

KEPT

by L. B. Plum

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PROLOGUE

She never let someone she loved, other than her stepfather, touch her like this.

This time is different, she thought to herself. *This time is different, because he loves me. He warned me, but I asked for it.*

His blows were nothing like those she had taken growing up. He didn't use a paddle, cane, or belt. No, this weapon bore a more direct force. It went where it was aimed to land with determined accuracy. It grabbed her hair, punched her chest, and clawed at her back where he knew it would make her suffer the most. He would make her pay for what she had done to him. She had always been afraid of his hands, which bore the testament of years of manual labor. They were strong and looked as if they had been decorated with stones for knuckles. His menacing hands that once held hers on their wedding day when they made their promise to love and to honor each other for life. Those same hands that wrapped around her throat now as she gasped for air and tried desperately to hang onto the little life she had left.

CHAPTER 1 -- JULY (PRESENT YEAR)

Sarah wiped the warm drool from her cheek as she stirred awake. Her eyes struggled to stay open, as the morning light made it more difficult. The night before was a blur. She could remember scantily-clad showgirls that loomed over her in their five-inch heels and feathered headdresses. There may have been a street mime and...Elvis? Sarah wasn't sure about it all. The more she tried to remember, the more she doubted her memory.

It must've been a dream, she hoped as she leaned her head against the headboard. Being awake was making things worse. She wanted to drown herself in sleep to wash away these strange and fragmented memories. Closing her deep brown eyes, sleep called to her.

It wasn't long before she felt a tight grasp around her left breast. Suddenly wide awake, Sarah glanced down at her petite chest. She had always been embarrassed by her seemingly less-than-ample bosom. Wearing clothes that were loose on the top and accentuated nothing more than her hourglass waist made her less self-conscious. Her breasts were often concealed from the murmurs of people, and she was perfectly fine with that.

The hand that held her clutched and squeezed. They were large hands that made her chest feel even smaller than it was, but

they belonged to *him* and she melted. Nothing seemed to make sense, the dreams of the night before, the strange room which she was only starting to realize must be a hotel room and *him*.

Jason. Jason Crowe, or is it Jason Crosse?

It was only beginning to come together. Sarah had never done something like this in all of her twenty-three years. Whatever happened between Jason and her the previous night, she could only imagine. It made her heart flutter with adrenaline she had never known before. This passion was all new and a bit *crazy*, but for once she didn't mind because *he* was the cause of it.

Their eyes met, and for the first time she noticed how beautiful he truly was. His hair was dark brown, almost black. It was definitely darker than her wavy auburn hair. He couldn't have been more than a few years older than her. There was an allure in his hazel-green eyes that filled her with utter bliss, knowing she owned their attention at that very moment. Still, there was something in his stare that prompted an unwelcome level of discomfort. Sarah couldn't put a finger on what or why it was. Perhaps it was the fact she barely knew this man lying shirtless next to her.

Could he be naked? Sarah blushed at the thought.

He stared at her with such intensity that she didn't mind for a while. When his stare lingered for longer than she was used

to a man watching, it frightened her. Before she could think to flee, his hand left her breast and grabbed the back of her head. Jason forced his lips on her as he climbed over her body with his. She sank back into the bed feeling his muscles flex, his shoulders, his arms, his legs. He was definitely *naked*.

###

His hair tickled her neck, as he rested his ear against her chest checking for signs of her heartbeat.

“I’m still here. I’m alive. I made it,” Sarah toyed.

Jason lifted his head and studied her face. He looked different somehow. There was a calm in his eyes that hadn’t been there before. They looked almost somber.

“I’m okay,” she reassured, soothingly. “Are you? I was just joking.”

She felt his fingers caress her lips and then her cheek. There was a connection between them left behind through this simple gesture alone. For Sarah, it was electrifying, and she leaned into his touch like a gullible puppy.

The world around them was quiet just long enough for her to hear the words pass his lips. “I never want to lose you, Sarah Crosse.”

The words came out barely as a whisper, but she heard them loud and clear, blaring in her ears.

“Sarah *Crosse*?” she repeated.

Jason sat up and faced her. He jokingly teased, “Mrs. Crosse! Don’t tell me you remember nothing of our wedding night.”

He scooped her left hand up with his and intertwined their fingers. Sarah’s eyes immediately rested on the matching wedding bands on both their hands. How could she not remember her own wedding night? The previous night was a hazy blur. Embarrassed, she gasped as she pulled the duvet over her head.

As Jason tugged gently on the duvet, it fell from Sarah’s face. She blushed and her cheeks turned red like apples. He drew her into his arms so that her head relaxed on his shoulder. “I’m sorry. I should have known you wouldn’t remember,” he said. “Last night after we left Maureen’s party at the bar, we had dinner, drank a little, and then headed over to the nearest chapel. I guess you had too much to drink, but I didn’t realize that until much later. Gotta give my baby what she wants, you know.”

Slowly, his hand glided down her spine to the small of her back. Before his fingertips could inch their way into her panties, Sarah pulled away. She hadn’t quite decided how she was feeling. It was a tossup between bewilderment and shame – bewildered because she couldn’t remember something as life changing and remarkable as marrying Jason Crosse and shame for seeming foolish enough to marry someone while drunk and not recall it the following morning. His recollection of what

happened the previous night didn't match up with the kind of person she thought she was. She had only been tipsy a few times in her life, but never enough to understand what it meant to be "under the influence" until now.

If they were really married, what would they do now? They came from two completely different places, literally. He resided in Phoenix while she was in San Diego. They had chance meetings over the course of three years through get-togethers with the same circle of friends but never spent more than five minutes conversing until two days ago. Would he ask for an annulment after realizing how truly wasted she was the night before? Should she ask for an annulment? Although, she was beginning to think she really didn't want to.

It had been a little less than a month since her last breakup. Even though she didn't believe her marriage to Jason was a result of a rebound, many would probably see it as that. Amazingly, however, she was slowly realizing she didn't care. She'd always felt out of place in her previous relationship and too much time apart only wedged more distance between them. There was something, however, about her new husband she felt drawn to. He had the kind of strong and alluring persona that made her feel looked after and less vulnerable to the world she once knew. In the two days they spent together, they were barely ever apart.

It was definitely something she wanted to consider getting used to.

“If you don’t mind my asking, whose idea was it to get married?” she asked timidly.

“I proposed, and you said yes. You seemed like you really wanted to,” Jason coaxed.

“I was *drunk!*” she blurted, but at once wished she hadn’t. The effects of the alcohol had worn off long ago, and she was beginning to feel the side effects of her actions.

“Well, you looked so surprised and happy. How was I supposed to tell the difference between that and your drunken face?” he said matter-of-factly. “It was the most wonderful moment of my life. We’ve seen each other around now and then for the last three years, but the universe came together somehow last night. I wasn’t even planning on going to that bar, you know. I was tired as hell and just wanted to go to the room to sleep. But Darren and the other guys dragged me there, literally kicking and screaming, I swear. I’m sure glad they did, though, because if they didn’t... Well, I would’ve missed out on the most important opportunity of my life.”

Cupping her face in his hands, he stared into Sarah’s eyes and she was forced to look into his. The tenderness in his eyes glistened as he made an effort to ward off his tears. He swallowed the lump that formed in his throat.

Oh boy, I'm in trouble, Sarah thought.

“I knew after we spent the last two days together that I never wanted to be with anyone else. This is something I’ve never felt before,” he whispered.

Drawn to his lips, Sarah leaned in and sighed, “Me, too.” She could smell his sweet breath and his salty skin. It gave her a rush as he kissed her gently.

“I love you, Sarah,” he said between kisses. “I love you. I love you. I love you.”

In that moment, she didn’t doubt what she wanted. The way he looked at her, touched her, and spoke to her, comforted her in some way that made her want to please him even more so to return the favor. Although they knew little of each other, being with Jason was unduly intimate, as if he’d been in her presence all of her life.

New, yet familiar, she thought.

Their foreheads touched, separating their lips only inches from each other. Sarah could hear someone’s heart pounding rapidly, but she couldn’t tell if it was Jason’s or her own. So close, they breathed in each other’s breaths. The anticipation made her head swirl.

“Sarah,” he breathed. “Will you marry me?”

Taking time to absorb the moment, she closed her eyes. The thoughts in her head swirled with questions spinning too fast

to answer and nagging insecurities she eagerly cast aside. Lost in his charm and the moment, she relied on her heart to answer, "I already have."

"Don't leave me, Sarah," he forbade.

Intoxicated by his persistence, she pledged her commitment, "I promise. I never will."

"Ever," Jason whispered his insistence.

"Never ever. I promise," she said, wanting desperately to please him, to make their marriage flourish.

"Good. Because if you do, I'll always find a way back to you," he said, his eyes filled with an intensity that overpowered her. Before she could think anything more of his warning, he claimed her under his lustful trance.

CHAPTER 2 -- SARAH TWELVE YEARS OLD

The pounding of her heart told her she was afraid, and the piercing side stitch pain warned her she was running too fast and too much. She felt her body slow as her legs got heavier with every step, but she pushed herself harder to get away from her pursuers. There were three of them, all taller, stronger, and older than she was, perhaps in the eighth grade. She knew one of them, the boy, Ryan. He had been her first and only kiss, her first crush. Little did she know the intimate moment she shared with this boy was all part of an experiment orchestrated by Lexi, the cruelest girl in middle school and perhaps the most insane.

Before Ryan and Sarah's shared kiss, Lexi thought it would be amusing to discover how much a boy like Ryan could be influenced by her. Toying with people became an interest for her at an early age. She found manipulation entertaining.

Immediately after finding out she wasn't the only female with a school-girl crush on Ryan, Lexi schemed to permanently wipe her competitor from the race. Instead of merely throwing herself at Ryan, she found ways to bring Sarah and Ryan together. She went out of her way to draw his attention to Sarah, noting how prettily she dressed each day, the less than awkward

way she moved during gym, and especially her developing adolescent figure. Eventually, her plan worked and Ryan took a liking to what he saw in Sarah so much that he decided to ask her to the spring dance. It was then that they shared a kiss when she accepted his invitation, despite her worries of her stepfather's wrath if he found out.

The night before the dance, however, Lexi used her slender body and budding curves to lure Ryan to her home. Bound to destroy the relationship she helped to bloom, she worked on convincing him that Sarah had never intended to go with him to the dance. She recruited her twin brother to help her carry out her cruel scheme by threatening to tell their church-going parents of his unholy obsessions. Fully aware of the urgency to take his sister's blackmail warning seriously, he agreed to fictionally confess to Ryan that Sarah had agreed to go to the dance with him instead. Hurt and betrayed, Ryan allowed Lexi to carry out the final stages of her test in her bedroom behind closed doors. As Lexi learned to master manipulating the carnal desires of boys, Sarah was soon to discover she was no opponent for Lexi.

Sarah continued to run from her bullies. When she finally reached the door to the small, three-bedroom bungalow her family rented, her troubles were far from over. Lexi, Ryan and Kristy were yards away and quickly catching up, as Sarah

struggled to unlock the door. Just as she placed the key into the hole, Lexi grabbed onto her shoulder and pulled her back. She almost fell down the two steps leading to the front door but was able to hold onto the railing. Ryan stepped in as Sarah tried to steady herself on her feet. With two hands, he pushed her chest hard, and she stumbled backwards down the steps and landed onto the dirt ground.

Sarah winced, a sharp pain shot through her hip and lower back. As she tried to stand, Kristy, a girl much too burly for her age, yanked the backpack from Sarah's shoulder and tossed it into the street. She placed a foot onto Sarah's chest and shoved her back to the ground before walking away with Ryan. Sarah stayed still, catching her breath and hoping they were gone for good. She closed her eyes, and when all was quiet, she bolstered herself up only to be greeted by a blow to the head and then blackness.

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When Sarah awoke, she caught sight of a strange woman embracing the face of a strange man as he lifted her up, readying themselves for a passionate kiss. But it was not raining where she was. It was dry and dark, with only a yellow tinted lamplight to brighten the room. It took her a moment to regain her sense of self before she realized she was in her bed scrutinizing a poster of the film "The Notebook."

"Good. You're finally awake. It's about time," Shawna Graves said, annoyance in her voice. She was a portly woman with shoulder-length, curly hair. There was nothing about this woman's personality, temperament or physique that resembled Sarah, except that they wore the same face in features but not in years.

"You doin' okay?" Shawna asked with little interest. Before Sarah could answer, her mother remarked, "Well, you look rested. They didn't do more damage than you're used to."

She opened Sarah's palm and placed two ibuprofen tablets in it. "No sense in lying around doing nothing. Take these and hurry out. Your sister's hungry." Shawna hurriedly left the room, leaving Sarah to gather herself out of bed on her own.

The bruising on her chest and the dull ache made her feel like an injured sloth. She would go on to prepare dinner for her mother and little sister, reserving some leftovers for her stepfather who was expected to come home soon after dinner but never did. No one at the table ever mentioned the dried blood on her forehead, nor the swelling and bruising around her left eye. There was a "Don't ask, don't tell, and you won't have to get involved" policy at the Graves home, something Sarah never understood and had always resented.

After her mother and sister turned themselves in for the night, Sarah placed some ice in a washcloth and laid down in her

bed. Despite her pains, she was able to drift off to sleep fairly quickly. It was nearly two o'clock when Sarah was awoken by the slamming of the front door followed by a woman's voice (her mother) and ending with a muffled growl (her stepfather).

Finally, Sarah smiled. Daddy's home.

CHAPTER 3 -- SEPTEMBER (PRESENT YEAR)

The key was jammed again in the door to their Linda Vista apartment. The red paint was peeling and faded, and the sun-beaten door itself was warped slightly within the frame. It was a wonder why they needed to lock it, since it took quite some muscle to get the door opened or closed in the first place.

Irritated that she was already as late as she was, Sarah furiously jiggled the stuck key. She struck the door with her palm, and she felt the sting of the impact on her skin.

"Oh, come on!" she vented her frustration. "Come on!"

"Trouble, Ms. Sarah?"

Sarah turned to where she heard Mrs. Dearly below. She saw the seventy-year-old woman waving up at her from the bottom of the stairs. Mrs. Dearly had a thin frame and a slightly hunched back. She kept her brown and silver hair tightly pulled back into a neat bun behind her head. Although she appeared to have a frail, grandmotherly body, her looks deceived. She was as sharp as a tack, and Sarah found herself having to bite her lip around her.

"Hi, Mrs. Dearly," she waved back. "The key wouldn't turn again, but I've got it."

"That's good," said Mrs. Dearly. "How's married life coming along?"

Sarah sheepishly smiled, "Two months and still going strong."

"I haven't seen the two of you out and about together since you've moved in," Mrs. Dearly pried.

Sarah raised her eyebrows but still managed, with some effort, to keep the smile planted on her face. Mrs. Dearly knew no limits when it came to other people's private lives or, at least, hers. The old woman had been living below her apartment even before Sarah moved into it two years ago. Some days, Sarah would wonder if her neighbor often spent her time monitoring the footsteps above her apartment, waiting for someone to come in or out. There was no hiding from her widowed neighbor.

"I've been busy working, Mrs. Dearly," Sarah replied, not wanting to disclose too much.

"Well, you mustn't work too hard. All work and no play makes life boring," said Mrs. Dearly. "When Tom was working at the station, he made sure to come home every day for lunch. We spent lots of time together."

"You must be a good cook with all that practice," Sarah said.

Mrs. Dearly shook her head, "Nope. Not me. I can't cook for anything. I served him some good afternoon delight. That's

what I did. And he'd go back to work hungry but very satisfied." She winked mischievously.

"Oh," gasped Sarah.

"You remember Aidan, my son?"

"Of course, Mrs. Dearly. How could I forget?" She shifted her weight to the other leg, uncomfortable about where this was leading. Sarah had dated Aidan for two years, how could she forget? At the time, she thought it was love at first sight, the rarest of all the true loves. Sarah recalled the first day she met the widowed woman. Her son had been visiting at the time, and Mrs. Dearly insisted that he come over to assist Sarah with her move into her apartment upstairs. At first Sarah resisted and thanked her neighbor for her well wishes and volunteering her son. But she came to discover that her elderly neighbor was a persistent lady, and whenever she suggested something it was probably best just to go with it. That same day she met Aidan, seven years her senior with tousled ash brown hair and blue eyes. It was a long distance romance they tried to make work, but they saw each other less often as Aidan worked more hours as a veterinarian in a twenty-four hour urgent care center. He worked through the night while she slept and vice versa. Still, there was plenty to remember, especially since Mrs. Dearly would always find a way to mention her son whenever she was around, always starting off with "You remember my son?" or "Remember Aidan? My boy?"

You dated for some time.” Sarah, of course, would just nod and play along as if Aidan was a distant acquaintance between them.

"He works at the animal hospital five days each week, sometimes six. And you know him, as if that weren't enough, dedicating all his time to those animals, during his free time he volunteers at the local soup kitchen. Never seems to stop working and helping others, that boy," Mrs. Dearly continued.

"Well, I'm sure keeping busy helps the time pass faster. Aidan's never been one to sit around twiddling his thumbs."

"I suppose it's fine for a single person like Aidan to keep himself busy, but for a married woman..." Mrs. Dearly shook her head.

"Everything's going fine, Mrs. Dearly," Sarah assured.

"All right. I hope so," Mrs. Dearly murmured as she turned towards her apartment. "By the way, Aidan is taking a break to visit next month. Just to warn you..."

"Okay, Mrs. Dearly. Don't worry about me. Thanks," Sarah chuckled.

The old woman disappeared through her door at the bottom of the stairs, and Sarah returned to wiggling the key in the keyhole. It was jammed. She shook the knob as she pulled on the key to come out. When nothing seemed to work, she took her frustrations out on the door, pounding it with her fist.

“Dammit,” she pounded harder. The door swung open. Jason grabbed her pounding wrist in midair as he leaned back to avoid a blow to the face.

“Hey! The keyhole already sucks. Don’t take the door down with it,” Jason said, a look of consternation on his face.

Was that a joke? Sarah panicked. Is he joking, or is he going to lose it?

A reassuring smile crept onto Jason’s face as he released her wrist. Relieved, Sarah embraced him and buried her face in his chest.

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The first two months of their marriage wasn’t as easy as they had expected. Sarah felt the stress of their marriage every day since Jason quit his construction job in Arizona to move to San Diego to be with her. He had been lucky to have a job in his home state with Stone Construction, one of the largest construction builders in Arizona. The unemployment rate had hit an all-time high, and Jason watched as many of his friends lost their jobs while he held onto his. Much to his dismay, his unemployed friends turned against him. They knew Jason wasn’t as good or as experienced as they were in his job. It was also no secret he would disappear once a day into the trailer office of Paula Stone, wife of custom homes building tycoon Walter Stone.

Paula wasn't by any means pretty or attractive during her time with Jason. It was well known she was a gem before she met her husband. A former beauty queen and one time centerfold, it wasn't until she began uncovering her husband's affairs that she tried desperately to please her husband with enhancements and "structural" changes. She used their money to hide her physical faults and natural signs of aging. While the scars healed on her skin, the emotional scarring ran deep. For years, she plotted her revenge against Walter. She thought of divorce but figured it would only put a dent in his pocketbook. Suicide crossed her mind but she knew he would eventually get over his guilt and marry one of his mistresses. Then Jason came into the picture, and she knew that if she couldn't hurt her husband through revenge then she could at least fill the void he left in her heart. She loved Jason as much as anyone could love a younger man she knew was just using her, but that never stopped her from giving Jason whatever she could that he desired.

The morning Jason approached Paula to let her know he was leaving the company, she offered him a raise and bonus. She had just recently purchased his latest vacation to Las Vegas. There was no reason she wouldn't be able to shove a little more money his way to get what she needed. When he refused and told her he married a girl in Las Vegas and was moving to San Diego, she wished him well and cut him his last check.

Once Jason took the check, she grabbed his wrist and leaned over the desk that stood between them. The air conditioning in the trailer had stopped working weeks ago, and no one had bothered to try to fix it. She had one of her workers place a box fan behind her desk. She didn't mind the heat, and she enjoyed the way the fan blew up her skirt while on the desk.

Jason had always thought she looked like a tiger with the way her lips pursed tight in a mischievous smile and her eyes shone fiery and bold. Her blouse was loose and low cut, displaying her full cleavage. Jason fumbled as he placed the check into his shirt pocket, his stare never leaving the tiger woman's exposed chest.

"Are you certain you want to do this," she looked at him with a sultry gaze. Her throaty voice alluring as she breathed his name, "*Jason?*"

Jason's eyes finally broke from her bosom and fell to the desk. "If you're asking me if I want to get married and start my life with my wife, Paula, I've already done it."

She pulled herself forward onto the desk, until she was kneeling in front of him. Letting go of his wrist, she took his collar into her hands and drew him to her. Jason's gaze slowly crawled upward from the desk to her hands gripping his shirt until his eyes locked with hers. Paula was a tigress, ready to pounce and eat him alive.

It was hot in that trailer, and he could feel the sweat dripping from his temples. Breaking himself from her spell, Jason backed away from the desk. He shook his head, "I've already done that, too."

Stunned, she dismounted from the top of her desk and like a little girl ready to throw a tantrum, threw herself in front of Jason. Fuming with rage, she pulled her hand back ready to slap him across his face. Jason raised his arm, prepared to backhand slap her before she could deliver her stinging blow.

"You wouldn't dare," she challenged.

"No, I wouldn't," he declared.

"But you want to," she said.

Silence filled the trailer as she waited for a response from him. Her arm grew tired as she finally relaxed it at her side. When she realized he still maintained his formidable position, she took a few steps back. In that moment, she caught a glimpse of something wicked in his eyes. Suddenly it hit her like freight train, as she realized what caused him to appear so dangerous. It was *pleasure*, pure pleasure at the idea of possibly *hitting* her.

"I've already had my way with his wife," Jason taunted. "I wouldn't dream of taking more of Walter's satisfactions away from him." He lowered his arm and reached out to touch her cheek.

Before he could touch her, she returned to her desk. In her chair she crossed her legs, further distancing herself from him.

"My husband's only crimes against me have been neglect and infidelity. No one can say I've been an angel in our marriage either," she said stoically. From her desk drawer, she pulled out a pack of cigarettes and shook it until one slid into her hand. Although her fingers trembled slightly as she lit the cigarette, he took no notice.

She continued, "Walter may have his faults, but he's not an entirely evil bastard. He's never laid a finger on me, nor has he ever threatened to do so."

"Maybe that's the problem between the two of you," Jason shrugged. "There's not enough *fingering*."

Just as swiftly as Paula removed her shoe and flung it towards him, he escaped through the trailer door. The shoe hit the door with a loud thud, and he could hear her shrill shriek as he made his way to his car.

###

If Sarah could accomplish anything with ease and perfection, it was preparing a meal or, what she liked to call it, a feast. Becoming a chef wasn't an aspiration she dreamed of as a child. Instead, it evolved from a necessity at a very young age to learn to cook in order to keep her family fed.

Growing up, her stepfather, Bill Graves, was on the road for two to three weeks at a time. On the days waiting for her truck driving husband to arrive home, Sarah's mother, Shawna, would lay in bed waiting for him. She knew it would be hours into the middle of the night when he would make it back from The Jukebox, but she waited for him anyway. It was at this bar that Sarah's mother knew Bill was doing more than just guzzling a few beers. He would always joke that he could be addicted to worse things like alcohol or women, but Shawna never saw how it could be better that he gambled their money like throwing garbage in the trash bin. Bill was her second husband, and she didn't care to divorce him to find a third. It would be too much work to do so.

Sarah's real father died when she was only two months old. His story was worse than the one that Bill was writing with her mother, or so her mother would try to convince them. Her real father would beat her mother every night to the point she couldn't get up to work in the mornings. The bruises on her body were too visible to completely cover with her work uniform alone, and her face would swell over her eyes or lips. It became impossible for her to commit to a stable job regardless of how flexible the schedules were.

Bill, however, was a blessing compared to her real father or so her mother wanted to believe. Shawna reasoned that at least

he was gone often enough that she could find the time to waitress at the local diner. It was the perfect excuse to be out of the house when her husband was on the road and to not deal with the children she had at home.

When not at the diner, her mother hid in her room with the door shut. Sarah could remember being as young as seven years old when she first began fumbling with the oven knobs and stovetop. It was a miracle she never received any serious burns or injuries after all those amateur years in the kitchen. Her mother rarely came out of hiding by the time dinner was served and her stepfather, too, joined them once in a blue moon if he was not trucking. Sarah often credited her parents for inadvertently helping mold her culinary genius, a bittersweet recognition.

Soon after graduating from the Culinary Institute, she began her career as a personal chef four years ago to a working couple in La Jolla, it soon evolved into a nanny/chef position when the wife, Evelyn, gave birth to their daughter, Macy. It was an opportunity Sarah didn't know how to pass up. Being a full-time chef was what she had worked towards - not evolving into a part-time nanny. Still, she was comfortable working for the Moores, and after years of trusting Sarah to feed them, they didn't see how they could rely on anyone else to care for their daughter as well. She had to take on the job.

Tonight, after caring for the Moore family's needs, she felt exhausted. It wasn't unusual for her to work for ten hours every weekday. Evelyn and Gregory both worked long hours, but this week was more draining than Sarah was used to. Gregory had been called to Florida on a business trip while Evelyn was on-call at the hospital over the weekend, which meant Sarah had to work over the weekend as well to care for the Moore's two-year old daughter.

Relieved to be home, Sarah was still all too pleased to prepare a home cooked meal for Jason.

"Evelyn gave me the next three days off," Sarah began. "She said Gregory would be back from his trip tomorrow and can watch Macy for the next few days."

Silence followed as Sarah waited for a response from Jason. Deciding he wasn't all too happy about her working such long hours during the past week, she continued cheerily, "They felt so badly about taking my time away from home that they gave me a bonus check. We can go on a day trip, maybe to Catalina Island. It'll be the mini-honeymoon we never took! We've been talking about doing something since Las Vegas, but we never get the chance to do it. Something always comes up. Let's not wait for tomorrow. Tomorrow may be years away. And, besides, today *is* yesterday's tomorrow. So we have to do it now!"

Proud of her mini-honeymoon sales pitch, she stuffed a chunk of chicken into her mouth and grinned as she chewed. When she noticed him picking at his food, she felt unsettled and laid her fork on her plate. "Don't you like it?" Sarah asked with a look of disquiet on her face.

"I like it," Jason finally responded. He managed to squeeze out a tiny grin upon his face but continued to push his food around his plate.

Unconvinced, Sarah continued, "It's chicken with ginger and black bean sauce. I put it over a Mayan couscous."

Jason smiled wryly, "It's good. I like it. Thanks."

Sarah dropped her napkin over her plate, obviously irritated by Jason's lack of communication. "How can you know if you like it when you haven't taken a single bite?"

"I like it, okay?" Jason stuffed a large piece of chicken into his mouth. "See? There! You happy now? *I like!*"

He huffed and threw his napkin onto the table, his chair falling backwards onto the floor as he stood up. In utter dismay, she watched as he left the dining area and entered into their bedroom. Soon after, she followed him into the room dimly lit by a lone lamplight by the bed. She found him lying on the bed face up, his forearms drawn over his eyes. Uncertain about how to handle her moody husband, she carefully sat next to him on the

bed. For a moment, she thought about placing her hand on his chest, a small show of support, but quickly decided against it.

"Listen, Jason. I'm tired. I've worked my butt off this week." Sarah pulled the hair band out of her braided hair. Not bothering to change her clothes, she crawled under the covers. "I'll take care of the dishes in the morning. I'm going to bed. I don't know why you're being so irritable."

Switching off the lamplight, she settled onto her pillow. Before she could close her eyes, Jason's voice bellowed, "Because you're an insensitive bitch!"

She turned the lamplight back on and just as quickly bolted up into a sitting position. Before she could think of a response to his cruel accusation, she was shoved against the shoulders and quickly pinned down on the bed. He grabbed her face, and for a fleeting moment Sarah thought she saw a void in his eyes. His eyes belonged to a stranger in that instant before they darkened into something even more unfamiliar and foreboding. Her attempt to scream was cut short when his mouth was all over hers, causing her cry for help to sound like a deceiving euphoric moan. The pressure of his lips over hers it made it difficult for her to breathe. Dizziness was starting to sink in as she felt the world around her abandon her. She had an awful realization that the one person who could rescue her from this terrifying occurrence was doing the terrorizing.

Frightened, she attempted to push her husband away, but he proved to be too strong as he continued pressing against her, forcing her to lie on the bed with his body overtaking hers. Grabbing her arms with his right hand, he pinned them over her head. She writhed to break free but only felt him tighten his grip. With his other hand, he removed her pants and panties far enough to expose her, and she could feel his bulge against her sex. He thrust himself into her hard, harder than she ever felt him before. His suctioned mouth over hers eased, and as she inhaled her first full breath she groaned. It was as if he was claiming her and punishing her at the same time.

"Jason, no. No, Jason. No, no, please, no," she whimpered repeatedly, her voice sounded weak and foreign. All her life she had been the one to pick up the pieces where everyone else had failed. No one was here now to salvage whatever strength she carried inside her.

"Stop, Jason!" she cried, but he kept pushing inside her, faster with a brutal force. Her hips ached and she suffered the anguish of muscle spasms in her upper legs.

"Jason, you're hurting me," Sarah pleaded. His left hand traveled to her breast and squeezed hard, his nails dug into her skin. She hollered in pain, and he was done. Rolling over onto his back, Jason fell asleep. Stunned by the abruptness of how it

ended just as quickly as it had started, she didn't move. She couldn't.

With all that had just happened that evening, she suddenly felt empty. Perhaps she was just too exhausted to think about whether she should be upset or frightened of her husband. Something deep within her knew she should feel angry, frustrated, or hysterical even. But as the seconds passed, she felt more physically drained and emotionally numb than anything else. It didn't matter to her now. He was asleep and looked surprisingly harmless, even innocent. She thought about what she would accomplish if she woke him up to discuss the events of that evening. She knew already of his mood swings and short fuse. Waking him now to discuss what happened –

What did happen? she questioned. Rape? Can my husband rape me?

Whatever it was, sleep seemed like the better option rather than waking the sleeping lion. She was too embarrassed to face him right then anyway. How would she address it, as rape or angry sex? Or were they the same thing? How could anyone rape someone they *loved*? But, at the same time, how could anyone not consent to have sex with someone they had sex with before *and* loved? Her world of emotions was headed in a downward spiral of confusion. She wasn't sure if she should perceive herself

as a crime victim or a pestering wife who wakes her husband to complain about a bad sexual experience.

The lingering pain - like acid between her legs, made her feel more like the former rather than the latter. Perhaps, she contemplated, it was intended as a reminder of the suffering she had caused him, so dreadful he took his anger out on her. It was because of her, after all, that he abandoned his life and stable job in Arizona. With no workplace to go to, he didn't have any friends in the area, his family resided in Arizona, and she had been working long hours lately. She was all that he had in San Diego, and she had abandoned *him*. He adored her and left everything behind for her. Of course, he was angry. How could he not be?

I should have seen this coming, she began to rationalize. *How stupid of me. I was awful to you, Jason.*

Things were stressful for him right now, she thought, especially with the difficulties of finding work. Although he had spared her the details, he informed her of his former boss's resentment towards him for leaving the company after so many years. Never had they imagined his employer would go to great lengths to advise their contacts in San Diego not to hire him. She felt it was odd that they held such a vendetta against Jason, but he convinced her to not probe any further. He asked her to put it behind them so they could start their life together without looking

back. It was a good idea for that situation, and Sarah felt it would be wise to apply the advice again to this other rough patch. If they were to build a future together, they had to put the past behind them.

That night, confused and worn out, Sarah made her choice. She would fall asleep and bury the dirty secret she wasn't sure she had. In the morning, the sun would rise and her world that had abandoned her would embrace her once again.

From the Author:

Thank you so much for taking the time to preview my book. I truly hope you enjoyed it so far! You can purchase the full ebook on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) or a paperback edition on [Lulu.com](https://www.lulu.com).

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With warmest of wishes,

L. B. Plum

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