

Bad Moon Rising

Frances di Plino

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Contact Information: enquiries@crookedcatpublishing.com

This book is dedicated to my parents. Antonio, whose Italian ancestry inspired both my pen name and Detective Inspector Paolo Storey's lineage and Elizabeth Rose (1934-2011), who would have been thrilled to see this novel published.

About the Author

Frances di Plino is the pen name of Lorraine Mace, humour columnist for Writing Magazine.

She is also a deputy editor of Words with JAM, writes fiction for the women's magazine market, features and photo-features for monthly glossy magazines, and is a writing competition judge for Writers' Forum. Winner of a Petra Kenney International Poetry Award, she has been placed in numerous creative writing and poetry competitions.

Lorraine, a tutor for Writers Bureau, is the author of the Writers Bureau course, *Marketing Your Book*, and the co-author, with Maureen Vincent-Northam, of the *Writer's ABC Checklist* (Accent Press).

Bad Moon Rising

"I loved this tense, fast-paced and gripping novel. A brilliant debut."

Amanda Hodgkinson

New York Times Bestselling author of 22 Britannia Road

"sensational, a complete hit... truly thrilling... pure brilliance"

Bethan Townsend

Judging Covers Reviews

"read-at-a-sitting page turner"

Patrick Forsyth

The Woman Writer

"With memorable characters and a plot that keeps the reader guessing right to the very end, Frances di Plino's debut novel, Bad Moon Rising, will more than satisfy any fan of good crime writing."

Jo Reed

Author of the Blood Dancer series of novels

CHAPTER ONE

“Please, no. Oh God. No more. Please.”

Excited by her pleading, he pounded his fists into her face. He craved release, but couldn't give in. Not yet. Not while she could defile him. Only when her swollen lids meant she could no longer see did he allow himself to take her throat between his hands and free her soul.

He waited for her death throes to pass, then relaxed his grip and moved down the bed to suck and caress her breasts. His heart pounded. Now. He had to move now before it was too late. Shifting position, he straddled her body. Arching his back, he emptied his hatred onto her breasts.

Shuddering, he slid from the bed and fell to the floor.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered. “So sorry, so sorry, so...”

His throat constricted. As tears flowed, he screamed. Thrashing wildly, he knocked against the chair holding the woman's clothes. Her tights fell across his neck and he panicked, clawing himself free.

Fucking whore!

“God forgive me,” he sobbed. “She made me. Forgive me, God. Forgive me.”

Crawling to the corner cupboard, he opened the door and reached for the scourge. He braced himself, then flicked the nine-tailed lash, the tiny spiked ends digging into his flesh.

Each strike lifted him closer to purity, until he collapsed. Exhausted, he slept.

He woke at first light, ready for the next stage. Filling a bowl with water, he brought it to the bed, then scraped under each of the woman's nails before washing most of her body in the warm water. He swabbed above and below her breasts, careful not to disturb his gift, the sign of her salvation. From under the bed he brought out a small black leather casket. He removed a fine-toothed comb and ran it through her pubic hair, placing the loose hairs in the envelope he'd already marked with a number four.

Detective Inspector Paolo Storey hunched deeper into his sheepskin. The cold suited his mood. A biting wind, typical for the dying days of February, gusted across the front of the criminal courts and played havoc with the press microphones. One of the reporters dropped his dictaphone. It bounced once before landing in the gutter. A spasm of disgust crossed his face as he reached down and brought it up, dripping with sludge. For the first time that day, Paolo felt like smiling. He didn't like reporters, and that one in particular enjoyed knocking the police.

He couldn't understand why the press considered it was okay to have a go at the people trying to put criminals away. Lowlife cons had more rights than their victims. He tried to contain his anger but he was too mad at the world in general, and justice in particular.

Paolo and his Detective Sergeant, Dave Johnson, stepped back to allow the solicitor and Frank Azzopardi to pass. The reporters began yelling questions, each determined to be heard. Matthew Roberts stood beside his client, waiting for the noise to abate.

“Seems the bastard's got away with it, sir,” Dave whispered.

Paolo turned his head slightly to answer; the icy wind was making his eyes water. “Yeah, that tends to happen when the only witness disappears, particularly when she's also the victim. Ssh, let's hear what Roberts has to say.”

“My client, Frank Azzopardi, a well-respected businessman, has been the victim of yet another effort by the police to improve their conviction rates. He has been unfairly targeted, accused of attempted murder and grievous bodily harm, yet not one witness to the alleged attack has come forward. Even the supposed victim hasn't felt it worth her while to follow up

on her original statement. We have been told today that the Crown Prosecution Service cannot find sufficient evidence to bring the case to trial and that all charges against Mr Azzopardi have been dropped. We shall be making a complaint about the harassment he has suffered at the hands of an overzealous police force. Depending on the outcome of that complaint, we will consider our legal options. That is all, we have no further comment.”

Paolo knew they were most probably too far away for Roberts and the reporters to hear him, but he lowered his voice just in case.

“I could’ve written that speech for him,” he said. “He’s like Pavlov’s bloody dog. See a camera – badmouth the police.”

They made an incongruous pair, the Maltese pimp and his legal representative. Matthew Roberts dressed with a quiet elegance at complete odds with his client’s flamboyant attire. It was easy to see why Roberts made female heads turn: tall and good-looking, he exuded confidence and charm. Azzopardi was only a few inches shorter, but a swarthy complexion, shiny black hair and flashy designer clothes made him look almost a caricature of his companion.

Roberts and Azzopardi had a close friendship that went all the way back to their shared schooldays. As a teenager in the same school, Paolo had once wanted to be part of Matthew Roberts’ inner circle, but even back then he’d loathed Azzopardi. Now the less he had to do with his former classmates the better, but with Roberts representing Azzopardi it was impossible not to run up against both of them.

The two walked away, the reporters at their heels still calling out questions.

Paolo sighed as they passed. “I’ll get that bastard one day. We’d best try and track down our missing witness.”

They walked towards Dave’s car, Paolo silently running through the possibilities of what might have happened to Lisa Boxer, until Dave interrupted his thoughts.

“Do you reckon Roberts believes all that guff he spouts?” he asked, patting his pockets until he located his car keys. “I mean he can’t really be stupid enough to think you’d try to frame Azzopardi just to get a conviction, can he?”

Paolo wondered if Dave was questioning his integrity. They hadn’t been partners long enough to establish any kind of rapport yet, so he wasn’t sure what the younger man thought, especially as the case predated Dave joining the team.

“I don’t know what goes through his head. Maybe he just likes being on the box. I feel as though I can’t switch the set on without Mr Smooth spouting police corruption.” Paolo changed his voice to imitate the cultured tones of Matthew Roberts. “It is my belief the police couldn’t find their own stations without a map. They are incompetent.”

He waited until Dave stopped laughing. “All I know is, I had Azzopardi this time and I let him slip away. I should’ve insisted on protection for Lisa Boxer, but I didn’t. On the other hand, she might have done a runner. Prostitutes don’t like dealing with the police, not even when we’re on the same side.”

They got in the car and Dave manoeuvred it away from the kerb, edging smoothly into the Bradchester traffic.

“How come you never clean this garbage heap?” Paolo asked, kicking around to move empty Coke cans, burger wrappings and newspapers so that he had somewhere to put his feet.

“I never have time, sir. Maybe I should get myself a girlfriend.”

Paolo grunted. “Fat chance of that. You know what they call you back at the station?”

“Of course. Tomcat. I love ’em and I leave ’em. But I bet I could still get one of them to clean the car if I put my mind to it.”

“Sorry to ruin your daydreams, but we’re living in the twenty-first century, not the dark ages, or haven’t you noticed?”

“No! Are we really?” Dave asked, laughing in a way that irritated Paolo even more than his crass comments.

Paolo allowed his mind to wander until Dave’s next question caught his attention.

“So you believe Azzopardi did it, sir? I mean he says he didn’t, and his alibi seems pretty good. The girlfriend’s not budging, and we don’t have anything on him other than the prostitute’s story.” He paused. “What made you believe her, anyway?”

Paolo fumbled in his pocket, bringing out his cigarettes. He shook one out and held it halfway to his lips. “I saw her in hospital after she’d been beaten,” he said, his voice hardened as he remembered. “There wasn’t a part of her that wasn’t bruised.”

Paolo fell silent, remembering the way Lisa had barely been able to move without crying out.

“You really think the girlfriend was ready to perjure herself?”

Paolo sighed. “Maria Vassallo has been Azzopardi’s girlfriend since she was fifteen. She’d say the sky was black at midday if he wanted her to, then hotfoot it to confession straight afterwards to wash her soul clean.”

“So why did he do it? I mean, why would he get his own hands dirty?”

“I think it was meant as a warning to the Albanians to stay off his turf.” He raised his lighter and lit the cigarette, then dragged the smoke deep into his lungs. “Azzopardi only took over his uncle’s empire a few years back; he’s got no intention of letting anyone else in. As for why he did it himself, I know for a fact he likes to slap the girls around. His Maria has carried the odd bruise.”

“Then why has Lisa Boxer disappeared just when we needed her to convince the CPS? D’you have to smoke? The car stinks for days afterwards,” Dave said, opening the car window.

The sudden rush of cold air hit Paolo like a physical blow. “Christ, you trying to give us both pneumonia? Close the window, for God’s sake. This car stinks whether I smoke or not.” He took another drag on his cigarette, then opened his window just enough to let the smoke out. “I agree with you, it doesn’t add up, which is why we’re going to pay a visit to Miss Boxer.”

The car moved steadily through the Bradchester streets. Paolo closed his eyes, uninterested in the change of scenery as they travelled away from the affluent detached properties that ringed the centre of town and headed towards the council estates on the outskirts. The thought of a man like Frank Azzopardi getting away with anything stuck in his gullet, but his real contempt he kept for Matthew Roberts. How Roberts could bring himself to represent someone like Azzopardi was beyond him. Even though he’d known both men for more than twenty-five years, he still didn’t get it. Strange how just recently he’d been running into people he’d gone to school with...

Paolo’s phone rang, bringing him back to the present.

“Storey. Okay, where? Right, about fifteen minutes. Yep, we’re on our way.”

He put the phone back in his pocket. “Seems like our chat with Lisa Boxer will have to wait. Turn around when you can; we’re heading to Gallows Heath. Remember just after you’d joined the team, they found a woman’s body that looked like a lump of butcher’s meat?” At Dave’s nod, Paolo continued. “They’ve found another one.”

CHAPTER TWO

He switched on the laptop and waited for it to power up. Taking the memory stick from the table, he tried to fit it into the USB port. Anticipation made his hands shake and he had difficulty fitting the flash drive into the opening. Breathing deeply, he forced himself to calm down and eventually succeeded in slotting it home. Turning off the table lamp, he sat in the dark and waited for the images to appear.

Even though the camera angle still wasn't exactly right, he could see more of this one's face as she thrashed from side to side trying, and failing, to avoid his fists. As he watched his onscreen self, his hand slipped under his cassock, moving in time with each punch.

Now, as he saw himself spurting over her dead body, the heat rose, higher, tighter, throbbing, spurting. Dead... fucking... filthy... whore. He fell forward, body jerking in ecstasy, until the last exquisite twitch.

Sated for the moment, he lolled back in the chair, heart pounding, thinking of the great gift God had bestowed on him. It meant he'd never be caught.

You can't catch someone who doesn't exist.

Gallows Heath formed a green barrier between the haves and have-nots of Bradchester. The wide expanse of common was the only place where the two sectors of society almost met. Council estates bordered the south and east sides, private housing overlooked the heath from the other two boundaries.

The car park on the southern border, providing parking for two nearby tower blocks, was already cordoned off. The blue and white tape, fluttering in the howling wind, looked almost festive.

A crowd had gathered, and a chorus of whispered horror battled against the sound of the rising storm. Paolo shook his head.

"I'd pray for rain to drive this lot indoors, but that would make our job even harder," he muttered.

A constable came over as they approached the cordoned-off area. Flashing his warrant card, Paolo smiled at the uniformed man.

"PC Gibson, sir," the young man said. "The schoolboys who discovered the body are over there with WPC Start. Their names are Patrick Kilbride and Freddy Samson."

Paolo looked across to where a couple of lads were being reassured by a policewoman. "What do you know so far?"

"The boys were playing football on the heath and kicked the ball into the car park. They saw an arm and panicked. Fortunately that chap over there, a Mr James Smedley," he said, pointing to a man sitting on a nearby bench, "was passing and had a mobile. He called the emergency services and stayed with the lads until we arrived."

"Right, let's have a look, shall we?" Paolo saw the young man's face blanch and took pity on him. "You wait here, Gibson. Keep the vultures at bay."

A look of relief flooded the constable's face. Paolo guessed it had probably been the young policeman's first corpse.

As Paolo and Dave approached the body the stench of decay made them gag. The top half of the corpse had been dragged from its black plastic shroud. It looked likely that an animal had ripped through the bag. Teeth marks showed where chunks of flesh had been torn off. At first glance it was barely recognisable as human, apart from the bleached hair and painted fingernails.

“Jesus!” Paolo looked up to see that the SOCOs had arrived and walked back to the tape to meet them.

“Dr Royston,” he said, nodding in greeting.

Paolo kept his expression neutral, aware of Dave watching for any possible interplay between him and Barbara Royston. There’d been some talk at Christmas after the party, which he was sure would have been repeated when Dave joined the team, even though no one had actually asked him face to face if there was anything going on. His thoughts drifted back to that night and he wondered if Barbara would ever forgive him. Sighing, he shoved the question to the back of his mind.

Barbara held his gaze, almost challenging him to say something, but he had no idea what. The forensic pathologist’s thick blonde hair was held back in a ponytail, emphasizing her pale complexion and dark blue eyes. The livid birthmark staining her neck was on show for all to see. A flicker of emotion passed across her face, but Paolo couldn’t read it. When he didn’t speak, she gave a half shrug and turned away. As she walked towards the body, Paolo watched her rigid back. He had to clear the air, but now wasn’t the time.

Leaving Barbara and her team to their examination, he turned to Dave.

“Come on, let’s go and talk to the kids who found the body.”

WPC Start was smiling and chatting to the two lads. Paolo looked over at Dave and could see him eyeing up the policewoman in terms of a future conquest. Coffee-coloured skin and almond-shaped brown eyes hinted at an ethnic mix. Pretty without being striking, she gave Dave a look that seemed to sum up his interest and reject it. Paolo took a silent bet with himself that Dave would see that as a challenge.

Patrick Kilbride and Freddy Samson looked to be in their early teens; both had short cropped hair, one dark and the other ginger. They were wearing the hoodies and oversized jeans that comprised the uniform of Bradchester youth and both looked terrified. They squared up to him as he approached, trying to give the impression that finding a dead body and dealing with the police was no big deal. An impression that disappeared as soon as they had to describe what had happened.

“It were just lying there, like. All bloody,” Patrick said in answer to Paolo’s question about finding the body. He shuddered. “The ball went in the car park, dinnit? An’ we ran after it. It rolled up against the... you know... the...”

Paolo waited, but Patrick swallowed and shook his head. “What happened after you found the body? Did you touch anything?”

“No way,” Freddy jumped in when his friend didn’t answer. “We ran. He was screaming like a girl,” he said, giving Patrick a disparaging look.

“I was not,” spat his friend. “What about you then? You puked your guts up. You wasn’t so tough, was you?”

“Well it stank, an’ I nearly fell on it when I went to get the ball.”

Paolo was put in mind of his daughters, when they used to bicker. His throat closed with the old familiar ache and his guts tightened. His skin suddenly felt clammy.

“Okay, lads, that’s enough,” he said in a harsher tone than he’d intended.

Forcing himself to concentrate, he continued to question the friends for a little longer, but it was clear they couldn’t tell him anything else. Paolo asked WPC Start to see them home and make sure there was someone to take care of them.

He left Dave to question James Smedley, who looked even more shaken than the boys, and headed back to Barbara.

“First impressions?” he asked.

“You know I hate it when you do that,” she answered. “This is science, not some guessing game.”

“I wasn’t asking for details, Barbara, just your impressions.”

“Ja, well, you always want answers before I’ve even had time to decide what the questions are.” As always when she was upset he could hear a slight South African twang in her voice.

Paolo watched as she debated with herself whether or not to answer him. Professional pride won.

“Initial impressions? Cause of death appears to be strangulation. The way the body was left and the black plastic bag used, I’d say we were looking at a repeat of last month’s murder.” She looked up at him, her full lips curved, not quite smiling. “But don’t quote me on that until after the autopsy.”

She turned back to the body, dismissing him. As Paolo walked away, his mobile phone rang. The display showed his ex-wife’s number and his stomach churned. That was all he needed to make his day complete.

“Hi, Lydia. Nice to hear...”

“Don’t forget Katy’s prize giving. It starts at 7.30, so don’t be late.”

She was gone before he could reply. Paolo sighed. How had he screwed up his life so much that Lydia now hated him? Shaking off the familiar despair, he sighed and continued over to where Dave was standing, grinning broadly.

“What have you got to smile about?”

“I’ve got a date tonight. WPC Rebecca Start is about to find out what a lucky girl she is,” Dave answered.

Paolo glared at his Detective Sergeant. “Let me tell you something right now,” he hissed so that no one else could hear, “you need to change your ways. When you’re on the job, that’s all you think about. Got that?”

Dave nodded, but the smirk playing around the corners of his mouth riled Paolo.

“Don’t think being related to the Chief Constable earns you any special treatment in my eyes, because it doesn’t. So stop using my crime scene as a fucking dating agency. And keep your conquests to yourself.” He waited to make sure the message had got through. “Right, drop me off back at the nick. You go over to Lisa Boxer’s place and see what you can find out about our missing witness. I’m going to read through the reports on the last girl who ended up looking like this.”

Paolo looked up as Dave entered his office.

“Any joy?”

“None, sir,” Dave answered making himself comfortable in the chair opposite Paolo. “Looks like Lisa Boxer has done a bunk. Her neighbours claim they haven’t seen her for over a week. Not that I’d take their word for anything. Definitely a bit dodgy, the residents of that house. I got the impression they wouldn’t let on even if they had something to tell.”

“Were you able to get into her place and look around?”

“Yeah, the old bag who runs the rooms let me in. She swore she hadn’t seen Lisa since she last paid her rent. What a dump. I feel as if I need a long hot shower, which I’m now going home to have. Aren’t you supposed to be somewhere, sir? I didn’t expect you to still be here.”

“Shit!” Paolo grabbed his jacket. “I’m off. Call me tomorrow if anything comes up.”

Paolo searched frantically for a place to park. Finally he found a spot, streets away from the school. Parking the Ford Focus, he slammed the door and ran.

Sidling into the back of the hall, he was relieved to see Katy still at the side of the stage waiting for her name to be called. As she walked forward, she scanned the rows for him. Her face lit up when she spotted him at the back; the fingers of her right hand wiggled in acknowledgement. His heart contracted at the sight of her. Dark hair and eyes, olive skin and delicate features, she had his mother's beauty and grace. Katy was a true Italian – petite in stature, but powerful beyond her size when her temper flared. So unlike Sarah who'd been tall for her age; fair-haired with striking hazel eyes – his eyes...

Paolo shook off the memories.

Katy rushed up and hugged him as soon as the ceremony ended. Following close behind came Father Gregory, her English teacher, yet another ex-classmate from Paolo's schooldays. It was turning out to be a day for meeting people he would rather not have to deal with.

"Pizza Hut, Dad?" she asked, eyes shining.

"Why not, unless your mother minds?" he said, turning to Lydia.

Father Gregory spoke, distracting Katy's attention and Lydia moved towards Paolo.

"We can go," she said, "but I need to get home early."

Paolo took in Lydia's expression. *And you don't want to spend time with me, do you?* He wanted to say something, anything to take that look off her face, but Katy had finished speaking to Father Gregory and turned back to them. The moment was lost.

"Please say we can go," she begged her mother.

Lydia smiled. "I've just told your father we can. Come on, I'm starving."

As they turned towards the exit, Paolo felt a hand on his arm.

"Paolo, could I have a word?" Father Gregory said, his usually open face clouded.

"Yes, of course. You two go on ahead, I'll meet you inside Pizza Hut," Paolo said, then turned back to the priest. "You look solemn, something up?"

"Nothing serious at this stage, but it could develop into a problem. I need to talk to you about Katy's religious beliefs."

"Me? Why? She's free to believe what she wants," Paolo said.

"Well, no, she isn't, I'm afraid. Not in *this* school, Paolo, you know that as well as I do. The school board's views were made clear before we accepted her. I'd hate Katy to be suspended from St Ursula's, but unless she keeps her disturbing views to herself, that might happen."

Sending his girls to St Ursula's Convent School had been his only concession to his own catholic upbringing – and he wouldn't have done that if his mother hadn't left him money and a guilt-ridden obligation in her will. He'd stopped believing in God when he was about Katy's age.

"What disturbing views?" he asked, trying not to lose his temper.

"She told her class today that there was no such thing as life after death. She refused to accept the resurrection of our Lord and tried to hold a poll on the subject. Sister Mercy had to remove her from the class."

Paolo tried hard not to laugh, but a chuckle got through.

"It's no laughing matter. She's also insinuating that all priests are paedophiles."

Losing all urge to laugh, Paolo glared at Father Greg. "She actually said that?"

"Not in so many words, no. But it was clear that's what she meant. Please speak to her, Paolo. She's too good a student to risk losing her place here."

They'd found a table and ordered by the time Paolo arrived. He didn't want to question Katy tonight about what Father Gregory had said, but knew he couldn't put it off for long.

“I thought I’d come over tomorrow, do those jobs around the house I’ve been meaning to get round to,” he suggested with a smile in Lydia’s direction.

“Not tomorrow, Paolo. Maybe next weekend.”

“Oh, Mum, why not? Dad never gets to come over when he wants to. You always make him wait.”

Lydia sighed. “Katy, that’s not true. Your dad never thinks about my life. He feels he can just turn up whenever he wants.”

“Well maybe he should be able to. What’s wrong with that?”

“Katy, don’t speak to your mother like that.” He smiled at Lydia. “Next Saturday will be fine, but maybe Katy and I could do something together tomorrow, what do you say?”

“Great,” Katy said. “Say yes, Mum.”

“Why not?”

Lydia smiled at him, but without warmth. Even now, it seemed she couldn’t forgive him for leaving her to deal with her pain alone.