

EXACERBYTE by Cat Connor

EXACERBYTE

By

Cat Connor

Chapter One.

Every Intention

My phone chirped like a demented cricket. It was the second call in two minutes. Demented crickets are never good. I pulled over to the shoulder and stopped. Cars whizzed by me. The phone chirped again. I answered it.

“SSA Conway.”

“Ellie, Chrissy here. Just reminding you about the high school visit.”

“I hadn’t forgotten – there’s plenty of time yet.” I checked the time on my watch just to be sure. “I’m dropping by Cassie’s then I have a few things to do. I don’t have to be at the school until later this afternoon.”

“Tell Cassie she’s invited to my place next weekend. My turn to cook for us all.”

“I’ll pass it along.”

I dropped my phone on the passenger seat and pulled back into the traffic.

Ten minutes later, I parked in the driveway behind Cassie’s Subaru. Icy rain splattered from the gray sky as I cleared some mail I noticed poking from the mailbox. Clutching a few letters, I wrapped my jacket tighter against the cold wind and hurried to the front door.

I knocked and waited shuffling from foot to foot to keep warm. I knocked again. There were no signs of life beyond the stained-glass inset in the door.

“Cassie!” I called.

No reply.

I walked along the porch. The curtains were open. It difficult to see into the room; even weak winter light caused too much glare. I cupped one hand against the window and placed my eye up to it. No one moved within.

I knocked on the window as I peered. For a second I thought I saw something moving by the living room door. “Cassie!”

There was a skittering of paws on wood. Suddenly Roscoe's face was pressed against the window, his huge paws on the windowsill. Tongue lolling.

"Roscoe! Sit!" The large dog dropped to his hairy backside, tongue still hanging from his open mouth. He wasn't the brightest of dogs but he was sweet.

He'd left a large reddish smear across the glass.

I craned my neck to see if the dog was bleeding but couldn't see anything. I jogged around the back of the house, letting myself in the back gate. Still no sign of human life.

I pulled out my cell phone and called Cassie's cell. From where I stood I heard her phone ring. It had to be in the kitchen. I hung up before it went to voicemail and hammered on the solid back door. The only noise beyond was the dog tearing across the house and sliding into the kitchen cabinets.

It just wasn't right. Cassie never left without her cell. Her car was there. Roscoe was in the house, not in his centrally-heated dog run. I counted rocks in the garden beside the back porch until I found the hollow one and the back door key. I knocked, turned the key and handle and then called out as the door swung open.

Roscoe hit me like a freight train, knocking me back. I scrambled to my feet and wiped my slimy hands down my jeans. "Damn drooling dog."

Roscoe bounced around me, slobber flying.

"Sit!"

He plopped like a stone sending a cloud of fluff into the air. His yellow fur was stained red in patches. His large hairy feet were matted and messy. "What's on you?" I held his collar and leaned down. There was no mistaking the smell. "Blood."

I couldn't trust the dog to stay, so with a firm grip on his collar and my Glock in the other hand I started searching the house. We were in the laundry. I followed his dark footprints into the kitchen. My eyes scanned the immediate area. My nose prickled at the smell of fresh blood. On the corner of the kitchen counter, there was blood and long strands of dark hair. Blood dripped down the front of the cabinets. I held the dog tightly, stopping him from putting his hairy feet in any more evidence.

Above the dog's panting, I heard a click. I closed my eyes and concentrated. A door clicked shut. Someone was in the house. Dog, gun, no hands left for the phone. I crouched down next to the dog and pried my cell from my belt. This wasn't going to work. I stood up and put a leg over the dog, successfully trapping his head between my knees. I managed to send an emergency call to Delta A. An open line was all I needed. I slipped the phone into my shirt pocket.

"I hope you can hear me. I'm at Cassandra Smith's home in Reston. Possible home invasion. There is blood all over the floor. Can't find Cassie. I need back-up and paramedics."

Voices jumbled in my pocket. Sam's overrode Lee and Chrissy's. "We're on our way Chicky Babe. Notifying local police."

"Good to know."

I adjusted my grip on the panting dog and wound my fingers tightly under his collar. With care I moved my leg, so I was next to him again. "Come on Roscoe let's find Cassie."

We cleared the kitchen. I noted more blood splatter on the walls and smearing on the doorframe. Drag marks on the floor lead down the hallway. The blood faded into the carpet fibers.

Another click.

The dog pulled. I pulled back and whispered, "No."

My heart raced and stomach twisted. With trepidation, I opened the guest bathroom door. Nothing. I closed the door. If anyone was hiding, they couldn't use the rooms I'd cleared for cover without alerting me by opening doors.

My attention focused on the guest bedroom. Silently I opened the door. There was nothing obvious. I checked under the bed, in the closet, behind the curtains. No one. No sign that anyone had even been in the room.

Four more doors led from the hallway.

The dog whined softly as I swung open the next door. It was Cassie's home office. I breathed for a moment. The entire room was visible from the doorway. A desk, chair, overstuffed bookcases and her laptop.

Next was another bedroom, used as a storeroom by the look of it. Boxes piled high around the walls. Roscoe and I swept the room keeping an eye on the hallway the whole time. Only two rooms remained. One on the right and one on the left at the front door end of the hallway. One was the living room and one Cassie's bedroom.

The dog and I stepped carefully into the room on the right. The door was open. Nothing out of place at all. No one hiding under the sofas in the living room. No one behind the floor-length drapes.

The only place left was Cassie's room. It had a walk-in closet/dressing room and a separate bathroom. Two rooms within a room. Both with locks. Maybe she was in one of the rooms and was safe. Maybe it wasn't her blood all over the dog. I looked down at Roscoe. He was the dumbest and friendliest dog I'd ever met. This was not a guard dog; this was a seventy-pound lapdog. He was likely to lick someone to death or maybe trip him or her with his over-exuberance but otherwise, he'd never harm anyone. Roscoe whined and pulled me. He wanted to get into the bedroom.

Bang.

It sounded close.

My stomach flip-flopped sending bile rushing toward my mouth.

I swallowed hard, took a deep breath, held tight to the dog and twisted the knob of Cassie's bedroom door. I pushed it hard so it hit the wall behind the door. The dog flinched.

Deep blue curtains bellowed into the room. I checked behind the curtains. The French doors were open; there was blood on the floor and bloody footprints outside on the porch. In the distance, sirens.

"Cassie!"

Nothing under the bed. I tried the dressing room door. Locked. I banged. "Cassie!"

I let the dog go. Roscoe scratched at the door. Then ran to the bathroom door and scratched that.

“Cassie! It’s Ellie.”

I listened. Roscoe scratched and whined. “Roscoe, shush.”

He looked at me with his head on one side, ears alert and goofy tongue falling out of his mouth. Then I heard it. A voice from the bathroom.

“Ellie.”

Bathroom locks aren’t that secure. I didn’t know where Cassie was, so couldn’t shoot. I braced myself on the doorjamb and kicked. Wood splintered. The lock groaned. The dog tried to force his way between my legs. I shoved him out of the way. He made another attempt.

“Get out of the way.”

I kicked again. The door flung open.

My gun was already in my holster as I pushed Roscoe again to get him out of my way and rushed to Cassie. She was covered in blood and sitting against the bath. A wooden long-handled body brush in her hand.

“Jesus. You look like shit.”

“Really? But I feel so good.” Roscoe dropped his big furry head on her lap. “You are the dumbest dog in the world,” Cassie mumbled patting his head. “Completely useless and I wouldn’t be without you.” The brush clattered to the tiled floor.

I pulled a towel from the rail and pressed it against her head. My pocket was erupting with noise.

“Excuse my pocket; it’s been very worried about you.” I lifted my phone and spoke into it. “Cassie needs paramedics. Tell police they’re going to need dogs, someone left on foot.” I dropped my phone back into my pocket and concentrated on Cassie. “Who did this Cas?”

“Never saw his face ... he wore one of those scarf things soldiers wear ... shema ...”

“Shemagh?”

“A brownish color.”

After a couple of false starts, she managed to tell me more. “He had same the same color boots, dark blue jeans, a dark jacket. Odd eyes.”

Sirens stopped outside. Heavy footsteps ran to the front door.

“I’ll let these guys in, or they’ll break your pretty door.” I hurried away.

I called out and identified myself before opening the door to four uniformed patrolmen. I gave them a description and went back to Cassie.

The towel was soaked in places. I grabbed another and pressed it against her head.

“Odd eyes?”

“Different shades of brown.”

“Excellent.” I called out to the police and relayed the extra description of the Unsub’s eyes, then turned my attention back to Cassie. “You hurt anywhere else?”

“He hit my head against the corner of the kitchen counter a few times; when I fell he kicked me and then dragged me up the hallway.”

“I am so glad I left my scarf here last night.”

“Me too.” Tears escaped her swollen eyes and coursed through the bloodied bruises. “You scared him away. I locked myself in here when he went to investigate.”

“Any idea who *he* was?”

I was aware of police hovering in the bathroom doorway, they were happy enough to let me ask the questions.

“No, he never spoke but he seemed very interested in the pictures on the fridge.”

She moved and from a pocket handed me a piece of paper. “He gave me this.”

It was a photo of Cassie and me, taken over a year ago, in a heated debate outside the Hoover Building.

“That’s an old picture.”

“When we met.”

We both smiled. We came from opposite ends of the same problem and met with an explosion in the middle. Cassie was the social worker assigned to Carla Torres the day her mother was murdered. Within a week of our first meeting, she began trying to convince me Carla Torres was better off with me than in foster care. Cassie and Carla

became fixtures in my life. Fixtures in all our lives. We all hung out together. Sam, Lee, me, Carla, Cassie, Chrissy, sometimes even Caine. The pictures stuck on the fridge were of all of us, having fun, proving that family is what you make it.

Cassie looked at me. “Dinner your place next week.”

“Yeah dinner at my place.” I wiped tears from her face with my fingers. “We’ll talk before then.”

“Call me.” Her eyes rolled back. She slumped forward. Her hand went limp in mine.

“Cassie!”

Suddenly a paramedic was in the room. He almost threw me out of the way.

“She’s unconscious,” I said. “She was talking and seemed okay.” As okay as someone who’s been beaten to a bloody pulp can be.

She was talking.

I grabbed the dog and pulled him out of the way, as the paramedics began CPR. That’s where Sam and Lee found me. With my arms wrapped around the stupid dog, sitting on the bedroom floor, while paramedics tried to bring my friend back to life. A few times while sitting there, I felt sinister eyes watching, an unwelcome feeling I knew all too well and one I’d hoped to never experience again. When I looked over my shoulder, there were only police. I scanned everything with expert eyes looking for telltale signs of hidden cameras and saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Through the bathroom door I saw the paramedics. One looked over at me and shook his head. They weren’t in the business of giving up. One was bagging her, the other doing CPR. A suited man ran past me and into the bathroom. I watched him drop to his knees next to the paramedics and Cassie. His head turned and eyes locked on mine. Supervisory Special Agent Kurt Henderson otherwise known as Doctor Henderson. His head shook ever so slightly as his mouth took on a grim line.

Police crawled all over the house. They found some clear boot prints on the porch.

Sam went to look.

He returned with his opinion. “Combat boots. Cassie mentioned a shemagh? Military or a poseur?”

“My money’s on poseur,” Lee said, watching the paramedics.

“She’s not going to make it.” I knew the words were mine but they felt foreign. My arms tightened around the dog’s hairy neck. “She has a brother in Richmond. We should call him to take Roscoe.”

Lee pulled his phone from his belt and made a call. I listened to him talking to Chrissy. He wrote a number in his notebook.

“Ellie, do you want Chrissy to reschedule your afternoon?”

I shook my head. “No. I’ll carry on. I’d sooner be busy than sitting around waiting to hear from police.”

He finished talking to Chrissy.

I heard Kurt call out the time.

Cassie was dead.

A police officer asked that they leave her body where it was. The medical examiner was on his way.

Kurt weaved his way around people to me. “There was nothing we could do. Autopsy will confirm but it looks like she had a massive brain bleed due to trauma.”

“She was talking. I had no idea she was going to die.”

“I know.” His hand rested on my shoulder. “Head injuries are unpredictable.”

“Thank you for coming,” I said hoping my voice didn’t crumble.

“Heard your call. Figured I might be able to help.” He shrugged. “Sorry.”

Kurt walked away. I guessed he’d wait outside for the medical examiner.

Lee turned to me and said, “I’ll find the officer in charge and see about notifying Cassie’s brother and finding somewhere for Roscoe to stay in the meantime.”

“I need to go home and clean up before I visit that high school.”

Lee squatted in front of me. “I can do the high school visit. You could stay here with Cassie and Roscoe.”

A few deep breaths later I replied, “You know nothing about poetry.” In all honestly I knew about the same. I could write it but had no clue about iambic pentameter or any other device I was sure the kids would know and be able to discuss. “I can’t stay here

without inserting myself into the police investigation and no one wants me telling cops how to do their jobs.”

“I could come with ...”

“Not necessary, but thank you.”

“Carla?”

“I’ll go over to her foster parents place after school and tell her myself.” The last things Cassie said to me rolled around my head. The air was filled with noise and I needed quiet. “I’m just going to go outside. It’s a bit claustrophobic in here all of a sudden. I’ll take Roscoe and put him in his run.”

Lee nodded. I used the dog to help me stand. He stuck close as I walked to the front door. I didn’t need to hold him. From the front porch I could see two police cruisers at the end of the driveway, three more sat across the street. Officers were taping off the front lawn and drive.

Roscoe leaned against my leg as I walked him through the back gate and over to his impressive dog run. He walked inside. Roscoe whined and pushed against me. I patted his head and tried to speak to him calmly. “It’ll be okay Roscoe.” I knew he knew Cassie wasn’t coming back. The dog dropped to the ground, his head on his paws, brown sad eyes watching me. It was like his life-force drained with Cassie’s. I checked he had water and tossed him a few dog biscuits. Cassie kept a small bag of dog snacks in a cupboard inside the run. It also contained his leash and brush. Roscoe took a biscuit into his kennel. He flopped onto his bed. I closed the wire gate and locked it. I expected the sound of dog teeth crunching followed me from the backyard. There was nothing but a mournful silence. By the time I reached the house the yard was filled with the saddest howl I could’ve ever imagined.

I leaned back on the wall by the front door and eyed the two chairs sitting on the porch. Serenaded by the dog’s grief I thought about the night before. Cassie and I sat out on the porch. It was a cold night but the sky was clear. We’d watched shooting stars, drank coffee and righted every wrong in the world. Cassie had again broached the subject of me adopting Carla. She told me she’d written a letter and placed it in Carla’s file, her

recommendation for Carla's future. Our coffee cups still sat on the small table between the chairs.

A mixture of blood and dog fur stuck like a macabre patchwork on my jeans.

Footsteps.

Caine stood in front of me. "Cassie?" Gruff as ever.

I swallowed, hoping the word wouldn't choke me. "Dead." I looked down not wanting to see Caine's eyes. "Did you see Kurt Henderson?"

He nodded. "Who's running this?"

"Not us. Police. I heard someone say Darren Reid was Officer in Charge."

A cop appeared behind Caine. He was tall, broad shouldered and about forty years old. I'd seen him before but couldn't place him. As it happened, I didn't need to.

"SSA Conway, I'm Darren Reid. We met at Mac Connelly's house a few years ago – home invasion."

That's how I knew him. He was the cop Mac knew.

"You found the cat and took it to Bob Connelly's," I replied, shaking his hand then introducing Caine. "This is SAC Caine Grafton."

They shook. With pleasantries out of the way, work mode resumed.

"What happened here?" Caine asked while he pulled the on shoe coverings and gloves another officer handed him.

"Cassandra Smith, a fifty-one year old social worker with Child Services was murdered. Agent Conway was first on the scene and with her when she died. We don't have a motive yet. Follow me."

I stayed where I was.

"Conway?" Caine said. I got the message and walked behind Darren and Caine into the well-known interior of Cassie's home. Hundreds of photos of kids smiled down at me from the hallway walls. Their eyes followed me. I figured I could handle those eyes watching me as long as I didn't have to acknowledge losing a friend.

I almost walked into Caine, not noticing he'd stopped outside the kitchen. Darren entered the room. Caine and I stood in the wide doorway. Last night the room had been

bathed in warm light and the delicious aroma of homemade lasagna. Today it was blood splatter. I shivered.

“Okay?” Caine asked.

“Sure.”

I shuddered. My eyes flicked to the refrigerator door. Photos stuck by magnets covered the entire surface. There were photos of me, Cassie and Carla at various outdoor events over summer. Some of us hanging out in Cassie’s backyard, or my backyard. My eyes landed on a picture of Lee, Sam, Carla and Cassie. I remembered taking it.

“Cassie said the Unsub seemed interested in those photographs.” I pointed to the refrigerator. “He gave her a picture. This one.” I took the picture from my jacket pocket and gave it to Caine.

He showed Darren and the questions began.

“You know the victim well?”

“I know Cassie very well.”

“What’s your connection with Cassandra Smith?”

“She was the social worker assigned to protect Carla Torres. Carla’s mother was murdered.” I breathed in to steady my voice. “Cassie was convinced that Carla would be better off with me than in foster care. She was my friend.”

“This is where the injuries were sustained. The Unsub then dragged Cassandra down the hallway ...” Darren walked back down the hall and into Cassie’s room. He pointed to a bloody patch on the floor by the bed. “We believe she was left here for a few minutes.”

“That could’ve been when I came in the back. Cassie told me I spooked him. She used that time to get to the bathroom.”

“When I came in here, the door here was open.” I pointed to the french doors. “Once I determined the Unsub was gone I found Cassie in the bathroom.”

I blinked trying to stem the prickling at the back of my eyes. Cassie’s body called to me. I moved carefully avoiding blood and crouched beside her. Her out-of-focus eyes stared at nothing.

“Oh Cas, who did this?” I wanted a reply but none came. There was a smell of bleach by her hands. I hadn’t noticed it earlier. It tickled the back of my nose and triggered a memory. I sniffed. Chlorine. Chlorine bleach. “Caine – she has chlorine on her hands.”

The crime scene took on a new meaning. I scanned it for anything else that would go with the chlorine. Familiar poetry. Notes. Bourbon. Possessed by the past I walked back through the house, searching everything again with new eyes. Caine and Reid followed me in silence. The kitchen gave off the strongest smell of chlorine. My nose led me to the sink. There was a teacup. I sniffed and recoiled. The cup had contained chlorine bleach. I pointed it out. “She must’ve been soaking it to remove tea stains from the cup.”

I opened the cabinet under the sink and discovered a large bottle of Clorox. One mystery solved and it wasn’t sinister. I’m pretty sure the sigh that escaped was audible.

“Do you have any suspects?”

“Only you,” Darren replied.

Caine bristled. “SSA Conway was not involved in this unfortunate incident.”

“I’m not in the habit of killing my friends and I sure as hell wouldn’t beat someone to a pulp then call police,” I muttered at Darren. “And I don’t wear combat boots. You find a shemagh anywhere? Are my eyes different colors?”

He shook his head.

“We only have the description you gave. My officers weren’t able to confirm it with the deceased.”

“You need to look elsewhere.”

“I’m starting with what’s in front of me,” Darren replied.

It felt as though he wanted me to be involved. My annoyance rose. “What else have you got or are you content to waste time with me?”

“Did Cassandra have a partner, boyfriend? Anyone she’s been dating?”

Nothing then.

“No one permanent. She dated a guy from Alexandria a few times but said it wasn’t going anywhere.” My brain started to kick in. “Have you looked for her day planner – his phone number will be in there.”

“There was no day planner that we’ve found.”

“It might be in her car. Or maybe she uses her laptop as a day planner. That’s in her home office.”

My cell phone chirped. I looked at the screen. Chrissy. I looked at my clothes. Blood soaked. Time to go home and shower.

“I have to go. I’ll write my statement tonight and email it to you.” I took my card from my pocket and handed it to Reid. “You can reach me anytime. Keep me informed.”

He shook my hand. “Don’t leave the country.”

“If I were you I’d start checking for bugs and wireless cameras. Something is not right here,” I said, barely keeping a nasty edge from my voice.

“You Fed’s think everything is about terrorists and spies,” he scoffed.

“I’ll walk you out,” Caine said, turning me toward the door before I could snap a retort at Reid. My hand strayed to my hip. My fingers brushed the grip of my Glock. It took real will power to shove my hand in my pocket and not decorate the room with Reid’s blood.

“Is he for real?” I snarled at Caine as we stood on the driveway. “Don’t leave the country, it’s all about terrorists and spies. Who the does that fucktard think he’s dealing with?”

“I’ll handle him.”

“Thanks.” I looked at him. “Cassie was a federal employee – can Delta B investigate?”

I knew Delta A couldn’t. It’d be like investigating a family member’s murder. Not good to be so close.

“No reason why we can’t run a parallel investigation. I have the impression you are not filled with confidence by Mac’s old buddy?”

“Nope.”

“You sure you’re okay?”

Hell no.

I avoided the question. “I gotta go clean up and visit a high school.”

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The first two Ellie Conway novels – killerbyte and terrorbyte are available in both eBook format and paperback. Links available from the following places:

Rebel e Publishers site.

<http://www.rebelepublishers.com/>

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