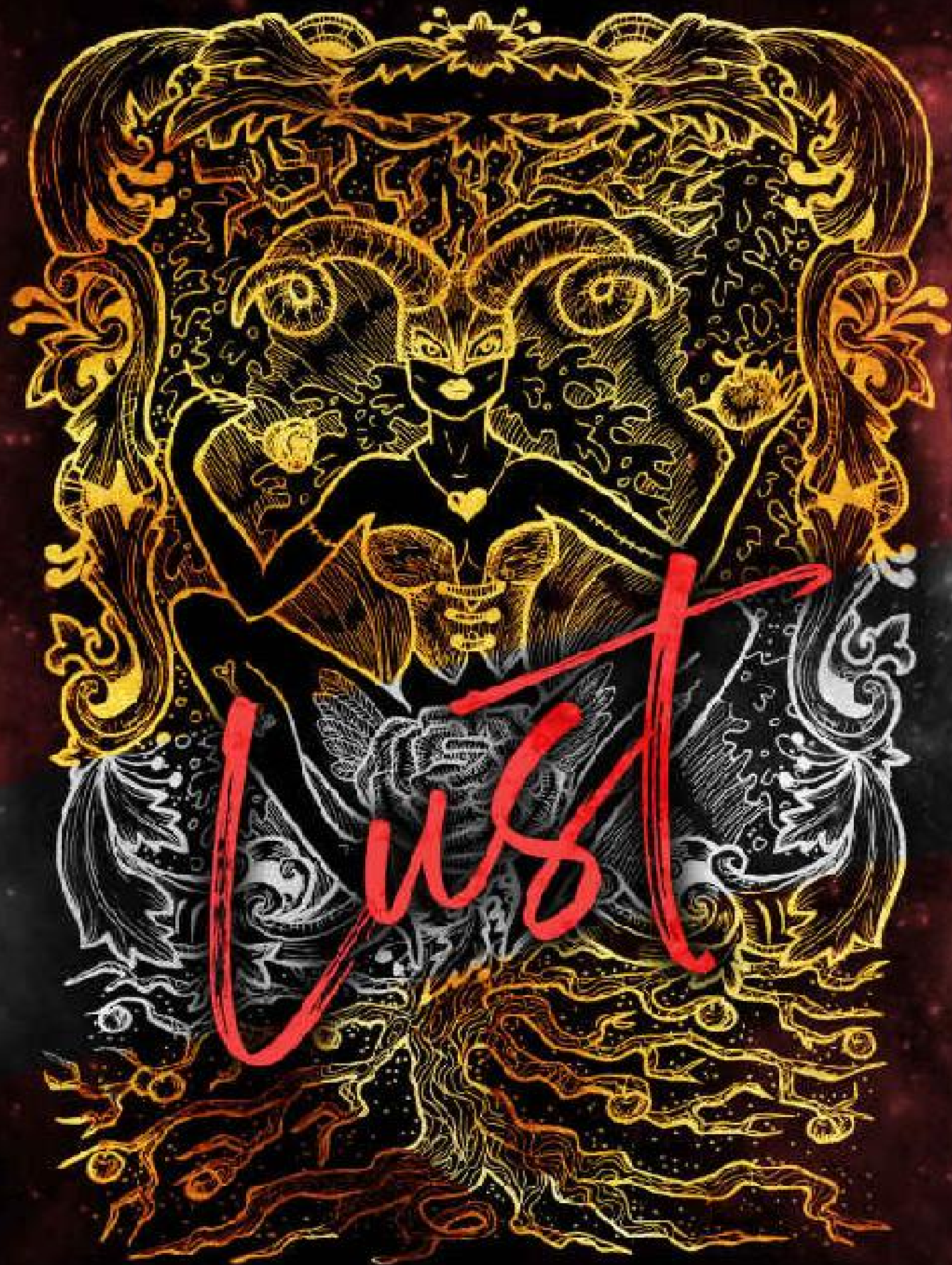


SEVEN DEADLY SINS SERIES



SIMONE MONROE

Lust

Simone Monroe

Copyright © 2023 by Simone Monroe

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Cover by EmCat Designs

Copyediting and proofreading by Sarah Wentworth

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, events, situations, and questionable behaviors are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events or entities is purely coincidental.

Dedication

To every girl who dreams of sliding on silk underwear and posing in front of your bedroom mirror to tease the stalker you know is watching: Aaron observes everything. And he loves what he sees.

Contents

Author's Note

Prologue

1. May, Twenty Years Ago

2. November 1st

3. November 27th

4. November 27th

5. November 28th

6. November 29th

7. November 30th

8. December 1st

9. December 2nd

10. December 14th

11. December 15th

12. December 16th

13. December 23rd

14. December 24th
 15. December 25th
 16. December 26th
 17. December 27th
 18. December 28th
 19. December 29th
 20. December 30th
 21. December 30th
 22. December 31st
 23. Epilogue
- About The Author

Author's Note

This is a work of pure fiction. It features people whose approaches to reality have been twisted by difficult life experiences. If you're upset by stories in which people hurt each other, sometimes out of anger, sometimes in pursuit of pleasure, then this is not the book for you.

Aaron Luther may seem warped, but he wasn't born that way. If you're not comfortable reading about the bullying he experienced, please recommend this book to one of your messed up reader friends. I'm talking about the ones who hide their blushing faces behind their hands whenever they're caught reading in public.

This book also contains descriptions of violence, death, and various sexual activities, including unwanted sexual advances. Aaron sometimes uses force, though never without consent. One could also argue that Ruby cheats on her husband, though one can easily make the case that the man deserves everything that happens to him.

It may be simpler to make a list of things that don't happen in this book: no children or animals are harmed. No one has tentacles, at least none that I know of. Guns and knives are used only for their intended purposes. Other metallic objects make occasional sexy appearances. Pumpkin pie is featured, and sometimes abused. Christmas gifts are abundant and creative and may or may not include pudding.

Prologue

December 31st

Aaron

The dark stain on the warehouse floor looks like Florida. The room is only dimly lit by moonlight filtering in through the windows, and in the infrared view of the camera, it's not clear whether the stain is blood, grease, or just a shadow. But I know that in the light of day, it would be the dark wine color of congealing blood.

The image on my phone is small, and the camera, built into a screw in a vent midway up the wall, is at an odd angle. I second-guess my original assessment. The stain looks more like California than Florida. Yes, there's the bend along the coastline right around San Francisco, across from where Lake Tahoe vanishes under the tilted torso of the hitman, just above the odd jut where his left elbow sticks out above the ground.

A yawn stretches my face, and I lean back in the creaky desk chair and stretch my arms above my head. The chair is much too small for my six-foot-seven frame. Fake leather squeaks as I shift again, toggling to another app on my phone. One with a much better view.

Ruby.

My beautiful queen stands in her bathroom facing the mirror. Grime streaks her cream-colored sweater, and a darkening

bruise spans from her left cheekbone down to her jaw, but a smile lifts the corners of her mouth. She bites down on her lower lip before grabbing the bottom of her sweater and pulling it up over her head. A thrill starts deep in my belly as I watch her undress.

Ruby unzips her skirt and tugs it down over her thighs. Underneath, sleek shapewear squeezes and tucks her body into a smooth form. As she rolls the stretchy fabric down her belly and over her thighs, her body eases free of its confines, and I can practically hear her sigh in relief.

“Take it off,” I whisper. “Take it off, baby. You’ll never have to wear that shit for me. Never have to pretend your body is anything other than the gorgeous shape I’ve always loved.”

My fingers trace her contours on the screen of my phone, lingering on the underside of her breasts, cupping the air as though it held the expanse of her hips, the softness of her ass. I touch and caress the image until steam from the shower obscures the camera’s view.

Returning to the warehouse, I scan the first image again. The other two bodies are just lumps of flesh and fabric, like someone dropped a couple of shopping bags and their contents spilled haphazardly across the floor. The soles of one guy’s sneakers look clean and barely worn, while grease streaks the other guy’s blue jeans. I glance at the would-be hitman one last time. His body still covers part of the bottom half of that California stain, left knee pointing, fittingly, toward Death Valley. Maybe it’s settled a bit since the last time I looked,

shifted as rigor sets in? For a moment I contemplate staying and watching the progression of death, but I have better things to do.

I switch back to Ruby and watch her body blur and refocus as water streams over her creamy skin.

Chapter 1

May, Twenty Years Ago

Aaron

Mysterious sauce slops out of the black plastic ladle, covering my pork chop with a brown sheen. A cacophony of shouts echoes around me, and an elbow jabs into my hip, prodding me to move along the line. As the now all-too-familiar tunnel vision sets in, I close my eyes and imagine turning down a huge dial on all the commotion. Next to the dial, I picture a large red switch. With a flip of the switch, I become a scientist—an observer on an alien planet. My oversized black hoodie is a lab coat. No, a uniform. No, a space suit that protects me from the dangerous atmosphere of planet high school’s lunchroom social scene.

A cup of vanilla pudding completes my lunch, and I shuffle toward the far corner of the cafeteria. To my left, a group of girls in heavy makeup sits along one side of a plastic table. Hair ironed limp and lips shining like oil slicks, they primp themselves in little hand mirrors, jostling and giggling and glancing toward the lunch counter. Their full, bright lips remind me of the swollen asses of baboons, glowing hormonal beacons that scream, ‘fuck me! Fuck me now!’ I nod in understanding. They can’t help themselves. They’re following their natural instincts.

Slowly, I turn to follow their gaze. A row of football players peels off the lunch line and walks toward the girls, sauntering past me with exaggerated swagger.

Most of their names elude me, even though they're tossed around the school hallway like currency. One guy, though, pauses in front of me, seeing right through my cloak of invisibility. He reaches toward my tray.

Brent. Brent Michelson. Star running back. He looks at me briefly, a flash of hatred emanating from his pale blue eyes. A boulder lodges in my chest, capturing my breath. It's an unpleasant and unwelcome sensation. Fear.

No. I will not feel fear. Stepping back within my mind, I envision my hand reaching out and circling his neck, then squeezing until those cold eyes bulge out in a bright red fountain of blood.

"Aaron! Hey, over here!" The sound cuts through the vivid image, and Brent's gaze whips forward, changing into something inscrutable that sends an acid drip to the pit of my stomach. With a grunt, he reaches back and grabs the pudding off my tray, then moves on.

"Aaron, are you deaf or something?" Ruby's voice slices through the lunchroom din, a lighthouse summoning me home amid the storm. Wielding my tray in front of me, I pass the table where the football herd has joined the preening girls, staring straight ahead until I reach Ruby.

The light from a large window ignites the red in her long, wavy auburn locks. I force myself to focus on her hair and on the brilliant blue of her eyes, not on the way her large, round breasts rest on the table as she leans forward to reach for her

sandwich. Not on the plump curve of her lower lip, stuck in a seemingly perpetual pout.

“Gourmet fare today, huh?” She gestures toward a carton of milk, a ham and cheese sandwich, an apple, and a pudding cup. Picking up the sandwich, she takes a big bite and chews with her eyes closed, a smile crinkling the skin around her eyes.

“That good, huh? I guess I should have gotten the ham.” My tray clatters onto the table.

Ruby opens one eye, looks at me, then at the sloppy pork chop on my plate. Shrugging, she takes another bite of her sandwich. I prod the grayish lump of meat on my plate, as if I could will some life back into it.

Hints of rose and sandalwood drift to my nostrils, mingled with whispers of jasmine and tobacco. Ruby’s signature scent. She once showed me the old bottle of Fendi perfume she’d inherited from her grandmother, who’d raised her. Since her grandmother’s death last summer, Ruby bounces around between a couple of aunts, just waiting to finish high school and move to New York City. She said the perfume makes her feel like her grandmother is still around. Also, it smells hella sexy. Trying not to think about how much I’ll miss Ruby when she’s gone, I close my eyes and let the scent drown out the clumsy odors of ham and cheese and unwashed teenagers.

“Brent looked like he was about to spit in your food.” Ruby laughs.

“What’s that guy’s fucking problem?” I survey the crowd, lingering on the rowdy athletes in the middle of the room. “Wait, don’t tell me, let me guess.”

Taking a bite of my food, I suppress the urge to spit it right back out. Instead, I chew slowly while I watch the girls giggle and laugh and primp across the table from the football players. Every few seconds, they turn toward one another in feigned conversation, but they always end up looking at the boys, checking to see whether they’re being watched. Clearly wanting to be wanted.

Suddenly, the quarterback reaches out and tugs a dark brown lock of hair on the prettiest and most popular girl: Emma Lawson. Emma yanks her hair out of the quarterback’s grasp, flipping him her middle finger, which he grabs, then slides his closed fist up and down her extended digit, flicking his tongue at her.

Fucking juvenile.

“Everyone wants to feel like they’re hot, that’s all.” Ruby slowly peels back the lid of her pudding, then licks the lingering chocolate off the foil lid, her tongue caressing a lump of chocolate. Against every shred of discipline, my body responds to the enticing image, dick stiffening between my legs. I clear my throat and turn back toward the jocks.

“And they feel hot when someone else wants them.” Ruby drags her spoon across the top of her pudding repeatedly until it’s full, then sucks the pudding off the spoon like a lollipop. I

fight the image that comes to mind. Blood rushes to my erection and it throbs against my leg.

“At least I don’t have to worry about that kind of bullshit.” With a smirk, Ruby rolls her eyes. “No one wants the big girl.”

My dick twitches, and I try not to look at the smooth white skin of her neck, try not to imagine how it would feel between my lips and how easily the little blood vessels under the skin would break under the pressure of my tongue and teeth, leaving a beautiful red mark behind, a mark that would show everyone exactly how much Ruby is wanted.

A blush creeps up my neck, and I pull my hood further over my face to hide my embarrassment. It’s ludicrous enough that this gorgeous senior with the amazing voice is my friend. But for some reason that my teenage brain cannot comprehend, Ruby thinks she’s as much of a loser and outcast as I am. When it became obvious that our schoolmates enjoyed tormenting the tall, skinny, quiet freshman nerd, she took me under her wing.

“How can we make money off their desire?” I point my fork toward the table of popular kids.

“Sell them condoms?” Ruby laughs, and the sound sends a warm wave along my spine.

I duck my head further into my hood to hide my smile. “People want to be wanted, so how can we give them that feeling over and over again?”

She turns to me with a gleam in her bright blue eyes. “You mean let them lust after each other while we laugh all the way to the bank?”

“Precisely.” The wheels start turning in my mind. There has to be an algorithm that could help with this idea. Numbers fall into place, like a story writing itself.

“Aaron?” Ruby calls me back to reality. Her fingers wiggle in my face. “You zoned out again.” She winks.

“Sorry, just thinking.” Pushing back the hood of my sweatshirt, I run my fingers through my thick tangle of curls.

“There’s always so much going on in that head of yours.” Ruby reaches over and ruffles my hair, her fingernails scraping against my scalp.

I suppress a gasp. Images flood my mind: my head between her legs, her fingers in my hair. Even though I don’t know what to do, I’d figure it out. I’d focus solely on her pleasure and keep working until I got it right, just like everything else in life.

The sharp clang of a warning bell slices into my fantasy.

“Just one more week of this hellhole.” Ruby gathers the remains of her lunch into her tray. “And then Broadway, here I come!”

“You’re going to be huge.” I can’t contain the wistful tone in my voice.

Ruby turns to me, laughing her magnificent laugh.

“Aren’t I already huge?” She grins.

“No, Ruby.” I shake my head. “You’re perfect.” It’s the closest I’ve ever come to expressing my feelings, and my jackhammering heart insists it’s about to burst right through my chest.

Her blue eyes narrow and her lips curl upward.

“And you, Aaron, are the nicest friend a girl could possibly wish for.” She leans over for a quick hug. Her chest presses into my face for two incredible seconds before she saunters away from the table. As the crowd thins out, I watch her move, watch the only person who’s been kind to me all year disappear from my day the same way she’s about to disappear from my life.

Once my raging erection has finally died down, I discard my tray and head out of the lunchroom, still lost in fantasies about my friend. Nevermind the fact that I’ve never even kissed a girl.

The first blow is a left hook to my jaw from one of the linebackers. I don’t know his name, but he’s a real neanderthal, who also happens to be about six foot two and twice my scrawny freshman weight. The impact of his thick fist spins my head around before he grabs my arm and drags me into the boys’ locker room.

“Well, well, well, what have we here?” Brent Michelson spits in my face, a gooey glob that lands just above my left eye, then dangles into my field of vision. I want to wipe the

disgusting slime off my skin, but Devonte White, a wiry wide receiver, twists my arms behind my back.

The quarterback stands behind Brent, a little to his left, arms crossed over his muscular chest. Watching. My mistake, he explains calmly, was helping Emma Lawson with her math homework. I had no business spending time alone with the star cheerleader.

A punch to the ribs from the linebacker emphasizes his point.

No business.

Sure, he adds, she claims I didn't touch her. But how could a horny nerd like me resist his girl?

Brent grabs my hair and yanks, my neck straining against the pressure.

"We don't like nerds," the quarterback says as Neanderthal sinks hard knuckles into my diaphragm. I gasp for breath, but he punches me again, this time in the gut. I collapse onto myself, and Devonte holds me up by my twisted wrists.

"You think you're better than us?" Brent's fist crashes into my jaw. "You'll never even come close." The next blow strikes my nose and I hear a crunch of bone.

The superficial damage to my body gradually fades from my awareness, though. I retreat deep within, to a place that's usually my safe haven when the world outside seems cold. But all I find today is darkness. And in that deep, dark place, an ember ignites. Rage.

Chapter 2

November 1st

Ruby

The package of coffee is brand new, still sealed, so I slice the top open with a pair of kitchen shears and pour two scoops into the pot without bothering to examine the grounds for any suspicious smells or signs. As usual, my paranoia seems laughable, but I refuse to let down my guard. The old machine gurgles, sputters, then sends a hissing stream of water through the coffee grounds.

I'm not certain my husband is trying to poison me. Being in witness protection seems to have slowly worn down my sanity, smoothing the edges just a little more each day until life flows by in a numbing blur of frightening sameness.

I probably wouldn't even suspect him, if it wasn't for the soup.

It was our first anniversary since coming back to California. When I got home from work, the table was set with linen napkins and tall candles that were usually stowed in the back of the pantry. Large white dinner plates held slabs of veal covered with tangles of shredded vegetables and nestled in a bed of buttery young potatoes. Beside them, bowls of squash soup let off tendrils of steam. He'd said he'd picked the food up from the fancy French restaurant downtown, the one where you had to have a reservation months in advance.

Everything tasted delicious, except the soup. Its strange, bitter flavor lingered on the back of my tongue. I didn't say

anything, just scraped it into the sink when he went to grab something from his truck. I didn't want to hurt his feelings when he was being so unexpectedly considerate. That's also why I didn't tell him I was going to call the restaurant to complain.

The person who answered the phone was very confused. They had no squash soup. Yes, the veal dish was their specialty, and they were glad I enjoyed it. But the soup of the day was a tomato-based vegetable affair. They hadn't had anything with squash for months.

I thanked the man, set the phone down, and blinked stupidly at the wall about ten times.

What. The. Fuck.

After I testified against the Fioravantes, my husband was my only link to the past. Why on earth would he try to kill me? On the other hand, if he was really trying to kill me, why not just go to the Marshalls for help? But then, if I was wrong, which I was sure I was, I would lose the only person I had left, the man who'd willingly taken on a new identity with me. On the other other hand, ever since we moved close to our hometown so he could be near his parents, he'd grown increasingly awful, drinking constantly and treating me like shit. Why not just give up the protection altogether and try to resume my old life? But my musical dreams had died when I testified. My old life had nothing left for me. This conundrum tangled my mind into knots.

I pour a cup of fresh hot coffee and a drip splashes over the side of the mug, scalding my finger.

“Ow!” I stifle my cry and listen for any evidence that I’ve woken my husband. Hearing nothing, I run cold water over my finger long enough to take the edge off, then grab my coffee and go back to icing a chocolate cake. I’m just scrawling the last part of the name Manuel when my husband’s bedroom door slams and heavy footsteps thud along the carpeted hallway. Cursing, I drop my icing bag and hurry to the coffeepot to fill his cup.

“You’re up early.” I plop two cubes of sugar into the mug and set it on the table.

“Going to visit my parents. Have to hit the road.” He sinks into a kitchen chair and sips his coffee, then makes a face. His eyes, red-rimmed and watery, reveal the sleeplessness of someone who stayed up late with Johnny Walker. Maybe his parents will mistake the look for evidence of emotion. They always seemed to give him the benefit of the doubt.

He grabs a bottle of hazelnut-flavored creamer and dumps it into his drink, causing it to splash onto the white linen tablecloth. Characteristically oblivious, he ignores the spill, swirling the cup to mix the contents.

“What are you looking at?” He glares at me and takes another sip. “This coffee’s cold.” He spits a mouthful back into his cup, then pushes it away. More of the liquid sloshes onto the tablecloth.

Yeah, cause you filled it with creamer, moron.

But I keep my mouth shut, grab another napkin, and start blotting again. Arguing with him never goes well. He only cares about winning the argument.

“I’ll probably stay the night with Mom and Dad.” He gets up from the table and heads toward the cake. Before I can stop him, he plunges two fingers into the cream cheese frosting and drags them along the top of the cake, right through the word ‘Happy’.

“What the fuck!” The exclamation slips out before I can stop myself. Leaping toward the cake, I see that the once exquisite cursive across the top now reads ‘Ha Birthday Manuel’. Tears prick the backs of my eyes.

“You think I like you getting up all early and shit to make a cake for some other guy?” He sneers. “Come on, Carol. When was the last time you even took care of me?”

“When was the last time you ‘took care’ of me?” Fuck trying not to argue with him. If he wants to fight, then he’s going to get a fight. He knows I hate when he uses our cover names, just like he knew how I’d react if he messed with Manuel’s birthday cake.

“Really?” he laughs. “You really think I give a shit about ‘taking care’ of you when you haven’t made your husband come in months? You should be ashamed of yourself. Useless waste of space. Waaay too much space.” He stalks out to the garage.

I fight to blink back tears. One sneaks down my nose, though, and drops onto the cake, digging a divot in the smooth

surface. I wanted the cake to be perfect, but my bestie will understand.

With a sigh, I do my best to repair the icing on Manuel's birthday cake and pack it carefully onto a tray. At least I can try to enjoy my friend's birthday.

"Divorce his nasty ass." Disdain curls Manuel's lip and he quirks his eyebrows. "Seriously, Carol, what does that troll bring into your life besides a perpetually limp dick?"

Every time Manuel calls me Carol, I feel a familiar twinge of guilt. I wish I could use my real name with him.

"I can't divorce him," is all I say. Manuel rolls his eyes. Maybe he's right and I could divorce my husband, but I don't know what he'll do. If he really wants to kill me, what would stop him from selling me out to the Fioravantes if I ask for a divorce? I'm probably worth more to him dead than alive.

"Girl," Manuel sneers, nostrils flared, "if you think that ogre is the only person who could possibly want your thick thighs and dreamy eyes, then he has you brainwashed worse than I thought."

"Careful, Manny." I bump my hip against his. "I'll start thinking you're trying to get in on all this juicy goodness."

"Mmmmm." He winks. "You know if I wake up straight one day, you'll be the very first to find out."

I just shake my head.

"Let's go have some cake before someone else decides to sample the frosting."

He smiles.

“You know what my birthday wish is going to be?”

“Shhhh!“ I punch his arm. “Don’t tell me!”

He ignores my admonition.

“That two Prince Charmings will show up and sweep each of us off our feet and out of this dismal place.”

We step into the dingy break room. The cake platter sits open on the table, a large slice already taken out. Nothing here is sacred.

Fuck my life.

“Let’s make some damn wishes.” I pull out a cigarette lighter and a small package of birthday candles.

As I insert the pink and yellow candles into the surface of the cake, I consider wishing that my husband would love me again, but that thought just makes me laugh. Maybe I should wish that I really am crazy and he’s not actually trying to kill me! I look around the windowless breakroom, illuminated by one bare fluorescent bulb, and consider what my life has become. Maybe death wouldn’t be so bad.

Manuel stares expectantly.

“Got your wish, girl?”

“It’s your birthday.” I light the candles. “You’re the one who gets to make a wish.”

“Let’s do it together.” He grabs my hand and closes his eyes.

For a moment, death doesn't seem so appealing after all. Instead, I close my eyes and wish simply for something to change. For a magic wand to wave over my life and turn all my damn pumpkins into carriages.

Chapter 3

November 27th

Aaron

Cardboard cutouts of brightly-colored turkeys hang from every other light pole in the mall parking lot. I wrap my gray cashmere scarf around my neck before opening the door of my rented Maserati. It's unseasonably cold in Sacramento, even for late November.

It's not that I don't have a suit I can wear to my father's funeral. Hell, I have five of them back at the hotel. But I want something black and ugly, just like my feelings for the old man. Something I can wear once and then burn with the rest of my memories of the person who abandoned me when it mattered most. I still won't be cheap, though. Whatever I buy will remind the other assholes at the funeral that the skinny beanpole, Gumby pancake hands, the nerdy bookworm, turned out to be far more successful than their wildest dreams.

The nearest cardboard turkey clearly wasn't hung with tall people in mind. As I duck to escape its dangling tail feathers, something catches the corner of my eye. I nearly ignore the subtle glimpse, but then it registers: an ear. A delicate swirl of pink skin framed by a soft golden curl. And along the edge of that ear, a row of tiny diamond studs.

That delicate line of gems lives in my fantasies daily. My fingers have traced that swirl of flesh a million times in my mind. My lips continually caress their surfaces and my tongue

demands to be unleashed into the center of that spiral, to whisper the lust trapped inside me for twenty long years.

At first, I'm sure I'm hallucinating. I step behind a tree and inhale deeply, willing the oxygen to calm my brain. Exhaling a cloud of breath into my fist, I sneak a glance from behind the tree.

The world stops spinning.

My heart nears explosion.

It's her.

Her red hair has been bleached blonde, but I'd know that face anywhere. Her plump lips. The soft curve of her jaw. The way her eyes nestle into the roundness of her cheeks. Her button nose, her perfect little nostrils that flare when she laughs.

But she's not laughing now.

No, I'm seeing my Ruby for the first time in twenty years and she has clearly been crying. Sitting behind the wheel of her silver SUV in the parking lot of this stupid mall, my queen has rivulets of mascara running along the arches of her flushed cheeks. Her beautiful blue eyes are scrunched closed and rimmed with red.

She wipes her eyes with a paper napkin and then blows her nose. I duck further behind the tree. I've dreamed for years of this moment, but I won't intrude on her, not now. I'll wait until the perfect opportunity, when she will have no possible option but to become mine forever.

My queen swipes below her eyes again and sniffs visibly. Straightening her shoulders, she inhales deeply, her chest rising and straining against the top button of her blouse. She tugs the fabric together and smoothes it, hiding her incredible cleavage, then adjusts the name-tag pinned above her left breast. It says 'Carol'.

But I know she's Ruby. I've searched fruitlessly for her for twenty years, and here she is, so close I could reach out and touch her. But why is she using a fake name? Why is she covering herself up? And who the fuck made her cry!?

Thank you, Dad, for dying when you did. Otherwise, I might never have found my new sole purpose in life: I will learn every aspect of her existence, and I will destroy whoever caused an ounce of sadness to mar her beautiful face.

Ruby's car door opens. I shrink behind the tree, but she seems too focused on holding her head up to notice me. Her long blonde hair falls in lustrous waves over her proud shoulders, cascading down her back. She straightens her pale green blouse, checking again to ensure that she's covered, then tugs it down at the hem to conceal the roundness of her ass.

Briefly, I avert my gaze, just to control my growing erection. How many nights have I imagined that ass bare in front of me, pictured the pattern of my handprint emblazoned on her flesh? But now is not the time. Before I claim her, I'll solve whatever caused those tears.

At a safe distance, I follow Ruby discretely toward the mall. She shivers in only her blouse, pausing briefly by a large

concrete waste bin to toss her tissue. Only then, when she lifts her hand up into the thin November sunlight, do I notice the tiny spark on her left ring finger. I laugh. The thing is like a poppy seed. A speck. *Motherfucker*. Whoever he is, he doesn't deserve to even kiss the ground beneath my Ruby's feet.

Ruby enters Henschley's department store through a side entrance, one with a small brown sign over the door that says "employees only". I hurry to the nearest public entrance and stroll to the men's section, head on a swivel, searching continuously for any sign of the object of my every fantasy.

The first black suit I see will do. I grab it off the rack and wave it toward a tall, slim man in tight red pants and a gray button-down shirt. The black lettering on his gold name-tag reads 'Manuel'.

"Can you find this in a tall?"

"Let me see, sir." Manuel scans me from top to toe and back again. I'm used to the hungry way his eyes take in my broad shoulders, lingering on the muscles of my chest before swooping down the length of my thighs. My height is a constant topic of conversation, as though no one can meet me without evaluating themselves against me. Just wait until they see my bank account! Not to mention other things...

Once he's fully undressed me with his eyes, Manuel meets my gaze again.

"We can certainly find a way to accommodate you, sir." As he whirls and speeds off across the floor, a familiar smirk plays across my lips. Being rich opens doors, but I sure as hell

enjoy being sexy. People will do just about anything once you spark their lust.

Still no sign of Ruby. I follow the man toward the fitting rooms, where he unlocks a door and ushers me inside. While I wait for him to get the suit, a conversation leaks through the paper-thin walls between the dressing room and what must be an office on the other side.

“What took you so long?” It’s a man’s voice—a high-pitched, nasal, wheedling tone.

“I’m sorry, I was only gone two extra minutes. I’ll cut my next break short.”

It’s her. It’s definitely her. I’d know that voice anywhere, the voice that shouted my name down the long hallways of our school. Someone’s criticizing her? Which asshole with a death wish dares to speak to my Ruby like that?

“It’s not just today, Carol, it’s your whole attitude. When will you do what it takes to make it at this job?”

It takes all of my willpower not to punch a hole through the wall and grab the motherfucker by the throat.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Barnum. I’ll try harder, I promise. You know I really care about this job.”

Ruby? This is my best friend, who stared down jock assholes in the High School hallway, who threatened to call their mothers and accuse them of grabbing her ass, or to call their girlfriends and tell them that she’d sucked them off...? What?

My middle fingers twist in my ear canals, trying to erase what I just heard. There's no way my Ruby would take that shit. First tears, now groveling to this asshole over some department store job? Where's the regal queen who enthralled the whole school with every musical performance?

"Your suit, sir." Manuel knocks on the dressing room door, then pushes it open and slides the garment through the narrow gap. Sighing, I strip out of my coat, boots, blue jeans, and white t-shirt. I don't care about my dad's funeral anymore. Never really cared about it much to begin with, but it's been completely surpassed by my new and very crucial mission: to rescue Ruby from whatever hell her life has become and finally make her mine.

How convenient that the timing coincides with the launch of my new luxury subscription service, the Arrow Black app. How perfect will it be for Aaron Luther, established playboy, to greet the press at launch time with his future wife on his arm, proving to the millionaires about to shell out for Arrow Black that love is always possible?

The thought sends fire surging through my veins. The girl who filled all my High School fantasies, the best friend I could never admit I wanted, is finally going to be my wife. Sure, there's the tiny little problem of that ring on her left finger. But even the thought of it makes me laugh, because a guy who'd give a girl like Ruby a ring that insignificant won't be a challenge for me. I'll figure out his weaknesses and exploit them before breakfast, then have him begging for relief.

I laugh at the image.

A knock sounds on the dressing room door.

“Everything okay in there, sir?”

I turn in front of the mirror. The suit looks fine. A little tight in the chest, a little short in the sleeves and pants, but it’ll do for something I’ll wear for an hour and then incinerate.

“Acceptable,” I reply. “I’ll take it.”

As Manuel rings up my purchase, he’s joined by a bald man in a hideous mauve suit. His open jacket reveals a mint green shirt. Buttons strain over his round midsection. He looks like a terrible porn actor from the 1970s. Without even reading his name tag, I can practically hear his voice in my head. Nasal. High-pitched. Obnoxious. This has to be the guy who’s abusing my Ruby.

A quick glance at his name confirms my suspicions. Not only does his label provide both a first name (Gary) and a last name (Barnum), I can also infer that the presence of both names means he gets to feel important.

Well, fuck you, Gary Barnum.

Ruby doesn’t appear again before I leave the store. It’s for the best. I’m not ready for her to see me yet, and I’m late for lunch with my family at the clubhouse. But I’ll be back soon enough, and I will find out everything there is to know about her life. By New Year’s Eve, Ruby will be kissing me under the mistletoe, just in time for the launch of Arrow Black on January first.

د کورنۍ

Ruby

I swear to God, if Gary suggests one more time that I should suck his cock to get ahead in this job, I'll agree to do it just so I can bite the damn thing off and shove it down his throat. Looking at his ugly face and bald head makes me want to puke, but I do need this job, I really do. So I smile, nod, grit my teeth like always, and play along as much as I can without actually throwing up all over his ugly polyester suit. Luckily for both of us, all he manages to do is silently grope my chest before Manuel summons him out of the office to deal with an important customer. Tears well up again as I grab a handful of clothes off the rack by the dressing-room.

No. Fuck no. I won't cry any more. Not about Gary, and certainly not about my stupid husband. And certainly not about Delilah.

After fifteen years of marriage, I can count on one hand how often I've looked at my husband's phone. But I was home with a migraine and his alarm went off while he was in the shower. The annoyingly upbeat song blared shrilly through my skull, despite the layer of pillow pressed against my ears. Finally, I dragged myself over to where he'd left the phone on top of his dresser, just to turn the damn thing off.

And there was her name. A beautiful name. Attached to a very beautiful woman.

Good morning, sexy.

The message was simple. Straightforward. Seductive. Even my brain chose to read the words in a smoky, sultry voice.

Delilah's ten years younger than me, if she's being honest in her profile on the Arrow app. Long, honey-gold hair flows over bronzed shoulders in her cover photo, in which she wears a tiny white bikini. You have to have a thorough tan to pull off a white bikini. Delilah's tan makes her coppery eyes glow.

After looking at the first picture, I told myself I'd seen enough. My finger kept swiping, like it had a mind of its own and had decided to destroy my self-esteem.

Is she being truthful in her pictures? My husband sure as hell isn't. His profile is full of high school photos and pictures from his semi-professional football days, before he got hurt and stopped playing. Before we were married.

When he married me, my husband swore he loved my body, that all the years of teasing and torment in high school had been an attempt to hide his attraction. He said he'd been too embarrassed to admit to his friends that he liked the Big Girl and swore he wasn't only interested in my lucrative record contract. At first, his attention in the bedroom underscored his point.

But that was fourteen years ago, before everything changed. Before he got hurt, before we went into protection, before my contract was gone and I had to start working whatever odd jobs I could cobble together.

His enthusiasm in the bedroom faded quickly after that. Sex became a chore for him to barrel through with eyes closed,

racing to the finish line as quickly as possible. Just like he used to run the ball in high school. Hard, fast, and fuck whoever got in the way. Fuck me and my desires, fuck the possibility of love, and family, and children.

Breath catches in my throat at the thought of children. I hold a silk blouse in front of my face. Too late. A tear rolls down my cheek, and I wipe it on the sleeve, giving no fucks about whether I damage the expensive fabric or the pattern of tiny red cherries that covers the white fabric.

Of course, beautiful Delilah already has a child. She can probably get pregnant by just breathing in the same room as a man. She's probably already pregnant from just texting him. I'm sure she doesn't have some obnoxious condition like polycystic ovarian syndrome destroying her dreams of motherhood and saddling her with crippling pain every month. No. Delilah is clearly utterly perfect.

I hang the silk blouse among the other versions of itself, noticing the small streak where my tears marred the delicate pattern. Whoops. A quick tuck keeps that sleeve out of sight. Then, for good measure, I move the blouse to the back of the rack, never mind that it's a size small.

"Delilah," I whisper to the blouse, "you get in the back of the row, honey. That's the price for fucking another woman's husband. You get to hang out with the fat girls in the back."

They haven't actually fucked yet, or at least that's what their messages suggest. But I know it's only a matter of time. No one talks to someone that way if they don't actually intend to

lick each other's assholes. With a sigh, I hang a pair of charcoal wool trousers. Delilah's asshole probably smells like roses. That's probably where he'll start, and then he'll take his time from there, exploring every inch of her flawless skin.

“Carol, honey, you okay?” Manuel's voice makes me jump. It still takes me a second to register that he's talking to me. Even though I've been using the name for fourteen years, I can't seem to get used to it.

“Clearly not okay!” His eyes widen as he takes in my face. “What can I do?”

“Why?” I step closer to him and whisper, “do I look like I've been crying?”

“No.” He frowns. “You look like you want to cut a bitch, and you just hung a pair of men's slacks in the women's section.” He lifts my chin with a long, delicate finger. “Have you been crying?”

My chin quivers, giving me away despite my shaking head. With a deft swipe of his handkerchief, Manuel dabs the corners of my eyes.

“If Gary's on your ass again, I swear...”

But there's nothing he can do about Gary. I told Manuel once, early on, that Gary suggested sexual favors could get me ahead in this job. He was ready to march with pitchforks right to HR. But I can't afford to find another job right now, not with bills piling up and my husband pissing our money away.

“Not Gary.” The lie sends a twinge of guilt through my stomach. “It’s my husband.”

Manuel’s eyes darken, lids lowering over the dark brown. “What did that motherfucker do now?”

“I don’t even think he’s done anything yet. Beyond talking and flirting, anyway.” A sniff escapes, and Manuel hands me his handkerchief.

“Leave the asshole, Carol. He doesn’t deserve you. He doesn’t have any idea what kind of a gem he has for a wife.” He takes half of the remaining garments from my hands and nods toward the next set of racks. Sighing, I follow him. If Gary catches us socializing, he’ll haul me into his office for yet another scolding, and he’ll probably grab my ass this time. We have to look busy, even during the midday slump.

“So some bitch wants to take your nasty husband off your hands.” Manuel hangs a long green chiffon dress on the rack, and I slide a peach-colored version in nearby. “Good riddance. Don’t waste another tear on him.”

Pausing near a mannequin, he fingers the soft fabric of her flowing green blouse.

“This would look great on you, honey. Why not treat yourself to a little wardrobe upgrade and come out with me for karaoke Friday night?” He turns around, one eyebrow raised. “I know you love to sing...”

A bitter laugh burns my throat. If only he knew. “I’ll consider it.”

With a pat to the mannequin's butt, Manuel moves on to a display of cashmere sweaters.

"We're still on for the Christmas talent show, right?" He carefully folds a sweater over his arm before setting it on top of the pile.

"Yeah." I struggle with a dress made from a bunch of zippers bound together with minimal fabric in between. It's a jumble of teeth and threads and won't stay on the hanger. I shove the bunched up garment onto the nearest rack.

With a laugh, Manuel pulls it off again and deftly organizes the straps into the right configuration so the dress drapes on its hanger like it's a runway model. He holds it up to my body and whistles, a low sound. "I take back what I said about that blouse back there." He smiles slyly. "Treat yourself to this dress. You'd blow everyone away. You should wear it for the talent show."

"Yeah right," I scoff. "First of all, I'm sure I don't have—" a quick glance at the price tag turns my eyes to saucers, "five hundred dollars to spend on something I'd wear only once. And second," I take the dress and press it against myself so it follows the curves of my breasts and belly, "I'd look like someone wrapped a marshmallow in rubber bands and paperclips. The bar would pay me to leave so I don't scare off their customers."

"Stop being mean to my friend." Manuel snatches the dress out of my hand and returns it to the rack. "Don't you dare say those nasty things to Carol about her gorgeous body."

His kind words pull a smile from my gloom. “I don’t deserve you, Manny.” Standing on my tiptoes, I give him a little peck on the cheek.

“Honey, you deserve better than me. What you DON’T deserve is Mr. Has-Been Football Player treating you like shit and then sneaking around with some other bitch while you’re here working your fingers to the bone.” He hangs a dove-gray coat with a flourish, wiggling his long fingers in emphasis.

Noticing my chin start to quiver again, he swiftly shakes his head. “No you don’t, Carol, honey. Do not give that man any more energy today. Let’s play first to sell the ugly duckling. Fifty bucks to the winner.” With a wink, he strides off toward the men’s section as a couple enters through the exterior doors.

The ugly duckling, a fluorescent fuchsia raincoat, looms on a display in front of them. I watch the couple give it a wide berth as they pass, as though they can feel its pinkness radiating toward them.

Just you wait. You’ll learn to love it before I’m through with you.

But even as I launch into my favorite workplace diversion, the thought of Delilah pops back into my head. She’d look dynamite in that pink raincoat. With a sigh, I walk toward the couple.

“Can I help you find anything in particular today? Maybe I can interest you in some of our fashion-forward choices?”

Chapter 4

November 27th

Aaron

Walls of oleander bushes whiz past as I speed along the Sacramento streets. A sense of purpose turns the gears in my mind, and the knowledge that I'm about to have everything I've ever wanted sends a high rushing through my veins.

'The nicest friend a girl could possibly wish for.' That's what Ruby called me all those many years ago. Well, I'm about to show her just how nice a friend can be when he has an unlimited bank account, unlimited time, and a raging hard-on with her name on it.

Praying I escaped the family luncheon quickly enough, I ease back into the mall parking lot. The cars of evening shoppers crowd the lot now, even though it's the middle of the week. But I still find Ruby's SUV right where I left it, and a nearby parking spot provides a perfect vantage point to observe the side door where she'll likely exit the building.

Even though my Maserati is a rental, I've already stocked the glove box with spiral-bound notebooks. Turning the radio to a classical station, I pull one out and relax into my seat.

What we know

- 1. Ruby works at this crappy department store*
- 2. Day shift, at least on Wednesdays*
- 3. Silver Honda CRV, license 1KLR487*

4. Someone made her cry today, and that asshole is going to pay. Scratch that. First, he's going to suffer, and then he's going to suffer some more, and then he's going to wish he had never been born.

Pen gliding over the small sheet of lined paper, I barely notice a flash of color at the side door. Long blonde waves hang like a curtain down to her waist, catching the rays of the setting sun. For a few seconds, Ruby looks like a beam of light and my breath catches in my chest. Then she passes under the shadow of a large sycamore tree, and she's human again. The growing dusk etches lines around her mouth and eyes, lines that whisper of worries and heartache and hard work. Lines that I will do my damndest to erase.

She slips into her vehicle, adjusts herself behind the wheel, and then pauses, as if frozen. Is something in her life so bad that she's hesitant to even go home?

My blood boils, and my hands grip the steering wheel, knuckles whitening under the strain. The sound of grinding teeth drowns out my thoughts.

Deep breath. You can't go to her yet. Just follow. Find out where she lives. Find out who's hurting her. Then swoop in and sweep her off her feet. She's not ready for you yet.

Ruby sighs. The headlights of the car turn on and the engine purrs into action. Headlights off, I follow from a distance, promising myself that tomorrow I'll trade in this distinctive

convertible. No more than two days per vehicle. And all from different locations.

As we approach the first light, I stifle the urge to pull up next to Ruby. Soon enough. Once I know where she lives, I'll see as much of her as I want. What better time to try out the new surveillance equipment for Arrow headquarters? A violin sonata by Debussy soars through my speakers. I turn up the volume. The soothing melody of the strings wreaths around me, and I float along the roadway like I'm sailing on a cloud.

Another car merges between us, and I slow down and nearly miss her turn into a residential neighborhood. Without bothering to signal, I whip around the bend.

Modest one-story homes on small, well-groomed lots line the streets. One or two have seasonal decorations: wreaths of fake fall leaves on front doors, a row of wrought iron turkeys marching along the edge of a lawn, and then, up ahead, a ridiculously oversized vinyl slice of pumpkin pie, topped with an enormous dollop of whipped cream.

Okay, I was starting to think this was a sweet little neighborhood and that maybe being middle class wasn't as awful as it had always seemed. But I have standards, and they absolutely do not include inflatable lawn decorations, which populate their own circle of hell.

As I contemplate which knife I'd use to puncture this monstrosity, Ruby pulls into the driveway. Of the house with the piece of pie. Right next to a jacked up lime green Chevy pickup truck. There has to be an explanation. My Ruby would

never, not in ten million years, approve of such a hideous thing in front of her home.

Her shoulders slump as she gets out of the car and shuffles to the mailbox, where she pulls out a stack of letters. So Mr. Lime Green truck doesn't check the mail. Interesting. I hate how defeated Ruby looks as she makes her way up the walk toward her front door. But when she walks past that nasty vinyl slice of pie, she kicks it with the toe of her shoe. I smile. Ruby hates it just as much as I do.

Lingering out of sight behind a neighbor's boxy shrubbery, I nearly miss the name on the mailbox. But a last ray of sunlight catches in the silver metal letters and they suddenly glare like neon. Jackson. So that's the name I should have been searching for all this time—Carol Jackson. No wonder I couldn't find her. Where the fuck did it come from? And who owns that hideous truck? I don't know anyone named Jackson, but a dreadful feeling settles in the pit of my stomach.

Then he comes to the door. He no longer has the lean physique of a high school athlete. The hair that sticks out from under his baseball cap is sparse and graying. But it's definitely him. Brent motherfucking Michelson.

For a few seconds, the raucous noises of a cafeteria fill my ears, drowning out all rational thought. My shoulders tense and my hands clutch the steering wheel, as though bracing a lunch tray against imminent assault.

But my attention is drawn back to the house. The greeting between Ruby and Brent does not look joyful. He looms in the

doorway and she tries to slide past him, but his bulk leaves little room. The years have not been very kind to him. Never a tall man, Brent appears to have grown sideways, and a prominent beer gut blocks Ruby's path.

Their voices escalate. I roll down my window.

"Are you going to let me in?"

"Not until you tell me what's wrong, Carol."

There's that fucking name again. All this time I'd been searching fruitlessly for Ruby Alvarado. How long has she been living as Carol Jackson? Bile rises in my esophagus.

"Why the fuck does it matter, Brent? Aren't you going out with the boys like you always do?"

Brent straightens, like he's preparing for a fight. Ruby just shakes her head and elbows him aside. After a quick look around, Brent follows her, closing the door behind him.

Excellent. He's not there most nights. Out with the boys? Yeah right. I'll look him up on Arrow as soon as I'm back in my room and find out who really takes up Brent's evenings. But before then, it's time to do a little Christmas shopping.

Whistling along to a piano concerto in D minor, I back down the road until it's safe to turn around, then speed to the nearest jewelry store. Tomorrow, I'll resume my reconnaissance and install cameras. For today, Carol Jackson just moved to the top of Santa's list, and I have a feeling she's going to be a very good girl.

د کورنۍ

Ruby

“Not until you tell me what’s wrong, Carol.” Brent’s words echo like a schoolyard taunt while I walk down the dark hallway to my room.

He doesn’t really want to know what’s wrong, and he knows that calling me Carol always gets under my skin. He’s just trying to distract me from the fact that he’s going off to get drunk again, maybe even to spend time with Delilah.

Stripping off my uncomfortable pantyhose, I realize I don’t even care about the sex. If Brent wants to get his dick wet, let him. An evening to myself with a hot bubble bath seems infinitely more inviting than waiting until he gets drunk enough to act interested in me, then passes out before he can perform.

A glance in the mirror shows me the body Brent no longer wants: heavy breasts that strain against E cups, soft belly, round hips that fill the glass and spill beyond its edges. Thick ass that swallows up my thong. I take off my underwire bra and pull on a comfy sports bra, followed by yoga pants and an old t-shirt.

When we first got together, I was about to be on the radio and Brent was the star of his semi-pro team, considering going for the draft. We met up again randomly in a bar, and he claimed he’d fantasized about me throughout high school. It felt good to be with someone from before. Felt like I could

trust him. I gave him a chance, and he took the chance to bury his dick in me at every opportunity. I couldn't even walk through the door without him tugging off my pants. He'd have his tongue all over me before we even made it to the sofa. Or the armchair. Or the dining room table.

Now, though, he seems to despise the body he once worshiped.

"Maybe I'll get you Jenny Craig for Christmas," he told me just the other day, punctuated by a loud belch and an ugly laugh.

Look in the mirror, asshole. But I didn't say it out loud. Brent's an unpredictable drunk, and speaking my mind has sometimes meant carefully layering foundation over bruises later, so no one at work asks uncomfortable questions.

Hoping he'll be gone already, I wander out to the kitchen to scavenge for dinner. I'm engrossed in the contents of the refrigerator when I hear him, his voice nearly drowned out by the loud hum of the aging appliance.

"Yeah, baby, I can't wait to meet you, too." His voice sounds so low it's almost comical.

"No, no," he continues, clearly oblivious to my presence nearby. "I'm still out of town for the next few weeks."

Slowly, quietly, I close the refrigerator door and tiptoe into the hallway.

"Yeah, that's right, baby. Maybe New Year's Eve. Our first date. Mmmmm... I can't wait."

The thought of anyone waiting around for Brent is so ludicrous that I hurry back to my room just so I can laugh out loud. Has Delilah even seen a photo of him that's not ten years old? Does she have any idea what kind of abysmal taste he has in lawn decorations? But even though I'm laughing, the conversation leaves me chilled.

‘Maybe New Year’s Eve. Our first date.’

Is it strange that a married man thinks he can get away from his wife on New Year’s Eve? I pick up a planner from my bedside table, grateful Brent’s snoring made me insist on separate rooms. One more thing Delilah doesn’t know about him yet: she’ll never get a moment’s sleep lying next to Brent, unless she’s deaf. Which I doubt. Sure, a beautiful woman like her could be deaf. But Brent isn’t smart enough to figure out how to have a phone conversation with a deaf woman. Nope. Pretty little Delilah is in for a rude awakening.

Brent and I already have plans to go visit his parents on New Year’s Eve. Does he expect me to go see them by myself? I wouldn’t put it past him. Or does he believe I won’t be around at all? As in, I won’t be alive anymore?

Ruby, you’ve been listening to too many True Crime podcasts.

But what better motive to kill me than to be with another woman?

And to think I married Brent precisely because I trusted him. At twenty-three years old, with a multi-million dollar recording contract signed and a nationwide tour planned, I had

my fair share of people who wanted a piece of my pie. Which is why running into Brent at a dive bar while back home for the holidays seemed so fortuitous. Here was someone who knew me, who wasn't only interested in my budding fame, who confessed, googly-eyed, to years of pent up desire. I figured at least he was good for a couple of weeks in the sack.

A key dangles from the drawer of the nightstand. I always leave it there, conspicuous, precisely so that it will look like I have nothing to hide. Taped to the underside of the drawer, however, is another set of keys. These open the small safe on the floor of the closet that I keep behind a jumble of boots. Carefully moving the boots aside until the little black box is visible enough for me to open it, I look down at my Sig Sauer P365.

It was easy to prove my need for a weapon. Let's just say that testifying that the record company run by the seemingly reputable Fioravante brothers was really a front for human trafficking did not make me any new friends.

Footsteps sound outside my door. Shoving the pile of clothes and shoes back over the safe, I hurry out of the closet. When Brent enters the room, I'm sitting calmly on my bed, holding a festive candle from my bedside table.

"I'm going out," he sneers.

"I know." I shrug, then stare at him for a minute, unflinching.

He finally looks away.

“What time should we leave tomorrow for your parents’ house?” I inhale the cranberry scent of the candle, breathing a deep, calming breath. Not thinking about the gun in my closet. Not wishing I had the guts to just use it on him.

“Whatever time I fucking feel like.” He turns and limps out of the room. He’s probably already too drunk to drive, but my give a shit wore out years ago. Let him get arrested. Let him crash and rid me of my misery. I only hope he doesn’t hurt someone else in the process.

I listen for the obnoxious growl of Brent’s truck starting up and hear it fade off down the street. The air around me seems suddenly warmer, full of oxygen. I inhale the scent of cranberries again. Time for a little self-care. Grabbing the candle, I make my way to the bathroom and turn on the tap in the bath, letting the water scald my hand as I test the temperature.

Ironic how the feeling of pain, when desired, can even be pleasurable, but when it comes from an abusive brute, it sears itself indelibly into one’s memory. I empty a half-full bag of lavender Epsom salts into the steaming water, inhaling the delicate smells that waft toward me on tendrils of steam.

Dinner will be a bar of chocolate while relaxing in a hot tub of bliss and reading my newest romance novel. My life may not be perfect, but who says I can’t enjoy myself every now and then?

د کورنۍ

Aaron

It's past eleven in the evening when I finally set down a pile of bags and bundles on the counter in my suite and flip open a notepad.

To do:

- 1. Get cameras*
- 2. Install cameras*
- 3. Daily gifts for Ruby*
- 4. Watch Ruby enjoy gifts*
- 5. Enjoy watching Ruby enjoy gifts*

The thought of it all makes me want to enjoy myself right now. My dick throbs. All I can think about is burying myself in her while gazing into her brilliant blue eyes, fucking her like that until she comes all over my cock, and then flipping her over and ravaging her senseless.

No. Focus. Save that energy for Ruby.

Gritting my teeth, I open my computer and scroll through the list of surveillance equipment we plan to test at Arrow, then pick up the phone.

“I need these tonight,” I tell my assistant. “Just get them to my hotel.” He'll have to fly up from our San Diego office, but he'll take the company jet.

I know I won't be getting any sleep, so I don't even try. Instead, it's time to do some research. For years I've searched for Ruby Alvarado and found only the fact that she had signed with Canzonetta Records. A few years later, when she seemed poised for stardom, her burgeoning music career disappeared when Canzonetta went under. But their website simply ceased to exist with no explanation. And she disappeared, too.

Today, though, I search for Ruby Michelson and Canzonetta. And there it is: she testified in court. Against the owners.

According to the article, the brothers who founded Canzonetta, Riccardo and Patrizio Fioravante, lured young girls to the United States with promises of recording contracts, then trafficked them. And my queen helped bust up the whole damn thing at the expense of her career.

My teeth grate. During those years, I hadn't search for Ruby. I'd been blissfully building a life for us, waiting to court her until I'd proven myself, completely unaware that she was about to vanish for fifteen years. Why wasn't this situation all over the news? Sure, it was a small company, but still. Something about the way this story was so deeply buried raises questions I don't know how to answer.

Fueled by a rage that fills my veins, I unpack my purchases and spread them across the black leather sectional sofa in the living area of my suite. The first thing I open is a large calendar. Two gray kittens playing with a ball of red yarn against a white backdrop form the tender holiday image on the December page. Great contrast to my fiery mood. I pull a

Mont Blanc pen out of my briefcase and scroll through my phone for some good concentration music. Glenn Gould playing Bach. Perfect.

As harmony gradually returns to my blood, I write ‘Ruby earrings’ in the square for November twenty-ninth. Looks like Santa’s coming early this year! Then I skip all the way down to the twenty-fifth of December. I know what I have planned for that day, so I write it in, even though I haven’t found it yet.

By the time my assistant arrives with the equipment, lines and curves of careful cursive fill in the other squares on the calendar. Naughty gifts, nice gifts. Sweet gifts, spicy gifts. Gifts that make you want to sing and gifts that make you want to... do other things. All I know is, Ruby’s going to be smelling wonderful and feeling soft and looking tasty by the time my New Year’s Eve deadline rolls around.

I meet my assistant in the lobby, where he hands me a leather briefcase, gives a quick salute, then turns and vanishes back out into the night. He knows me far too well to ask any questions.

Without bothering to return to my room, I signal the valet to bring me my car. The route to Ruby’s house already feels as familiar as my favorite hoodie. I park a few doors down in front of a dark house. Brent’s truck is missing. Out with the boys, no doubt. Reminding myself that I still have to look him up on Arrow, I get out of the convertible, close the door silently, and walk slowly toward Ruby’s driveway.

Her SUV is only a few steps past the edge of the sidewalk. I can see the spot I'll use for the tracker, an area on the frame of the car in the rear passenger side wheel well. One foot steps onto her driveway, then the other. I'm inches from her car when a light comes on in the driveway and I'm suddenly completely illuminated. Lunging for the SUV, I slap the tracker into the place, sprint back to the sidewalk, then walk casually toward my car, praying the light was simply on a motion sensor.

Just as I'm about to get back into my car, a noise behind me makes me freeze. Turning very slowly, I see through the branches of a thick crepe myrtle that Ruby's porch light has come on. I crouch down and look between the lower branches of the tree. Ruby stands on her front porch, blonde hair gleaming in the yellow glow of the porch light. And she's holding a gun.

Chapter 5

November 28th

Ruby

“Come out, you little bitch,” I shout. “Show your face and I will fucking shoot you.” The gun feels surprisingly light.

At first, I figured Brent had triggered the light in the driveway. Then I realized I hadn't heard his damn truck, so I figured it was that neighborhood stray cat again. Would a cat be intimidated by a Sig Sauer? Doubt it. Don't care. I would shoot him if it would stop him from sneaking back into my garage and spraying, which he's done twice before.

A slight movement near the McAlister's house makes me swing around, and I feel like a cop the way I'm pointing my gun at every little noise.

The cat does not appear.

Finally satisfied that there's no marauding feline, I tuck the gun into the waist of my robe and go back into the house. The thing's not loaded, anyway. Maybe I should keep a round in it from now on. Just in case.

Still on edge from the near battle with that darn cat, I fill the chamber before I lock the gun back up. Then I make myself a cup of chamomile tea and curl up in the living room to watch shows about husbands who murder their wives.

When I wake up on the sofa hours later, daylight streams through the living room blinds, some guy is about to get away

with the mysterious death of his third spouse, and my left arm is completely numb. With pins and needles pricking my arm, I stumble into the kitchen and start peeling potatoes and carrots, still in my robe. Brent's truck blares its undeniable bright green presence through the kitchen window, so I tiptoe around the kitchen hoping he'll sleep off most of his bender before we leave for Hawk Ridge.

The carrots already sizzle in the pan, coated in sugary butter, before Brent stumbles into the kitchen. Without a word, I hand him a cup of coffee. He glowers at the kitchen table and scrolls through his phone while I whip the mashed potatoes into thick, creamy mounds.

"Hey!" His sudden shout makes me jerk the hand mixer, spraying potato chunks in a wide arc along the backsplash.

He shoves his phone in my face.

"Isn't this your high school buddy?" He points to a picture on a gossip site. It's my old friend Aaron, still wearing a hooded sweatshirt, but looking much more muscular than in high school. A pretty blonde woman hangs on each arm, and all three of them have the tousled appearance of people desperate for caffeine after a late night of sex and cocaine.

"It's that total nerd you always ate lunch with," Brent presses. "He's, like, rich now or something." He cackles. "Guess maybe I shouldn't have flipped his lunch tray quite so many times." He laughs again, then slaps my ass. "Bet you wish you ended up with him instead of the star running-back, huh?"

When I don't respond right away, he slaps my ass again, harder this time.

“Looks like he'd have dropped you by now for some hot, young thing, anyway.” He holds up his phone and speaks directly to the picture. “You're lucky I'm not there, nerd-breath. I'd take those little blonde numbers right off your hands, just like two tasty cups of vanilla pudding.”

“Ahem.” I clear my throat. “Your wife is standing right here.”

“Oh yeah, you're right.” He leans toward the picture on his phone and whispers loudly, “hey pretty girls, we have to go talk in the other room so my wife won't suspect there's something going on between us.” With a final look at me, he pockets his phone and heads out to the garage.

Great. Happy Thanksgiving to me. Wiping bits of potato off the kitchen backsplash, I imagine what my old friend Aaron would say if he saw my life today.



Aaron

As soon as the blue dot of Ruby's SUV turns onto the highway and heads up the hill, I zip back to her place. This time in a forest green Toyota Corolla. I start with the side entrance to the garage. It's so much easier to pick a lock without an audience, and this one doesn't even require any fancy equipment. I slide my AmEx black card between the door and the frame, and the door pops open with a soft 'click'. Not even a deadbolt. Amateurs.

By the time the sun sets on this sleepy suburban neighborhood, I have eyes in Ruby's front entrance, hallway, kitchen, dining area, multiple views of her living room, the door to Brent's room, her room, and multiple tantalizing views of her bathroom.

In the garage, I use the monitoring software on my phone to test every camera, switching from one view to the next, imagining Ruby coming home from work, walking through the house into her room, then stripping down for a bath. My cock aches, and I decide to give myself one more little Thanksgiving gift. I should get out of here before the neighbors get curious about my car, but the need between my thighs is too overwhelming to think straight. Carefully, I prowl back down the hall to Ruby's room.

The top drawer of her tall white dresser yields what I need: a pair of black lace panties. The feel of her underwear in my

hands sends blood surging to my cock, and when I bring them to my nose, the faint odor of her sets my heart pounding, too. But I can find something better. The closet. I grab a bottle of jasmine-scented lotion off the table next to Ruby's bed and step into her walk-in closet.

Just inside the door, a white wicker basket overflows with clothes, mostly black slacks and colorful, silky blouses for work. And underwear. A week's worth of underwear. Lacy things in various shades soon fill my eager fingers and her sweet scent wreaths around me. The thought that Ruby wears such sexy panties when she's at work draws a moan from deep in my chest.

Being this close to her is intoxicating. I pull my tormented cock out of my jeans and imagine Ruby at work, naked except for her underwear, running from me between the rows of clothing, trying to hide herself between racks of fabric while I stalk down and claim what's mine.

Mine. I finally found her and now she's mine. I squirt a dab of lotion into my palm and slowly stroke my thick length, feeling an urge to mark everything I see. The jasmine scent mingles with the earthy sweet smell from Ruby's panties. It's like she's here, right in front of me, ready to spread her legs and satisfy my need.

My eyes close and I see only her, kneeling on all fours, waiting for me to part her flesh and find my way home. Falling to my own knees in Ruby's closet, I feel my balls tighten, but it's still not enough. I spread her panties on the ground in front

of me, then grab her silkiest pair and rub them along my shaft. The silk glides along my lotion-slicked skin.

“Ruby!” Her name bursts out of me as I spray my pleasure across her underwear and then collapse on the pile in front of me. Now they smell like both of us. Soon, everything here will smell that way.

Pocketing the silkiest pair, I toss the rest back into the wicker basket. Time to leave this place just as I found it. No visible signs of my presence, even though I’ve marked my territory.

The door clicks shut behind me as I exit the garage, and I try the handle to be sure it’s locked. I scan the neighborhood. All clear. I’m rounding the corner of the garage when I suddenly see signs of life. An older man wheels a dark green garbage can down to the street, right next to a mailbox that has ‘Hansen’ scrawled on it in bright white lettering.

Seriously? On Thanksgiving? Mr. Hansen waves to me as I pass, and I wave back, turning my head away so he can’t see my face. He looks like he’s in his late seventies, maybe early eighties. With any luck, he won’t remember seeing me at all. Oh well, what’s done is done. Time to ditch this car and get a new one. I’ll have just enough time tomorrow morning before my father’s funeral.

I wait in the car until the old man’s front door closes behind him, then reach into the glove compartment for the little box that waits there. I haven’t wrapped it yet. I wanted to see the gems one more time in person before the cameras show them in Ruby’s pretty little ears.

The box opens silently, and I angle it so the gems catch the sunlight. *Beautiful. Just like their namesake.* A perfect way to show my queen how much I value her. I snap the box shut and pull a sheet of wrapping paper out of a bag on the passenger seat. The paper shines like sparking rust in the sunlight, and I use my pocket knife to score an edge along the paper before cutting a perfectly straight line through the stiff, shiny paper. I set the box onto the paper, then find where each crease should be and score the lines before folding them, making each fold as pristine and flat as possible. Once the paper's been taped into place, I wind a shiny wine-red ribbon around the little package and fasten a metal tag to one of its trailing ends.

Merry Christmas, Gorgeous.

My sister Linda never lets me wrap presents when she's around. She says I'm painstakingly slow. But no one has ever complained about the final product. See, that's the thing about perfection. Everybody loves a perfect outcome, but people often chafe at the process required to reach it. Once I have Ruby fully for my own, all the moments of my life leading up to that perfect outcome won't matter one bit. Regardless of what I have to do to get there.

When I'm satisfied that no one else is planning to take out the trash or go for an evening stroll, I saunter over to the Jackson's mailbox and pop my little gift into the dark void, now pregnant with possibility. Santa came early this year,

Ruby, just for you. Once I have my way, he's going to keep on coming. And these days, I always get my way.

Chapter 6

November 29th

Ruby

I slip in through the employee entrance at Henschley's hoping to blend in with the Black Friday crowd. The annual shopping frenzy started at five, but Brent's dad was hospitalized for another stroke after Thanksgiving dinner, so we didn't leave Hawk Ridge until four am, and I'm three hours late for work.

Despite my excuse, Gary insists we meet in his office.

"There are ways to get ahead at Henschley's," he says, stale coffee breath wafting across his desk. "Being late isn't one. I expect you to show me how much you value this job."

He circles the desk slowly. "I can't wait to see how ambitious you are, Carol," he whispers.

The hairs on my neck stand on end.

He palms my hip, and his fingers dig into my flesh. As I dodge his grip, a guttural groan sounds from his throat. Like a pig rooting in mud.

Bile rises in my throat, and the banana I choked down for breakfast churns in my stomach.

"I have to get to work." Stumbling backward, I feel for the doorknob behind me.

Gary's nostrils flare, and he nods curtly.

I flee without daring to look for a bulge in his pants that would tell me he'll be on a "business call" for the next ten minutes.

When I finally catch up with Manuel a few hours later, he's shelving men's ties in little white cubbies.

"Gary can go fuck himself." I pluck a piece of lint off a fuchsia tie and tell him about our boss's advances.

"If he's pulling that shit with you, what do you think he's doing to other women?" He points to a pretty young coworker. "What if he's touching on Lucia? Would you forgive yourself for keeping quiet?"

Memories of another young girl come to mind, a girl who barely looked eighteen, glimpsed beyond the crack in a door. A shudder runs through me, and my teeth grind.

Keep it together.

"You okay, Carol?" Manuel's fingers snap in front of my face. "You zoned out again, honey. Come on. Lunch break." Grabbing my arm, he steers me toward the door, signaling to Lucia that we're taking our break.

"Noodles?" Manuel marches us to the food court.

"I could go for a burger." I point to In n Out. "Animal style."

"You know who else could go for it animal style?" Manuel imitates Gary's snort, then glances over and bites his lip. "Too soon?"

I shrug. "There's nothing to do but laugh."

As the first bite of loaded burger sinks into my stomach, a small measure of relaxation spreads through my limbs. It seems like the first time I've truly breathed in weeks.

"I hate this fucking job." I shake my head, then glance at Manny. "Not you, though. You're awesome."

"Of course." He waves a hand. "I get it. Gary sucks. Convincing people to buy overpriced crap sucks. Why don't you just start singing again?"

"It's not that simple." Wishing I'd never told Manuel I used to be a singer, I stuff a couple of French fries into my mouth and imagine a world where I could reclaim both my name and my songs.

"We're still on for the talent show, right? Just Give Me a Reason? I've been practicing. The Christmas Party is in two weeks." He holds up a crisp fry like a microphone. "I'm ready to win ourselves a Big Dill Pickle!"

"Yes, we're still on." I roll my eyes at his mention of the corny prizes Henschley's gives out. "I've been practicing, too," I confess.

Manuel pops his French fry microphone into his mouth and reaches up to give me a high five.

"We're going to kill it," he declares.

When I finally get home at six-thirty in the evening, it's already dark, and the driveway is empty. I check the mail, knowing my husband never would have remembered. Nothing

but a dark green envelope. For once, there's not even any junk mail.

Just as I'm about to close the box, the glow from a street lamp catches on something deep inside.

My heart thunders in my ears.

A surprise from the Fioravantes? An explosive planted by Brent?

But when I pull the thing out, it doesn't look like a bomb. It seems too... pretty. Too symmetrically wrapped. Too much like something you'd see in a Christmas display at a jewelry store. Heart still racing, I carry the little box and the dark green envelope into the house.

It's not until I've set them both down on the kitchen table that I see the metal tag fastened to one of the ribbons on the box.

Merry Christmas, Gorgeous.

Who the hell is Gorgeous? I don't remember Delilah using that nickname in any of her chats with Brent. She doesn't seem like the type of person who'd call a man Gorgeous.

Could it be from Manuel? He's the only man these days who'd ever call me gorgeous. Certainly not my husband. Unless, of course, it's some kind of explosive after all. Cautiously, I shake the gift, listening carefully for telltale rattling noises.

Silence. Nothing but expectant silence.

Well, fuck it. I untie the shiny red ribbon, then grab a butter knife and carefully slice through the tape. If it is for Brent, I'll be able to wrap it back up. He'll never notice the difference.

The black velvet box opens silently. My heart stops, then races, vacillating between terror and excitement. When I see the contents, I gasp. Pear-shaped droplets of rich red dangle on gleaming gold posts. They glow like fresh blood against the pearly white cushion beneath.

Rubies.

Who the hell would send me ruby earrings? Someone who knows my real name, that's who. The fear takes over. It must be the Fioravantes. But what a strange, expensive way to let me know they've found me. Each facet of the gems captures the light and reflects it back in a brilliant gleam. These look real, and if they are, they cost a lot of money.

Feeling a little dirty, I take the gift to my room and replace my signature little gold hoops with the ruby droplets. Before even going to look in the mirror, I fold the wrapping paper, carefully peeling off the tape, then wind the red ribbon into a little ball. Both will go in my gift-wrapping bin. I'll leave no evidence of this mysterious present, not even in the trash. After tucking the metal tag into my underwear drawer, I finally look at myself in the full-length mirror.

The earrings glitter in the dim lamp light of my bedroom. *They would look incredible with my old red hair.* I tug wistfully at a strand of blond. If this is how the Fioravante

brothers decided to remind me of everything they stole from my life, they've succeeded. But I don't care. Let them find me. Meanwhile, I'll be looking like a million bucks. Merry Christmas, Gorgeous!

The roar of Brent's truck breaks my fantasy. *Shit*. I place the ruby earrings carefully back in their box, then tuck it away in my underwear drawer next to the metal tag from the gift. I'm still fastening my gold hoops back into my ears when Brent stumbles through the front door.

"What's for dinner?" I hear him before I see him. The springs of the sofa creak as he sits down heavily, then the metal tab on a beer can pops and the yeasty tang of cheap beer wafts from the living room.

"I ordered delivery," I lie, standing in the doorway to the living room. "From the Chinese place we like." Hastily, I pull out my phone and type in the name of the restaurant.

"Chinese?" Brent huffs. "Fine."

He finally looks up, a scowl on his face.

"What are you looking at?" He takes a long swig of beer.

"Nothing." I shrug. "Just wondering whether it's time to get a new couch. That one's getting creaky."

"Like we have the money." Brent tilts his can to drain the final drops, then looks back up at me. "You look different today. What did you do, change your makeup or something? Get a haircut? Wait—" he laughs. "Don't tell me you lost five

pounds.” This comment is apparently hilarious, because he throws his head back and laughs so hard his belly jiggles.

Rolling my eyes, I turn and walk back to the kitchen.

“Someone sent us a Christmas card,” I call back over my shoulder. But when I pick the thing up and look at the return address, I see that it’s from my dentist. The card features a tooth wreathed in holly berries. ‘May Your Christmas be as white as your smile’ reads the caption underneath.

I fasten it to the refrigerator with a magnet shaped like a little sandal.

“Who’s the card from, that lame guy you work with?”

“No. My dentist.” I ignore the jab at Manuel.

“Wow, big deal, so glad you told me about it.” Brent turns up the volume on the TV. “When’s dinner getting here?” he shouts over the roaring crowd.

“Fifteen minutes,” I reply, even though I know he can’t hear me.



Aaron

The camera in Ruby’s bedroom mirror does not disappoint. After spending the day at my father’s funeral, watching her is a blissful reward. Her smile while she’s wearing my earrings ignites a spark in me that thaws frozen places deep in my

heart. I can't wait until she sees what else Santa has in store for her.

Buzzing with energy, I wrap the rest of her presents. Sheets of ornate tissue paper and shiny strands of ribbon cover every surface in my suite as I hum along to Rachmaninoff. The world seems swollen with promise.

By five o'clock in the morning, a pile of perfectly wrapped packages covers the long desk in the corner of the living area. Satisfied, I finally flop onto the large sofa. A loud growling from my stomach quickly reminds me I haven't eaten since dinner, though. Time to visit Deelite's Diner. It's been years. I can't wait to find out whether the coffee still resembles jet fuel.

I throw on a wool coat, grab my keys, and head out into the morning chill. It's still dark when I leave the hotel, but by the time I exit the highway, streaks of peach color the low clouds that hang above the foothills in the East. I pull into the back entrance at Deelite's and park behind the building.

The diner is surprisingly full for such an early hour. A tired-looking woman whose gray bun is surrounded by a haze of loose hairs grabs a plastic-coated menu and gestures for me to follow her to a booth at the back. On one side, an archway leads to "cowboy" and "cowgirl" labeled restrooms. On the other, a half-door made from uneven wooden planks swings open every few seconds as waiters pass through with steaming plates.

Everything looks enticing, but I know what I want. I set the menu down and watch the waitstaff hurrying past. Finally, a tall woman, probably in her late twenties, pauses and stares at me, jaw momentarily slack. After a heartbeat, she shakes her head quickly and continues into the kitchen. She reappears moments later, holding a small pad of paper, a pencil tucked behind her ear.

“Sorry for staring earlier.” Her cheeks turn a rosy pink. “You looked familiar.”

“I have one of those faces.” I scrutinize the name on her red plastic tag. “Delilah.”

Squinting, she tilts her head to the left while her eyes comb my features.

I hand her the menu.

“You don’t want to order?” She raises her eyebrows.

“Au contraire, Delilah. I do want to order.” I smile. “I’d like a three-egg omelet with mushrooms, olives, and feta cheese. I’ll also take a steak— medium-rare—a yogurt parfait, and three slices of extra crispy bacon.”

She writes quickly, nodding while she jots down each special request.

“Anything to drink?” She doesn’t look up.

“A cup of your grungiest diner coffee. And a pitcher of cream.”

“I’ll bring you some honey, too, sir.” She looks at me and winks, then shoves her pencil into the thick twist of blond hair at the nape of her neck.

This is what I get for talking to the press: strangers know my drink order. *Sigh*. So she did recognize me.

Pulling my hood over my head, I shrink into the corner of my booth. It was one thing to hide in plain sight when I was a gangly teenager. Sixty pounds of muscle later, hiding under a hood often makes me look menacing. But maybe that’s not a bad thing. I roll up my sleeves, revealing my tattoos.

“That’s pretty cool ink.” Delilah sets a tray on the table, then unloads a carafe of coffee, a small pitcher of cream, and a little glass jar of honey.

“Thanks.” I never talk about my tattoos in interviews, and I’m tempted to cover them again so she doesn’t tattle to whatever magazine taught her my preference for honey in my coffee. But something about her feels genuine, trustworthy. She moves a shoulder of her sweater down to show me the feathered arc of a wing, then leans closer like she’s sharing a secret.

“I was eighteen.” She smiles. “Dated a guy who ran a tattoo parlor. The relationship didn’t last, but tattoos are forever. So,” she nods toward my ink. “What’s your story?”

I stretch my left arm out to show her a ring of black thorns circling my wrist, then flip my hand over and reveal where the thorns enclose a bright red anatomical heart.

“Wow.” Squinting, she leans closer. “That heart practically sparkles. Like a ruby.”

Nodding, I stretch out my right arm. A black line circles my wrist, carved and knotted like wood. On the inside, just over my pulse, the tip of an arrow points into its own feathers.

“That’s thought-provoking.” Her forehead scrunches.

“Cupid shoots his arrow, but it circles back around and aims at the shooter.” I clasp my hands together in front of me. “In the end, wouldn’t a lot of people be better off if they could just fuck themselves?”

Delilah pours coffee into my mug, adds a dash of cream and a big spoonful of honey, then stirs slowly.

“I can think of a lot of people who really *should* go fuck themselves,” she muses, “but wouldn’t that put you out of business?”

I laugh, then glance around to see if anyone heard, but no one’s paying attention to us. That’s when I notice it, though, through the large plate glass window, idling in the parking lot and belching out thick gray exhaust. A jacked up lime green pickup truck.

What are the odds?

“Delilah,” I lean forward, “I’m going to need your help with something.”

She rests her elbow against the back of the booth, and I catch a strong whiff of citrus. A pleasant smell.

“Can I count on your discretion?” I pull a wad of hundred-dollar bills out of my pocket.

To her credit, her eyes don’t widen. She doesn’t gasp at the sight of the cash. She simply nods her head up and down.

I peel a bill off the stack and slide it across the table.

“I have to be sure I can trust you.” I slide another bill after the first. Without looking down, Delilah palms the money and slips it into the pouch in front of her apron.

“There’s more where that came from, obviously.” I fold the money back into my pocket.

Delilah waits, a faint smile playing over her lips.

Through the window, I watch Brent step out of his truck, adjust the front of his pants, kick a plastic bottle against the curb, spit an arc of brown juice onto the ground, and limp toward the entrance to the diner. Just before he moves out of view, a man in a suit appears and walks stiffly beside him.

“What do you need me to do?” Delilah asks.

I look up to see that she’s carefully watching my face.

“When those men come in, I want you to move me near them. Close enough that I can hear.”

She glances quickly over her shoulder.

“No problem, boss.” She pats the pocket of her apron. “I’ll get that order in right away.”

Within minutes, I’m seated with my back to Brent and my breakfast spread out across the table in front of me.

“Thanks fer meetin’ me here, Gio,” Brent slurs. He sounds as drunk as he looks.

“What’s the emergency?” The other man seems impatient. “And why do we have to meet here?”

“I like the view.” Brent can’t possibly be referring to the concrete parking lot or the freeway on-ramp visible just beyond it.

Just then, Delilah walks up to their table.

“Hello darlin’. What’s a nice place like you doin’ in a face like thissss?” And there it is. The view.

“Good morning, Ben. What can I get for you boys?” So his alias is Ben. Benjamin Jackson. Sounds almost presidential, not at all like the sodden mess draped into the wooden booth behind me.

Ben/Brent orders breakfast. Gio asks for coffee, black. He seems to grow more irritated by the minute.

“Let’s talk cash. Money. Moolah.” Brent cackles.

“As I’ve already stated, it’s five thousand up front.” The man sounds formal. Professional. “The rest after.”

Brent whistles. “I’ll scrape it together.” He finally slurs. “When can we get started?”

The other man moves audibly in his seat, his suit rustling against the wooden surface.

“Ben.” Gio’s voice is a low hiss. “We don’t discuss specifics in public. Is this all you needed to talk about?”

“What else is there ta talk ‘bout?” A loud clunk resonates against the back of the bench between us.

“When you text me nine-one-one, I assume there’s an emergency.” Gio’s words are clipped. “I figured she was onto you.”

“That dumb bitch doesn’t know shit.” Brent laughs like a barking hyena.

My blood boils. He’s talking about Ruby, I’m sure of it. I don’t know what these two assholes are up to, but I’m going to find out. I signal to Delilah, who hovers a few tables away. She glances toward me, but then responds to a shout from behind her.

“This should cover our meal,” I hear Gio say.

Shit. He’ll get away before I can pay my bill. I pull two more hundred-dollar bills off my stack, tuck them under the edge of my plate, then slip out of the booth and around to the back of the restaurant. I didn’t see Gio drive in, but I’ll spot him when he’s leaving.

Sure enough, I round the corner just as a black Range Rover pulls out of the parking lot. I slide in behind it and follow him onto the freeway.

Despite my discrete distance, Gio weaves expertly through traffic. Either he’s used to driving evasively, or he knows he’s being tailed. I fall back behind a semi-truck to ease his suspicions. A sudden squeal of brakes ahead signals a disruption to traffic. The next thing I know, Gio’s Rover darts

off the highway to my right while I'm still in the far left lane, another semi truck barreling down next to me.

Motherfucker got away. This is going to be more interesting than I thought.

Taking the next exit, I mentally review as much detail about Gio's car as I can remember, kicking myself for not capturing a photo of him while I had the chance. Everyone's on the Arrow App these days, and with our facial recognition software, I could have learned his identity in seconds. Something about this guy seems off, and he might be a danger to Ruby. For now, though, the most I can do is deliver today's gift.

Chapter 7

November 30th

Ruby

It takes Manuel all of three seconds to notice my new earrings.

“Girl, either your man decided to ask forgiveness in a major way, or you’ve finally learned how to treat yo self!” He reaches out and fingers my earlobe, lifting the gem to catch the soft light in the intimates section of the store. “These look like they cost more than a Kardashian’s plastic surgery bill!”

“I don’t know how much they were.” I shrug. “They were a present.”

His eyes widen. “So, old boy realized he’s a total jackass? Hell hath frozen over!” He clutches his hand to his heart.

“No, not that,” I laugh. “He’d probably buy me a ten-dollar bouquet and a cheap bar of chocolate. He’d never spring for these.”

“Then who?” Manuel leans forward, his hands on my shoulders, eyes like saucers. “Spill the tea before my brain overheats.” He gives me a little shake.

I shrug again. “Honestly, I don’t know. They were in my mailbox. Didn’t even have my name on them, just a note that said ‘Merry Christmas, Gorgeous’.”

“Oh. My God.” He presses his fingertips to his mouth. “Are you telling me you have a Secret Fucking Santa who gave you ruby earrings? Where. The fuck. Do. I. Sign. Up?”

“I guess I do have a Secret Santa.” A smile rolls across my face. “Unless they were really meant for one of the neighbors. But I say finders keepers.”

“That’s right, Gorgeous.” He slaps my ass. “You deserve them.”

When I get home that evening, Brent’s truck is in the driveway. Fighting the sinking feeling it always provokes in my gut, I walk over to the mailbox. Maybe, just maybe, I really do have a Secret Santa. Maybe there’s something there again today that will brighten up my night.

Sure enough, tucked behind three credit card offers, a crinkly mass of tissue paper rustles against my fingertips. I glance at the house before pulling it out, but there’s no sign of movement. Brent’s probably passed out on the couch. I pull the package out of the mailbox and untie the ribbons on either end, the same deep red color as yesterday.

A silk scarf unfurls in my hand, a geometric pattern of red, black, gray, and white. I wind the scarf around my neck, its softness caressing my skin. Classy. Santa has good taste.

I’m about to walk boldly into the house as though I’ve owned this scarf for years when a little piece of paper flutters to the ground.

*I can't wait to see you
dressed in only this.*

The fuck? Automatically, I look around, as though the person who gave me the scarf must be lurking in one of the neighbors' yards. Or maybe it's one of them? Mr. Hansen across the street always seemed awfully friendly.

In case it is him, I look toward the Hansen house and give a little wave, but the windows are dark. Not even the porch light is on.

"Who are you waving at?" Brent's voice startles me from the front door.

"Thought I saw Mr. Hansen at his window." I quickly jam the tissue paper and the little note into my purse.

Brent stares at our neighbor's house. "You need to get your eyes checked, Carol."

I try to edge past him into the house, but his bulk blocks the doorway.

"Nice scarf." He fingers the soft fabric.

"A new line we're carrying at work." I press my shoulder against him, but he doesn't budge.

"Oh yeah? Maybe one day you'll come home in something worth looking at. Like some new panties." He laughs. "Not that anyone wants to see you in panties, Carol."

The way he says my name drips with disdain.

"You used to beg me to ride your face, Brent." I stare into his unblinking eyes. "With my panties on."

His eyes travel from the top of my head to the toes of my worn Mary Janes.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He turns and walks back into the house. “And that scarf is fucking ugly.”

Stroking the soft fabric, I make my way back to my bedroom and close and lock the door behind me. Then I pull out the wrapping paper and the note and spread them on my bed. The paper is delicate, a pattern of gold embossed Christmas trees sprinkled over a forest green background. It resembles something we sell at Henschley’s but looks fancier. The gold trees are shinier and thicker, the green a richer color. Flattening the paper against my quilt, I fold it into a neat square.

The note is handwritten on thick, cottony paper. It looks like it was torn out of a journal. I run my finger along the rough edges, then lift it to my nose and smell it. There’s a faint scent of peppermint mingled with something else. Aftershave? Something rich, yet subtle.

*I can't wait to see you
dressed in only this.*

The scrawl looks vaguely familiar, and an odd sense of comfort rises from a forgotten place in my chest.

Clearly, the scarf and note aren’t from Brent. There was no flicker of recognition on his face when I walked by. And I don’t think Manuel would pretend he’d never seen those

earrings before. He's a good actor, but not that good. Would the Fioravantes want to see me naked? I doubt that, too. Dead, perhaps. But not naked.

My heart beats faster as I unwind the scarf and spread it across my bed. Whoever gave it to me wants to see me naked. The thought moves through me like a dare, kindling a fire in my veins. Slowly, as though doing it for the very first time, I unbutton my black polyester work slacks and peel them down over my thighs. The shapewear that extends up past my waist is harder to remove gracefully, but I grasp the top on either side and roll it slowly down my body, over my belly and past my hips, until it joins my pants in a heap on the floor.

Naked from the waist down, I feel almost silly, but I deliberately unfasten each button of my cream-colored silk blouse and let it slide down my arms and onto the bed behind me. My bra is a simple, cottony thing that clasps in the front, so I undo the clasp and feel my breasts relax, like they're exhaling after a long day.

My heart pounds as I tug the bra straps off my shoulders. I imagine someone watching me, imagine that the person who bought me that scarf is waiting patiently for a reward.

I turn to the bed, bend over, and pick up the scarf, draping it over my shoulders. Then, I walk slowly to my full-length mirror. Taking a deep breath, I slide the fabric up to my neck and wrap it in once, letting the ends hang down between the globes of my bare breasts.

My reflection wants to mock me. She wants me to feel silly for standing here looking at her. Instead, I pluck at the neatly rolled border of the beautiful scarf and admire the bright pattern on the fabric, then let my admiring gaze pass over my own body, thinking kind, positive words. Like full, and round, and voluptuous, and... sexy. Someone wants to see me naked. That person thinks I'm sexy. My reflection smiles at this thought, a smile that radiates into my cheeks and rearranges my whole face into something I barely recognize: happiness.

A knock on the door demolishes the blissful moment.

“What the fuck are you doing in there? What are we having for dinner?”

Whatever you make for yourself, I want to shout back, but I don't feel like a fight right now.

“I'll be right out,” I tell Brent. With a slow exhale, I throw on cotton thong underwear, a sports bra, sweatpants, and a t-shirt, then top it all off with the scarf.

Gritting my teeth, I unlock the bedroom door.



Aaron

Holy Hell. Seeing Ruby strip for me in front of her bedroom mirror nearly makes my brain implode. The joy on her face... I want to bring that look to her every single fucking day and take away everything that causes her pain. Especially her husband.

I flip open my list and review the elements of my plan.

- 1. Brent has to go*
- 2. It should be an accident*
- 3. There are lots of ways that people can have accidents when drunk*
- 4. Some of these involve blows to the head, others involve accidental cuts that bleed profusely.*
- 5. Tragic.*

My left hand moves absentmindedly to the thick line of skin that runs from my right shoulder down along my chest, massaging the scar tissue. The past twenty years evaporate as my mind flashes back to that day in the locker room.

“What do you think? Should we show him how serious we are?” The quarterback grins.

Aren't they already showing me?

There's a click of steel as Brent flicks open a knife. He holds the sharp tip against my chin.

Great. So they're not just dumb brutes. They have weapons, too.

"My girlfriend said you were sweet." The quarterback takes a step closer. "She said you seemed like a really nice guy." Another step. "She said she could imagine herself liking someone smart like you." He spits his words into my face. "What did you do to her, you piece of shit?"

I open my mouth to reply, but blood coats my tongue, and no words form.

"Should I fuck up his face?" Brent presses the blade harder against my skin, and the tip pierces the surface.

"Naw, he doesn't look like he cares about his face." The quarterback stares me up and down again.

"You're right-handed, right?" He points to my right shoulder, just below the collarbone, then draws a line with his finger, starting at my shoulder and ending in the muscles of my chest. "I want you to think of me every time you type, nerd-boy."

Brent's jaw trembles briefly, his nostrils flare. Then the muscles in his jaw clench and he lunges forward. Searing pain radiates through my shoulder.

"We don't like people who don't know their proper place," Brent hisses.

Someone's arm wraps around my neck from behind in a chokehold, their grip slowly tightening. As I struggle to gasp

out a breath, I see blood gushing down the front of my shirt. Dizziness overtakes me. Everything goes black.

The scar throbs under my fingertips. It does this whenever I remember, the skin growing hot and prickly, like it's re-experiencing the whole ordeal. I've spent the past twenty years telling myself that living well was the best revenge, but I no longer have to force myself to choke down that ridiculous lie. Fate has delivered Brent into my lap. He'll pay for what he did to me, and for whatever he's doing to Ruby. Time to finally look that cretin up in the Arrow app and find out just how badly he's treating my queen.

After only thirty seconds of checking his message exchanges, my neck wags like a bobblehead. Unbelievable. Now I won't feel nearly so terrible for what I have to do to you. Just kidding. I wouldn't have felt terrible to begin with. But now I know he deserves it even more.

The text message chain with Delilah is as long as it is sordid.

"Cum all over your tits while you suck my balls" is a particularly vivid highlight. I try, and fail, to imagine the logistics of this particular act.

Delilah. The name sounds familiar. And then it hits me: the waitress from yesterday. I don't even have to scrutinize her profile pictures to be sure that she's one and the same. Brent's pictures, on the other hand, are over a decade old.

What could compel a beautiful girl like her to fall for someone like him? The answer isn't hard to find. She's kind, she's thoughtful, and she has a kid. A seven-year-old boy. He's

her world, and no doubt her greatest vulnerability. She probably thinks she has to settle. Even for a selfish, cheating prick like Brent.

But when she waited on him the other day, there was no hint of recognition in her voice. So this asshole is creeping on his online mistress at her job and she doesn't even know it. Which means they've never met in person.

I file all of this information away for future reference. Maybe it will help me with my plan. First, however, after I drop off Ruby's next gift, I'll head up to Hawk Ridge. There's an item on his list that's only available at the Hawk Ridge High School cafeteria. The lunch ladies at my alma mater will be thrilled to share their bounty with the school's most prestigious alumnus.

Chapter 8

December 1st

Aaron

After slipping Ruby's package into her mailbox the next morning, I hit the highway. Just outside of Hawk Ridge, I stop at a little cafe. Grabbing my notebook out of the glove box, I step into the blustery afternoon.

Dry oak leaves swirl around my feet, rustling against the asphalt parking lot. Even the Corolla looks out of place between a rusty old Dodge pickup and a nineties model Subaru. Everything here is covered in a thin layer of red dust. It hasn't rained much yet this winter, but once it does, all that dust will turn to mud. I shuffle my feet over the large black welcome mat before I step inside.

The interior is surprisingly warm, with every corner illuminated by the yellow glow from exposed incandescent bulbs strung along the ceiling. After ordering a double-shot of espresso from a pretty young woman, I find a good spot in the corner and pull out my notebook.

Okay. What do we know so far?

- 1. Brent is an asshole*
- 2. Brent is a drunk*
- 3. Brent is meeting some guy in a suit talking about large sums of money*
- 4. It's time for Brent to go bye-bye*

5. *Probably a knife*
6. *Or a crash*
7. *Or crash, then knife*

A knife is my preferred method, of course. After the attack, I found solace in a forge in Hawk Ridge, where I made knives with the carved initials of each of the boys who'd beat me. But I do have to be practical. There are other logistics to consider. His drunkenness could certainly work to my advantage. Much easier to overpower someone who's already tranquilized themselves for you. And I wouldn't want to do it at the house. Too much mess, too close to Ruby. Have to lure him away...

"Can I get you anything else?" a voice tugs me out of my fantasy. The barista stands next to my table with an expectant look on her face. "A scone or something?"

My stomach growls. It's been a few hours since my breakfast protein shake.

"Yes. Another double-shot." I smile at her. "And a blueberry scone."

"Coming right up." She looks at me with a quizzical expression, like people do when they're sure you've met before, but they can't remember your name.

Sigh. Fame creates the constant risk of recognition. Oh well. If this girl realizes who I am, I'll toss her an autograph or a big tip or a particularly attractive match in the Arrow app.

Almost out of habit, I discreetly snap her photo, then log into the app and find her profile. Everly. Nineteen years old. Cute pictures, with her long brown hair, her bangs hanging down to thick brows that highlight piercing blue eyes. The girl gets lots of messages from older guys eager to show off their anatomy. *Disgusting*. Sometimes I hate this app, even though I created it.

Poor Everly. She deserves a lonely rich man who will sweep her off her feet and out of this tiny mountain town. As long as she doesn't mind a teensy age gap.

Opening the Arrow Black app, I feel the familiar thrill, the excitement that comes from holding people's future happiness in the palm of my hand.

Plenty of men on Arrow Black request a young partner with brown hair and blue eyes. Some even specified someone "innocent" or "inexperienced". It's been loads of fun teaching the algorithm how to define words like that.

Dustin McAdams, surgeon, forty-two... he'd love a pretty girl like Everly, but he looks too jaded. Leroy Williams, colonel in the US Army, forty-five, divorced, no kids... too rigid.

Usually, I'd let my sister Linda do this part. Sure, she grumbles about the ethics, but we're close to completing the algorithm that'll pick for us, and there's no better training than showing the app who its human overlords would choose.

Jonah Matthew Hamilton. Good old American boy. Handsome guy, sandy blond hair, blue eyes. Only thirty-one.

Wonder why he's using the Black app? Based on the credit card that made the purchase, he either has a very understanding wife, or his mama subscribed for him. The boy's a lawyer, but his parents are loaded, too. My guess is, they want him to settle down.

I look back up and catch Everly tucking a stray lock of hair behind one ear before leaning over to drizzle a work of art into someone's cappuccino. Her green sweater hangs loosely on her tiny frame, exposing the thick strap of a black tank top and the pale skin of one soft shoulder.

Many men would find her very attractive. In fact, two months ago, I might have asked her out just to give the paparazzi something pretty to photograph. I might have even taken her to bed, though I would have wound up disappointed. Jonah Matthew Hamilton, on the other hand, could probably show her a proper good time.

As if she can hear my thoughts, Everly looks up and stares directly at me with those piercing sapphire eyes. A rosy flush blooms over her cheeks and she nods toward where my scone sits on a small colorful plate next to a tiny espresso cup.

Yes, she deserves a little excitement. And Mr. Hamilton and his meddlesome mother deserve to find out just what the Arrow Black Platinum package can buy. I click the match button, and let the artificial intelligence get to work. Who needs the cumbersome process of getting to know someone through conversation when a computer can do it for you?

I watch Everly's tattered Vans sneakers glide across the worn wooden floor of the cafe.

"Sorry for the wait." She sets my scone and espresso on the table. Then she looks up at me from under long, dark lashes. "I'm sorry to bug you—I bet you get this all the time—but you look just like that Arrow guy. Mr. Luther." She hesitates.

Shit. Is she going to ask me out?

I don't have time to respond before she rambles on. "I know it's silly, it's just that he's from around here, and if you were him, I'd have a huge favor to ask."

"And if I were him, what favor would you ask?" A smile plays over my lips.

She blushes to a deep pink.

Definitely going to ask me out.

"It's my mom. She's, like, obsessed with you—with Mr. Luther—and if I could get an autograph..."

I nearly choke on a relieved laugh. "Your mom, huh?"

Everly nods.

"Show me where to sign."

Eyes wider than satellite dishes, Everly zips back to the counter, returning in seconds with a framed photograph of a familiar-looking brunette.

"She gave me this to keep at the counter for when I get lonely. I think she just likes knowing my male coworkers drool over her." She notices me staring at the picture and laughs.

“She had me really young,” she explains. “She’s only thirty-seven.”

“What’s her name?” I pull the picture closer, searching the smiling brown eyes and chestnut locks for some clue that will jog my memory.

“Lawson.” Katie smiles. “That’s our last name. Her first name’s Emma.”

Of course! The queen bee.

“We went to school together.” My tone is breezy, though my heart thuds audibly in my ears. “And your dad?” *Please not Brent. Please don’t tell me I’m sitting here planning the demise of your father...*

A cloud of pain furrows Everly’s smooth brow, then passes just as quickly. She shrugs. “You probably remember him, if you went to school with mom. I guess it’s no secret. He never admitted to being my dad, but we got a paternity test and everything.”

The suspense sends my pulse screaming past my eardrums. *Please, for the love of everything, don’t let it be Brent.*

“My mom won’t even say his name, but he was the quarterback of the football team. Apparently, something happened. Other football players were involved...” Her hand travels to her throat, rubbing the pale skin on her neck. “I’m sorry, I don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

“Don’t feel bad.” I grasp her free hand. “You’re answering my questions, that’s all.” Her fingers tremble under mine.

“What shall I write to your mom?”

Everly frowns. “She always said everyone was mean to you and she wishes she’d paid more attention to guys like you instead of the popular jerks. She says she wouldn’t deserve even the time of day from you.” She hands me a thin-tipped marker.

I slide the photo out of the cheap plastic frame and scrawl across the picture.

Of course I’ll give the time of day to one of the prettiest girls in school.

—Aaron

“There.” I hand it back to Everly. “That should make everyone sufficiently jealous.”

Then I unclasp my Rolex from my wrist and hand that to Everly, too. “Give this to your mom and tell her she definitely should have paid more attention to nerds like me. My heart was already taken. But who knows, some other nice nerd might have made her a very happy woman.” *Kill them with kindness. Until they deserve another type of death.*

“Wow!” Everly’s eyes look like they’re about to pop out of their sockets. “Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack.” I flash her my most magazine-worthy smile, then watch her glide back to the counter, clutching the watch like it might flee back to my wrist if given half a chance.

Just wait until Arrow Black works its magic and Mama meets her baby girl's new billionaire boyfriend. A smile curls my lips. Being rich and powerful sure has its perks.

I leave the cafeteria with a spring in my step, eager to work my charm on the Hawk Ridge High School cafeteria staff.



Ruby

The silky black negligee caresses every curve of my body, slipping and sliding over my skin like the hands of a careful lover. My nipples harden under its liquid softness, turning me on in a way I haven't felt in years.

Of course, I hurried home after work and made a beeline for my mailbox. Of course the little package wrapped in brown paper sent a tingle along my spine before I even opened it. Once I saw what was inside, that tingle spread throughout my body. Whoever sent me this gift might as well be touching me right now, their fingertips dancing over the surface of my skin and leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake. Santa has stepped up his game, and I'm about to enjoy the result.

Grateful that Brent is out drinking, I step into my closet, reach up to the highest shelf, and feel around blindly until my fingers find the hard packaging that's tucked beneath the scarves and sweaters. Praying the batteries are still good, I pull it down and take out the pink silicone shape, squeezing my eyes shut in a silent plea as I push the little button.

A steady buzz answers my prayer.

Feeling wonderfully feminine, I stand in front of the mirror and admire the way the lingerie lifts and squeezes my breasts into round mounds of soft flesh. My fingers draw circles over their upper contours, then trail down my sides and along the lacy edge of the silk, down to the place where my thighs meet,

where my blood beats in an excited, throbbing pulse, preparing me for pleasure. I tug the silk aside and touch the vibrating silicone to my clit.

“Thank you, Santa,” I moan, as though he were standing on the other side of the mirror. “I worked hard today,” I whisper, then wink at my reflection. “Time to reward myself.”



Aaron

Watching Ruby put on her lingerie is like an excruciatingly slow train ride toward heaven. Finally, she's transformed into a goddess. The black silk molds itself perfectly to her sensual form, and I imagine that I'm the one touching her every place the fabric caresses her skin.

And then she goes and gets a vibrator. Not one that's casually kept in a drawer beside her bed. No. One that's hidden away on a top shelf of her closet. Something her husband probably doesn't know about. And I get to watch her use it.

"This is our lucky day," I whisper to the bulge in my jeans. "We're about to have a very, very, very good night." Thank God I'm back in my hotel room to enjoy this situation properly.

The vibrator buzzes as Ruby carries it over to the bed. She pauses for a few seconds, her back to the camera, and the thick pink silicone cock disappears somewhere in front of her body. She stiffens. She must have pressed it to her clit.

"Turn around," I whisper, undoing the button on my jeans. "Turn around." She reaches the edge of the bed and climbs up. Her ass cheeks are on full display, their creamy expanse visible beneath the lacy pattern. Although I don't mind this view one little bit, I'm desperate to see just what she's doing with that vibrator.

I unzip my jeans.

Slowly, gracefully, Ruby lowers herself onto the bed and rolls onto her back. Now my view is perfect: right between her spread legs.

I pull my cock through the fly of my boxer shorts and grab a bottle of lotion off my desk. *Thank you Brent Michelson, for being a total douche and leaving your wife home alone for me tonight.* I squirt a blob of lotion into my hand and wrap it around my rock hard cock.

The vibrator hums quietly on the bed beside Ruby. Eyes closed, she slowly slides one hand down her belly until her fingertips rest between her thighs. Her hips rise against her hand, and she rubs herself over the black fabric. Then, with a little moan, she moves the silk aside and uses her other hand to guide the vibrator toward her glistening pussy.

“Holy fuck.” I hiss, pumping myself in my fist.

Ruby teases her pussy with the giant pink dick, sliding it along her folds, gathering moisture. Then she presses it against her clit and her moans get louder. She grinds herself against the tip before she slides it down toward her entrance and then, with a little gasp, inserts it into her pussy one delicious inch at a time.

Her hips roll forward to meet the penetration, eager and hungry.

“You want cock, baby girl?” I thrust into my fist, pretending, wishing, that it was her body squeezing me and not my own

lonely hand.

Chapter 9

December 2nd

Aaron

Ruby's little performance in the black silk lingerie made it very clear to me that she needs more toys. Despite my pile of carefully wrapped presents, I hurry out the next day and buy the best vibrator necklace I can find. She'll guess that I've been watching her, she'd have to, but part of me wants her to know that I've already infiltrated her life.

Once I've slipped the new gift into the back of Ruby's mailbox, I zip back over to Deelite's Diner. It's time Delilah knew the truth about her online lover.

My visit coincides with the end of shift. Sure enough, after lurking in my Buick in the parking lot for only seventeen minutes and thirty-five seconds, I spot Delilah blinking against the bright sunlight as she lights up a cigarette behind the low brick building.

She doesn't look up as I approach her, just sucks in nicotine like a lifeline, trailing out long tendrils of gray smoke that rise like banners in the crisp, cool air.

"You came back," she says, still not looking at me.

Good powers of observation. Even more reason to like this woman. Even more reason to keep her away from Brent.

"We don't see a lot of rental cars in this lot," she adds, "so I was curious. Figured you were here to see me when you didn't

get out of your car.” Finally, she turns to look at me, staring steadily through her cinnamon eyes. “The question is: why?”

I shrug, and she takes a few steps across the pitted asphalt between us, nimbly avoiding the cracks in her low heels.

“If you think I’m going to fuck you just because you gave me a good tip the other day, that’s not how I work.” She laughs, showing rows of pearly white teeth.

“You’re not my type.” I dismiss her with a wave of my hand. “But I believe we have a mutual acquaintance. I’m here to stop you from making a terrible mistake.”

She takes a final drag from her cigarette before grinding out the butt with her heel.

“What are you talking about?” Her eyes narrow and her arms clamp down across her chest.

“You mean whom?” I wink, then pull out my phone. “‘I wish I had two cocks so I could fuck your tight little asshole with one while you choke on the other.’ Sound familiar?”

Her face reddens, and her eyes flash. She stumbles back a step. “I don’t know what kind of sick joke this is, but get the fuck away from me.”

I lift my hands in the air to show I’ve nothing to hide, then I step back, too. “Just had to prove to you that I know what I’m talking about.”

“Did Brent put you up to this?” Her face twists into a grimace of pain. “I knew he was too good to be true.”

Suppressing the urge to comfort her, I shake my head. “Lord, no. He’d never talk to me in a million years. But he is too good to be true. That’s what I came to tell you.”

“And you had to dig through my personal information to do that?” She scowls. “Are you some kind of sick pervert?”

“That’s debatable.” I think about the cameras at Ruby’s, about what I’d give right now to be watching her undress, or change, or bathe.

Delilah shakes her head, a look of disgust twisting her lips.

“Look, I went into your profile. No point pretending I didn’t. But it’s Brent I’m interested in, not you.”

“You’re gay?”

I laugh. “If I were, he’d be my last choice. Come on.” Pointing to my car, I reach for her hand. “Let’s sit and talk.”

“Are you kidding me?” She tucks her hand behind her back. “No way. Pervert. We can sit in my car. I don’t care how nice yours is.”

“Okay.” Can’t argue with that. Smart girl.

She stomps toward a maroon minivan at the end of the parking lot. Small patches of rust rim the bottom edges. She slides open the rear door.

“You can sit there.” She points toward an area next to a booster seat that’s strewn with LEGO bricks. “And I’ll sit in the driver’s seat and decide whether I want to drive you straight to the police for being a massive fucking creep.”

“Yes, mom,” I tease. Clicking two bricks together, I watch her walk around to the front of the vehicle. I hate to burst this single mother’s fantasy, but I have to tell her the truth.

Once she’s settled, I wait until she’s looking at me, then casually add a few more bricks to my design.

“Brent is Ben.” I look up.

She stares at me blankly.

“The drunk guy the other morning. The one you sat me next to. He comes here a lot?” I search around on the seat for more bricks.

Delilah nods slowly.

“That’s Brent. He lied in his pictures. Lied about everything. He’s married.”

A look of horror crosses her face. “My ex cheated.” Her hand flies up to cover her mouth. “My son’s dad. It’s not even the worst thing he did, but I’d still never do that to another woman. Ever. I didn’t know.”

“Of course you didn’t.” Three more LEGO bricks and my design takes shape. “He’s a huge fucking creep. You seem like a good person, and I didn’t want you to suffer.”

“Thank you.” Tears fill her eyes. “I can’t believe I let myself get so invested in someone I never even met.”

“Well, if people didn’t do that, I wouldn’t have a multi-billion dollar company.” Pausing my construction, I study the

woman in front of me. She seems solid, smart. But can I trust her? She did what I asked the other day, without any questions.

“Will you do me a favor?” I watch her face carefully.

“Of course.”

No hesitation. Good.

“I need you to keep talking to him.”

Her nose wrinkles.

“Nothing more than conversation.” Grabbing the last few LEGO bricks off the seat, I study my design.

She frowns.

“I want to put you on my payroll,” I explain.

Her eyebrows raise, but she still says nothing, just glances down at the object forming in my hands.

“There will be a non-disclosure agreement.”

“I don’t want you to pay me to talk to some cheating asshole. I’d feel like a whore.” She cups her chin in her hands, though, clearly considering the offer.

An idea comes to mind. “You can help me test some new software we’re working on. Consider the Brent thing a side project. I just have to be able to trust you.” I hand her the LEGO design. “You decide. The money’s there if you want it.”

Turning the object in her hand, she studies it, then looks at me.

“Even my son never built a knife out of his LEGOs before.”
She smiles.

“Can I trust you?” I maintain a steady gaze. It’s definitely a knife. Boxy, but recognizable.

“Fine.” She nods once. “I’ll look over your contract and I’ll think about it.”

Bingo. She’s in. Allowing a small smile to creep across my lips. I slide open the door and step out of the van. “My sister Linda will be in touch,” I call over my shoulder.

“Don’t you want my number?” Delilah sounds eager now.

Excellent.

I laugh.

“You think I don’t already have it?”

“I’ll wait for the call,” she says.

I barely hear her. I’m already halfway back to my car, only thinking about how amazing it’s going to be when Ruby finds, and uses, her new vibrator necklace.



Ruby

When I unwrap the vibrator necklace, my breath catches in my throat. A chill wraps around me.

Did he see me last night? He saw me. It would be too much of a coincidence that I used my vibrator yesterday and then he got me one today. Right?

My bedroom window looks out onto the backyard. It's not fenced. Anyone could pass through, and unless one of the neighbors saw them and said something, I'd never know. The blinds are down, but not completely shut. There's a four-inch gap in the curtains. Someone could have easily peered through and seen my whole session yesterday. I pull the curtains closed, slip the vibrator necklace onto my neck and tuck the pendant under my t-shirt, then go out to the kitchen to cook dinner.

The guilt I feel seems ludicrous, but it's there, turning my stomach while I sit across from Brent at the kitchen table and slowly chew a bite of baked chicken breast.

Brent showers his plate with salt.

"What?" he asks, looking up from his plate. "It's bland."

I shrug. "It's a new diet."

"What, make the food taste so bad you can't stand to eat it?"

Silently, I squeeze a lemon wedge over my chicken. There's no winning with him.

His phone lights up next to his plate, and he glances down, then up at me. I pretend not to notice. It lights up again, and he smiles.

Delilah.

The feeling of guilt sinks deeper into my gut and transforms into something else, something hard.

Brent pushes his plate back and picks up his phone, ignoring me completely.

After choking down one more bite of food, I stand up and clear the table. Brent doesn't say anything to me when he leaves the kitchen. He's staring at his phone so hard he walks into the doorframe.

"Motherfucker," he shouts, followed by a string of curses at his own clumsiness.

I turn on the water in the sink to drown him out. The hard feeling in my gut shifts further as I scrub the plates and pots and pans. Each stroke of the sponge, each echo of Brent's angry words, erodes my guilt just a little more.

Thirty minutes later, I lock my bedroom door against the sound of his loud snoring on the sofa and sit down at the end of my bed to scrutinize my newest gift. I should feel afraid. I should probably even call the police. But the sight of the new toy resting suggestively in my palm sends blood pounding through my veins. Any guilt I felt earlier has dissolved into curiosity. There's no question of whether I'll use it. I have to find out exactly how well Mr. Santa knows his toys.

Switching on the vibrator, I discover that Santa was thoughtful enough to charge it before wrapping it. I press the device against the palm of my hand to test its strength. My fingers tremble slightly, whether from nervousness or from excitement, I can't really tell. To soothe my nerves, I put on my ruby earrings, then wrap my silk scarf around my neck.

I'm about to start stripping in front of the mirror when I remember the bedroom curtains. Stomach full of butterflies, I go to the window and pull the curtains apart, creating a gap just big enough for a man to look through.

Chapter 10

December 14th

Aaron

Other than my delightful diversions with Ruby, development of the Arrow Black app gobbles up my time. I've set up a new office space in downtown Sacramento for a series of seemingly endless meetings where Linda and I wade through reams of red tape to ensure that the right people have the right non-disclosure agreements in place. We also make sure that although never mentioned, use of artificial intelligence is never actively disallowed by the Terms of Use on any of our platforms.

Meanwhile, Delilah meets up with me at the new office after her shift to watch my Jonah and Everly experiment. Gradually, so as not to raise red flags, the AI, nicknamed Eros, gathers relevant information on Everly, then woos her incrementally each day.

“I really don't know how I feel about this.” Delilah sips an eggnog latte one morning, yawning against the fatigue of her overnight shift. Eros just complimented Everly's haircut, then expressed an interest in Blue Tangerine, an obscure band that Everly mentioned in an article for her high school paper a few years back.

Everly

Omg!!! I can't believe you've heard of them.

Would you believe me if I told you they were one of my favorites?

Lol, no, but I think it's awesome that you know Blue Tangerine. What's your favorite song?

I think Ten Days in Purgatory without You is their most technically complex song, but I love the melodic simplicity of Wrap me in Moonlight.

O M G me too!!!

Delilah rolls her eyes.

“What happens when they actually meet and she tries to talk to him about this stuff?” She licks a frothy foam mustache on her upper lip.

“Mr. Hamilton will do his homework.” I hand her a napkin. “And don't worry, Eros has limited range to use poetic license. Mostly, it'll stick to the facts about them both. This is just the

bonding phase. Manufactured butterflies.” Watching the process gives me my own butterflies, a fluttering sensation in my chest. A welcome change from the ice cold boulder left there all those years ago in high school. Watching people’s emotions surrender to my manipulation insulates the memories of fists against my ribs, leaving only a dull rumbling in their wake.

“But shouldn’t we feel bad about controlling someone’s emotions like that?” The flicker of doubt in her green eyes is so human it makes me smile.

“You’re not jaded yet, Delilah. That’s why you’re my favorite new employee.”

“You don’t know me well enough to know how jaded I am.” A cloud passes over her features, furrowing her brow. With a shudder, she seems to shake off some dark thought.

“Aren’t I your only new employee?” She smiles. “And I’ve never heard you mention any kind of performance evaluation. All we do is watch a computer flirt.”

“I trust you.” I shrug. “That’s all the evaluation I need. And believe me, I’ll have other tasks for you soon. Now, I have to go get ready for a party. Can you hold down the fort for a while?”

“Until I pass out in about two hours.” Delilah moves the cursor along rows of dialogue that spring up in real time across my computer screen. “Am I allowed to intervene if Eros gets out of line?”

“Only if he’s about to blow up the whole enterprise. Otherwise, we have to let him learn from his mistakes.”

“Like me,” she groans.

I smile. “Stick with me, Delilah, and you’ll learn that your little mistake was the best thing that ever could have happened to you.” I leave her to monitor the lovebirds and zip off to get ready for the Henschley’s Christmas party.

The party isn’t until tomorrow, but I need to make sure the place is properly bugged long before the first guests arrive. How convenient that an anonymous donor offered them the use of the country club my family belongs to. How convenient that the club is booked for a private event all day today, one that requires no staff presence. Without any interference or distractions, I’ll have the place wired in no time.



Ruby

“Girl, please tell me what amazing gift Santa gave you last night so I can live vicariously through your insane adventure.” Manuel is practically drooling, and even though it’s the day before the talent show, he’s much more interested in hearing about my latest kinky present than practicing our song for tomorrow.

It’s not surprising. I’ve had to tell someone about my gifts, otherwise, I don’t think I’d believe them myself. The vibrator necklace has been tucked between my breasts every day since I first used it. Since then, the daily presents have ranged from sweetly romantic to downright dirty, and my heart plays a drum solo every time I approach my mailbox.

“Wait.” Manuel presses a finger to my lips as I’m about to tell him what I got last night. “Let me guess. Let’s see... you’ve had the earrings, the scarf, lingerie, a pretty little necklace, silk panties, a silk robe, The Illustrated Kama Sutra, body paint, a very stunning corset—”

“And don’t forget the scented candles and the set of high-end jasmine scented bath products,” I add.

“Sure, sure,” he dismisses me with a wave. “The boring presents. But the day before yesterday you got that giant tube of premium lube, so I can only assume that last night...” He looks into my eyes, searching my face for the answer.

I feel my cheeks ignite with an intense blush, and I can't stop the self-conscious smile that spreads across my face.

"He didn't." Manuel's eyes widen.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I shrug.

"You're going to make me say it, aren't you?" He looks around, then leans in and whispers. "My man gave you a butt plug."

Nodding, I try unsuccessfully to stifle a laugh.

"Please tell me you're wearing it right now." Manuel closes his eyes.

"I've never used one before." I shake my head. "I was nervous."

"Darling, you came to the right place. All you need is to prepare yourself with that magical little wand you keep around your neck and then slather on the contents from the tube of fun he gave you, and you'll be good to go."

"What would I do without you?" I pat his shoulder, still feeling the heat in my cheeks.

"Um, you'd probably burst like a popped balloon with all this craziness if you didn't have me to talk to. But seriously, Carol, when do you think this guy's gonna want to meet? I mean, he must be giving you all this stuff for a reason, and I don't think that reason has anything to do with taking a walk in the park and holding hands. He wants to F you up, down, and sideways. You have to ditch that husband of yours."

“I know.” The mention of Brent instantly deflates me. “Maybe Santa just wants to be generous, but he’s not up for anything else. Maybe it’s old Mr. Hansen across the street, and he just likes to watch me through my bedroom window.”

“Well, since you’re leaving the curtains open, he’s getting a show either way, so I’d say he’s enjoying himself. But seriously, Ruby. What are you going to do when Santa wants to take things to the next level?”

“Maybe Santa will whisk my husband off to the North Pole.” I sigh. “Maybe that will be his final gift.”

“A girl can dream.” Manuel squeezes my hand. “Back to work, but let’s practice our song at lunch, okay? We’re gonna win that pickle statue this year if it kills us.”

As I hang discarded garments among the racks, I think about the part of my latest gift that I didn’t share with Manuel. It wasn’t just one plug. It was a whole set. And there was a note:

Use these to train for me

A little bit every day

I can’t wait.

Chapter 11

December 15th

Ruby

The Christmas party's on a Saturday, but of course I have to work. By the time I get home, I'm in such a hurry to get ready that I almost forget to check the mail. My hand touches nothing in the mailbox, though. It's completely empty. I've gotten so used to my daily gifts that I reach in again, not believing such emptiness is possible. For a second, I assume it's Sunday, though that doesn't explain Santa's omission. But then, I remember that it's Saturday, and a ball of dread sinks into my stomach as I drag my feet toward the front door.

Sure enough, a stack of envelopes waits on the kitchen table. Next to them, a necklace sparkles in an open box. Behind that, Brent's fist grips a can of beer, which he lifts slowly toward his clenched jaw.

"Awesome, the necklace came!" I reach for the box, my heart thundering a million miles an hour.

Brent yanks it out of reach.

"Where did you get this?" he growls.

"Haha." I force a laugh. "Manuel sent it as a joke thing we did. Part of my costume for tonight."

"Oh, so your gay friend buys you diamonds now?"

"Diamonds?" Shaking my head, I widen my eyes in feigned innocence. "That's some fake-ass cubic zirconia. We had a

twenty-dollar limit.” I peer more closely at the necklace. “He may have gone a little over.” I shrug.

“So you’re saying Manuel wrote this?” Brent shoves a note across the table.

*I'll watch these diamonds sparkle on your pretty
neck tonight,
while I count down the days until you're wearing
my hand.*

“Sounds like your so-called friend wants to kill you.” He takes another swig of beer.

Sounds like he wants to fuck me. A rush of excitement floods my core.

And then I swear Brent mumbles the words, “he can join the club,” but he’s talking into his beer can. My pulse pounds loudly in my ears. I tell myself it’s just paranoia, that I didn’t hear what I thought I heard. But my heart still races.

“It’s a running joke I have with Manuel.” I trace a line across my neck and stick out my tongue. Brent doesn’t react, so I reach for the box, surprised when he simply hands it over.

“You and your stupid friend can enjoy your sick joke by yourselves tonight.” He finishes his beer and crushes the can under his fist. “I’m not going to your lame-ass party to watch you and your little work boyfriend tell inside jokes and sing duets.”

While I'd normally be relieved at Brent's absence, this time I feel queasy. No Brent means Gary will feel like he has an open invitation to hit on me. Or worse. But I don't dare beg Brent to come after this exchange.

Without another word, I carry the necklace back to my room. Even though the note didn't instruct me to strip, I take off all my clothes before I put it on. The diamonds glitter and shine in the last few rays of sunlight that stream through the crack in my curtains. I can't even begin to count the number of carats this thing must have. The gold that holds the gems presses like a heavy collar around my neck.

There's no way Mr. Hansen bought something this expensive. I've only ever known one person who could possibly afford something like this, but there's no way it's him, either. That would be too good to be true.



Aaron

Even though I wanted to wait in the parking lot and watch the party on my phone, I force myself to stay in my suite, observing in the comfort of a hoodie and sweats. Ruby arrives a few fashionable minutes late, Manuel by her side. Both of them look great, but paired with a navy blue velvet dress, Ruby's necklace is what turns everyone's heads. Maybe I went a little overboard; I just couldn't help myself.

It doesn't take long for Gary to notice her arrival. He practically jogs over as soon as he realizes she's there. And then the motherfucker touches her necklace. Touches it with his greasy, disgusting fingers. Ruby gracefully brushes his hand away. My blood simmers. He doesn't let up, though. He keeps after her, talking close to her face and slowly corralling her toward a corner of the room. Once he seems to think he has her trapped, he reaches out and slides a hand down her side, around her hip, and down—

Ruby nimbly steps away, waves her fingers in his face, and makes a beeline for Manuel at the bar. My blood boils. Watching Ruby evade her disgusting boss makes me want to light the clubhouse on fire. Sure, she can hold her own, but she shouldn't have to. Time to distract the asshole. Time to revise my master plan.

I send a quick email, then call Delilah. She didn't work at the diner today and her son's at a sleepover, so she's spending the

evening working on Arrow Black development.

“I have another job for you.” No friendly greeting needed.

She laughs. “Thank God. I was getting bored watching Eros solicit nudes.”

“Did he succeed?” I’m mildly curious. This is advanced behavior for the AI.

“Not yet. Everly says she wants to meet him first.”

“Then I think we have a success story. Tomorrow, we’ll let Jonah know it’s time to schedule a date. Meanwhile, you’re about to get your own match on Arrow Black.”

“You mean I’ll be testing Eros myself?”

“Nope. You’ll be chatting with a man named Gary, and you’ll convince him that you’re falling head over heels in love.”

She sighs dramatically. “I guess we both know that won’t be hard for me to do.”

“There’s a reason I hired you,” I laugh. “Just be on alert. As soon as he takes the bait, you’ll get a match alert. Then just turn on the charm.”

“Am I required to send nudes if requested, boss?” The humor is clear in her voice.

“We aim to please the customer.” I grin. “But there’s no rule that says they have to be your own.”

Her laugh reminds me what a great choice I made hiring Delilah. She’s certainly a diamond in the rough. *Thank you,*

Brent. At least the man has good taste in women.

My attention returns to the party just in time to see Gary check his phone, then excitedly start swiping. Perfect little puppet. I wait until he finally pockets the device again, then log into his profile and find Delilah.

Match. Check.

Time to let the lady work her magic.

Speaking of magic, Ruby and Manuel take the stage moments later for the annual Henschley's talent show. I turn up the sound. Manuel's a decent singer, but Ruby kills it, even earning a standing ovation from a portion of the crowd.

Hell yeah. That's my baby.

My fingers twitch with the urge to touch her. I don't know how much longer I can watch her every day without going insane with lust.

Then Gary and three other managers get up and do a campy rendition of an NSYNC song. They jump around on stage like drunk teenagers, bumping into each other and singing horribly off key. The crowd goes wild, clapping and cheering and stomping so loudly that I turn down the volume and search the crowd for Ruby to distract myself from their ridiculous antics.

Gary's group is followed by the award ceremony. The whole thing is clearly a stupid setup, because they win first place, each one of them receiving an idiotic statue of a dill pickle. It had to be rigged. Why else would the organizers have four of those pickle statues on hand? But Ruby still looks totally

deflated. I even see her fingering the diamonds of her necklace, as though reminding herself that she still has something good going for her.

Damn right, baby. And you're about to have a whole lot more than that once I get rid of everything that's standing in our way.

Chapter 12

December 16th

Aaron

The steel blade of my knife gleams in the thin December sunlight as I file away every imperfection. Once the blade is smooth as glass, I polish the loopy, scrolling B carved into the handle.

As I work, a plan coalesces into my mind. I thought Brent was going to have a tragic accident, but now that Gary invited himself onto my list, there's an arguably easier task: convince them to eliminate each other. Or at least make it look like that's what happened. Shouldn't be too hard once they're both in love with the same woman.

And, speaking of the devilish diamond, a text message from Delilah pops up on my phone.

Delilah:

This dude is nasty.

Perfect. Gary's already getting hooked. I pick up the phone and call her. I won't risk putting our conversation into writing.

"You work quickly." I don't bother with hello.

"Trust me, there was minimal effort on my part. He's a creep, and he thinks he's the shit."

"Excellent. Keep reeling him in. Speaking of creeps, how's Brent?"

“He came into the diner this morning.” Her sigh radiates through the phone. “I should get an Emmy for pretending not to know that drunk asshole.”

“And that’s why I need you to keep working there a little bit longer.”

“I’m not complaining. Well, okay, fine, I guess I am complaining. But only about the fact that I have to be civil to him. Oh, and he wants to ‘meet’ me on New Year’s Eve. Our first date.”

This just gets better and better. It’s like these two dudes are suicidal.

“Make plans with Gary, too.”

“He’ll be thrilled.” She doesn’t ask why.

I make a mental note to give her a raise.

“Keep in touch.” I end the call. I got a feeling this next one is going to be a good year.



Ruby

Even though it's the day after our holiday party, I drag myself home exhausted after a full shift on Sunday. Holiday season means working seven days a week.

Since Brent discovered the diamond necklace, I'm terrified to check the mailbox. My Secret Santa's been giving me presents on Sundays, and I don't believe Brent fully bought my Manuel story, so I assume he'll monitor the box even when the mailman doesn't come.

Sure enough, the mailbox is empty. Fear twists my stomach as I walk into the house. The kitchen table is also empty, though, and there's no sign of Brent. Breathing a sigh of relief, I put on a pot of water for pasta and go back to my bedroom to change.

I take my time undressing, despite not having anything new to put on. Naked except for my vibrator necklace, I stand in front of the mirror. There's no gift today, but everything else this guy has given me makes it clear that I'm wanted, and that thought alone is enough to make me smile. Now, if only I knew who the fuck was doing all of this. And why.

The note from yesterday is stashed in my underwear drawer with the rest of my treasures. Pulling it out, I remind myself to start locking my bedroom door when I'm not home. The last thing I need is Brent finding all the other gifts.

*I'll watch these diamonds sparkle on your pretty neck tonight,
while I count down the days until you're wearing my hand.*

The words cause a sharp intake of breath, and I can feel an invisible hand on my neck. It's not fear that makes me gasp, though. Anticipation is what gallops through my veins.

Ever since I testified against the Fioravantes, my life stalled into a monotonous suburban purgatory. I was about to be someone, maybe even become famous. But when I realized that the people who'd promised me the world were dangling that same promise in front of other girls to trap them into sexual slavery, I threw it all away to take them down. I did the right thing, but it cost me my future. And I became Carol Jackson, and her life fucking sucks. Sucked. Until now.

Unclasping the vibrator from my neck, I open the drawer on my bedside table and pull out the lube. Santa may have missed today's gift, but that doesn't mean I won't put on a show. Just in case someone is watching. Carol wouldn't do something like that, but Ruby motherfucking Alvarado sure as hell will.

The bedroom window is near the head of my bed, and I move the mirror just right so that anyone who might happen to look through the window can see between my spread legs. The metal feels cold against my clit, making me gasp again, this time purely out of pleasure. I close my eyes and lose myself in the sensation.

It's not until I open my eyes again and look directly into the mirror that I notice the package. Wrapped in the same tissue paper and tied with the same red ribbon as usual, it's wedged on my windowsill, held in place by a small branch from a bush outside.

My heart thunders as I open the window and bring it inside. The package is round, rather heavy, and there's a sound of sloshing liquid. A jar of something special for the bath? I tear open the paper.

It's a jar, all right. A jar of pickles.

What the fuck?

I search through the tissue paper for something else, some explanation.

Another handwritten note drifts to the floor.

You were robbed. You were a bigger Dill than anyone else last night, and you always will be.

My heart stops beating. *He was there?* My mind scans back over every face from last night. Did anyone from another store seem particularly interested in my necklace? Could it be Gary?! But he barely seemed to notice the necklace. Only seemed interested in grabbing my ass.

Setting the jar on my bedside table, I get back into position. Whoever gave me this gift was clearly watching me last night.

If they happen to be watching now, they've earned a show.
And they're about to get one.

Chapter 13

December 23rd

Aaron

When Ruby gets home the day before Christmas Eve, it's already completely dark out, a sprinkling of lonely stars glittering in the moonless city sky. After going in at eight in the morning to restock shelves stripped bare by frantic holiday shoppers, I imagine she must be exhausted. Thank God Brent's not home. Ever since he discovered the diamond necklace, he's been checking the mailbox religiously, so I've had to get creative with where I leave her presents.

It's been hard not to shower her with jewels, but I've managed to hold back. Just the pair of diamond earrings that I tucked onto her windowsill to go with her necklace. And a platinum bracelet with a little microphone charm that I tucked into the branches of the bush outside her window. And the ruby ring. That one was a bit trickier: I used a Slim Jim to get into her car one night and tied it to the steering wheel.

Her neighborhood watch group is surprisingly lax. They didn't notice me going into her car, and they didn't notice me entering the house to leave remote controlled vibrating panties in her underwear drawer and a pair of very cozy sheepskin slippers at the foot of her bed.

The brand new espresso machine was arguably the most complicated. I had to let myself in and then set it up on the kitchen counter. But I'll want a cappuccino after I spend the night, so it will be worth it. Ruby explained to her husband

that she's testing a new model from the store, and he didn't bat an eye. All he seemed to care about was enjoying a double shot. Unfortunately, not the kind I'd like to give him, right between the eyes.

But luckily he isn't home this evening, because I left today's gift in the fridge. If that asshole had found it first, I might have had to speed up my extermination plan.

As usual, Ruby goes straight to the kitchen when she gets home to start making dinner. No clear plan today, though. She just stares into the fridge as though searching for inspiration. It takes a full minute before she even notices the little brown package. Once she does, she takes it out, looks around, closes the refrigerator door, and goes to the table. The camera has a side view, so I can't read her face while she opens it. I just see her shoulder shake, and then she clutches the vanilla pudding cup to her chest.

A strange wave of emotion overcomes me, too. She might as well be sitting right next to me, I feel so connected to her at that moment.

She stands up, goes to the drawer, gets a spoon, then walks back to her room, locks the door and sits down on her bed.

I think she found the camera in her mirror the other day. She used to make sure the window had a view while she appreciated my gifts, but lately she's focused her attention on the mirror. Today is no exception. She faces the mirror and slowly peels back the cover of the pudding cup, then slides her spoon across the surface until it's full of gooey goodness.

Plump lips close around the metal of the spoon, and every ounce of blood in my body surges to my cock. I tell myself I'm not going to jerk off to a woman eating pudding, but by the time she scrapes the last morsel from the bottom of the cup, I'm pumping frantically, and when she leans forward after her last bite and licks her lips, I'm done for. A mess of pleasure explodes over the rumpled leg of my jeans. Holy fuck. If I don't have this woman soon, I will literally expire.

Chapter 14

December 24th

Ruby

Manuel scrunches his nose when I tell him about the pudding cups.

“Santa’s either running out of ideas, or he’s trying to tell you he likes to play with his food.” He winks. “Let’s see if he adds some whipped cream and cherries to the mix.”

What I don’t tell him, though, is that I think the pudding means something else altogether; that I believe this present tells me more about Santa’s identity than his sexual proclivities. Sure, it could have come from anyone who went to Hawk Ridge, or even just someone who knew that’s where I went to school. But it could also be from the boy who used to watch me eat my pudding for dessert every day. The boy who seemed to want to watch a whole lot more. The boy who happens to be a billionaire.

“I guess we’ll see.” I smile and shrug, but my heart leaps in wild anticipation.

When I get home, I run through the house searching for my next gift, but there’s nothing. Nothing on the windowsill, nothing in the bushes, nothing in the kitchen or in my underwear drawer. Not even in the mailbox, which I still check, just in case.

Trying to be grateful, I focus on the gifts I’ve already received. But even a steamy shower with my jasmine body

wash doesn't fully erase my disappointment. I'm all dried off and slathering on my jasmine lotion when I finally see it, hidden in plain sight.

My breath stops and the world grinds to a halt. I hoped it was him when I got the diamond necklace. I suspected it was him when I got the pudding cup. But there's only one person who would ever think to get me a bottle of original, discontinued Fendi perfume. The kind I used to wear in high school. The kind I got from my grandmother.

Aaron.

Heat rises to my cheeks. The thought of my old friend fills me with an inexplicable joy, a warm thrill that seeps through my body.

For a second, the image of the man in the magazine pictures flashes through my mind—the handsome billionaire with a laughing blonde model on each arm. But the magazine billionaire is a foreigner; someone completely out of reach. That's not the Aaron I'm thinking about now. I'm thinking about my friend, the sweet object of my schoolgirl crush. I'm picturing his serious brown eyes, shaded by his perpetual hoodie. I'm picturing the devotion I always saw in those eyes, but didn't dare believe was real.

Daubing a spritz of perfume on each side of my neck and the inside of each wrist, I can't think of anyone else who would know how much this perfume meant to me.

Is he watching me right now?

My whole body throbs. My cheeks ignite to a brilliant crimson. I already found the tiny camera in my mirror. I don't know how he got into my house, and I don't care. There have to be others, probably at least one here in the bathroom.

I run my hands along my curves, massaging the lotion into my breasts, my hips, my buttocks, my legs.

Aaron.

I'd been a virgin in high school, too nervous and self-conscious to believe anyone could like me. Not to mention the fact that I was eighteen when Aaron was just a gawky, adorable freshman. But now...

"Aaron." His name comes out in a whisper while my fingers slip between my thighs. I close my eyes.

"Aaron." I say it again, stroking and teasing myself, imagining it's his hand on me, in me, about to make me come.

The notes, the gifts, the way his lust brings me to life... all coalesce into a pinpoint of exquisite pleasure. I collapse in a pile of ecstasy on the bathroom floor, praying that he can hear me scream his name.

Chapter 15

December 25th

Aaron

When I finally get a moment away from my family's Christmas gathering, the first thing I do is pull out my phone and check on Ruby. It's already well past three. I hate that I haven't checked on her sooner, especially knowing that she's home with Brent.

He's in the living room watching television and she appears to be roasting something in the oven. The fact that she's cooking for that man makes my skin crawl, but I can't stop her. Not yet. I just wonder whether she's wearing my Christmas present while cooking food for her ogre of a husband. Just the thought of that scent on her, the rose and sandalwood mingled with jasmine and tobacco, sends a surge of blood to my cock.

Can't be having a raging erection right now, though. A slap to my cheek distracts me enough to rejoin my family without embarrassment.

The next time I check on Ruby, it's after six. Brent's still in his living room, drinking beer in front of the TV.

Some Christmas.

Ruby's in the kitchen again, this time washing dishes.

Does that asshole do nothing around the house?

I stare at her body and imagine running my fingers over her long green sweater, tracing the seams along the outside of her

stretchy blue jeans, then reaching around to trace the inside seam while I press myself against the expanse of her ass.

Then the unthinkable happens.

Brent must have unglued himself from the couch because he suddenly walks up behind her and grabs her ass.

Anger shoots through me.

Ruby's whole body stiffens.

Mine.

He touched something of mine.

She's clearly repulsed by him.

The man is obviously a complete idiot, because instead of backing the fuck away like I'm sure she ordered him to do, he runs his hand along the curve of her hip and pulls her toward him, pressing his groin against her body.

No. Fuck no.

Rage grips my senses. Ruby whirls around and pushes him away with both hands, but the asshole grabs her shoulders.

Fingers trembling, I turn up the sound.

“You're my goddamn wife, Carol, and you never give me any ass. Ever.”

“Oh, because you're such a delight to be around.”

“You owe me.” He shakes her, still holding tightly to her shoulders. “I'm tired of jerking myself off. It's Christmas. Do something special for your man.” He gyrates his hips.

“And you’re fucking drunk. I’ve told you, I won’t do it when you’re drunk. So it’s my fault we never fuck? Well, fuck you too, Brent. Take responsibility for your own shit for once.”

Fuck this. I’ve had enough.

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

“Sorry, Mr. Hansen,” I whisper. I press a button on my phone. When I switch back to the surveillance app, I see both Brent and Ruby rushing to the front of their house.

Good, it worked. Disaster averted. But I can’t stand here and watch, waiting for something terrible to happen. I have to get to Ruby, even just be close by, so I can intervene if she’s in danger again.

After mumbling my goodbyes to family, I hurry out to my innocuous Hyundai Sonata. I keep the surveillance on while I drive, watching Ruby and Brent stand by their front window, illuminated by alternating red and blue lights from the police cars attending to the minor explosion that just went off in the mailbox across the street.

Once I’ve turned into the neighborhood, I pull over and kill the lights and engine. Watching and waiting, I have only my trusty surveillance to reassure me that my queen is safe.

When I finally see Brent’s truck take off down the road, I can’t resist the temptation. With Ruby so close that I can almost smell her new perfume, I get out of the car and walk quietly along the hedges until I’m standing outside her bedroom window.

د کورنۍ

Ruby

I've never been more relieved to see Brent drive off in his truck. The feeling of his hands on me nearly made me puke, and it's exhausting to think about fighting off his advances all night. Whatever happened to Delilah? I thought the advantage of your husband having an affair was that he'd leave you alone to fantasize about your sexy stalker?

When I finally return to the kitchen and finish up the dishes, my spine tingles as I imagine the things he's seen, the many times I've visibly enjoyed his gifts. The way his note makes it clear that he lusts after more and more of my enjoyment. The fact that he's probably responsible for the explosion at Mr. Hansen's house. The fact that he's probably watching me right now.

Setting the last pot on the rack to dry, I walk back to my room, hips swaying as I bask in the knowledge that someone wants me and wants to see me happy. In my room, I take my time slowly stripping down to nothing. Once I'm naked, I let the reflection in my mirror speak to me, imagining his attraction.

My hands become his hands as they slide down the curve of my round hips, then back up to the groove of my waist, the hands of someone eager and curious and horny as fuck. Heat builds in my core, and a finger trails up between my breasts,

then back around to one nipple, circling and pinching. A sharp pain sends a shock of pleasure resonating through my chest.

Humming, I go to my closet and retrieve the little black negligee, slipping its lacy strings over my naked flesh. It barely covers anything, just accentuates every dip and curve, the sensual thickness of my flesh. Seeing myself with his eyes has me so turned on that I'm about to start a private session, when the McAlister's light comes on outside, the one that lights up whenever they let their obnoxious little dog out to pee. Usually, it just streams obnoxiously into my bedroom window. This time, however, it highlights a silhouetted figure visible through the gap in my curtains.

Aaron.

I knew he was watching me from a distance, but never imagined what I'd do if he was here in person.

Throwing the red silk robe over the tiny negligee, I slide my feet into a pair of fuzzy slippers, hurry to the front door and step outside. The neighborhood sighs with quiet sounds of night. Nothing seems amiss. But it's like I can hear another breath mingled in with the distant crickets and the soft whisper of wind in dry leaves on the ground.

What the hell. If I'm wrong, no one will know but me. But if I'm right...

I open my mouth and take a risk: "You can come out now, Aaron."

A shadow detaches itself from the corner of my garage, and a tall, dark shape moves into the illumination of the outdoor light. In person, he's even more handsome than the pictures. My breath catches. Before me stands a chiseled version of the once soft features of my high school friend. His dark brows look painted on, a perfect splash of color across his brow, offsetting the angles of his prominent cheekbones, while the square cut of his jaw begs my fingers to trace its contours.

“Is it really you, Aaron?” The words drift from my lips as he steps closer. Muscles coat his once skinny, gangly frame, and his broad shoulders block out the light as he nears me.

“I think a better question,” he says, raspy voice tickling my spine, “is who the fuck is Carol?” He grabs my wrist and my pulse pounds into the place where his fingers dig into my flesh. “And what the fuck did she do with my Ruby?”

My Ruby.

My once shy, introverted friend stares at me steadily from under hooded eyes, and a thrill runs through my body. It isn't a question. He has simply and inevitably claimed me, without hesitation.

MY Ruby.

“Well?” Aaron leans in and speaks directly against my ear, his voice vibrating my skin, making each little hair stand on end. “Are you going to invite me in?”

Shivering in the chilly December evening, I lead him down the walkway toward the front door, clutching my robe around

my middle. As we pass the giant slice of pumpkin pie, a loud ‘hissssss’ sounds, and I turn just in time to see a glint of moonlight on steel as Aaron tucks something into his pocket. The vinyl pie wobbles and starts to tilt. A smile tugs at my lips as I open the front door. I guess Aaron liked that ugly thing just as much as I did.

There’s no light on in the entryway. Only the faint glow from outside illuminates the hallway. As I reach for the switch, a hand grabs my arm.

“Wait.” Aaron steps inside and closes the door behind him, plunging us both into darkness and closing out the outside world along with all rational thought and reason.

“Do you trust me, Ruby?” His hand moves slowly up my arm.

I nod, then remember that he can’t see me.

“Yes, Aaron. I always trusted you.”

His fingers tangle in my hair, and he tugs me toward him. His breath pours hotly onto my neck, raising goosebumps over my exposed skin.

“I’ve been watching you,” he whispers.

“I know.” I turn toward him, and his other hand finds my waist and snakes around my body.

“I could see you, but I couldn’t smell you.” He pulls my head close to his. Lips brush against my earlobe. His nose traces a line along my neck and the sound of his inhale sends a shiver along my spine.

“You’re wearing your present,” he murmurs against my skin. “You smell perfect. Just the way I remembered you every day since I last saw you.”

Here, in the darkness, with this man holding me immobilized, I know I should feel afraid. And a tiny tendril of something winds up from my belly, like a warning signal that says, ‘the safe life you once knew has ended’.

Fuck yeah, it has. And I’m all for whatever comes next. And whoever comes after that.

“You murdered my pumpkin pie out there.” I laugh softly.

His grip tightens on my waist.

“I created a special blade,” he purrs, “for each person who ever did you wrong. Those knives get hungry. The pie was just collateral damage.”

“And do you think you’ll get to use them?” My heart thumps against my ribs.

He doesn’t answer, just brushes his lips across mine.

“Ruby.” My name is a hiss of air that wreaths around me, and my bones turn to rubber. Aaron’s grip tightens, pulling me even closer. Something long and hard presses against my stomach and for an instant I think it’s a gun, but then I feel it twitch and he thrusts against me.

“Fuck, Ruby.” His hand slides down from my waist, and he grabs a handful of ass. He presses his forehead against mine. “I’m going to lose control.” His fingers in my hair massage the back of my head, then tighten again, grasping a thick handful.

He moves forward, pressing me against a side table in the hallway. Something falls to the ground with a crash. My head jerks in that direction.

“I’ll buy a new one.” He grabs my chin, holding my face still.

“You don’t even know what it was.” I laugh.

“Doesn’t matter.” He moves me clear of the small table, pressing me hard against the wall. His fingers glide along my body, twisting and turning in the fabric of my robe.

“What are you wearing under this robe?” His voice sounds husky.

Blood hammers in my ears.

“You know. You saw me put it on.”

“I did. But I haven’t seen it in person.”

“You’ll have to look.” I cover his hand with mine.

“No lights.” He finds the opening of the robe and gently parts the folds, sliding his fingers along the surface of my skin.

A shiver flows through my body as he grasps the lacy edge of the lingerie. Reading the pattern like Braille, he traces around the edges of my breasts and down over my belly. His mouth follows his fingers, stringing little kisses over the surface of my skin. When he reaches the place where the fabric plunges down past my belly button, he lifts his head.

“I’m only going to ask you once, Ruby. If you say yes, there’s no going back.”

The thundering of my heart nearly drowns out his next few words.

“Are you mine?” he whispers.

I know that my answer will rupture whatever barrier is holding him in check, unleashing twenty years of pent-up desire. I know I risk being swept away in the force of the flood that follows. But it’s too late. I’m already adrift in the sea of him, just waiting for him to pull me down into his depths. To the place where I am all his.

“Yes,” I reply, and hold my breath.

Grasping the sides of my robe, Aaron falls to his knees, pulling it off my shoulders as he goes. Skin suddenly exposed to the cool darkness, I shiver again. There’s a ripping sound as he tears my negligee in half, and his fingers grip my inner thighs as he spreads my legs apart.

“Open for me,” he demands. Liquid lust pools between my thighs.

“Now.” His voice sounds angry.

I move my legs apart.

He trails a finger along the lips of my pussy.

“You’re ready for me.” His face presses against me, tongue lapping at my clit.

“Mine,” he murmurs.

The vibration echoes through me, weakening my legs.

His finger slides up into me, and I press my eyes closed against the darkness, overwhelmed by the sensations. He adds another finger, pumping them rhythmically in and out while the pressure of his tongue intensifies. My breathing grows rough, gasping as I near the edge. It's been a long time since I came with another person, and I feel suddenly self-conscious.

As though he can sense my hesitation, Aaron pauses, removing his fingers and leaving me panting. He stands up.

“Don't be scared, Ruby. I need things from you. I need to make you come, and then I need to use you. I'm going to do things to you that might even hurt. But I'll always make sure you feel pleasure, too.”

Illustrating his point, he pinches my clit between his thumb and forefinger, making me gasp.

“You just have to trust me.” He releases his fingers, and a rush of pleasure flows through me. “I've had twenty years to prepare for you, and I don't think I'll ever be satisfied.”

“Now.” He kneels again. “I'm going to lick you until you come all over my face, and then you're going to take my cock just like my beautiful queen should have been doing every day since we first met.”

He sucks me into his mouth, teasing my pussy with two fingers, sliding them along my slick lips until my body starts to quiver, then plunging them in. I scream, and he licks and sucks me harder, pressing me against the wall with his other hand while I buck and shake. One orgasm catapults through me, then another.

“Aaron, please,” I beg. He responds by increasing the speed of his thrusts, pressing against my clit with a flat, hard tongue. I come again.

“Please stop.”

He removes his fingers and lifts his head. “You don’t decide when you’re done. I do.”

Slowly, deliberately, he inserts his two fingers back into my trembling pussy. His tongue finds my clit again, and he flicks it once, twice, then latches on and sucks while his fingers pump into me once more.

A scream erupts from my lips as yet another orgasm rockets through my body. My legs wobble and I feel myself slipping down the wall. Aaron finally withdraws his fingers and licks me one last time.

“Only because I’m about to explode.” He stands, and there’s the sound of a zipper, then the sound of fabric falling to the ground. I reach a trembling hand for his cock, eager to return the pleasure he’s given me, but he grabs both of my hands and lifts them over my head, pressing them against the wall.

For the first time, he crushes his lips against mine, stealing my breath completely with the flavor of my pleasure. Still stunned by the orgasms he just forced on me, I’m pinned to the wall by his hand and his kiss. And then I feel him, hard, between my legs, the head of his cock against my entrance. And he feels huge.

“Aaron?” I wrestle myself away from his kiss. He continues to guide his cock, moving it along the slick lips of my pussy, pressing inward, upward. “I’ve never been with someone so...” I struggle to find the right words. “You’re massive.”

“Oh, so Mr. High School Running Back really is overcompensating with that ugly-ass truck?” He laughs. “You know what they say about us tall, skinny guys.”

My mind flashes back to high school, to my friend who always hid behind his hoodie. I feel myself blush.

“If only those cheerleaders knew, right?” I’d laugh, too, but my body is still melted from before, my muscles a puddle inside me.

“It wouldn’t have mattered.” His breath is hot on my neck. “I only ever wanted you.”

My heart flutters and I feel a fresh throb in my pussy.

“Are you ready, Ruby?” He kisses my cheek, then moves to my mouth, nibbling my lower lip.

“Yes,” I lie, not sure I’ll ever be ready for something that size. *Maybe he just seems bigger in the dark?*

Aaron thrusts into me, and the intensity catches me by surprise. I feel myself stretching around him. He pauses for a second and withdraws, then thrusts again, deeper. Pressure and pain give way to a sense of being filled, more and more, of being embraced by him entirely. Then he withdraws, leaving me suddenly empty. I hear a gasp. My own. And then he fills me again.

“My God,” he moans. His nails dig into my back, his teeth into my neck. His thrusts intensify and his hands move down my body, grabbing my flesh. He grunts, animalistic, pulling and turning and lifting my body in rhythm with his thrusts. I feel my feet lift off the ground as my back scoots up the wall.

Reaching for something, anything, to hold on to, I grip Aaron’s hair with one hand, the other grabbing his rock-hard bicep. He hammers into me relentlessly, like a shipwrecked sailor who just caught a glimpse of the shore—delirious and hopeful.

“Ruby,” he cries out, and sinks his teeth into my shoulder as his release explodes inside me. His body jerks, then jerks again, pumping me full. My mind flits briefly to thoughts of birth control, something I haven’t even considered in years, but then my attention returns to the weight of his head on my shoulder, to my own weight now pressing into my feet, once more solidly planted on the ground.

Aaron finally lifts his head. “I’ve never done that before,” he says.

“Which part?” I grin, even though I know he can’t see me. “Fucked someone against a wall?”

“Come,” he replies. “Inside someone. I’ve never come inside someone before.”

Stunned, I find myself completely mute.

Even as his cock softens, it still fills me, and he reaches down between us to ease it out of my body.

“I’m sorry about the mess.” He runs his fingers up my thigh, scooping up drips of cum, which he presses back inside me with the warm tips of his fingers. “I want to know you have a piece of me inside you until I see you again.”

I’m still dumbstruck by what he said earlier.

“Seriously, Aaron, you’ve never come inside another woman before?” It’s impossible for me to believe that someone so handsome and so successful, so surrounded by beautiful women, never actually fucked anyone.

“It’s not that I never tried.” He finally releases me and steps back to put his pants back on. “I wish I had stayed a virgin for you, Ruby, but I didn’t. I didn’t know whether I’d ever see you again. So I tried, with many women. But none of them were you, and it just felt insanely wrong.”

Suddenly, every night I’ve spent with Brent seems like cheating. Hell, my whole marriage seems like a farce, like I should have been with Aaron all these years.

“I wish it had been you I married.” I touch his hand, where his skin feels suddenly cool and dry.

“Come with me, Ruby.” He grabs my fingers, tugging me toward him. “Let me rescue you from all of this.”

But in the dark, he still doesn’t seem entirely real. My stomach clenches. There’s no way this man, the millionaire from the magazines, really wants me in his life.

“You don’t mean that.” My words sound ring in the hollow air of the dark hallway. “I’ll just turn your life upside down.”

“I can protect you.” His clothes rustle as he puts them on. “You don’t have to believe me tonight, but I’ll prove it to you, I promise.”

“I would only be a burden.”

Aaron’s hand grasps my chin.

“Living without you all these years has nearly crushed me.” His mouth meets mine, first gently caressing my lips, then devouring them until I’m breathless. “No matter what baggage you bring with you, I’ll always levitate in your presence.”

His words spark something in my chest, a fluttering of wings against my ribs, like a moth straining toward a flame.

“Leave the cameras.” Aaron releases me and I head him move toward the front door.

No point pretending I don’t know they’re there.

“They’re for your safety,” he continues. “I have to be able to make sure that asshole doesn’t touch you.”

“Okay,” I say, wishing I had the guts to go with him.

Aaron opens the door, standing for a minute in the light. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small package.

“I almost forgot your Christmas present.” He hands it to me.

I unwrap the gift while he waits, my fingers trembling under the pressure of his gaze. Inside a small box, nestled in tissue paper, lies a simple metal key. Looking up at Aaron, I search his face for some explanation, but he just wears a feline smile that lifts the corners of his eyes.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he says. It’s a fact, not a question.

Warmth floods through me.

“And every day after that,” he adds, then steps out into the night and closes the door behind him, leaving me sore, bemused, and indescribably happy.



Aaron

If I were the kind of person to sing and dance and click my heels, I'd be doing all of those things simultaneously as I leave Ruby's house. I'd be skipping down the walkway singing a little ditty at the top of my lungs. But Aaron Luther doesn't do those things. Instead, I stride. Right past the now-deflated vinyl shell of what used to be a giant slice of pumpkin pie. Right past Ruby's SUV that sits alone in the driveway. Right past the gaudy mailbox with its strand of Christmas lights wound around the wooden base like a candy cane.

The memory of Ruby's warm body in my arms, of her hot, tight pussy milking me dry, makes me growl with renewed lust. The fact that that slice of pie was losing its air while I filled her with my cum seems like a beautiful form of poetic justice. It almost makes me like the ugly thing. Almost. It definitely makes me smile.

My happiness is so distracting that it nearly drowns out the grumbling roar of an approaching pickup truck, one that's unnecessarily noisy. One that's jacked up much higher than any human needs. One that's painted a ridiculous shade of lime green. One whose owner didn't conveniently plunge off a precipice.

Fuck.

Luckily, I've reached my vehicle. I unlock the door, leap in, and duck down just soon enough to miss Brent's truck as it

careens past me and right up onto the lawn of his own damn house, knocking over the mailbox in the process.

Double fuck.

All I want to do is leap out of my car and beat the ever-loving shit out of him, but I know that would draw far too much attention to me and, worse, to Ruby.

He climbs out of the truck and stumbles over the post from the mailbox, falling flat on his face.

My fingers twitch in my pocket, stroking the folded steel of my knife.

He's already down. Just a quick jab into the jugular. Drunk man accidentally stabs himself in the neck.

The longer he lies there, immobilized by his own stupidity, the better the idea starts to seem.

But then Ruby appears. She's exchanged her silk robe for a pair of loose sweatpants and a t-shirt, covered with a long cardigan. Her face, illuminated by the light outside the garage door, looks furious.

I roll down my window.

“What the fuck, Brent.” Her voice maintains a lethal calm. Terrifying and awesome. Blood surges to my dick. My woman is fucking regal.

Brent groans an inaudible response.

“What's that?” Ruby moves closer to him. “I can't hear you.”

“I said,” Brent lifts his head, “I’m sorry, babe.” He drops his head again, hitting the ground with an audible thump.

“I’ll bring you a blanket.” Ruby hugs her sweater around herself, shivering slightly. “But you’re not coming inside. You can sleep out here right where you landed.” She turns and walks back toward the house, pausing by the limp heap of what used to be the world’s most ridiculous inflatable slice of pumpkin pie. She prods it with her toe.

“Actually...” She bends down and grabs a corner of the vinyl, then backs toward the man on the ground. “Here.” She heaves the wreckage of the pumpkin pie over him. “This should keep you warm enough. And it will finally have some practical use. I’m going back inside.”

And she does, without even glancing over her shoulder.

Badass.

Brent doesn’t move for a good two minutes, during which I wish we lived in Minnesota or upstate New York, somewhere where sleeping outside in December would mean freezing to death. Finally, he turns onto his side and curls up into a fetal position, wrapping the vinyl around his body like it’s a thick, soft blanket. Within a few seconds, the sound of snoring rumbles across the lawn.

As I prepare to drive away, I open the monitoring app just in time to see Ruby sink into a bathtub full of bubbles, a romance novel in her hand. My cock throbs. Ruby’s going to have a visitor at work tomorrow, and she better be fucking ready.

Chapter 16

December 26th

Aaron

Lust overwhelms my every thought, and I'm filled with insatiable need. I stride in through the front door of Henschley's prepared to shout her name, prepared to hijack the loudspeaker and demand that she spread her legs right here among the wrapped gift boxes under the ornate Christmas tree.

Instead, I'm met by the strains of violins playing orchestral versions of Christmas songs. Burgundy signs throughout the store advertise post-Christmas sales, and sprigs of greenery still hang at regular intervals among the racks.

At first, I see no one. Then Manuel materializes by my elbow.

"How may I help you, sir?" His gaze strips me of my blue jeans and button-down shirt.

"Ruby." Her name comes out as a growl.

Manuel fans himself with his hand. "I'm not sure who you're looking for, but I hope she knows how lucky she is."

With a sigh, I realize my mistake. "It's just a nickname." I pause. "I'm looking for Carol." My stomach turns at the use of the alias.

Manuel's eyebrows rise an inch up his forehead. "I believe she's in the manager's office."

"With him?" My nostrils flare and my heart pounds.

“Like he’d come in the day after Christmas.” Manuel laughs.
“No, she’s just balancing the cash.”

“Perfect.” My heartbeat slows to a more normal pace. “Show me where.”

“It’s really not in a customer access area.” But Manuel can clearly tell that I’m not the kind of customer who wants to rob the safe, so he leads me through the dressing rooms to a door at the back, where he knocks with three quick raps.

Blood surges to my cock before Ruby even opens the door. The minute I see her face, she might as well be naked.

“Ruby.” I rush into the office, vaguely aware of Manuel’s nervous movements behind me.

“It’s okay.” Ruby waves him off. “He’s an old friend. He’s fine.”

Without turning around, I pull the door closed, then grab a fistful of Ruby’s hair with one hand and her waist with the other.

“I need you,” I breathe into her mouth. “Now.”

I don’t wait for her to reply, just press my lips to hers and let my tongue communicate my urgency. Her body melts, already accustomed to my touch. Grinding my hips into her, I force her against her manager’s desk. Shoving a stack of folders aside, I lift her ass up onto the smooth mahogany surface.

Papers slide into a growing heap next to us, and Ruby pulls away to glance at the mess. “Aaron, I don’t think we should
—”

“Shhhhhh...” I press a finger to her lips. “We most certainly should, and we absolutely will, and you’re going to shut the fuck up and take this dick like a good girl.” My mouth covers hers again, and I feel her tongue move against mine, her hands grabbing at the button on my jeans. She unfastens and unzips them, tugging them down over my hips until they fall to the floor. Only my silk boxers stand between us, tented by the force of my erection.

Ruby’s wearing a dress that comes down to her knees. I easily slide my hand between her stockinged thighs to find out how much of an impression I’m making. The seam where her legs meet is wet, and I slide my fingers along the slickness, rubbing up and down the juncture of her thighs until I elicit a delicious moan.

“Good girl,” I whisper. “You’ll get my cock soon enough.”

Seizing the bottom hem of her dress, I yank it up over her head. Stitches pop as the fabric catches on her arms and shoulders, and she wriggles herself free. A lacy black bra is the only thing between her gorgeous breasts and my eager teeth. Her nipples harden in the cool air and my tongue teases them through the fabric while I fumble around the desk. A few more trinkets crash onto the linoleum floor. I punctuate the sound with a bite to Ruby’s left nipple.

Her yelp of pleasure floods my cock with desire.

Then my hand finds something cold, metallic, and oblong on the desk next to us. The Big Dill Pickle prize from the talent show. The one that should have gone to Ruby.

“You’re about to get a very special treat,” I murmur into her eager ear, then drop to my knees in front of her.

“Aaron, I have to get back to work.”

“Baby, you’re not going to be working here much longer.” I tear open Ruby’s tights and press her thighs apart. “Now hush and let me do my job.”

Her panties slide down her thighs with minimal resistance. My tongue strikes at her clit while two fingers sink into the sweet stickiness of her pussy.

“Oh, Aaron!” My name is a revelation on her lips, like I was just reborn between her thighs.

I add another finger, and she cries out, a sound that’s quickly muffled. Looking up, I see that she’s covered her own mouth.

Silly girl. Doesn’t she realize that will make me work harder so she’ll scream even louder?

As Ruby’s body moves in rhythm with my thrusting fingers, I increase the intensity of my tongue, pressing it against her clit and lapping at her flesh. My hand fumbles on the table until it finds the statue, and I withdraw my fingers from her drenched pussy.

“Don’t stop,” Ruby begs.

“Don’t worry,” I press the top of the statue against the swollen lips of her pussy, “I won’t.”

She gasps the instant the cold metal touches her flesh.

“What’s that?” she breathes as I ease the statue into her pussy.

“This,” I press it in further, “is the closest your asshole boss is ever going to get to making you come.”

She gasps again as the length of the thing fills her, and I resume my licking.

“You’re going to come all over this little trophy of his,” I add, “and we’re going to leave it on his desk so your scent will drive him crazy with what he’s never going to have.”

“Oh, God!” She rides the metal as if it were the real deal, writhing all over the damn thing. I can barely keep thrusting it into her as her orgasm crashes against my face.

While she’s still bucking and trembling, I pull the thing out and slide my boxers down my hips, releasing my erection. Ruby gasps as I enter her, but when I pause, she grabs my hips and pulls me closer, drawing my cock deep inside her.

I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to this feeling, of being where I truly belong. The experience is even more transcendent than the first time. Everything around us disappears—the office, the store, the city, the country, the world, hell, the whole universe—and all that matters is the junction of us, where my body prepares to dissolve into hers.

The sound of panting breaks through my concentration, and I realize I’m hearing my own breath, ragged and heaving. Sweat drips off my balls and trickles down my thighs.

Ruby, pressed into the desk in front of me, lets out these little whimpering noises. For a second I slow down, worried I might be hurting her.

“Don’t stop!” she cries, so I thrust harder. She grips the edge of the desk, trying to keep herself in place against the force of my thrusts. Her head falls back and I know another orgasm is close.

“Up here.” I grab her jaw and lift her face toward mine. “You’ll look into my eyes while you come.”

Her blue eyes widen, and her mouth opens slightly. I feel my dick throb inside her. My hand slips down to her throat, tightening around the delicate skin.

“My eyes are the only thing you’ll see, and my cock is the only thing you’ll feel,” I whisper.

Her chest heaves, and her pussy seizes around my cock. I tighten my grip on her throat as her orgasm intensifies, and my own body responds with an involuntary gush, pumping her full as she continues to tighten around me. As I come, darkness creeps around my own field of vision, and I marvel at how Ruby is completely at my mercy, yet her body owns mine entirely.

Finally, fully spent, we collapse onto the desk. I feel myself begin to slide out of her, and her hand reaches down to capture our juices before they spill out onto the floor.

“No.” I swat her hand away. “We’ve marked this room. Let him find the signs that you were claimed right here on his

desk.”

A drip of cum falls from between her legs and we both watch it hit the cold linoleum floor. Ruby’s eyes lift up and her gaze meets mine, the icy flames in those twin gems nearly melting my heart.

“Aaron.” My name caresses me. She lifts her lips toward my face, eyelids lowering like twilight.

“Panties on.” I hand her a lacy pair out of my jacket pocket. “You’re going to wear these to catch the rest of my cum as a reminder of who owns you now.”

“Who owns me?” Her mouth curls up. “You act as though you won me at auction, Aaron. I didn’t even know I was on the block.”

“There are still a few more bids to place before the deal is final.” I don’t allow myself to smile. “You’ve been living in purgatory for far too long.” My sweeping gesture encompasses not only this little box of a room, but this store, this town, her marriage. “I’m about to set you free.”

At the mention of freedom, a tear pools in the corner of her eye. It draws me like a magnet.

“I know what happened, Ruby.” I catch the tear on the edge of my little finger, then lick its salty moisture off my skin. “You went off to be a star. You were poised to explode over the universe, and then you disappeared. I searched for you for twenty years. I only found out what happened after I realized you were married.”

More tears follow, and my fingers can't possibly catch them all, so I wrap my arms around her and let my shoulder absorb her sobs.

"You're the one who disappeared," she says finally. "That last week of school, you never showed up. I never got to say goodbye before I left for New York."

"Brent never told you." I lean back from the embrace, searching her face for any clue that she knew.

Only confusion registers on her face as she shakes her head.

"I was in the hospital." My jaw clenches.

Her brows furrowed even further.

"Your husband and his friends beat the crap out of me." My teeth grind.

Her mouth drops open.

"I'm so sorry." Her hand flies to her face, hiding her shock.

"You didn't do it."

"But I can't believe I married him."

"I'm sure you had your reasons." I search her eyes, but see only more tears.

"I was so lonely. When he promised me that who he was in high school had just been for show, I believed him." She squeezes her eyes shut and bows her head. "I can't believe he hurt you."

"You didn't know." I hug her tightly again, then release her. "It changed me, though. Brought on dark thoughts. And

urges.”

“Urges?” She looks up at me.

“To hurt people.”

“Like, sexually?”

I pause before nodding, hesitant to admit my desires even to her. “Among other things.”

Her tongue runs out along her upper lip, then she bites down on the lower one, leaving a faint imprint of her teeth in the smooth pink skin.

“I fantasize about it sometimes.” She smiles shyly.

“About what?” I lean forward and run my own tongue over her lips.

“About a little extra, you know...” Her cheeks blush to a bright pink. “Sometimes a little pain makes pleasure that much more... pleasurable, you know? I just never had anyone to do that with.”

“Now you have me.” I nibble her lip, searching for the marks left by her teeth, then bite down on them, hard.



My heart thuds in my chest, pumping blood so loudly it drowns out all other sound.

“I liked when you squeezed my throat earlier,” I admit, embarrassment sending heat creeping up my neck.

“That’s only a small piece of it.” Aaron strokes my cheek with the back of my hand.

“You said yesterday that you might need to hurt me. If you ever needed to do more than what you just did...” I trail off, not sure what I’m trying to say.

Aaron grabs my jaw and leans over me, heat emanating from his body.

“You mean,” he whispers, breath tickling my ear, “if I needed to tie you up and tease you for a day, you’d be okay with it?”

I nod as his words send shivers through my flesh.

“Or if I needed,” he continues, “to use your pretty mouth repeatedly, to fuck your throat until you’re hoarse...” His lips move against my skin and every hair stands on end. It’s all I can do to focus on breathing.

“And if I needed to punish you...” His hands trail lightly over me, fingertips tracing a line from my shoulders down the expanse of my back, past my waist and around my hips. “For all the time we’ve been apart.” He slaps my ass. “You’d take it all.” Slap. “Night.” Slap. “Long?” Another slap.

The sound resonates throughout the office. The sharp stings burn my skin.

His slaps vibrate in my pussy, and an intense throbbing builds there again.

Aaron stares at me as though he can read the need all over my face. He shakes his head.

“You dirty, dirty girl.” Heavy lids lower over his eyes. “Turn around and bend over,” he orders.

I obey, pressing myself into the desk. I feel his groin against my ass, grinding a fresh erection into me. A powerful hand grasps a fistful of my hair, yanking my head back, and Aaron slaps my ass again, much harder this time.

“Does my dirty girl need more of this big dick inside her?”

I nod, barely able to move my head against his grip in my hair.

He yanks my underwear aside, followed by the sound of his zipper, then his pants dropping.

Without any further warning, Aaron shoves his cock inside me.

“Is this what you wanted?” His breath is hot on my neck. The force of his thrust pulls a gasp out of me, and his other arm reaches around my body, his arm bracing my shoulder, while his hand circles my throat.

“Just let yourself go,” he rasps. “I’m holding you now. Whatever you’ve had to do to keep it all together, just let go. Give your body up for my pleasure. I’ll take good care of it.”

My mind drifts. Waves of pleasure that crash toward my body seem almost distant, like a fairytale seashore in some far-off kingdom where handsome princes rescue damsels from hideous dragons and perverted bosses.

“That’s right, baby.” Aaron’s voice cuts through my imagination. “Just let it all go.” His grip on my throat loosens

for a second, and blood pounds in my ears. I hear cries and realize they're my own, and that tears are streaming down my face. The force of Aaron's thrusts pushes me against his arm, steady and rhythmic and soothing.

"You're safe now with me." His grip tightens again on my throat while his other hand lets go of my hair and travels down to play between my legs.

The additional stimulation is too much. An orgasm tears through me.

"Good girl." Aaron keeps his mouth against my ear, his fingers on my clit until I'm completely wrung out.

"My turn now." He grabs my hair again and pounds into me.

"I've waited," he pants, "so long for this." His breath rasps between thrusts. "And now that I have you, it's a million times better than I ever imagined." His teeth sink into my back, pain surging through me while his cock twitches and thrusts and erupts.

We've barely had ten seconds to recover when a knock sounds on the door.

"Carol, you whore, tell your hunky billionaire boyfriend to put his clothes back on so I can open this door."

Aaron glares at the door.

"It's just Manuel." I laugh at Aaron's expression. "He's my best friend. He's just joking around."

Aaron raises an eyebrow.

“Hurry up,” Manuel continues, “or I’m barging in and whatever I see cannot be unseen.”

With a roll of his eyes, Aaron pulls on his pants and helps me tug my dress over my head. When he opens the door, he brushes past Manuel without a glance.

“Tomorrow,” he tells me, not looking back.

I just nod, even though he can’t see me.

“Ummm, Carol?” Manuel lingers over my shoulder as we walk out of the office, so close I can smell the Listerine on his breath. “Do you know who that was?”

“Yeah.” My lips twist to hide my smile. “It was my friend Aaron.”

“Your... friend? And how did I not know you had friends like that?”

“I didn’t even know I had friends like that.” I shrug.

Realization dawns visibly on Manuel’s face, and I watch him progress through the stages, from suspicion, to shock, to denial, to acceptance and understanding.

“Holy motherfucking Christmas on a cracker made of platinum and motherfucking pearls, you little whore.” This is clearly his version of speechlessness.

I laugh.

“Secret Santa,” he adds, then repeats the phrase, as if I didn’t hear. “Secret motherfucking billionaire Santa.”

I press a finger to his lips.

He just shakes his head, then throws his arms around me and buries his face in my neck.

“There is a God,” I hear him mumble. I even detect what feels suspiciously like a tear wetting the skin on my shoulder.

Chapter 17

December 27th

Ruby

As soon as I park for work the next day, Aaron pulls in next to me in a Mercedes van and rolls down the window, gesturing for me to do the same.

“I figured boss man might be here today,” he explains, “so we’ll use this during your break.”

“That’s awfully presumptuous of you.” I smile.

“If you think that’s presumptuous, wait until you see what I have planned.” He laughs, then winks. “Just come out during your break.”

When I approach the van a few hours later, there’s no one in the driver’s seat. For a minute, I assume he stepped away and I missed him. A bitter swell of disappointment lodges in my throat.

Then a man wearing a white mask springs out of the back of the van, grabs both of my hands and twists and binds them tightly behind my back, and covers my mouth with a strip of cloth.

“I’ve seen the books you read,” a voice whispers behind me. Aaron’s voice. “I know what gets you off.”

His hand slides around to grab my throat.

“Do you trust me, Ruby?”

I nod, barely able to move my head against the collar of his hand.

“Do you grant me permission to do whatever I want with your body?”

A thrill runs through me, stealing my breath.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Tell me your safe word.” The pressure of his hand increases, and blackness creeps around the edges of my field of vision.

“Pomegranate,” I breathe. “It’s pomegranate.”

“Have you ever used that word with another man?”

I’d laugh if I could, but there’s too much pressure on my neck. I shake my head, almost imperceptibly.

“Good. Then I am going to use you like an innocent little kidnap victim.” He squeezes down on my throat, and everything goes dark.

When I regain consciousness, I’m bumping along in the back of the van. A pillow cushions my head, and a soft comforter covers the metal floor of the van. But my body still jostles with each movement the vehicle makes on the uneven road. A thick, dark blindfold covers my eyes, and I can taste the rubber of a ball-gag in my mouth. Rope binds my arms behind me and fastens my legs together at the ankles.

With a final jolt, the van comes to a stop. A few seconds later, I hear the rear doors open. Glimpses of sunlight peek in

around the edges of my blindfold.

“Oh good, you’re awake.” Aaron’s voice is raspy and delicious, sending a thrill along my spine. This man, my old friend, seems a bit deranged, and my body can’t seem to get enough. Just the sound of his voice sends wetness gushing between my thighs.

Metal creaks as he climbs into the van, and I feel the ropes around my ankles loosen.

“You’ll be doing a bit of walking,” he explains, then hoists me to my feet and leads me out of the van, carefully guiding me over the edge.

After we’ve walked for at least five minutes, he brings me up a set of steps and through a door. The scent of wood smoke tickles my nostrils, and I hear the distinct crackling of a fire. Heat warms my face. Aaron walks me closer to the fire, then kicks at the backs of my legs so I fall to my knees.

He yanks down my work slacks, exposing the silky black panties he gave me. Heat from the fire licks at my skin. “Right now, you’re nothing more to me than a whore I picked up off the street, got that?”

I nod. My heart hammers in my ears.

“I have these fantasies.” Aaron sounds further away now. “Years worth. It’ll take twenty more years just to fulfill them all.”

I sit back on my heels, struggling against the rope that binds my hands. Suddenly, there’s a whirring sound, and then a

‘crack’ and the sting of leather against the skin of my thigh. I hear myself cry out behind the gag in my mouth.

“Don’t struggle.” Aaron’s voice sounds strained. “I don’t want to have to hurt you.”

My heart hammers in my ears, and I wait with bated breath for him to tell me what comes next.

His hands caress my hair, and I feel his body move in front of me, blocking the heat from the fire.

“I’m going to take out this gag,” he says, unbuckling the strap behind my head. “But only as long as you do exactly what I say. Can you do that?”

I nod. The gag releases, and his powerful hands massage my jaw, then a thumb traces along my lips before sliding into my mouth.

“Suck,” he instructs.

As I lick and suck the salty skin of his thumb, I feel the liquid slickness gushing between my thighs. How long is he going to torture me before granting me release? His thumb withdraws, and I hear the sound of a zipper, then feel the thick head of his cock press against my lips.

“Open,” he demands, and slides into my mouth. I know I can’t fit much of him in my mouth, and I struggle again against the bonds that tie my hands, wanting to use my palm to help pleasure him. He withdraws from my mouth and I feel the hard ‘smack’ of his cock against the side of my face.

“I told you not to struggle,” he sounds almost apologetic. “Please don’t make me hurt you.”

Before I can say anything, he thrusts into my mouth again. This time, his cock slams against the back of my throat, gagging me. I feel blood rush to my pussy. Fuck, I never knew how much this kind of thing could turn me on.

He grabs a fistful of my hair and starts thrusting into my mouth rhythmically, creating a slapping, smacking sound against my lips.

“You’re taking my cock like a champ.” He traces his finger along my upper lip. “Now let’s see what other holes this hot body has to offer me.”

Suddenly, he’s gone, and the heat of the fire blasts my face again.

Then he grabs my hair.

“This way.” He guides me by the hair, and I shuffle along on my knees in the direction he’s taking me. My chest presses into cushiony fabric. A sofa, probably. The ropes around my hands loosen, and I’m eager to massage the circulation back into my wrists, but Aaron seizes them and pulls my arms up over my head. Once my hands are in front of me, I feel something round and wooden. The arm of a sofa, maybe, or a chair? Cold metal hits my wrists and then there’s a loud “clink” and my arms are cuffed to the wooden arm of the furniture.

“I don’t trust you not to fight back.” Aaron’s voice is low in my ear, his breath making the hairs on my neck stand to attention.

“I won’t, I promise!” I’m not sure I want my hands free, though. Something about the restraints feels safe. Secure.

Aaron muffles my words with a kiss.

“Shhhhh,” he whispers. “Or the gag goes back in.”

Then I feel him move behind me.

“Kneel,” he commands. “Ass up.”

For a second, I think he’s going to fuck me in the ass, and the thought of his monster cock going into that tight and tender place both thrills and terrifies me. Instead, he tugs off my underwear and slides his fingers between the folds of my pussy.

“So fucking wet for me.” He groans, and I hear a wet smacking sound, like he’s licking his fingers. “And so delicious,” he adds. He does it again: touches me and then licks his fingers, making little noises like a person might do at a very delicious restaurant. After he’s tasted me two more times, he teases me with the head of his cock, pressing it repeatedly against my clit.

“This is all about me, little slut.” He rubs against me again, then pushes into my entrance. “Your body is my toy today.”

His cock fills me, and I moan.

“Naughty naughty.” His hand covers my mouth. “You’re not allowed to enjoy it. You’re just my whore right now.”

His thrusting intensifies, and I bite down on his hand. He growls and slaps my ass, then pulls out of me. A few seconds later, I feel the sting of his whip on my thighs, once, twice, three times.

“You have to learn to behave.”

I feel his body behind me again, and I tremble as his cock enters me once more. His breath is soft as he pants against my ear.

“Such a sweet, sweet slut.” He reaches around and fingers my clit. “Maybe I want to reward you after all.”

A gasp escapes me. I can’t help myself.

“Quiet,” he reprimands. His slap stings my cheek. Then his fingers return to my clit. “I don’t want to have to punish you with my cock,” he says, strumming me.

I try to hold my breath, but it bursts out of me in another gasp. He stops touching me, just as I’m on the edge.

“You’ll never learn if I don’t punish you.” He grabs my hair, yanking my head back. My shoulders strain as my arms, still cuffed to the furniture, stretch in front of me.

Aaron hammers into me, thrusting hard and fast.

“I knew you were a greedy slut the moment I first saw you. I knew your pussy was hungry for this cock. You want to come all over it, don’t you?”

I don't answer. He pulls my hair harder.

"Answer me," he demands.

"Yes," I gasp.

"Yes, what?" His thrusts intensify.

"Yes, I want to come all over your cock." I'm still hovering on the edge, desperately wishing he'd touch my clit again.

"Too. Fucking. Bad." He gives a final thrust, then his cock twitches, and he collapses on top of me.

Holy hell. I tremble in frustration, unable to touch myself, desperate for him to touch me.

After what seems like an eternity, he kisses my neck, then unlocks my hands. Gently, he guides my body around until I'm facing him, then removes my blindfold.

All I see are his soft brown eyes.

"Ruby," he whispers, covering my mouth with a deep kiss and lifting me onto the sofa behind me.

My body still trembles with anticipation. He slides a hand between my thighs.

"You did so well, my queen." He climbs onto the sofa between my legs and massages my thighs, tracing the places where his whip left marks. "So well," he repeats, and slides two fingers into my pussy.

I gasp, then look quickly up at him, expecting a rebuke.

"It's okay." He smiles. "You're allowed to now."

He leans over and licks my clit, slowly, savoring the taste.

I moan and close my eyes. The sofa shifts audibly, and I feel his cock press into me. I look up at him, surprised.

“What can I say?” He shrugs. “Twenty years is a long time to wait.” He moves into me gradually, inch by inch, then lays his body along the length of my quivering form. “Now I’m going to make you come,” he says, and fucks me into complete oblivion.

I have no idea how much time has passed when we finally get off the sofa. But before we get dressed, Aaron has a final demand.

“Wear the plug tomorrow.” It’s not a question, it’s an order.

“I won’t be at work,” I point out. “I finally have a day off.”

“I’ll meet you at home.” He runs a finger down my back and around the curve of my ass, delving into the crack until he finds the soft, tender skin. Feather-light, he traces along the edges of the opening. “I haven’t had this part of you yet, and I can’t wait to find out how it feels.”

“You’re so big,” I say tentatively, my stomach tightening again at the thought of fitting him inside me.

“That’s what you’ve been training for, Ruby. I’ve been watching you, remember? I know you’ll be ready for me.”

I’m two hours late returning to work from my lunch break.

“I covered for you, girl.” Manuel meets me by the door. “But you’d better go convince Gary that you’re heartbroken over

your dead aunt.”

“Thanks, Manny, you’re the best.” I start toward Gary’s office.

“Go by fragrances on your way,” he winks. “You smell like a whorehouse and a campfire had an illegitimate love child.”

The smile doesn’t leave my face until I get to Gary’s door.

Chapter 18

December 28th

Aaron

The next morning I can't sleep. Finally, around six, I go to the diner for coffee and eggs, my phone carefully angled away from other patrons while I watch Ruby blissfully passed out in bed. Before my food has even arrived, Brent walks into the restaurant. Stumbles, actually, accompanied by a couple of vaguely familiar looking guys. Football players, I realize. From Hawk Ridge. Brent seems to be taking the whole witness protection thing seriously.

I'm distracted enough by them that I miss the moment when Ruby wakes up. When I look back at the phone, she's no longer in bed. I find her in the bathroom, brushing her teeth. She's wearing her silk robe, and I wait in eager anticipation for it to fall open.

But she's teasing me, sliding the folds of fabric over her skin to show a strip of creamy white, then slipping them closed again. After three minutes and thirteen seconds of this torture, she puts down her toothbrush, rinses her mouth, and lets the robe drop to the floor. With a wink at the camera, she saunters back to the bedroom.

For the next ten minutes, I sip black diner coffee with a massive erection throbbing in my pants while I watch my lover pleasure herself into three violent orgasms before sliding a plug into her ass. For me. All for me, while her husband sits a few yards away talking sports with his high school friends.

Some of whom once beat me to a bloody pulp. And all I can think about is how I have to go bury myself in Ruby's ass before my dick bursts right here in this restaurant.

I flag down Delilah.

“Keep him here.” I point to Brent. “I don't care how you do it, but keep him here for at least two hours.”

A slight nod of acknowledgement is her only response. I slap a hundred-dollar bill onto my table, rearrange the front of my pants, and stride past the table of jocks out to my Range Rover. They're too caught up in their own conversation to even notice me.

Ruby's still in bed, naked, when I get there, reading one of her romance novels. I watch her through the bedroom window while I slowly stroke my cock, which hardened again instantly the moment I saw her. Finally, unable to wait any longer, I pull out a glass cutter and reach up to slice a hole in the windowpane.

As though she can sense me, Ruby looks up from her book and shakes her head. She rolls out of bed, her body on full display, saunters over, and opens the window.

“If you cut this glass, it'll be freezing in here. What are you thinking?”

Climbing over the windowsill, I shrug. “I'll buy a new one.”

She rolls her eyes.

“It'll take time to replace. Meanwhile, it's still December outside.”

“Touché.” I reach down and fondle the end of the metal plug in her ass. It’s warm from her body heat. Blood surges to my cock. I’ll soon be the one experiencing that warmth.

“Are you ready for me?” My voice sounds thick, raspy.

Ruby climbs up on the bed and gets on all fours. “Do I look ready?”

The metal gleams, and I bend over to kiss the surrounding skin. Licking the edges, I taste the tang of metal on my tongue.

“I’m going to take this out in just a minute,” I grab the bottle of lube from her nightstand, “but first, I’m going to prepare to take its place.”

Ruby turns to look at me while I strip off my shirt. I’ve bared my chest in dozens of photoshoots so drooling photographers could display my body to countless clamoring men and women. But right here, with the love of my life, I feel self-conscious. I hesitate, my t-shirt pulled halfway up my chest.

“You’re fucking gorgeous,” Ruby breathes.

I lift the shirt the rest of the way and show her what was covered up with makeup and Photoshop in all the pictures: my scar.

“My God.” She reaches for my shoulder, tracing her finger along the line of knotted skin that runs from my right shoulder down my chest. “What happened?”

“Your husband and his buddies.” My jaw clenches.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I wish I’d known. I wish I could have stopped them.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Salty tears prick the backs of my eyes, but I allow none to escape the fortress I’ve built. “It’s ancient history. But I hope you understand why it brings me so much joy to fuck his wife’s tight little asshole under his own roof.” I grab her shoulders and turn her around, then grip a handful of her hair and murmur into the perfect seashell of her ear, “now get back on your knees, my queen.”

With a gentle shove, I push her back onto all fours. I quickly finish stripping off my clothes, then walk around to the other side of the bed and present my cock to Ruby’s waiting mouth.

“This time you’re going to see it while you suck me,” I tell her. “So you’ll know just how much more is left while you imagine how I’m going to feel in your ass.”

She moans as she takes my cock into her mouth, sucking greedily.

“Slow down.” I slap her cheek. “This is just the appetizer.”

She looks up at me with those wide blue eyes, the picture of innocence even while my thick cock glides between her pretty pink lips.

I could stare at this image forever, but I have another prize waiting. Cupping her chin in my hand, I slowly pull out of her mouth and watch her pink tongue lick her lips, like she wants to lap up every last taste of me. This woman drives me fucking wild.

Forcing myself to walk casually, I make my way back around the bed. Once there, though, I seize her by the hips and drag her toward me, all pretense of calm evaporating.

Again, I lick around the edges of the silver plug, then I drag my fingers through the slick moisture that coats her eager pussy and circle the plug, watching her body writhe as I tease the sensitive skin of her asshole. Her moans send another surge of blood to my cock, and I almost can't stand the wait. Then gently, gradually, I ease the plug out of her and plunge my tongue into the vacancy it leaves behind.

Ruby's moans escalate to a full-on scream.

"Just wait until it's my cock in there." I drop lube onto my shaft and coat my erection, then tease her hole with the head of my dick.

"Please, Aaron." She backs toward me, ass and thighs quivering in anticipation.

I press forward, inserting just the tip.

She groans, a low, animal sound.

I press further, a millimeter at a time.

"You're doing so well, Ruby." I massage her opening with my thumb, then reach around to pinch her clit. "I think you're going to take the whole thing, baby."

"How much is left?" She gasps between words as I continue to inch my way in.

Frowning, I eyeball the length still espoused in front of me. I've buried about half of my ten inches. I thrust forward.

"Just a little bit more," I lie, sliding my fingers rhythmically over her clit and teasing the lips of her pussy. "Just a little bit more." I watch another inch disappear into her thick, gorgeous ass—the ass I've fantasized about for the past twenty years. Remembering all the times I've imagined this moment almost sends my orgasm catapulting through me, and I pull back a bit.

"Don't stop," she gasps out, and I thrust back into her, adding another inch. Three more to go, but I won't tell her that. Instead, I focus on her clit while I slowly drive my cock toward paradise and Ruby's moans drive me to the brink of sanity. It's all I can do to focus on making her come with my fingers.

She starts to pant. "Oh God, Aaron. I don't know how much longer I can hold on. I don't want to come before you're all the way inside me."

"Don't worry." Increasing the pressure on her clit, I watch her writhe and shake under me.

"Oh, Aaron." She groans again.

I plunge two fingers into her pussy just in time to feel wetness gushing out of her.

"Aaron!" she shouts my name and thrusts back onto my cock, swallowing the remaining inches with her tight, pink asshole.

“Oh fuck, Ruby!” The muscles of her ass contract and spasm around me and I thrust back and forth, giving over to complete pleasure until I feel myself explode into her. I collapse onto her wrecked body, creating a heap of naked delight on her bed.

“So that’s payback for the scar, huh?” She whispers, after an eternity.

“Oh no.” I brush my lips against her ear. “That satisfied only a fraction of a percent of my need for revenge. But every time I make you come, my scar seems a little less important.”

She laughs, her body shaking in my arms, and I tighten my grip on her with one arm while I reach down and slowly withdraw my cock from her ass.

“Don’t move.” I kiss her ear, then jump up and walk to the bathroom, where I grab a washcloth from beside the sink and soak it with warm water.

Returning to Ruby, I carefully wipe her clean.

“You’re so fucking sexy,” I tell her, peppering little kisses over her skin after each swipe of the cloth.

“I suppose that’s a perk when you have to give me a million revenge orgasms.” Her back shakes a little after she says this, so I know she’s laughing. I roll her over, though, and stare into her eyes.

“Ruby?”

She blinks twice, nodding.

“You know this isn’t just about revenge, right?”

She nods again, slowly.

“I’ve been in love with you since the day we met.”

“Oh, Aaron.” She plunges her fingers into my hair and pulls my face down for a kiss, her tongue sliding between my lips. “You’re my angel,” she says finally. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you.”

I’m about to start listing her numerous incredible attributes when an alarm tone sounds loudly. At first, I look at Ruby, assuming she must have an alert on her phone. But she just shakes her head.

Then I remember: I set up my phone so it would ring through if Delilah called. In case of complications with Brent.

“Shit!” I jump up and grab my pants. Sure enough, she sent a text five minutes ago telling me Brent was getting ready to leave. Followed by another one thirty seconds ago saying he was walking out the door. She must have called when I didn’t respond to either.

Ignoring the call, I pull on my boxers.

“Brent is on his way home.” I turn to Ruby. “Come with me,” I plead. “I can’t stand leaving you here with him.”

She frowns and shakes her head.

“Aaron, spending time with you has been amazing, but your life is so different from mine. It’s not just that I can’t risk being so public. I’m also not, you know, the right kind of girl for you.”

Without bothering to fasten my jeans, I run to where she sits on the edge of her bed. The skin of her face is cool against my palms as I cup her jaw, staring into the endless blue pools of her mesmerizing eyes.

“When will you believe that you’re the only girl for me? That no other girl has ever mattered?”

Her lip trembles, and moisture gathers in the corners of her eyes.

“I want to believe you,” she whispers. “I do. Let’s just not push this any faster than we have to. I don’t want to destroy the fantasy.”

“It’s not a fantasy, Ruby.” I press my mouth against hers. She opens slightly, just enough for my tongue to gain entrance, just enough for my breath to move into her, as if I could resuscitate her hope, her belief.

She pulls away, and a tear spills down her cheek.

“Nothing has ever been more real to me than you.” I kneel before her and bury my head in her lap.

“You should go,” she whispers, though her hands are tangled in my hair.

“What if I could make him disappear?” I rise slowly, and her grip loosens.

“Then part of my nightmare would be over.” She smiles. “Only the mafia left to worry about.”

“Fuck them.” I stand, fasten my jeans, and pull on the rest of my clothes. “Every resource Arrow has will be at your disposal. The Fioravantes won’t touch you.”

“You sound so certain.” She hurries over to the window and pulls it open. “About them, and about Brent.”

“I know I’ll get you the best security money can buy.” I climb over the sill and drop down onto the lawn outside, then turn back toward Ruby. “As for Brent: the less you know, the better.”

“Then I won’t ask.” Ruby leans out through the opening.

I grab her jaw.

“He doesn’t touch you, understand?”

She nods.

I tighten my grip.

“I’m serious,” I reiterate. “Brent Michelson no longer lays his hands on what is mine.”

“So possessive.” A smile tugs at her mouth, and she leans forward, puckering her lips. “It kind of turns me on...” She winks and rotates her body, smacking her ass so it reverberates in front of me.

“Bad girl.” I reach through the window and smack her, too, hard enough to communicate that she’s not allowed to arouse me right when I have to leave. “Save that until tomorrow.”

“Why?” She leans over the windowsill, her breasts bulging like tantalizing cantaloupes. “What’s happening tomorrow?”

Resisting the urge to pop a nipple in my mouth, I give her my most mysterious look. “I guess you’ll find out,” I say, and slip away along the back hedge toward my car, heart hammering in my chest. *Time to finalize the plan.*

Chapter 19

December 29th

Aaron

My exciting agenda for the following day involved booking an entire ski slope for the morning, abducting Ruby from work again, and engaging in some very gymnastic antics on a ski lift. Instead, I find myself waiting with Linda and Delilah on the tarmac at the municipal airport at six in the morning, waiting to board a flight to Arrow's ultra-secure compound in Ensenada.

“Are you going to introduce me to your new girlfriend?” My sister's gray-blue eyes look anything but placid as she scrutinizes Delilah warily.

Delilah laughs.

“Linda, this is Delilah.” I gesture from one to the other. “Delilah, this is my sister Linda. She's the one who wrote up your contract. She's my accountant, slash public relations manager, slash overall right hand at Arrow, and I know you two are going to be the best of friends.”

Linda pulls the hood of her winter coat up over her steely gray ponytail and huffs out a breath.

“It's great to meet you.” Delilah offers her hand.

“You don't look like a software developer.” Linda shakes Delilah's hand firmly. “No offense.”

“None taken.” Delilah shrugs. “I'm not.”

“Then why do you have her working with Eros?” This question is directed at me.

“Because I didn’t need a software developer. I needed a relationship builder.”

“So she is your girlfriend.” Linda rolls her eyes.

Delilah looks from me to my sister, then back to me. Apparently deciding not to get involved in the family squabble, she pulls out her phone and scrolls, a small smile playing across her lips.

“You should probably contact your morning appointment and tell them about the change of plans,” she says, not looking up.

“Oh, now you’ve got her doing your scheduling?” Linda steps closer to Delilah. Despite her aggressive tone, her face looks kind. Concerned, even. “Listen, honey. It’s not like him to hire one of his dates to work at Arrow, but you should know that it never lasts with my brother. So enjoy the plane rides and the fancy dinners and everything else while you can.”

“Geez, Lin.” I wrap a hand around her shoulder and tug her away from Delilah. “It’s a good thing she’s not my girlfriend, or I’d be demoting you to the mailroom.”

“We don’t have a mailroom.” My sister’s eyes narrow.

“Exactly.” I wrap my arm around her shoulders. “Just because Delilah’s pretty doesn’t mean I’m dating her. In fact, she’s got her plate full already.” I wink at Delilah. “But I

promise you, she's quickly becoming an integral part of the team."

"Okay." Linda shrugs. "I just wanted to make sure everything was kosher." She stretches her hand out to Delilah. "I apologize for my assumption."

"No worries." Delilah grins. "I took it as a compliment."

Reassured that these two important women will get along, I step away to break the news to the number one woman in my life that I have to go out of town for a couple of days. Kicking myself for not providing Ruby with a burner phone, I realize that the only way I can call her is to contact the store, since I refuse to leave any trace of our contacts on her cell phone.

The line at Henschley's rings repeatedly, then disconnects.

"Fuck." I kick the tarmac.

Linda glances over at me, then shakes her head.

The flight attendant opens the door to the plane and gestures for us to board.

I call Henschley's again. Finally, after ten rings, a male voice answers. I recognize Manuel.

"Tell Ruby, I mean Carol, that I had to leave town for a couple of days. Tell her I'm sorry and that I'll make it up to her."

"Okay, Mr. Mysterious Tall Dark and Handsome." He doesn't even ask me to confirm my identity. I make a mental note to get him on the payroll and ascend the steps into the

waiting jet. Wishing Ruby were at home, I switch on the monitoring app and stare at her empty bed. I won't be able to watch her once we're in The Vault, and who knows how long we'll be in there. These meetings have been known to stretch well into the night.

True to form, our meetings continue until after eight pm. Linda and I return to my Ensenada condo after sending Delilah home on the jet to pick up her son from a relative's house and prepare for an overnight shift at the diner. We'll have more meetings in the morning.

"I know you're going to explain that whole Delilah situation to me eventually." Linda scoops Indian takeout onto her plate in front of the TV in my living room.

Grateful that she didn't push for details, I recline on the sofa and close my eyes.

"How well do you remember growing up in Hawk Ridge?" I ask her, eyes still closed. "Do you remember high school?"

"Yeah." She takes a bite of food. "I remember being a senior when you started as a freshman and how all my old teachers kept telling me how smart you were."

"Yeah," I scoff. "That sounds about right." Opening my eyes, I see that she's scrutinizing me closely.

"I remember you used to hang out a lot with that one girl from my class. What was her name?"

"Ruby." A sigh slides out of me, the weight of those years suddenly heavy on my shoulders.

“Yeah, Ruby.” Linda takes another bite. “She was a great singer. I thought she even got a recording contract or something. I wonder what happened to her? I feel like I’d remember if I ever heard her on the radio.” She shrugs. “Another casualty of the Hawk Ridge curse.”

“The Hawk Ridge curse?” Intrigued, I turn to face her.

“It refers to the fact that people who seemed so popular and successful at our high school ended up stuck in the cycle of parenthood or drugs or petty crimes. It’s probably true of every small town. You’re an exception. Especially,” her face darkens, “after what happened to you. Is that what you wanted to talk about? How those guys almost killed you? I’m sorry, I forgot about it for a minute.”

“I wish I could forget about it.” Taking a bite of food, I allow silence to settle over us for a moment. “You know, Dad’s reaction was worse than what those guys did.”

She doesn’t respond, just stares at her plate.

“He told me that he never imagined his own son could be such a pussy and could fail to defend himself. He told me he wished they had finished the job.”

She still doesn’t look at me.

I shove a piece of butter chicken into my mouth, only to discover that my appetite has vanished completely.

“Is it wrong to be glad that someone’s dead?” She takes a bite and chews slowly, the muscles in her jaw clenching and unclenching.

“You’re asking the wrong person.” Pushing my plate away, I get up and go to my room. I toss Linda a quick “good night”, then close the door, kick off my shoes and stretch out on the bed. The need to see Ruby, even from a distance, overwhelms me.

First, I look at the tracker on her car. It’s at her house. Of course, she’s already home from work. It’s late. The tracker seems to move, though, and I tap the app, but it shows that it’s updating in real time. Must be a weird glitch, because the dot bobs around a bit, as though her SUV were bouncing into the house, which is impossible.

I scan the cameras. Finally I find Ruby in her room, reading a book. Her face is blocked, but I can see the cover. Severed by Vengeance, it says. By Elle Maldonado.

A fitting title.

Closing my eyes, I allow images of Brent’s severed head to drift through my mind.

Soon enough, my queen. Soon enough.

Chapter 20

December 30th

Ruby

Two whole days without Aaron stretch like years, each minute passing by with excruciating slowness. Without any gifts or any contact other than his brief call to Manuel, I'm starting to think maybe I really am crazy and that I actually hallucinated everything that happened between us. Brent's truck in the driveway when I get home from work on Monday just reinforces the fact that I've been plunged back into purgatory, my angel nowhere in sight.

"Get your purse, Ruby." Brent doesn't even wait for me to come inside. "We're going for a drive."

My heart thudding, I pray that Aaron is watching.

But then I see what's on the kitchen table. My heart stops beating together. There's a cluster of wires and tiny gadgets, some no larger than the head of a screw. The jumbled pile spills across the formica surface of the table.

"What's all this?" My voice sounds foreign. Terrified.

"Yeah, I'd be scared, too." Brent stares at me, the whites visible around his cold blue eyes. "Apparently, someone's had our house bugged. You, Carol. They've been watching you." He pulls a small, round, flat piece of metal out of the pile and dangles it in front of me. "This one was in your bathroom. He was watching you shower."

“He?” My heart starts beating again, but it’s an uneven staccato. I feel faint. “How do you know it’s a he? And why me? There’s a whole pile of shit here. What’s to say they weren’t watching you, too?”

“There was a tracker on your car.” His voice is eerily calm. “I found that last night. But there was none on mine.”

I shrug, eyes wide.

Brent slams both fists onto the table. The vibration sends wires and gadgets tumbling to the floor.

“C’mon, Ruby. How big an idiot do you think I am?”

I freeze. Brent never calls me Ruby anymore.

He stares at me, jaw clenched and nostrils flared.

“That’s what he calls you, right?” he sneers. “Your little friend? Or should I say, ‘boyfriend’?”

Fear boils the pit of my stomach, sending searing flames into my throat.

“You think I haven’t noticed all the little presents? Not just the diamond necklace. Earrings. Rings. And that god-awful perfume. The shit you used to wear in high school. Yeah, fuck, I liked it then. But the minute I smelled it on you the other day, I knew he had to be involved. And then I find this shit.” He picks up another camera, this one a little silver number the size of the head of a pin. He drops it into my hand. Tiny wires drape across my palm. “This was embedded in the mirror in your bedroom. Pointed toward your bed.”

“You really think—” but I stop myself before Aaron’s name crosses my lips. I can’t let Brent know his suspicions are true.

“What I think is that you and I are going for a little ride, Ruby. Get your purse. We’re going out.”

Why would he be so insistent that I get my purse? Then, I remember all the stories about missing persons, and how they always talk about whether the person’s purse went missing with them. And I know without a shadow of a doubt that I’m about to go missing, that I’m not actually crazy, and that whatever Brent’s been planning all this time is finally coming to a head.

“Fine.” I whirl and hurry to my bedroom. “I’ll even use the potty first so we don’t have to stop along the way.”

Surprised not to hear the sound of footsteps behind me, I run to my closet and reach up onto the highest shelf. It doesn’t take long to realize why Brent didn’t bother following me, though: the shelf is empty. That’s when I finally look around my closet and notice that everything from that shelf has been tossed on the floor. Without sparing a millisecond in thought, I race into the bathroom, where I lock the door behind me and turn on the faucet.

I know being scared is supposed to make a person pee themselves, but the terror currently stabbing me in the gut seems to have the opposite effect. I sit on the toilet for what feels like forever, but nothing comes out.

Then Brent starts knocking on the door.

“What the fuck are you doing in there, Carol? We’re not going to a fucking beauty pageant.”

“Coming!” I shout, and splash cold water on my face.

“Now!” he hollers, “or I’ll break this motherfucking door down and drag you out.”

As much as I want to buy time, I believe what he says about breaking down the door, so I towel off my hands, take a deep, trembling breath and open the door.

Only to find myself staring into the barrel of my gun.

“Looking for this?” Brent waves the weapon toward the front door, indicating for me to walk in that direction. “You really think I’m a complete idiot, don’t you? Well, it’s finally time you learned your lesson.” He walks behind me down the hallway, occasionally jabbing at my back with the pistol like he’s prodding cattle to the slaughter.

“You’re driving,” he says flatly, handing me the keys to his truck.

I oblige, wondering whether I should just drive into a telephone pole.

As I pull away from the house, I remember my recent “kidnapping” by Aaron, and my heart sinks. Without the cameras, without the tracker on my car, how will my angel even know I’m gone?



Aaron

As soon as I leave The Vault the next evening, I turn on my monitoring app. My fingers fumble as I unlock my phone, in desperate need of a dose of Ruby, like a teenage boy nervously opening the pages of his first Playboy magazine. Security must have tightened up this building, though, because all I see is fuzz. No images come through. My teeth grind thinking about the fact that I'll have to wait until I reach the street to catch a glimpse of my queen.

A text alert pops up on my phone. It's just a quick note from Mom, something about New Year's Eve. Yet another family obligation to avoid. As I stride out of the elevator and across the polished marble of the first floor of the Arrow building, however, the significance of the text sinks in.

My heart falls to my feet.

The Arrow building isn't locked down. The text from mom came through just fine. There's something wrong at Ruby's house.

Desperate to be mistaken, I click back over to the monitoring app and I flip through the various views. Outside. Kitchen. Bathroom. Front hallway. Bedroom. Nothing. Only fuzz. My frantic fingers feel numb. Finally, I see something on the last one, a camera I'd wedged into a grate in the hallway to monitor the door to Brent's room. The view has changed, but the camera

is still on. Now, however, all I see is a closeup of the speckled linoleum that covers the floor beneath the kitchen table.

Someone tore down my cameras. All of them. And because I was in this series of stupid fucking meetings, I missed the whole thing. Now, I'm over two hours away from her house and helpless.

Ice cold dread fills my veins, then steels into resolve.

I dial Delilah.

“You have to get in touch with Brent.”

She responds with silence.

“Delilah?”

“I've been trying to call you all day, Aaron, but nothing went through. Brent was at the diner this morning. With that same guy from before. Gio. They were arguing.”

A lump of granite forms in my gut.

“What did you hear, D? Tell me you heard what they were talking about.”

“I couldn't catch it all, but I heard Brent tell the other guy he was tired of waiting and to meet him at the warehouse.”

“Call him right now.” My voice grates. “Tell him you have to meet up. Make some excuse. Tell him you can't wait until tomorrow, that you'll break up with him if you don't see him tonight. Make it believable.”

“Or we can just see where he goes.” Her voice sounds shockingly calm.

“What do you mean?”

“I put a tracker on his car, picked one up at the office the other day.”

Relief floods my veins, nearly making me collapse.

“Delilah?” My hand shakes with a surge of adrenaline, “this is not a drill. Ruby’s in danger. It’s go time. We have to get Gary there, too.”

“Got it.” She silently waits on the other end, so I end the call and contact my flight team. Apparently, they value their jobs, because they promise they’ll be ready to go by the time I reach the airport. No questions asked.

Two hours later, I’m sliding into the driver’s seat of my car back in Sacramento. Before turning the key in the ignition, I take a slow, deep breath to refocus on the task at hand.

Everything is fine. We’re moving a little faster than I thought we would, but it doesn’t matter. Everything’s going to be just fine.

Except that a deranged lunatic has Ruby, and who knows what he might do to her.

“Fuck!” I pound my fists against the dashboard of the Lincoln town car, the only thing I could arrange on such short notice. It’s not ideal, but it’ll have to do.

“Motherfucking piece of shit motherfucker.” I allow myself one more moment of frustration as I stroke my scar, remembering the way the blade glinted in a ray of sunlight right before Brent slashed my shoulder. The way he laughed

maniacally while doing it. The line of red blood that appeared on my favorite Nirvana t-shirt.

Fuck him. He will not win. Tonight, Brent Michelson will die.

Adrenaline makes my legs twitch. I turn up the radio to calm my nerves. Strings soar over the airwaves, crooning out The Swan by Camille Saint-Saëns. My phone lights up. A message from Delilah. A location.

Delilah

B at this spot. G on his way.

I will never regret hiring this woman. A wave of calm passes through me just as a flute melody soars over the soft vibrations of a cello. It's like a chorus of fucking angels straight from heaven, promising me I'll soon see my Ruby again.

I type in the location Delilah sent and throw the car into reverse just as a new song comes on the radio. It's an upbeat Tschaikovsky tune. Perfect. Tapping my fingers on the steering wheel I floor the gas, devouring the fifteen miles of pavement that separate me from my one true love.

Chapter 21

December 30th

Ruby

“Why are you doing this, Brent?” My hands grip the steering wheel as I scan my surroundings for some way to crash the truck, some way to get us out of this mess. The problem is, now that I have Aaron back in my life, I don’t want to die. I just want to get away.

Brent doesn’t respond.

Out of the corner of my eye, gleaming metal reminds me that Brent still holds a gun, my gun, pointed at me.

“You couldn’t even bother to get your own gun?” I risk a full-on glare in his direction. “What the hell is your end-game?”

“Just shut up and drive, Carol.” He jabs the gun into my side, and I find myself wondering whether I could lean forward just a bit and make him miss all vital organs, whether he would just shoot straight through a layer of fat. This body might come in handy after all! The thought makes me laugh.

“What’s so fucking funny, Carol?” Brent jabs me again.

“Don’t call me Carol.”

“You don’t decide what I call you.” He checks a map on his phone. “Turn right up here.” He gestures with the gun, then jabs me with it again.

“Do you even know where we’re going?”

“Do you even know how to shut the fuck up?” he snaps, then adds, “Carol?”

Without thinking about it, I slam my foot on the brakes. Both of us jolt forward. Pain shoots through my cheek, and I realize Brent smacked me with the gun.

“Don’t call me Carol,” I hiss.

“You’re lucky I didn’t shoot you,” Brent growls, pressing the gun into my side again. “Pull another stunt like that, and I will. I don’t care how much of a mess I make.”

Cold realization passes through me, an infusion of ice in my veins. He’s thinking about killing me, and he’s comfortable with the thought. His only desire is to minimize the mess. He must think he finally has a way to do it that won’t get him caught, and that’s where we’re headed now.

Well, motherfucker, you’re about a month too late, because now I will do anything I can to stay alive.

“Left up ahead,” Brent orders, yanking my focus back to the road.

After a series of turns, we cross over a railroad track and drive down a dirt road between rows of long, low warehouses. Their tin roofs are rusty, and gray paint flakes off their stucco walls.

Brent peers around us, then points to a particularly tired-looking building where the roof hangs over a partially crumbled wall, flapping against the jagged bricks along the top.

“Pull around back,” Brent demands, and I navigate the bumpy road to the rear of the building and pull up alongside a black Range Rover.

Brent keeps the gun glued to my side as he guides me into the building and down a long hallway. Blinking against the sudden darkness, my eyes finally adjust when we enter a long room, dimly lit through high plexiglass windows along one wall. I suddenly have a flashback of the cafeteria at Hawk Ridge High School, and I almost laugh again. Then I notice a man standing in the shadows at the far end of the room.

“Maybe you remember Giovanni?” Brent digs the gun into my ribs, prodding me toward him. “Enforcer for the Fioravantes?”

The man does not look familiar.

“Fuck, man.” Giovanni shakes his head. “Do not use my motherfucking name ever again.”

“Or what?” Brent stands behind me now, pressing me forward with the gun against my back. “I brought her here, just like we agreed.”

Giovanni sighs. “I need the money in hand, Ben, and I can make all of this,” Giovanni gestures toward me, “disappear.”

“So what are you, some kind of hitman?” I cross my arms heavily over my chest. Get them talking, isn’t that what you’re supposed to do? No, wait, you’re supposed to talk to them. Make them think of you as a human being.

“What if I don’t have the money now, but I’ll give it to you once the deal goes through?”

Giovani shakes his head. “No dice, my friend.”

“So you’re a hitman for the Fioravantes?” I wrack my brain for something personal to tell him, something to humanize myself. Nothing comes to mind. “I don’t recognize you. Are you new?”

“Stop talking.” He glares at me with oddly flat blue eyes. Something about them creates a chill deep in my gut.

“Take her out and give me the deal, and then I’ll cut you in at half.” Red blotches form on Brent’s neck. He’s getting desperate. Great.

“What deal?” I ask him. He doesn’t even look at me. “What fucking deal, Brent?”

The other man finally looks over, exasperation broadcast all over his face.

“Your husband is selling you out to the Fioravantes in exchange for them freeing up your music catalogue and giving him full rights.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Brent whirls on Giovanni, pointing his gun at the guy’s face.

For a second, the guy looks surprised. Then he steps toward Brent.

“You have a problem, man? You’re the one who showed up here without the money. I can’t take the job without half of the

cash up front.”

“Not gonna be a job anymore if you keep running your mouth,” Brent spits.

Suddenly, a familiar voice sounds from the doorway.

“What the fuck is going on? Where’s Delilah?”

“Delilah? What are you talking about?” Brent swings the gun toward the door.

“Gary?” My mind can’t compute his presence here. All I know is that this is my chance.

I grab Brent’s right arm with all my strength.

He jerks back.

The gun goes off.

Gary yelps in surprise, then falls over sideways.

“You crazy motherfucker!” Giovanni lunges toward Brent. Time crawls at a snail’s pace and everything moves in comically slow motion. Brent swings back toward Giovanni, who raises his arms, lifting his chest toward the gun. I swear I see the bullet leave the barrel and whiz straight into Giovanni’s flannel jacket, where it punctures the blue plaid, provoking an explosion of red.

Crimson blood spews out, splashing the gun, spattering Brent’s surprised face and painting the floor with its spray. Giovanni flies backward, hitting the wall behind him, then slumps toward the floor.

All of this happens in a matter of about two seconds, and then Brent's arm starts to swing back toward me. This time, I reach for his hand, striking his wrist so hard that the force of my blow knocks the gun to the ground.

"What the fuck, Ruby!" Brent leaps for the gun.

"Fuck you, Brent." I swing at him, striking his shoulder, and he stumbles backward, falling to the ground.

"I'll kill you, crazy bitch!" He scrambles up.

"Will you?" I pounce on my gun. The weapon's smooth shape reassures my fingers. Slowly, deliberately, I point it at Brent.

He freezes.

"Come on baby, you don't really want to shoot me, do you?"

"How many times have you tried to kill me, Brent?" I take a step toward him.

"What are you talking about?"

"How many times, Brent?" Another step.

"Does it really matter?"

He's right: it doesn't.

"Why?" Another step. I'm three feet away from him. Too far for him to reach me easily. Close enough for a very clean shot.

"Look at you." Ugliness seeps through his features, flattening the color in his eyes and twisting his lips. "I married a pop star. Now, I live with a department store clerk. Who wouldn't want a better life?"

“You convinced me that you loved me. That’s why I married you.”

“Sure, I wanted you. That much was true. But do you really think I would have married you if you didn’t have money?” His hollow laugh echoes through the large, empty room. “Even your nerdy little friend Aaron looks a hell of a lot better with a massive bank account, doesn’t he?”

Red obscures my vision, and my hand trembles. I force myself to maintain a steady aim. A quarter-sized spot on Brent’s forehead becomes my sole focus in the entire universe.

“You two deserve each other,” he snarls. “Too bad you’ll never get the chance to be together.” His body blurs as he charges, suddenly seeming as swift as he was in his high school running back days.

My finger is quicker, though, like lightning on the trigger.

The hole that opens just above his right temple is small, but the spray that spews out behind his head splashes in a long swath on the concrete floor behind him. The remainder of Brent’s face contorts into a mask of agonized surprise.

Then, his eyes go blank. His suddenly limp body tumbles slowly to the floor.

“Well, this is a convenient turn of events.” A strong hand grabs my arm, and I feel Aaron’s warmth just as my own body starts to sway, the room spinning around me.

د کورنۍ

Aaron

“Aaron.” Ruby crumbles in my arms, sagging against my chest. “You’re here.”

“Of course I’m here.” I squeeze her tightly, then gently set her on the ground. “Although it looks like I arrived a few minutes too late.” She drops the gun as she falls, and I pick it up with a gloved hand.

“No,” she whispers. “You came back to me at just the right time.”

Wiping the gun carefully with my handkerchief, I study Brent’s body.

“How convenient that he’s right handed.” *And that the shot was to his right temple. I couldn’t have planned it better myself.* Scanning the room, I assess the other bodies. “I suppose he shot the other two?”

Ruby nods.

Shaking my head, I close my eyes, briefly reliving the terrifying moments between when I first heard gunshots from outside the building and when I arrived in this room to find Ruby alive. A deep, shuddering breath refocuses me on the task at hand. I open my eyes and return to Brent’s body.

“There.” Brent’s fingers easily open and accept the gun. “That’s a bit easier for the cops to understand. You don’t want to make things hard on those guys. Their jobs are tough

enough as it is.” I crouch next to Ruby and wrap my arm around her, then point to Gary. “We have a love triangle. Your jealous husband shot the man who tried to be your lover. And then we have this guy.” I walk over to Gio, folded against the wall. His body flops as I kick it with the toe of my shoe.

“He’s supposedly with the Fioravantes, a hitman,” Ruby supplies.

“Perfect. Jealous husband tried to take out a hit, but something went wrong. Everybody winds up dead.” The toe of my shoe is red with Gio’s blood from where it prodded his chest.

“But why was Gary here?” Ruby sounds much calmer than I expected.

“Well,” I smile, “I guess it actually was a love triangle. He came to see Delilah.”

“Delilah?! Brent’s girlfriend?” Ruby looks stricken, and I realize we haven’t discussed my newest teammate. “What does any of this have to do with her?”

“So you knew about her.” I crouch beside her again and wrap my arms around her. “Don’t worry, she’s working for me now. I can’t wait for you to meet her. Come on, love, let’s get home.” I lean in for a kiss. As our lips meet, I nearly levitate with joy. I get to go home with Ruby tonight, and every night for the rest of my life.

My tongue presses between her lips, parting them slowly before I thrust into her mouth.

“Let’s get out of here,” I breathe against her cheek. “I need to be inside you, and this place is going to start smelling nasty pretty soon.”

Before leaving, though, I install a tiny camera in a vent in the wall. As I pocket the old screw, I notice Ruby watching me intently.

“Yes.” I smile at her. “It was that easy to keep an eye on you. This time, though, we can watch it together.”

As we exit the warehouse, Ruby frowns into the late afternoon light.

“What about Brent’s mom?” she asks tentatively.

“She still has you.” I squeeze her shoulder. “Something tells me she won’t mind very much when you introduce her to your old high school friend in a couple of months. Soon, she’ll probably realize she likes me a whole lot more than she ever liked her own son.”

I walk her to the passenger side door of my rental car and open the door. “Allow me to drive you home, Mrs. Luther.”

Just as soon as I remove the tracker from your dead husband’s truck.

Chapter 22

December 31st

Aaron

Morning light slices through my nightmare, and my eyes spring open. My heart pounds, blood throbbing in my ears. The boys stood around me, taunting me, the doorway blocked and my leaden feet useless. Their hands pounded into me, and I heard the crack of my nose breaking and felt the searing pain. And saw the blood. Again.

It's been the same dream for twenty years now, but this time with an added twist: this time, I had the knife. This time, I fought back.

I reach for the customary emptiness beside me, but my hand finds warmth. And softness.

Ruby.

Next to me, the most amazing woman I will ever meet breathes slowly, her back rising and falling. Her round shoulders shift. I stroke her silky skin, then follow my touch with a kiss. The feel of her under my fingertips inflames my desire, the twenty years of longing that I've only recently begun to satiate. A surge of blood rushes to my cock. I press against her, parting the soft cheeks of her ass with my hard shaft, moving closer to the place that I never want to leave.

Dragging the tip of my cock along her flesh, I feel her move against me. Her wetness covers the head of my cock, and I slide it back and forth along her lips, relishing every twitch,

every slight shift of her body, the way that she responds to me, knowing the intense pleasure I'll bring her. Knowing I'll explode in ecstasy as soon as she's awake.

"Baby?" She shifts onto her back, one ass cheek pressing into my erection. "Oh!" She rolls around to face me and reaches down to position me between her thighs. "What time is it?" she whispers.

"Does it matter?" I rub against her, sliding between her folds to press against her clit.

She moans.

"Don't we have that meeting to prepare for the Arrow Black launch tomorrow?" Her voice is breathy, expectant.

"Let me take care of you, baby." My fingers tease her clit while I press the head of my cock into her entrance. "That meeting, and every other meeting I'll ever have, will never be as important as you."

"Don't worry about me," her whisper is hot on my cheek.

I pull back and stare at her.

"I will always, always worry about you, and don't you ever forget that, Ruby Luther. You will always be my number one priority. In fact," I slide down her body, dragging my tongue along every inch of her beautiful flesh until my face is nestled between her thighs, "I'm about to show you just how much of a priority you are."

My taste buds can't get enough of her sticky sweetness, and her moans are music to my starving ears. Deep in my oasis

after wandering through a desert for twenty years, I've finally found life. The object of my lifelong desire is right here in my hands, in my mouth, and I want her all the time, every minute of every day. All I want is her, and I will do absolutely anything in order to make her happy.

Humming the tune of my delight against her flesh, I feel her squirm in my mouth, feel her fingers in my hair, feel her powerful thighs press against the sides of my head until all other sounds are muffled into obscurity and all I know is the lapping of my tongue like waves against the shore, growing ever higher and more rapid, a rising tempest of my lust translating into her pleasure. Her moans escalate, vibrating through her body. I lick harder, pressing against the tender spot, sucking her clit until she bucks against my face, then screams, piercing the air with her ecstasy.

“Aaron! Oh baby! Oh Aaron!”

I continue until she yanks me away from her.

“What about you?” Ruby reaches for my cock.

“I'll be fine.” I bend over and kiss the mounds of her incredible breasts.

“No way.” A naughty gleam lights up her eye, and she rolls over.

Fuck me.

“Oh, baby,” I breathe. “You ready for me?”

She nods.

I reach down and part the globes of her ass, then plunge my desperate cock into her pussy. The entrance is rough, and she cries out, pulling away from me. I grab onto her waist and yank her back onto my cock.

“You’re mine now, remember? I get to use you for my pleasure. And I will never,” thrust, “ever,” thrust, “ever get tired of showing you how,” thrust “much,” thrust “I’ve wanted you,” thrust, “since the very first day we met!”

She groans, a low, animal sound.

Smack! A hard slap to her ass sets her beautiful flesh jiggling, and I feel the ripples of her ass cheeks against my dick.

Fuck.

I’m about to explode into this woman, to force myself to finish even though I wish I could just stay in her forever. The sight of her is like Viagra, making me instantly and permanently hard. And worse. Because for her I will do absolutely anything. For her, I will fuck, I will fight, and I would even kill. Now that my lust has had a taste of fulfillment, it knows no bounds.

With another slap, I bury myself in her completely, then pull back as far as I can without leaving this heavenly place.

“Baby,” I tell her, “I’m gonna go hard.”

“Give me everything you’ve got,” she pants, and I fuck her with wild abandon, watching her body rock as I slam into her repeatedly, until waves of pleasure roll through me. But she’s

wrong about one thing: this isn't all I've got. She hasn't even seen the half of it.

Chapter 23

Epilogue

Six months later

Ruby

“**T**his will feel a little cold,” the technician says, squirting thick gel onto my belly. The feeling is familiar by now, but I still squeeze Aaron’s hand, more from excitement than anything else.

“Promise you’ll tell me when to look away,” I remind the technician.

“That’s right. You want it to be a surprise.” She smiles. “Well, everything is looking great, and—Whoops!” She leaps in front of the screen. “Look away!”

But it’s too late. I’ve already seen it. An involuntary squeal escapes my lips. “It’s a boy!” I look up into Aaron’s dark brown eyes and watch them fill with sparks of joy.

He squeezes my hand, but doesn’t say anything. Instead, his jaw clenches and he blinks rapidly, fighting off the same tears that spill into the corners of my eyes.

As we leave the doctor’s office, we discuss our plans for this evening’s gathering. We haven’t told anyone about the baby yet. With my age and our circumstances, we didn’t want to say anything until we were sure that everything was going well. But it’s about to be obvious that my body has changed, and the desire to share our joy outweighs the need to be cautious.

“Who all RSVP’d?” I mentally review the list.

“Both of my sisters, my mom, Delilah... did you ever hear from Brent’s mom?”

“Yep.” I smile. “She confirmed last night.” Even Brent’s family has shown me nothing but love ever since detectives shared the news that he’d apparently died in a tragic love triangle. Reports of Giovanni’s involvement seemed strangely absent, but I didn’t want to seem overly interested. Rather, I’ve requested my time and space to grieve privately, grateful for the sympathetic shoulder of my old high school friend.

“I can’t wait to share our news.” I lace my fingers through Aaron’s and close my eyes, letting the summer sunlight warm my face. “And I can’t wait to show our baby boy how much his parents love each other.”



One year later

Aaron

Ruby's in the other room asleep, her hand dangling into the bassinet beside the bed. I always wait until she's safely slumbering before I review the recording. She has enough sleepless nights with the baby. I don't want to give her anything else to worry about. As far as she knows, our life together is perfect. And I'm sure as hell going to make sure she has no reason to ever believe otherwise.

Gazing out the window of my study, I take in the last rays of sunset, marveling once again at the beauty of our home here in Hawk Ridge. Ruby's face when I showed her this house, when I showed her that her Christmas key unlocked this door, was priceless. I can't wait to keep creating that expression again and again. Which is why I have to find out more about this *Giovani*: so that I can make sure he doesn't cause any trouble for our perfect little life.

I knew he wasn't dead when I kicked him. The way the body moved was too relaxed, too intentionally limp. And then there was the blood. Of course, I had it analyzed later, the bits I was able to collect on my shoe. And, of course, it wasn't blood. Should I have taken him out then and there? No. It didn't make sense that a criminal would think to wear a bulletproof vest and fake blood. That's what I thought at the time, and I

still believe he's more than just an enforcer for the Fioravante's. But who is he?

It would have been easier if I'd taken a picture when I had him right in front of me, but it might be difficult to explain why I had a photo of a dead man on my phone. Instead, I'd had one pulled from security camera footage at Deelite's. Sure, it was grainy, but it was enough to be sure that this man didn't exit in Arrow, or in any other database I could access. In fact, something about his features confounded the facial recognition software.

There's no doubt his presence saved Ruby's life, for which I plan to reward him handsomely. As soon as he bothers to show himself. And I know he will. It's only a matter of when. And of what he's going to want from me when he does.

About The Author

Simone Monroe lives in Northern California with her husband and their amazing toddler. Simone has always been a writer, and has written loads of poetry, ranging from the maudlin to the (rarely) transcendent. Her first novel, *Undress Your Wounded Heart*, is available on Amazon.com. Simone loves to connect with readers. You can find her on the following social media platforms:

