

Colder Than Ice

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Crossing genres without apologies.

My friend Justine had warned me: it happens to every married woman. One day she'll wake up and think she's married the wrong man. Another day, sooner or later following the first, she'll know it. Both such days usually happen after a night of arguing or after a series of such night fights. Donald and I had never argued—at least not in any deeply serious way. But I'd known the truth for some time; it had come and gone in occasional flashes throughout the entire twenty-odd years. But such epiphanies had become steadier during the past nine months.

My gaze into a kaleidoscopic nothing slowly tightened to focus on the white-gold diamond ring on my finger, resting next to the teacup on my table. The diamonds twinkled, hinting *What right have you to wear this?* To my left, a young couple—probably in their twenties—ambled up to the counter to purchase a bag of tea. They held hands even as they sampled the pastries next to the register. I lowered my eyes, letting my focus fade back to yellows, pinks, and blues.

I never should have cheated.

No—that's not true.

I should have cheated *differently*.

The second problem was that the guy I met on the Amorous Anonymous site fit my needs perfectly. The first problem was that I'd gotten on the site in the first place. Yeah, that's a little backward, but that's how I felt these days. That's how my thoughts and second guesses ran. I'd like to think it was the site that had gotten me twisted.

The site had always had a creepy vibe to it. It had asked for a lot of weird personal info, all of which I'd answered with fabrications. I'd described my brunette hair with its seven strands

of gray as “sunset red.” My eyes changed from a settled acorn brown to a piercing sapphire blue. Five foot five became five foot eight—still shorter than the average man but promising longer legs for a would-be suitor. I hadn’t fibbed about being in shape. Between the gardening and the housecleaning and the periodic garage workouts, I was fit for some passionate tussling in the bedroom. I culminated the profile with the tart and only covertly apologetic pseudonym of *Sarah*. A perverted abbreviation of *siracha*: a name with bite and spice, or so the gin I’d been sipping at the time had told me. It was also a name my alcohol-fueled mind had mumble-read as “*Sorry*.”

“Lie, lie, lie till you die” was a common taunt thirty years ago, back when I was in prepubescence. But it had served me well on Amorous Anonymous. And even though it allowed me to meet the perfect paramour and carry on a flawless affair for eight or so months, just the fact that I had a presence on the site began to pick at my conscience after a while. That picking eventually peeled off a scab that let something loose to ooze under my skin, effecting a perpetual sensation no shower or lotion or scratching could ease. I considered a skin peel. Injections. Making odd mutilations to my body. Before I had a nervous breakdown or did something truly crazy, I’d decided to just end the damned lie.

Ending a relationship—even one garbed in falsehoods—could be just like ending a life. Maybe even more traumatic. Though I’d never killed anyone, both my parents had died suddenly, so I felt I knew well enough. My bearers had perished in a meeting of train and car, reckless driving resulting in a wreck. It had almost been a laughable cliché. After an anniversary date, they for whatever reason had taken a wrong turn, didn’t realize their Plymouth was low on gas, and wound up stalled on train tracks. Or perhaps my father thought his 1959 red Fury was badass enough to beat the train. If so, he misjudged. The secondhand vehicle was likely unable to

handle the thrust. I didn't know the exact story; I just remembered how I felt when the authorities had deigned to tell the news to me, their only child. The feeling wasn't giddiness, but something related. Not like mirth. More like the reverse of giving birth to an otherworldly creature, as if something fresh, like a garden salad, had been rapidly consumed, then just sat in my stomach to rot while my body refused to process it and something oleaginous eased back up my throat, its noxious scent outpacing it to waft out of my mouth and back into my nostrils.

It was a feeling I never wanted to repeat—so I'd planned to meet Isaac one last time, face-to-face. Neither a text nor a phone call would do justice to either of us. I didn't want to just break it off. I wanted to resolve the relationship, such as it was. And I wanted to absolve myself. We'd agreed yesterday via text to meet at the teahouse where we'd had our first face-to-face. I was already on my second cup of tea. He was forty minutes late. I hadn't heard a word from him all day. I chuckled inwardly at the thought that, after nine months of a relationship, he would suddenly choose to ghost me.

I checked once more over my shoulder, toward the door. I couldn't see it from where I was sitting; I could only make out part of the area where I'd left my shoes. Two young women, having finished their late lunch, were putting theirs on, one while standing, the other while sitting on a wooden bench. To each her own, I supposed, when it came to comfort.

A little to the right was the area for those who preferred to take their tea and edibles while practically sitting on the floor. Some did, forgoing the thick burgundy cushions arranged around the low-lying square tables. I preferred a table with the rosewood chairs that provided much thinner cushioning but were better for my legs. I'd stretched them plenty today, walking here from several blocks away and then taking in my surroundings before finally giving in and placing an order.

It was a place I'd made a note to visit more often. As it was, I'd only been here three times, each one with Isaac. And each time, I'd paid far more attention to him than my surroundings. Today I'd had a chance to browse the shelves of teapots and bowls, many of them highly ornamental, all of them for sale, much like the books on art, dress, and other aspects of Chinese culture that were also on display. Tea, of course, was available for take-home purchase—large, translucent bags filled with loose-leaf varieties one couldn't hope to purchase in any nearby grocery store. Much of the leaves, dried fruits, and other substances were of a sort no one around here would chance to grow in their backyard. Some were more common, if no less exotic on the nose: Jasmine, raspberry, lavender, and a host of other enticements I couldn't begin to name without stopping to read labels. Arranged and propped up in wicker baskets near the front door, the bags' colors and fragrances tempted customers when they entered and again before exiting.

Such a tranquil place had no need for incense or soft music, not with so many aromatics about. But peaceful atmosphere or not, I'd purposely chosen a relatively private table half-hidden from the entrance by a wooden support column. For added privacy, I sat with my back toward the front door, facing the passageway leading toward the kitchen.

If Isaac were here, he would no doubt be sipping on the green tea he'd ordered the first time we came, cherry zen. Green tea mixed with dried cherry bits and rose petals—a concoction releasing aromas highly appropriate for the season, if not appropriate for us together.

I pondered the remnants of genmaicha tea in my cup. Some of the contents had slipped through the filter. Mine was a grassy green tea, a blend of Sencha and roasted brown rice, which in turn gave it a slightly sweet, nutty flavor. While steeping, it gave off an aroma of roasted rice, which evoked an autumnal mood. But gazing at the leavings now, I just thought of cut weeds and

tossed rice, perhaps much of a lawnmower sack's contents after the landscapers went over church grounds too soon after a traditional wedding.

May was a near-perfect time for weddings and a much less perfect time to call in a sick day at the middle school. Being so near to the end of the school year, everyone was overloaded trying to get everything in order before summer break. All well and good—but today someone else could see to the kids' attendance. I'd expected Isaac to do the same with his office. Surely bankers got sick every once in a while? And what better place for two sick people to meet than a place like this?

To my right, just out of sight, I sensed a figure, hovering. I turned slightly more toward the kitchen, bringing her into three dimensions, the vivid hues of familiarity: the friendly middle-aged Chinese woman who'd been serving me. She was watching me, visibly eager yet seemingly hesitant to approach my table. I figured she probably had ten years on me, in her mid- to late fifties. Perhaps she was turning me over in her mind as I involuntarily began to do with her. Was she happily married? When she was pouring my tea and, almost under her breath, recommending the steamed lamb dumplings, I hadn't bothered to look at her fingers. In anticipation of heartbreak, I honestly hadn't paid her much attention at all. My stomach was already in knots; it didn't need food. And I didn't—yet—need kindness or sympathy. I needed to turn the final screw on a bad deed and let time begin the process of burying it. But now, wandering . . . *wondering* . . . Did this kindly woman smile at home as often as she did at work, or was it forced? Did she smile only to ease her way through life, toward the inevitable—?

I sensed rapid movement to my left. Shifting my gaze without sparing a turn of my head, I felt a familiar presence. *Love*. A nervous brand of it—jittery—making the nerves in my neck and hands twitch. Still, I didn't turn in its direction; I just scooted a little closer to the edge of my

seat, waiting for my lover to step into my view, reenter my world for the last time. I stared at the seat opposite me, expecting at any moment to see his strong hands grasp the sides—the thick fingers, the veined and tanned backsides, the diamond-studded wedding band that glittered like fresh snow kissed by noontime sunlight.

Instead, slender pale fingers grasped the chair's top back edge. There were no diamonds. Just a green sapphire nested like an egg inside an oval, jutting out at a right angle to the yellow-gold ring and lying parallel to the young person's left ring finger. The gem shimmered, passing off different shades of green, from lime to avocado.

I lifted my chin. The tall, freckled girl in a forest-green tank top and salmon-pink capris glared at me as she pulled back the seat, sat, then scooted forward, her deep blue eyes not leaving mine for even a flicker. She'd an oblong face, shoulder-length red hair with bangs, and was young enough to be my daughter. A thin layer of sweat coated her skin, though she wasn't breathing hard, as if she'd been running. Her breath did, however, seem tightly controlled.

Mine wasn't. My mouth had gone slack. I shook my head to get it working again. "*Who* are you?"

"Clarissa," she said in a low pitch. "Guillen."

Guillen? I squinted at her. "That sounds familiar . . ."

"It should." The way she glared, I half expected her irises to assume the hues of fire. "You and me, we're practically family."

I cocked my head, not sure whether I had any distant relatives by that name. I wasn't one to frequent family reunions. "Are we related somehow?"

"Yeah. *Somehow.*" Her ring's gem deepened to forest green as she leaned forward. "You've been sleeping with my dad."

I leaned back, hoping the chair would take the hint and allow me to slide under the table. But the cushion, thin as it was, kept me in place as my stomach hardened.

“That familiar enough for you?”

I couldn't look her in the eyes. Mine fell to that ring of hers, the gem trading hues at the same rate as my heart's increasing rhythm.

Isaac and I had never rendezvoused at his house, nor mine for that matter. Nowhere even near them—at least, as far as I knew. Residences were explicitly off limits; personal details were implicitly so. I'd never told him any details about my personal life, including my last name, and he mostly followed the same rulebook. Mostly. He had referenced a daughter a few times. And now that it was thrown in my face, I recalled he'd even mentioned his last name—but not to me. It was on one of the rare occasions when both our spouses were out of town, and we'd gone out to dinner; he'd spoken his surname when confirming his reservation with the *maître d'*. He'd volunteered little else about himself. But the daughter—this *girl*—she looked absolutely nothing like Isaac. And yet there was something about her. Something I felt I should have been able to identify.

I lifted my gaze. Her eyes fixed on mine as if she were trying to establish a beyond-surface connection. She kept her lips pressed tightly together as she took deep breaths through her nose, her chest heaving. She was attempting something. Intimidation? I searched her face, her shoulders, the parts of her body I could see to massage my memory, to sprinkle water on anything Isaac had left there. But I came up blank. I couldn't focus. Her tactic was working. I straightened in my chair, cleared my throat. “Just how old are you? Seventeen? Eighteen?”

“Don't worry about that. Just you shut up and listen.”

I gasped. “*Excuse me?*”

She leaned in farther, hunching her shoulders as a snarl played under her nose. “You stay away from my dad. *Period.* You never see him again.”

We were on the same page. But, thinking the young should have a bit more respect for their elders, I leaned forward a little, joining her in the conspiratorial tone. “*Or?*”

“*And* I don’t go to your family with what I have.”

I sucked in my gut. “Which is?”

“Just know it will be the end of your tolerable life.”

The little brat was pushing it. I didn’t like being blackmailed. To show her I wasn’t some easily frightened old lady, I decided to push back, just a little.

“And if I do see your dad again? Just one more time? Then *what?*”

She almost seemed to smirk as she shook her head slightly. “You’re not going to want to feel the hell I’ll unleash on you.”

“Listen, you little monster—”

“I’m not done, tramp.”

My body tensed as my eyes widened. “How *dare* you—?”

“I’m. *Not.* Done.” She spoke through clenched teeth while giving me a harsh squint. “I *know* where you live. I *know* where you work. I *know* all about you. You’ve done your best to mess up our lives. My dad’s and mine. I’ll destroy yours.”

Speechless, I could only shake my head, not only at the audacity of it all, but at the ferociousness of this pale, reedy girl. Did she have a criminal record? Was she armed right now? *What the hell had Isaac said about her?* My eyes left her face and traveled, not too quickly, across her body, this time trying to read her unspoken language, getting an honest feel—I hoped—on her intent. Did she have it in her to harm me? Could she really get to my family? My

eyes rested on that shimmering green ring as I tried to think harder about Isaac's brief mentions of her. Had she been a bad kid? Rebellious?

Best I could remember, he'd only mentioned her in passing. Or maybe I just hadn't been listening. No—I *know* I hadn't. I'd been more interested in looking at him and feeling him and letting him play with me. And vice versa. I hadn't needed companionship. I hadn't been looking for a shoulder to lean on, let alone cry on. I didn't need any more pals or conversationalists. My husband and son, my coworkers, my friends—between the three groupings, I had everything I needed in the emotions department. And I'd always carefully chosen what set of emotions to share with which group.

Isaac had only been a toy, an action figure. Both of us had agreed on our mutually intended statuses before we'd even met. Dolls meeting in playsets that would be monitored by none. And yet, when we actually met, it wasn't quite fire and ice, but he was a warmer prince to my cooler princess. His personality wouldn't allow him to be anything but friendly, a hugger and a hand-holder, a talker in almost any situation. And me—I'd tried my best not to listen, not because that husky voice of his wasn't nice to listen to, but because I didn't want to inadvertently volunteer information. And now his daughter claimed to have it all anyway, all the information I would have and could have given up.

The girl scooted her chair backward. "I've said what I've needed to." As she rose, my eyes flicked to her waist, searching for any signs of hidden objects. "There will be no second warning."

She seemed unarmed, didn't even have a clutch purse with her. Still, I kept my eyes on her as she left the table, moving toward the entrance. Barefoot, she made no sound on the

wooden floor—no creaking wood or sticky soles. It wasn't due to grace. She talked like a mafia hit man but moved like a knock-kneed teen not yet comfortable with her body.

Consciously, I wasn't sure how seriously to take her. My racing heart and fidgeting fingers seemed to have already concluded she was a threat. My legs had far less energy. Once she left my sight, I only turned and remained in my chair. The sight of the empty one across from me fuzzed into blurriness as my mind became a cyclone of thoughts, each one in such a hurry that comprehension of anything was an impossibility.

I wasn't certain how long this lasted, but eventually my heart neared a normal pace and my sight returned as I figured I'd better get home.

I don't know how long she'd been standing there, but when my server asked me if I'd like anything else, my tongue was almost quick enough to say, "A firm smack across that girl's cheeks—top or bottom, pick one." But I gathered just enough self-control to only ask for the check. I tipped for two.

I sat on the bench near the doorway to put on my sneakers. I hadn't seen the need to wear anything classier considering the occasion—that and the fact that I'd just have to take them off anyway. Sandals were out, as I didn't want to walk around the teahouse barefoot—like the girl had. Holding my left shoe in my hand, I paused. It was forest green and salmon pink. Just like the girl's outfit. What the hell kind of coincidence was that?

I shuddered when stepping out onto the sidewalk. The winds had picked up. The sky was overcast, a stark change from the partly sunny sky of my morning and a dashed promise of this morning's weather forecasters. Though I could've easily fit one into my shoulder bag, I hadn't bothered to bring an umbrella. Hadn't even put any thought into the weather after leaving the

house. Now I had an impending fear of being drenched in a downpour. Still, I wasn't about to remove the sunglasses I'd just put on.

I hadn't driven as I didn't want to take even the very slim chance that any of my coworkers who took their lunch breaks off campus might travel far afield from the school and spot me. The sunglasses would stay on until I was safely back home.

How had the girl gotten here? She carried no purse that I saw and likely wouldn't have been stupid enough to leave it with her shoes near the teahouse's entrance. Car keys and her license could have been in her pockets, but I doubted it. The capris weren't skintight, but I saw no outline of keys or even a phone, a mainstay for most these days, especially for girls her age. Maybe she only carried a credit card, had gotten here by cab—like I had—and had left the same way.

I double-checked the contents of my own purse to ensure I still had enough to get home. I always left credit cards at home when rendezvousing with Isaac, stocking my purse with cash and gift cards instead. This erased the chance Don would see any red flags on my credit card statements, should he ever happen to look at them.

Today I had plenty of cash, but there wasn't a single taxi among the cars zooming by on the street in front of me, all with their headlights on. I walked two blocks west and still saw not even a hint of the familiar red-and-black sedans. One last time I looked to my left and right, up and down the street, before rushing to take refuge under a nearby bus stop shelter. The rain hadn't come, but I didn't want to gamble.

Secure and dry, I took the prepaid out of my shoulder bag and called a taxi. As I waited, three buses came and went. I could've gotten on any one, but I didn't want to be subject to anyone else's schedule.

The red-and-black late-model sedan I'd been expecting never arrived. Instead, an all-black old model vehicle pulled up to the bus stop shelter. A 1963 Bentley. After twenty-plus years of being with Donald, one couldn't help but have some of his classic car knowledge rub off. I was hesitant to reach for the door handle, thinking it had to be here for someone else. Such a vehicle couldn't have been being used for a cab. The driver rolled down the window and assured me it was. He was on the wrong side of the car; then again, so was the wheel. As I stepped in, I almost felt as if I were stepping back in time, back into a time before I was even born. But the gray-haired Pakistani man behind the wheel may've been around back then. I settled myself on the left end of the back seat so that I had part of his left profile in view, though with the creeping darkness outside, his face remained mostly in shadow, even when he turned slightly toward me.

Yet I felt a measure of comfort. The back seat was clean. The air was fresh. And the elderly man spoke in a proper British accent, one I'd rarely heard outside movies. At first, I thought he was putting me on, but as he went on making innocuous small talk, I realized he was authentic.

"This is just an occasional pursuit," he said as we waited for a swaying traffic light to turn green. "Extra funds for my daughter. She's away at university."

On any other day, I might have pressed the man for his life story, but being in such a vehicle, I couldn't push Donald away from my preoccupations. He'd started chasing me in high school, and I'd never bothered to run away all that fast; I even walked on some days. The two of us were somewhat unusual in that I was the older one in the relationship, by three years. I went

to college nearby, patiently waited for him to graduate, then said yes. He took a year off but soon was off to his college, two states away. I found a grad school close to where he wanted to be and enrolled. I did well, but he excelled and continued to do so for the next two decades, working in the pharmaceutical industry. His funds were primarily spent on vintage cars, our son, and me, essentially treating us all equally. Right there, that's off-balance—even if it took me a while to realize.

Through it all, I never once thought of quitting my job as a middle school principal's assistant. It paid a lot better than any other job I could get in this area with a degree in library science. From the outside looking in, Donald was an ideal husband. Viewed from a right angle, he was a fantastic father who'd helped spawn a wonderful son. Viewed from any other angle, that picture was distorted. At 180 degrees, viewing the picture straight on, there was one big, obvious problem. I'd tried to deal with it for more than twenty years, playing the dutiful and faithful wife—even though it was shortly after the honeymoon when I'd woken up, if only momentarily.

Of course, I'd talked the problem over with trusted friends. They were quite rational, not like the scheming birds one sees on late-night television dramas. *Who cares if Don's a flop in the sack, a total fish—you're living a dream!* They forever insisted I had a pretty perfect life, and the only thing that was missing could have been satisfied with “novelties”—toys one wouldn't want to purchase in a brick-and-mortar store nor in any store with one's own credit card. I'd agreed about the novelty but decided on a different type of toy.

In the abstract, my friends made sense. But sexual needs are primal needs. One can no more deny them than they can deny food or water or companionship. Those who deny

themselves usually end up batshit crazy, oftentimes harming themselves in the process—and too often harming others.

The bare necessities of life were well understood when it came to men. Men were expected to be sexual creatures; were understood to be nearly insatiable; and were derided, mocked, or considered suspect if they weren't trying to bed someone during every moment of their lives not spent eating, drinking, or sleeping. It was the opposite side of the coin for women. We were supposed to be ever receptive to the male come-ons, but if we spent every moment trying to get some satisfaction—well, there was a wide variety of names for those types of women, none ever spoken aloud in polite company. They certainly weren't on the level of *player, stud, or chief executive*.

Names were names, and titles were titles. I'd decided, maybe a little too late, that I wasn't going to spend the remainder of my short life a toe's length from the county line of happiness. As the old saying went, I had needs to fulfill and, I thought, only a few smart ways to fulfill them. I believed the smartest was going on Amorous Anonymous, the website dedicated to those in relationships who wanted a fling, and creating a profile, one that lacked photographs but made up for it with verbosity.

I'd created a fake persona that was true enough when it came to my requisites and desires, and I communicated with potentials via the site's self-contained email system. Isaac was the only man with whom I'd established enough of a connection to want to communicate with off the site. We progressed to texting each other, me via a disposable phone that had only voice and text functions. And he . . . *Did* he use a secure phone? Or had he used one that his daughter had access to? It now seemed like the latter. And if I'd had an inkling at the time, I would've cut off all communication then. Instead, I'd proposed our first face-to-face meeting.

Today was supposed to be the last such meeting, but I'd gotten a different face instead. I wasn't going to let it end like this. I *had* to see Isaac, and I wasn't going to let some angry little rot intimidate me from doing so.

"Driver," I said after we'd turned left onto Penn, "I changed my mind. Take me to the corner of Edson and Murphy Street."

Isaac and I had expertly pledged ourselves to secrecy, as the career affairists do—but I was no dummy. The man had been such a damn talker, certain things just stuck in my head whether I'd wanted them to or not.

I didn't know where he lived, but he had mentioned what he did for a living. He used the phrase "banker's hours" like he'd invented it. Once, when arriving late for a date, he'd apologized by making a bad pun about having his hand in "glover." It wasn't hard to run a random search at the local library during one of my lunch breaks and come up with Glover & Franklin, some kind of financial institution that catered to companies and wealthy individuals. I'd idly driven by the place on a few occasions, just to get a look at the façade, faintly hoping I might see him exiting the building, at which point I'd pull up and offer him a quick ride, letting him interpret that however he wanted.

I told the driver to drop me off a block away from the original corner I'd given him.

"Are you positive?" he said. "I will take you as close to where you're going as possible. The clouds will burst open at any moment."

I was positive. I wanted to walk a little, get the heart pumping in a healthy way in order to gather up some courage. Leaving the vehicle, I heard the trees rustling in the park across the street, over the noise of the afternoon traffic separating us. I took it slow even when one wet bead splattered on my shoulder, and then another on my forehead. The rain was as slow coming as I was going, but the impending downpour was as inevitable as day's end.

I entered the building's lobby dry, but the atmosphere indoors was even less cheerful than the gloom I'd left behind. Fawn walls and marble tile flooring the color of pewter comprised the open area. Each step in my soft sneakers seemed to thud and echo in the mostly empty space.

The few people scattered about were engrossed in whispered cell phone conversations that carried farther than they should, though none of the words cohered in my ears. The speakers casting furtive glances at me seemed intent on keeping it that way as they moved farther away from me if I happened to get too near while walking my as-straight-as-possible path toward the elevators.

“Uh, *excuse* me?” said an adenoidal voice to my left. “Miss?”

I slowed and turned my head. Sandwiched between and mostly hidden by two thick columns was a concierge’s desk, manned by a diminutive woman with a round face who peered at me through black square-framed glasses. I stopped walking and cleared my throat. “Are you talking to me?”

“Yes. You’ll need to sign in and show ID if you have business here.”

I certainly had business, but I wasn’t about to do either of those things. I approached the desk slowly, casting furtive glances at the nearby security guards, a tall black man and a stocky light-skinned woman who, with each glance, seemed to be taking an increasing interest in me. “I, uh, don’t have my ID with me. But there is someone here I really need to see.”

“I’m sorry, but you can’t go up without an escort. Maybe the person expecting you can send someone down?”

He wasn’t expecting me, and if he knew I were here, it would be unlikely he would send anyone down. My mind raced, traveling just a little ahead of my words. “Can you, uh, please call Glover & Franklin? Ask for an Isaac Guillen? I have a package that I must give to him and him alone.”

Wasn’t the best way to put it. The security guards narrowed their eyes at me as they raised their chins. I tried to deflect that interest by focusing on the frowning concierge.

“Where’s the package?” she said.

“In my purse,” I practically blurted. “I hadn’t wanted it to get wet.” I’d had the unconscious foresight to carry my shoulder bag purse today, but not enough to have put anything inside that resembled a package.

I almost grinned at the concierge as she only glanced at my purse before picking up the phone. “You said Isaac . . . *Guillen?*”

I nodded once. My already racing heart seemed to double its pace. What if that wasn’t his real name? “Or, uh, anyone approximating that name.”

She cast a sidelong glance at me as she dialed. My heart seemed to inch toward my throat until I heard her relay the message to the upstairs receptionist. She hung up and nodded her head to the left. “You can have a seat over there.” On the other side of the left column, a cluster of mocha-brown leather armchairs and couches were arranged around sleek wooden tables.

I stiffly made my way to the farthest armchair then released a stuttering, long-held breath, one taken in with resignation and released in anticipation. As much as I tried to sit still and relax, my body trembled. I needed a focal point. I dug the prepaid out of my purse and gazed at it blankly for who knows how many minutes until the *ding* of the elevator interrupted my trance.

My head jerked up just as he emerged from the cab. Not Isaac. Some other sharply dressed man. I turned back to my phone, only to go through the blank-gaze-then-raise-head cycle three more times. I only seemed to zone out completely when I turned to the window, expecting increasing rain as I casually contemplated what I might fix for dinner this evening. The idea of a garden salad appeared in my head and burst just as quickly when I heard, “Sarah?”

The deep, commanding voice had almost made me drop my phone. I looked up at his face—swart and chiseled, with a neatly trimmed three-day stubble beard. His normally warm

brown eyes narrowed as he stood before me like a father who, placidly walking the streets, had turned a corner and looked down with a combination of surprise and disgust to see his daughter panhandling. And yet he called me by that false name—that apologetic pseudonym—the only name of mine that he knew.

I rose slowly. On my feet, I was still a head shorter, still had to keep my chin raised to meet his questioning eyes. But I met him as an equal, an equal in a misbegotten conspiracy. An equal who found herself hurt and confused at his recent lack of care.

Now he certainly cared. His posture and tone made that clear. “What in—?” He hurriedly looked around, then lowered his voice. “What in the *hell* are you doing here?”

My near-whispered response was less angry than his but just as insistent. “I needed to see you. You didn’t meet me as you promised.”

“I—” He stopped himself, flushed. He motioned me away from the chairs, toward a corner of the lobby, the interior point farthest away from other eyes and ears. “Something came up.”

“I’ll say it did. I wanted to end this romantically, *peaceably*, but I guess someone had other ideas.” I may as well have been speaking in an Irish brogue for the expression on his face—frustration and confusion, unhappily mixing. I forwent my plans and went to my more immediate concern. The two security guards intently eyeing us were a sharp spur.

“Call off your daughter,” I said.

His eyes widened. “What?”

“Control her. Get a handle on—”

“*What?*” His nostrils flared. In that instant, I saw a side of him I’d never seen. He and his daughter didn’t look alike, but today they seemed fond of the same emotions. But I wasn’t about to take one step backward.

“Isaac, she showed up at the teahouse instead of you. I can’t imagine you sent her in your place. If you did, well, that’s another thing. Either way, she threatened me. Threatened to destroy my life. My family—”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

My eyes narrowed. Was he really not hearing me? “Your *daughter*. I spoke to her about an hour ago. She threatened me, and—”

“*What* are you *talking* about?” His face was now a grotesque mask. Anger, frustration, and confusion all seemed to be competing for dominance. My words weren’t difficult. My request wasn’t impossible, I didn’t think. Did my voice sound different in this area of thick columns and wide-open spaces, different than how it sounded in my own head? I tried once more, pushing back against his patience and mine.

“Clarissa. She—”

He held up his hands, palms outward. His patience had snapped. The two security guards approached with deliberation. The female lifted her radio to her mouth. My throat caught; something churned in my abdomen. I did my best to keep my composure, to not break into a cold sweat, let alone make a dash for the front door.

“I don’t know what the hell this is.” Isaac’s voice was low pitched yet firm enough to slap my attention back to him. “What the hell you’re trying to do. Why you’ve come to stab me in the place where I make my living. Put food on my table.”

My face must've taken on its own grotesque appearance as I stuttered. "But . . . I'm *trying* to tell you . . . I—"

"Sarah—I told *you*. My daughter, Clarissa, died two years ago."