



*the woman
at the edge
of town*

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Chapter 1

Fingers of rain tapped at the world with the quiet insistence of an unwanted question. It had rained all morning the day of Sarah Kay's twentieth birthday, and it would continue into the afternoon and evening and keep going into the night. Drizzling. Not the fun kind of puddling showers or the exciting, gothic-horror rainstorms, but an uneven, wavering rainfall that would let up just long enough to give a little hope that the sun would come out, then piddle out jerkily again from graying clouds.

It went with the gray day Sarah was having. It had started with pancakes from Eileen, her mother, which were nice, but...just enough effort to make her feel ungracious for not being more impressed. Then she'd been to work, where no one had much noticed. A dull, six-hour shift of front-facing in a supermarket, the same as any other, the same as any job she'd worked over the summers or holidays since she'd started high school.

The first box of Pop-Tarts in the stack had been taken out, leaving a little cavity, so she pulled the next one up, then the next box of cornflakes, the next box of microwave popcorn—all because it looked better when products were all lined up front and center like Tom Cruise's teeth.

Two thoughts circled each other with depressing regularity as Sarah worked. The first was that her job only existed because some consultant somewhere—who wore a suit that cost more than her internal organs—had done up a report saying that the company could increase its earnings by 0.00002% if the products were on the front edges of their shelves instead of recessed by a unit or two. Identical men in identical suits with identical millions had done similar reports for Walgreens, Target, Walmart, and all the other big-box stores Sarah had tried and failed to fit in at.

The second thought was that she could go back to college, figure out her major, graduate top of her class, and this would still be the only field that would be hiring.

After work was a birthday party at home that bored her sick. There was pizza, sure, and ice cream and...well, balloons. Perfectly fine for, like, Tuesday. But she'd rather have some *real* fun.

Instead, her mom was threatening to watch *Practical Magic* with her as if it was some kind of ritual. None of her real friends were here, except for her boyfriend Tyrese; the rest were all her mom's friends and people she was *supposed* to be friends with, and she was twenty seconds away from just bailing. It'd probably take hours for anyone to notice anyway.

There was one real perk. She'd been paying on her car for three years now, a gently used 2013 Prius that she'd gotten two thousand dollars off of because the dealer was trying to move inventory and no one else wanted a car with a purple paint job like Willy Wonka was riding around in it. So her big birthday present was that her mom had finished paying it off for her. It was so damn practical that she would bite her tongue clean through before she let herself be ungrateful.

Vanilla ice cream, though. She could be petty about that. Who got vanilla ice cream for a birthday party? It was like signing *Have a great summer* in someone's yearbook.

She soldiered through thanking everyone for their gifts—mainly gift certificates, gift cards, and some sort of amulet that was supposed to protect her from evil spirits. But if it worked and evil spirits were a real concern, who would sell something like that? Then she was finally able to bolt, with Tyrese in the passenger seat and her behind the wheel.

She put the Prius through its paces, and it seemed to accelerate just a little faster, purr just a little louder, with the pink slip all hers. They orbited town like a satellite, tires throwing up gales of puddled water.

"It's a race thing," Tyrese told her.

"What? No."

"I'm ninety-nine percent sure it is. They make a *Baby-Sitters Club* show where Kristy's a black girl. People hate it."

"That's not what it is."

"So you like Kristy being black?"

"I'm...confused why Kristy needs to be black when Jessi's black..."

"Oh, so being black is Jessi's thing?"

"Kinda. It was the nineties."

They'd been friends since elementary school, when he'd been the only boy willing to keep pulling her ponytail after she'd clobbered Billy Finch. In middle

school they'd been bros, Tyrese sneaking her his dad's beer and Sarah bringing him her mom's lingerie catalogs. In high school, they'd made it official, going out to Sandra Bullock movies together and everything. There'd been some make-out sessions, she'd let him feel her up when those Sandra Bullock movies got steamy, and then at prom—

He was her first, he was her boyfriend, and she loved him. They'd even done the long-distance thing for a bit while she'd been away at college. Eventually, they'd get married, maybe start a family...

“So you think Kristy should be white?”

“You're not listening.”

“Of course I'm listening. I'm spellbound by you. I'm entranced.”

He plucked her right hand from the steering wheel and gave it a kiss. She snatched it back, gripping the wheel tighter. “C'mon, ten-and-two. I'm trying to drive.”

“You're trying to explain why you don't like a TV show without sounding racist.”

Sarah made an exasperated sound of disbelief. “They're not even babysitters anymore! They grew up, moved to the city, started a law firm, and now they *call themselves* the Baby-Sitters Club because they ‘babysit’”—Here Sarah thought to do air quotes, but since she was determined to keep her hands on the wheel, she did a similar motion with her shoulders instead—“their clients. They're in their thirties now! Which, by the way, is a ridiculous age to be partners in a law firm.”

“It's a reinvention. This is what they do when they grow up.”

They passed a herd of cows grazing in their fenced-in enclosure, drooling cud from their chomping jaws.

“They all become attorneys? It's using a bunch of familiar names to get people to watch another generic doctor-cop-lawyer show. Not even familiar names, since now they're calling Stacey ‘Simone,’ so I guess thank God they finally did something about a girl being named Stacey. That was really a glaring plot hole...”

“So you just want a show about teenage girls babysitting?”

“Kinda. I mean, if it's *called* the *Baby-Sitters Club*... I just don't get how it's the *Baby-Sitters Club* if they're in a different city, with different backgrounds, different names, different jobs—when you read a story, it has a kind of a soul, and you shouldn't mess with something's soul.”

“So you want the same thing over and over again?”

“I just like things the way I like them.”

“Yeah...” Tyrese drawled, grabbing her hand again. “That’s the way I like you too.”

He began sloppily kissing her hand, bathing her knuckles in spit. She tugged, but he had a good grip and bigger biceps than her.

“Tyrese, c’mon, quit it.”

“You gotta learn how to drive with one hand sometime, babe, or how are you ever gonna use your cell phone?”

“Tyrese, I’m serious.” She gave him her best death glare. “It’s a ten-minute drive. You can’t go ten minutes without molesting—”

She happened to glance forward then and saw it so abruptly that it was like her previous view of clear, empty road had been shattered by this new sight: a car, its front end hugging the trunk of a tree, its back half protruding back onto the street and into her lane.

Sarah jerked the wheel—one-handed—and stomped on the brakes. The Prius obeyed, swerving to one side as the brakes locked, but there was no reassuring stop, just a liquid feeling of suspension—drifting, drifting, drifting on the wet pavement. Then she was thrown to the side, the car spinning out as it was ripped to a stop. She couldn’t keep it on the road, heard the squealing tires give way to a meaty, pulping sound as her wheels dug into the dirt and grass of the ditch. Then, mercifully, they stopped.

For a moment, Sarah was frozen. Just breathing. No videogame reflexes, no adrenaline rush, just a prolonged wondering: *What the hell happened, what the hell happened, what the hell happened?* Her mind ticked away like a clock; she actually shook the cobwebs out. This was an emergency. She was in an emergency. She always pictured herself being cool, calm, collected—not an action hero, no, but if someone robbed the store she was working in, she’d keep a level head and open the cash register and send them on their way. Now she was one of those people who just went into hysterics.

No. Emergency. She had to make sure everything was okay. She looked at Tyrese. He was gulping air, his eyes wide, a slight tremble in his frozen face. As much in shock or whatever as she was. Maybe more so. Sarah patted his arm. “You okay?”

“What the *fuck?*”

“You’re okay...”

The other car. Belatedly, Sarah realized she was still holding down the brake pedal. The Prius was still in drive. She groped for the gear shift, found it, jammed

it into park. Then, just on instinct, she pressed the stop button and killed the engine. Her headlights continued to blare out, drawing a mournful beep from the car's systems. She barely heard it. Where was she? *The other car*. She undid her seatbelt, pulled herself out of the Prius. She didn't feel as if she was hurt. No broken bones or blood—probably should've checked for that before she started moving.

Her legs seemed to have developed all sorts of interesting kinks, though, threading needles through the flesh of her thighs as she staggered the few feet up to the road. The Prius looked fine; just one side had been gone over by Freddy Krueger, and—Holy shit, the driver's side mirror had been clipped off entirely. Her mom was going to *kill* her. Her gaze moved past the gouges of muddy soil where the tires had clawed over the fresh skid marks on the road.

She could see the other car's taillights, their glow rising like smoke to the branches of the slanted tree above, which had shifted aside for the darkly wheezing car bundled up against its trunk. From here, it didn't even look like a wreck, but rather some kind of bizarre taxidermy. A jackalope or something.

Sarah took a step forward, getting her feet under her, then stopped immediately, recognizing the car. Anyone in Bathory would've recognized the 2002 Vertigo Streiff, one of those cars that was halfway to being a Batmobile. In a town full of Ford trucks and electric-shaver Japanese imports, it was the only automobile that made her understand how guys could think of cars as sexy.

And it was driven by Nina fucking Rose.

She looked back at her Prius. Her modest, piddling little Prius. Tyrese was groaning, coming out of his daze with a stupefied slowness. "Call 911!" she called out to him.

"Wha?" he asked. "What happened? Everyone okay?"

"*Call 911!*" she insisted, but he was even more out of it than she was, sluggishly patting his pockets for his phone. Sarah hurried back to the car and reached inside for hers, in the sunglasses case in the roof. It wasn't really designed to be reached for by someone who wasn't in the driver's seat, and she slipped on the wet grass, driving her knees into the mud. Growling at herself, she wrenched herself up, grabbed the cell phone, and sloughed her way across the road to the wreck.

It didn't look bad. Well, what had been a gleaming model of engineering perfection was now a Christmas ornament, but it looked more like a fender bender than anything with the phrase *wrapped around* in it. Exhaust drooled out into the red atmosphere of the taillights, while something hissed out from the engine into the grass underneath the car. The headlights captured the leaves still falling from

the struck tree. Sarah pulled her jacket shut around herself, suddenly registering the cold attacking her leggings and blouse.

The windows were rolled up, tinted, and Sarah could see her own glossy shadow in the driver's side one as she approached. "Hello in there? Are you okay? Ms. Rose?" She rapped her knuckles on the glass, and the sound was weirdly echo-y. In a cartoon moment of imagination, she wondered if that was because she'd broken something, picturing the whole car collapsing into dust from her tapping on it. Something tasted bitter in her mouth. Maybe she'd bitten her tongue.

There was a dull, flat roar from the car, and Sarah stumbled back, nearly tripping over her own feet before realizing it was the window. It only came down a few inches, and through it the cabin was completely dark; she couldn't even see through to the other window. What she could see were a pair of eyes.

They were dark, narrow like a cat's, and rimmed with kohl, with hazel irises flecked with deeper black trapped in them like they were amber. The pupils were totally black, so black they actually caught the light like a glossy stone and reflected little pinpricks of white. The eyebrows were manicured, each eyelash a deft brushstroke, and the look in the eyes was clear and intent, so intent it seemed to push through to something behind Sarah, staring through her with such power that she felt an urge to turn around and see what it was.

And there was blood. A scarlet strand of it, weaving from higher on the forehead down between the eyes, marking the profile of Nina Rose's straight, distinguished nose. On her pale skin, it seemed to pick up the little light seeping past the cracked window, glaring like fire, triggering a wave of guilt inside Sarah.

There was a pregnant pause; Sarah couldn't think of what to say.

"You're about the most beautiful girl I've ever seen," Nina Rose said, her voice a dreamy whisper—centered, prepossessed, and totally out of tune with the wet, dreary evening, the shuddering car wreck, the blood still halving her face.

Absurdly, Sarah felt herself blushing before she realized it was probably just the head trauma talking. "I'm going to get you out of there."

Sarah reached for the door but heard the echoing *click* of the car's locks being engaged. She pulled on the handle and, no, Nina Rose wasn't unlocking it. Sarah was locked out.

"There's no need for that." The voice had risen to a slight, breathy timbre that seemed more fitting to the smoky eyes and their cool gaze. More focused now, the eyes scoured Sarah's face. "I'm fine."

“I should still take a look at you. I’ve taken a first-aid course—I could do something about that cut.”

“There is no need.” The voice was firm, definite—the woman behind the glass had the air of someone who decided things that stayed decided.

Frustration swarmed inside Sarah. She looked down, spotted a decent-sized rock at her feet, and picked it up. There were worms underneath. *Еwww*. “You might have a concussion, a spine injury, so either I can break the window, or you can let me in.”

The eyes narrowed. Then, quite counterintuitively, there came a rich, deep laugh. It seemed totally incongruous to the first impression she’d just gotten, an unlearned sound like that a broken toy would make, and Sarah almost thought the woman was going into hysterics before it abruptly ended.

Sarah supposed she cut quite a figure, standing there in a Katy Perry concert T-shirt, leggings as pants, with her hair mussed up by the crash, and holding a muddy rock as if it was a lethal weapon. It wasn’t as if she would’ve actually *done it*. She just needed to be sure no one was bleeding out or going into shock or—anything. But then she heard the sirens, turned and spotted the red lights coming like watercolors mixing in with the mist, and dropped the stone.

Tyrese must have managed to call 911 after all. And they’d had someone in the area. The benefits of living somewhere where nothing ever happened.



Eileen showed up right on the heels of the ambulance and proceeded to have a full-blown freak-out. All Sarah wanted to do was get a look at Ms. Rose, right across the road, hidden in a swirl of EMTs, but no, she had to get a lecture. Really, a double lecture, because Tyrese’s grandfather showed up too and had it out with him. More of a teeth-gritted scolding than Eileen’s audio offensive, but equally effective. Both of them kept their defenses half-hearted, hoping they could play dead and convince the ’rents to pass up an easy kill.

Then, to Sarah’s horror, Eileen went to talk to Nina.

Sarah tried to follow her, talk her out of it, but Eileen gave her a loaded finger point and generally insinuated that the Warsaw Pact would be kaput if she didn’t stay right where she was. So Sarah was left watching and listening to Tyrese’s continued dressing-down, as Eileen went to apologize on her behalf.

When Eileen came back a few minutes later, Sarah winced inwardly. This must’ve been what criminals felt when they saw the Bat-Signal. “Well, *she* appreciates your help—”

“Oh, *she* does, does she?”

“Yes, well, she isn’t your mother, and she isn’t wondering why you were going so fast that you nearly ran into a car wreck instead of being able to stop in time,” Eileen enunciated. “Although I suppose I should just be grateful you’re still alive.”

“Yes. You should always be grateful for that.”

“Don’t get snippy!” Eileen waved her hand at the crumpled Vertigo. “That could’ve been you.”

“For all you know, I saved someone’s life today. And maybe I already feel bad about the car, *Mom*, so you don’t have to—” Sarah stumbled over not saying the F-word. If it were anyone else... “Rub it in!”

“Wow. Guilt. I didn’t know you were capable. I’m sure this will make your Prius ‘gently used’ all over again.”

“I’ll get it fixed. It’s not like this town doesn’t have a body shop.”

“And you’ll pay for it how?”

“I’ll figure something out.”

“Because that’s your strong suit,” Eileen finished for her. “Figuring things out.”

Sarah just bit her lip and looked away. Eileen never understood. She wasn’t in any mood to battle anymore. “I’ll start looking for a second job in the morning.”

As she walked to her mom’s car—no way in hell Eileen would be letting her drive home; she’d sooner eat the bill for a tow truck—she felt eyes on the back of her neck. Dark, hazel eyes.

Chapter 2

Eileen woke Sarah up the next morning by dropping a DVD on her pillow. Sarah was dozing lightly enough to try making sense of the slipcover instead of falling out of bed. “*Defensive Driving?* Mom, come on, it’s...eleven a.m.”

Eileen was merciless. “You said in the morning—”

“It’s still the morning.”

“If you were going to stay up half the night, you’d think you could’ve filled out some job applications...”

No, *now* Eileen was merciless. She’d had a little bit of mercy before; it was gone.

“I couldn’t sleep. It was the adrenaline.”

“And every other night? Do you go skydiving? Street racing? Well, now you’re up, so I expect at least one interview scheduled by the end of the day, and you can watch the first disc of that program. And it came with a booklet, so I will be testing you.”

Sarah opened the DVD case. “*The Dangers of Drunk Driving?* Mom, I wasn’t drunk.”

“At least a drunk person would’ve had an excuse. Now go and get the mail; you can have breakfast before you hit the pavement.”

Sarah had slept in the hoodie and sweatpants she’d thrown on after scrubbing the mud out of the clothes she’d been wearing last night. She pulled the hood up over her ears and got out of bed. “No one hits the pavement anymore, Mom. All the applications are online.”

Eileen was in hot pursuit as she trudged downstairs. “You’re in trouble and you expect me to put you on the computer all day?”

“You could install Windows 8 on it.” The joke was clearly lost on Eileen, who didn’t respond.

Sarah stepped into some flip-flops, taking far longer than necessary to put them on because she was determined to use only her toes—Goddamn her to hell if she

had to use her hands for fucking flip-flops—and then walked out to get the mail. Thankfully, the lecture stayed indoors. Eileen was even less a fan of airing dirty laundry than she was of a full sleep cycle.

Sarah took the mail out of the box—giving the old post-and-flag configuration a kick for being so damn quaint—and automatically sorted through it. Netflix, bills, birthday cards (no money), coupons for Sizzler, and... Holy shit.

An envelope with her name in the middle and Nina Rose's in the corner.



In her room, Sarah had all the lights off except for the neon *Eat at Joe's* sign that'd been a gift from her friend Beck, who'd worked at a junkyard. Its green glow served as nightlight and possible Superman deterrent while Sarah used her laptop.

The usual gang was all on Skype, except for Tyrese, whose grandfather still practiced corporal punishment: turning off the internet router until he'd done a laundry list of chores. There was Jonesy, who'd been childhood friends with Sarah until she'd moved away. They'd rediscovered each other on Facebook a few years back. In the interval, Jonesy had discovered boys and put on weight. She seemed happy, and Sarah had gotten too many maternal comments about at least getting diet soda if she was drinking sugar water to want to police how many chins Jonesy had.

Beck she'd met in high school. She was a townie like Sarah, but way straightedge, though she didn't look it: brush-cut head with what little hair was left dyed pink, nose ring, blue lipstick. Since none of them really drank, smoked, or shot up, things were civil with her, though she'd shown worrying signs of getting into veganism.

Then there was Sarah. She liked her looks. Her current ensemble was, well, "affordable," but she loved her body almost as much as pop stars said she should: the breasts that had taken approximately forever to come in, the legs that had sprung up just before high school ended, the hair that she'd stopped wearing in a ponytail so it could messily wrap around her shoulders, long and latte-colored. It had all come together pretty well. Athletic enough, thin enough, busty enough—everything "enough."

She supposed she should be more enthusiastic about it than that. It wasn't like no one ever liked her selfies. She guessed it just wasn't in her nature to proclaim herself beautiful, even mentally. Beck had her cool punkish side, Jonesy had her confidence...and Sarah just felt like...the sum of her parts.

“Hey, Sarah? We’re wondering why you called us all here today?” Beck asked. Sarah almost apologized for spacing out. Instead, she held up the envelope. Nina Rose’s neat signature over the address: 101 Gothel Lane.

“Holy darn,” Beck said. “Nina Rose. So we know she has hands, then?”

“She could’ve had someone write it for her,” Sarah reasoned. “She’s supposed to be a millionaire, after all.”

“Who’s Nina Rose?” Jonesy asked.

“Right, that was after your time,” Sarah realized.

Beck took over. “She’s like this hermit millionaire who moved into the old Stauffer place.”

“What old Stauffer place?”

Beck huffed out an exasperated sigh. “Did you even live here, woman? It was the seventies or something and this whole family was living there, white picket fences and everything—”

Boop. Sarah got a chat message from Jonesy underneath the roulette wheel of video windows. *So what’s the story with you and Ty, meow?*

What story? Same story as ever, Sarah typed back.

Beck was still going strong. “So he starts wondering who all these letters are coming from, right, so the next Tuesday he stays up all night to watch the door—”

Siriusly biutch? You tell me you’re trying something new in the bedroom and then all quiet on the Sarah Kay front.

“Naturally, he gets an axe, goes to his wife’s bedroom—”

Sarah flicked an annoyed glance at Beck’s ranting; she’d always been one step away from one of those girls who wrote to serial killers in prison.

Then she started typing: *It was fine. We bought some lube, tried out some different positions—*

“Then, covered in blood, he takes the bodies and—”

Sarah muted the audio. What to say? What the fuck to say? She typed: *It didn’t feel good. It didn’t feel bad. I wasn’t really expecting it to be great, not right away, but we’ve had plenty of practice, and I still don’t feel anything. It’s like my body responds, but I’m not invested in it. I don’t care. I keep thinking about the condom and the lube and shit like that. All the mechanics. Then it’s over and I don’t feel any different. No matter how many times we do it, it’s still like I don’t...*

The words just flowed out of her, like her fingers were attacking the keyboard, punching and chopping and no end in sight. She deleted all of it without sending and unmuted the conversation.

“And that rookie cop who found them is still in a madhouse to this day,” Beck concluded triumphantly.

“Wasn’t that an episode of *Hannibal*?” Jonesy asked.

“They have to get their ideas somewhere. So what’s the letter actually say?”

“Pretty much nothing.” Sarah held it up to the webcam.

Ms. Sarah Kay,

You are cordially invited to the home of Nina Rose, Tuesday, 6:00 PM. Semi-formal wear acceptable. Refreshments will be served.

“Nice calligraphy,” Beck noted. “She definitely pays someone to write that for her.”

“Like a medieval monk or something.”

“Is she suing you?”

“Are you bringing a lawyer?”

“Do you *have* a lawyer?”

“Sounds more like a party.”

The screen began artifacting, her friends’ faces decomposing into a collection of misplaced pixels. Sarah fought the urge to give her laptop a smack. Why did the internet in America suck so bad? She’d heard that in the Netherlands, they had free broadband as a civil right.

Purr purr, Jonesy sent via chat. Still waiting on an answer.

Sarah forced her fingers to press down. *It was great. I just don’t wanna talk about it and have my private life end up in one of your weird sex tweets.*

Moments later, a reply popped up. *Now she’s too good for my two million followers. *rubs paws all over your face**

Eh, most of those are bots.

“So are you going to go?” Jonesy asked, and Sarah realized it was directed at her.

“Yeah, I think so. At least it’ll get me out of the job hunt for a while. Why is it that the supermarket can’t give me more hours again?”

“Because then they’d have to give you health insurance,” Jonesy said.

“Oh, yeah, right.”

Tyrese came on then. Beck brightened instantly. “Hey, Ty.”

“Hey. Anyone on Twitch?” A chorus of nos. “You gotta check this out.” He sent them a link.

It was an ice rink, one big enough for the Stanley Cup finals, viewed from one of those high-up cameras you occasionally saw getting investigated by birds. The feed showed a number of people scuttling like beetles about the ice and the seating.

“What am I looking at?” Jonesy asked.

“It’s the World Domino League, or something like that,” Tyrese replied. He typed as he spoke, and it wasn’t long before Sarah got a message in the chat box: *U OK?* She typed back, explaining about the letter as he went on. “They’re building a domino knockdown with three hundred thousand dominos, going for the world record for knockdown with most tails... At least, that’s what their tweet says.”

“So...what am I looking at?” Jonesy asked again.

“No, it’s cool,” Beck said. “Something out of nothing. Thanks, Ty.”

Tyrese got Sarah’s message, read it rapid-fire, his lips moving a little as he parsed it. “Damn,” he muttered. “So, the old Stauffer place?”

“Old Stauffer place,” Sarah confirmed, feeling a little bit of pride for no real reason. Maybe just the result of being the center of attention instead of Beck’s latest crusade or whatever weirdness Jonesy had uncovered in her mom’s seventies romance novels.

“Wonder what it looks like on the inside. I hear Nina Rose never steps foot outside the place.”

“Well, her car does,” Sarah told him.

“You gotta wonder what she did on the inside, after the exterior renovations,” Beck said.

“What renovations?”

“You haven’t seen the renovations?” Beck asked. “I mean, sure, no one’s gone inside, but there’s nothing to stop you from *looking* at it.”

“I thought it was on an island,” Jonesy said.

“Islet,” Beck corrected. “In Dutch River.”

“Are you her real estate agent now?” Sarah asked.

“Hey, Jonesy moved away, fine, but I can’t believe you’ve lived here your entire life and never checked out the haunted house of Nina Rose.”

Sarah coughed. “Ditto. I can’t believe I’ve lived here my entire life either.”

“So what’s it look like, then?” Jonesy asked.

“Nobody tell her,” Tyrese ordered. “Sarah, go see it, take a selfie—”

“I’m not doing that.”

“How do *you* even know what it looks like,” Jonesy persisted, “if it’s on some kind of towhead?”

“Towhead, whoa, look who moved to Mississippi,” Beck sniped. “I have binoculars, Jonesy, clearly.”

“You think it makes them happy?” Sarah asked. She was looking at the window she still had open to Twitch, watching all those thousands of dominos being put into place.

“What?”

“All those dominos. It must feel pretty good, looking back and seeing all the ones you’ve placed. And having a big—” She gestured with her hand, symbolizing a domino tipping over. “To look forward to.”

“They’re probably just doing it for attention,” Tyrese said.

“Got a check from a deodorant company or something,” Beck agreed. “They just want it to go viral, or whatever buzzword their marketing guy used.”

“Yeah...” Sarah agreed hesitantly.

After they’d all signed off and she was *way* past a reasonable bedtime instead of just “up late,” Sarah left her laptop on as she lay down. She was playing an audiobook to narrate her to sleep, but she was also watching the dominos be lined up. It was soothing. Had to be for them too, all those people working on it. Having a passion for something. Must be nice.



Sarah was sure the note could’ve been inviting her to be executed by firing squad and Eileen would still insist she look her best. She still had her prom dress, a beaded, one-shouldered black gown from Laundry by Shelli Segal that she’d gotten for two-fifty. She and her mom brokered a bit of a peace, with Eileen fixing up her hair in a chignon.

When Sarah checked herself out in the mirror, she deemed the look professional, but cute professional. Sequins colorfully lined the left side of the dress, which also featured a ruched detail throughout and a mid-thigh slit to break up the oppressively floor-bound length. She loved the way it didn’t cling to her body like some needy, desperate Kardashian thing, but sort of got a firm grip on her physique and then gentled out into smooth, slight folds, modest and becoming. A few unambitious pieces of jewelry—she liked the simplicity of her Michelle Chang ear climbers, shaped like shooting stars—some trying-not-so-hard kitten heels, and a dark orange wool coat that she hoped went with the dress as well as it went with jeans and slacks.

Then her mom drove her to Dutch River. There was a little boathouse in a gully of the river, with a garage connected to it by a covered walkway. Sarah guessed that was where the Vertigo was stored when it wasn't hugging a tree. After all, it wasn't like Nina could drive it across the water.

"Just call when you need me to pick you up," Eileen said, putting a definite end to any cool, confident, sexy vibes Sarah might've felt.

"Sure. When's my car getting out of the shop again?"

"When you've paid for it."

Sarah gritted her teeth and reminded herself to get one of those insurance packages that offered a rental when her car needed repairs. No way she should be this dependent on her mother one day into being twenty years of age.

Sarah stepped out of the car, pulling her coat tightly around herself. The sun was high in the sky, but it was going from nippy to outright cold. She waved for her mother to drive off, stepped toward the short, squat boathouse, then waved again for her mother to drive on instead of parking there with the engine idling like a creeper. Finally, she heard the big minivan rumble as it drove off, and she was left alone with the scenery.

Dutch River spread out in front of her, wide and low, a fat, lazy thing painting itself from north to south. The current was gentle, tugging along leaves and a few branches at a stately pace, the island in the middle clearly visible. It looked like quite a few acres, shrouded by vibrant trees in the same shades of orange, gold, and red as the rest of the fall foliage. They reflected into the clear water, spreading around the island like a wreath. It looked pleasant enough.

Something was beeping. Exaggeratedly electronic beeps, like a misbehaving phone. Coming from inside the boathouse. She went to the door, with its beveled lights, and saw a phone lit up in the dim space. Abruptly, the door opened outward, and she stepped back to make way for an elderly man to come out into the light.

He was maybe sixty, full-cheeked and ruddy-nosed, wearing a pair of slacks, a comfortable-looking sweater over an amenable belly, and a flat cap atop his silvery hair. When he saw her, he put away his phone and drew up the glasses he wore on a chain around his neck, seating them on his bulbous nose.

"Oh, hello there. You must be the young lady." His voice was reedy with age but warm and friendly. "I'm Bill Shannon, the groundskeeper about here. So you don't have to worry about the cars or boats, anything this end of the river. That's all me."

Okay. Good to know. "Sarah Kay," she introduced herself. "I was, uh...invited."

“Yes. Right this way. Hope you don’t get seasick!” He stepped back into the boathouse, crooking his finger to lead her on, and flicked on the light.

Inside, the place was rustic, wooden, with tools lining the walls, some replacement parts on a few stock shelves, and a plain, unadorned motorboat moored inside the cement pool the wooden structure sheltered. There was a sort of combined railing and ladder, and even with his obvious lack of finesse, Mr. Shannon was able to nimbly help himself down into the boat.

“You can feel free to leave anything you want on the shelves. I’ll lock the door for you—only other way to get in here is to swim in, and brother, nobody’ll do that, not when they’ve got any sense!”

“Yeah.” Stepping carefully, Sarah lowered herself into the boat and quickly seated herself with fingers firmly wrapped around the bench underneath her. “Does this thing have seatbelts?”

“Nah!” Mr. Shannon didn’t look at her, instead concerning himself with unmooring the boat. He did it with practiced ease. “Now pay attention, because a lot of this is real simple, so I’m gonna think less’a you if I have to repeat it.” With a tired grunt of exertion, he cracked his back and then dropped himself into the driver’s seat. Pilot’s seat? The seat. While checking over the equipment, he said, “This river runs through the Partry Dam upstream; that powers your TV, your Xbox, what have you. So most of the time, these waters are nice and calm. Perfect for fishing, really... Ya mind pulling the zip start?”

“The what?”

“On the engine. Red doohickey. Just like starting a lawnmower.”

Sarah looked behind herself, grabbed hold of the red grip protruding from the engine, and pulled awkwardly. The cord it was attached to came out, and the crankshaft growled but then settled back into silence.

“Give it another tug! Real hard now.”

Rotating her shoulder and gritting her teeth, Sarah put all her might into ripping the cord free of the engine. The engine rattled, she let go of the cord, and an approving rumble set in, smoke puffing out of the engine in big cigar exhales.

“That’ll do her!” Mr. Shannon said, words muffled by the plug of chewing tobacco he’d just popped in his mouth. It only added to the chipmunkish, cuddly-old-man vibe he exuded, and Sarah found herself quite at ease. “Got your seat?”

“Yeah,” Sarah said, planting herself again, wrapping her fingers around the bench, a little less white-knuckled this time.

“Okey-dokey!” They took off at a steady clip, eating away at the distance between the shore and the island with no real appetite, the engine making quiet sounds of contentment. Sarah relaxed, reaching down to draw her hand through the water. It was cold, but not so bad.

“Hope you’ll excuse the lack of a proper welcome. Thought you weren’t coming; stepped inside to get out of the wind.”

“That’s okay, no problem.”

“Ha! I love that with you young people. ‘No problem’! Hope you folks hang onto that attitude.”

“We’ll try. So, what about the dam?”

“There’s no need for foul—*oh*, oh, Partry Dam. Yeah.” Mr. Shannon looked over his shoulder at her, keeping the boat on course with one hand. “Now most of the day the water comes through nice and easy, but at eight o’clock on the dot, they have to relieve the pressure or some such and they let a whole mess of it through. River gets fast, licks at the shore like no one’s business, and here’s the trick, now: waters are rough as hell. Before eight, you could get to where you’re going in a rowboat, maybe even swim it if the water weren’t so damn cold. After eight, forget it. I keep the boat nice and roped up, so whichever side you’re on at eight, you best believe you’re staying there for the night.”

“I don’t think I’ll be here that long.”

“Maybe yes, maybe no.” Mr. Shannon checked the forward view again, killing the engine as the island loomed up to meet them. On their remaining momentum, they sidled up to a gnarled old pier. “Now, think you can tie us off?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t—”

“Nothing to it,” Mr. Shannon assured her. “See the rope I untied when we got on? Just take that big ol’ lasso at the end, loop it around one of the pilings, and pull ’er tight. Can’t barely mess it up.”

Sarah tried it and was gratified when she got it on the first go. Mr. Shannon gave her an approving half-laugh, “Hee-ha,” and started up the ladder built into the pier.

“So have you worked for, eh, Ms. Rose long?”

“Since she got here.” With a huff, Mr. Shannon pulled himself up onto the creaking dock. He turned around to offer Sarah a hand up, but she demurred.

“So—what’s she like?”

Mr. Shannon straightened, parking his hands on his hips. “Couldn’t rightly say. Aloof type. Not mean-spirited or cussed or anything, just prefers her own company.” He offered his hand to Sarah again as she reached the top of the ladder,

but she politely ignored it. They walked side by side down the pier, to the start of a paved trail. It was somewhat overgrown with lush, fulsome weeds and grass.

“I bring her groceries, mail, anything she asks for. She likes having me about to work the boats—don’t think she much cares for them, even if they don’t give her any trouble. But neither of us are much for small talk. Guess that’s why we’ve gotten along so famously. Now this way, miss. As you can see, there’s not much to get yourself lost in. One trail—” He tapped his heel on the slightly cracked cement. “That takes you up to the house. You wanna leave, it takes you back down. There’s some spare canoes and oars set up around here—” Mr. Shannon looked around, pointed them out well after Sarah had spotted them. They were upside-down, stowed but looking seaworthy. “And Ms. Rose has one of them inflatable rafts up in the house, so there ain’t much chance of getting yourself stuck here. Just remember—whatever you do, don’t try the river after eight. I’m a pretty experienced seaman, not to give myself airs, and I wouldn’t try it. No disrespect meant, but I’d lay odds on you getting swept away if you even thought about it.”

“Got it. Evil river. Don’t piss it off.”

“Not evil, no, but certainly not your friend. Now, I’ve got one more personage I’m transporting this afternoon, but once I’ve brought him over, I’ll be waiting right here until you need to go back.” He gestured to a patio chair set up on the rocky beach. Sarah had to laugh. It had all the essentials for a bit of fishing, rod leaned up against the armrest, and even a floppy, fly-strewn fishing hat sitting on the seat.

Mr. Shannon started back over the water-warped pier.

“Wait,” Sarah called to him. “Aren’t you going to walk me up? Introduce me?”

“No,” Mr. Shannon demurred. “I’m not to go inside the house—I suspect she wouldn’t even want me hanging about. But don’t worry. You’re expected.”

“Well, uh—” Sarah didn’t want to part from the man. She found his presence comforting, and the lack of it... “Can you give me any...Nina Rose pointers?”

Mr. Shannon paused to think about it. “Well, don’t be foolish. She always struck me as the type with very little patience for fools.”

Gee, thanks. “Anything else?”

Mr. Shannon scratched his sideburn. “Maybe—ask her if she wants you should take your shoes off? She may be the kind doesn’t like strange shoes tromping about her carpet. Best to ask, worst to wonder, I always say.”

Sarah left him to it—wincing a little when she heard the engine flare up again, rotors churning the water to take him back across the river—and started down the path. It was strewn with mats of dead leaves. The canopy had been stripped bare

by autumn, browning leaves clogging the waist-high grass that extended in all directions. Moisture from an earlier gale had turned everything to shades of brown. The entire island was muted with it, even the grass beaten down by it.

Then she saw them. Splotches of pink and red, like dabs of acrylic paint on the fabric of the world, were blowing down the path. She stepped on one with the toe of her shoe, stooping to pick it up. It was a petal, though off what plant she couldn't imagine. She held it in her hand, rubbing its gossamer-soft surface between her fingers as she continued up the slight slope of the path.

She noticed other pink petals. There were more of them. A lot more, buried like treasure throughout the landscape, sticking to wet tree trunks, glistening in patches of grass, or just swirling in the air like tiny birds, never seeming to land.

Coming up the crest of the hill, she found her way laden with the petals, like roses thrown at her feet by an admiring throng, and she let out a delighted little giggle. The wind picked them up, stirring them at the hem of her dress like playful little fairies. She watched them wafting in the air, hanging in it like a perfumed mist. Then she saw the source.

It was a rhododendron, but it must've been at least a hundred years old. The shrub had grown to the size of a condo. The path circled it, expanding into a sort of driveway before cutting in toward the house, which had this gargantuan plant and its aura of feminine petals as a sort of front lawn. Sarah marveled at it, smelled the sharp scent of it, walked under its sheltering branches, and saw the sun through its multitude of leaves, held up for her like an umbrella. God, it was magnificent.

Then she emerged on the other side and saw the house. It was crazy. Queen Anne style, reminding her of the Carson Mansion but not nearly so big. Well, *big*, but not sprawling. Grand. All but the color. No grey slate, no prim white paint, no stucco brick. No, *this* house was painted in sharp, strong Day-Glo colors. Magenta, electric blue, neon green—each section of trim a new color, but all of it forming a whole, a punkish but unified scheme arising out of the chaotic mash of mad color. Sarah let out another delighted laugh. The whole damn place looked as if it was made out of bismuth, the crystal that refracted light in multiple iridescent hues.

Crunching the delicate petals under her shoes with a satisfying, fortune-cookie sound, Sarah went to the stoop and up the front steps, her fingers alighting on the black cast-iron railing as she came up the short staircase to the door. There was a brisk, unadorned floor mat, a glowing doorbell button, and—Sarah looked around—a camera in the upper corner of the recess, where most old houses had a wasp's nest. She gave the lotus-seed pod of the lens a half-hearted wave. Then she pressed the doorbell.

She was surprised when, instead of sounding a tone, it emitted a buzz like an intercom.

“Yes? Mr. Shannon?” The familiar voice of Nina Rose came, shocking in its clarity. Uncut, undiluted.

“No, ma’am. It’s me? Sarah Kay?”

“Ah. Yes.” Whatever drubbing Nina had taken from the accident, she was long past it now. Her voice was husky, authoritative, a lioness amused by her own hunting prowess. Sarah felt herself gulp. “Please. Turn the knob. It’s unlocked.”

“I was just kinda wondering what I was doing—”

She heard a click. Call over, evidently. Sarah reached for the brass knob—it was tarnished a little, worn half-smooth by time and lack of repair. She had to grind it in place a little to get it to turn before she could push her way into the house.

It was dark. The windows were drawn and shuttered, subduing what little sunlight did make its way through. She could see clearly enough, though. The house surprised her. She’d expected it—well, she’d expected some kind of Hammer Studios movie set, with cobwebs and cobblestone. Torches. But realistically, she’d thought it would be one of those modern aesthetics. Everything matchy-matchy, looking as if it was just waiting for a bunch of Gucci models to be draped across the furniture: lots of dark glass, lots of wide-open space, lots of Bond-villain opulence.

Instead, it looked almost like Sarah would’ve decorated it. The furniture was old, antique even, but well-made and sturdy. Largely oak or other wood, decently sized but obviously hand-me-downs or scrounged from various sales, maybe even some high-end Craigslist deals. It wasn’t Early Single-Income Family like Sarah’s room—no milk cartons as makeshift bookshelves—but the furniture was scarred, aged, or reupholstered at times. Some was leather, some was plush with fabric, but the dark colors and subdued patterns tended to go together. Nothing really matched, but it was on the side of eclecticism instead of being garish or clashing. It looked to Sarah like...a home. The way her house had looked before her father—

She nearly jumped, seeing the dog. It was one of those big black creatures that could double as a small horse. Since Sarah was on the short side, that put it pretty much at eye level with her even though it was sitting. She stared nervously at it, but it was so still, so quiet, that Sarah realized the darkness of the place had spooked her. It was just a statue.

“You seen the woman of the house around here?” she asked pleasantly, drawing up to the beast. “If she’s in the Batcave, you don’t have to tell me.”

She reached out to give the statue a pat, and abruptly, it was on all fours, teeth bared, growl reverberating as if a bass guitar had been struck. Sarah felt her heart punch her breastbone. “Nice doggy...”

“I see you’ve met my roommate.” Nina’s voice seeped into Sarah’s ear like honey, as slow and easy as ever, but Sarah was a bit too scared for her life to appreciate it.

“Is he vegetarian?”

“Not in the slightest. Takes after his mistress that way.” Out of the corner of her eye, Sarah was aware of Nina pausing on the flight of stairs she was coming down and folding her elbows across the railing. “What do you think, Barnaby? Would she taste good?”

Barnaby barked once.

“Yes, I think so too. But oh, what about portions? There couldn’t possibly be enough for both of us...”

Barnaby barked again.

“I think so too. Let’s just stick with dog food. Ms. Kay, if you would be so kind as to hold out your hand?”

Sarah did, subtly positioning it to catch her heart if the damn thing succeeded in breaking out of her chest.

“Barnaby, safe.”

Barnaby eagerly smelled her hand, bullet-sized nostrils pulling inward as his cold nose sniffed from the tips of her fingers to the pulse of her wrist. When he was finished, he parked his butt back on the floor.

“Good boy, Barnaby.” Nina addressed Sarah next, her voice losing some but not all of its condescension. “Now that he has your scent, he won’t bother you. You’ll be welcome here at any time.”

“Thanks,” Sarah said, her voice hiding some but not all of her sarcasm. Seemingly bored of her, Barnaby the Big Black Dog turned around and padded deeper into the house.

Sarah looked up the stairs. Nina Rose didn’t disappoint. The woman was dressed somewhere between exquisite and modest, somehow making Sarah feel underdressed and overdressed at the same time. She wore a wine-dark cowl blouse over a lacy camisole, hip-hugging slacks, and shoes with red bottoms. There was an elegance in the casualness of the look, sweet because it was so unexpected. Sarah had imagined some Old Hollywood thing, a glistening gown, an expanse of leg.

Her face too. Not at all what Sarah had expected. She'd pictured high cheekbones, thin lips—a chilly, aristocratic face to go with that cutting voice. David Bowie as a woman. Angelina Jolie before she stopped eating.

No. Nina Rose had a face made for noir, beautiful like an old pin-up or a decal on the side of a WWII bomber, but she was also *cute*. Adorable, even. Mouth wide and lips full, smiling with a gleam of white teeth, full cheeks fitted to that fond smile, eyebrows finely sketched, her hair cut short into a dark wreath about her scalp, exposing the neat little seashells of her ears. Seeing it, seeing her smile, Sarah felt an irresistible urge to smile back.

“Ms. Rose,” she stammered out, trying to maintain eye contact. Nina was making her feel inadequate from the neck up; no need to look further. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Meet you again, I mean.”

“We have met before, you know.” Nina took another padding step down another creaking stair. “One of your birthday parties, when I was new in town. You were ten—as I recall. I was seventeen.” She looked Sarah over, her eyes seeming to suck in all of Sarah’s body. “It seems like only yesterday you weren’t even as high as my boots.”

Nina in boots. Sarah blushed for no reason she could figure out. “Well, I’ve filled out a lot—*grown* a lot,” she corrected hastily. “Ms. Rose, I’m a little unsure why I’m here....”

“For a reward, of course.” Nina’s voice flowed into Sarah’s own words like wine filling a crystalline glass. She took another step, the tap of her heels muted on the carpeted steps, then the uncomplaining creak of it taking her weight.

“Reward?”

“For the other night. You saved my life,” Nina said. “Do you prefer Sarah or Ms. Kay?”

“Whatever you like is fine, Ms. Rose.”

“I prefer Nina. And that would make you Sarah.” Nina descended to the landing with a little exaggerated flourish. “There. Now we’re on even footing.”

Lame joke. Sarah laughed, not falsely.

“Say it,” Nina said.

Sarah was momentarily confused, but those dark eyes pressed in on her, and then she just knew: “Nina.”

Something seemed to pass through Nina. Her eyes opened a little wider.

“I didn’t save your life,” Sarah continued. “It was really just...”

“It’s really just my money,” Nina said. “I’ll decide how to spend it. And who on.”

“Money?” Sarah repeated.

“This is a big house, but I’ve never noticed an echo in it before.”

Sarah flushed. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. Just...improve.” Nina reached into her pocket and took out an envelope. “One thousand dollars. If that isn’t enough to cover repairs to your vehicle, I’ll have to assume your mechanic is cheating you, and that’s really your problem. I assume a check is okay?”

One thousand... “A check is very okay.”

“I am sorry about your car.”

“My car?”

Nina smiled, seeing Sarah realize she’d repeated herself again. “I heard that you ran it off the road to avoid hitting me. Since you don’t seem to think you saved my life, you’ll at least let me thank you for not killing me. Come. There is one other thing, since you’ve come all this way,” she said, and led Sarah further inside.

She turned on the lights as she went through each room but only dimly. Sticking to Nina’s heels—practically walking in her footsteps—Sarah decided the place felt cozy more than anything else. There was something surprisingly light about Nina’s presence. It drained all the intimidation out of the house.

They came to a sort of breakfast nook built into a bay window, offering a view over the river. The table was brief and circular, its top inscribed with a checkerboard pattern. Instead of chess pieces or checkers, though, there was a bottle of Perrier and two glasses on top.

Nina sat down on one end of the wrap-around booth. “Given that we met so briefly, I wouldn’t presume to guess at your tastes, but it’s water, so if you don’t like it, you’re probably going to die.”

“Water’s fine,” Sarah said, still standing. But at Nina’s slightly admonishing head tilt, she sat. “I’m just not very thirsty.”

“Then I’ll give you not very much to drink. But just so you know, at a job interview you should always accept refreshments. It makes you seem more accommodating.”

Sarah cleared her throat. “Wait, this is a job interview?”

“You’re not looking for work?” Nina asked. She wound the cap off the bottle. “And I was really hoping to snatch you away from the grocery store. They must’ve bought your loyalty quite thoroughly. What was it? 401(k)? Dental?”

“It’s not that I wouldn’t like a better job, it’s just...”

Nina poured for her first. “Just? I should think, having been invited to a strange woman’s house in the middle of nowhere for no earthly reason, there should be quite a lot of reservations on your end.”

Sarah smiled, almost more to herself than for Nina. It was like Nina kept throwing down the gauntlet, seeing if Sarah would respond in sarcastic kind.

She picked up her glass. “And a woman of your wallet never has to bother with reservations.”

“I wouldn’t, no, but then, the local Olive Garden doesn’t have much of a waiting list.”

“Don’t knock it. I’d love to work there. Hear you get free breadsticks.” Sarah sipped. The bubbles rushed in faster than she was ready for, tickling the roof of her mouth; the taste hit her tongue comparatively gently.

“Not bad?” Nina asked.

“I could get used to it.”

“A lot of people like it.” Nina played with her own glass a moment, tilting it this way and that to watch it catch the light, then set it down and poured for herself. Her eyes stayed locked on the flowing water, all business. “It so happens that my estate’s gardener retired last spring, and I’m ashamed to say that the vines and such have gotten a little out of hand. I could really use someone with a strong back to come by twice a week and help out. And I’ve heard your family has a green thumb. I paid the old gardener forty dollars an hour, and I see no reason to pay you any less.”

“My mom runs the flower shop, not me.”

“Then you wouldn’t know how to care for the tree in front of the house?”

“Rhododendrons aren’t trees; they’re shrubs,” Sarah said automatically. When Nina stared at her with approval, she felt an overwhelming urge to bite her hair like a little kid. “A very old, very big shrub... And it would need to be lightly watered, fertilized infrequently, a top dressing in early spring; and in the winter, you’d want to knock the snow off the branches with a broom handle so they don’t get overburdened and snap off.”

“That hardly sounds arduous. I’m not expecting you to work yourself to death, just to get a little sweaty.” Nina looked in Sarah’s eyes at the last word.

Although Sarah wanted to look away, she didn’t.

“You or whoever your business sends, that is.”

Sarah laughed disbelievingly.

Nina set the bottle down and swiped up her glass. “Did I tell a good joke? I do hope you let me know what it is.”

Sarah spoke apologetically. “Not that I get into a lot of car accidents, but I have the feeling not a bunch of them end with job interviews.”

Nina pursed her lips musingly. “I recognized something in you.”

Sarah poked at the cliché as if it was a cut on her lip. “Yourself, when I was your age?”

“Would you like that?”

“Of course. You’re accomplished, successful. Why wouldn’t I?”

“At the moment, I can’t think of a reason.”

Sarah cleared her throat. Something about the way Nina had said that. More than sincere, it’d been...aching. “Your offer’s very intriguing...”

“Oh, I haven’t begun to be intriguing.”

Sarah grinned. “I would have to check with my mom. She’s very— She wouldn’t like me making a decision like this without her.”

“Take out your phone,” Nina said simply.

Sarah did. No bars.

“Shame. I guess we’ll have to leave things in suspense. Do feel free to look around, get a feel for the place, then go back to your mother and discuss it. If you’re here tomorrow, I’ll assume you’ve taken the job. Until then...Sarah.”



Sarah’s stomach was a balloon animal as she walked away from the house, feeling those hazel eyes on her again. When she looked back, Nina gave her a wave through one of the upstairs windows. She waved back, feeling lightheaded, dizzy enough to tuck her head down and focus on one foot, then the other.

She heard the trill of the motorboat running as she came down to the pier, then saw it as Mr. Shannon idled the engine and used an outstretched arm to hold close to the dock. There was another man in the boat—tall, handsome in a way, gym shirt, gym pants. He pulled himself up onto the pier, eyeing Sarah as she came down.

“Hey,” she said cautiously. “I’m Sarah.”

Still he eyed her. “How many passengers does this ride seat, anyway?” he asked, inclining his head slightly to Mr. Shannon, but directing the comment nowhere in particular. Then, hoisting a duffel bag, he walked past her.

Sarah took a last, lingering look as he walked off. The woozy feeling was gone; he'd jarred her out of it. After the quick warmth of Nina's den, he'd felt cold and grating.

"Who was that?" she asked, accepting Mr. Shannon's hand to come down into the boat.

"Marshall something," he replied. "I think one of Ms. Rose's business associates. He comes by about once a week."

"He always that much of an asshole?"

"Can't say I would put it in that language, but yeah."

Sarah seated herself for the trip back. Nina was so kind and understanding and considerate. She didn't deserve to have to deal with an oaf like that.

He was unworthy of her.

Chapter 3

“Absolutely not,” Eileen said, the moment she caught sight of the check. “I forbid it.”

“You forbid it?” Sarah asked, pursuing her mother through the kitchen as she fixed dinner. She could almost hear Nina in her head, saying “echo.” “What are you even talking about? It’s free money.”

“Nina Rose’s money.”

“So?”

“She feels bad about your father, she thinks this will make it right, and it’s not something we’re going to take advantage of.” After taking the towel off her risen dough, Eileen started slotting it into bread pans. “What do you need money for, anyway? You’re not in school. You live here rent-free.”

“I want to get my car fixed and then maybe pay off some of our debts.”

“We don’t have—”

“We do!” Sarah interrupted. “We’re behind on the mortgage. You think I don’t notice this stuff, but why do you think I stopped going to college?”

Eileen stared at her. “You’re rewriting history.”

“And you’re not? You make it sound like dad’s accident was her fault somehow.”

“I did not—!” Eileen began shrilly, then settled. “I never said that. But we don’t need her charity.”

“Don’t we?” Sarah took a deep breath.

Eileen turned away. She probably thought the argument was settled. Like after she said what she said, that was that.

Sarah tried a different tack. “It’s not charity if I earn the money. She wants us to do her gardening.”

“Now we’re gardeners?”

“We do it every Tuesday and Thursday for three blocks. You close down the flower shop. What do you call that?”

“They’re in the area,” Eileen argued. “We can’t drive all the way out to Nina Rose’s every week. You saw how far it is. It’d take up the whole day.”

“Not the whole—I’ll go. I can handle the place myself. She wants me to come twice a week. And she’s offering to pay forty bucks an hour.”

“And your other job?”

“I can work it in around my schedule at the store. They’re not giving me full-time anyway. And they only pay minimum wage. The only place I can go from here is up.”

Now Eileen seemed past the point of sighing, in some weirdly tranquil place. “Sarah, what do you remember about Nina Rose? Really?”

“She was one of dad’s students. He tutored her, she made a bundle—so she’s grateful, so what?”

“I don’t think you appreciate how complicated things are.”

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Sarah said. “It’s a second job. You wanted me to get one. And I’m not asking for your permission, I’m asking for your blessing.”

Eileen still didn’t look pleased, but she said, “I’m not giving you my blessing. I’m giving you my permission. I hope you appreciate the difference when the time comes.”



“Guys, you sound like my mom,” Sarah told her webcam.

The Skype screens registered identical expressions of exasperated disappointment.

“C’mon, Kay!” Jonesy demanded. “What’s her deal? Is she all *Sling Blade*?”

“She’s my boss,” Sarah stressed. “I’m not going to gossip about my new boss. It’s really cool of her to give me this opportunity—I’m making forty bucks an hour. I had to agree to start paying rent before Eileen would let me take the job, so half of it’s going to the mortgage, but still, that fucks the supermarket up the ass.”

“Can you just take a few pictures?” Beck asked. “I mean, she’s fine with Google Earth taking pictures—you’d just be closer.”

Tyrese barely looked up from the mail he was opening. “C’mon, lay off her. She’s got a good thing going here. Speaking as one of her other good things, I appreciate she doesn’t want to screw that up.”

“Thanks, babe.”

“You two are boring ever since you hooked up,” Beck said. “At least tell us if Nina’s a vampire?”

“Of course not.”

“So you’ve seen her in direct sunlight?”

Sarah sighed. “Jonesy, what’s new with you?”

“Yeah, have *you* seen any vampires?” Tyrese asked, as Sarah got a chat from him: *Areal, what was she like?*

Sarah rolled her eyes and punched some keys. She could think of a lot of things to say about that woman.

The kind of person I wish I had met at college. Maybe one of the teachers. She could have gone all Dead Poets Society on me.

Sarah deleted that, instead writing: *She’s intense, smart, friendly...lonely. Very lonely.*



The next morning, Eileen gave Sarah pancakes for breakfast, and then she hitched a ride with Beck to the boathouse. Once more, she got to enjoy the house porn of Nina’s manor. The grounds were overgrown, but it wasn’t a jungle. All the weeds and wildflowers made it look like the Garden of Eden.

Sarah had always figured Eden wouldn’t be an orderly garden. It’d be wild and free.

On the long walk up the path, Sarah groomed herself a little, gathering up her hair into a ponytail, adjusting her stockings, and even putting on both straps of her backpack. All of a sudden, she wanted to look her best for Nina. Maybe it was just the house, so intimidating in its near perfection. Even it couldn’t live up to Nina’s impeccable fashion sense and general elegance, but it did throw her into stark relief. She was like the crown jewel of her own life.

Sarah wanted to be, like, one of the other jewels. Maybe that orb thing royals had, with the cross on top? She buzzed the intercom. No one answered. The pause was long, jarring—a wrench in the gears. Sarah stood there long enough not to feel awkward about hitting the intercom again. Still nothing. Panic fringed her thoughts; ridiculous as it was, she worried this was all some elaborate prank, that Nina was fucking with her, laughing at her...

The door flew open. Nina stood there in a sort of kimono, its glossy, green fabric leafed loosely over her body. She was dripping wet, bare-bodied except for the robe, hair falling in wet straits past her ears, tickling at the nape of her neck. Sarah could hear a shower still running in the background. And she could see Nina

in quite a lot more detail than she'd expected: her womanly hips pushing out the confines of the kimono, the way it flowed over her hourglass figure, the generous breasts, pendulous but firm, well holding their own against gravity... Nina pulled the kimono tighter around herself, hiding most of her skin but for her wet feet, her sculpted calves.

“Sarah...you're here early.”

“Yeah.” Sarah's mind was still off on an odd tangent, picturing Nina as a lounge singer in some old TCM movie with Rita Hayworth. All she needed was a glimmering red dress and an old-fashioned microphone to croon into. The woman looked made for black-and-white—Sarah found herself mentally dressing Nina in a gray silk robe instead, befitting her fine skin, and... *What the hell is wrong with you, Sarah Kay?*

“Yeah,” Sarah said again. “I thought I'd get an early start. For my first day and all. I didn't mean to disturb you—”

“No, no trouble at all. I was just wrapping up.” Nina smiled at her own pun as she adjusted her robe, slender fingers neatly working the dangling belt halves. They were little silk ribbons, whispering through the air as Nina deftly tied them. “Have you eaten?”

“Yeah, I had pancakes.”

“Oh, poor dear,” Nina cooed with mock sympathy, and Sarah laughed. “Come in, but give me a moment to throw something on. Just because I work from home is no reason to dress like it.”

Sarah followed her, Keds squeaking on the wet footprints Nina left on the tile, trying not to notice the wiggle of Nina's ass in the tightened kimono. That was just how she imagined Nina would sway her hips while she performed in some elegant nightclub—not vulgarly, but just enough so that every man in tuxedo and tails would be fantasizing about what else those hips could do.

Nina disappeared upstairs, coming back a few moments later in a baggy white T-shirt and boot-cut jeans with the right knee wearing thin. Dressing down did nothing to make her less attractive. The looseness of her shirt only made the ample swell of her breasts more prominent, pushing as they did against the folds of the fabric. And while her jeans weren't tight, the way she moved was interesting enough with just a hint of her figure showing. She came down doing up her belt, and Sarah fought the urge to look away as she pulled the leather taut.

“Laundry day,” she said.

Nina wasn't much of a tour guide. There were shelves and shelves of books, odd curios lining shelves and dressers, a big hand-painted Victorian globe in one corner—Nina didn't stop for any of it. "Mr. Shannon informed you of the river situation, yes?"

"Yeah."

"Good man. So if I have business in town, I could very well be stuck there overnight." Sarah was about to volunteer the guest room of her house when Nina said, "Obviously, I'm not above slumming it in a Four Seasons, but I'm a bit anal about my house. I'm one of those people who can't relax if she thinks she's left the oven on. So, while you're in my home, just in case I'm called away suddenly and unable to return, don't leave any electrical appliances on while you're not using them. No doors left open. Windows closed if you're not in the room. Exterior doors preferably locked."

"Yeah. Of course. I mean, I probably won't—won't be around enough for it to be an issue, but—"

Nina continued leading Sarah about, hitting a bathroom, the kitchen, a guestroom. "I'm not a slave driver. The reason I pay you is so I don't have to worry about the garden, thus it only makes sense that I don't worry about you either. You strike me as a fairly hard worker, and I rarely miss my guess about people. As long as the work is done, I don't mind you going at your own pace, or relaxing a little. If you're tired, take a nap. If you're dirty, use the shower. If you're hungry, help yourself. You might want to bring a change of clothes: this can be a dirty job."

"But someone's got to do it," Sarah leapt in.

Nina smiled at her. "Quite. I can't imagine you being too curious about this place—it's just a house, no different from any other—but feel free to explore. If you're looking for something in particular, it will probably be around here somewhere. No need to worry that you'll stumble across my seven previous wives or anything. One exception."

Nina showed her to a door, trying the knob for Sarah. It was locked. "This door leads to the basement. A few years back, there was something of a flood, and the water damage was particularly bad down there. The insurance company gave me a huge hassle, and I decided to hell with it, it's not like I need another room in this labyrinth. It's quite unsafe down there, so leave it alone."

"Absolutely," Sarah said, trying her best to look as if she was paying attention and diligently filing away mental notes, rather than wondering how Nina's hair could look so good fresh out of the shower.

Or why the shower was still running. She knew they weren't in a drought or anything, but still. Bad for the environment. She was about to ask Nina if maybe she should run up and turn it off when she heard the spray decisively stop, reducing itself to a dribbling, plinking echo.

Oh...

Nina escorted Sarah to the garden shed. It was in good repair from the last gardener, and Sarah quickly proved to Nina that she knew her way around the various tools. She really was good with plants; she'd helped Eileen with her business on and off, back before she'd been old enough for a real job.

"I suggest you start with the weeding," Nina said sweetly, handing Sarah an angled tool that would make it a breeze. Sarah had begged her mother for one of those, but no, doing it by hand built so much frickin' character. "And if you need anything, just let me know."

"Well, maybe..." *A glass of ice water. A power bar.* "I mean, if it's not too much trouble..."

"Yes?" Nina asked, and there was a tiny universe in how her lips wetly parted, teeth gleaming, almost feral, and in the quirks at the corner of her mouth as she waited for Sarah's reply. For what Sarah wanted.



Strong and insistent hands pulled Sarah in. Almost before she could feel their touch, warm lips were against her own and a tongue pushed into her mouth. It felt good but also weird. The hands slid down to crush themselves against Sarah's ass, pulling her further into their owner's reach. Her body was responding, but not in the right way. It felt as if she was short-circuiting. This was wrong somehow. She tried to push the thought away; this couldn't be wrong. She touched back, her hands groping and massaging—not as forcefully as her lover, more experimentally. It all felt so...different.

But that was nonsense, right? What was she expecting? What else would Tyrese feel like?

"We should stop," Sarah said, pulling away.

Tyrese's hands kept running over her as if he was looking for something. They were just...rough. Like they were made of sandpaper. Not like a woman's would be.

"I said *stop!*" She gave him a shove, and he broke off, immediately pouting.

“You said we *should* stop. Girls always say they should stop.”

“How would you know!”

His hand slid out from under her shirt, which he’d jammed up over her belly.

She pulled it down, straightening it until the band logo on the front was unwrinkled.

“So what? Why’d you come over if you didn’t want a little something-something?” Tyrese asked, trying and failing to keep his voice away from a whine.

“To talk!”

“We talked at dinner, we talked at the show—”

“So I guess I have a lot on my mind, okay?” Sarah lowered her harsh voice, softened it. “Rub my feet?”

Tyrese wasn’t any more eager to fight than she was. “Sure,” he said, groaning as she reoriented herself on his bed, kicking her shoes off and bringing her feet up so he could start kneading them. That always felt nice. A little clumsy, a little weird when his palms skidded temptingly up her ankles, squeezing like they were some sort of erogenous zone, but she thought it was good for them. He got to touch her, and she didn’t have to try so hard to let herself be seduced.

Tyrese pressed a kiss to the side of her foot.

It tickled. Sarah forced herself not to kick.



There was a notecard sticking out of Nina’s front door. Sarah pulled it free and read: *Prior engagement—the door’s unlocked. Please get started, will catch up later.*

Automatically, Sarah flipped it over. The back read, in Nina’s same elegant writing: *We’ll have to get you a key.*

Sarah tucked the card away and tried the doorknob. Sure enough, it was unlocked. She wondered what kind of ‘prior engagement’ a hermit-cum-possible-vampire could have. From the few times she’d been over already, they’d started to settle into a routine. Nina liked to get in a brief greeting and serve her a snack and a drink before she got started. Nothing much, just fruits or veggies, some juice or a smoothie. And Nina would ask about what Sarah’s plans for the day were, with Sarah gladly telling her.

It always felt nice, having someone ask her what was up and not expecting an essay. Eileen always grilled her at dinner, like on a daily basis she needed to make sure Sarah hadn’t brought shame to the family.

There was a sudden thump from upstairs—the kind of thing that would have plaster falling in a less well-made house. Sarah stared up at the resounding ceiling. That had been Nina, right? It had to have been.

“Ms. Rose?” Sarah called. She still wasn’t quite comfortable doing first names. That whole “respect your elders” thing Eileen had drilled into her ran deep.

She started up the stairs. “Nina? Are you alright?”

She could hear a *mélange* of sounds—muffled, meaty, rhythmic. Footsteps. Something creaking, metallic. “Nina?”

A pregnant pause. Sarah thought she could feel each individual air molecule against her skin. The noise stopped. Then Nina’s voice, out of breath: “Sarah? Did you see the note?”

“Yeah, I got it... Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine. Do you need help refamiliarizing yourself with your duties?” Nina’s voice was tinged with irritation.

“No. No, it’s all good.”



Nina’s backyard had six-foot-high hedges that hid it, and a goodly portion of her house, from the rest of her land. Sarah decided to tackle them today, killing anything that looked like a dandelion and stuffing it in the trash bag she dragged behind her. She was getting pretty into it, letting her mind wander.

Who had been in the shower while Nina was showing her around the house that first day? What was making those noises today? *Who* was making those noises?

Knowing there was no point in speculating, Sarah distracted herself with Barnaby, who had taken to watching her work like a prison guard in a chain-gang movie. Sarah didn’t take many breaks, determined to give Nina her money’s worth, but when she did, it was usually lying in the shade, petting an ecstatically grateful dog. He wasn’t so bad, once you won him over with belly scratches.

She was about to go inside to see if Nina had any more ginger snaps when the woman herself came out. She wore a loose silk dressing gown, the material nearly translucent, beckoning Sarah to try to look through it. The flesh underneath was...

Sarah quickly concentrated on the next weed. God, she was perverting on *her boss*. What was wrong with her?

Nina waved at her, and Sarah waved back, her hand doing a twitchy thing instead of the graceful acknowledgment Nina had perfected.

“I think it’s time for my hour of sun,” Nina said. Then she took her gown off, laying it ever so neatly across a patio chair. She sat down on a lounge, every inch of her stretched out for the light.

Sarah only allowed herself to look out of the corner of her eye. All Nina wore was a bikini, the two-piece covering almost nothing, like garnish on a steak. The rest of her... The school district had been too cheap to hire models for Sarah’s photography class and too prudish to get them naked anyway. They’d had to make do with photographing volunteers from the class, fully clothed, which meant that Sarah had wasted far more rolls of film than posterity could justify on Kesha T-shirts and jeggings.

But Nina... God, Sarah wanted to photograph that body every which way. Low-light, blinding light, silhouette, black-and-white. Under the bleachers, against a white background, in the woods. Everywhere. She wanted a portfolio of Nina, proof to convince the harshest skeptic that a woman really could look like that.

Nina gave her neck a crack, did her fingers next, and finally picked up a pair of sunglasses off the patio’s dining table. She slipped them on like the finishing touch of the picture she was making of herself.

Keeping herself very focused on her work—seemingly—Sarah craned her head just barely to the side. Her eyes took in the cute little toes on Nina’s bare feet. She dared to tilt her head further, taking in Nina’s legs. They seemed impossibly long with Sarah’s gaze traveling up them second...by...second.

A glob of white liquid squirted onto them, and Sarah looked away hurriedly, pulling the next three weeds at record speed. When she looked back, Nina was smearing suntan lotion up and down her calves. Completely ordinary and responsible. Sarah looked away just as Nina’s legs started to shine with it.

She pulled weeds and pulled weeds and pulled weeds. Quietly, efficiently—her mother would’ve been so proud. And when she looked back, it was practically by accident. A drop of sweat ran into her eye and stung, and as she wiped it away, she happened to look over at Nina—at those hands traveling over her breasts, up her throat, over her cheeks like the caress of a lover. Sarah had the feeling of being an intruder, stumbling upon a private moment—Nina in a moment of autoerotic pleasure. Then Nina’s hands slid back down, over the tops of her breasts, applying the lotion with the lightest touch. Sarah’s mouth went dry. If she’d tried, she would’ve found it impossible to look away.

Not that she tried.

Nina tugged her top down a little ways, exposing even more of her cleavage. The bikini top was loose-fitting, the kind of thing that might come off at a quick pull. She spread the lotion over her areolas, almost to her nipples—almost letting Sarah see them. Then she saw she'd gotten lotion on her top. Sighing, she moved to untie the knot in the middle. Sarah felt her breath hitch and couldn't imagine ever exhaling again.

Then Nina looked right at her. Her expression was impossible to make out with the black sunglasses blocking her eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry, Sarah. I forgot you were there."

"No, it's...okay. Don't mind me." Sarah tried to force a chuckle, but all that came out was a very hoarse cough.

Nina smiled graciously. "I know it's just us girls, but we don't know each other that well."

"But how are we going to get to know each other better if we don't..." Don't what? Don't see each other naked? Sarah wasn't sure if she was joking with Nina or trying to defuse the tension, or what that tension even *was*.

Nina turned over with her top held to her chest. "I think I'd better do my back anyway."

And what a back it was. Supple muscles, slender waist, and...a feature men were fans of and the appeal of which Sarah could very well understand. Nina's bikini bottoms could've been mistaken for body paint at first glance.

And it all needed suntan lotion.

"I could—" Sarah started, her words coming out as a squeak. She cleared her throat, but before she could start again, he came out, straightening his clothes. The man from the boat. He held a single glass of water clogged with ice.

"Your drink, madam." He set it on the ground under Nina's lounge. "Need someone to get your back?"

"Mmm. Desperately. Sarah?" Nina called out.

Sarah felt as if she was going to pass out. "Uh, y-yeah?"

"Would you like a drink?" Nina offered.

"No thanks." Sarah finally caught her breath. "I'm just gonna do the rest of the yard."

On the other side of the hedge, Sarah dropped flat on her face and just breathed. God. Shit, shit, shit. What was she doing? Nina was good-looking, but she wasn't *that* good-looking. Okay, she was, but Sarah didn't *care*. She was straight. She had a boyfriend. She had posters of Chris Hemsworth. So Nina was getting a tan? Good

for her. It was probably just to stop her from getting Alzheimer's or something, not so she could give her gardener (her *female* employee) wet dreams. Fuck!

"Nice workout today," the man said, sounding exactly the way Sarah imagined an internet comment section would.

"You weren't so bad yourself, Marshall. Do you mind if I remove my top?" Nina asked, the question drifting distantly through the leaves of the hedge.

Sarah felt her head shoot up like a prairie dog's, despite the split-second realization that Nina wasn't talking to her.

"Sure thing," Marshall said. "And my guy is sending you the sample. You can look over it, tell me if you're interested."

"Wonderful." Nina sighed.

Sarah's eyes darted to the hedge. She could just make out Nina, quivering under Marshall's hairy-backed hands as he lathered the suntan lotion onto her shoulders. "And get my sides too, if you don't mind..."

Sarah felt herself being pulled to the hedge as if her head had a magnet in it. And the leaves were magnets too. She nearly shoved her face in it as Nina leaned up, her breasts swaying under her, Marshall's grubby fingers running down the sides of her body. They barely touched Nina...there. Sarah suddenly developed a keen appreciation of Marshall's self-control. How could you *not* want to touch those? They were just so...and they were really...and then there was just how *round* they were!

"That feels good," Nina cooed. "But...just a little lower. You missed a spot."

Sarah knew what Nina was talking about. So did Marshall. His hands traveled back up Nina's ribs, toward her—

Sarah pulled herself away so hard she nearly gave herself whiplash. This was so wrong. The man was just helping Nina put on some suntan lotion, and Sarah was using simple skin-cancer prevention like an issue of *Maxim*! What, had she been a teenage boy in a previous life? Gross. She'd helped her friends put on lotion plenty of times and there'd never been anything sexual about it. It was just something you did at the beach.

"And my lower back now?" Nina asked.

Sarah forced herself not to listen. There was work to do. Nina had given her a great job. She should be doing it, not...*whatever* that had been. Almost viciously, Sarah returned to tearing out weeds.

"God, you must have magic fingers, Marshall."

"Thanks."

“Oh, I should be thanking you. Just work your magic on my thighs, and I’ll be absolutely *beholden*.”

Sarah heard herself groan. Okay. Just this once. Gently, her hands actually shaking a little, she spread the branches of the hedge and eased her head down to look through the hole she’d made.

Marshall was on his knees between Nina’s legs (they were spread, Jesus Christ), those oily fingers “working their magic” just below Nina’s ass. His hands moved with firm strokes; if he was nervous about touching Nina, he didn’t show it. Maybe he had a lot of experience with it.

Sarah felt another groan make its way up her throat.

“Between my thighs too, Marshall,” Nina said, her voice just barely carrying to Sarah, thanks to the wind. “I’d hate to get a burn there.”

His hands moved up Nina’s thighs and then down between them, as if he was spreading Nina’s legs. Sarah could’ve sworn that Nina raised her ass a bit but couldn’t be sure from this distance. She involuntarily arched forward for a better look, but it did no good. She could just make out Nina’s mouth. It seemed to be opening and closing. In pleasure, or was she just breathing...?

Did she hear Nina hiss in a breath, like she’d just been touched somewhere sensitive, or was that just her imagination?

Sarah didn’t notice she was leaning too far forward until she lost her balance and crashed through the hedge, displaying all the grace of a Bigfoot sighting.



“So you said you tripped?” It being IRL, there were no connection issues to spare Sarah an iota of Beck’s sarcasm. “And they bought it?”

“Why wouldn’t they buy it? Why would they think I was spying on Nina Rose putting on suntan lotion? Why would *I* think I was spying on Nina Rose putting on suntan lotion? You don’t think I was spying on Nina Rose putting on suntan lotion, do you?”

Beck gave the sidewalk a kick, propelling her skateboard a few more feet. Sarah hastened a little, walking her bike a smidge faster to keep up. When they were side by side again, Beck looked over and pretended to notice her again.

“No, no, you were just...enjoying the show. Lots of girls enjoy spending time with older women. They’re called lesbians.”

Another, stronger kick took Beck's skateboard out of comfortable conversing range, and Sarah broke into a jog to keep pace.

"Very funny. So you don't think I should change my name and move to Bulgaria?"

"Well, everyone should do that once in their life, but at least wait until your car's out of the shop."

Sarah was about to mount her bike when Beck slowed down to check the storefronts they were passing. "Is this it?"

"No, it's up against a Victoria's Secret, for some reason."

"Why wouldn't a Half-Price Books be next to a Victoria's Secret?"

"I don't know." They passed the park where the statue of Sarah's father sat, which she pretended not to notice. "You looking for anything in particular? Tell me now. I don't want you to bitch me out later because I didn't help you find a Brazilian translation of *The Fault in Our Stars*."

"Anything by Guy N. Smith. I've got five of the Crab books, so—one to go."

"Why do you read those things? They're not even scary."

"No, they're not scary, they're *awesome*."

"Here we are," Sarah said. The bookstore had spinner racks of ninety-cent paperbacks out under the awning. She gave one a spin, like the appetizer before the meal. Cheesy old Harlequin romances were currently tickling her fancy, and in her experience, ones about bare-chested Scotsmen were the Velveeta-iest. Easy to find too. You just had to look for the kilts.

Beck stopped, stepping on the tail of her skateboard to flip its front end up to her hand as she perused the other spinner rack. "Also, I'll take anything about anyone fighting a war on crime."

"Like detective stories?"

"No, like the Executioner. He's pretty much the Punisher, only he runs out of criminals to kill, so he just starts fighting the Cold War. It's amazing."

Sarah knew for a fact that Beck had every Ryan Gosling movie where he wasn't killing someone on DVD. It always struck her as odd that Beck could be into shopping and sewing and One Direction and basically every stereotype of the X-chromosome, but then also proudly display the cover to a splatterpunk horror paperback and declare triumphantly that it featured the killer bashing a victim's head against the wall so hard that her eye popped out, into his mouth, and he ate it.

Still, it made Beck easy to shop for. While the woman disdained internet shopping for herself—she preferred the thrill of the hunt—she was happy to accept treasured old paperbacks as gifts, no questions asked. Anyone who looked at Sarah’s eBay bids around Christmas would be liable to suspect psychopathic inclinations.

Sarah plucked out a Dean Koontz book with a suitably lurid cover—she knew, she knew, but needs must—and was about to show it to Beck when she caught sight of him.

“Holy shit! That’s the guy?”

“The guy?” Beck asked, following Sarah’s line of sight.

“The fucking guy!”

“Oh, the Fucking guy,” Beck said, pronouncing the capital letter.

Sarah gave her a look, setting the Koontz book atop the rack. “I’m following him.”

“C’mon, I left my good stalking shoes at home.”

Sarah pushed her bike into Beck’s arms. “Watch my stuff.”

“I’m already—” But Sarah was off. Beck groaned, called “Hey!”, and tossed Sarah her skateboard. Sarah caught it.

Marshall was across the thoroughfare of the shopping center, obscured by rows of parked cars and their sunlight-throwing windshields, but it was him, Sarah was sure of it. From the sidewalk opposite his, she kept pace, clutching Beck’s skateboard like a shield. She wasn’t sure why. In case he spotted her and went into a berserker rage, she would bludgeon him with it? Hold it up in front of her face so he wouldn’t recognize her? Sarah hung back, lingering behind the pillars that held up the ‘covered’ part of the walkway, dashing from one to the other but keeping mostly out of sight.

It didn’t take long for Marshall to turn into one of the shopping center’s storefronts. Sarah came out of hiding, crossing the street in just a little disbelief. It was a goddamn dojo. Gym mats, punching bags, katana stands, and samurai armor on display for that decorative flair. A class of students was working out under a young red belt. The sounds of sparring hit Sarah’s memory like a freight train. Last time, she’d heard it through floorboards...

Marshall emerged from a backroom, now wearing a black-belted gi instead of his street clothes. So she stepped inside, ringing the bell attached to the door, drawing Marshall’s attention as he looked out over the practicing students. He walked to her, bare feet slapping over exercise mats. “Kay, right?”

“Sarah,” she half corrected, half confirmed. “How’s it going?”

“I have class, so—busy.” And he started turning away.

“Nina and I were talking about you the other day!” Sarah bluffed quickly. “She said you were a really good teacher.”

“Did she now?” Marshall asked, crossing his arms.

“Yeah. She doesn’t want to presume too much, but she thinks she’s making really good progress with your lessons.”

“Well, she’s a hard worker,” Marshall said, and Sarah felt a goddamn hot-air balloon in her guts as the realization hit her. He was her fucking *guru*. “And I’m a pretty good teacher. Would you like to sit in on a class? You’d be surprised how much you can pick up in just forty-five minutes.”

“No, no,” Sarah demurred, trying hard to hide her smile. “I’ve gotta get gone. But good talking to you!”

“Yeah, you too. Tell Ms. Rose I said hi.”

Sarah nodded agreeably and headed out, feeling a bizarre urge to dance.

Beck pulled up next to her, riding Sarah’s bicycle, all wobbly. “God, this thing is so wack. Do all these fuckers have seats like this? ... What are you so happy about?”

Sarah tossed her skateboard back. “To him, she’s ‘Ms. Rose’.”

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THE WOMAN AT THE
EDGE OF TOWN

BY GEORGETTE KAPLAN

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