

THE COST OF BETRAYAL

THREE ROMANTIC SUSPENSE NOVELLAS

BETRAYED BY DEE HENDERSON

DEADLY ISLE BY DANI PETTREY

CODE OF ETHICS BY LYNETTE EASON



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Dee Henderson, Dani Pettrey, and Lynette Eason, *The Cost of Betrayal*
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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Henderson, Dee. *Betrayed*. | Pettrey, Dani. *Deadly isle*. | Eason, Lynette.
Code of ethics.

Title: The cost of betrayal : three romantic suspense novellas.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, [2018]

Identifiers: LCCN 2018018555 | ISBN 9780764231735 (trade paper) | ISBN
9780764231773 (cloth) | ISBN 9781493416059 (e-book) | ISBN 9780764233067
(large print)

Subjects: LCSH: Suspense fiction, American.

Classification: LCC PS648.S88 C67 2018 | DDC 813/.08720806—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018018555>

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Cover design by Studio Gearbox

Dani Pettrey is represented by Books & Such Literary Agency

Lynette Eason is represented by The Steve Laube Agency

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

BETRAYED

BY DEE HENDERSON

7

DEADLY ISLE

BY DANI PETTREY

153

CODE OF ETHICS

BY LYNETTE EASON

263

BETRAYED

DEE HENDERSON

ONE

ANN FALCON

ANN FALCON EASED TOWARD the front of the crowd. The auctioneer working his way down a line of tables was presently selling off kitchenware. She felt a light touch at the small of her back and glanced around to find her husband had rejoined her. She leaned toward him to be heard. “That was fast—find anything interesting?”

“Most of the paintings are too modern for my taste, but there’s one item, a Chicago-skyline print from the ’40s,” Paul replied. “They’ll be starting the art auction in about ten minutes, but it’s going to be an hour before they reach that print. How about you?”

“There are some silk scarves and half-used perfume bottles in a box of miscellaneous dresser drawer items that might make a nice painting arrangement. If the box doesn’t go over twenty dollars, I’m interested. That dumpy one with the green stripes on the side.”

He looked across the tables and nodded when he spotted her choice. “The third auctioneer has finished with the garden and

patio items and is moving over to tools. No surprise, the largest crowd is there. I'm going to scope out the furniture, then look through the industrial and professional section. It looks like several businesses are clearing excess inventory. The FBI lab is always looking for the basics in volume. Maybe something there will be useful to the bureau."

"I'll find you," Ann assured him, and with another nod her husband disappeared into the crowd. She liked spending weekends with Paul doing non-crisis things like wandering a big auction looking for hidden treasures. Twice a year this former aircraft hangar near O'Hare Airport filled with merchandise brought in by area auction houses. A day-long sale by professional auctioneers kept the crowd active and buying. She always found something interesting at this December sale to give as a gift, like the odd toy or the unexpected book.

She lifted her number as the box she was interested in got hoisted on high, quickly realized she was bidding against four people, and two dropped out at ten. The woman to her left still had the box when it reached sixteen. Ann hesitated, let the auctioneer call for the raise twice, looking to her for another bid. Ann saw brief regret rather than pleasure on the high bidder's face—she must not have really wanted it at sixteen. Ann nodded to the auctioneer and wasn't surprised when he called it "sold" to her at seventeen.

Three dollars under her limit gave her a nice deal. She accepted the box and the sales ticket from the staff. Twenty dollars on items for herself, now it was time to find something for either Paul or one of his family members with another twenty. She paid for her first purchase at the exit gate, hauled it out to the car trunk, and went back to shopping.

TWO

PAUL FALCON

MONDAY NIGHT PAUL FOUND HIS WIFE working at her desk in their shared home office, not surprised she was still up waiting for him. “Sorry I’m late.”

“What? Oh, yeah, it is late. You called, didn’t you?” She came swimming out of what it was she was doing to focus on him and smiled.

He leaned over her desk and kissed her. The conference call that had cost him a spaghetti dinner and movie with his wife had ended just after eleven. Some aspiring young bureaucrat in Washington, D.C., had thought it worth cutting corners to get a wiretap on a federal judge. Being the neutral party first hearing about the problem now, Paul would be spending the next several days untangling the current NYC investigation mess in order to tell his boss, the director of the FBI, what could be salvaged and who should be fired.

The big black bear of a dog at Ann’s feet rolled over and planted his paw across Paul’s left shoe, yawned, and shook

his head violently. Paul glanced down. "You were dreaming, weren't you?"

The dog merely rested his head across Paul's other shoe and tried to go back to sleep. If it wasn't such a typical greeting, Paul would have laughed. "You've been here awhile if Black has taken up station under your feet."

The auction-purchased box was on the floor beside Ann, the collection of perfume bottles now on her desk in a basket, the silk scarves neatly folded, along with a jewelry box and some rather unexpected items: a small sewing kit and a bulky pink pocketknife. He'd figured at this late hour he would find her upstairs painting, but she hadn't taken her auction haul up to the studio yet. "Did the jewelry box have anything in it?" It didn't look particularly old, but it had a highly polished cherry finish and a nice appearance.

"A man's ring, probably missed when the box was emptied, as it was in the lower compartment and kind of stuck. There are initials on the jewelry box." Ann closed the lid to show him. "A cursive *T.C.*, which makes me think female. The pink pocketknife has the name Janelle Roberts engraved on it. I got curious and was doing some research."

"Think you can trace where the box came from?" he asked, interested.

"I'd like to return the ring if it turns out to have sentimental value. A woman's dresser items suggest someone who died recently, so I started with obituaries. So far the initials *T.C.* has yielded only men. Jane or Janelle Roberts has yielded three obituaries, but none who seem likely to have carried a pink pocketknife or used this collection of perfumes. These are on the expensive end of modern fragrances. And the scarves have contemporary patterns. I'm thinking a rather young woman."

"I buy that logic." It was so like his wife to reason out how to track down a jewelry box in order to return a ring, and then

go the long route of original research. “Or you could call the auction company tomorrow.”

“What fun would that be?” she joked back.

He laughed. “I’ve got an early call with D.C. that I need to take back at the office. I’m heading to bed.”

“I’ll be—” she glanced at the items, the screen, and guessed—
“twenty minutes?”

He interpreted that to mean an hour if she found something interesting and could live with that. “Sounds good.” He kissed his wife good-night and wished the evening had unfolded differently. Then he eased his feet from under the dog and leaned down to ruffle fur. His life had been boring without a wife and a dog in it. He left Ann to her search.

Understanding realities, Paul packed a bag in case he needed to be on a flight to New York or D.C. tomorrow, took a fast shower, and crawled into bed. He was tired physically and mentally. Running the Chicago FBI office had a predictable order to it, but there hadn’t been enough Saturdays to just wander around at an auction or similar event and simply decompress. The year always ended hard in the FBI as December brought personnel moves, attempts to tie off investigations so the numbers could be counted in this calendar year, and higher crime rates as criminals seemed to operate with a desire to finish whatever was going on by year’s end as well. He put work out of his mind, turned his thoughts toward God. He was asleep before he’d finished his prayer for his large extended family.

IIIIIIII

“Paul.”

He woke enough to realize his wife was sliding into bed.

“Hmm?”

“I found a murder.”

If it was anyone other than his wife, he would have struggled

to come the rest of the way to full consciousness. This was Ann. She'd worked as many murders in her career as he had before she retired to marry him. "Okay," he murmured.

"I'll show you in the morning."

"That works." He wrapped an arm around her, glad to have her beside him, and dropped back to sleep.

He was more alert six hours later. He thoughtfully didn't turn on the overhead light, though it was dark outside, just shifted the bathroom door so a comfortable amount of light spilled into the bedroom.

"You said 'murder.'"

Ann mumbled something but didn't stir. He finished shaving, and she still hadn't turned over. They had a deal; he didn't wake her on the way to the office, and she would be a wife that didn't get snippy because she was exhausted. On her bedside table was a stack of printed pages that had not been there when he turned off the light. They looked like printed newspaper articles from—what was it?—six and seven years ago. He carried them into the kitchen, popped a bagel into the toaster, started coffee. He read through the material she'd printed, the items she'd underlined. He came back with coffee for both of them and took a seat on the side of the bed, turned on the bedside light. "You did indeed find a murder." He kept his voice low, conversational.

"Give me the coffee," she mumbled. He made sure she was propped up on an elbow and steady before handing over the second mug.

"Janelle Roberts murdered her boyfriend, Andrew Chadwick, the night he broke up with her," he summarized. "Stabbed him once and pushed him down a steep flight of stairs at the beach. She got twenty years for second-degree murder." He set the printed articles on the bedside table. "You found not just a murder, but an interesting one."

“Can you send the pocketknife through the lab for me? I put it in an evidence bag on your desk.”

“You think we’ve got the murder weapon?” Paul asked, genuinely surprised.

Ann shrugged. “It’s pink, has her name on it. By Janelle’s own admission, she had the pocketknife in her purse two days before his death—she pried a cork out of a bottle for her friend Tanya. The fact she couldn’t produce the pocketknife was used against her at the trial because the model was consistent with the blade that stabbed Andrew. It makes sense it was the murder weapon, hidden somewhere cops didn’t locate during their search. They turned up her tennis shoes with faint blood traces in the treads, but not the pocketknife.”

Paul considered Ann’s request. After six years in prison, winning an appeal was unlikely, yet having the murder weapon would impact a DA’s decision on how to retry the case should the need arise. “Okay, I’ll send it through the lab.”

“Thanks.” Ann drank more of the coffee. “The friend Tanya, by the way, is the sister of the dead man. Janelle had a particularly bad night. She stabbed Andrew with a pink pocketknife that has her name on it. I imagine she was afraid to throw it in a dumpster—hey, it’s pink!—someone probably retrieves it. She could bury it, but if someone finds the knife years later, it’s still got her name on it. If she doesn’t get it cleaned well first, there might be traces of blood left, and there’s no statute of limitations on murder. She would have needed to melt it down to truly dispose of it safely.” Ann paused, thought a moment, and added, “That’s not so easy to do. She’d need a blowtorch or something like it, since I don’t think putting it in the oven would get it hot enough to reshape metal.”

Paul smiled as his wife gestured with her mug. “Anyway, cops are on her doorstep that night,” she continued, “serving a warrant to search her place. So now Janelle’s afraid to go

near where she stashed the pocketknife while cops see her as their primary suspect. She gets arrested, can't make bail, and the trial renders a guilty verdict. Her landlord ends up hiring two guys to box up her apartment because her friends have all deserted her and she's no longer paying the rent. The missing pocketknife falls out of the ceramic Christmas tree she had stored in a neighbor's locker area—or some other similarly odd hiding place. It gets tossed into a box, everything heading toward the cobweb-end of an unused basement, while the landlord sorts out if he can legally sell Janelle's possessions or not. Years later, everything gets cleared out and that box ends up at Saturday's massive sale."

Paul could easily envision the kind of scenario Ann had laid out. "The initials on the jewelry box, T.C., that would be Tanya Chadwick, the dead man's sister?"

"It is. Good memory." Ann shoved pillows around to get more comfortable. "We know from the news articles Janelle and Tanya were best friends since second grade. I can see that jewelry box being passed along. 'I don't need this anymore, as I've got a larger one—do you want it?' and Janelle ends up with Tanya's jewelry box. They reach their twenties and Janelle starts dating Tanya's brother. Then the bad breakup happens, Janelle kills the brother, and there goes the friendship. I haven't tracked Tanya down yet. I don't know if she's still in the Chicago area or not. Not that I plan to say anything if we've found the murder weapon. I just want to hand it to the DA in case an appeal results in a new trial."

"We're of like minds on that," Paul agreed, but wondered how awake she was and proposed an obvious question. "Have you considered the fact this box of items could instead be Tanya's things, rather than Janelle's?"

Ann blinked twice, her face registering her surprise. Then she handed him the coffee and collapsed back, pulling one of the

pillows over her face. “I just wanted an interesting collection of dresser things to paint.”

He set the mug on the side table with a smile and rubbed her arm. “It raises an interesting question. How did the sister of the dead man come to have the pink pocketknife in her possession? And why doesn’t she say anything about it while her friend is on trial for murder and they are talking about the fact they can’t locate that very pocketknife?”

Ann sighed as she lowered the pillow. “You figure out if it’s the murder weapon. I’ll figure out where that box came from—if it’s Janelle’s belongings or it’s actually Tanya’s things.”

He leaned over and kissed her. “Enjoy your puzzle.”

“You’re heading somewhere? I saw the bag by the door.”

“I sincerely hope not, but if so I’ll make it a lightning trip.”

“Take a good book for the flight.”

“I will. Go back to sleep.”

She nodded and rolled over to hug his pillow. He shut off the side table light. The dog was still snoring, resting on his back, feet in the air, guarding the bathroom door. Paul gave him a belly rub and whispered, “Take good care of her today.” Black’s tail swished back and forth. Paul collected his luggage, stopped in their shared office to pick up the pocketknife now in an evidence bag, and headed downstairs to the waiting car.

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“Miss me?”

The dog darted away to bring back a mangled fuzzy bear that growled when he bit down on it hard enough. Paul set down his luggage, gave the bear a solid tug to confirm its special place as the favorite toy, and rubbed Black’s head. “Where is she?”

The dog turned his head and looked toward the office rather than the stairs to the studio. “Thanks.”

It had been a long two days. A federal judge was taking bribes

to sway his rulings, and not much of a case was left that could prove it, given how tainted the investigation had become. The Chicago office would be taking over the matter from the New York office, which meant he had to figure out who he could give up for the next six weeks from among the best of his investigators. Probably Sam and Rita, as he trusted them to get it right, but it was going to mean that what they were managing now would land back on his desk.

Paul paused in the doorway of their home office. "I'd ask if you missed me, but I recognize the look that says you're not even sure what day it is."

His wife turned from the whiteboard, now a case board, set down the marker she held, and walked into his hug. "Welcome home," she said with a satisfied sigh.

"You've been busy."

"Don't want to talk about it," she mumbled against his chest. "I want spaghetti and a movie and your feet up on the coffee table beside mine."

He rubbed her back and chuckled. "That sounds perfect. Are you fixing that meal or am I?"

"We'll call your sister and ask for a delivery from the restaurant. You can choose the movie so long as it's not one of the X-men ones."

"Deal."

They ate dinner at the kitchen counter, tabbing through the family messages and photos of the last couple of days to share updates before retreating to the living room to enjoy a movie and decompress together from what life had already tossed at them this month.

Their month would only get busier. Paul didn't want to think about how many holiday parties were stacked on their social calendar for the next few weeks. His extended family would start arriving to town. And between Christmas and New Year's

they were hosting a gathering here that the governor was likely to attend. Ann would handle it, but every year at this time he regretted that they couldn't make December about half as complex as it inevitably turned out to be.

He idly twisted a strand of her hair around his finger, glad for at least one evening in their week to reconnect. They still functioned best as *us*, and he wanted more than anything to protect that. Not for the first time he thought about retirement, mulling over his working assumption it was more than five years and less than ten years away. He could feel himself getting closer to the day when he would say more than two but less than five years.

When the movie was over, and even Black had decided he'd had enough popcorn, Paul steered the conversation to the details of Ann's last few days. He knew she really didn't mind talking shop. She'd retired, and he'd been promoted too high to take the lead on a case anymore, but they still kept their hands in the investigative side of things by working the occasional cold case together. "I heard the pocketknife came back as a positive match for the murder weapon."

Ann stirred enough to uncross her feet and sit up. "There was blood on the longest blade, and the DNA is a match to Andrew Chadwick."

"Your whiteboard looks a lot like an investigation."

She glanced his direction. "Just preliminary thoughts. You were right. The box of items belongs to Tanya Chadwick."

He was surprised to hear his brief suggestion had turned out to be right. "You found an obituary? She's dead? Or did you track the box ownership down through the auction company?"

"Tanya is very much alive and now living in New York City. I've learned the box I purchased was brought to the area-wide auction by Mark's Auction House. They had bought fifty-eight boxes of household goods, twenty-three pieces of furniture,

and eight floor rugs from a Michelle Rice, a woman who turns out to be the former house manager for the Chadwick family. Tanya sold the family home this year, and Mrs. Rice has moved on to new employment. I spoke briefly with Mrs. Rice today. She said she would have packed the items that were taken to the auction house. I'm having coffee with her tomorrow under the guise of showing her the jewelry box and ring so I can confirm I'll be returning the ring to its rightful owner. I should be able to guide the conversation around to learn how that varied collection of items, including a pink pocketknife, made it into the same box. I went ahead and put out requests today for the trial transcript and the case file. I'll give the materials a few days of my time and see what I can learn."

"Want some help?"

"Do you honestly have an extra brain cell right now?"

"I'm burned to a crisp."

She rubbed a hand across his hair and smiled. "Still just smoking gray showing up. You begin turning active flame and I'll start to worry. I'll take a preliminary look at the files and let you know." She reached for her glass sitting on a coffee-table coaster. "I don't expect to get very far. The knife probably showed up after the trial was concluded, and Tanya couldn't convince herself to throw it away but didn't want to talk to cops ever again, so she dumped it in a drawer. Janelle was already in jail for the murder. Six years later, Tanya decides she's going to stay permanently in New York and makes arrangements to sell the family home back here in Chicago. The house manager is directing a crew of people, boxing what is going to Tanya in New York, what is going to the auction house, and what is being left for the house stagers to use in showcasing it for sale. In the process, the pocketknife that had been dropped in a forget-me drawer ends up in a box of dresser items heading to auction rather than the trash."

Paul could hear the cop in her putting the pieces together in logical order. “The common-sense answer does tend to be what happened,” he murmured. He knew she’d look until the question was resolved to her satisfaction. “Ready to call it a night?”

“Been ready since about the second half of the movie. I don’t sleep as well without you.”

He reached for her hand and pulled her to her feet. “Now you’re just being kind. I’ll walk the dog tonight if you tackle unpacking my bag. I’d rather not see a reminder that I might get pulled away again.”

“How deep is the snow?”

“They’re saying ten inches by morning, mostly lake-effect.”

“You can walk the dog.”

Paul laughed. The dog enjoyed fresh snow, liked to crash through drifts and climb mountains when it got piled. The walk that would take twenty minutes in the summer would take forty in winter. “Black, want to walk?”

The dog shook himself awake and headed out to the entry for his leash.

Paul kissed his wife, content this one corner of his life was in good order, and went to join their dog.