash in his wallet, but the hard drive's missing from his PC. No storage devices of any kind anywhere, and he might have had a laptop too." Lalonde slipped his hands in his coat pockets. "There's a photograph of you in the master bedroom."

No, couldn't be. "As far as I'm concerned, Dad's been gone three years. If you think otherwise, then show me proof."

"Do you remember the name of his dentist?" Krueger asked, pen poised over his notepad.

"No. I take it fingerprints haven't helped identify him yet?"

Krueger shook his head.

Casey headed for the door. "Let me change first and wash the grunge off my face."

"That's unnecessary," Lalonde replied. "The sooner we go to the morgue, the quicker we'll have answers."

"This is a costume to attract trash, Detective." She turned to Krueger. "Go figure, huh?"

Casey tried to move fast to the women's locker room downstairs but Lalonde's news had a paralyzing effect. The same thing had happened three years ago when that doctor called from Paris. She was at

work then, too, eating a cheeseburger. In a heavy French accent, the man explained how botulism had killed Dad. Her first response had been anger. No one had even bothered to let her know he'd been sick. After the call, she threw up. Greg was driving the M9 at the time, so Lou had taken her home.

Casey reappeared twenty minutes later to find the detectives looking curiously at her, trying not to seem surprised. Casey attempted a smile. She'd replaced the gelled spikes with her usual light brown curls, the heavy makeup for a trace of lipstick, and the skimpy clothes with plum trousers and a silk blouse.

"Did you need to perform an entire makeover?"

"Why do a half-assed job?"

"For expediency?"

Following him to the exit, Casey rolled her eyes and waved at a worried-looking Amy. Lalonde chose the back seat of the Sebring, while Casey sat in front with Krueger.

"Tell me about the food poisoning in Paris," Lalonde said.

"Dad died nine days after eating at a burger joint called Alvin's All-Canadian Café. The bacterium was in a mayonnaise-based salad dressing."

"How many others were ill?"

"No one, according to my lawyers."

"Lawyers?"

"I'd heard that adults stood a fairly good chance of surviving the toxin. I wanted to know if the hospital had been negligent. The lawyers didn't think so. Apparently, botulism's not easy to diagnose when only one person's been infected, and it took too long to find the source. By the time the doctors knew what was wrong, Dad was too far gone."

"Bit odd that only one person was infected, isn't it?"

"I thought so. It turned out that some fool used the remains of a jar of mayonnaise that hadn't been refrigerated. The restaurant was busy at the time and no one would take responsibility for it."

The drive to the airport to collect his body had been surreal and, in some ways, offensive. She'd had to pick up Dad from the cargo area,

not that she would have wanted him swooping down the chute at the luggage carousel. But still . . . cargo.

Losing someone she loved and trusted had depressed her for a long time. Her adult relationships had never been as strong or trusting.

"I guess a blood analysis hasn't been done yet," Casey said. No one answered. "You guys really don't want to tell me much, do you?"

Lalonde kept his gaze on the window.

→ → →

Casey rubbed her arms and shivered. The morgue was colder than she thought it would be, or was she shivering because of the possibility that all her grief had been wasted on a lie? An attendant accompanied Lalonde to a labeled, oversized drawer and Casey's heartbeat quickened. Lalonde produced a key and unlocked the compartment. The attendant slid a shrouded body toward them.

Someone touched Casey's arm and she jumped. Krueger. Sympathy flashed across his face as he guided her nearer the body. She'd tried to mentally prepare for the sight of mutilated flesh and a close resemblance to Dad. One of last year's criminology classes had discussed body decomposition. Nasty stuff. She vowed to stay cool and calm.

Lalonde turned to her. "Ready?"

Feet apart, arms crossed, and standing strong, she said, "Go ahead."

One glimpse of the victim's face and her stomach somersaulted. Gashes crisscrossed his scalp and descended to what remained of the left side of his face. Dried blood and bits of gray stuff matted his hair. Dozens of cuts mangled the upper half of his left arm and shoulder.

"Is this man Marcus Holland?" Lalonde asked.

Memories of Dad raced through her mind, images so vivid it was as if no time had passed and grief was just beginning.

"Is he your father, Miss Holland?"

"Just a sec." Her legs grew shaky. Casey looked at the attendant. "Is there an appendectomy scar?"

She'd only glimpsed the scar once, by accident, after Dad's operation twenty years ago.

Lalonde nodded to the attendant who lifted the sheet. Casey looked at the floor.

“There is,” the attendant said.

“Well, Miss Holland?” Lalonde asked.

Casey swayed toward the body, then recoiled, terrified of touching it. She tilted to one side. Hands gripped her arm and shoulder. Perspiration dampened her upper lip.

Lalonde said, “Get her some water.”

How could this man be Dad? It didn’t make sense. “No bloody way!”

“Are you saying this man isn’t your father?”

Pulling free of Krueger’s grasp, she charged out of the room.



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