

A Star Is Falling

Act One

Ruthy

Chapter One: Welcome to *Rock Bottom*, Ruthy Ronan

“I’m an *actual* smack whore,” Ruthy thought ruefully.

She perched on the edge of the seat of an ultra-high-end restaurant toilet bowl clutching the green vial in her palm so hard her beautifully manicured nails dug into her sweaty palms. In her rush to get into the stall she hadn’t even bothered to close the door. She could see her reflection in the restroom mirrors -- wide blue-green eyes in her pale, freckled face with makeup applied to look like there was no makeup, framed by tendrils from her expertly styled mane of dark honey red hair. She watched with fascination as her pouty lips quivered with longing to stuff the vial’s whole load of rose-grey powder into her pert nose and pressed them together *hard* to make it stop. She quickly looked down at the bumps her tightly curled toes made in her sneakers. The job required that she wear flats. It felt weird after a life in heels. It seemed that she learned to walk in heels, and considering her most-stagey-of-all-stage-mothers, it was entirely possible that she did.

“What the holy hell am I doing here?” she wondered.

Ruthy often thought of her life as if she were being filmed in her own biopic. It was natural for her since she’d been on screens of one kind or another since she was seven – and from three if you included print modeling. In this and other embarrassing situations she imagined her thoughts as a Meredith Grey style downbeat voiceovers giving urgent, poignant counterpoint commentary to scenes of her life as they unfolded. Ruthy had a great voice for voiceovers. She could use her husky timbre to inflect the right amount of pathos balanced with guarded optimism and self-deprecating humor.

If she died tonight – of embarrassment, obviously – she hoped they could get Emma Stone to play her in the first of many tribute movies; as with Marilyn, one simply wouldn’t do. Emma had the right kind of voice. Surely Emma’s voiceovers would be more upbeat and wry like Ruthy’s idol, Carrie Bradshaw. It was a strangely calming thought, and Ruthy relaxed just a bit.

Her fondest fantasy was that she would do the voiceover herself, years and years from now wrapped in a life of safety, sanity, and security with a scratchy timbre like Jeanne Moreau as the older Marguerite Duras narrating the film *The Lover*, but even her most optimistic self-talk saw very little hope of that.

It all started, as most of her problems did lately -- with cash-flow issues, there not being enough cash to flow for her madcap life style and to support the army of hangers-on: her stylist, her manicurist, her lip-pouter, her personal assistant, her publicist, Margot and the other lawyers, and all the rest -- never to leave out her boat-anchor of an endlessly needy, needy family -- or to fund the even more needful continued supply of rose-grey powder in green vials, though she was seriously trying to taper that part off as best she could. It had been three days and seven hours since the last one. And forty three minutes, not that she was counting.

The movie roles had long since dried up and even the TV guest spots were fewer and further between. Her IMDB listing read like a shame spiral. You can only really make real money doing *Playboy* once. So her agent, Devin Malarsky -- and there's another one she had to support -- had finally landed her one of those celebrity-draw gigs in a musical. It was in *Hairspray*. Hairspray! And not even on frickin' *Broadway* -- in a road company ninety-minute, one act cut down production in Vegas. *Vegas!* But it paid cash, and cash was needed to flow.

She wasn't cast as Tracy, thank the prince Harry, who despite rumors she had never dated, rats! Okay, she'd gotten a bit -- Ruthy preferred the term "puffy" -- as of late, but not puffy enough for Tracy. Frankly despite the two over-produced albums Ruthy had done in the Oughts (hey, the first went *double platinum* and second managed *gold*) she didn't have the singing chops to carry off Tracy even in a fat suit -- screw you, Baltimore. Ruthy was given the -- a little on the nose -- "mean girl" role of Amber Von Tussle. Still, it could have been much worse; they could have made her the stage mother, Velma.

Ruthy rested her forehead on the cool burnished aluminum stall and recalled the meeting with Devin about a month ago that led to her being in the restaurant. Ruthy's saw the screen swirl in her mind's eye as she faded to a flashback from recent memory.



The infamous long list of all her too famous lovers had just been leaked -- no one knew, but by her own mother! -- and the tabloids were having a field day since some of her paramours had been in supposedly committed relationships during the times they had been in proximity with her. She was feeling seething angry and so horribly betrayed and maybe even a tad bit of shame. She sat in a manner that she hoped would be seen as primly on the edge of the huge U-shaped teal leather booth in the very back of the hotel VIP lounge. She toyed with the string in her cup of chamomile tea, rolling it between

her fingers of her right hand while she cradled the now cold cup in her left. She was only half listening to the banana oil that Devin spouted.

Devin was a greasy man from his jet black pomaded-back hair and olive complexion to his onyx highly polished Bruno Magli's. Even his shiny blue-black permanent five o'clock shadow looked like an oil slick. He was as thin as dipstick and as sharp as a gas price spike.

She never really trusted Devin. He never sneaked looks at her rack. It was, according to just about everyone, one really great set of tits, and -- despite everything you could read on internet click bait -- completely real. (She'd had some in hindsight regrettable stuff done to her face, but she always left The Girls alone.) Even gay guys eyes dipped in her cleavage with a little appreciation. She understood that the fact Devin didn't meant that he did not see her as an attractive person; he only saw her as a commodity -- like meat -- to be sold.

She'd already spent a good half hour appealing to him to get her a movie gig, any movie gig. She wanted more than anything to be back on set, to have a script in her hand, a light on her face, a boom mike over her head, and a cue to hit. She couldn't believe that at twenty-eight she had become Norma Frickin' Desmond. She was an actress; an actress acted. She had a ton to offer. It was a good speech. It sounded mostly like it did in her head when she had run it over and over and over at two in the morning almost every night when she couldn't sleep. She'd even teared up a bit at the end. Moreover, Devin had managed to pretend as he hadn't heard it more than twenty times before in one form or another.

"We're working on it, trust me, but it's like this," Devin oozed when she grew too hoarse to continue. He touched the low glass table between them and left streaks as he moved his finger back and forth. "We've received an offer from Big-big Star (the Non-Disclosure Agreement she had to sign prevented her from even thinking his real name) to go on just one date with you. Now, it might be because he was left off your list and is feeling . . . unfashionable, let's say, but after seeing you in the show he is suddenly and passionately eager to pay you a substantial amount of money to have dinner and spend the night in your hotel room . . ."

Devin anticipated her shocked and blush-burning face, and held up his glossy palm, ". . . stipulating that no actual physical activity need take place in said hotel room. We've gotten a good bump in ticket sales from the list leak. If we time this right a mutual release about a possible affair to the tabs might just roll that wave into next quarter. And having Big-big Star owing us a favor wouldn't be the worst thing. He could be looking for his next costar."

He kept his hand up and said a number, okay, not second-lead-in-a-movie-money, but definitely guest-arc-on-a-sitcom money.

Ruthy thought about it for a good five minutes while Devin sipped his single malt. It was quiet except for the murmur of dueling daytime talk shows on two separate plasmas over the small bar and the jangle of the ever present slot machines being fed by elderly Midwestern tourists down the steep carpeted stairs on the other side of a velvet rope. You'd think a VIP lounge would be a closed off room somewhere, but no, it had no value to the VIP's or the hotel unless the "ordinary" people might just get a brief glimpse of the denizens on top of Olympus as they walked by.

"I guess I could eat," she had replied finally, blinking back mostly real hot tears that it had come to this. She could be an interim beard like the Spanish chick with the same last name. It was only for one night as there was no chance it would go further. She was too old to be his next wife, and there was no way she was becoming a Cosmetologist or whatever. Besides that, she'd never met him beyond seeing him at industry events and was a little curious to see what he was like in person.

"Um, did you clear it with Roxanne?" Ruthy wanted to know, flushing again. Roxanne was Ruthy's mother and her agent. The former was an accident of birth; the latter was the condition Roxanne had placed on Ruthy moving to Los Angeles when she was only seventeen. Roxanne got a cut of whatever Ruthy made until she was thirty. It seemed a good deal at the time, exchanging what felt like prison for thirteen years of indentured servitude. In hindsight she probably should have stuck it out the last year. If only she hadn't been so in love with Wilbur. *Wilbur*. He was the beginning of a great many of her past and present difficulties, but that was a story for another flashback.

"Yes, of course. Roxanne thinks it will help the brand," Devin replied, downing the last of his drink.

(Ruthy's mental voiceover growled, "How very *Pretty Baby* of her.")



But here she was on the night, at her hotel's best restaurant, waiting for him to show up. Ruthy was shockingly on-time -- she so, so wanted it over with --and he was irritatingly late. She had sat at the table by herself surrounded by all the eyes and hopefully only a couple of handpicked paparazzi with their ill-concealed cameras and pointedly sipped her Bling H2O bottled water with lime. Just water -- nothing else. After five minutes of that she tried to casually amble to the ladies room to rose-grey sand off the edges of the evening. It probably looked more like a sprint to the gawkers. She chocked it up to not being used to wearing flats. She wondered how women walked in them. Ruthy also wondered why she had been asked to wear plain non-designer jeans and a red and white checkered blouse with her

Amber V. T. powder blue cardigan over it. She'd been a party to some strange dress up sex before, but nothing so retro. Surely a publicity date with Big-big Star called for a little black dress. Most of her glorious honey red hair was in a tight bun pinned to the back of her head.

The stall wasn't cool against her forehead anymore, and she could hear the attendants mumbling with intensity to each other. She could make out the word "O.D." and some frantic discussion as to which one should discover her body. She understood from the whispers that they both equally did and did not want to be the one that did the deed.

Ruthy took a deep breath through her nose – the bathroom smelled of apricot blossoms and pee, a surprisingly not altogether unpleasant combination – forced her hand open, and looked at the vial. It was just then that she realized that she wasn't inhaling the contents of the vials; the vials were sucking her life out, a half a gram at a time. Sure, that sounded even to her more than a little like a line from a Lifetime Movie or a cautionary speech made by grizzled detective – like, say, Karl Malden's -- at the end of a bad '70's action show, but with a mental gulp she comprehended how correct it was.

She decided that this was what she was waiting for, what she'd heard rapturously described by countless fellow addicts in innumerable NA meetings, almost like it was Nirvana (the *place*, not the music group). This was finally *Rock Bottom*. She had finally found it! Right here on the highly polished dove-grey marble luxury bathroom floor.

("Ruthy had no idea how so very wrong she was and how quickly the actual, so much worse literal *Rock Bottom* was coming," her voiceover might have said.)

Enough was enough. She'd go out there, have a pleasant meal, and tomorrow with clear eyes, full heart, and a can't-lose attitude find her way out of this nightmare life she had allowed to engulf her. She'd make good choices! She'd become the bright, assured woman that she had portrayed so often in the middle part of her career when it was her personality and talent and not just her nearly naked body, former glamor, and joke value of her personal life that landed her roles. She knuckle-dabbed the corners of her eyes to catch the moistness leaking into the concealer. Thank God her nose wasn't running so they wouldn't think she'd been snorting something – or at least have any tangible evidence to back up the assumption.

She flushed the toilet for show. She dramatically held the vial over the swirling water for a moment, but ended up caching it securely in her purse. No telling what the evening would bring. The vials might be sucking her life, but inside them was sometimes the only cozy place she'd found in a cold cruel world.

The two pale, blonde ponytailed, and disturbingly thin girls in matching bone white blouses and stiff black vest/miniskirt sets each nervously thrust warmed towels at her after she washed her hands and checked her makeup. She couldn't tell if they were relieved or disappointed that she was still alive. Ruthy smiled and accepted both, using one for each hand. She took a selfie with them and left a tip large enough to make them coo as she left the restroom.

Ruthy felt good about herself for the first time in seemingly forever.

Big-big Star was at the table with all of his teeth out when he saw her approach. He didn't bother to stand up. The aged waiter with the bushy white mustache pulled out her chair. He seemed strangely familiar. She sat down and held out her hand to Big-big Star, suddenly shy. Like his recent ex, she too had had a poster of him on her bedroom wall when she was a girl. When she was fifteen she had told everyone she wanted to become an actress just to meet and marry him.

"Hello," she said a tad breathless.

He grinned hard again, stared at her face even harder, and took her hand to suddenly pull her to him and kissed her cheek. Somehow she managed to avoid flinching or pulling away. His kiss was like a sharp bite and actually stung. She shifted in her chair so the pap's wouldn't get a picture of where his lips hit. She feared he'd left a mark. She spread the napkin on her lap and picked up the menu from her plate to gain time to compose herself.

"It's great that you could make it. Thanks for coming," Big-big Star leaned back and openly leered at her. His sapphire blue eyes seemed like they were backlit, they were so intense. "You won't need that. I've already ordered a special meal for us, since it is such a special, special night."

"Okaaay," Ruthy said and handed the menu to the hovering waiter, obviously paid by one rival paparazzo to plant himself in another's camera line, and maybe even eavesdropping for a scoop to sell himself. It came to her that the waiter sort of reminded her of Waldorf on *The Muppets*. She wondered if there would be heckling. It might make the evening less daunting. She was so used to being heckled it would be a cold comfort.

Big-big Star gave the guy a challenging look and waved him away. The waiter scuttled off grudgingly.

That's when it got kinda awkward. Ruthy wondered if she should politely inquire about his various children with his many wives, compliment him on his clothes (he was wearing a black silk tee shirt under a charcoal leather jacket that really accentuated his broad shoulders *nicely*), or maybe bring up one of his movies. The only one she could remember liking was the one where he was a motivational speaker and frogs rained out of the sky at the end, but she couldn't at that moment recall the title for

the life of her. She should have thought about what to say instead of obsessing so much about what might possibly happen later on in the evening and feeling sorry for herself.

“That’s not quite right,” he said looking up and down at how she was dressed. “Entirely my fault for not being more specific.”

He reached over and with his warm wrists brushing the sides of her full breasts tenderly buttoned her red and white checked blouse up over her cleavage one slow button at a time to her throat. His touch was very gentle but at the same time very commanding. He caressed the edge of her neck with just the tips of his fingers. She felt a rush of heat in her core and squirmed a bit in her seat. He smelled like musky exotic spices and maleness.

“Better. That’s perfect; you look perfect,” he said huskily. She thought she could spy the beginnings of an erection in his tight jeans. She felt so turned on at that moment and wished they could just skip dinner and head up to her room for some non-disclose-able activity.

Big-big Star held out his crystal tumbler of hideously overpriced bottled water to toast with her. She paused; it was bad luck to use flat water! She was super superstitious. She eyed where the salt was to throw over her shoulder when he wasn’t looking and held her glass up.

“Here’s to a special, special evening” he purred.

Gamely, she pushed her glass into his and said, “*Sláinte*”. She drained the water as she noticed her mouth was really dry. The water had a faint bitter chemical tang so she set the glass aside. The kitchen probably didn’t rinse it properly.

Big-big Star began to talk about how much he enjoyed her performance in the show and that’s when things got kinda blurry, not suddenly, but steadily. She leaned forward slightly, struggling to keep it together. The room became a swirling soup of *sotto voce* exclamations of feigned shock and surprise, punctuated by sparking cell phone camera flashes. She couldn’t sort any of it out. She stuck out her numbed tongue to look at it to see if it had grown as big as it felt.

“Are you feeling okay?” Big-big Star asked and stood up. She managed to notice that he was wearing lifts almost as high as Elton John in *Tommy*. (Ruthy was a huge Ann-Margret fan and had seen all of her movies many, many times.) Big-big Star couldn’t have been much taller than an inch or two more than her own five foot, five. His strong hands grasped her shoulders and pulled her to him. His chest was so warm and comforting. His muscles enveloped her and gave her some sense of safety.

(“And she hoped she wouldn’t gakk on that soft shirt,” the voiceover, ever the black comedienne, sneered as the room started to buck and spin.)

Big-big Star gathered her up with the assistance of his bodyguard (who hefted most of her weight.) They shuffled her off down the long hallway through the lobby (and so much the worse, like she was Bernie in *Weekend At Bernie's* when a real gentleman would have carried her like the robot did Anne Francis in *Forbidden Planet* or the creature toted Julie Adams in *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*) to the elevator bank where the door was being held open by a squirrely concierge. When the door closed and the elevator started its rapid rise to her floor it jolted some semblance of sensibility, and she had a second where she knew what had been done to her and started to protest, but that brief clarity faded when they pulled her into her suite and deposited her body on her bed face down.

She heard Big-big Star slap his bodyguard on the back with jocularly as he was leaving. The door closed, and she was left alone with him.

Big-big Star paced the room like a furious animal, chuckling and clapping with glee. Then he jumped up and down on the bedroom's dressing chaise until it cracked in the middle beneath him, sending him rolling on the carpet. He immediately popped up, attempting to make it seem like it was planned. He pointed at her and exclaimed, "And that's why I do all of my own stunts!"

She wondered why she was still even partially conscious but realized somehow that it was probably all the sucky rose-grey powder vials over time that build up her tolerance enough to stand a healthy dash of Rohypnol or whatever he used. She tried to work enough ire to be able to shoo him from her room. Maybe a finger, one of the ones without a ring to weight it down, moved, though maybe not. If one did move she hoped at least it was the middle one.

She was angry as only a redheaded Irish-Italian could get. If he had played the game and followed the script they could have had a nice meal first, been "caught" in some pseudo romantic tab snaps and likely ended up here anyway. She had been itching to get her warm palm on what the trashy novels called his manhood even while her leg had been rubbing up against it in the elevator. The roofie-Ruthy option pretty much trashed her image of being in recovery, making her seem like a drunk while made him look all gallant and understanding.

It just wasn't fair.

Then he kissed her neck with his warm lips. They didn't feel so cutting this time. He panted as he massaged her limp shoulders, worked up past all thought. It felt soooo good. He eased the muscles at the base of her neck with his thumbs. She felt his hands ease down her back along her spine to her hips and then beneath her, inexplicably skipping her lovely boobs, to undo her button fly. The jeans were pulled softly down over her bottom to her knees. The air conditioning was cool on her burning flesh.

He clucked-clucked, “They were supposed to be tighy-whities,” as he slid his fingers beneath the elastic band of her grey Calvin Klein cotton bikini panties. When the front of the panties pulled free from her mons they were slick from what bad romance novels called “her internal nectar”. The chilly air tingled on her dampness.

This was every woman’s ravishment fantasy, to be completely helpless as a rich, famous, and powerful man had his every way with her. It covered millions of pages in ink in hundreds of thousands of mass market paperback. Her voiceover chuckled that she was *livin’ the dream*. She screamed back silently at it that it was wrong, wrong, wrong. But frankly, my dear, it didn’t *exactly* feel that way.

He swiftly moved down from her neck to her ass and pulled her fleshy butt cheeks apart. His tongue darted onto her anus and the sudden wet warmth slashing at her almost made cum right there. Again and again he assaulted her to the core, the hard tip of his tongue darted to one corner to the next, over one ridge and into the next furrow. The painful scrape of his stylist sculpted stubble against the inside of her ass cheeks only made the sensation of the forceful lapping all the more urgent. He was practically drooling and the hot run off mingled with her own sweltering juices. She tried to squirm a little to move her clit hopefully against a hard lump of wrinkle in the bedspread. The movement turned her head enough from face down so she could watch what was happening in the mirrored wall. She could breathe more easily too.

He growled and slapped her ass to get her to stay still.

Then he pulled off his own jeans and flung them into the mirror, the heavy belt buckle turning the glass into a spider web. His manhood was so engorged it stood away from his body like a thing separate from him. He was a modern god, his hard muscles gripped his bones like thick cables around iron bars. He flexed in the cracked mirror: his carved biceps, his sculptured thighs, his dark hair wild on his head and tight dark tight curls embellishing his proud groin. He spat on his strong hand and rubbed it on the tip of his glans and moved over to her, lying like softness itself on her bed. Her warm toned body from weeks of dancing was spread helpless before him.

He poised himself over her and eased the tip against her anus and worked it unspeakably gently into her. She had been braced for a hard, sharp thrust to rip her senses asunder, but that was not the case. He just patiently moved himself down, in, forward, deeper until his hard, flat stomach rested on her soft bottom. He kissed her neck again, and she wasn’t as skeeved from where his mouth had just been as she would have expected. He was nothing like what she expected. After a moment he started to move, gentle and kind, back and forth, filling her and leaving her, entering and withdrawing. It was so sweet. It was so tender. He covered her completely with that hard body, the hard muscled weight of

him as sensuous as the swollen hardness filling her, the musk of him enveloping her senses. It was so different from all the others. And she could do nothing, not even thrust back against him. And then without any buildup or the usual hectic pre-crisis frenzy he just came, quietly, with just a hard puff of breath on her neck and the hot spurt that filled her insides.

“Ritchie, oh, Ritchie. Ayyyyyy,” he moaned, wiggling an upturned thumb in the air in front of her face.

With a soft burst of insight, not unlike his recent explosion, perhaps beyond credulity considering her chemically fogged state, though perhaps only in such a state could cognitive leaps be possible, she realized he had fantasized that she was a *Happy Days* era Ron Howard and he the Fonz.

She was strangely intrigued. Who knew what floated some peoples’ boats. Ruthy wished it had been the weirdest thing she had encountered. But, plus side, it also meant that he found her ass was boy small! Whoo-hoo!

She was vaguely incensed by the hypocrisy of him being comfortable using a date-rape drug and quite obviously a blue pill enhancement (he was still drill bit hard inside her -- at his age!) when he was so adamant and publicly against depressed postpartum women getting supposedly artificial relief.

More to the point she was hoping he would help a sister out, and if he wouldn’t use that broomstick on her sopping and needful lady parts he at least use those talented fingers to ease her gripping tension. Ruthy was a lucky, lucky girl in that she came very easily, but she needed *some* stimulation.

But after a few minutes he pulled out and moved to leave her, just patting her ass like she was a sheep. He pushed on her hip to lean forward to wipe his dick on her bedspread. That’s when she unfortunately projectile pooped all over him, right in the face, with three or four forceful lumpy brown gushes. Ruthy had been taking tons of Ex-Lax because in addition to giving her sweet moments of quiet bliss, the rose-grey powder kinda blocked her up quite terribly. The gentle pumping action combined with his sudden withdrawal and hey, *an ambush dose of muscle relaxant*, freed her up. Truth be told, the relief from the constipation was almost as good an orgasm. She wished she could give him a thumbs-up back.

Big-big Star did not take it well. He proceeded to trash her suite. Many forms of consumer electronics were reduced to their fractional component parts. Furniture was disassembled as violently as possible. Walls were punctured, and fixtures unfixed. Her belongings were torn asunder. What was even more unsettling was that he did it all quietly and slowly, expending minimal energy and with extreme focus looking at her while he did one ghastly crime against fashion after another. He didn’t

even bother to wipe the shit off his face; his staring blue eyes and gritted teeth shone from an ocre-brown mask. His still turgid penis kept pointing at her. Without the adrenaline of sexual arousal and fear Ruthy finally passed out while he was forcing the door off the mini-fridge using the iron as a wedge.



Ruthy woke up to the maid poking her in the boob with the handle of a feather duster. She looked up and saw the middle aged Hispanic woman in a uniform silently screaming. Ruthy wondered if she had somehow lost her hearing, but realized the maid was so upset she wasn't breathing and so could not manage to make a sound. Ruthy sat up, peeling her legs from the detritus dusted pile of sticky poop, and patted the maid on the arm.

The Munch-y-maid dashed pell-mell out of the suite, stumbling over the remains of the flatscreen, leaving Ruthy to marvel at the almost artistic level of destruction that Big-big Star had wreaked. It must have taken him *hours*. One example: the left shoes he had impaled in wall, the rights he had snapped off the heels. She waded through the piles of shredded designer dresses and broken open cosmetics to the bathroom. She picked up her bent tooth brush and used her finger to scoop enough of the clean looking areas of paste on to it to brush. All the glasses were in a crystal pile in the sink so she started the shower to get water to rinse her mouth. Ruthy peeled off the cardigan, blouse, and sports bra, untangled the pins from the bun, and moved into the stall. When the hot water hit her and the crusts on her legs started to slide down the drain she was momentarily grateful the curtain was gone, so it would feel less like *Psycho* when the cops came to arrest her. She wondered if she could salvage enough makeup to keep this mug shot from being too hideous.

Oddly enough she had gotten the best night's sleep in a long, long time. She wondered if the drug he used was also available by prescription.

Officially. Rock. Bottom.

Chapter Two: What Happens In Vegas May Make You Stay In Vegas

“So we are crystal clear,” Margot admonished in her plummy Received Pronunciation accent when Ruthy finished her tearful recitation of the previous night’s grisly events, “there is to be no mention of Big-big Star *at all* when we get in the courtroom. He’s chagrined over how he acted and will pay all the hotel damages and reimburse you for all the inadvertently harmed personal items plus a bonus stipend for your discretion and trouble. Also, he convinced the hotel to not pursue criminal charges. For an asshole he’s being surprisingly accommodating, or his raft of church-affiliated lawyers convinced him to be. One gets the impression that this has happened more than once before with severely negative outcomes for his brand.”

Margot, an exotically beautiful woman from the Indian subcontinent via the United Kingdom, was Ruthy’s lawyer and had magically pried her out of so many scrapes she felt like Ruthy’s fairy godmother. Margot was stunning in a blue blouse, wine colored leather mini dress/jacket set, and calf high boots. She had small gold studs in her ears and a wide Indian gold ring on her left thumb. She was several inches shorter than Ruthy.

They were meeting in a small anteroom in the courthouse while Ruthy changed out of the orange jump suit into a new navy frock and white sweater. Ruthy balanced herself with a few fingers on the mahogany bookshelf as she pulled up the frock over her (boy-slim!) hips. The shelves were caked with dust and now so were her fingers. The room had no windows and the only light came from green shaded reading lamps on the desk which was scratched along the edges, likely from handcuffs.

“Inadvertently,” Ruthy said, flicking the dust off before sliding the short sleeves of the frock over her shoulders. With a sigh she eased into the heels. Big-big Star had missed maiming one right periwinkle Jimmy Choo. The left had a plaster smudge at the sole, but few looked at her feet. The Girls were back out.

“He doesn’t have to give you anything. The prior NDA is still in effect.” Margot zipped Ruthy up and used her white teeth to cut the tag hanging from the shoulder.

Ruthy's Irish/Italian rage flared briefly, "We both know how flimsy that is. I don't think it would hold up after what he did to me. Am I'm supposed to just say 'You can be my wingman anytime, Assman?'"

"Do you want to press charges? If you do, Love, I am with you all the way, but the pragmatic part of me feels it would be best for you if you just move past it – after we get you tested for STD's. Let Karma take care of him." Margot said a number, a two or three episodes as a featured player on a hit sitcom in the second or third season number. It would cover her operating nut for a month or three – maybe even as long as five if she limited her shopping a bit. Ruthy got the impression that Margot wouldn't have approved of the "date" to begin with. Ruthy should have run the meet past her before telling Devin to agree to it.

Ruthy took several beats before responding, "I was alone. I was petrified. There was no one by my side. Let's blame a bad reaction to Ambien?"

"It's as good a story as any. You really need the money. While they forgive the trashing of the suite, the hotel cancelled the remainder of your contract. Whitney Pierce starts in as Amber tomorrow."

"If the hotel isn't an issue why am I about to go into court for an arraignment?"

"You don't remember what they arrested you for?" Margot made a bemused face.

"I was still kinda out of it from the roofie and trying to find something to wear from the pile of "inadvertent" confetti. There wasn't anything left except this *one* pair of shoes. The cops had to get me sweat clothes from the hotel gym. I was worrying about the mugshot since I didn't have any makeup or anything to use to do my hair, and I knew I looked like shit. Though, thank God, it came out okay. I've heard the whole Miranda spiel enough before so I didn't bother listening. Um, I really thought I was in trouble because of the hotel room." Ruthy made herself shut up, though she was kinda sure that she wasn't going to like what Margot would say next one bit.

"They found a vial in your purse."

"Oh. Shit."

"Yeah."

"That can't be good."

"It isn't. Ruthy, I thought we were all done with that." Margot's reprimand stung worse than it would have from anyone else. Her incredibly large toffee-colored eyes showed real, personal concern. Ruthy wondered what Margot would look like with her black hair out of the severe bun. Even looking so sad she was really lovely, an almond shaped face with creamy almond complexion and those huge maroon colored lips.

Ruthy hung her head and not just because she was putting in her lucky earrings, gold elephants with their trunks up she had bought while in India making a documentary on women's issues, "I thought so too. I was clean, completely, really. And then I hit a couple of bad months. Losing the baby and then losing the TV show after looking like such a loon in the episodes they shot and then exile in Vegas. I've haven't even used it . . . recently. There was just the end of a really bad patch." Ruthy held up her unclean hands, dust still on one, plaster from the heel on the other. "I'm so *sorry*. But I'm done with it now. I promise. I honestly can't do it anymore."

Margot handed her a wet nap, "Finally?"

"Yes. Finally."

"What outcome are you hoping for today?"

"I want to go back to rehab. I need to do it for real this time."

"Good girl. You stay here and lemme talk to the ADA. Let us see what we can do to get you back on track." Margot put her hand on Ruthy's shoulder. If she had squeezed it would have made Ruthy dissolve into tears, but the comely lawyer knew not to do that. That's what made Margot, Margot.



The ADA was a young-ish chubby guy named Chad Everrod who wore wool three piece suits despite the Nevada heat. He was going a bit bald prematurely and sported the first comb-over Margot had seen since her father. She could tell that Chad like to smirk a lot to give the impression his case was stronger than it was, but any possible impact of the smirk was ruined by his dimples.

"I have you right where I want you," Chad opened without allowing a beat for an introduction. He was unabashedly grinning into her cleavage as she approached him. Margot had her own Girls and knew how to use them too.

Margot understood immediately that Chad wanted very much to fuck her violently and fuck her client and that the seething frustration of that strong unmet physical need made him dangerous to deal with. This was to be a bullfight, so she had to be the matador. Luckily when it came to practicing the law she didn't even need a cape; she was a ballerina, blithely dancing around the bulls and their shit.

They met at the end of the corridor beneath the three story high glass security windows veined with what looked like chicken wire. It was very quiet in the hallway. Some local folk sat on wooden benches looking nervously at the doors of the court rooms. The judge had blocked entry to the

courthouse for anyone without proof of immediate business. He didn't want the usual hooting, confetti tossing carnival of press and onlookers that showed up whenever Ruthy was in court. A couple of cops in sandy colored uniforms stood next to each other outside the room Ruthy was in. She could feel them watching her backside and legs as she walked to Chad and knew that Chad was playing to them more so than to her, the bull letting the steers know who was boss.

"Margot Archana," she smiled, proffering a warm light brown hand for him to shake, ignoring his taunt.

He wiped his palm on his trousers and took it, mumbling his name. Apparently he hadn't practiced saying anything pleasant after the initial salvo. He was just a nervous, horny bull and expected a counter attack. Margot figured he was a recent hot bullshit acquisition from some other, colder jurisdiction like Buffalo and had yet to update his wardrobe and likely anxious to make his bones with a quick high profile conviction in the new arena.

It was warm, bordering on hot, from the early afternoon sun streaming through the windows; the air conditioning didn't effectively reach to the end of the corridor. Margot took off her jacket and draped it on her arm. "So, Chad, what was your guys' probable cause to search my client's personal space?" she asked calmly. She idly looked at her smart phone, fingering the screen.

"Good luck with that defense," Chad snorted. "The officers were called in on a demolished hotel room and found a naked loopy actress who has a long history of substance abuse. It would have been negligent not to search the place."

"Okay. That's reasonable. I concede the validity of the search." Margot hadn't planned to develop the argument, but knew that boy attorneys liked to win things however pointless, and if he was given some semblance of early victory it would make him more cocky and, oddly enough, less aggressive. She could see Chad relax a little. It was time to pirouette.

She held up her phone to show him the display. "Here's an eBay posting by someone in Las Vegas, Nevada offering a cherry lip balm owned by Ruthy Ronan. It was put up early this morning."

"So what?"

"Well, the purse containing the vial was found in the restaurant downstairs not in her room."

"It's her purse," Chad protested, "It had her driver's license and credit cards in it."

"You're ready to prove that no one, say, a scandal-hungry tabloid journalist, could have slipped the vial into it. Or a hotel employee couldn't have been getting rid of his or her stash when the cops showed up? You have, of course, a solid chain of custody from the waiter to the restaurant night manager to the concierge to your officers proving no one opened it, not even for a minute. If my client

was to look at the purse's inventory you are sure that there would be nothing missing -- like a cherry lip balm? If something came out, anything could've gotten in."

Chad fumed but had no rejoinder. He obviously hadn't read the case file at all, thinking drugs plus purse equals an automatic win.

Margot continued, "In your highly constitutional search of my client's room did you find anything else that was incriminating -- drug paraphernalia, blocks of black tar heroin, a meth lab?"

Chad shook his head no. Margot was surprised to find she missed the dimples.

"And, of course, you had her pee in a cup, understandable and perfectly legal considering how you found her. Were there drugs in her system?" Margot held up the page from the report with her sharp maroon nail point on the pertinent word.

"It was *Inconclusive*. How did you get that?"

"How I obtained it is my business and none of yours. So her condition could easily be just a bad reaction to a sleep aid for which she has a legal prescription, as my client maintains. I think we are we done here. Do you agree?"

"I need to call my boss."

Margot nodded and walked back down the corridor to the anteroom to check on Ruthy. Her phone binged cheerfully. She went into the room and closed the door. Ruthy looked at her so anxiously it nearly broke her heart.

"I believe it is gonna be good news," Margot said. "It's at least fifty-fifty, maybe sixty-forty, they'll let you go outright. And on a positive note, I just sold a cherry lip balm that was supposedly yours on eBay for sixty-five bucks."

"You're worse than my mother," Ruthy joked, knowing Margot must have had a good reason.

"That was *mean*." Margot said taking Ruthy in her arms as the younger woman finally started to cry.

Chad knocked on the door after a half hour or so. Margot went out in the corridor to talk to him.



While Margot and Chad negotiated her fate Ruthy thought about her supposed cherry lip balm. Someone paid \$65 for something that may or may not have been in touch with her lips. Every single day of her life a horde of paparazzi followed her around like Pigpen's dust clouds and took

pictures of her, and even the grainy, distant shots where you would have a hard time making out it was even her earned them a salary likely many times what she was making lately.

The internet was crammed with pictures of her in all stages of dress – some real and some surprisingly well PhotoShopped. How terrible for the girls whose bodies her head was forced to wear. They were all likely their urban neighborhood or small town’s crowned prom queens (at least they got to go to a real prom!) drifting into a career of being photographed stark naked only to have Ruthy’s face and hair grafted on their form. She thought all the guys who paid to look at them must be idiots, and even more so when she started posing nude herself, since there was a ready comparison to how fake the pictures were. When she was being objective Ruthy would admit that a select few of them had markedly better bodies -- she didn’t have the world’s best butt, some tastes notwithstanding, and all of the faux hers had such nicely tanned skin instead of her patchwork of freckles -- but most of them – particularly those where some kind of active sexual encounter was depicted -- sadly did not, and she was embarrassed for her poor face. She imagined it blushing to match her hair. Some of the faces they used were from when she was sixteen; she wondered if that made the compilations kiddy porn.

Her antics sold tabloids by the bushel full. Her every move was entertainment news headlines with hourly updates, most of it only the wildest of speculation. At any time she could go on eBay and see dozens of other listings for pictures supposedly autographed by her and only a handful actually were. The same pictures were used to make key rings, tee shirts, face masks, mugs, and all manner of weird tchotchkes. On Amazon there were a dozen unauthorized biographies, hagiographies, and hatchet jobs all culled from the same two dozen or so slanted magazine articles. Her own grandmother hawked her childhood snapshots and baby clothes. Her mother stooped so low as to sell hugely embarrassing pages from her own daughter’s recovery journals that she stole while helping Ruthy move.

Ruthy was an industry unto herself like Apple or General Motors and never got a dime for most of it.

She’d at least been paid a minimal stipend for some of the hundreds of magazine covers she’d appeared on, and those issues usually sold fabulously. She was a popular, popular girl.

But when it came to making movies or television shows all most no one would touch her.

It had been so easy at the beginning. She was in demand from the age of three despite being the only redheaded, short, and normally shaped model in a crowd of elongated blonde stick figures. Her first gig was to look happy eating chocolate cake! How tough was that? She’d been plucked like Cinderella from thousands of girls to play the twins and given a three picture deal at twelve on the

weight of her one (or really double) performance. The studio gifted her with a million dollar bonus over her contract rate for her work playing a daughter and a mother.

She'd been made to feel so special. It always had troubled her to be singled out so much for her talent; she hadn't even told her friends she was in the first movie until after it came out. Now that she wasn't considered so special, it troubled her so much more to not be.

She was at a loss as to what to do with her life. Rehab. Rehab was next for her. She looked forward to it this time; she'd actually do the work instead of going through the motions. She would focus just on that and let the rest of it go for now. She didn't need to be movie star; she was just a girl with hopefully surmountable substance abuse problems.

(Her voiceover growled, "You should have *used* or *flushed* the damn vial.")



Chad was miserable. He took Margot out of earshot of the two guards, "My boss still wants to prosecute. Even if we lose he thinks we'll look good just by putting her on trial."

Margot expected that, but understood that Chad was now on her side as he didn't want a likely high profile loss on his likely spanking new record.

"We might agree to NRS 453.3363," Margot said.

'What's that?' Chad asked. He *was* new.

"It's a Nevada no contest drug plea. Yeah, okay, it's usually reserved for first time offenders, which technically she is *in Nevada*. If your boss and the judge go for it, Ruthy will be entered into a program called 'Nevada Drug Court' where she'll be given no jail time and mandatory drug counseling. The judge would formally decline to convict her and "suspend" the case by putting her on probation. After she completes the program, the judge dismisses the case, and Ruthy will be free of any conviction or record. For you and me, it's Win-Win."

"This is what you wanted all along."

Margot shrugged. "Maybe."

"What are we talking about?"

"Sixty days of rehab in state and ninety days' probation with ongoing NA meeting attendance."

"I have to check in again." He moved away to make the call.

Margot waited in the hallway. She returned to the door. The older cop smelled of cigarettes and acted like he wanted one badly. He fingered the pack in his breast pocket. The younger one flushed

suddenly and turned away from her when she caught him gawking. “Shouldn’t be long now” she told the older one.

Chad’s conversation was brief; she could see him begin to mouth the statute number and that was all that was needful. He nodded to her like a good little bull who had been made into baloney.



It took until early evening to get in front of a judge. His honor, Laurence Andrew Orderly – nicknamed “Law & Order” or “L&O”, did not allow any recording devices or cameras in his courtroom; all hardware was collected at the doors by a specially assigned bailiff. There was a short moment of comedy at the beginning when one reporter tried to get past the gatekeeper with Google glasses on and another hack ratted him out to avoid being scooped.

L&O was stringent about there being absolutely no talking. He felt his courtroom was a CHURCH OF THE LAW. He was a man of a certain age, heavy of brow, jowly like a basset hound, bald as hot house tomato, with cloudy eyes and uneven teeth. One wrinkled collar point of his shirt poked out from under his robe. A visible green booger was suspended in the long protruding nose hair of his left nostril.

Chad had stated his charges with minimum dimples; Ruthy had made her no contest plea in as contrite and sorrowful manner as she could manage while avoiding looking or laughing at the judge’s nose; Margot had given an excellent case as to why this time was different and a promising young woman should be allowed to put her fractured life back together. Everyone in the court awaited the judge to seal the deal. The absolute quiet was only broken by the *skritch skritch skritch* of the court room sketch artist working in colored pencil on velour drawing paper. L&O allowed her to attend because the Supreme Court had them. It was understood that she would make him look good, that is to say like a folliclely-challenged Perry Mason, but still resembling L&O somewhat.

The courtroom wasn’t very large: twenty by twenty crammed with a lot of blonde wood furniture. Since there wouldn’t be a trial the judge allowed the crushing number of the press clambering to attend to use the jury box. Margot didn’t object as any case involving Ruthy was tried by them anyway. Of course Chad and his boss (who took the prosecutor’s second chair ostensibly to supervise the pro forma arraignment) were happy to have them there as that was the whole point anyway. So there they sat, Ruthy’s very own Greek Chorus there to witness her current personal tragedy.

Ruthy clutched her journal to her chest. She was beyond relieved that it wasn’t destroyed or discovered. While they were waiting for Chad to get docket time before the judge Margot dashed over

to the hotel to retrieve it from the hotel room safe. Ruthy always locked it up whenever she wasn't writing in it so it had escaped Big-big Star-mageddon.

While she was waiting Ruthy wrote in her journal, "Despair is a thing with talons/That gouges furrows in the Soul/And screams in pain without words/And never stops at all."

Margot also collected two green garbage bags of stuff Ruthy's assistant, the unctuous Tad, thought might be repairable or of sentimental importance. The rest was to be assessed for fair market value for agreed upon reimbursement and then shipped in securely sealed boxes to an incinerator facility.

L&O cleared his throat so hard his jowls swung like those click click balls people have on their desks. The booger dropped a little further down the nose hairs. The judge finally noticed it and wiped it off on the sleeve of his robe. He nodded to Ruthy. Margot stood up crisply and helped Ruthy to her feet.

"Miss Ronan, I hope you understand that I cannot in good conscience allow you to be let off with what the County has so generously proposed. I do not believe it would be of sufficient penalty to dissuade you from repeating the offense since you have already done so in two other jurisdictions. The State of Nevada has some of the harshest drug penalties in the nation for a reason: to interdict the use of narcotics within its borders since it is so open to other vices. The standard sentence for this crime is a mandatory minimum one year in prison."

Margot started to speak, but the judge hushed her.

"Let me finish. Let me finish. I cannot see how that would be of help to Miss Ronan, so I am following Solomon's lead and cutting the baby in half. I shall suspend my sentencing provided you spend a one week in the Clark County Detention Center followed by a six month mandatory stay in a rehabilitation facility on the approved Nevada list. You will be placed on probation for the remainder of one year where you will maintain continued treatment and report regular attendance with Narcotics Anonymous for a minimum of 90 days. If you complete this in a satisfactory manner I will dismiss the case. Do you agree?"

Margot looked at Chad. He was all dimples. The goddamn bull had fucked her over after all. She thought she saw DA wink at L&O. Margot turned to Ruthy, who shrugged and nodded. Margot sadly shrugged and nodded back. She prided herself on maintaining calm no matter what the situation, but in this case she was well and truly pissed.

Ruthy managed to murmur, "Yes, Your Honor. I agree." She was strangely pleased that even old L&O admired her cleavage even while he was selling her down the river.

L&O banged his gavel. He took the already prepared documents from the ever eager Chad and signed them.

Margot accepted the papers from Chad but whispered softly in his ear, cupping it with her hand, "If you kept our deal I was gonna let you fuck me tonight." She licked his lobe and sighed her warm breath on it. That wiped the dimples off his face. He seemed like he was going to cry. It was a lie, of course, but he deserved it.

Ruthy autographed the papers, hugged Margot hard, gave her the journal, and held her hands out to the bailiff to be cuffed.

("This is a good thing," the voiceover in her head said. "It was the beginning of my new life, my true life.")

Ruthy had no clue at the time how wonderfully and horribly true that was, though at the time she had no way of knowing that before the end of the year she would be so completely happily married and that four months after the wedding she'd be dead.