

An Excerpt From

Son's Reward

The Blazer Saga

Madylin Roberts had been sitting in the conference room for nearly an hour. She had learned patience.

As long as Adrian Peters eventually walked through that door, her patience would have been well worth it. She had been clamoring for this interview for over six months.

She knew she was not the only reporter waiting for this opportunity.

To her knowledge, though, she was the first one to make it through the door.

The story had started a number of months ago when a mysterious accident at Omega Enterprises left a dozen high profile businessmen dead and a number of others injured and disfigured.

Eventually, evidence was released showing that one of the visiting businessmen, a little known gentlemen by the name of Lance Biggerman, had smuggled in a prototype weapon in an attempt to assassinate Omega Enterprises owner Raymond Rassond.

The weapon was described as a personal bomb, designed to eliminate targets in close range. Somehow, when attempting to detonate the device, a malfunction caused the weapon to affect all the occupants on the top floor. Incredible amounts of radiation were detected on the top floor even days after the incident. Those who died did not die from the actual explosion, but rather from a rapid degradation of cellular structure.

A handful of these individuals managed to survive, but even they did not escape unscathed.

The mystery was further confounded by the disappearance of Raymond Rassond. The owner of Omega Enterprises had shown no shyness to the media in the past, but he had been invisible since that night. All comments from Omega Enterprises had been that he was unavailable.

Rassond's wife, who had recently filed for divorce, only went on record as saying, "No comment."

Madylin, known by her colleagues as Maddy, had taken an interest in this story, which did not please her editor.

She could not deny the potential impact of what she had uncovered. She had gathered many pieces of the puzzle. She was nowhere near to collecting all the pieces, but she had enough of the picture to realize that she had originally been trying to assemble the wrong image.

There was a much bigger story behind this high-profile attempted homicide.

Maddy was prepared to stretch her patience pretty far to uncover the truth. However, she knew that she would eventually have to admit that she was being toyed with.

She held on just long enough.

After one hour and seven minutes, Adrian Peters and a woman Maddy did not recognize stepped into the conference room. Maddy stood and gave her professional smile as Peters straightened his suit and walked towards her.

"Ms. Roberts," he said in a friendly, business-like voice. "Forgive me for keeping you waiting."

"It's no problem," she said as she shook his hand. "It's a pleasure to be able to finally speak with you."

He stepped aside. "Let me introduce my administrative assistant, Jeanette."

Maddy shook the middle-aged brunette's hand.

Peters then motioned for them all to take a seat. "Please understand that I don't have much time. My schedule has been tighter than normal."

"Thank you for speaking with me personally, Mr. Peters. I know Jeanette or another assistant typically speaks to the press for you, but I'm glad to get some personal statements from you for this piece."

Peters nodded, straightening his posture. "Help clarify this story for me. I'm *The Atlantic Tribune's* man of the year?"

Maddy smiled, suddenly hopeful that he had not called the front office to confirm her assignment. "A nominee. No decisions have been made yet." She quickly added, "We're doing a special feature for each nominee."

Peters smiled and leaned back. "Well, that's alright. Who else got nominated?"

"Sorry," Maddy bluffed. "Even I don't know the whole list."

Peters accepted the response. "Go ahead, Ms. Roberts. I'll let you have a few minutes. What do you want to ask?"

"First things first." She lifted her recorder out of her purse and showed it to Peters. He nodded. She

hit the record button and sat it on the table.

“If you don't mind,” Maddy began, “maybe you can start by refreshing me on your full background. Feel free to include any recognitions or honors.”

Peters complied, starting with his beginnings in security at Newton Technologies in Boston to his studies at Virginia Tech and Syracuse. Then he recapped his days working for Darren Vollaire and finally his current position at Omega Enterprises.

Maddy noticed that as Peters gave his answers, Jeanette took rather extensive notes. She was curious as to exactly what the assistant was making notes of.

“What is it you enjoy about your work here at Omega Enterprises?” Maddy continued.

“An unlimited number of possibilities exist out there, Ms. Roberts,” Peters responded. “We have a world of troubles and trials, but the same world also holds solutions. At Omega Enterprises, we use our resources to uncover those solutions. I have a chance to make a difference. That's not something a man gets to do everywhere.”

Maddy nodded. “Do you feel that you do greater work here than at previous employments? For example, when you were working for Darren Vollaire?”

Peters gave her a look that warned her she could wear out her welcome.

“Working for Vollaire gave me many stepping stones, Ms. Roberts. However, I felt I needed to make a career move for both personal and business reasons. I try to make my work matter regardless of my employer.”

“Mr. Peters, how has your position developed here at Omega?”

“My role has always been to lead in the development of technologies and in the aggressive nature of our projects. Expect Omega to go more public with some of these projects over the next couple of years. The public will get excited. We are about to revolutionize genetics.”

“So your leadership role has increased?”

Peters smiled, a hint of his arrogance shining through. “Great men have one mission in life. Achieve great things.”

“Would you say your leadership role has grown past that of the company owner, Raymond Rassond?”

Peters controlled himself, but she could clearly see aggravation in his eyes. “What is that supposed to mean, Ms. Roberts?”

“It means, Mr. Peters, that Mr. Rassond has not been seen publicly in quite a while. Not since the

incident upstairs. During that time, you have been seen more regularly as the face of Omega.”

Peters hesitated. “Rassond has been occupied as of late. During that time period, I've helped shoulder the responsibility. It's called running a business.”

“Given recent activity, one might think you were calling all the shots these days.” Maddy paused briefly before continuing on. “If Rassond isn't calling the shots any more for whatever reason, that would leave you next in line, would it not?”

“Hmmp. Just to clarify, am I a nominee for man of the year or is it Ray? Because you seem to be asking a lot of questions about him.”

“I'm sorry to digress,” Maddy said. “I know it's a difficult time for the company, having to deal with the attempt on Mr. Rassond's life. Truth is, without that incident, you may not have had the opportunity to step out into the spotlight to be a nominee for the award.”

Peters chuckled as he reached over and hit the stop button on the recorder. Then he stood, straightening his suit once again. “I think my time is running short, Ms. Roberts.”

Maddy smiled, deciding she may have played her cards too early. “I'm sorry, Mr. Peters, do you not have time to answer a few questions about the company's owner?”

“I think maybe he would be a better source for those questions.”

“Thing is,” said Maddy, “I can't get a hold of him.”

Peters shrugged. “Keep trying.”

Maddy nodded as Peters turned to the door. Jeanette also stood. “Maybe I can just try to contact his brother,” Maddy said.

Peters paused. For a brief moment, Maddy saw the expression on his face that gave him away. “His brother?”

Maddy reached into her bag and pulled out a folder. “I didn't have this confirmed, but I stumbled across him and could not deny the resemblance. I'd almost claim they were twins.” Maddy pulled out a picture of a man that looked incredibly similar to Raymond Rassond. There were differences in hair color and other minor features, but the resemblance was uncanny.

“Landon Jones. Former candidate for Illinois state senate.”

Peters raised his eyebrows. “Seems like an interesting interview.”

“Yeah. Too bad he went missing a few months ago. His name had to be withdrawn from the election.”

"Another dead end for you, Ms. Roberts."

"Do you know if Rassond and Jones are brothers?"

Peters shook his head. "Ray didn't talk to me about his family."

Maddy shrugged. "It's a wonder. One would think he had a pretty big family." She pulled out another photo. This man also looked similar to Rassond.

"Ever hear of this one. Jordan Blankenship. I don't have much on him."

Peters did not cover his emotions as well this time. He snatched the file of photos and handed them to Jeanette.

Maddy tried to retrieve them, but Peters blocked her attempt.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Peters, but those were my pictures."

"Forgive me, Ms. Roberts, but I speak for Mr. Rassond when I say stick to researching your own family tree." He picked up the recorder.

Maddy dropped her smile and reached out for the recorder. "I didn't bring all of my possessions as party favors, Mr. Peters."

Adrian removed the tape before returning the recorder to the reporter.

"Have your newspaper remove me from their list of nominees, Ms. Roberts. I don't feel it's an honor I would care to receive."

He and his assistant left without another word.

Maddy waited until he reached her car before turning off the second recorder she had kept in her purse. When she got home, she would secure the recording in the same cabinet that she was keeping the original photos in.

Peters' expression had been quite telling when he saw the Blankenship photo. Maddy's leads were not dead after all. She loved her job.

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"For the love of Mary, Maddy! Seriously! Come freakin' on!" What got into that twisted mind of yours? Are you trying to end my career? Are you trying to give me ulcers?"

Maddy listened as her editor, Dan Upton, continued his rant. He would not hear her until he was finished, so she had learned a long time ago to let his outbursts run their course.

After several minutes, he finally calmed down.

"Give me a break, Danny. I'm getting you a major story. Maybe more than one. Trust me on this."

Dan scoffed. "No, Maddy. What you are doing is going to powerful, wealthy men and ticking them off for no good reason. That's not good for me, and it's not good for you."

"Ticking people off is what we get paid to do," Maddy argued. "The more influential they are, the better the target."

"No, Maddy, no. We tick people off when we have proof. What you're doing is going to keep lawyers in my office from now till freakin' Christmas!"

"I think this is big, Danny," Maddy replied. "I think this is bigger than anyone could have ever imagined. You've got to let me keep working these leads. Trust me, Danny. Please."

"Why? Peters is a dead end. You're getting nothing from him and probably nothing from anyone who works for him."

"I've got an interview lined up with Beth Rassond. I meet with her tomorrow."

"Ray Rassond's wife?"

"Soon to be ex-wife. I think she'll be willing to talk."

Danny sighed. "About what, exactly? Be serious, Maddy. Where do you expect this to lead? Is this going anywhere that actually produces a story?"

"I have a theory."

"Oh, Lord. I should've known."

"Hear me out. If I'm right..."

"No, Maddy. I don't want to hear the word if."

Maddy sighed. "Do you want to hear this or not?"

For a second, she thought he was going to say no. "Go ahead," he muttered.

"I just emailed you some photos. Open the one that says Jones."

"Alright, Landon Jones." Danny paused. "Wow."

"See. Peters would neither confirm nor deny relations."

"They could be twins."

"Yes. Could be. This guy was running for Illinois state senate. Dropped off the face of the earth all of a sudden. Open Salters."

"Jeremy Salters. Hmmm. Looks like Rassond may have had a large family."

"The Salters guy died about two and a half years ago. Lived out on the west coast. Cause of death was health related, but details were less than straight forward. More question marks than Elvis Presley or Michael Jackson."

"Yeah. He looks like he's seen a few too many doctors. Let's look at this last one. Blankenship?"

"Yeah. Jordan Blankenship. The resemblance is closer with him than the others. You ought to have seen Peters' face light up when I showed him this one."

"So what are these? Rassond's clones?"

"Don't get crazy on me, Danny. I'm not writing a sci-fi piece here."

"Then what's going on?"

"All these guys are Ray. Or rather, Ray is all of them. He has different lives, all over the country. Different wives maybe. It makes sense. All of these men have weird things going on. Sudden disappearances. Mysterious deaths. Maybe Rassond has a multiple personality disorder."

"You think this is what's going on?"

"It makes sense," said Maddy. "Successful wealthy businessman drops off the face of the earth. Maybe this attempted homicide pushed him over the edge. Maybe Peters made an attempt to gain power and sabotaged him. All the evidence points to something funny going on."

"And you think the wife will talk?" Danny asked.

"She's going through a divorce. There's a lot of money involved. Two kids. If this goes public, it helps her position in court, in public, wherever. She has no reason not to talk."

"You would think Peters would benefit by outing him as well."

"Possibly. But there was more going on with Peters. At least I think so."

"Like what?"

"One source I talked to said there was someone there the night of the incident. Someone who prevented the weapon from killing anyone. Someone with unique powers who saved lives."

"Hmmm. Sounds familiar these days."

"So." His words perked Maddy up. "Do you really think the reports about an angel rescuing people are true?"

Danny chuckled. "No. But there are too many different sources to deny that something's going on."

"Well, trust me, Danny. There's a lot going on here too. Let me talk to the wife, and then I'll dig up info on Rassond's aliases. I'm thinking this Blankenship identity looks like a hot lead."

Danny hesitated. "You may have something. Stay on it."

"Good man."

"But be careful. You're dealing with some high profile names here."

"You got it chief." She hung up the phone, leaned back, and lit a cigarette.

Then she imagined the look on Beth Rassond's face when she dropped those pictures in front of her tomorrow. She loved her job.