PAYBACK



Sometimes karma takes so friggin' long, you have to lend a hand

Eve Rabi

Romantic Crime and Suspense

PAYBACK

By Eve Rabi

Sometimes karma takes so friggin' long, you have to step in and handle things yourself.
Book 1 in the Payback series

A romantic Suspense, Romantic crime book about love, murder, revenge

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents
Prologue
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Excerpt from One Way or Another
Excerpt from Betrayed
Romantic Crime Thrillers by Eve Rabi

PROLOGUE

SYDNEY AUSTRALIA
2012

Operator: “Police helpline, what is your emergency?”
Caller: “Eh, a woman, like, she’s screaming her head off. Can you send the police? Please?”
Operator: “What seems to be the problem?”
Caller: “She says…she says that someone stole her car and stuff...”
Operator: “State and town please?”
Caller: “Eh, Sydney…St Ives…”
Operator: “Yeah, where about in St Ives?”
Caller: “Warrimoo Avenue, outside the eh, shops and stuff.”
Operator: “Would that be…corner Dalton road and Warrimoo?”
Caller: “Eh, let me see...yeah, that’s it.”
Operator: “Is anybody hurt?”
Caller: “No. Just the baby.”
Operator: “Baby? Did you say a baby was hurt?”
Caller: “No, no, she was *in* the car. The baby. Sorry, I’m just fifteen so…”
Operator: “She was in the…are you saying that the car was stolen *with* a baby in it?”
Caller: “Yeah. Can you hear her? The mother? She’s screaming her head off like a ban—”
Operator: “Yes, I can. What’s she saying?”
Caller: “She’s saying…hold on…eh, she says she knows that it’s her ex, like, he’s behind it, and she’s screaming and running up and down the street, going mental.”
Operator: “O…kay. I need you to stay on the line. What’s your name?”
Caller: “Carly. But my cell battery is dy—”
Operator: “Hello? Hello? Carly, can you hear me? Hello?”

Chapter One

Sydney, Australia
2012

The first time Tom hit me, I was eight months pregnant. Slapped me across the face so hard, I saw tiny white stars, even though I was indoors. I was twenty-two, he was thirty-five.

I was eight months pregnant and waddling like a duck; he was approximately one hundred and eighty pounds of solid muscle. He took part in triathlons, ran five kilometers every day, had wheatgrass and quinoa for breakfast, a green salad with no dressing for lunch, and usually ate lean chicken breast with three different colored vegetables for dinner.

Fit, disciplined, and focused – that was my husband.

Throughout my two years of marriage, I'd seen bursts of his rage – towards me and others, and his road-rage – now that was the worst – it terrified me. Especially since he liked to take on truck drivers. The bigger the truck, the greater his rage. Usually, people steered away from trucks, but not Tom; he took them on, provoked them until I was shaking with fear.

Deep down, I guess I did fear being hit by him one day, but I didn't expect it *that* day – the day of my second wedding anniversary.

I was so stunned by the slap, I didn't move away or try to defend myself. I just stood and gaped at him, one hand on my cheek, the other on my swollen belly.

"I take care of *everything*!" he hissed. "All you had to do was chill the Cristal, and you forget to do that. A small thing like that. Chill. The. Cristal – how hard is that, huh? Huh?"

To celebrate our wedding anniversary, Tom had invited eight couples to a four-course sit-down dinner at our house, located in the upscale suburbs of St Ives, Sydney.

He had hired caterers, waitstaff, and a barman. Like all of Tom's parties, it promised to be interesting, excessive, and showy.

It was true – all I had to do was chill the Cristal, as he had taken care of everything else, without consulting me once about anything. Not even asking me who I'd like to invite. Solo – that's how Tom operated.

I didn't mind. Tom was extremely capable, highly efficient, and most of all, he had flair. I didn't, so if I did make a suggestion for just about anything, he'd usually scoff at it and shred it to bits, making me feel like the hillbilly I was. So over time, I stopped suggesting or contributing, and left everything in Tom's highly capable hands. That suited him just fine.

With pregnancy hormones, my brain sometimes became a pile of mush, and I would walk into a room and forget why I was there. I often forgot which level I had parked my car on at the mall.

It annoyed the hell out of Tom as he called it foolish, and God knows, being as astute and intelligent as he was, he didn't suffer fools gladly.

As my pregnancy progressed, everything I did was foolish and stupid to him, and he became increasingly irritable with me, and finally, he hit me.

"See what you do to me!" he snarled, his nostrils flaring, his lips a thin white line. "You *make* me act like this."

After throwing me a look of disgust, he stood in front of the mirror, carefully adjusted his tie, straightened his five-foot-eight frame, and walked towards the door of our bedroom.

At the door, he paused and turned to look at me. “Put on a darker shade of lipstick, wear the necklace I bought you for Christmas, and be downstairs in five,” he said before he walked downstairs.

With my hand on my cheek, I sat on the bed, shrouded in disappointment and disbelief.

How could he hit me? I asked myself. How could he hit a *pregnant* woman? His pregnant wife – who does that?

There was no way I was going to go to his party after that. I would leave quietly through the back door before our guests arrived. I wouldn’t even *tell* him that I was leaving him. To hell with him and his party.

Just then the doorbell rang. Too late. Our guests had arrived.

“The place looks wonderful, Tom.”

“Thank you.”

“Yes, it’s just fabulous, Tom. Marvelous. Where’s Arena?”

“She’ll be down in a sec,” I heard Tom say. “Honey, our guests have arrived,” he called in a sweet voice from the foot of the steps. “Arena, sweetheart?”

I panicked. *What do I do?* How could I possibly *not* show up when guests had already arrived? In all honesty, I’m ashamed to say, I chickened out. Feeling pressured, I decided I would go downstairs and be civil and courteous to Tom’s friends, but I would leave immediately after the party. If he tried to stop me, I would have it out with him and call the cops if I needed to. I may have been twenty-two years old, but I realized that Tom had crossed a line and I wasn’t going to accept it.

I scrambled up from my king-size bed and walked over to a mirror where I eyed my cheek, red from his slap.

I picked up some concealer and dotted it over the redness. Didn’t work. His imprint on my cheek and the welt showed through the concealer.

I tried green concealer. That did the trick and that was the first time I learned that green concealer worked better on bruises better than yellow or beige concealer.

Over the years I used a lot of green concealer, and I became an expert at concealing “flaws.”

Luckily, my deep mahogany hair was in a bob and fell in a sharp point two centimeters below my ears. (Styled as per Tom’s strict instructions. He ordered me to wear my hair *exactly* that way. He was in awe of Victoria Beckham.) That night, with the help of a little wax, I pulled the edges forward so that it covered my cheek. Just in case the green concealer let me down.

Then I went one step further and decided that if the concealer faded and someone enquired about the marks on my face, I would simply say that I had an allergy – a new facial that didn’t quite agree with me. (Over the years, my friends were surprised at how many facials didn’t agree with me.)

Still dazed, I adjusted my clothing, darkened my lipstick, put on the chunky gold necklace that Tom ordered me to wear, and waddled downstairs. As instructed.

When I reached the last stair of the spiral staircase of our 2.6-million-dollar home in Sydney, which had a spa, sauna, tennis court, and an Olympic-size pool, I plastered a smile on my disappointed lips and murmured greetings to our guests.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Tom watching me with elevated eyebrows, probably waiting to see if I would tell on him, or indicate marital discord in our supposedly perfect marriage.

I ignored him and focused on our guests. I would deal with the bastard later.

After a while, his eyebrows returned to normal and he moved towards me. As if nothing had happened, he slipped his arm around my waist. I stiffened, then casually tried to shrug it off, but he held on, his fingers digging into my side, tacitly warning me to behave, or else.

After our last guest had arrived, Tom rattled a knife on a Royal Doulton goblet. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is now time for me to give my beautiful wife her anniversary gift."

With a fake smile plastered on my darkened lips, I allowed him to take my hand.

He led us all outside, where a silver BMW X60i E75 was parked in our driveway, a huge red bow on it. I knew that it cost more than a hundred and fifty thousand dollars, as I had gone car shopping with him weeks ago.

"For you, my love," he said.

All eyes were on me, most of them filled with envy.

Overwhelmed by the slap and by the present, I remained mute.

He pinched my waist. Hard.

"It's beautiful," I murmured quickly, feeling pressured to say *something*. It truly was a lovely vehicle, although the one I was driving, a Mercedes four-wheel drive, was just as beautiful.

I looked at him. "But, I didn't get you anything, Tom." My voice felt strained and high-pitched.

He hugged me. "You are my gift alone, Arena. You bring me so much joy, my love."

"Aaaawwww!" I heard a guest mutter. "How sweet!"

My guests had no idea that less than an hour ago, this man had slapped his pregnant wife.

"And that's not all," he said and produced a pretty red-and-gold box. Tom opened it, revealing a chunky diamond bracelet. He slipped it onto my wrist, then kissed my hand and bowed obsequiously.

Back inside, gasps of delight and more unbridled envy abounded, which Tom seemed to visibly revel in.

Envy was Tom's currency – his elixir of life. Without it, I do believe that he would have shriveled up and simply died.

Then he took me into his arms and once again, lovingly embraced me. When he kissed me, he threaded his fingers into my hair and slipped his tongue into my mouth. His kiss felt horrible – like sucking on raw steak. I felt awkward and uncomfortable, and I wanted him to stop the Broadway show. I was a lousy actress and a terrible leading lady for sure.

When I jerked slightly away, his fingers gripped my hair and pulled hard, a silent warning – *Play along or else.*

Having no choice, I became a supporting act in his show and felt like the phony I was.

Then the doorbell rang.

He released me and said, "Will you get that, darling?"

I was surprised, because Tom always answered the door. After a moment's hesitation, I opened the door and caught my breath at the sight of the biggest bouquet of roses I had ever seen.

"For Mrs. Arena Botha," the delivery guy said, struggling to carry the bouquet.

Again, the room echoed with oohs and ahhs!

Of course, I was not one bit impressed with any of his gifts. It was not that I was ungrateful. Sure, his gifts were lovely, but I would have preferred if he had given me the gifts that morning, when it was just the two of us, or if he had sent me the roses during the day.

These gifts were all about him and his ego – *Look at me. Look how successful I am. See what I can give my woman. Don't you wish you were married to me instead of your husband? When*

you leave here tonight, you're gonna wish you were Arena. You're gonna wish you were Tom Botha's wife.

I did leave the house that night, but it wasn't because of Tom's slap. I went into early labor and had to be rushed to the hospital that very night. Three hours after our last guest had left, I held in my arms a beautiful blue-eyed boy called Warren, who became the silver lining in my life.

All thoughts of leaving Tom and ending our marriage went out the door after that. I continued living with Tom, starring in his Broadway shows and buying copious amounts of green concealer.

One word to describe living with Tom – suffocating.

Every time he was around, I felt like I had a pillow over my face. I dreaded the hour when he would walk through that door, and when he left the house, I felt like the pillow had been lifted from my face.

Weekends were the worst – the pillow seldom lifted, and unlike most people, Monday was my best friend. I looked forward to it.

The moment Tom left the house for work, I would let out a long sigh, make myself a cup of hot chocolate, and as the morning progressed, my shoulders would slowly drop from around my ears and I would smile.

My Sunday morning psalm: Monday my love, where are you?

Chapter Two

The second time Tom hit me, Warren was eight months old.

Tom grabbed me by the hair and smashed my head against a door. I lay dazed on the floor while my baby screamed his head off. There were no tell-tale signs of the assault – no blood, no marks, just searing pain. It took me an hour to see one of everything again.

We had been arguing about my family. When we migrated to Australia from South Africa, Tom had promised that I could visit my mother and siblings every four months or so. Either that, or he promised to send plane tickets for them to visit us in Sydney.

Now that they wanted to see my baby, my mother's first grandchild, Tom wouldn't let me go to South Africa, and he flatly refused to send my mother a plane ticket.

My mother, being a pensioner, couldn't afford to pay her way to Australia, something Tom was aware of.

Seeing my misery, he said, "You want to go to South Africa, go! But you are not taking Warren with. Go yourself."

Of course I wouldn't leave my baby and go off to South Africa. But I had been diagnosed with postpartum depression and desperately needed my mother's help with the baby, even for just a little while. I felt isolated and alone in Australia, I was jumpy all the time and I cried easily.

In my heart, I knew that I wasn't a model mother – I wasn't serene and smiling beautifully like the moms in the Toddler S26 ads. Chewed-up nails, disheveled hair, sweat pants, dark rings around the eyes – that was me. (Bet you'd never see Victoria Beckham looking like that.)

Tom became a tyrant to live with. He was a neat freak and a perfectionist, and of course the house had to be a certain way, or he'd go ballistic and throw things around. I could cope with that when I didn't have a baby, but things had changed.

Tom refused to understand. It didn't matter that I had sleepless nights and that I was recovering from a caesarian section – everything had to continue being immaculate, organized, and perfect.

A place for everything and everything in its place – that was one of Tom's many mottos. (He had about sixty mottos that he lived by. That I eventually had to live by.)

My life became increasingly miserable.

The part I hated the most about my miserable existence – the bedroom. I hated the way he demanded sex just about every night, forced me into perverted positions, and the fact that he was insatiable.

I hated the way he roughed me up during sex, grabbed me by the hair, twisted my neck to kiss me; the way his hand fastened around my throat while he thrust vigorously into me; the way he took total control over my body and my soul, and dominated me in the harshest possible manner.

I hated the way he demanded I orgasm in record time, then got irritated when I didn't, the way I had to fake it just to please him, the way I broke down and cried in the bathroom so many times after I had sex with him – the man I had chosen to have and to hold.

That video of Pamela Anderson giving Tommy Lee a blow job – he forced me to watch it with him.

"I want *that*," he said, pausing the video at a certain point and pointing to Pam. "See that look in her eyes? See that? I want that. That babe, she *likes* it. She *wants* it. She's *begging* for it.

See? See? I want that, you hear? You better shape up, Arena, 'cause I *expect* nothing less than that. *Basic Instinct*, *9 ½ Weeks* – now that's what we should be having. You have to sweat, Arena. If you don't sweat during sex, you might as well be fucking your …wife."

Everything he said didn't always make sense, but I never questioned him. I didn't care to; I just wanted it to be over. And … never once did I sweat during sex. Not even a slight slick over my body.

If, while we were having sex, Warren cried, which was often, Tom wouldn't stop so that I could take care of our baby.

"I come first," he'd declare in an angry voice. "Always. He must understand that. I am the man of the house. This is my house. I always get priority. Always. You have to teach him that early in life, or he's gonna get spoiled."

Once, Warren cried so pitifully – I just couldn't take it anymore. In the middle of sex, I broke down and wept.

Tom got so mad at the sight of my tears; he withdrew from inside of me, stormed over to Warren, and yelled into my poor baby's face for about five minutes. "You just want attention all the time! You are such an attention seeker, you little wuss. Grow up, be a man!"

Warren got so scared, he started trembling and sobbed without a sound.

When I tried to protect Warren from Tom, he shoved me so hard, I fell back and bruised my tailbone. As I lay on the ground in agony, he grabbed Warren by the scruff of his neck. "Do you want to sleep on the balcony tonight? Cry one more time. I dare you. See how dark it is out there? That's where you will sleep all night *without* your mom."

Warren didn't make a sound after that. Not even when I took him in my arms and tried to comfort him.

I knew I had to leave Tom. But how, I wondered? Where do I go? I had no money, and I knew that Tom would cancel my credit cards when I left. I had no family in Australia, no friends, and I was so young and green, I didn't know where to start. It was easier to just stay, so the idea of leaving Tom was shelved.

To keep the peace, I did everything I possibly could to please Tom. But his beatings, verbal and physical, took their toll on me. Day by day, my spirit slowly eroded. I became really unsure of myself, and I existed under a cloak of shame.

Shame that I was the kind of woman who allowed a man to walk all over me and to beat me. Shame that I wasn't strong enough to tell him to take a hike.

My confidence was almost nonexistent, and I felt fat, unattractive, stupid, and worthless.

How did I get to be like this? I kept asking myself.

As for sex – I hated it. If I never had sex again in my whole life, I would be the happiest woman alive, I concluded.

Just about every woman I knew would hate it if their husband had an affair, a mistress. Not me.

I prayed that he'd find someone, have a torrid sexual affair so that he could leave me alone.

All I wanted was to be a mom to my baby, and to not have to live in a state of constant stress.

Even though it was easier to stay with Tom, I kept thinking about leaving him, and I just couldn't get the thought out of my mind.

I realized that if he divorced me, he would have to give me half of everything. Then I remembered the prenup I signed. I didn't have a copy of it; Tom had it tucked away in his safe at work. But I knew clever Tom would make sure I got nothing from him. I was certain of that.

My future seemed bleak, uncertain – and feelings of hopelessness sapped away all my energy.

One day Warren was watching a television commercial for some pasta product. In the commercial, the father arrives home and says, "I'm home!" and his three kids rush to jump into his arms. They hug and kiss, after which the wife hugs and kisses the husband. The family appeared loving and so happy.

"Mom," Warren said, his eyes fixed on the family.

"Yes, honey?"

"Do daddies really hug their children like that?"

I stopped what I was doing and looked at Warren. Tom never hugged Warren. In fact, he barely acknowledged Warren, and when he did talk to Warren, it was to scold him about something or berate him for being a sissy.

"Look, Mom." Tears filled my eyes as I watched my son rewind the commercial and watch it again. Each time the children dived into their father's arms, Warren chuckled. "See that?"

It was the saddest moment in my life. I scooped up my son and held him to my breast as fat tears rolled down my cheeks. That was the moment that broke me. That was also the moment that I decided, come what may, I was going to leave Tom. He didn't deserve me or Warren.

It may have been the saddest moment in my life, but once I made a decision to leave Tom, I felt so much relief that it also became the happiest moment in my life.

Chapter Three

I began to save some of my housekeeping money. Saved it in a jar in Warren's room, which he seldom went into. But maybe I was too transparent, because when I returned from shopping one day, Tom was seated at the dining table, the money from the money jar spread out before him. "What's this?" he demanded.

My heart sank at the bust. I scrambled my brain for an answer. "Oh, just teaching Warren how to save money," I said in what I hoped was a casual voice.

His eyes narrowed at me. "There's over a thousand dollars here. I counted."

He counted.

"Well, I told him that if we save over five thousand dollars, and if he didn't nag me for toys all the time, we would surprise Daddy and buy tickets to Disneyland."

"Disneyland or … South Africa?" His tone of voice told me that he wasn't buying my story.

"What do you mean?"

For a few moments, he stared at me. Then he stood, scooped up all the money into the jar, and said, "I'll put it in the bank. It's safer there."

Devastated, I could only watch helplessly as he walked off with my hope, my freedom. It may only have been a thousand dollars to him, but to me it was everything.

After that, Tom watched me carefully and monitored every cent I spent. Wanted to see whatever I bought all the time. He had no problem with me buying stuff using the credit cards; it was just cash he didn't want me to have access to.

In fact, he loved it when I went shopping with my friends and bought tons of expensive and unnecessary stuff. When I returned home, he'd post-mortem my shopping expedition.

"Who'd you go with?"

"Did she see what you bought?"

"What did she say about it? Was she impressed?"

"Did she buy one too?"

As I said before, we had to have bigger, better, shinier, newer, or he wasn't happy. In his mind, Tom's life was one big race, one big competition, and he had to come first, had to win every race, all the time.

"Nobody remembers the person who came second," he always said. "To be noticed, you have to come first."

And he was a mean drunk. Whenever he got drunk, which he did after just two Johnny Walker Blue Labels because he hardly ate, he would lecture me on how fortunate I was.

"You are so lucky to have a husband like me. All your friends, they wish they had married me."

"If I were a woman, I'd be attracted to me, 'cause I am a *great* catch. No really, I am."

He was right; my superficial circle of friends thought he was something – man-extraordinaire, doting father (he was wonderful to Warren in the presence of people), loving husband (he always held my hand in public, looked deep into my eyes when we talked, cozied up to me in front of friends), successful businessman (he flaunted his money, paid when we took friends out to dinner, bought super expensive gifts for people), and a super-fit athlete, an iron man (he had a ton of trophies on display to prove it). *Don't you wish your husband was hot like mine?*

Meanwhile, with Tom monitoring my spending, my freedom eluded me, and that television commercial haunted me.

After much thought, I realized I needed a credit card to obtain my freedom. One that Tom didn't know about.

But I was not gainfully employed, so how did I get one? No bank would give me one. Instead of giving up, I decided I would find a way to obtain one. It would be a challenge, but one that I would overcome.

Out of sheer desperation, I lied on an application form about my employment status. Somehow, in a couple of months, I managed to secure myself a credit card! I was ecstatic.

The first step towards freedom. All because of a credit card with a measly limit of just five thousand dollars. To me, it was a key, and I treasured that key.

Now, Tom would search, and if he found the credit card, I would be in so much trouble. To prevent him from finding out, I put the card in a ziplock bag and stuck it in the freezer between the broccoli and spinach.

I went one step further and redirected all credit card mail to my post office box that I rented. Then I rented a storage facility in another suburb. I was excited by my baby steps. Tiny little steps towards my freedom. Hope blossomed inside of me, and it was responsible for the energy I suddenly had.

The first things I placed in my storage unit were certified copies of all Warren's and my documents. Then I started buying like crazy using Tom's credit cards. Bags, jewelry, clothing, designer jackets, designer boots – I went on major shopping sprees and chose expensive stuff.

Unlike most husbands, Tom didn't get upset at my spending; he was happy. "Glad to see you getting out of your slump," he said. "It's about time."

After showing Tom all my purchases, which he demanded to see, I would hang them up in my massive closet and quietly save all the wrapping from the items I purchased. In my storage locker, I saved every single wrapper, box, receipt, tag, manual – anything pertaining to the purchase.

After I left Tom, I would have no money, so I planned to sell the unused items on Ebay and use the money to live on. Because of the original wrapping and boxes, all the items would be brand new.

In my storage locker, I had a desk, a chair, and a laptop. Every second day, I would sit at the laptop and update my inventory. It was something I looked forward to.

Over a couple of months, I had amassed almost twenty grand worth of bags, jackets, shoes, dresses, make-up, toys, and soft furnishings. All designer.

Okay, so I would probably get half of what they were worth, but that would have to do. Until Warren was old enough for me to hold down a full-time job.

Even though I longed to use the money to go back to South Africa, I knew that if I left the country with Warren, Tom would, without hesitation, have me arrested. I would have to live in Sydney, so I needed to find a way to survive.

Each time I took a step towards my freedom, I got more energized, and the pillow moved farther and farther from my face.

Since I desperately needed support, I toyed with the idea of confiding in some of our friends. But Tom had me associating with people he deemed worthy of our friendship. People I found shallow and almost pretentious, and who made me feel small and inadequate. So in essence, I had no real friends, just shopping buddies. However, whenever one of my pretentious friends

received expensive jewelry, I made a point of telling Tom how wonderful her jewelry was and how much I admired it.

Lo and behold, my jealous and vain husband/abuser would better that – a bigger diamond, thicker gold, and more expensive. I would smile and store the present away, then stash the box and price tags in my precious storage facility.

The only hope I had in my life was my storage locker. It was like a shrine of freedom to me.

After I visited my locker and worked on my inventory, my spirits always soared.

Once, I was driving home from my storage unit when Nicki Minaj's "Freedom" played on the radio. I pumped up the volume as tears filled my eyes. *I feel free, I feel freedom…*

I didn't mind the profanity – I just loved the chorus. When will I sing those words*? I feel free, I feel freedom…*

At the thought of being completely free of Tom, tears rolled down my cheeks. One day I would taste freedom. I would fly like a bird and soar with my baby on my back.

One day…

But for now, I would take comfort in the fact that I was already feeling free. *Somewhat* free.

Chapter Four

I amped things up and regularly decluttered – cleared out my cupboards and Warren's. "Donated" stuff to charity. Made a huge noise about it for Tom's benefit. Updated and upgraded stuff around my entire house, to his delight. He loved it when I redecorated, especially since he got to choose everything new.

But I wasn't donating to charity. All my old stuff was carted off to my storage locker. All the TVs, CD players, bedside lamps, kitchen utensils, furniture, and soft furnishings Tom thought I gave away were in my storage unit, ready for my new home. My nest was growing and freedom was within striking distance.

Tom did not want me on birth control, but God forbid I got pregnant while I was trying to escape his clutches, so quietly, I took a contraceptive injection.

But I experienced an adverse reaction to the injection and had to switch back to the pill, which I hid in my freezer next to my illicit credit card among the frozen Brussels sprouts and cauliflower. The freezer was coming in pretty handy these days. Who knew frozen vegetables could multitask?

My fear that he would find out my plans to leave him caused me such panic attacks that at times I threw up from nerves.

I knew that for some reason – and God knows why – Tom didn't want to lose me. He couldn't live without me for long. Never once did I kid myself that it was because he loved me too much. He only loved himself. It was the *control* that he needed. Without that control, he floundered.

He was a pretty guarded and private individual, so I didn't know much about his childhood. But I knew that he had severed all ties with his family a long time ago. It became obvious very quickly that he was extremely jealous of the close relationship I had with my mom and my three siblings. He was especially jealous of my relationship with my darling brother Ritchie. Like most abusers, he had lured me away from my family so that he could control me.

Then disaster. During one of my visits to my doctor, he smiled and said, "Congratulations, Arena. You're going to have a baby."

"Wha…what?"

"You're pregnant."

"I can't be!" I whispered. "No!"

Dr. Jackson's smile vanished.

"No, no, no, no, no!" I cried.

My doctor stared slack-jawed as I broke down and cried in his office. Sobbed.

"Arena, what on earth is going on?" my doctor finally asked.

Dr. Jackson's voice was so gentle that I felt like blurting, "I don't want to have this baby. How can I possibly bring another child into this marriage when I live with a tyrant who terrorizes our three year old? Warren is not allowed to be a child, he is not allowed to leave toys around, he's not allowed to have tantrums, he's not allowed to run around barefoot. He's constantly bullied and mocked by his father. He is forced to grow up quickly or face his cruel father's wrath. I can't have this baby, Doctor. Make it go away. Please." That's what I really wanted to say. But Dr. Jackson played squash with Tom every Friday, so…

"Talk to me, Arena."

"Hormones," I muttered and hurriedly left Dr. Jackson's office.

Tom was ecstatic with the pregnancy and threw a lavish party, where he showered me with jewelry. This time, I accepted the jewelry with a smile. When I look back, I think Tom liked the idea of more kids simply because they displayed his virility, and they were nooses around my neck. Most importantly, they would keep me dependent on him.

From the moment he met me, he was always afraid of losing me. When we first met, I was carefree, but quite confident. He had to work really hard to get me, so it baffled me as to why he treated me the way he did.

It was a difficult pregnancy – I had several miscarriage scares, and I had to be admitted to the hospital at various stages of my pregnancy. No way could I leave Tom now. The noose tightened, and deep down, I resented this baby who had brought the pillow closer to my face.

Then, on a cold July morning, a beautiful, bouncy, blue-eyed angel with lips like rosebuds and skin like satin was placed in my arms.

She was the image of my sister, and I just melted as I held my heart in my arms for the second time in my life. All resentment of her flew out the window. She was so soft and delicate that I vowed never to let Tom harm her.

"We shall call her Sasha," Tom announced. I had no say in the naming of either of my kids, whatsoever.

He didn't hurt Sasha, but he grew increasingly impatient and mean towards Warren for no reason. When Warren would cry, he would call him dumb or sissy or stupid and offer him Sasha's pacifier.

When I intervened, he would get furious, accuse me of taking Warren's side, and then he'd terrorize Warren even further.

It was flabbergasting to realize that Tom didn't see Warren as his son; he saw him as his competition, as another *man*.

One night, while reading a bedtime story to Warren, who had been crying earlier on, I stopped and whispered, "Warren, soon you, me, and Sasha, we're going to leave this house and live away from Daddy."

His eyes lit up. "Really, Mom?"

I nodded and put my finger to my lips. "Don't tell Daddy, okay? Our little secret."

He took my finger from my lips and tapped it to his. "You promise, Mom?"

"I promise, honey. And I'm even going to allow you a dog. A teeny one. Not right away, but soon after we settle down."

His eyes filled with delight. "We gonna live without mean old Daddy?"

I nodded. "So when Daddy is mean, just remember that soon we are going to say bye-bye to him and live just by ourselves."

"Then can I run around the house and play hide-and-seek in it?"

"Absolutely."

"Can I yell?"

"Absolutely."

"Can I eat in the TV room?"

"Absolutely."

"Can I…can I walk around without my shoes?"

"Absolutely!"

"I can?" He threw his arms around me and hugged me hard, and my heart ached for my son who wanted to kick off his shoes when he was inside his house.

After that, every night I would read him a quick bedtime story, then talk more about our life without Tom.

"Will I be able to leave my toys lying around?"

"While you are playing, yes!"

"Awesome, Mom."

"Would I be able to…?"

It would be question after question, and he would eventually fall asleep with a smile on his face.

When Tom wasn't around, Warren and I packed a suitcase for him, stuff that he could take in a hurry, then hid the suitcase in the storage locker. Sasha's suitcase and mine were also packed and hidden. Only my jewelry couldn't be packed in advance. I worried about that, as I needed my jewelry so that I could sell it and survive.

In spite of my concerns, our freedom was so close that I became really excited. Because of that, I was able to tolerate Tom's continued abuse.

Having two kids drained me of energy, and I just wasn't able to look the part Tom wanted. I had not lost the baby weight, and because I was sleep-deprived, I didn't have the energy to exercise and be glamorous.

I would awake two to three times a night for Sasha, and then be up at 7 a.m. to give Tom his wheatgrass and quinoa, then get Warren ready for preschool and drive him to it. The day with baby Sasha was a blur and before I knew it, it was time to pick up Warren again. I was constantly exhausted.

That didn't sit well in Tom's perfect world. To him, my exhaustion and failure to look less than perfect was simply an excuse.

"Look at Victoria Beckham. She lost the weight like that!" He snapped his fingers. "She has *four* children, and yet she has an amazing figure. Four! How many children do you have?" He'd cup his hand to his ear. "Sorry, didn't hear you…what did you say…? Ah yes, two children. Not three, not four, just *two*. Oh, and let's not forget that you *don't* have a fashion empire to run."

He didn't hesitate to criticize my appearance at every opportunity.

"Am I supposed to introduce you as my wife while you wear *that*?"

"What's with those granny shoes?"

"Are you wearing sweat pants again?"

"Look at Elizabeth Hurley – she lost the baby weight within weeks with that watercress soup or whatever. Why can't you? I'll google the recipe for you if you like."

"How many children has Angelina got? Her own children?"

Berated, belittled, and beaten, I could no longer bear it. Sasha was three months old, Warren was four years old – it was time to leave this toxic environment, I decided.

The question was, when? How? Do I just walk out and leave him a note? Do I talk to him and say goodbye?

I didn't know just how to do it, so I floundered a bit.

Chapter Five

I had gone shopping one Saturday morning with just Sasha. Unable to handle two children while shopping, I left Warren with Tom. Reluctantly, at that. However, I hurried with my shopping and tried to rush back before any drama could take place.

When I arrived home to find Warren sitting on a chair facing the wall, his chin buried in his chest, his body jerking with silent tears, I went berserk.

"Warren? What's wrong? Why are you crying, Warren? Why are you sitting –"

Warren put a shaking hand to his lips, his eyes as wide as saucers. "Don't talk, M…Mom, or you'll get into t…trouble too."

Furious at seeing my son so broken by his father, I pulled his hand away from his lips, then hugged him.

Tom entered the room. "Get away from him!"

"No, he's four, Tom," I yelled. "You can't do this to him!"

I had never yelled at Tom before, so for a few moments, he looked at me in surprise. After he recovered, he grabbed me by the collar and hauled me away from Warren.

Warren started to scream, then Sasha started to cry.

"You don't want to listen to me, you can go!" Tom said as he dragged me towards the front door.

"Okay, okay, okay," I said, not wanting to be separated from my kids. "You are right. He needs discipline."

Tom's shoulders relaxed.

"Let me cool off a bit and I'll be fine. I'm sorry."

"That's better," Tom said and released my neck.

A couple minutes later, I approached Tom. "I need to buy a gift for Thea's party tonight. Forgot all about it. I'll just nip into the shops. Can you handle Sasha for half an hour?"

After hesitating, he reluctantly nodded.

I raced to the banks, and using both of Tom's credit cards, withdrew five thousand dollars from each account. Slipping the ten grand in my bra, I dialed the cops. Quickly, I explained that I was leaving my husband and that I needed help. "I just need the cops to be present so that there is no drama," I said. "Please."

They agreed.

Feeling a little confident, I drove towards my home and lingered at the end of my street. When I saw the cop car, I followed them to my house.

Tom's jaw dropped when he saw the cops behind me.

"I'm taking the children and I'm leaving," I said.

"Why?" His voice was almost a whisper.

"Because I don't like the way you treat me and I don't like the way you treat Warren, Tom. I can't take it anymore."

For a few moments, his eyes became granite and his lips thinned. "Really?"

I nodded. In spite of his tangible fury, he threw out his hands and shrugged. "If that's what you want, then…"

He was playing it cool for the cops. I knew his modus operandi. But I didn't care. Freedom had arrived. In a few moments, I would be free.

I left my kids with a female officer and rushed around gathering stuff. Luckily, most of it was already packed and hidden, but I wanted to take as much as I could.

"Keep him downstairs," I whispered to the cops.

They did, and I was able to get my jewelry from the safe as well. The jewelry would probably bring me another twenty grand, if not more, I thought as I shoved all of it into my pockets.

Tom was so quiet, I think he was shell-shocked.

But Tom, being Tom, couldn't stay silent for long. When the cops' backs were turned, he walked into my bedroom, leaned in and whispered, "I will get you for this."

I didn't answer, but continued packing.

"Hear me, Arena, I am going to hurt you in such a way, you will never recover from it. You will never be the same. Never!"

I paused with my packing, but did not look at him. I was too scared to. "What, you want to kill me, Tom?"

"Nope. Want you to live. Feel every day. Hurt every day. Wait and see."

Slowly I turned to look at him. There was so much venom in his look, a chill ran through me.

Would he maim me, perhaps?

Unhinged by his cold threats, I raced downstairs, took Sasha from the cop, took hold of Warren's hand, and started to leave my palatial home in St Ives, one of Sydney's most affluent suburbs.

I still had my keys to the house, and I hoped that when he wasn't around, I could slip in and take some more of my things.

"I want her keys," Tom told the cops.

Damn!

Without arguing, I removed my house key from my bunch of keys and gave it to him. What he didn't know was that I had another set made in anticipation of this. Hopefully, he wouldn't change the alarm code to the house.

I bundled my kids into my car and started to drive towards a women's shelter I had cased a few months ago.

I could afford a hotel room for the night, but I had read somewhere that to show real abuse, a woman should try to spend a night in a shelter. It strengthened her case of abuse later on. I didn't know if that was true, but I did it anyway.

As I drove with the cops following me, I looked back at my son. "This is it, Warren," I said in a shaky voice. "We're going on a little holiday first, then on Monday, we are going to find an apartment and then we are going to –"

"– Live happily ever after, Mom?"

I laughed even though tears ran down my cheeks. "Exactly, my baby."

At the next traffic light, I leaned back and put out my hand. "Hit me!"

With broad grins, we high-fived each other.

"I gotta get our song," I said, and searched for my freedom song on my CD track. When it came on, I cranked up the volume.

"Sing with me, Warren! *I feel free*…"

And he did.

I was free.

We were free.

Finally, I could sing my song of freedom and smile, even though tears of joy and utter relief ran down my cheeks.

Chapter Six

At the shelter, I was given a cubicle the size of a small bathroom for me and my kids. I didn't mind one bit – it was another step towards total freedom. The people, just about all volunteers, were friendly, supportive, and most helpful. I voraciously gathered a ton of information about support groups in the area and government assistance for women in my situation, all of which I planned to use.

At night, I kept my kids close and slept soundly, to my surprise.

I awoke each morning with a smile – the albatross from around my weary neck had flown, and freedom tasted better than anything I had ever tasted in my life.

That Monday morning, I dropped off Warren at his school in St Ives, which was paid for till the end of the year, and with Sasha in a stroller, I set about finding an apartment.

It was exhausting, but by 2 p.m. that afternoon, I had found one with the security I needed. It was expensive – way more than I expected. With the rental bond and the first month's rent, I was down five grand – a massive hole in my cash reserves. But security was something I just had to have because of Tom's threats, so I had no choice but to accept it. The building had swipe card entry to *everything,* and floor restriction too, which made me feel really safe.

I moved in forty-eight hours later, and the first night, we slept on the floor. But that was okay. Soon I would have all that I needed.

"It's like we're camping, honey," I said to Warren.

"What's that?" he asked.

I ruffled his hair and made a mental note to take Warren camping. Tom refused to camp. Everything had to be five-star with him.

My apartment was tiny – one bedroom, a kitchenette, a tiny lounge/dining area, and a narrow balcony. But it was secure, centrally situated, and…did I mention that I was free?

I was so heady with excitement that I couldn't stop smiling.

"What about Daddy, Mom?" Warren asked.

"Warren, this is now *our* home, honeybee. You will visit Daddy sometimes, but you will live here with me."

"But, he's never going to visit us here, right?" Warren asked, a look in his eyes that could be described as wary or hopeful.

"Nope."

"You promise, Mom?"

I hugged him to me. "I promise, my darling."

My laptop, iPad, and iPhone came in handy. After cancelling my email account and creating a new one (in case Tom had my password for my old email account), I found a website which supported abused women and made contact with them. After interrogating me to ensure I wasn't just some abusive husband's snitch, a lovely kind lady by the name of Fatima paid me a visit.

She gave me names of other women in the area who were in the same situation, who could support me and, I guess, become my friend. You know, same hole-filled boat…

She also sent some students over to help move my stuff from the storage unit into my apartment.

My apartment started to look, as Warren put it, heaps cool. We assembled beds, packed away kitchen utensils, and although I was dropping with exhaustion, I was humming.

As expected, Tom cancelled all my credit cards the afternoon that I left him. I was expecting that, and that's where my plan B came in – my items in my storage unit, the ten grand I carried around in my bra, and the five grand that my secret credit card would allow me to withdraw to pay for the apartment.

Tom also cancelled my phone contract. I was expecting that too, and already had my old iPhone in my storage unit with all my contacts backed up. So far, I was ahead of him, and that gave me confidence to believe I could outsmart Tom and make it on my own.

As for Centrelink, or government benefits, imagine my shock and horror to learn that I was being denied.

"Your husband has annotated an annual income of greater than two hundred thousand dollars, Mrs. Botha. And according to him, you have received more than half of that."

"I haven't," I protested, but my pleas fell on deaf ears. I was denied benefits. Tom didn't have to declare anything, but he chose to in order to punish me.

I was floored. I was counting on Centrelink benefits to survive. How would I manage without it?

My smile disappeared and my confidence plummeted. Who the hell did I think I was taking on an astute businessman like Tom?

But, I summoned my strengths and decided I would engage the services of a legal aid attorney and fight Centrelink. I would not give up just because they said no.

Then, I was denied the services of a legal aid attorney. Apparently, my husband's income was too high to qualify for free legal help. A double whammy that left me hyperventilating.

What had I done? I'm embarrassed to say, I actually panicked and thought about returning to Tom. What good was freedom when you were going to starve to death? When you and two little kids were going to starve?

But Fatima, seeing my distress, rushed to my rescue and quickly *wrangled* me the services of a legal aid lawyer, Gina King, to assist me with Centrelink. Together we would have to prove that I had not received that kind of money. Though it would take months, maybe even a year, I had something called hope after that.

In the meantime, my frugal existence continued.

For a while after that, I was scared and suffered bouts of self-doubt. But my inner strength and the desire to protect my babies was so strong that it overrode all my fears and propelled me along. Soon my spirits lifted again and my smile returned.

To increase my support, I made contact with other abused women in the vicinity referred to me by Fatima. To my surprise and delight, one of them lived in the same building as me.

Soong Richardson was a sassy mail-order bride from Thailand who decided to flee her abusive fifty-nine-year-old Australian husband with her five-year-old son, Charlie.

She'd been in the country for six years, and her English was fairly good. Around twenty-five, pretty, and streetwise, Soong was not embarrassed to tell everyone that she had been raised in a brothel in Thailand and put to work at the tender age of four.

I learned that she was subjected to horrific abuse in the hands of her employers, and her tales made me cry – like the time she got pregnant from a client, was taken for an abortion, and within twenty-four hours, was put to work again. Because she was still bleeding from the abortion and weak from the blood loss, her employers cut her a break – she was to give only oral sex to customers.

When a fifty-something Australian man asked her to be his wife and promised her a wonderful life in a land called Australia if she agreed, she thought she'd hit the jackpot and readily accepted.

Turns out he was a sexual deviant who wanted her to wear a leather mask, chains, and gags, and wanted to stuff things into every orifice of hers. At the same time. *All* the time.

She explained that even though she had been a prostitute, after she had a baby, she no longer wanted to do all those things, and she had seriously believed that she had put her past behind her.

"Honey," she said in broken English, "he give me *Fifty Shades of Grey* and he say, 'Soong you must read this book and do me like that.'

I laughed out loud.

"I say, 'I know more than that book, so fuck you.' Then I leave him."

Like me, Soong was taking control of her life once again. With the help of Centrelink, she was currently studying to become a remedial massage therapist.

I may have laughed at her story, at bits of it, but my situation was not that much different from hers. I too was a mail-order bride (except that my English was perfect). I understand that now.

Tom had left South Africa for Australia years ago, returned to South Africa in search of a bride, found me, then wooed me into marrying him at the tender age of nineteen and fresh out of high school. He enticed me into moving to Australia, promising that together, we would pave the way for my family to immigrate to Australia, using his business.

Until I met him, I had never traveled and was pretty green about…*everything*. So I believed him.

But like all abusers, I understand now that he just wanted to isolate me from everyone, leaving me without support, alone, defenseless, and totally reliant on him.

He succeeded at everything. But that was Tom; he finished what he started. Always.

As for *Fifty Shades of Grey*, mine was slightly different – Pamela and Tommy Lee, remember? As I said, just *slightly* different from Soong.

Even though Soong constantly called me "Honey," and out of habit talked to me like she was talking to a past client, I really liked her warmth and caring nature. She was rough, a fighter, a real loudmouth – but her heart was in the right place.

I think she pitied me, because she became very protective towards me. I was really grateful for her friendship and for her big-sister attitude.

We soon became firm friends and…a huge bonus – our boys loved playing together. I watched her son and she watched mine.

Often she would show up at my apartment after my kids had gone to bed, clutching her text books and with tears in her eyes. She didn't understand so many aspects of her studies because of the language barrier, and it frustrated her to tears.

I readily helped her understand, and at times, even did her assignments for her, then explained it to her like I was talking to Warren.

At times like that, I was really grateful that I was fluent in English.

In fact, I had so many things to be grateful for that I kept a Gratitude Journal and counted my blessings on a daily basis, something my mother had taught me to do.

Especially when I became anxious, which was often. Two children under the age of four, one a baby, no family or close friends to support you – I challenge any woman in my position not to be bludgeoned by bouts of anxiousness and self-doubt.

With regards to my financial situation – a quick calculation revealed that I could only be home with Sasha for about four months if I was frugal. *Really* frugal.

I tried not to think about leaving Sasha with a nanny. She was so little, and she really needed me so much.

In the meantime, even though we didn't have money, we would have fun. I made sure of that.

We played music every day. Tom only allowed us to listen to classical music, and he literally banned all modern music from our house. Now I rebelled like a teenager, and we played absolutely *no* classical music. Pop, country, R&B, rap, boom-boom music, heavy metal, head-banging rubbish, as Tom called it – we played it *all*. All our music had words and drums.

I would put on the music and dance with Warren while Sasha cooed in her baby cradle.

We were excited, we were happy, and life was good.

Even though we had meager meals and I wasted nothing, even though we had only the bare necessities in our apartment, even though we never had take-out, and even though there was no money for new toys, or even money for McDonald's, we were laughing.

I splurged on an online accounting course. I figured that accounting was something I could manage from home. My Ebay business cruised along, but since a lot of my stuff was designer, sales were slow. I didn't mind. I worked hard with the intention of making it.

The amounts I was offered for my jewelry by pawn shops were ridiculous, so I decided to sell them online. There too, sales were slow.

When Sasha was six months old, I secured a work-from-home position from a local print shop. Even though Laura, the owner, had wanted someone to work from her shop, I convinced her that I could be just as efficient working from home, and that if she didn't like it, she didn't have to pay me. She too had a six-month-old baby, so I guess she understood, because she agreed.

When she saw how and what I had done in a week, she was thrilled and kept me on. In fact, she even paid me to watch her child some days, which added to my income.

To cope, I woke up at 5 a.m. and worked till 7:30 a.m., uninterrupted. Then I'd work when Sasha napped, and late at night when the kids were asleep.

I was excited about the steady income and scouted around for more jobs, even though I had little time left in the day for more work. But little Sasha was such a lovely baby, that at times, I swear she understood my workload, my struggles, and she did her share by being good.

Soon I landed an accounting job at a local swim school for three hours a day, two days a week. And…they allowed me to bring my baby to work! Roses.

After a while, they too were happy with what I had produced, and didn't even mind that I did most of the work from home.

With all the work I was doing to earn money, my housework suffered and I was pretty unkempt, but I didn't care – I had no pressure from anyone to be anything other than myself and to do my thing. Freedom.

One morning, I caught a glimpse of the woman in the mirror. I stopped and took a closer look. The girl that stared back at me was someone I had forgotten – my pre-Tom self. My hair had grown really long. Tom always wanted me to wear it in a bob, just below my ears, and the color had to be deep mahogany, remember? Now it was the lightest brown with not a hint of red in it, and it was tousled and unstructured. It was, dare I say – sexy.

My clothing had also changed. I wore mainly jeans and casual tops these days. Tom wanted me dressed to impress all day, from the time I woke up, to the time I went to bed. He wanted, no, make that *insisted,* that I wear coordinates, pumps, and full make-up. He abhorred sneakers.

But now I was wearing only moisturizer, lip gloss, *sneakers*, not an ounce of green concealer, a pair of jeans with a casual sweater, and guess what – my clothes weren't coordinated!

I took a step toward the mirror and smiled at the woman in it. "You pretty li'l thing, you. Look at you – you've lost weight, your eyes are shining, and you're just the picture of happiness."

I then kissed the mirror and laughed out loud. For the first time that I could remember, I heard myself laugh and…I liked my laugh. In fact, I liked myself. For the first time.

Chapter Seven

The legal aid attorney, Gina King, wrote to Tom and informed him that she was representing me, and that he could contact me through their offices.

Gina went on to inform him that I was happy to meet to arrange visitation with him and the children. She informed him that I was open to him seeing the children as often as possible, but for formality's sake, we wanted to stipulate visitation days.

How would Tom reply? I wondered. Tell me to go to hell? Demand to see his kids every day? Fight me for custody? I held my breath and waited for his response.

We got none.

Gina wrote to him a few weeks later and again, we got no response. He was eerily quiet, and that made me really nervous.

Six weeks later, Gina served him with a summons for separation and divorce. Shortly thereafter, Gina received a letter from one of the largest attorneys in Sydney – Gerr, West and Mart – who notified us that they would be representing Tom in the divorce. Oddly, Tom made no demands.

My biggest fear was that he would fight for custody. He didn't, so I, in turn, asked for nothing, even though we had three residential properties, a commercial building, and a thriving business. I was happy to walk away with my freedom, and child support to feed my kids.

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"I can't go, Soong," I said. "I'd rather save the twenty dollars for food and diapers and…stuff."

"But Honey needs to go out and have fun. Otherwise Honey get dull and then…"

"But then, Soong, there's also the issue of a babysitter. I'd have to pay her and…"

Being the problem solver that she was, and being the good friend she was, Soong bought me a ticket to the local dance. Not only that, but she engaged in some old fashioned bartering – she arranged for a mother of some Thai girl she knew called Julie to watch over both my two kids and little Charlie. In exchange for babysitting, Soong would give the mother a massage, and I would help Julie with a TAFE English assignment. How could I argue with that?

The dance was just six minutes away from my apartment, so I could be home in no time if there was a problem.

I was really excited after that. My first solo outing since I had left high school. I had enough pretty clothes and stilettos already, so that problem was solved.

With Rihanna's "I Just Wanna Dance" playing in the background, I exfoliated, painted my nails, shaved my legs, plucked my eyebrows, and finally, I was ready. I looked in the mirror and smiled. I looked nice. Different. Pretty.

"Ready, honey?"

When I saw what Soong was wearing, I groaned inwardly. She was dressed in a tiny cerise sequined skirt, a cerise boob-tube, magenta glitter lipstick, and big clear heels. She had colored her hair blonde, and it was a really bad, patchy job. She looked like, dare I say it – a hooker.

"What you think so of my clothes?" she asked, turning around slowly, an expectant look on her face. "What you think so?"

What could I say? She was feeling great and she was comfortable in her skin of magenta and glitter.

"You look great," I lied.

She frowned at me. "Why you no ready, Arena?"

I looked down at my strappy black top and my stilettos and shrugged. "What's wrong with –"

"Nah, nah, nah!" she said. "You look fifty years old. Honey must get sexified." She circled her boobs, then stuck out her butt. "You look old!"

I sighed and fished into my cupboards for a top that showed cleavage so that I wouldn't look fifty. I found a silver-and-black top that bunched under the breasts.

She gave a thumbs-up to the top, but she shook her head at my jeans.

"Okay, fine," I muttered and went in search of a black skirt.

She looked at the black Tokito bandage skirt and frowned. "Give it to me."

I handed it to her. To my absolute horror, she ripped a part of the skirt off. "Now wear it."

"Soooong!" I cried. "That skirt was so –"

"Put it on, put it on!"

Still stunned, I put on the skirt.

She clapped her hands. "Hundred percent."

As I looked in the mirror, I had to admit, it wasn't bad, even though it was ripped. In fact, I looked sexy.

"Honey get husband tonight."

"Oh, no," I said, as I grabbed my purse and followed her out. "I do *not* want a husband."

"Or a fuck then," she said. "Casual fuck."

"Oh, no!" I chuckled. "Not that either, thank you."

"What? You no lika fuck?"

I shook my head and stuck out my bottom lip. "I actually hate it."

She blinked rapidly at me. "Because of your husband?"

I nodded.

"No worries, Honey," she said, patting my back in a reassuring manner. "Right man and Honey will love to fuck."

I doubted it. "Yeah…"

****

The dance was a blast. I was not going to spend my money on drinks, but Soong solicited drinks for us with absolute ease. Before I knew it, I had had three shots of tequila and a vodka Red Bull. Tipsy and happy, I celebrated my newfound freedom by dancing for the first time since I had met Tom the way I wanted to – with my hands in the air and without inhibition. Tom didn't approve of "wild" dancing, only ballroom-style dancing. He and I even had lessons, which to me were so boring. I wanted to salsa and Zumba, but Tom would have been absolutely aghast had I done that.

With Soong and her friends, we unleashed ourselves on the dance floor. We danced all the time and only took breaks to catch our breath. Exhibited ourselves.

I was not short of male attention and had to turn down quite a few offers from guys who wanted to buy me drinks. Soong had warned me about being roofied, so I wouldn't have accepted drinks from anyone other than her, anyway.

But, I was secretly pleased that I could command attention from men. I had thought that I had lost my mojo somewhere between motherhood and Tom's smothering, but evidently, I still had it. My ego was stroked big time.

At around midnight, mindful of my babysitter, I made plans to leave.

"Okay, Honey," Soong said, sounding disappointed at having to leave her squeeze called Mike, an Aussie guy with shiny green eyes and a naughty smile.

"You don't have to come, Soong. I will take care of Charlie."

Her eyes lit up. "You sure, Honey?"

"Yeah, of course, have fun. I'll see you tomorrow," I said with a wink.

"Hundred percent, Honey!" She ran off to dance with Mike.

As I stepped out of the dance hall, I removed my heels and started my six minute limp home. Served me right for dancing non-stop on stilettos.

It was a safe area and there were quite a few people around, so I wasn't afraid of walking home. The night was balmy and had a holiday feel to it. For a while, I enjoyed the solitude of being on my own. No kids. A rare thing.

But as I walked home, I couldn't help feeling like I was being watched. Tom! My heart quickened.

When I turned around, I saw a big, tall guy behind me. Fear snaked through me. I had seen him at the dance, watching me. He wore an open checked shirt over a white t-shirt, cargo pants, a beanie, and brown boots. He had a beard and a thick mustache – hairy, scary.

I quickened my pace, kept to the lit-up sections of the road, and hurried home. But I could hear his footsteps behind me. When I quickened my steps, so did he. I broke into a trot and cleared my throat, ready to scream if I needed to.

Finally, I reached my building, but he was still behind me. Quickly and with shaking hands, I swiped my card and darted into the building. When I glanced behind me, he was entering my building. How the hell did he get inside? I wondered. Had I left the door open in my haste to get away from him? He didn't look like he lived here – to me, he looked like a homeless person.

With my heart thumping, I raced into an open elevator and hit the "'Door Close" button. He began to advance towards me, his eyes focusing intently on me.

Close! Close! Close! I prayed to the elevator as my heart slammed inside my chest. Luckily, the doors shut. In his face too.

Shaking, I ran to my apartment, opened the door, ran inside, and locked it. It took a while for my heart to return to its normal state.

I made a mental note not to walk alone at night. This homeless guy, or whoever he was, had freaked me out something terrible. I also made a mental note to get some mace.

Soong probably spent the night with Mike, because at 11 a.m. the next morning, she was still not home. I decided to take the three kids to the park. "C'mon, kids!" I said as I tried to bundle them into the elevator. Just as the elevator doors were closing, a huge hand slipped through it and held it open.

To my horror, it was the homeless man. He got into the elevator and glared at me. My mouth, already dry from the alcohol I had consumed the night before, went drier. My legs became wobbly and my throat constricted with terror. Was he going to rob me? Steal my wallet? Drag me away from my kids and rape me somewhere in a dark corner of the building?

"Hello," Charlie said.

"Hello," the man muttered.

No, don't! I wanted to scream at Charlie.

Warren smiled at him.

No don't Warren! Don't look at him, don't smile at him, just be ready to run.

Luckily, the moment I got out of the elevator, there were people all around. I grabbed the children and guided them away from the homeless man as quickly as I could.

It was the scariest elevator ride I had ever endured in my life.

Hours later, on my way back, I bumped into Soong in the foyer, and to my absolute horror, she was laughing with the homeless man.

I waved at her and quickly scurried away. What is wrong with Soong? Why isn't that guy scaring the hell out of her?

Later, when she and I got to my apartment, I tackled her about it. "Why were you talking to the homeless man? He's so –"

"He not homeless, Honey. He cop."

I stared at her for a moment. "What? That guy with the checked shirt and that horrible beard? He's a cop?"

She nods. "Underwear cop, I think."

"Underwear?" I squinted at her. "You mean, under*cover* cop?"

She gave me the thumbs-up. "Hundred percent, Honey."

"No way. He can't be that. No friggin' way, Soong."

"Is," she insisted.

"Really? Wow! I thought he was a homeless man, Soong."

She laughed.

"I thought he was going to snatch my purse or kill me with a knife, take me behind the building and rape me. Gosh, I was shit scared."

She laughed. "Really? Honey was so scared?"

"Oh yes," I said. "I wanted to run out of the elevator when he entered."

She laughed her head off and slapped me on the back. "You are so paranormal, Honey."

"Para*noid*," I corrected.

Chapter Eight

Soong and I were standing outside my door talking about Mike, the guy she was now seeing, when we saw the homeless man, or the *underwear* cop. After throwing me a dirty look, he smiled at Soong. "Hey Soong! How'd your last assignment go?"

"Is fucking shiiiit," Soong said with a laugh. "Fifty-five percent only."

"Aw, that's too bad. But you passed, right?"

Soong nodded. "But I pass, so is good."

He put out his hand. Soong high-fived him.

To my surprise, he opened the door of the apartment…*across* from me. I looked at Soong with big eyes. He hadn't been following me, he had been returning to his apartment! And to think I closed the elevator doors on him. Crap! I made a mental note not to get so para…*normal* in the future. My mind was littered with mental notes, as you can see.

"Bear, you meet my friend Arena?"

Underwear Cop looked directly at me and for the first time I noticed cobalt eyes. "Yeah, she's the one who shut the elevator on me," he complained in a baritone voice.

"Oh, sorry about that," I mumbled, my face flaming.

His name was Bear? Really? He looked like one though.

"That's because she think you are homeless man," Soong said and collapsed into fits of giggles.

Bear frowned. "Whaaaat?"

Soong shut up!

"She from St Ives, you know. And she South African *too*. She get very scared of you that night."

His bushy eyebrows shot up as he eyed me in disbelief.

Soong, shut up!

"Homeless?" He made a point of checking out his threads. "Homeless…"

"She say…" Soong continued laughing, "she say…she think you steal her purse and –"

"Whaaaat?"

"Sooooooong!" I hissed. "Will you stop?"

"– take her in the side of the building and rape her."

"Rape her? Me? Is your friend nuts?"

My hands flew to cover my face, while Soong laughed harder.

With an amused smile on his face, Bear folded his arms across his chest, widened the gap between his legs, and eyed me.

"Whaaat?" Soong asked, still laughing. "I lie? I no lie, right? My story hundred percent."

I gave a dismissive wave and groaned with embarrassment. "I…I gotta go," I muttered and shut the door on their laughter.

"So what else did she say?" I heard him ask.

Behind the closed door, I shoved all my knuckles into my mouth and cringed. What else was she saying to him?

Oh God! He was my neighbor – how do I handle living across from him after all the things I said about the man?

****

Two days later, I found myself next to Bear waiting for the elevator, stroller in hand. Immediately, my face felt hot. “Hi,” I muttered.

“Hi,” he returned. The twinkle in his eye told me that he found my embarrassment highly entertaining.

For a few moments, we stood in strained silence, but I was aware of a smirk on his hairy face.

Finally, I could bear it no more. I whirled to look up at him. “Look, I’m sorry I said those things. I didn’t know that you’re a cop and I just…I was scared, okay, and really, I shouldn’t have said all those things because –”

“Relax,” he said in a rich, highly amused voice. “*Neighbor*.”

I fell silent and bit my bottom lip.

The elevator arrived and he held the door open for me.

“Thank you,” I said, feeling like something between a fool and a nutcase.

“You’re welcome,” he said, his eyes crinkling at the sides.

I walked on.

“So, you don’t like beards, then?” he said from behind me.

“Oh God!” I groaned. “She told you –”

“– *everything*. And if I were you, I would turn red too.” He looked like he was trying not to laugh out loud.

I shook my head and looked up at the ceiling. “Remind me never to rob a bank with her. Maybe I should move. To the moon, Mars, wherever!”

He laughed.

My head dropped. “I’m sorry. I…gosh, I haven’t been this embarrassed in a long time.” I looked up at him. “At least you’re entertained, right?”

“Well, yeah. I haven’t been this entertained in a long time. And you should be sorry, and you should be doing everything to make it up to me.”

I gave an embarrassed chuckle. “When my ship comes in, I will buy you a cup of hot chocolate,” I said. “Howzat?”

He appeared to think about it. “With marshmallows?”

I smiled. “It’s fifty cents more, but hey, you’re so worth it, I’m sure.”

We both laughed as the elevator reached the ground floor.

“Have a nice day,” I said to Bear as I left the elevator.

“You too,” he said, and disappeared around the corner.

****

We bumped into each other often in the building, and whenever we did, we shared knowing smiles and some light banter. He high-fived Warren, talked to Sasha, and seemed friendly with all the residents in the building.

“You should know that Soong called you paranormal,” he said.

“You should know that Soong called you an underwear cop,” I said in a smartarse voice.

We both laughed once again.

Most of the time after our encounters in the building or in the elevator, I left red-faced, but smiling. He came across as a little shy, and I think that’s why he hid behind all that facial hair. Knowing that he was shy made me a little bolder.

One day, I turned to him and said, "I've invited Soong and Mike to dinner. Would you like to come too?"

He looked taken aback by my invite. Had I perhaps been a little too bold? Too forward?

"Eh, when?"

"Tomorrow night. Before you say yes, I must warn you, it's a *simple* dinner."

What I meant was, it wasn't going to be a sit-down, four-course, catered dinner like I used to throw when I was married to Tom the tyrant.

"Eh…"

"It's okay if you can't or you don't want to. I mean, like I understand and –"

"Arena!"

I stopped babbling.

"I have my daughter with me. Would you mind if I brought her along?"

I looked at him in surprise. I had no idea he had kids. Was he married? Oh no, did I just assume he was single and make an ass out of just me?

"Sure. Absolutely. Of course. How old is she?"

"Four."

"Perfect! Warren would love it. "You're not married, right?" I had to ask.

"No, not at all."

I nodded. Thank God!

"Well, then I'd love to come to dinner and…simple is good. What can I bring?"

"Oh, just some wine, perhaps."

"Okay. I'm looking forward to your cooking."

"Oh." I bit my bottom lip again. "Hope I don't disappoint you."

"You'd better not," he said with a smile. "You have a lot of making up to do. Rape, homeless, shutting the elevator on me…a lot, remember?"

"Oh shaddup!" I muttered, wanting the earth to open up and swallow me right then and there.

He laughed. "See you tomorrow night."

I couldn't believe that I had actually asked a guy out. How daring was that? Brazen. This really was the new me, I thought.

Mike, Soong's latest flame, was a pleasant guy, in his forties and in Sydney on a work contract. I doubted it was anything serious between them, but they seemed to be having fun. Mike and Soong had invited me a few times to Soong's place, so it was my turn to reciprocate. Soong didn't cook, and Mike was dying for some home cooking.

It was the first time I would be entertaining, and I was quite excited about it. I had received money from the work I had done, so I could afford a simple dinner.

The appealing thing was that I could have fun while preparing to entertain. With Kanye and Jamie Fox's "Golddigger" playing in the background, and Warren helping to peel potatoes while Sasha crawled around, it was just a great, laid-back atmosphere.

So what if the crockery wasn't matching and the glasses weren't Royal Doulton and the cutlery wasn't Georg Jensen? It was all still good to me.

Unlike the times when I was with Tom – if things weren't perfect for our guests, Tom would get furious and worked up, so much so, that every time we entertained, I used to be terribly stressed and simply dreaded entertaining. Now I was in control and loving every moment of it.

Because I had two kids under five, I had to prepare well in advance, and I did. I actually started early that morning. By the time my guests arrived, I was almost done, just the salad left to assemble.

When I caught myself belting out "Feel This Moment" with Christina and Pitbull, I stopped my dicing, put down my knife, and smiled. This moment needed to be savored like fine wine. And I did. I cracked open a Heineken, took a huge gulp, and smiled. Beer, not wine.

Beer was significant at *that* moment. Tom liked beer but never drank it in public – didn't want to come across as a beer-drinker for fear he'd be mistaken for a yobbo (an Australian term for an uncouth person). So he only drank Johnny Walker Blue Label around friends. You know, to impress them further.

I liked beer too, but of course, I wasn't even allowed to buy it. Had to drink champagne in a long-stemmed crystal glass in front of people.

But in my teeny tiny kitchen, I was drinking beer in a can – cheap and tacky and I loved it!

Freedom – what a delightful thing to be able to do *whatever* you like. Never again would I give it to a man.

Talking about men…if I was being really honest, I'd say that I was looking forward to seeing Bear, my homeless-man-underwear-cop. I had some serious making up to do, and I was going to do it tonight.

Mike and Soong arrived first, bringing a ton of food and drink, for which I was grateful.

Bear was the last to arrive, and he brought starters, desserts, wine and beer, and goodies for the kids.

"Wow, Santa!" I said, impressed with his generosity. "You didn't have to bring so much stuff, but thanks."

"Ho! Ho! Ho! And you're welcome," he said. "This lovely girl here is Amy. She's four, and has never met a lolly she didn't like."

Amy looked a lot like Bear, and she was equally shy, hiding behind his legs. Until she met Charlie and Warren. She ran off with them and we never saw her again until it was time to eat.

"Welcome to my humble abode," I said with Sasha on my hip.

"Thank you. Can I help with anything?"

"Eh, drinks, please. If you can top up everyone's glasses..."

We had a pleasant evening, during which I discovered that Soong had told him all about my abusive marriage and my great escape.

"Oh God, Soong!" I muttered in dismay.

Bear grinned at my discomfort. "She also told me you didn't like –"

"Don't say it!" I begged. "Please don't." I looked at Soong. "I'm gonna kill you, Soong."

"But Honey, he *ask* me," Soong protested. "He ask me all the time about you. Every time."

I swung around to look at him, my eyebrows elevated.

"She's…she's lying," he said, his face turning red in spite of all that facial hair.

My turn to grin. Busted!

Soong's jaw dropped. "I…not…not a…liar. He ask so muuuuuch. Why she leave her husband? She see anybody right now?"

Alcohol, when it came to Soong, doubled as truth serum.

Bear scratched his head. "Anybody got duct tape? I got some gagging to do."

"How old she be…? So many questions, I say, 'Bear, you want to know, why you don't ask her?'"

"Fuuuuck!" I heard him mutter. His turn to pray for a natural disaster to occur right then.

When Soong and Mike left, Bear lingered behind and helped with the dishes. Soong didn't help at all. The thing about Soong – as sweet as she was to me, she had few domestic skills and wasn't a very good mother. She loved Charlie, make no mistake about that, but she had grown up

in a brothel and experienced not an ounce of mothering herself. She didn't even know her mother. She was always fascinated when she saw me nurturing my kids, and she ran off and copied me a lot, which was great for little Charlie.

After Bear and I finished with the dishes, we put the kids to sleep, including little Amy, and moved to the balcony where we sat and chatted for hours. Light, flirty banter.

"So what's your real name?" I asked.

"Guess."

I chuckled. "Wolf?"

He grinned. "Close. My name is Shane Shaw."

"Chainsaw? Hey, that's an awesome name!"

"Funny!" he said, his eyes crinkling.

"Well, nice to meet you, Shane."

"The pleasure's all mine," he said in a shy voice.

We chatted some more, and when I looked at the time, it was 3 a.m.

"I guess I should leave you," Bear said.

"I guess I should go to sleep or my little monsters will get me up at six tomorrow morning."

Reluctantly, we stood up.

"Do you want to leave Amy here? She's sound asleep."

He nodded. "Good idea. No use waking her up."

I walked him to the door.

"I had a good time in spite of Soong's tell-all," he said.

We both chuckled.

"Now we're even."

He nodded. "Guess we are."

We smiled at each other.

He scratched the back of his neck, then jerked his head around. "Would you…would you like to go to like…out sometime? Like dinner? Or maybe…? I dunno…"

"Yes. I would like to go to dinner, Bear."

He stopped scratching his neck and looked at me. "Oh, okay then. That's good. Great. Um…next Saturday, then? Or is it too soon?"

"Next Saturday will be great. I'm on the shelf at the moment, so I've no plans."

"Hundred percent," he said, imitating Soong.

We both cracked up laughing.

"Well goodnight, pretty lady," he said, then tipped my nose with his finger.

"Night, Bear," I gushed, feeling like a teenager.

Alone in my bed, my mind drifted to Bear. He was sweet. Warm and…*easy*. I was looking forward to Saturday night with him.

Easy…what a nice word. *Easy*.

Chapter Nine

To my disappointment, I didn't see Bear again all week. I found myself craning my neck and looking around for him, but I assumed that he was out working somewhere.

When I did see him at my door on Saturday night, I gasped.

He was clean-shaven, his mustache was gone, and his hair was cut short and neatly styled. His clothes – dark pants, blue and white striped shirt, and black shoes – not the usual cargo pants and sloppy shirts.

He looked so handsome, I couldn't believe it was the same homeless-man creature. In front of me was a hunk. Totally.

"Wow!" I said before I could stop myself. "You look…nice."

He blushed. "Th…thanks," he said as red crept all over his handsome face.

"Shall we?" he asked, then ushered me into a waiting cab.

"You dressed up for me?" I asked in the back of the cab.

In the dark I could still see his bashful smile. "Maybe." He looked at me. "Yeah, I did. I wanted you to like me."

I laughed.

We traveled for almost forty-five minutes to a lovely restaurant with a fireplace. I could see why he traveled so far and obviously paid a fortune for the cab. The restaurant was small and cozy and memorable, the food was home-style (more like soul-food), and the service was personal. The waitstaff referred to him by name.

I was impressed.

Bear and I talked, argued, and laughed all through dinner, and I couldn't believe how time flew. I drank more than I usually did and enjoyed the feeling of busting loose. It seemed like he didn't want the evening to end either.

As we stumbled out of the restaurant, he took my hand in his. I liked it. I liked the roominess and the warmth of his touch. So different from Tom's touch.

Everything about Bear made me feel comfortable and safe, and in the taxi I found myself sitting really close to him with our thighs touching.

It had been a while since I had been with a man, and I was nervous about that aspect – you know, the physical intimacy. (I hated sex, remember?)

To my surprise, with Bear I found myself wondering what it would be like to kiss him. What it would be like to lie in his arms. What it would feel like to make love to a hunk like him. Tom was a smaller guy, not a hunk, just a well-put-together kind of guy most women found attractive. Bear was big and beefy, someone you could cuddle with. Easy.

When we reached our building and got into the elevator, he held onto my hand, then made a show of examining it before he kissed the back of it.

So sweet. We went on to exchange a series of shy smiles.

At my door, I turned to him. "I had a great time tonight, Bear," I whispered, mindful of Yang, the babysitter waiting inside my apartment.

"I had a *phenomenal* time," he said. "I would like to do it again."

I nodded.

He leaned his face slowly down towards mine. I held my breath.

Gently, without touching me with his hands, he pressed his lips against mine. So soft, so brief, yet so delightful and heady.

"Goodnight beautiful," he whispered, his lips hovering over mine.

"Nite, Bear," I whispered before I entered my apartment, disappointed that he didn't choose to take more from me. Or ask for it.

****

The next time we went out, Bear drove us in his Jeep. We had dinner at a local restaurant, then watched *The Fast and the Furious*. When we arrived back home, he killed the engine in the apartment parking lot, then turned to me and kissed me. Slowly at first, then urgently, and I couldn't believe how turned on I was.

This was so unlike me. I mean, I hated sex, I hated intimacy, yet I wanted Bear. Badly. So much so that we necked for almost half an hour in the car in the dark. He wanted me, I could tell, and I liked *how* he wanted me.

"I have something to tell you," he said between kisses.

Immediately alarm bells gonged in my head, and I tried to pull away, but his face stayed put and he anchored me into my seat with just his torso alone. "What is it?"

"I have to go away for six weeks."

I blinked at him in the dark. "Six weeks? Why?"

Slowly, he ran his fingers through his hair.

"Are you…please tell me that you're not still married, Bear?"

He moved away, back into his seat.

Ding! Ding! Ding! Please don't let him say "yes," I silently prayed.

"I'm like you, Arena – separated. No chance of reconciliation whatsoever. But that's not it – I'm going on assignment."

He seemed so awkward and cagey that I didn't believe him. With our eyes locked, I straightened up my top, pulled down my skirt, and smoothed down my hair. "Fine." I opened the door and let my disappointed self out.

"Hey, wait!" He rushed around to me and took me in his arms. After squeezing me to him for a few moments, he kissed my unresponsive lips once more, then led me to the elevator.

"I need to be honest with you, yet I can't. I just need you to trust me."

"I'd be lying if I say I can, Bear," I said, then punched the keys inside the elevator.

"That's how I lost my wife and child," he said to my back, his voice melancholy.

I swung around to look at him. "Wha…?"

"One day I came home and all I found was a note. She said she couldn't take this lonely life anymore, and that she was moving on."

The elevator stopped and we got out.

"But I have to do what I have to do. I'm committed to it."

"I get it," I said in a stiff voice. "Thank you for the lovely –"

He grabbed me around the waist and turned me to him. "Arena, don't! Let me explain, okay?"

I didn't answer.

"Please?"

"Fine."

He jerked his head towards his apartment.

I started to shake my head.

"I'm not going to touch you. Promise. I just wanna explain."

Reluctantly I put away my door keys and followed him into his apartment.

I was surprised at his apartment – it was more spacious than I expected, and it was fully furnished with modern black leather couches and black and white striped cushions. Big TV, lots of audio stuff, and gadgets. A bit untidy too – a real man cave for sure.

A peek into his bedroom from where I stood revealed his unmade bed. As I said, a manly apartment, but comfy. He slipped his arm around my waist again and crushed me to him.

"You said you weren't going to –"

"One li'l kiss," he whispered, and captured my mouth with his.

Trouble was, I liked his kiss far too much. After allowing him to kiss my lips, my neck, and my shoulders, I reluctantly pushed him away, and I have to tell you, it took every ounce of willpower to do that.

"Okay," he said, getting out wine glasses and pouring us a glass of red each.

He sat me on the couch, then sat next to me, our bodies touching once again.

"As you know, I'm an undercover. I enjoyed my work until I got married and had a baby. Then it didn't work. But I wasn't able to just walk away from my job, and Sarah, my wife, well…let's just say I didn't blame her for splitting like she did."

I took a sip of my wine.

"I plan to quit because I want a normal life. It is unfair to bring a girl into my life with my job, so I didn't date. Then you came along and you were all over me."

"Whaaat?"

He grinned. "Wining and dining me, wanting me so much…"

I smiled.

He cupped my cheek with his large hand. "This is my last assignment. After this, it's all over."

"Yeah? When do you leave?"

"In three weeks' time."

So soon. "Where to?"

He shook his head and tucked my hair behind my ears. "Can't tell you, baby."

I liked being called "baby" by him. Tom didn't do endearing, so it was new to me.

"Okay, I get it."

He reached for my glass, placed it on the table, and took me in his arms. "I really like you. Tell me you will be there when I get back. I really want you, Arena. Badly."

"Bear, look, I have to think about it. I'm sorry, I can't give you the answer you want. "

His disappointment was tangible. Slowly he released me, his shoulders slumping.

"And besides, I'm really unable to commit to anything – it's way too soon for me."

He nodded slowly.

"Thanks for the lovely evening," I said as I walked to the door.

He watched me silently, didn't try to stop me.

I opened the door and left.

In bed that night, I stared at the ceiling in the dark. Well, that's that, I supposed. No way was I going to sit around and wait for some guy who spun me a long story about going away for six weeks and he couldn't tell me where…I wasn't buying it.

I had some serious living to do, and I was going to do it. Unfortunately, I'd have to shake off Bear.

Pity. I enjoyed his company and how easy he was.

Easy. What a nice word. Oh, but I said that already.

Pity.

Chapter Ten

We awoke to persistent knocking.

"Arena!" Bear's voice.

Alarmed, I threw open the door. "What is it?"

"It's a beautiful day and we're going on a picnic," he said, lifting up a picnic basket, his eyes traveling slowly up and down my sleep shorts and skimpy tank top. "Get the kids and let's go."

"But…but –"

"No buts, unless you're referring to your own butt, or mine, and frankly, I'd rather talk about yours because I like it. *Really* like it." He grinned.

I giggled as my hands automatically moved to my butt.

"I have three weeks with you guys, and I am going to make it count. Got bacon and eggs, cheeses, and all sorts of stuff that's guaranteed to make you feel guilty after you've eaten it. But…we're gonna have breakfast in a beautiful spot, whether you like it or not. After we pick up Amy." He smacked me on the butt. "Move it!"

Within an hour, we had baby Sasha's car seat strapped into his Jeep, Warren buckled up next to Amy, and we were heading to this great picnic spot near some natural waterfall in the Hawksbury area that he promised would take my breath away.

And it did.

While I took in the amazing scenery and inhaled the fresh air, he made us bacon and eggs and even coffee. Insisted I put my feet up and relax while he took care of things.

I loved looking at him – without his beard and mustache he looked so different, sexy, and I found myself loving all the kisses we sneaked. Especially the deep, intimate ones, where he slipped his hands under my top and caressed my breasts when the kids weren't looking. It melted me in places I didn't know could melt, and I wanted more.

I got to see a very goofy side of him as he romped with Warren and Amy. He wrestled with them, then dangled them by their ankles, then acted like King Kong, and the kids loved it.

Even baby Sasha cooed at him and responded to his voice. I loved the way he interacted with my son, and all thoughts of dumping him and going on with my life evaporated.

We spent the day together, and when it was time for us to return, the kids were sleepy but happy.

At just about every red traffic light, he leaned in and stole a kiss, each kiss becoming deeper, longer, and hungrier. His touch became bolder and left my body tingling.

Back at the apartment, I bathed the kids and put them to bed while Bear made us a stir fry.

After a quick shower, I slipped on a top and a pair of shorts and went into the kitchen, only to find that Bear wasn't there. The food was almost done and was on the warmer.

Minutes later he rushed in with two bottles of wine. "What did I miss?"

"Where did you go?"

"Shower." He slapped his body randomly. "I felt all icky sticky."

"Snap! I showered too," I said as I stirred the pot on the stove.

He walked up to me, slipped his arms around my waist and nuzzled my neck. "You smell good," he whispered, then kissed my neck, turning my knees into jelly.

I had no idea that the back of my neck was so sensitive.

"So do you," I said, and turned around to slide my arms around his neck.

"It's my aftershave. It's as awesome as I am."

I laughed and gently stroked his face. “I like this.”

“Yeah?” His voice was just a whisper.

“Yeah, a lot.”

We kissed again.

“I have to grow my beard again, you know that, right?”

“Why did you shave it?”

He jerked back. “Why? I wanted to impress you with my pretty face. Wanted you to see me and say, ‘Wow, he’s so cool, so handsome. I got to have him!’”

I laughed and hugged him tighter. “I did. I think you’re very cool. And…handsome.”

“Aw shucks, you say the nicest things, Miss ’Rena.” He swooped down and slid his tongue into my mouth.

I wrapped my arms tighter around his neck and angled my head for more of his kisses, and I was amazed at just how turned on I was by him.

When it came to Tom, I was never ever turned on. Not once, or I would have remembered it. He always led and I followed. Let me rephrase that – he dictated and demanded and of course, I did as he *ordered*.

But at that moment, I had the urge to drag Bear into the bedroom and fuck the daylights out of him. Well, it was nighttime, so it be would *night*lights.

As his tongue probed my eager mouth, his zealous hands moved to my breasts. I sighed and slipped my hands under his t-shirt and stroked his muscular back. His response was to groan into my mouth and press his hips to mine. He was such a sexy man, and I was embarrassed to feel a silkiness between my thighs almost immediately.

It had been a while since I had been with a man, and I felt untouched. So to have him touch me that way, so intimately, was pleasant, and my body reveled in it. Things became so heated in the kitchen, I had to do something. Turning off the stove, I took his hand and led him to my dimly lit bedroom.

Slowly, I removed his shirt and tossed it behind me. I kissed his broad chest, his neck, and his soft mouth. He moved to take off his belt, but I stopped him.

“Here, I’m in charge, Cop-Man,” I whispered. “You do as I say, or I will handcuff you to that bedrail, hear me?”

His eyes lit up.

With my eyes locked on with his, I slowly undid his belt. Then, with my tongue in his mouth, I slowly unzipped his jeans and pushed them down his long muscular legs. Gently, I caressed his hips, his thighs, his butt, but stopped short of his erection, which was huge and dying to be sprung.

I must say, this power that I was flexing made me feel, well, *powerful*. For the first time, I was in control, and I found it a huge turn-on.

His groans spurned me on even more.

“Baby, please…”

I smiled. “Patience…”

Bear Shaw didn’t do patience, evidently – he grabbed me, tore off my top, unhooked my bra, and freed my breasts into his waiting hands.

“Beautiful,” he whispered.

He kneaded them softly before he sucked on them, one at a time. With a deep sigh of pleasure, my head fell back. His flaming kisses traveled all over my breasts, my neck, down my stomach, and over my thighs. I caught my breath when he kissed between them, my shorts

offering little protection from the heat of his urgent kiss. I didn't want him to stop, but he did, only to yank down my shorts. He pushed me onto the bed and climbed over me.

"I want you," he whispered. "Now, please!"

I responded by tugging down his underpants and freeing his angry erection.

At the same time, he rolled down my panties and slipped his fingers between my thighs. As his fingers went deeper inside of me, I grabbed the length of his shaft and ran my hands over it.

With a guttural groan, he parted my thighs and drove deep into me. I felt every inch of his length and raised my hips to accommodate more. I wanted all of him.

Never before had I experienced such pleasure, and I wanted it to last – I wanted to savor every moment, and to exist as one for as long as possible. It felt like I was rebelling, having casual sex, making all the moves.

I mean, we hadn't talked about monogamy and love and commitment –all that stuff – *important* stuff as yet, so it was all casual, something foreign to me. Yet, I didn't care – I wanted him, and I was taking him because…I felt like it. Liberating much? You bet.

He withdrew from me, then turned me around and took me from behind. As he thrust inside of me, he reached around to grab my swinging breasts.

"Man, you're beautiful!" he whispered over and over, and I felt as beautiful as Cleopatra at that moment.

After a while, he flipped me around again and shoved me onto my back, then entered me again. With his tongue in my mouth and his dick deep inside of me, we existed as one again.

He was in control for sure, but it was different from Tom. He was firm and loving, giving, and I welcomed his moves, loved every moment of it.

As he twitched inside of me, I felt a million tiny bubbles explode within me. I grabbed onto his shoulders and let out a long sigh as my body shuddered with relief. My first orgasm *during* the deed. I was surprised that I could actually orgasm with a man. I never thought it was possible.

Then those firm, muscular thighs took over and rocked my body till he exploded deep inside of me.

Slick with sweat, we lay in each other's arms and grinned.

Sweat. How 'bout that? I actually *sweated* while fucking. It was possible after all. Tom was right, then.

"Damn!" Bear chanted. "I'm at a loss for words. Damn!"

"Ditto!"

We laughed and kissed lightly.

"There's dinner," I reminded him.

"Yeah, but I want seconds." I knew that he was not talking about dinner. "And thirds."

I laughed and pushed him off me.

Dinner was quick, and we hurried back to bed for seconds, which was longer, slower, and more intense than round one.

Bear spent the night in my arms. Thereafter, he spent every night in my apartment, in my arms.

We were unable to stop touching each other. It was just beautiful, and I was smiling all the time.

Warren and Sasha adored Bear, and the moment he entered the apartment, they were all over him.

He loved it and was always buying them presents. I suspected that he was lonely and liked the family set-up that I had. Amy, his daughter, spent more and more time with him, and we became a family of five. So much so that he asked me to move in with him.

But I wasn't ready for that. I was enjoying my freedom and didn't want to surrender to him, which was what would have happened had I moved into his apartment. Guess I was still wary and scared of men.

He didn't say much, but I could tell he wanted me to trust him more. Unfortunately, he'd have to give me more time.

One day, Bear stormed into our apartment and said, "I'm hoooooome!"

Warren bounded to Bear, grabbed his legs and hung onto him. Bear scooped him up, threw him in the air, and then hugged him.

Then Sasha started jerking her body, putting out her hands to Bear. He took her from me and hugged them both.

We're the family in the commercial that Warren once questioned me about, I thought. Finally, we're that family. Tears of joy stung my eyes at the realization of a dream. How lucky was I to meet a beautiful man like Bear.

To our absolute delight, Bear's assignment was postponed for some reason. It meant that we had another month together. Then again, to our delight, it was delayed once more. We could hardly believe our luck. Another month together, with just two weekends away from us due to meetings in Queensland and Melbourne. We treasured every moment together.

Bear's generosity was astounding. I no longer had to be frugal and cautious about money. Without me asking, he just took care of everything – groceries, utilities, clothes, gas – *everything*, and I felt unbelievable relief.

He was old-fashioned in that way – didn't want a woman to pay. He even gave me a credit card and insisted that I use it. I did, because I had to.

Amy's mother was dating a younger guy who wasn't into kids. This bothered Bear, so Amy spent more and more time with us, and that made Bear feel complete.

I, of course, welcomed Amy with open arms, although I felt a little concerned when she started calling me Mom. I didn't mind at all, in fact, I loved it, but I was mindful that she had a mom already, and I didn't want to cause her mother any hurt.

We were driving the kids to the beach, when at a red traffic light, Bear stopped and looked at me.

"What?"

He took my hand, kissed it, and squeezed it on his chest. "I love you," he whispered.

That was so unexpected that for a moment, I just stared open-mouthed at him. I mean, I knew that he loved me and I felt the same way about him, but he was *declaring* his love at a red traffic light. That was huge.

"I love you," I mouthed as tears of happiness filled my eyes.

He smiled and leaned in for a tender kiss.

The light changed, so with my hand still in his, he drove on.

At the next traffic light, he leaned towards me again. "Don't ever go away, Arena. Stay with me forever."

I smiled and hugged him.

Imagine, a few months on my own and I was already in love with a wonderful man.

And…a wonderful man loved me!

How could I not be happy?

Every day with Bear was better than the last. Seemed like my life had finally come together. I had lived through a terrible storm that lasted years and I had survived, only to find my rainbow at the end. How cool was that? How lucky was I?

Life was good. Strike that, life was simply great.

Chapter Eleven

Still no word from Tom about seeing our kids. His silence made me uneasy, I had to admit. But it was better to let the dog lie, so I did.

As for Mike and Soong – they moved in together shortly after Soong graduated from TAFE. Mike set Soong up in her own beauty and massage studio and…they asked me to do all their accounting! Of course, I was thrilled. Even though I had Bear, I still wanted my nest egg, clutched at it, refused to really surrender to Bear.

I helped Soong out a lot with Charlie so that she could work the extra hours she needed to build her new business.

She in turn babysat for me when I needed to run errands or go out with Bear.

Sometimes I helped Soong out at reception while Sasha played on the floor with her toys. By placing an ad in the local newspaper and bribing the consultant with a sensual massage for her and her boyfriend, I managed to score Soong some free editorial, and that got Soong's phone ringing. She was thrilled.

I really loved Soong, and I would have done anything to help her succeed. In fact, I started feeling the same way about Mike. He was a good man, and I loved how he loved Soong.

Look at me, I thought – loving *everybody* around me suddenly. Such an Oprah moment.

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"This will be my last assignment, I promise," Bear said to my morose face.

The day had finally come, and he was leaving. I was close to tears at the thought of being without him for six weeks. How would I manage? How would I sleep without him when we slept entwined in each other for the last four months? What do I say to my kids when they ask for him? They had grown so fond of him and wouldn't allow him out of their sight. His bond with Warren was particularly strong.

Imagine, I used to wait for Monday mornings so that Tom could leave home, and if he had to go away on business, I was in heaven. With Bear it was different – I was almost crying.

He placed his palms on either side of my face and looked into my tear-filled eyes. "I'll ask for a transfer, we'll get married, we'll buy a house, and baby, we will be happy. Trust me. I don't want to fuck up what we have. I haven't been this happy and complete in years. I need you, understand? I need you all. I like this 'us.' I don't wanna come home if there is no 'us.'"

I nodded, then hugged him. "I love you, Bear," I whispered. "Please come back to me. Don't let anything happen to you. I couldn't bear it. Oh God, please, Bear, I don't think I can live without you."

"Nothing's gonna happen, baby, but if anything does, you contact Captain Warner of Hornsby Police, okay? He'll try to get word to me. Don't talk to *anyone* else about me, just him."

Parting was truly a sweet sorrow – I hugged him and cried buckets as we said goodbye. When he left, the apartment felt empty, and I felt an overwhelming sense of loss. It was as if a light had gone out.

I could hardly wait for my Care Bear's return.

****

About a week after I said goodbye to Bear, Sasha, who was almost a year old, developed an ear infection. Although she was on antibiotics, she was unable to sleep at night, and therefore cranky as hell.

I drove her back to the doctor, who immediately referred me to an ear specialist. Sasha cried all the way to the ear specialist and all the way back home. Just screamed her lungs off in the back of my car.

"Sasha, Mommy's gonna stop the car just now, darling," I chanted as I navigated my BMW through school-hour traffic to pick up Warren.

The heat in Sydney didn't help – a scorching ninety-nine degrees. I was hot and exhausted from not sleeping for three nights, and I had dark rings around my eyes to prove it.

"Mommy's gonna carry you just now, my baby. Just hang in there."

She continued screaming.

Feeling rattled by her screaming and close to tears myself, I turned my car onto Warrimoo Avenue, St Ives, the suburb of Warren's school, the suburb I fled months ago. To avoid more turmoil in his life, and since it was paid for in advance, I had kept Warren in his preschool.

Less than five blocks down from his preschool was a small string of shops, which I needed to visit to get milk, bread, and a bottle of cold water for Warren. It was a routine for me to stop at the shops before I picked him up.

I pulled into the parking lot, only to find that there was no parking. Damn! Behind me, Sasha yelled her lungs out.

"Lemmee sing you a song, sweetheart," I said, and lapsed into "Incy Wincy Spider."

Nothing doing – she screamed louder, so I shut up.

Frazzled, I drummed my fingernails on the steering wheel while I waited for someone to pull out of a parking space.

"Just now, my darling, hang in there."

A long five minutes later, a Merc pulled out *directly* in front of the little grocer I needed to visit. Relieved, I maneuvered my BMW into the cramped parking space. I cut the engine, scrambled out of the car, and opened the back door to take out Sasha. I balked when I saw her fast asleep.

For a few moments, I stared at my baby, who hadn't slept all night. Who had barely slept for the past seventy-two hours.

My dilemma – if I got her up, she would scream her head off again. If I let her sleep, I wouldn't be able to get my bread, milk, and water. Could I possibly leave her in the car while I ran in?

I looked at the supermarket – its entrance was about ten feet away from my car. From where the cashier sat, she had a clear view of my car. The milk fridge was right next to the cashier. The bread shelf was opposite the cashier.

I gauged and calculated – I would be able to dart into the supermarket, grab bread and milk, pay for the stuff, all the while never taking my eyes off the car. Probably all in sixty seconds?

The searing heat forced me to make a quick decision. I turned on the ignition, which turned on the air conditioning, then I shut the car door. I took some money out of my purse and raced up to the shop, grabbed the milk and water, scooped up a loaf of bread, and in less than sixty seconds, was in line at the cashier. I looked at my car again. All was okay. So far so good. It was a quiet, affluent neighborhood, and nothing bad ever happened there.

My money was in my hand to speed up payment, and there were only two people in front of me standing in line to pay. This will go quickly, I thought.

The old woman in front of me holding a can of cat food turned and smiled at me. I smiled back at her before my eyes shifted back to the car.

I would have to wake Sasha when I went to pick up Warren, a thought I dreaded. I expected her to be furious at me for getting her up, but I would have no choice.

"Hot, isn't it?" Cat food lady said.

"Yeah," I said in a tone that did not encourage conversation. I just wanted her to pay for her stuff and move out of the way.

She did, to my relief. Took her cat food, her change, and shuffled away.

I paid for my stuff and took a step forward.

At that particular moment, the old woman with the cat food lost her balance and stumbled backwards into me, dropping her cat food and her loose change that she held in her hand.

Normally I would not hesitate to help, but I glanced at my car and decided, not today – let someone else do it. I walked ahead.

Nobody did.

She was so old – how could I possibly not help her? Sighing, I turned back and scrambled to pick up the cat food and change for the lady.

"Thank you so much," she gushed. "Thank you, thank you!"

"You're welcome," I mumbled as I picked up her coins from around her feet.

I stuffed them in her hands and turned back to my car.

It was gone.

I blinked rapidly. The parking space directly outside the grocer where I had parked my car was empty.

I looked around, craning my neck for a silver BMW X6. Nothing.

"Oh God!" Dropping my bread, milk, and water, I ran up and down the parking lot looking for my car. Maybe I parked somewhere else? I hadn't slept in three nights, so maybe in my muddled state, I had gotten the parking spaces mixed up.

But there were only twelve parking spaces in the parking lot, and none of them had my car with my precious baby in it.

"Are you okay?" a woman pushing a stroller asked.

With both my hands on my head, I choked out the words, "Someone stole my car!" I grabbed her arm, "Please help me! Call the police."

"Your car?"

A group of teenagers congregated around me.

"Call the police, please!" I begged as I struggled to breathe. "My baby, she's in the car! Oh God! Oh God! Oh God! Call the police!" Like a deranged woman, I ran up and down the street and then back to the empty parking space I had parked in.

But my car, with my baby in it, was gone. Stolen in broad daylight.

****

"Officer, it's my ex-husband," I told the female cop as I sat on the sidewalk outside the grocer and rocked. "It's him. I just know it. It's him. Please believe me, it's him."

It was a boiling hot day, yet I felt chills.

"Okay, ma'am, we are looking into it," she said in a kind voice.

Four detectives arrived and took over for the cops.

“Ma’am, I’m Detective Tims,” a man in his fifties with a striped shirt and a fatherly voice said. “This here is my partner, Detective Hunter.”

I glanced briefly at the man standing next to Detective Tims, watching me with hooded eyes, almost suspiciously.

“Now, we know that you’ve probably told a dozen or so people what happened, but please, I need you to tell –”

“It’s my ex,” I said. “He did this. Trust me, he did. I know he did, Detective.”

“Okay, so tell us about it and what happened.”

I press both palms to my tired eyes before I tell my story again.

I watched crime shows, and I knew that the police would have to rule me out as a suspect before they investigated others, so I wanted to cooperate with them, tell them everything they needed to know so that they could exclude me as a suspect as soon as possible.

“Where is your son now?”

“He’s with a friend from school and his friend’s mom.”

“Tell us about your husband.”

“Soon to be ex,” I said. “His name is Tom Botha, and he did this, Detective. We…he…he’s been abusive to me, and when he started taking it out on my son, I left him. Moved into a women’s shelter one night…got help from various sources, and for the last six months I’ve been living in an apartment.”

“What kind of work do you do?”

“I am a part-time accountant – work from home.” I looked at him with pleading eyes. “Please look for my baby. Please!”

“Ma’am, every cop in Sydney is looking out for your car and your baby.” He pointed to the sky. “Hear that?”

I nodded at the whirr of a helicopter, then wrapped my arms tightly around my body and rocked harder. “It’s been two hours…”

“We aren’t going home until we find your child. Rest assured.”

A female officer crouched in front of me with a cup of water in her hand, and the detectives stepped away from me.

“Is there anyone I can call for you? Family members…?”

“All my family is in South Africa. Please call Soong and Mike. They’re my friends.” I gave them my phone to access Soong’s number.

“Anyone else I can call?”

I gave them Fatima’s number – the leader of the Domestic Abuse support group. They called her too.

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Yes, but he’s away.”

“Away?”

I nodded. “He’s an undercover. Bear Shaw. Actually, his real name is Shane Shaw. I don’t know where he is right now…he couldn’t tell me but…you guys should know.”

“Okay, we will look into it.”

“Tell him I need him, please.”

She nodded.

I grabbed her arm. “He did this. My ex, Tom, he vowed that he was going to hurt me because I left him. He promised on the life of my children that he would. Swore.”

She nodded slowly, then gently extracted my arm from hers.

About thirty minutes later, she returned to me. “Your ex-husband’s in South Africa, Arena. He left two days ago, and he’s due back tomorrow on the 2 p.m. flight.”

I looked at her in disbelief. “That can’t –”

“We’ve contacted his offices, confirmed that he did indeed board a flight to South Africa. Even obtained footage of him boarding the plane. We checked his credit card with the bank – showed a string of activity in Cape Town over the last couple of hours.”

My head lolled. How could that be? I was so sure it was Tom.

“He’s ruled out as a person of interest, Arena. Now, I’m taking you home.” She got to her feet.

“No, I wanna stay here!” My conscience bludgeoned me, and I felt that if I left that parking space, I would be somehow leaving Sasha behind. It didn’t make sense, but I was no longer playing with a full deck.

“We’re arranging a press conference for you to appeal to the person who took your car.”

“Press conference? Okay, fine. Let’s go!” I jumped to my feet, eager to plead to whoever it was that had Sasha. I would beg on my knees if I had to.

Chapter Twelve

To my dismay, I cried so much at the press conference that I was convinced I had done a bad job with my appeal. Talking about Sasha was so painful that I broke down at the very *beginning* of the conference and could barely string sentences together.

"I'm so sorry," I said to the cops after the press conference.

"No, you're all right," they said. "You're human. It's understandable. Let's get you home."

On my way home, in the back seat of a patrol car, my mind drifted to Tom's parting words, "I will make you pay for this, Arena," he had said in a clear, concise, and meaningful voice. "In the worst possible way. You will live to regret this. Just you wait and see. Nobody crosses me. Nobody."

Worst possible way...

He was behind this. He had to be. Nobody could tell me differently. I knew it for a fact.

I closed my eyes and leaned my weary head against the window. Images of Sasha's beautiful face and her charming, angelic smile flashed in my mind. I crossed my arms over my head and curled into a ball.

I tried so hard not to think of her in the dark somewhere, crying, calling for me. She was ill and in pain…oh God!

Stay strong, stay calm, positive thoughts, I told myself. She'll be traumatized, but I'll nurse her till she's better.

We arrived at my apartment in Hornsby where Soong, Mike, Fatima, and some other residents I had befriended awaited me, all with worried looks on their faces.

I held onto Soong and Mike and wept. "He did it," I said. "I know that for a fact. Don't tell me otherwise. He did it."

****

I was unable to eat, unable to sleep, and simply unable to concentrate. Two female cops stayed behind in case it turned out to be a kidnapping and ransom became an issue. Tom's wealth made them consider ransom as a motive.

They sent everyone home except Soong, who did her best to comfort me.

"Get some rest while you can," the officer said.

I tried, but I could not sleep. Instead, I lay in bed with Warren and thought about Sasha.

I managed to doze for about twenty minutes eventually, then I was up again to give Warren his breakfast.

When I saw the two detectives saunter into my apartment at around 9 a.m., unshaven and looking like they'd been up all night, I knew it was news.

I threw down my dishtowel and rushed up to them. "Did you find…?"

Detective Tims nodded slowly. "Ma'am, we found…we found the car, and Sasha…ma'am she was in–"

"Oh thank God! I have to give her an antibio –"

"Ma'am, I'm afraid, she…she didn't make it."

"Wha…?" Did I hear right?

"Ma'am, Sasha didn't make it."

"What do you…?" I threw out my palms. "Like, what do you mean?"

As he explained, I heard a deafening roar in my ears, like that of a waterfall.

I got only parts of what they were saying.

"…thief realized…baby in the car…abandoned…heat…too much in the car…organ failure…so sorry…"

Someone in the room was screaming hysterically. It was me.

Chapter Thirteen

They say words cannot describe the pain you suffer when you lose a child. I believe that words might, so I'm going to try. It's like shards of broken glass, jagged pieces surrounding your heart, and every time you breathe, they stab viciously at you, incapacitating you and making you wish you were dead. It's like you are constantly swallowing sea sand. Your throat is dry as the Sahara and almost swollen from the abrasiveness.

It's like everyone is talking at once, but no sound escapes their lips. It's like being on a carousel at the fair, and it's spinning at one hundred miles an hour, almost out of control.

I wanted to die, curl up and just let the life ebb out of me. But I had Warren to think about.

My life became a blur and I welcomed it. I didn't want clarity now, it was just too painful.

But unfortunately, my blur didn't last. Once the cloak of numbness deserted me, a Niagara of tears prevailed. Even when I was asleep, tears silently cascaded down my cheeks.

I wanted my mother – but she couldn't get a visa due to her health.

I wanted Bear, but…

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I was a suspect in the death of my child.

I understood that, accepted it, and answered all the ridiculous questions they asked over and over again. I accepted blame for my part in Sasha's death. What I did was stupid, careless, and fatal. I was a bad mother, an unfit one who deserved to be punished.

Hurt me, I deserve it.

Of course, I consented to a polygraph – I had nothing to hide, and all I wanted was for them to rule me out as a suspect, so that they could go after the monster who stole my car, then abandoned it in a quiet side street and left my child to bake in it.

Multiple organ failure was the cause of her death. Her tiny body was too delicate to handle the oven the car had become.

On top of all of this, I worried about Tom. Was he going to take away Warren? Declare me an unfit parent and petition the courts for full custody? Then punish me by never allowing Warren to see me again? What would I do if that happened? The thought freaked me out further, and I never let Warren out of my sight.

A policewoman visited. "Your husband has arrived in Sydney. He would like to see you both. Also, he wants to discuss funeral arrangements."

I silently chewed on my nails. The last person I wanted to see was Tom.

"We can do this at the police station if you're not comfortable here," she said, reading my mind.

"Okay," I quickly said. "I don't want him to know where I live."

Because Sasha died in my BMW, the police had seized my car for evidence and forensics.

But the police were more than happy to drive me to the police station for my meeting with Tom. In fact, the police were wonderful in every sense of the word. Even though I was a suspect.

Tom was at the police station when Warren and I arrived. Taking a deep breath, I braced myself for the finger-pointing from him. Braced myself for the *barrage* of accusations coming my way:

"You really fucked up, didn't you?"

"This is what you do when I'm not around?"

"So much for independence and all that shit you wanted."

"This would never have happened had I been in control."

"Freedom? Really? This is the sum of it?"

"What a neglectful mother you are."

"You killed our baby. YOU!"

"Relax," Sargent Smith said, placing her hand on my tensing shoulder. "We're going to be in the room, so if anything happens…"

I nodded and put a hand over my bloodshot eyes. "He's going to be livid. Oh God!"

"We can handle him, Arena. We do this all the time. Don't you worry about a thing. We know his type."

"He's pretty charismatic, be warned," I said. "He'll win you over."

"Ha! We'll see about that," Sargent Smith said. "A woman with a baby and a toddler doesn't walk away from a life of luxury unless her husband is a monster."

Appreciating what she said and encouraged by Sargent Smith's words, I made my way to Tom.

I was really surprised at the way Tom looked – red-eyed, two-day-old stubble, hair disheveled, mismatched clothes – highly unusual considering he was such a neat freak, immaculate all the time, obsessive about his appearance.

"Arena!" he cried, a look of distress on his face. "I am so sorry." He threw his arms around me and hugged me.

I stood stiff in his embrace as all four officers looked on, their hands on their pepper sprays.

There was no reproach, no abuse, no gloating from Tom. He actually, to my astonishment, appeared distraught, broken and didn't try to staunch his flow of tears. I'd never seen him cry before, and in spite of everything, I was moved by his tears. He too had lost a child, no matter what a monster he was. He was happy when I got pregnant with her, remember? I was the one who was dismayed at the pregnancy.

Relieved, I really appreciated the fact that he wasn't blasting me for my error of judgment.

Putting our differences aside, we cried together over the loss of our precious baby.

Releasing me, he scooped Warren into his arms, sank into a chair, and wept some more.

To me, who knew him so well, he looked like a man in mourning, and as I watched him, confusion mushroomed inside of me – was I wrong about him?

Even more confusing – my instinct, which I had come to rely on, was telling me that I was not wrong.

"Daddy loves you so much," he whispered to Warren.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed the officers exchange surprised looks, then looks of sympathy at Tom.

We discussed funeral arrangements without a single accusation. I wept throughout our conversation. Talking about flowers and coffins for your baby would break any parent's heart, and God knows mine was in pieces already.

"I'll take care of everything," he whispered, taking my hand in his. "Don't worry about a thing."

I nodded, grateful that he still hadn't fired a single bullet of blame my way.

"You don't have a car anymore," he pointed out. "I'll arrange the Merc for you to use."

I couldn't believe that he was so helpful.

"Th…thanks."

He released my hand and walked over to talk to the police officers standing around.

Through my grief, I watched as he talked to every one of the officers, mentioning them by name, and when they nodded and smiled at him, prickles of alarm shot through me. I knew Tom's MO – win them over, one by one.

Charm, then disarm. Slowly but surely. That's Tom; his charm was a vital part of his arsenal.

Most alarming was Sargent Smith – she appeared to be hanging on to his every word.

"My wife is a great mother," I heard Tom say, loud enough for me to hear. A small chuckle escaped him. "Excuse me if I still say 'my wife.' I've never dated another woman, so in my mind, she's still my wife, and they're still my family. Silly, I know."

"Oh, no, no, we understand," Sargent Smith said in a sympathetic voice.

"Sorry again."

"No, don't be sorry, Mr. Botha," Sargent Smith said. "We *totally* understand."

I was pretty sure that after the policemen and policewomen met Tom, they thought differently of me – that I bullshitted them about Tom. Probably thought that I left him because I wanted to play the field, fuck around. How quickly did I get a boyfriend?

What they saw was a man broken over the loss of his child, yet he treated me, his errant and neglectful wife, with the utmost love and respect. Who wouldn't gravitate towards him?

I heard a detective ask him to take a lie detector test. Would he? Excitement ran through me, and I held my breath as I waited for his answer.

"Sure. Absolutely!"

I was stunned at his answer. I just couldn't believe how readily he agreed to take the test. Had I been so wrong about Tom's involvement in Sasha's death?

The police, after exchanging knowing looks, then shooting a confused glance in my direction, thanked Tom and arranged for the polygraph that very afternoon. The polygraph would show deception if he was involved in Sasha's death, so I was hopeful. Deep down, I knew that he was. I was convinced of it.

Then, to my utter astonishment, he passed the test. I was floored. How was that possible? I no longer knew which side was up.

Even more confusing, Tom went on TV and offered a hundred-thousand-dollar reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the murderer of our baby!

Were these the actions of a guilty person?

If I was wrong, then I was committing a terrible sin – accusing an innocent father of the most heinous crime ever: murdering his child. Calling him a monster.

Imagine if I was accused of killing Sasha? I was a suspect, true, but imagine if I was wrongfully *charged* with Sasha's death? How would I feel?

So, if Tom wasn't responsible for the death of our baby, then who was? If it was someone else, then I had one more person in my life to hate, but my gut told me otherwise – nagged me like a persistent gastric ulcer; It. Was. Tom.

But that was only *my* suspicion. Everyone else's eyes were now on this boyfriend of mine who couldn't be found, and the questions darted at me, fast and furious.

"This Shane Shaw you talk about, have you and him been fighting recently?"

"Has he ever been abusive towards you?"

"Has he ever been abusive towards your children?"

"Did you know him while you lived with Tom?"

"Bear is still married?"

"Did he resent your children, feel that they are in the way?"

“Did he ever threaten to hurt them?”

“He’s not like that,” I explained. “He loves my children and he loves me. He’s a wonderful man.”

They exchanged yeah-right looks.

“He’s even given me his credit card to use. Look!” I start to search for the card, then I remember that my purse was in the car the day it was stolen. My purse was never retrieved.

The officer shot me a funny look and shrugged at my explanation.

Chapter Fourteen

I became concerned when nobody could locate Bear.

After a few days, I requested a meeting with Captain Warner. He, for some reason, was reluctant to see me. But I persisted and eventually I was ushered into his office.

"Mrs. Botha, I'm really sorry for your loss." He shook my hand.

"Thank you. Please call me Arena."

He gestured to a chair. "You mention a Bear Shaw."

I nodded as I took a seat. "*Shane* Shaw."

"Unfortunately, we don't have anyone by that name, I'm afraid."

"That's because he's an undercover. Probably has a different—"

"I know all the undercovers, and I know nobody by that name, ma'am."

I frowned and rubbed the back of my neck. Could Bear have given me the wrong details? What the hell was going on?

"I can't show you photos of all our undercovers and ask you to identify him, but do *you* have a photo of him?"

"Sure." I pulled out my phone and showed him a couple photos of Bear.

He took my phone, excused himself, and left the room.

When he returned, he was shaking his head. "Sorry."

I placed a hand on my forehead as confusion rained over me. "He has a daughter, Amy…?"

"Do you have a vehicle registration, perhaps?" he asked in a sympathetic voice.

I shook my head, feeling the fool that I was.

"I will look into it, check out his apartment, and get back to you. Can I ask that you please don't pursue this? I don't want to alert this person in any way. I will be on it."

Alert him in any way? This person? What the hell was going on?

"Sure." They had Bear wrong. He wasn't the fraud they were making him out to be. However, by the time I left the police station, I felt somewhat duped by Bear. How did I even know that he was a cop? I just took his word for it.

But he had given me Captain Warner's name? Maybe he gave me the Captain's name not realizing that I would actually *need* to contact him. How stupid was I? He was probably married to someone in another state and was leading two lives. A candidate for an Oprah show.

Even though I doubted who Bear really was, I didn't believe that he would hurt Sasha. I remembered how he held her and how he would kiss her cheek when she slept and how many soft toys he had bought her. He adored her. That I believed.

Anyway, what did it matter if Bear was a fraud? I couldn't even think about him with Sasha's funeral dominating my thoughts. I stowed Bear away in the attic of my mind. Later, Bear, whoever you are.

How do I describe the funeral? Heartbreaking. I wanted it to be over. I never wanted to remember Sasha like the way I saw her – ashen and in a tiny white box. Part of me died with my baby that day. I would never be the same.

I remember feeling rage – I wanted to hurt someone. Badly. Maim, injure, slash at them with a knife – I just wanted to fight.

I stood at her grave and closed my eyes. *Sasha my baby, mommy is so sorry to have hurt you. I promise you darling, that one day I will find the person who did this to you and I will hurt them like they hurt you. I promise my darling baby. I love you forever.*

****

For three weeks, Tom was consistently wonderful to Warren and me. Sometimes I had to wonder if this was the same man who abused and mistreated both my son and me – the man who grabbed me by the throat and squeezed till I saw tiny black dots in front of my eyes. Who had towered over Warren and smashed a CD with his bare hands, scaring Warren into wetting his pants. Who mocked Warren and called him names because Warren wore a Pull-up to bed.

Who grabbed my phone out of my hands and dropped it into the toilet once, because I was too long on the phone with my mother in South Africa, who had just undergone chemotherapy. Who threatened to hurt Mom if Warren wet the bed again.

As I said, it came to a point where I had to quiz myself as to who I was. I felt like I was going mental. I worried that I was.

Tom was always helpful, eager to make us happy, and he spent like crazy on Warren and me. Bought us stuff we didn't ask for and didn't even need.

He had passed the polygraph, defended me like crazy, and most of all, he had made no attempt to take Warren away.

"Losing Sasha has been a wake-up call," he said to me. "I know that I have done and said some things that were truly…" He hung his head in shame. "I didn't want to see the kids because I feared that I was too weak to give them back to you. I needed the time to do some soul-searching, and I did, Arena, I did. By God, I did – realized just how much I loved you and my kids. Without you, Arena, I am incomplete. I've been in therapy, and I have tackled demon after demon. Trust me – it has really helped me see where I went wrong."

"Okay."

"Everybody deserves a second chance, Arena. I need one too. Come home. It's where you both belong. I miss my son so much. Losing Sasha has changed me. I can't bear to think that something could happen to Warren."

"I will think about it," I said. "For now, I have too much on my plate to consider anything drastic. Please understand."

"Absolutely. Take all the time you need."

A wonderful changed man, or a con artist? I had to wonder; I was so damn confused.

A few days after Sasha's funeral, I found a bulky envelope in my mailbox addressed to me. Gingerly, I pulled it out, opened it, and gasped. In it was two thousand dollars in cash.

I whirled around to see if anyone was watching me, then quickly shoved the money into my bag. It was Tom, I was sure. He was helping me out. Trying hard not to think about his ulterior motives, I decided to say nothing. With Bear's credit card gone, I really needed money, so…

****

Culpable homicide. That was what I was charged with. I nodded and pleaded guilty. I had this incessant need to pay for my negligence. My way of righting my horrendous wrong. I was responsible for my baby's death, and I wasn't shirking that.

I *needed* to pay. I needed to bleed, then only would Sasha be avenged for *my* part in her death. Twisted way of thinking, but…

My dilemma was Warren. If I went to prison, what would become of him? He was just five, and a battered five-year-old at that, thanks to his authoritarian father who ruled with an iron fist and iron foot. After Sasha's death, Warren became very clingy and slept with me.

Tom said that he had changed, but I knew that nobody changed overnight. I worried about Warren – stressed about leaving him with Tom.

When Tom heard that I was being charged with culpable homicide, he rushed to the police station, appearing distraught as hell. He secured me a lawyer right away – one of Sydney's finest.

"She's a good mother," he protested. "She'd never do anything to harm her kids. Okay, sure, we had our problems, but as a mother, I cannot fault her. Absolutely not."

He went on to urge the police not to charge me.

"I know that you guys, you have a job to do. I respect that, and man…I mean, you guys found the car in less than twenty-four hours, so…I mean, I *applaud* you. Absolutely applaud you. But my wife…you have to have a heart. She's a mother who has suffered."

Even though he was saying all the right things, I wished he wouldn't call me his wife.

As he ranted and raved about me and what a wonderful mother I was, I watched as the attorney's defense slowly disintegrated.

Anyway, due to mitigating circumstances, I was sentenced to two years imprisonment, but…with *no* jail time, just probation. All because of Tom's attorney, Tom's pleading with the prosecution, and Tom's support.

I could be with Warren. I cried with relief.

Chapter Fifteen

Even though I wasn't losing Warren, and even though I wasn't going to prison, life was unbearable.

The pain of losing Sasha coiled around my heart and threatened to squeeze the life out of me. I wanted numbness. I wanted drugs I wanted darkness. I wanted silence.

I withdrew from everybody and everything and no longer left my apartment, unless it was absolutely necessary.

Soong and Mike were wonderful – they took care of Warren on the days when I couldn't get out of bed, the days when I stayed up all night, all day, and then became a zombie who sat in a chair and stared out of the window at nothing.

I forgot to eat, forgot to shower, forgot to take Warren to school some days, forgot to pick him up from school. In short, I had lost my marbles.

Tom had been working hard on his relationship with Warren, and slowly, I saw Warren warming towards his father.

I was relieved. With Bear the bastard out of the picture, Warren needed a father figure, and who better than Tom, his biological father?

"I want to take him to Canberra," Tom said. "Just for a week."

"Do you want to go, Warren?" I asked, expecting him to say no.

"Yes! Daddy is taking me to the monster truck show."

"O…kay then."

"Why don't you come with?" Tom asked.

I gave a dismissive wave.

"It'll do you good."

"I'm not in the mood."

"I'll get you a separate bedroom…?"

"I need to be alone, Tom," I said. "Besides, I need permission to leave the state. Parole, remember?"

"Okay, if you change your mind, I will arrange permission for you with your parole officer." They left without me.

A day later, I called and talked to Warren.

"Mom? Can…can you come over? Please? Mom? Mom?"

Ding! Ding! Ding! Something wasn't right with Warren. Why was he whispering?

"What is it, Warren?" I asked with my heart in my mouth.

"Nothing Mom, I just…I just…need you, that's all. Please, Mom."

I felt like a sumo wrestler was sitting on my chest. Then and there, I decided that I was going to get Warren.

It was 6 p.m. No time to get permission to leave the state.

"Put Daddy on the line, Warren."

"He's missing you, that's all," Tom said in a casual voice. "Come on over."

"I don't have permission, Tom."

"They won't know. Just get into the Merc and drive down. Don't break any speed limits and you'll be fine. C'mon, he misses you! He's been through a lot – let's give him a break."

Without thinking, and fighting off panic, I got into my car and drove to Canberra. It was a four-hour drive, so I could drive there, pick up Warren, and drive back by morning. Nobody

would know I had left Sydney. I was careful with my speed and followed the rules of the road so as not to be stopped by the cops.

All went well.

Until I got to Canberra. Five minutes after I arrived in Canberra, and just six minutes away from Tom and Warren, I was pulled over by the cops!

I was stunned by my misfortune. For violating my parole, I was arrested and thrown in jail to serve my two-year sentence.

My rotten luck? You bet. Nothing affected me much those days, not even going to jail.

It was the numbness – it gave me a thick skin. I wanted to be removed from society so that I didn't have to interact with anybody.

The only person who really affected me was Warren, who was now in Tom's care.

I felt helpless and furious with myself for allowing that to happen. But I needed to keep Tom happy. I was very pleasant to him, saying all the right things and giving him hope that I may go back to him. It worked; Warren whispered that his father was nice to him.

Was I relieved!

****

Silverwater Correctional Center was where I was to serve my sentence. Minimum security, but a prison nevertheless.

Tom, of course, automatically got full custody of Warren. How could I possibly fault him? It wasn't like he petitioned the courts for custody. I had stupidly brought this on myself. Losing custody of Warren made me once again think of suicide. I had basically lost both my kids because I had chosen freedom.

Anger cloaked me. This freedom crap – I had it all wrong. I was a nut job who messed up at every turn. Couldn't even get it right with a boyfriend. What an epic fail I was.

Tom however, wasn't – he was doing just fine. He brought Warren to see me every Sunday. He usually brought tons of gifts, food and chocolates with, most of which I gave away to other inmates and some to the wardens.

Everybody around me loved Tom and looked forward to his visits because of that.

To my utter relief, Warren didn't look too sad or distressed, and for that I was immensely grateful and relieved. Perhaps Tom had changed after all. I so wanted to believe it.

I was a model prisoner, hoping to get early release from prison. I stayed out of fights, did what I was told, and spent my spare time sleeping and thinking about Warren and Sasha.

While incarcerated, I had plenty of time to think, and I thought about Bear too. What a disappointment he was to me. A con artist who preyed on gullible, needy, stupid women like me. What a sucker I was to believe all that he told me.

"Don't leave me ever, Arena." Arsehole!

"I don't want to come home if there is no 'us.'" Motherfucker!

"Haven't felt this complete in a long time." Bastard!

It was almost three months since he had left, so of course he wasn't coming back. Was he wining and dining some other sucker while I languished in prison? Was he laughing his arse off at my trusting self?

I worked out what I would say to him if ever I saw him again. If he was fortunate enough to encounter me. It wasn't going to be pretty if he did.

But after the bout of unbridled anger dissipated, I thought about Bear in a different way – his arms around my naked body, his muscular thighs over mine, his smiling cobalt eyes. The way he held my face with both his hands when he kissed me. That night at the restaurant with a fireplace – our first date. The way he played with Warren and Sasha. The day he told me that he loved me. Our favorite waterfall picnic spot…

I ached for him so much, I cried myself to sleep. In spite of everything that he did, I wanted him to hold me and love me the way he had before. Even if just for a day. What a pity that he knew exactly *how* to love me. Guess he cracked the code to my soul, got to my heart, and shredded it to pieces.

He was no longer my Care Bear; he was stripped of that title.

****

Two months after I was in prison, I had a visitor. Thinking it was Tom, I made my way to the visitor's room and balked.

"Bear," I mouthed, my heart flipping inside of me.

He stood there, hairy, disheveled, and looking like the disgusting piece of crap he was.

I hesitated, then walked slowly towards the man I once loved with all my heart. The dog who promised me the earth, only to let me down like Tom did.

"Arena, I'm so sorry, baby," he said. "Sasha…I loved that child, I really did."

Really now, you rotten piece of garbage?

"You should have said twelve weeks, not six, Bear-whoever-the-fuck-you-are," I snapped as I slumped into a chair. "What happened, Bear – Goldilocks run out of porridge?"

Bitterness oozed out of me and I felt like someone else was talking inside of me. "If I could, I'd take one of these guards' weapons, shove it into your mouth and blast you to smithereens, you revolting piece of shit. Who the fuck are you? Or have you forgotten who you are with all the yarns you spin?"

For a moment, he stared at me, then with his eyes still on me, slid over his police ID.

I sneered at it. "Made in China. You should have got some for the children too, you arsehole."

"Arena, stop!" he hissed. "I am who I say I am, for fuck's sake!"

I folded my arms across my chest and glared at him. "Don't you take that tone of –"

"I was delayed, okay? The assignment took longer than I expected, Arena."

"Really, Double-O-Seven? Hey," I leaned forward in my chair, "can I be Moneypenny? Pretty please!"

He sighed. "Arena, contacting me would have compromised our investigation that took months to set up. I returned this morning and I'm here now. Don't do this."

Slowly, I stood up. "For the record, I really fell in love with you. I didn't expect to fall in love with another man after what I had been through, and I didn't want to. But you…you played me like a harp and it h…hurts." I was furious at my voice for breaking, for exposing my vulnerability. Quickly, I took a deep breath and swung into damage control. "But hey, I learned my lesson."

"Arena, listen –"

"Keep the beard, you look better in a mask."

"Arena!"

I turned and walked away.

"Arena, stop!"

Secretly riled at seeing him again, I hurried to my cell and paced. Bastard! How could he act so sincere? If I didn't know him better, if I hadn't talked to Captain Warner myself, I would have believed him. What a slick actor. What a dog! These men and their Broadway shows. Well, that was the last I was seeing of that jerk. Even though I was rattled, I tried really hard not to think of the man I loved so much.

Later that day, to my surprise, I got another visitor.

It was Bear again. "Not you again," I said, and turned to walk away.

"Arena, wait!"

I stopped walking.

"Look, Arena!"

I turned around and looked into a familiar face. I peered at Captain Warner, the man who told me that Bear was a fraud. "Captain…?"

"He'll explain. Please, Arena, give me a chance, baby!"

"Don't call me baby! Don't ever call me baby again," I hissed, my index finger darting at him.

Bear stared at me and said in a defiant voice, "Baby. I love you."

"DON'T!"

Heads started to turn to look at us.

"Baby," he repeated.

"D…don't!" My voice started to break again.

"I love you!" Bear persisted. "Just listen to him. What have you got to lose? Please."

I looked at Captain Warner. "Please, Arena," he mouthed.

Bemused, I shuffled to take a seat opposite them.

"Mrs. Botha, I want to apologize for misleading you," Captain Warner said. "Officer Shane Shaw, or Bear as we call him, is one of my finest, and I was protecting his life when I told you what I did. Right now, I cannot go into details, but I can confirm that he is who he says he is."

He went on to explain that contacting Bear would have compromised not only Bear's life, but would have put the lives of other undercover cops at risk.

"All I could do was to give you some money. I watched you take the two thousand dollars from your mailbox."

"You?" My eyes bulged.

He nodded. "I'm really sorry to do that to you, especially during that terrible time in your life. I really had no choice but to stop you in your tracks."

My eyes flew to Bear. He had not lied to me after all!

Bear nods slowly, a look of relief in his eyes. "I love you, baby," he whispered.

My bottom lip started to tremble.

"I can't walk away, Arena," Bear said in a gentle voice. "I don't wanna. I wanna stay and fight."

My hands started to shake.

"We can do this, baby. Nothing and nobody can break us up if we have each other. Take my hand, baby. Don't push me away. Please. I need you, and I want you to need me. It's how I'm wired."

"I…I…but…" I burst into tears. Put my head on the table and sobbed.

Quietly, Captain Warner backed away, leaving Bear to handle my tears, which were a combination of relief and sorrow. He hadn't duped me. He was real. All his promises and declarations were genuine. He wanted to stay in spite of everything. I was worthy.

Sorrow…that's another story.

"I n…needed you so m…much, Bear. I needed you to hold me. To t…tell me that I would be okay, Bear. I needed you so much!"

He hung his head, and when he lifted it, his eyes were full of tears. "Baby…" he shook his head, "to see you here, like this, after what you've been through…"

I nodded slowly, and for a while, we battled tears and sorrow together.

"How did things go so bad so quickly?" he asked.

I asked myself the same question – my life was going great, all my dreams were being realized, then wham! Disaster. My world was destroyed in a matter of seconds. I was in prison – what more could happen to me?

When we both were calmer, he smiled at me. "I will be waiting for you when you get out. I'm gonna marry you."

I nodded.

His face turned solemn. "Coming home and not seeing you and the kids across my apartment…" He ran his fingers slowly through his hair. "It's wrong. So wrong. I don't want to come home anymore. It's a horrible feeling, Arena. I'd give anything to turn back the clock. To go back to those wonderful days we all spent together." We both fell silent as pain oozed through us.

What I would have given to turn back the clock. I would never have left my baby in the car. I would never have left Tom if I had known what was going to happen.

"You be strong, okay? I'll be waiting for you, and we *will* get Warren back, baby. I promise you that, okay?"

I didn't answer.

"Okay?" he demanded. "I want you to be whole. I *need* you to be whole."

I nodded, desperate to believe him and grateful to hear him say that about Warren.

"Say you love me."

I looked up at him. "I can't touch you, so I need to hear you say that."

"I love you, my Care Bear."

He gave me a sad smile. "I love you, Arena." He placed his hand over his heart, then slapped it loudly. "All of this, baby."

I put two fingers to my lips, then pointed them at him.

"Man, I wanna hold you so much," he whispered, his voice filled with desperation.

"Me too," I croaked.

With tears in our eyes, we tore ourselves away from each other.

****

To my absolute joy, I was released after just six months in prison!

As promised, Bear was waiting for me with flowers and champagne. He scooped me up and whirled around with me before he kissed me. Then we hugged for a very long time.

To avoid riling up Tom, I didn't move in with Bear.

I moved in with Soong, who had moved into a house with Mike while I was in prison, until I could figure things out.

At first, Bear wasn't happy about the idea of me living with Soong, but Soong and I worked on him until he accepted it. Reluctantly at that. I did see him every day though.

Before I had gone to prison, I had given Soong a key to hold for me – the key to my storage unit, which housed all my jewelry, documents, and whatever I had left. In it was also a phone, which I was happy to have again.

Back to life. Back to my reality without my children. How could you enjoy freedom when you didn't have the people you loved by your side? When you couldn't be with the ones you loved?

I no longer had Sasha.

I no longer had Warren.

I no longer could live with Bear.

How the hell was I free?

****

Although I wanted to ask Tom for joint custody of Warren now that I was out of prison, I hesitated, deciding to work on him bit by bit. Besides, I was on parole, and I knew that the courts would ask me to wait out the rest of my sentence before they considered my application for joint custody.

Whenever I wanted to see Warren, Tom allowed it, providing he was there.

Not wanting to cause a problem, I accepted it.

Warren was thrilled to have me around and hugged me hard. But to my absolute dismay, he grew tearful whenever I left.

"Soon, baby," I whispered, my heart splintering. "Soon."

I was able to get back my BMW, but I couldn't bear the thought of using it. Every time I looked at it, I saw Sasha's angelic face in the back seat, and memories, bad ones at that, deluged over me. I eventually sold it and kept the cash.

I didn't need a car anyway, so I didn't ask Tom about the Merc sitting in our three-car garage in St Ives, and this time, he did not offer it to me. He became guarded and reserved after I got out of prison, and I attributed it to the fact that Bear was around.

However, being the proud peacock that he was, he never once mentioned Bear, as if to say that Bear did not feature, or was way too insignificant to be even worthy of a mention.

Sometimes, when I needed to see Warren, I used Bear's Jeep to travel to them. Tom eyed the Jeep with a sneer on his face, but said nothing.

I was relieved that he wasn't badgering me into coming back to him.

To keep myself busy, I started working full-time at Soong's. My aim was to build a solid life with a proper income so that when I petitioned the courts for custody of Warren, I would get it. I wanted full custody, but was happy to allow Tom as much visitation as he wanted.

Bear and I saved most of our money for the attorney we planned to get. Each time he had gone on assignment, he had received a huge paycheck, and he saved all that money. Plus, he had his share of the proceeds from the sale of his house after the divorce. The total amount he had in his bank account was five hundred and forty-three thousand dollars.

It was for a security-related business he planned to open one day when he resigned from the police force.

Now he was more than happy to give it all to me for the attorney's fees. "Use every penny, baby," he said, giving me his bank card. "We'll make it back, somehow. Warren's worth it."

I was moved to tears – he was prepared to forgo his dream for me. What more could I want in a man? If this is not showing love, what is?

Chapter Sixteen

When Kobus's girlfriend, Lanita, called me, I was really surprised. I had met Lanita once when she and Kobus came to dinner. She was a sweet girl, and I wondered why she would hang with a thug like Kobus, who disrespected her something terrible in public.

"He was involved in a car crash and he wants to see you," she said in a tearful voice. "Say's he's gonna die."

"Whaaaat?!"

"Says you must not let Tom know about this call."

I never liked Kobus, who was a fairly close buddy of Tom's. Rumor had it that he was also into stolen artworks and bulk-car hijacking. He was always upbeat and laughed the loudest in the room, and his tattoos scared the crap out of me – skulls and snakes and blood drops …

His frequent visits to the bathroom and the way he always wiped his nose made me suspect that he was a cokehead.

When I mentioned it once to Tom, he told me to keep my trap shut and mind my own business. So I did.

I looked at the time – 6 p.m. Bear was working the night shift. Maybe I should go tomorrow, I thought. But Lanita's words about not telling Tom sparked my interest, so I got dressed and headed off to Hornsby Hospital.

I was shocked when I saw Kobus – he had a huge bandage on his head and was hooked up to about four machines. He also had three intravenous lines, a urine bag, he was having a blood transfusion, *and* he was on oxygen. His face was bloated and almost unrecognizable.

When he saw me, he flicked his finger at me.

I walked closer to him. "Hey Kobus. You look like shit, man." I smiled, trying to make light of the situation.

He didn't respond to my joke. Instead, he sent Lanita out of the room and began babbling. As he did, I clamped my hands across my mouth to prevent myself from screaming.

He told me that Tom wasn't in South Africa during the time of Sasha's death.

He was in Sydney lying low. Kobus had assumed Tom's identity and traveled to South Africa, where he carefully established a paper trail on behalf of Tom.

Meanwhile, Tom had stalked me for days, sat outside my apartment, watched Bear and me on the balcony, watched us dancing with his kids, watched us at the waterfall picnic spot with Bear, saw us kiss and make out, and he was livid.

He told Kobus that he couldn't rest until he destroyed me for taking up with another man.

Tom got his chance outside the shops. Stealing the car was his plan all along, but he planned to have *both* the children in the car when he did.

Luckily for Warren and unfortunately for Tom, Warren wasn't in the car that day.

He had wanted to frame me for their deaths and send me to prison, but things didn't go according to plan, and all I got was probation.

Disgusted? There's more – he went one step further – enticed me to Canberra, causing me to violate my parole, then called the cops anonymously and informed them that I was violating parole by leaving NSW.

His aim from the very beginning was to send me to prison. Take away from me the freedom I craved.

He had hoped, now that he had custody of Warren, I would move back in with him, but since I refused to and was with Bear, he was fuming and was planning something big where Bear would be blamed and go to prison for life. Then I would go back to him. He wouldn't stop unless I did.

Kobus wasn't sure what he meant by "something big," but he suspected it involved Warren.

All Tom's niceness after Sasha's death was just an excuse to get closer to me and win me back. When that failed, he moved to plan B, C, and then D.

His words to Kobus about this new plan of revenge: "Bloody. Very bloody."

Kobus warned me not to approach Tom, as nothing he said could be proven, and Tom may hurt Warren if I made him mad. He suggested that I take Warren and disappear. It was the only way, he said, or Tom was coming after me with an Uzi. "He's got a P.I. on you all the time."

"Why you telling me all this, Kobus?"

"Because I am going to die and I want to tell you before I do. I didn't expect him to kill his child. I thought he was taking them out of the country to hide them or something."

"Why didn't you go to the cops?"

"Skeletons," he said. "Too many in my closet."

"How did he pass the polygraph?"

"Some antiperspirant shit on his fingers to mask the sweat, and he took a valium or something to calm himself down."

"Oh my God!"

As he was talking, a machine started beeping, so nurses and doctors kicked me out of the ward.

I stood in a daze as all that I heard minutes ago reverberated in my brain.

If Kobus lived, I was okay. I could go to the cops and tell them all about it. But what if Kobus died? All proof died with him. What would I do then?

****

I raced back to Soong's house and threw up. Mainly out of absolute terror.

How could I possibly leave Warren with Tom after hearing what I just heard? I needed to do something to keep Warren safe, and I needed to do it right away.

But what?

My mind raced – Tom killed Sasha because I left him. He may now go after Warren and Bear if I did not go back to him. It's me he wanted, simple. I felt trapped. I felt *imprisoned,* actually.

Being in Silverwater was nothing compared to what I was feeling at that moment when I realized just how trapped I was. Return to Tom, or lose Bear and Warren.

I accused Tom of a heinous crime – I was right to do that. He was a monster who thought nothing about killing his own child.

When I thought of the tears he'd shed over Sasha's death, the way he acted broken and like a man grieving…

How could he be this way? Kill his own child? Who does that? A psychopath? A sociopath? The thought sickened me.

But in a way, I was relieved – my gut refused to be fooled and kept nagging me that it was Tom.

Clever Tom – he hoodwinked police and passed a polygraph.

Brilliant Tom.

Evil Tom.

After a lot of thought, I came to a conclusion – the only way I would be free was to kill Tom.

Then we'd all be safe and at peace. I would have to fight back and fight dirty if need be.

That was a solution, but a long-term one at that. Right now, I needed to diffuse the situation, calm Tom down. He wanted me, and if I acquiesced, everyone would be safe. I needed to go back to Tom until I had the opportunity to kill him.

My calm at such a terrible thought surprised me. But I had been through so much that I too had evolved – I thought nothing of murder. In all fairness to me – a man who thought nothing of murdering a beautiful baby. His *own* baby.

The thought of living with Tom in that suffocating…*building* (it was not a home at all) sent me flying back into the bathroom to throw up again. It was by far the second worst thing I would have to do in my life. Identifying Sasha's body in the morgue was the worst.

But it was something I just had to do – submit to Tom.

Decision made.

Bear. I groaned. How the hell did I tell him that I was going back to Tom? I didn't want to hurt him. He didn't deserve it, but it was something I just had to do.

I couldn't just leave without an explanation – the man gave me his all, proved his love time and time again. I owed him answers.

He was at work and would be back in the morning, so I wrote him a long, lengthy letter explaining every little thing. After I wrote the letter, I left it on my bedside table.

As I dressed to go to Tom, I had a thought. What if Bear decides to take matters in his own hands after reading the letter? What if, while he was doing that, Tom shot him or hurt him really badly? What if Bear hurt Tom and had to go to jail?

I couldn't risk that. I'd rather hurt Bear and explain later.

I rushed over to the letter, picked it up, tore it into tiny pieces, and threw it into the rubbish bin.

Donning a red mini skirt and a matching top, a G-string, a push-up bra, and stilettos, I got into Bear's Jeep and drove down to St Ives.

"Arena!" Tom cried, surprise all over his face at the sight of me on his doorstep, dressed in seduction attire.

"Hope I'm not disturbing," I said in a breathy voice.

"No, no, no!" he said. "Warren, look who's here!"

Warren bounded into my arms. "You came, Mom, you came!"

When I saw him dressed as he was, in a matching pants and shirt, hair neat, shoes on his feet, I wanted to cry.

"Join us for dinner?" Tom said, his eyes flitting between my exposed thighs and cleavage.

"Depends…what are you cooking?" My voice was flirty, my manner teasing.

"Eh…I'm…not, but…" Small chuckle. "But, what would *you* like?"

He never cooked, I knew that.

"I can order it. Tell me, what would you like? *Anything* you want, I can get it."

Eager to please. Mm.

"Thai would be nice. Haven't had that for ages." I knew that his favorite food was Thai, and today, I wanted to please him.

"Thai? You got it." He rushed to the phone, and with his eyes fixed on my cleavage, placed the order.

As he did, I looked around the house I had left behind. Luxury carpets and designer furnishings in various shades of white and cream, expensive artworks to make us the envy of all in our sphere of influence, hi-tech furniture, marble floors…

Yet, it was never a home, it was more a showroom that courted envy and greed. I hated the place, but I reminded myself that my son was there, and I had to do what I had to do to save him from whatever his father had in store for him.

Tom hung up the phone and rushed to Warren and me.

"Merlot?"

"Just a glass. I'm driving."

He handed me a glass and sat across from me. Slowly, I crossed and uncrossed my legs. Not quite *Basic Instinct*, but enough for him to salivate.

"You look good," he said, his eyes on my lips.

I eyed him above the rim of my glass and gave him a coy smile.

He talked about…*something* – I didn't hear half the things he was saying.

Without asking, he topped my glass, then his.

"Hey, I have to drive home," I protested, nursing my coy voice.

"Relax. *This* is home." His turn to smile at me over the rim of his glass.

"Mm, the place looks good, just like I remember."

He gave me an I-do-my-best shrug. "So, sexy, what brings you here?"

I let out a delightful giggle and watched him visibly relax. "Felt like seeing you guys."

We sat around the table when our food arrived. I couldn't eat, not after what I heard from Kobus, but I pretended to, and moved food around my plate. He was nervous I think, because he drank a lot, and quickly too.

After dinner, I put Warren to bed. He was so happy to have me at his bedside, he couldn't stop holding and kissing me. My heart broke at his neediness. "Come live with us, Mom," he begged. "Daddy is nice to me, now. I'll tell him not to hurt you again."

"Okay, my baby, I will," I said, and lay in bed with him until he fell asleep.

When I walked out of the room, Tom, now definitely drunk, took my arm and led me to the hot tub.

"For old time's sake," he said.

I absolutely did not want to get into the hot tub with the murderer of my child and my tormentor, but I had to remind myself why I was there – I give myself to him, and everybody is safe.

I could do that.

"But, but, I don't have a bikini, Tom," I protested in a girlish voice.

"You don't need one," he slurred. "God, I love it when you say my name."

I was aware that a ton of my clothes were probably still in this house, so clothing wasn't an issue.

"C'mon!" He tugged on the hem of my top. I didn't stop him.

Slowly, he peeled off my top and threw it aside. Then he unzipped my skirt and let it drop to my ankles.

I allowed him to unhook my bra and free my breasts as I kicked away my skirt. When he reached for my G-string, I stopped him. "Easy now," I said with a smile.

"My turn…" I unbuttoned his shirt, removed it, and threw it over my shoulder. Then I slowly moved my hands down his chest, over his stomach, and undid his belt buckle. As I unzipped his pants, I allowed my hands to brush against his erection.

"God!" he groaned.

I dropped down to my knees as I tugged off his pants.

He was going crazy with my moves. Go crazy you son of a bitch, I thought to myself. I didn't remove his underpants.

Once inside the tub, he tried to kiss me as he fondled my breasts. He was literally going nuts with desire for me.

I couldn't believe just how obsessed he was with me. It wasn't like I was a raving beauty or a sex kitten or anything special. In fact, I was exactly the opposite of what he wanted. He just wanted to win, and I was his prize. If Bear got me, then Tom would have lost the game, and that was not something Tom could live with.

I giggled and allowed him some tongue action. He pressed his erection against me and tried to dry-hump me, except that we were in the water, so it was more like *wet*-humping me.

I allowed him that too before I moved away. "Gosh, you're like a hormonal teenager, Tom!"

He nodded as he ran his tongue slowly over his lower lip. "You still turn me on, baby," he whispered as he moved closer to me.

"Yeah?" My voice was breathy again.

"Oooh yeah!" He grabbed my face and licked it hungrily. "Nobody makes me hard like you do. Zero to solid in less than two seconds. Feel it." He took my hand and slipped it into his underpants. "I wanna fuck you so badly."

"Yeah?" My voice was enticing.

"Yeah. I wanna hear you call my name when I'm deep inside you."

"Yeah?"

"I wanna take you from behind."

"Ooooh." I dropped my head back, as if I were weak with desire for him.

He ran his tongue down my neck and around a nipple before he took it into his mouth and sucked vigorously on it.

"You like that? Huh? Huh? You always liked that, remember? "

"Oooh yeah."

When he tried to slip his fingers between my thighs, I clamped them together, stopping him.

"Whaaaat?"

"Too soon."

He nodded, a look of disappointment on his face. "When? Tell me when?"

With a kittenish smile, I ran my hands slowly over my breasts, then my thighs. "Soon."

"Tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow? That's too –"

"No, c'mon!"

"I'll think about it." I turned like I was about to leave.

He was behind me in an instant, pressing his hot dick against my butt.

His hands reached around me, grabbed my breasts and squeezed. "God, I want you! So badly."

"Why me? There are so many other girls…"

"Nah. You do it for me. From the day you first rejected me."

"Rejected you? When did I do that?"

"That day at the party, when we first met? You were the only girl who wasn't interested in me. When I looked back and saw you looking bored and unimpressed, I knew you were the girl for me."

"Mm." True, I wasn't interested in him.

"Then why the hell did you treat me like shit?"

"I'll change. I promise. I already have."

"Really?"

"Please! Come back. I need you. Tomorrow. Everything else…bygones."

I turned around and faced him. "I'll give it a trial. But I want more freedom, and you better play nice."

He responded by kissing me wildly. I managed to leave without getting fucked by him. But I knew that I had him hankering after me, which was what I wanted.

I felt better and safer now that I knew he wasn't mad at me. I knew that he wouldn't hurt Warren or Bear as long as he had hope.

Bear! Oh God, how the hell do I tell him that I'm leaving him? My heart broke at the thought of not seeing him again, not holding him, not kissing him. But I had to stay focused, so I forced Bear's feelings out of my thoughts.

Chapter Seventeen

"What the fuck are you saying, Arena?"

We sat across from each other at Bear's dining table.

"Bear, remember when you asked me to trust you? Because you had a good reason?"

He didn't answer.

"I need you to trust me, baby. I need to do –"

"You need to go back to him? After what he did, Arena?" He slammed his fist on the table. "Are you crazy?"

"– this. Bear, please, I'm not saying goodbye to you. I'm saying…for a while. Trust me. I will explain later."

He jerked to his feet, knocking the chair back and making me jump.

"I fucking love you. Hear that? I love you. I wanna help you. Do what needs to be done. I know something is up, and I want you to tell me what it is." He wagged his finger at me. "I will kill for you, Arena. Kill for Warren too. It's not new to me, baby. You don't know me. You have no idea who I am. I don't wanna tell you because I don't wanna scare you off, don't wanna lose you. But if you walk out the door, we're done. Hear me?"

It was so tempting for me to tell him everything, but I worried that he'd go after Tom.

"I need you to trust me, Bear," I said as I picked up my bag.

Bear looked at me with tears in his eyes. "I gave you everything I could, yet you do this to me, to us, Arena?" He grabbed his keys and stormed out of the apartment.

With a heavy heart, I called a cab and went to the hospital. Kobus was sitting up in bed, looking much better, and I was certain he wasn't going to die.

"So, tell me more, Kobus," I said.

He gave me a blank stare. "'Bout…what?"

"Sasha – Tom's involvement with her death."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he snarled.

His reaction took me by surprise.

"My baby. You said that Tom stole the car with Sasha in it. You said that you helped him."

Kobus's eyes bulged with what looked like fear. "Are you fucking high? Get the fuck out of here. I never said those goddamn things."

I stared at him in disbelief. "Yes, you did the other day, Kobus."

"I must have been drugged and talked shit. None of it was true, okay? None of it. None! Now get the fuck out of here, you cheating whore! I know all about you and your cop boyfriend – the cunt you left Tom for."

"What?"

He glanced around, then dropped his voice. "And stop talking shit like that. You can't prove nothin', you hear?"

I was shaking with fury. "Listen here, you bastard, you told –"

"And leave my goddamn name out of it, or I'll put a bullet in you, I'm warning you. Tom will have to stand in line to get you."

So much for going to the cops. They already think I'm nuts because of all the things I said about Tom. Now without Kobus backing up my story, I will come across as a psycho. But he did say those things – about the waterfall at the picnic spot, us dancing in my apartment…

As I stormed out of the hospital, I vowed to kill Kobus one day. How and when I had no idea, I just knew that I would.

****

Fucking Tom was the worst part of this whole Operation Kill Tom. He was my baby's murderer, my tormentor, the only being who could quietly turn my world into hell. I felt violated when he was inside of me, fought the urge to throw up and even cried at times. I felt like I had taken a thousand steps back, like I was being raped. Pretending it was Bear touching me helped a little. Just a little. "I'm on a mission," I kept reminding myself. "I have to do what I have to do."

Tom was on top of the world at our *reconciliation*, as he called it, and went out of his way to be nice to Warren and me. He bought me a huge diamond ring – five-carat baguettes, gaudy and as ugly as hell. But I accepted it graciously when he presented it to me in front of friends.

To save face, he didn't outright announce my return to our friends. He just casually dropped something about my return in conversation. One night, eager to see what he was up to, I quietly approached his study and stood outside the closed door, eavesdropping. I overheard a conversation on loudspeaker with Mike Thomas, one of his friends.

Tom: "I'll have to run it by Arena, Mike."

Mike: "Oh?" (Confused voice.)

Tom: "She's asleep now, but I'll talk to her about it in the morning." (Casual voice, but making it clear that I am back.)

Mike: "Arena's asleep? Is she back then?" (Surprised voice.)

Tom: "Oh yeah. Some time now." (Casual voice.)

Mike: "Oh really? So, you're back together then?" (Prying voice.)

Tom: "Of course. Who can stay away from me, Mike?" (Frivolous and bragging voice, followed with a chuckle.) "She just needed some alone time, and let's just say…things didn't go her way. But that's all water under the bridge, and we have a child so…"

Mike: "That's pretty big of you, mate. What a stand-up guy you are."

Tom: "Just doing my best, Mike. Just doing my best. Anyway, she's nagging me to join in her bed, so I'd better go."

Smooth – that was Tom.

****

We were in the hot tub and Tom was wasted, courtesy of me. I plied him with whisky, kept topping up his glass without him asking, without him realizing it, until he was staggering.

I liked him drunk, because then he'd have trouble getting it up and of course, he couldn't fuck me then.

"I can't believe you're back," he said, slipping his fingers into my bikini and trying to finger me, but fumbling. "You like that, huh?"

It felt like he was trying to insert a cactus into me, so no, I did not like it; I hated it.

"I can't believe I'm back either," I retorted in a sarcastic voice, then quickly followed it up with, "Feels good to be back." I kicked my legs and swam away from him. He followed me and turned me around to face him.

"It should," he said, pulling down my top and exposing my breasts, "because Arena, I'm it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. If you knew what I'm capable of, you would admire me," he slurred as he squeezed my breast.

"Yeah?"

"Cops, ha! They think they're smart. Ha! Dumb pieces of shit. Shit! Shit! Shit! I have the ability to outsmart them all. Detectives, cops, you name it. All of them. Seriously. Whole shebang!"

I knew he was having a dig at my darling Bear.

"Oh, c'mon, Tom!" I said in a goading manner. "They found our car with…" I stopped, unable to utter her name in his presence.

"Yeah, *eighteen* hours later! That long? Eighteen hours, Arena? Give me a break!" His mouth curling with disgust, he released my breasts and moved away from me. "They're a bunch of morons with their lie detector tests and their interrogations and their investigations…all shiiiit. Stupid pricks. Nobody can outsmart me, Arena. *Nobody*. Not Tom Botha, businessman extraordinaire!"

Okay, he had passed the lie detector test – had to hand it to him – he's smart, all right. As I pulled up my top and adjusted my bikini bottom, I cocked my head to one side and squinted at him. "Nobody?"

He threw out his arms and puffed out his chest. "I am brilliant, BABY! Your husband is fucking brill…i…ant! You really have no idea how amazing I am." He stabbed his chest with his index finger. "I am the real deal. All in one. Me. I am as good as it gets. All these other fuckers who think they can take me…" he fanned the air, "generic."

I quietly burned while he bragged. He was, after all, talking about how he fooled people over killing his own baby, not how he triumphed in a business deal or something. How could I have married a man with no heart? An *animal* with no heart?

My eyes fell on the half-empty whisky bottle on the side of the hot tub. Suddenly, I had a fantasy of slamming the whisky bottle against his head, then holding his head under water until he drowned. End of Tom.

I could get away with it. After all, he had copious amounts of alcohol in his system, and in that state he could have fallen, bumped his head and drowned?

I would play the innocent wife. "Yes, officer, I did swim with Tom, yes, but I left the hot tub, took a shower, and went to bed, while he continued drinking in the hot tub. If only I had stayed with him. If only I had stopped him from drinking so much."

I could do it.

In a trance-like state, I picked up the whisky bottle, my heart thudding. This is how it feels before you kill someone, I thought. Slowly I waded toward Tom, my heart now booming.

"What?" he asked. "What are you up to, Arena?"

Warren's crying face flashed before me. What would happen to him if I went to jail over Tom's death?

"I…I…" I looked at the whisky bottle and shook my head hard. "I wanna pour you another drink. Where's your glass, Tom?"

He held up his hand to stop me. "Got to take it easy on the booze if I don't want to look like a… gorilla, right?" He meant to say bear, not gorilla.

With something between a grimace and a sneer, I watched him guffaw at his own joke.

Bastard!

"I'm gonna take a shower," I muttered as I hopped out of the hot tub.

****

A week later, when I dropped off Warren at school, I was handed a letter addressed to Mrs. Arena Botha. Thinking it was a letter from the school, I thanked them and tore it open.

Baby,

I found your letter to me, the one you tore up. I pieced it together and know what you're up to. Don't do anything silly. They will get you. I have a better idea. Meet me Wed at Soong's for a massage. I'll be waiting for you.

I love you.

xxx

PS: I really really love you.

The letter I wrote to Bear was torn in such tiny pieces – how the hell did he put it together?

"Wow!" I whispered, unable to believe that he took the time to do that. And this "better idea" that he had—what could it be?

For a few moments, I clutched the letter from Bear to my chest, my only line of contact with him.

Thrilled to know that Bear wasn't mad at me and that he wasn't rushing to do anything crazy, I waited for Wednesday. Impatiently at that.

Soong threw her arms around me when she saw me, then ushered me into the broom cupboard where my Bear was waiting for me.

We dived into each other's arms and kissed like crazy before we tore off each other's clothes.

It felt wonderful to be in his arms again, to feel him that close to me.

I lay on the floor in Bear's arms as we kissed some more and talked.

"What do you want to do to Tom?" Bear asked.

"Kill him," I said in a casual voice as I stroked Bear's face. "Karma is taking too friggin' long. I can't wait, Bear. I have to take control of things myself. I have to kill him."

He nodded as if I had just informed him that I wanted to order a pizza or something.

"We're gonna kill him, but we're gonna do it my way." He then went on to explain.

After he finished, I ran my fingers slowly through my hair, overwhelmed with all that had to be done.

As if reading my mind, Bear said, "I got it covered, baby. Just do as I say and things will happen."

I looked at him silently.

"Trust me. Please?"

I nodded slowly.

He handed me a packet of pills.

"Headache…?"

"It's not what it looks like. Pop one of these babies into his drink and he will sleep through the night so soundly, you'll be able to do what you like to him."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. And when he wakes up in the morning, he'll act weird and have difficulty remembering things."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, but don't be tempted to kill him in his sleep or get him to sign anything, okay?"

“Mm, pity.” I pouted.

He smiled, and when he did, he looked so beautiful that my heart leapt and I just had to give him another kiss.

Bear spent some time going over other parts of the plan with me. I made suggestions, gave him details, and eventually, after a lot of hugging and kissing, we tore ourselves out of each other’s arms.

Chapter Eighteen

On the night in question, dressed in a sheer pink baby-doll negligee and a G-string, I sashayed up to Tom and handed him his second whisky laced with the sleeping pill in it.

"See, now that's what I want in a wife," he said. "Someone who is one step ahead of me." He smiled with satisfaction at my Stepford ways. "Sexy bitch!"

I allowed him a grope or two. When he tried to slip his hand into my G-string, I grabbed it. "Go upstairs, strip, and wait for me," I said in a husky voice. "I got some plans for you. It involves sweating. Both of us sweating."

"Ooooh, I like it!" he cried and drank up. Within half an hour he was fast asleep. Snoring.

"Tom?" I pinched him, tickled him, and even slapped him, but he didn't wake up.

I nodded, and as instructed by Bear, I slipped on some latex gloves, walked up to a shrub in my garden, and removed a packet from under it containing a large bag of white powder, together with several small bags of white powder.

I walked up to a sleeping Tom and pressed his fingers to the bags.

Next, I went to the safe, opened it, and got out his 9 mm. I knew that his fingerprints would already be on the gun, but I needed to make sure. After placing the gun in his hand and ensuring that I had his fingerprints on the trigger as well, I slipped the gun into a plastic bag.

I fetched Tom's black beanie, slipped it over his head, then removed it and placed that too in the plastic bag. Finally, I slipped a pair of black gloves onto his hands, removed them, and together with the other items, placed all of them under the driver's seat of Tom's Porsche.

I went back inside the house and switched my living room light on and off – my signal for Bear to fetch the bag from under the shrub.

A short while later, after glancing at the clock, I called one of our pretentious so-called friends, Trish, about her cheesecake recipe. (I hated cheesecake.) After thanking her for it, I hung up.

Half an hour later, I dialed another one of our pompous friends, Miriam, about the same recipe, saying that I preferred hers to Trish's.

"Oh, everybody prefers my cheesecake to Trish's, Arena," she bragged. "Don't know why Trish bothers to bake in the first place. Everything she bakes tastes like it was chipped out of Ayers Rock itself. Dry and tasteless." She gave a jeering laugh.

"I totally agree, and sorry for calling you so late," I said. "Didn't realize the time."

Around midnight, Bear, wearing a ski jacket identical to one that Tom had, a black beanie, and black gloves, strode into our garage, which was opened, slipped behind the wheel of Tom's black Porsche, and drove away. In the passenger's seat of the Porsche lay Tom's cell phone.

An hour later, I heard the Porsche pull into our garage.

I peeped in to look at Tom – he was still snoring.

Throwing on a gown, I ran down to our garage. Bear was adjusting the driver's seat back to its original position. He was wearing gloves, so he didn't need to worry about fingerprints being on the Porsche.

I shut the garage door and looked at Bear. He looked wired, and his eyes were shiny. After he handed me the bag again, we talked in my kitchen.

When he finished, I smiled. "Come with me, Baby Bear. Let me give you a tour of my crib and then I'm going to fuck you silly."

He smiled.

I showed him around the house, then took him into my bedroom where Tom was sleeping. I motioned to the bed.

"Here?"

I nodded and shed my gown while Tom snored away.

"You sure?"

"Yep, I'm that screwed up right now. The ultimate disrespect. I want to do it with him in the bed."

Bear grinned. "Whatever floats your boat, baby."

As we floated my boat, Tom suddenly opened his eyes and looked at us.

Both Bear and I froze.

"Arena?" Tom squinted at me, then at Bear. For a few moments he just stared. Then his eyes closed again and he resumed his snoring.

Bear and I exchanged nervous looks.

"Thought you said he wouldn't wake up."

Bear shrugged, then we continued our disrespecting of Tom.

"Do you think he'll remember this when he wakes up?" I asked as we dressed.

"Nah. It'll be like a dream if he does. But he'll wonder if it was really a dream. Trust me, I've tried and tested it."

I nodded. "Hope it plagues him."

"It will. Make no mistake about that."

"Now, I have to do what I have to do," Bear said.

I nodded reluctantly.

"See you in a month, baby," he said, taking my face in his hands for a deep kiss.

With a heavy heart, and with tears in my eyes, I said goodbye to my lover and friend. The man who loved me enough to kill for me.

Chapter Nineteen

It was Saturday morning, but I arose at 6 a.m. and got dressed. It was going to be a big day, and I was excited.

When the doorbell rang, I took a deep breath and threw open the front door.

"Mrs. Botha?"

"Yes?"

"We're detectives Eric Hahn and Sol Cusson, and we'd like to speak to your husband, please."

"Sure," I said with a worried look on my face. "Come inside and have a seat. I'll get my husband. He's asleep. Is everything okay?"

Both Hahn and Cusson nodded.

I ran up the stairs and shook Tom. It was a while before he managed to open his eyes.

"Honey, there are some detectives wanting to speak to you."

"What? So early? What about?" He rubbed his eyes and blinked away the fog of sleep. "I can't believe how sleepy I am."

"I'll get you coffee, darling," I said, but remained where I was.

Tom rolled out of bed, threw on his Hugh Hefner robe, and stumbled downstairs to the waiting detectives.

I hovered around, anxious to hear what they were saying.

"What do you mean Kobus is dead?" I heard Tom say.

"What?" I gasped. "Kobus?" I put my hands to my mouth.

Tom shook his head. "Wow! I can't believe it. Kobus. Wow!" Slowly, he sank into a chair and pulled his gown around him.

Poor Tom, he appeared genuinely distraught over the death of his loyal friend. I really should be getting him coffee, I thought. But I didn't.

"We think it might be robbery," the detective said, his eyes fixed on Tom. "Some of his valuables are missing – his watch, his wallet, and a few other things."

Tom frowned. "Robbery? You're kidding me!"

"Where were you last night between the hours of 10 p.m. and 2 a.m.?" Detective Hahn asked.

Okay, we've all watched *Law and Order,* and we all know that when a detective asks you a question like that – you're a suspect.

Tom's surprise was classic. "Me?" He let out a mirthless chuckle. "I was home. With my wife. In bed. Sleeping."

All eyes flew to me.

"Eh, um…ye…ah," I said. "Yes, of course. He was home. With me. In our bed. Sleeping. Yes." I gave a short laugh. "Surely you don't suspect…" I frowned and looked at Tom.

He shrugged and looked at the detectives with eyebrows raised.

"Well, we received a tip that a black Porsche, which was parked in the vicinity, was seen speeding away from the scene of the crime."

"A black…?" I whirled around to look at Tom, my eyes wide and accusing.

"What? That's ridiculous!" Tom exclaimed, then threw me a stop-looking-at-me-like-that look.

"Where were you last night between the hours of 10 p.m. and 2 a.m.?" Hahn asked me.

"Me?" I shrugged, then answered. "I was home. Baked a cheesecake when my husband and kid were sleeping."

"Can anybody verify this besides your husband?"

"Well," I said, scratching my eyebrow with the nail of my thumb, "I spoke to my friends, um Trish, then I called Miriam around 10, then I…" I lifted and dropped my shoulders. "I have the cheesecake if you'd like to see it."

"That won't be necessary."

As they talked, I walked into the kitchen, took Tom's cell phone, and slipped it into the fridge. When I walked back into the living room, it was with a glass of water for my husband.

He accepted it and drank it all. Side effects of the sleeping tablet – extreme thirst. Dutiful wife, wasn't I?

In a show of solidarity, I even inched closer to Tom and put my hand on his shoulder.

What a good wife I was while nails were being hammered into Tom's cherry wood coffin. (That's what I saw him in. Nothing but the finest for my flashy husband.)

"Can we take a look at your phone?"

"Sure," Tom said, and started looking for his phone. We couldn't find it.

"Problem?" Detective Cusson asked.

"I can't find my phone," Tom said.

An awkward silence followed.

"You had it just now, honey."

"No, I didn't!" Tom snapped and continued hunting.

"Sorry," I muttered.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed the looks being exchanged between the detectives.

I joined in the hunt for Tom's phone, and after about five minutes, I opened the fridge.

"Got it!" I said, and handed it to the detectives.

"Was in the fridge," I said with a ditsy chuckle.

Tom cocked his head at me. "Fridge? *You* must have left it there. I wouldn't."

I looked at Tom, blinked rapidly, looked at the detectives, then at Tom again. "Yeah…yeah…I must have. Yeah."

More knowing looks passed between the detectives.

As the detective checked the call log, his face lit up. It was then that I allowed myself my first inward smile.

"Can I see that?" Tom asked. He appeared to be more alert by that time.

The detective nodded and handed the phone to Tom.

Tom checked his call log and shrugged. "What were you looking for?"

The detective responded with, "Can we look around?"

"Sssssure," Tom said.

"No," I said. "Get a warrant first."

Bear instructed me to say that. Didn't want Tom to walk later on because of any technicality.

Tom frowned at me.

"No, Tom, tell them to get a warrant." I was so adamant that Tom, after he got over his surprise, eventually nodded. To my relief.

While the detectives continued talking to Tom, a search warrant was delivered to them.

"That was quick," Tom muttered, his brows knitted. "Do I need a lawyer or something?"

"Do you?" the detective countered.

"No," I answered, then looked at Tom. "Of course you don't!"

For the first time since I'd known Tom, he looked unsure.

With excitement coursing through my veins, I threw open my doors to the team that arrived to search my house, and when Tom wasn't looking, I was extremely cooperative.

I did resist the urge to offer them lattes or even whisky – that's how happy I was.

When they found Tom's gun in the safe, the beanie, the cocaine, and some of Kobus's jewelry hidden in the garage, there was a flurry of activity and twitters between them.

I was so thrilled with the succession of nails in Tom's coffin, I wanted to bake cupcakes. Maybe even bake another cheesecake. Did I mention I liked to bake and cook when I was excited?

Anyway, the detectives asked Tom to come down to the police station for questioning.

What? No arrest yet? I was a tad disappointed.

Tom threw out his hands. "I ask you again: do I need a lawyer?"

"Well," Detective Hahn said, "if you are guilty of something, or if you think you need one, then you need one. But if you are innocent, I guess you won't need one, right?"

Gibberish, I know, but it worked.

"I don't need one, and I am happy to answer all your questions," Tom said. "Hopefully, I will be home in time for lunch."

Tom should have asked for a lawyer. Sure, he was cocky enough to think that he was smart enough to handle anything, but at that moment, he believed that he was innocent, so he wasn't worried.

When Tom left with the cops, I walked to the freezer and opened it.

"What should I make for lunch?" I asked out loud.

"Warren!" I called. "Let's bake cupcakes."

****

Tom returned home around midday looking tired, distracted, and disturbed.

"Tell me all about it over lunch," I said.

"What did you make?" he asked in an absentminded voice.

"Let me show you."

We sat down to a lunch of roast leg of lamb, mashed potatoes, baked pumpkin, savory rice, minted peas, and gravy.

But wait, there's more:

For dessert – chocolate cupcakes and cheesecake – Miriam's recipe, and she was right; her recipe was great, and not at all like it was chipped out of Ayers Rock.

Tom didn't thank me for the awesome feast I had spread. Guess he was too preoccupied. But that was okay – I understood that he had a lot on his mind.

Just as we were about to eat, the cops arrived to arrest Tom.

My day was getting brighter.

"But this is just ridiculous," I protested, putting down my carving knife and removing my pink apron. "You got the wrong man, officer."

"They're idiots! Call my lawyer, Arena!" Tom shouted as they led him out in handcuffs.

"But can't he at least have his lamb first? I baked cheesecake, Officer."

They ignored me – the cheek of them.

I tottered behind Tom, wiping away crocodile tears. "Tom! Oh God, Tom!"

Oscar-worthy performance? You bet. All my experience on Tom's Broadway shows, remember?

"It's okay," Tom said when he saw how distraught I was. "I'll be back soon, Arena. This is just a misunderstanding. They've got nothing on me. Nothing!"

"Okay, honey, I will call Ian Saunders right away!"

And I did call Ian Saunders – about three hours later. I did everything I possibly could to inspire confidence in Tom, the motherfucker, because of the one thing I wanted – okay, *two* things I wanted:

1) I wanted general power of attorney, where I have full control of all Tom's affairs and money.

2) I wanted Tom to believe that I was one hundred percent on his side, because if he suspected me of framing him, and when and *if* he got bail, he would come after me. I was still scared of him.

Oh, and I really was desperate for him *not* to make bail on Monday. But that was up to the judge.

Next, I needed to work on his attorney.

Ian Saunders was a sixty-something man who, according to Tom, had a penchant for double Ds. He wasn't fussy whether it was silicone, saline, or au naturel, but he liked them younger than twenty-five. (The bearer of the double Ds that is, not the implants.)

He also worked hard, was an excellent attorney, but was highly driven by the dollar, which came before everything else. He agreed to meet me in an hour at his offices in St Ives.

Wearing a push-up bra, hooker heels, and a belt for a skirt, and even though I knew that at his age the only thing that could get hard was his arteries, I tottered into Ian Saunders' office.

"Oh, Mr. Saunders," I said, wringing my hands, "I do worry about your fees. Tom has full control of all money, and I fear that I may not be able to pay –"

"That's no problem," he said to my push-up bra. "I will get you a GPA signed right away so that you have full access to all his funds. I will need a down payment of twenty grand, you do understand that, sweetheart?"

"Just twenty? I allocated thirty to be on the safe side, Mr. Saunders."

"Well, yeah…it would eventually be more like fifty, darling. And it's Ian."

"Tell you what, Ian, why don't I give you fifty for…I dunno," I tucked my hair behind my ears and batted my eyelashes at him, "*safekeeping*...I do hate handling money. It's too much for my twenty-five-year-old brain." I let out a giggle.

It was fun watching him salivate. When I left his office, he walked me out to my car, and I was really hopeful about the power of attorney.

"Take care now, darling," he said, and smacked me lightly on my butt.

"Oooh!" Another girlish giggle escaped me.

To my utter joy, he showed up at my door hours later with a power of attorney from Tom.

"Got it!" he said, waving it at me. "Told him that you needed it and that it was best if he signed it right away, and he did."

Thrilled, I invited him in and offered him whisky, which he accepted. As he drank, I quizzed him about the power of attorney. His response was music to my ears – the power of attorney permitted me to dispose of all/any of our assets if I needed to, and it gave me complete control over all of Tom's money. Excellent. I resisted the urge to rub my hands with glee.

The moment he left, after giving me a hug and copping a good feel of my arse, I called in real estate agents and got valuations on all three of our residential properties. (After I rubbed my hands with glee.)

It was Saturday afternoon and I was sure they wouldn't answer or wouldn't be interested until Monday, but to my surprise, all the real estate agents were willing to come out and see me right away.

"Well, I guess you can round up your buyers, 'cause I'll know in days if we can start selling," I said.

They did, and went on to badger me to allow them to show the properties to prospective buyers.

If Tom found out about my calling in agents and questioned me about it, I would give him the story Bear had told me to give him – I would tell him that I needed to ensure we had enough money to pay for his defense, and since I wasn't sure which property would sell quickly, I just got valuations on them all.

All I was doing was lining up my ducks and getting ready to liquidate our assets to help his guilty arse, if need be.

Early Monday morning, I planned to get a valuation on Tom's business, as well as the commercial building we owned. The thing that bothered me the most – would Tom make bail?

I'd know on Monday. Till then, I held my breath and baked more cupcakes.

****

I remember the exact moment I got the news. I was driving to my storage locker, listening to Jason Derulo's "Riding Solo." Yeah, he was putting on his shades and covering up his eyes…

Nice song.

What was the news? Oh, Tom was denied bail.

The bail gods were smiling down on me for sure. I was so excited, I pulled over and texted Soong, filling her in on what had happened thus far. She in turn would forward my text to Bear, as arranged.

When I visited Tom in prison, my crocodile tears flowed. "How do I manage this? It's too much for me to handle. I'm scared, Tom."

"Arena, don't worry. I'm asking for a speedy trial because I am being framed. I will be acquitted; I know that for a fact. It's the dumb cops – I think they are framing me for some reason."

The dog didn't even suspect *me*? Was I that dumb to him? That *insignificant*?

Evidently I was. Shucks!

Well, I shivered in anticipation for the day when he had his gigantic revelation – it was his stupid doormat of a wife who done it (not the butler). She grew a spine and with the help of her lover, fought back – got his arse thrown in jail.

How did she do it? Well, here's how it all went down:

Bear wore a jacket similar to a black one that Tom had, drove to my house, parked a street away, and while Tom was knocked out and sleeping peacefully, picked up Tom's Porsche, his gun, and his cell phone, then drove to Kobus's house.

As suggested by me, he parked outside a cranky neighbor's house a few blocks from Kobus, who gave all of Kobus's visitors hell if they dared park outside her house and obstruct her view of the *road*, regardless of the time of day or night.

She had a habit of recording license plates and giving it to the cops. My bet is that it was she who tipped the cops off about Tom's Porsche fleeing the scene of the crime.

According to Bear, he got Kobus just as he opened his front door, so there was no breaking and entering. This led the cops to believe that the murderer was known to Kobus.

Bear shot him in his right arm straight away in case he reached for his weapon.

"This is for baby Sasha, you prick," Bear said.

Kobus apparently pleaded for his life. He said that he owed Tom, as Tom had helped him waste his brother-in-law years ago, and that Tom expected him to return the favor.

"I didn't know he was gonna kill the kids, I swear," Kobus had claimed.

"Gimme your phone," Bear said.

Kobus gave it to him.

"Gimme your password."

Kobus gave it to him.

"Remember what you said to Arena? You told her to shut her trap or you'll come after her?"

"Hey, man, I'm sorry, man –"

"She sent me to kill you," Bear said. "She's behind your murder."

"Arena? She?" He appeared shocked according to Bear.

Kobus started begging. "I'll give you priceless pieces of *original* art that will set you up for life if you spare me. I'll give you drugs. You want coke?"

Bear laughed.

"Please, man, please, I beg you! I need a hospital. I'm in pain, man."

"I'll bet that's what Sasha would have said if she could have talked that day, right?"

"Please! Please!"

Bear responded by firing three more rounds – two in the chest, one between the eyes. Counting the one in his arm – a total of four.

He then went on to call Kobus using Tom's cell phone. He called nine times, answered on Kobus's phone, then used Kobus's phone to call Tom's phone. That was a lot of cell phone activity between the two at such a crucial time.

Smart, huh? But wait, there's more.

After that, Bear deleted the call log from Tom's phone.

Of course when the cops checked Tom's phone, they found no record of him calling Kobus. But when they got access to his phone records, they noted cell phone tower activity that placed Tom in the vicinity during the time of the murder.

Also, the nine calls Tom made to Kobus, then deleted? Why would an innocent man delete his call log and all evidence of his calls to Kobus?

The left hand glove the cops found at the scene of the crime wasn't OJ Simpson's or Michael Jackson's – it was Tom's.

"If you kill Tom, you'll be a suspect," Bear had warned me. "Kill Kobus, frame Tom. That's your answer. With a trail of evidence – Tom's gonna need a dream team to defend him."

"Okay." What Bear said made sense. But the question on my mind at that time – would we be able to pull it off?

"You'll be Tom's alibi," Bear explained. "When the cops question you, you will be a great alibi and verify Tom's whereabouts. Hopefully, they will let you take the stand in court even though you are protected by spousal privilege." He went on to explain in detail.

I smiled. "I see where you're going, Care Bear."

"Glad you do."

After Bear told me all about it – the killing of Kobus and the artful framing of an innocent man, instead of being repulsed by him for murdering a man, I was so turned on with what he did for me, the fact that he would *kill* for me and my children, that I wanted to fuck him right away, and of course, I did.

In Tom's bed *with* Tom sleeping in it. I was nuts, I know, but Tom had made me that way.

Anyway, Bear, using his brother's car, drove down to Melbourne. His brother Steve, also a cop, had already driven to Melbourne days earlier, using Bear's car and credit card, thereby establishing a paper trail for Bear, just like Kobus had done for Tom.

All this so that Bear, if questioned, was out of Sydney during the time of the murder, or appeared to be.

So far, we had played Tom at his own game and appeared to be winning. Time would tell, because Tom would not go down without a fight.

Chapter Twenty

Tom had a lot of time to think while behind bars. I was sure he may have suspected me of framing him, but he never questioned me about it.

Maybe it was because I was adamant that he was home that night – me being his strong alibi.

Or maybe it was that he knew that I was behind it, but he didn't want to upset me in any way by accusing me of it, for fear that I would change my story as to his whereabouts that night.

I felt really powerful to know that I held Tom's fate in my hand. Who wouldn't?

When questioned by Ian about Tom's whereabouts, I was adamant that Tom was with me.

After Tom was denied bail, slowly my story began to fall apart.

When the prosecution questioned me, I bit my nails, turned red in the face, and looked towards the left of the ceiling – imparting hope that Tom was lying about his whereabouts and alibi, and that maybe I was too.

Even with the detectives, I wouldn't make eye-contact, and ensured I looked flustered. So much so that a female detective took me aside.

"I know how hard this must be for you considering your history – the abuse you suffered under him, but here is your chance to do the right thing." Blah! Blah! Blah! She reminded me so much of Mariska Hargitay from *Law and Order,* I wanted to call her Detective Benson.

I nodded, fought back tears and said, "I *thought* he was with me, Detective, but now I'm so confused."

Closer to the trial, I drip-fed the detectives crucial information they could use against Tom.

"Okay, so was there any bad blood between the two of them that you knew of?"

"Well, I heard them argue over the phone a few days earlier – something about Kobus calling me while he was in the hospital."

I knew that it would be a matter of time before they found out that I had visited Kobus in the hospital. Lanita would probably tell them that Kobus didn't want Tom to know that he was calling me.

They exchanged excited glances.

"Did he call you *while* he was in the hospital?"

"Yes. Said he had something to tell me but, he never got a chance to talk to me as his machine went off and the nurses told me to leave. I hate hospitals, so I left."

"Do you have any idea what it was about?"

I nodded. "He once mentioned something about Tom cheating on me, and maybe now that they had a fall out, Kobus wanted to tell me all about it. Rat on Tom. I dunno…"

"Fall out, eh?"

"Yes."

"And how did you feel about Tom's affair?"

"I don't really believe that he did. Tom would *never* cheat on me. He loved me. But if he did, it was in the past. I saw someone, Tom saw someone – it's over. Time to move on. Tom and I are together now. We're looking ahead, moving on. "

They stared blankly at me.

"So, do you think Tom found out that Kobus had called you?"

"I don't know. He may have." I shrugged.

Happy with my damning answers, the detective and her partner went on their merry way.

I returned to the kitchen to finish my baking. I was making a fudge chocolate cake. Or was it *chocolate* fudge cake? Cakes can be so confusing at times.

****

With Tom out of the house, Warren and I were really relaxed and very comfortable in our luxury surroundings. We had plasma televisions in just about every room, a hot tub, satellite TV, luxury beds, a solar-heated pool, and a state-of-the-art kitchen, among other things – how could we not be comfortable?

"Mom, is daddy coming back?" Warren asked.

"Why, hon, do you want him to?"

He shook his head slowly.

"Why? I thought things were cool with you both."

"It was, but he's scary. And I don't like to dress up all the time. My clothes are scratchy, Mom."

"Would you prefer if he never came back?"

He nodded.

I gave him a hug, wishing that such a little boy didn't have to feel such fear of his own father.

As for Bear, I missed him so much, I ached for him.

How I wished I could have had him around to share all this luxury and comfort with me. After all, he was now my soul mate. Remember, he surrendered his life savings to me not so long ago. Was willing to forfeit his dreams to help me get Warren back.

One more week, then we would meet at Soong's house. I could hardly wait.

When we finally saw each other, we hugged and kissed and spent all our time in each other's arms.

"Come stay with me," I said.

"Nope. But you can come stay with me."

"C'mon, Bear. Just one night. I need you. This is *my* house now, not Tom's. And besides, I'm selling the house soon." He eventually spent a night with me. Then another, and another.

Bear and I invited Soong and Mike regularly for drinks, dinner, and to join us in the hot tub. Together we shared a lot of laughs and good times.

I made a decision that as soon as the trial was over, I was going to give Soong some money for her business.

Also, I was going to make a hefty donation to Fatima's support group so that they could continue to help women in need.

****

"Can I help you?" I asked the small Asian man decked out in ninja gear standing on my doorstep, looking irate.

He balked at the sight of me, then waved a yellow envelope at me. "I need payment, and Mr. Botha, he is not answering his phone, and I've done all the work and –"

"What's this all about?"

"I'm a private investigator and I've done all –"

"Private investigator?" My ears pricked. This must be the guy who was following me!

"Okay," I said, eager to get rid of him, "but Mr. Botha is away indefinitely."

"What? What are you saying? I'm not getting paid?"

"How much does he owe you?"

He hesitated then said, "Seven thousand dollars."

I started to shut the door on him.

"Okay, two thousand dollars, then!"

I eyed the man, then the bulging yellow envelope in his hand. "Fine. Let me take a look, and if it's worth it, I will cut you a check right now."

He handed me the envelope.

I tore it open and went through it. As I did, I turned ashen and gripped the table to steady myself.

I had expected stuff on me, my whereabouts, but inside was a full report on Bear. Photos, information about his real name, the schools he attended, his place of work, who he reported to, his bank account details, his car – the most in-depth report I had ever seen.

It scared me that Tom had this kind of information on Bear. What was he planning to do with it?

What scared me even more was the dossier on Amy – photos of her at school, at ballet classes, on a jungle-gym, in the supermarket with a young woman who I assumed was Amy's mother, the car the woman drove, their house.

"See?" Ninja said.

Trying to keep a poker-face, I nodded, then went on to hand him a check.

The moment he left, I called Bear and told him about the envelope. He didn't care that Tom had information on him, but he was horrified by the news of Amy's surveillance.

Tom was after Bear in a huge way, it seemed. My bet was that he had planned to do something creatively horrific to Bear. It was a damn good thing he was behind bars.

****

I had been waiting for this day since Kobus confirmed that Tom had killed my baby, so when I was called to the witness stand, I was ready.

Ian Saunders, Tom's attorney, questioned me first, and of course, I was fluent with my answers.

When the prosecution questioned me, to Tom's horror, I was ditzy and melted like ice cream in the sun.

"No, I can't be *certain* that Tom was with me all night, you're right. But like, I think he was." My eyes shifted to the left of the ceiling. "I'm like…fifty percent sure? I think...?"

"Mrs. Botha, may I remind you that there is a strong penalty for perjury?"

My bottom lip began to tremble as he shoveled more questions at me.

"Yes, Tom gave me a bag of clothes and asked me to get rid of it. Said that he got fish bait on them and that they smelled, something like that. So I threw the bag away."

"No, I've never seen Tom fish before, but maybe he took up fishing when...when I wasn't looking…?"

"Yes, Tom and Kobus did argue sometimes. But it was nothing, I assure you."

Finally, "Yes…Tom, he did instruct me to tell police that he was with me all night. But it wasn't like he was forcing me to. He just asked me to. Nicely."

"Arenaaaa!" Tom screamed. "What the hell is WRONG WITH YOU?"

"I'm so sorry, Tom," I said. "I told them what you told me to."

"Contain your client," the judge yelled to Ian Saunders.

"They will send me to jail for perjury, honey. I'm so sorry, but I have to tell the truth, sweetheart."

"You lying bitch! You're such a liar! I don't believe it!"

I sobbed into my lacy white handkerchief as he hurled abuse at me. Well, it was Kleenex actually, but I pretended that it was a white, lacy handkerchief, like I'd seen them use in the western movies.

"He's not a bad man," I sniffed to the jury, "he…he just has a temper, that's all."

"Shaddup! Shaddup! SHADDUP!" Tom screamed as the bailiffs dragged him out of court. "I will get you, Arena. I will kill you, I promise!"

With tears in my eyes, I went on to give my damning testimony.

Ian Saunders glared at me before he cross-examined me. That was okay – I planned to give him a hug later on, which would bridge troubled waters between him and me.

"You paint a picture of your husband being a violent man, yet you went back to him?"

I took my time in answering. "He had a temper and it was scary, yes, but he told me that he would change, and he did change. I've been with him for almost a month and he never hit me or hit my son once, never threatened to put my son out at night in the dark, never threatened to kill me, except now, never screamed at me once in the last thirty days, which was amazing. Except today, when he threatened to kill me." I looked at the jury. "He really has changed."

I knew exactly how I sounded (Bear had schooled me on how to answer and what kind of questions I could face), and I bet Ian Saunders regretted cross-examining me. In fact, I bet he regretted putting me on the stand in the first place.

"No further questions!" Ian Saunders snapped, his lips a thin line.

The prosecution was not finished with me.

"Besides today, did your husband, at any other time, threaten to kill you?"

"Y…yes. But what does that have to do –"

"Yet you went back to him? In spite of all of –"

"I loved my husband in spite of everything, yes. We lost a child, and both of us were broken. It made sense for me to try and make it work. He's an innocent –"

"So why did you lie about your husband's whereabouts?"

"I didn't lie when I made that initial statement. I thought it was correct. But after a while, I wasn't so sure and…" I placed a palm on my forehead. "Look, I don't want to go back to jail for perjury. I have a son who needs me. I need to tell the truth. Maybe my husband may not have been home during the time of the murder, but I am confident that he didn't kill Kobus and that he will be found not guilty. Just because he's got a temper, doesn't mean he's a bad man."

Outside the courtroom, Ian Saunders took me aside. "Your testimony was extremely damaging to Tom's case, Arena. Is there something I should know?"

I hesitated, then burst into tears. "Tom told me that he killed Kobus and that if I said anything, he'd kill me. I'm finding it really hard to live with Kobus's murder on my conscience, Ian, and like–"

"He told you that he killed Kobus?"

"Yes, but I don't believe he did. He's not a murderer. And if you tell him I told you that, when he comes home, he's going to beat the daylights out of me, Ian."

"Oh, darling, somehow I don't think he's coming home anytime soon."

"What do you mean, Ian?"

Ian sighed, shook his head, then started talking fast and furiously, and for a moment, I thought I was at an auction.

"The glove with his DNA on it, the old lady across the street confirming that a black Porsche was parked outside her house around the time of the murder, the murder weapon in Tom's house, the phone calls Tom made around the time of the murder which puts him outside Kobus's house, the cocaine with his fingerprints *and* Kobus's on it, and now *your* testimony – *your* inability to alibi him."

He took off his glasses and rubbed his sunken eyes.

"What can I do to help, Ian? Tell me, just tell me."

"Pray," he said before he walked away.

"On my knees?"

He gave a dismissive wave, but didn't look back.

"Okay, then!"

Two weeks later, after only an hour of deliberation, the jury returned with a verdict.

On the charge of first degree murder…drum roll please…guilty!

Tom's head lolled, then he turned and shot me a murderous look. I deadpanned for a moment as I let victory wash over me, then started wailing. Loudly.

Tom was sentenced to thirty-three years for murdering Kobus. The cocaine charges added another thirteen years, to be served *consecutively*. Total…forty-six years, with parole only after thirty-five years. I could live with that.

They say revenge is sweet.

It's not. It's *very* sweet.

The injustice of it all – an innocent man behind bars for a crime he didn't commit.

True, but let's not forget how it all started – he was a sociopath, a psychopath who thought nothing of killing his own child. He was a child murderer, and he belonged in prison.

When I stepped out of court, I stood aside and closed my eyes.

I pictured my baby Sasha's angelic face, her melodious gurgles, her smile that melted hearts, and a dry sob escaped me.

Sasha my baby, I did it. I avenged you, sweetheart. I will never forget you. You live on in my heart.

I drove home to Bear's open arms and we hugged for a while before we cracked open a bottle of champagne.

"To baby Sasha," he said in a solemn voice.

"To beautiful Sasha," I said, then embraced my soul mate, who I was sure would take a grenade for me.

Warren was now safe.

Bear was now safe.

I was now safe.

"Let's go tell Warren the good news," I murmured. "That his daddy is never coming back."

Bear chuckled. "I think you're gonna make his day."

"Never ever?" Warren asked, his eyes wide with anticipation.

"Never ever, sweetheart."

"Not even for a visit?"

"Not even for a visit, baby."

"You promise, Mom?"

"I do, Warren. I promise."

Warren smiled, then looked at Bear. "You gonna be my dad?"

Bear smiled at me, then tossed Warren's hair. "I'm almost sure I am."

"Will I be able to call you Dad, like Amy does?"

Bear's smile vanished and he swallowed hard. "Yes, champ. But you can call me that *now*, if you like. We can play pretend. And…it makes me feel good to have a son." They hugged while I watched, my tears falling into my glass and mingling with my Cristal.

Chapter Twenty-One

I severed all ties with Tom and stopped contact with him. Ignored all his pleas to visit him that Ian Saunders frequently passed on to me.

My divorce went through quite quickly due to the fact that my husband was incarcerated and that we had already undergone a long-term separation.

So, finally, something I never thought would ever happen did – I was free. Free in *every* sense of the word. I felt like I had ingested some mind-altering illegal drug – I was just so high on life.

What made it different this time was that Tom was safely behind bars, I was with a man who shared a blood-secret with me, and I had all the money I needed.

I couldn't ask for anything more. Except for my beloved baby Sasha. I would have given all my freedom to have her back in my arms. But that wasn't going to happen.

When Bear asked me to marry him, we were in South Africa enjoying a wonderful vacation. Amy accompanied us, and that made it all just perfect for both of us.

We were on safari with my family, watching two lions nuzzle each other, when Bear turned to me and whispered, "I wanna do that too."

"Okay, why don't we run it by the ranger, see if he can ask the lion permission for you to nuzzle it?" I joked.

He laughed and took me into a playful headlock. "Smartarse, I wanna marry you and nuzzle you forever."

"What?"

He released me and took me into his arms. "Be a gun to my holster? Say yes, 'cause I'm really looking forward to jumping on Oprah's couch."

I laughed and took his face in my hands. "Yes! I will be a gun to your holster. I will marry you, my love."

Two days later, in the presence of our kids, my family members, the staff of the game lodge we were staying in, amidst lions and tigers and under a molasses sky, I became Mrs. Arena Shaw.

Life was good.

Life was perfect.

Chapter Twenty-Two

When I returned to Sydney, I got several messages from Ian Saunders that Tom desperately wanted to see me. I decided to visit him.

On a dreary day darkened by grey clouds, I got into my car and drove to Silverwater Correction Center, my previous abode, and currently Tom's.

To my delight, his eye was black and he sported some serious bruises on his face.

"Hi, honey," I said in a voice similar to Soong's. "You look like shiiiit. Hey, have you been having sex here? Cheating on me?" I grinned.

For some reason, he was not amused.

"Silly me, I forgot, I'm no longer your wife." I lifted up my hand and flashed him my wedding ring. "I'm married now, to the gorilla. Like my ring? It's a solitaire." I leaned forward and dropped my voice, "Sorry, but I really didn't like the baguette you gave me. It looked too big and…vulgar, like I was trying to impress, so I sold it and donated the money to a women's shelter."

He glared at me.

"What?"

"I know that it was you who framed me," he said in a low, controlled voice.

I was aware that conversations were recorded, so I was careful how I responded.

"Whachu mean, dear?"

"I mean –"

"Hey, you should try green concealer. I have some at home. Damn, I would have brought you some had I known someone was tearing you a new one." I winked.

"And…I know *why* you did it," he continued, ignoring my jibes. "That night, he was in my bed fucking you. It wasn't a dream, he was there, naked and in *my* bed." As he spoke, his eyes bulged and his voice rose in pitch.

"*My* bed. Now you sound like one of the bears from Goldilocks, Tom…berlina."

His jaw set.

"Ohmigod, you're right – you are smart!" I smiled. "And tell me, Tom…berlina, how did this make you feel when you realized that I had disrespected *you* in such an atrocious way?"

With a murderous look on his face, he continued. "He helped you. You aren't smart enough to pull off something so huge on your own. He killed Kobus, then planted all that shit in my house. That night, I had a dream you were fucking him right next to me, in my very bed. But it wasn't a dream– it was real. After helping you, he further disrespected me by fucking you in my bed while I slept. In the *same* bed while I slept in it." He shook his head. "What a slut you are."

"Cheap," I said.

"What?"

I leaned in. "I am a *cheap* slut." I grinned, then winked. "Cheap, cheap!" I was enjoying this. "But…he couldn't have helped me."

"Why not?"

" 'Cause he's a cop, remember? They're all really dumb, according to you."

He slammed back in his seat and stared at me, his lips in a thin white line.

I gasped. "You're losing your hair, Tom…berlina."

"Stop calling me that!"

"Going bald. Ohmigod! Does Medicare cover hair implants?"

"Because I took away something you loved, right?" he said, ignoring my jibes.

I deadpanned at the mention of Sasha, even though I felt like I had been hit in the face with a cement brick.

He leaned in and dropped his voice. "Let me tell you something – she woke up and cried for you." He sat back and smiled as the knife drove deep into my already wounded heart.

You motherfucker! You son of a bitch! You evil bastard of a cunt!

I wanted to vomit at his words. I wanted to jump over the solid glass wall and kill him with my bare hands. I wanted to pull the knife out of my heart and stab him over and over again, till he was no more, till he lay in a bloody, lifeless heap.

But, he was behind bars, paying for a crime he did not commit. I had to be happy with that.

Somehow, I managed to fake a smile then continue. "Oh, by the way, I've sold all your properties – the houses, the business, the building, the cars, the furniture – everything."

"I heard."

"I got nine point nine million."

"What? They were worth at least fifteen!"

"Yeah, I could have gotten more, but I let it go cheap cheap – hey I'm using that word a lot today." I chuckled.

"See, I don't have to split with you. You get zilch and the money is all gone! I let it go 'cause I wanted to go on a honeymoon with my new lover. Well, sort of – we went on a honeymoon, *then* got married. The one you dreamt about, the cop."

Tom's eyes hooded and his nostrils flared. "You're using all my hard-earned money on that bastard?"

"Yeah. I've bought him a Corvette too. And a jet ski. He loves it, and together, he and Warren, they have so much fun." I smiled as he struggled to contain himself.

"Using your hard-earned money, we're going to Disneyland too." I leaned in and dropped my voice. "We swam naked at the beach in Cape Town, and you know what? We fucked in the water and it was awesome, Tom…berlina. Hey, I wondered –"

"Stop calling me that!"

"– why didn't I do that sooner? What a rush." I shivered with delight.

"Oh, talking about me fucking Bear in the water, I paid the private investigator you hired to spy on Bear and his child, so you owe me two thousand dollars. But…I'm happy to accept an IOU." I smiled. "Yeah, I know, I know – I'm generous to a fault."

All I got was a glare.

"Hey, is it legal to spy on a cop? On his family?"

He rubbed his chin slowly.

"Didn't go according to plan in the end, eh, Tom…berlina?" I shook my head. "Poor you – didn't get to hurt the guy who was porking your wife, huh? The guy who was disrespecting you and zoning in on your family." My smile grew bigger. "Poor Tom…berlina."

"You're such a whore."

"Oh, talking about whore, how's my hair?" I brought it forward and stroked it. "It's long and almost blonde these days. Nice huh?"

He shook his head and let out a mirthless chuckle. "You fucked me over. *You*! Who'd have thought?"

"Such a harsh thing to say, Tom. But I want you to know that every time we open a bottle of Cristal or Moet, we first drink to you out of *respect* for you – you know, your money…? Then we toast to other things. Oh, and we may be moving away from Sydney forever, so

unfortunately, you will never see Warren again. I'm going to tell him that you passed away while giving oral sex to a man with seventy-six tattoos."

"Whaaat?" His breathing became labored.

"Oh, and one final thing – remember when you said that you were so smart, you outsmarted the police and shit? Guess what, you weren't really, 'cause you're here and the c*o*ps put you here."

"You fucking bitch!"

"See you in fifty or maybe thirty-five if you survive jail and the anal. Such a pretty boy like you will definitely be getting your fair share of admirers here. Don't forget to think Pamela Anderson when you're giving blow jobs. Remember that video? That's how you must look when you're doing it. Like you want to. Like you enjoooooy it." I pointed two fingers at my eyes.

"You motherFUCKING WHORE!"

"Hey, I bet your dance card is always full? Oh, and don't forget now, if you drop your soap, leave it." I laughed. "That's why they invented soap-on-a-rope." I laughed some more as the guards surrounded us, alerted by his shouting.

"Enjoy your solitary, now," I whispered, "and remember the key words to success…Pamela Anderson." I sang the last part, then fell about laughing.

"I WILL MURDER YOU ONE DAY, YOU FUCKING CHEAP SLUT!" he screamed as the guards dragged his arse away. "YOU DON'T KNOW WHO YOU ARE FUCKING WITH!"

"Bye Tom…berlina, and thanks a million for the money. Oh, I mean, thanks nine point nine million. Much appreciated!"

"YOU BIIIIIITCH!"

I laughed as I walked down the corridor, away from my ex-husband, whom I had fucked over.

But as I walked away, I thought about victory – how could I claim victory when I lost my baby? When I lost a part of me? Nobody won in this whole sordid mess.

But Tom did have the last word after all – he said that he would hurt me in such a way that I would never be the same again. He was right, after you lose a child, you can *never* be whole again.

But, as my shrink pointed out, I do have another child, Warren, who desperately needed me. I had to find a way to move on and maybe *pretend* to be whole.

As for Tom, he was behind bars for a crime he did not commit, and *I* had put him there. Well, Bear and I. Of course, I couldn't have done it without my Care Bear. In fact, I shudder to think what may have happened to me had Bear decided that I was too much drama and left.

For successfully putting Tom behind bars, maybe we could claim a kernel of victory after all? I think so.

When I stepped out of the prison, the clouds had vanished, the sun was soft and caressed my bare shoulders, and my spirits lifted.

What a beautiful day, I thought. What a beautiful life it is going to be.

As I walked to my car, the song "Walking on Sunshine" by Katrina and the Waves played in my head and I bopped to it, because I felt like I was really walking on sunshine.

END

Dear Reader, do you really think that Tom will let Arena have the last word?
Nope, not Tom. Even from behind bars, he finds ways to terrorize Arena and exact revenge.

Read what he does next in One Way or Another, book 2 in the Payback series, by clicking on any of the Amazon links below:

Amazon UK:
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Excerpt from
One Way or Another

From God knows where, I manage a smile. We lock eyes across the prison glass and for once, I do not avert them.

"Say my name, Arena."

"T…Tom."

He closes his eyes and drops his voice. "Say it again."

"Tom," I whisper in a hoarse voice.

With his eyes closed, he smiles and moves his head around as if he's listening to beautiful music on a harp or violin.

"One more time. Say, I love you, Tom."

I can do this. Just stay focused.

"I love you, Tom."

"Now say, I wanna fuck you, Tom."

I hesitate.

His eyes fly open. "Say it!" he hisses. "Say it. Say, I wanna fuck you, Tom."

"I...I wanna …fuck you, Tom."

A smile lights his face. "Around 9 p.m.," he whispers, his eyes still closed.

My body leans in, hanging onto his every word.

His head bobs around, his eyes still closed. "Yep, 9 it is."

Hope surges in me. "T…tonight?"

His nod is so slight I have to ask again. "Tonight, Tom? You promise?"

He opens his eyes and nods.

"Thank you," I say, relief surging through me.

"You will visit me in prison every fortnight, understand? That's every *alternate* Friday. Don't get it wrong, Arena *Botha*."

My head bobs as he talks.

"We have a deal, right?"

"We have a deal," I say with all the enthusiasm I can muster. "Yes! Yes!"

His eyes linger on my breasts. "The next time you visit, wear red." His eyes remain glued to my breasts. "And wear a skirt. A short one. And wear your hair up. I don't like it this way."

"Sure. Sure!"

It takes every ounce of self-control not to run out of the prison.

End of Excerpt

To read more, click on the amazon links below:

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Warm regards
Eve Rabi

PS: If you have enjoyed Payback and One Way or Another, you will probably enjoy Betrayed. It too is a story about revenge.

Here's what one of my readers posted about Betrayed:

"This book captured my attention immediately and kept me up late at night until it was finished. It was heartbreaking at times and packed with so many emotions. I found myself sometimes laughing and reaching for tissues at other times."

EXCERPT FROM
BETRAYED

****

It all started with Harry Hargreaves, my stepfather.

How do I describe him?

Let's see…smart and crafty. And mean. Very mean. That's *my* description.

Now if you asked Mocha, my best friend, her description would be slightly different – "Pussy ass, hairy mudderfucking Harry."

Harry swept into our lives when I was three-years-old. Ambitious and calculating (quietly at that), he was a divorcee with no kids and he had his eye on the White House.

My late father, Senator John Waterhouse, had been both popular and wealthy. So when Harry met my mother, the strikingly beautiful Amelia, who was also a wealthy senator's daughter, he thought she'd look great in photographs and as arm candy, so he married her. After all, she was ten years younger than him and docile enough for him to push her around, which he did, all the time.

Most importantly, it helped that my father had left both my mother and I financially well off.

Harry pretended to be nice to me until the day he married my mother.

From that day on, he did everything in his power to isolate me from her. I was too little to fight Harry, my mother was too meek to stand up to Harry, so he succeeded – my relationship with my mother changed for the worse.

Harry had full access to my mother's money, which he quickly squandered on cars, a yacht, extravagant holidays and by just throwing money around at strip clubs and whatever else took his fancy. Throwing my *mother's* money around.

I was a quiet child, loved by everyone and was always told how pretty I was with my blonde tresses and blue eyes. A replica of my mother.

"She looks like a porcelain doll," I often heard.

But Harry, for some reason hated me. Yes, *hated* me even thought I was just three-years-old and by no means a spoilt child. He always accused my mother of spoiling me and when she tried to defend me, Harry became pretty vicious towards my mother with his rants and accusations. I didn't want my mother hurt or in tears so I kept out of Harry's way to prevent them fighting.

Shortly after they got married, my mother gave birth to twins, Ashley and Nicole who looked just liked my mother, which meant they looked like me.

Nicole and Ashley adored me and I in turn adored them. Harry hated that they loved me and tried to isolate me from them as much as possible.

By the time I was ten, I realized that Harry despised me.

He never hit me or did anything tangible where I could cry abuse – he was smart about it – excluded me in indirect ways, making me feel unwanted and in the way, like I didn't belong. Subtle things – buy a four-pack of cupcakes, muffins, picnic set, ice-cream. (I was a kid; those things hurt like hell.)

Then when the mistake was pointed out to him, that we were a family of *five* and not four, he'd look at me as if he was seeing me for the first time and say, "Ah, yes, so I see. My …mistake."

Or he'd say, "Forgot that you lived here." Comments that would cut deep, as I was a kind and sensitive child.

As I got older, he'd say things like, "Didn't expect to see you here. Thought you'd be out with your friends. Oh, I forgot, you don't have any friends."

I was a shy child, so no; I didn't have that many friends. I was also a bookworm and preferred to spend time with my books rather than hang out with dumb friends who wanted to live at the mall and flirt with boys.

Sometimes, I'd hear Harry and my mom in their bedroom laughing and playing with the twins, with their bedroom door closed. I longed to be part of that laughter and wished he'd invite me in to romp with them, but nobody was allowed in their bedroom, unless Senator Harry invited them in.

To drown out their laughter and to staunch the flow of negative thoughts – that I didn't belong, that I wasn't good enough, that my mother loved the twins more than me, that my mother didn't care, I'd slap on headphones and bury myself in my books. If I couldn't hear their laughter, maybe it wouldn't hurt that much.

My favorite game with Ashley and Nicole was playing school. I was the teacher and they were the students. They loved it cos I would dramatize their lessons.

My teachers told me that I would make a great school teacher one day. They said I was nurturing by nature. I wasn't sure what that meant, but I liked how they said it.

Of course, being the daughter of a Senator, I attended private schools and I managed to get great grades. Teachers waxed lyrical about me at parent-teacher meetings.

Unfortunately, Nicole and Ashley were not so lucky. They struggled in school and had to have extra lessons to keep up – a mild form of ADHD.

This didn't sit well with Harry – he took it as a personal failure and became angry at *me*. Whenever I was reading, he'd call me to do something that didn't need to be done, nag me about the state of my room, about my music being too loud, pick on me about my hair, my shoes, my clothes, my nails, the fact that I was too quiet at the dinner table, mock me when I *said* something at the dinner table.

I lived in a state of stress when Harry was around and I particularly hated dinner times when we were in close proximity to each other.

He had a voice that he used on the twins, an endearing one, and a separate one that he used on me, blunt, curt, irritable. He could reduce me to tears with just a few words and one look.

I was a cry-baby – cried easily, cried buckets when Simba's father died in *The Lion King*.

As I got older, to cope, I dressed my hurt and confusion in a coat of arrogance – a don't-give-a-damn attitude. That made things worse as I gave him ammunition to use against me.

"You are just arrogant and disrespectful," he'd complain.

Where was my mother in all of this?

She was around but shit-scared of him. He'd have a serious go at her if she gave him lip. Threatened to divorce her and leave her destitute many times.

She was especially scared of that, as she had no working skills and came from a family that never encouraged women to work. Also, she no longer had money and had to rely on Harry to support her.

"Mom, he's horrible to me," I complained. "He's mean to you too. Let's leave him. Let's take Nic and Ash and go live far away, Mom. We can do it. I will help with the twins. We'll be happy, mom, I promise you."

"Okay, Kat," she said as she wound strands of blonde locks around her fingers and tugged out clumps of hair, adding to the bald patches on her scalp. "Do you want some chamomile tea? It'll calm you down."

After seeing that, I decided never to do bring that up again.

I loved my mother, but quietly I resented the fact that she didn't do enough to protect me from Harry.

But my sisters were great – they hated it when Harry put me down, and being the feisty little things they were, they stood up for me. They never hesitated to tell Harry off. After an episode of Harry being mean to me, they'd bring me treats and give me hugs to cheer me up.

They hated Harry more when he was mean to my mom, and often told him that they didn't love him and that they wished that Uncle John, his kind friend, was their daddy.

He didn't like that at all and accused my mother of having an affair with Uncle John, which was not true.

I also think he was scared of losing the love of his daughters, but he was doing a good job of doing precisely that.

By the time I was sixteen, I had had enough of Harry's meanness and bullying ways and tried to find a way out of my house.

Most of my school friends were from society homes, privileged girls that were as superficial and mean as the girl next to them.

I felt trapped, alone and unwanted.

I was an affectionate child by nature, but I seldom got hugs from my family. Untouched. That's how I felt.

One day, in the year 2002, on a chilly winter's day, while crying at the bus stop over Harry's nastiness – his insistence that I take the bus to school in future and not get my mother to drive me to school, I met Mocha.

For a while she watched me cry silently from a distance, then she approached me.

"Gurl, you got boyfrien' trouble?"

I shook my head.

"School?"

"Step-father," I murmured.

She nodded and gently tucked my hair behind my ears, a sympathetic look on her face.

"Okay, okay, you can tell Mocha," she said. "Go on."

"Mocha?" I said through my tears.

"Yeah, ain't too coffee, ain't too hot-chocolaty," she said, circling her thumb and her forefinger. "Jest right."

I smiled.

Mocha, who I learned attended public school whenever she felt like it, which was about thrice a month, was sixteen too, but older than me by a couple of months. Her mother was black and her father, who she didn't know, was white, but she was one hundred percent hood and refused to be anything else.

She was pretty – dark, tight curls that fell around her shoulders, liquid brown eyes, caramel skin, a curvy soft body, big boobs, big ass, Angelina Jolie lips and a smile that made her eyes sparkle.

After glancing around, she dropped her voice and said, "My mama name me Jane, but you tell anyone dat and I will throw you under dat bus." She winked. "Have a rep to maintain and Jane, dat name, it don' cut it cos I ain't gon get me no Tarzan anytime soon."

I laughed.

"And I is drunk enough right now to do it," she boasted.

"You are?" I was fascinated. Never met a drunken person before, let alone a school girl who was drunk at that part of the morning.

"My step-father, he also a prick. Big one. But it don't matter, I jest steal all his money and his booze. This morning, I stole his vodka."

A prick? Wow, I loved the way she talked. It was so *Boyz in da Hood.* I was sheltered, remember? Never got out much, wasn't allowed to watch much TV either.

"You did?" My eyes were wide with wonder, my tears forgotten.

She nodded.

She had tattoos – an angel on her arm, a love heart on her shoulder, a butterfly on her ankle, a set of paw-prints on her boob, '*Loyalty'* and '*Respect'* written on the back of her thighs and the words *Slippery When Wet* on just below her navel. Her cousin worked in a tattoo parlor so she got free ink and she made the most of that.

Mocha lived about five minutes from me, but in a less affluent section of Early. Her house was shabby, with peeling paint, overgrown grass and a few broken windows. Her room was at the back of the house and it was the size of our main bathroom. We entered and left through a side window.

Even though the house was dilapidated, they had a make-shift bar and tons of booze. I later learned that her mother's boyfriend was a barman at a club who stole booze from work and sold it to friends at a reduced rate.

"What's your favorite drink?"

"Eh, um, whisky," I said, mainly because Harry drank whisky. I had never drunk alcohol in my life but I wasn't going to tell her that. "A bit of everything."

"A bit of everything?" she snapped her fingers, "Long Island Tea."

"Tea, okay. Got any chamomile? My mom drinks chamomile."

"Suuuuure, I got tea."

With a wicked smile, she began pouring different drinks into a beer glass – vodka, whisky, rum and about six other drinks. Just throwing it in without measuring. Finally she cracked open a can of coke, added some to the concoction and handed it to me. "Long Island Tea, Mocha's version."

Gingerly, I tasted it and screwed up my face. "It's awful, coffee. Doesn't taste like tea at all."

"It's *Mocha*, not coffee, and jest down it, gurl!"

I couldn't get her name right and I couldn't down it either, but with her prompting, I managed to finish it. My face spasmed, so to get rid of the taste, she gave me some Irish crème, which took away the awful taste in my mouth, but the crème was, well, it left me feeling *really* queasy.

In spite of how much I drank, I was as sober as anything. "I'm not drunk yet," I complained to my new friend. "Don't know what the hype is all about."

"Say whaaaat?"

"Don't know what the big *deal is*," I said, mindful of Mocha's limited vocabulary and the fact that she went to school only three times a month.

Then I stood up and the ground floated. "Whoa, coffee!" I shouted.

"*Mocha!*" she corrected and helped steady me.

Okay, I was tipsy and it felt deliciously good, so I wanted to dance.

"Hey, coffee, you got any *Teenage Dirtbag?*"

"Say what?"

"Wheatus? Hits of 2001."

"Wheat whaaaat?"

"Oh. *Can't Fight the Moonlight?* By LeAnn Rimes?*"*

She shook her head slowly.

"*Murder on the dance floor*? Sophie Elle…Eeeeehhh…" I started to laugh at my thick tongue.

She shook her head even slower.

After some eye-rolling and muttering, she put *on Let me Blow Your Mind* by Eve.

"Gurl whachu doing?" she asked when she saw me dance.

"I'm dancing," I said as I jumped around with my hands in the air.

"Dat ain't dancing. You dance like dat and it's gon rain in here. Dis is how we do it." She indulged in some serious booty shaking. "Drop it low, gurl. See?"

"Got it!" When I tried to drop it low, I dropped alright – I lost balance and fell.

She laughed. Hard. But she had a laugh that reminded me of musical chimes, so I didn't mind her laughing at me. I just wanted to drop it *really* low.

As we were having fun, Sia snaked into through the window.

Sia, Mocha's cousin, was seventeen and she too had tattoos, but piercings were her thing – on her upper lip, her lower lip, her nose, her eyebrows, her ears and her belly button.

(I was both fascinated and repulsed when she later declared that she planned to pierce her nipples and her vagina soon.)

She wore a back hoodie, black tights, black lace-up boots and had about twenty silver earrings in total. She was around 5'8, caramel skin, green eyes, black hair, but with ginger roots and she didn't look like someone you wanted to make eye-contact with on the subway.

Pretty underneath that black eye-liner and black lipstick, but scary.

"What the fuck, Mocha?" she asked eyeing me as if I was road-kill. "A snot-nosed private school, priss…?"

"Relax, Sia," Mocha said in a voice as soothing as the chamomile tea my mom drank. "Kat here is …" She shook her head slowly, "her pussy ass step-daddy, he abuse her, Sia. All da time."

Sia's frown lessened.

"Likes to sticks his dick in her, Sia."

"What?!" I was mortified by what Mocha had just said. That wasn't true at all.

"Eh, Mocha, that is not …"

Mocha's head snapped to look at me, the look on her face telling me to zip it.

I did and sipped on more Irish crème.

"Harry, dat's his name, Sia. Pussy ass *Hairy* mudderfucking Harry dey call him."

Where she got that from, I had no idea. Harry wasn't hairy at all.

He was always impeccably dressed – clean shaven, slicked hair, with a cardigan around his shoulders that tied loosely in front. That kind of a guy.

"What?! The fucker!" Sia glared at me for a moment, fury flashing in her emerald eyes. She whipped out a blade from inside her boot and flicked it open, scaring the daylights out of me.

"You tell pussy ass hairy mudderfucking Harry that I will cuuut off dick, slice off his nuuuuts, punch fucking holes in him if he ever does that again, you hear me?"

As if Harry had done all those terrible things Mocha spoke of, I nodded meekly, mesmerized by the blade in Sia's hands.

"If I ever see Hairy in the street, he best turn and run or I swear I gon punctuate the ma'fucker!"

Silently, I prayed that Harry never encountered Sia in the street so that she could never *punctuate* him.

Mocha the shit-stirrer, nodded her approval at Sia's vow. "Das my homegurl."

"Puncture," I corrected.

They both looked at me.

"*Punctuate* is a verb," I explained. "You use it to intersperse or interrupt a sentence or…"

"Gurl, you need a 'nother jug of tea," Mocha said.

"Oh, okay. Did you have any green tea?"

"Sure," she said as she threw different drinks into the beer glass, added coke and handed it to me. "Here's yo green tea, Mocha's version."

"Oh, thank you so much," I said as I accepted it.

So wound up was Sia about Harry, that she brought out a cigar. Except that it wasn't a cigar, it was a blunt.

I had never smoked weed in my life, (let alone a cigarette) but in an attempt to fit in, I did what they did, I smoked it. It tasted like crap but I was too wasted to care.

Shortly thereafter, to their amusement and disgust, I vomited. Retched.

When I finally stumbled home hours later, I vomited some more on the road.

Then throughout the night, I hurled till my stomached burned, my head ached and my body shook. I was convinced that I was dying and vowed never to drink tea again, no matter which island it was from. Only coffee. Or maybe Mocha.

The next morning, I was shaking and dehydrated and wasn't able to go to school.

Sia, Mocha and I became friends. I hung out with them all the time and was exposed to a world I didn't know existed.

Their obtuse world, which I was rudely introduced to, was different, fascinating and dangerous at the same time. But as long as I stayed close to them, I was okay.

I hated weed, I decided, but of course, I never told anyone that.

It would have destroyed my new-found rep as a badass who imbibed in drugs and alcohol.

At the bus stop, I used to be pushed to the end of the queue by some mean girls name Jenny Coltier and Samantha Bailey. They used to bully me and make fun of me. I was a pushover so I didn't nothing about it.

One day over a nice cup of tea in Mochas establishment, as she called it, I mentioned Jenny and Samantha.

"Is datafact?" Mocha asked as she sipped on her beer. "I got yo back," she said.

I had no idea what she meant, but I liked the way it sounded.

The next afternoon, before I could get to the bus stop, Sia and Mocha were already there scaring the bejeebers out of the school kids.

"I don't care how rich you bitches are," Mocha said as she circled the terrified girls with a knife in her hand, "Kat here's my homegurl and any of you hoes fuck wid her and I will beat yo ass, then stab you with dis." She flicked her blade several times. "You feel me?"

"Yes," all the girls murmured.

"That goes for you bitches too," Sia said, waving her knife the boys looking on. "I will cut off your nuts and make a coin purse out of it. Don't think I won't, cos I just got out of Juvi."

The kids at the bus stop were …*kids*, and they were shaking in the boots at the sight of these tattooed and pierced girls brandishing knives and threatening to stab them and cut out their family jewels.

"Now, who da fuck be Samantha and Jenny?" Mocha demanded.

About twenty hands pointed at Jenny and Samantha.

Mocha walked slowly up to them.

Jenny and Samantha held onto each other and began to tremble.

Mocha eyed them with narrow eyes. “I wid stab you both right now, jest like dat, but I don’t wanna get bitch on my knife,” she said.

“I’m ain’t worried ’bout that,” Sia said, her green eyes, blazing.

Both Jenny and Samantha started crying. Sobbing.

“Apologize to my homegurl,” Mocha said.

They did. Profusely.

After that incident, it was as if I belonged to the Mafia. Nobody fucked with me. I got a seat every time in the bus and I was always at the beginning of the queue. In fact, kids greeted me all the time without making eye-contact with me.

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The one thing I had that they didn’t have was money – my mother was always generous with me, so I was able to provide money for the entertainment, which loosely interpreted was weed.

And booze at clubs.

They loved that about me and schooled me in the ways of the world. First lesson – how to roll Harry.

I was to nip into the room (when he was in the bathroom) and help myself to his wallet. Not all of it, but just some of it. Never take the largest note or the smallest note, just in-between. Take a mental snapshot of it before you pick it up, help yourself, then leave it exactly the way you found it.

Next lesson – how to crack open the safe at home.

“His daughter’s birthday,” Mocha said.

“His wedding anniversary,” Sia added.

“His ex-gurlfriend’s birthdate dat he can’t get over,” Mocha said.

“I don’t think Harry has one,” I said.

“Gurl, Hairy’s a lying, cheating ma’fucker and he’s porking someone else right now, trus’ me.”

“Okay,” I said, astounded that Mocha knew so much about Harry when she hadn’t even met him.

But they were right about the safe – after about seven attempts, I got it opened and helped myself to some of his cash. I never took anything belonging to my mother, just Harry. After all, he was a lying, cheating motherfucker who couldn’t get over his ex-girlfriend.

My favorite colors were pinks and peaches. And sometimes soft yellow. Oh, and beige. And white. Sometimes a mother-of pearl white.

Now my favorite color was black.

Actually, I didn’t really like black – made me look like I was from the Addams’s Family, but hey, to conform, I caved – black tights, black top, black shoes, black lipstick and black nail polish. Just like Sia, minus the tattoos and piercings.

Once when I was really tipsy, I allowed Mocha to pierce my ears with a sewing needle and cotton. (Yes, my ears weren’t even pieced, much to the amusement of my friends.)

I fainted when I saw the blood, but when I came around, I felt cool. As cool as Christina Aguilera in her *Dirty* video and for a while, I didn’t walk, I strutted.

Talking about music, Mocha looked at me listening to my iPod and frowned, "Gurl, whachu listenin' to?"

"Eh, Brittany."

"Say dat a…gain," she said in a tone that made me hesitate to repeat what I just said.

"I said, I …was listening to *Hit me Baby One* …"

She leapt up and clamped her hand over my mouth. "Gurl," she whispered, her eyes darting around the room, "you listen to music like dat and dey gon' beat yo ass. Why you say dat? Huh?"

"Say …what?"

"'Sup?" Sia asked from across the room.

Mocha removed her hand from my mouth, turned to Sia, dropped her voice and pointed to my iPod. "Brittany. Can you believe it?"

"Nassssty!" Sia said, shaking her head.

"But…but…it's Brittany *Bitch*!" I pointed out.

"Gurl, she ain't no bitch. She in da Mickey Mouse Club – Mousketeer! She ain't never gon be a bitch."

"O …kay." I scrolled down my iPod. "*Genie in a Bottle*? Christina…?"

She shook her head. "Mouse…ke…teer."

I scratched my head.

"Put some Eve and …lil Kim and …and TLC…"

"Okay." I never heard of most of these singers. "Destiny's Child?"

"Nah, nah, not Destiny's Child, but maybe Kelly Rowland! *Work* with Missy Elliot? Dat one."

I didn't know that song, but I said, "Sure."

"Hey, can I keep Pink? I know she's white and all, but she's pretty bad. She's got tats and piercings …"

They conferred for a moment and I heard the words *Family Portrait* and finally they turned to me and nodded.

My smile was one of relief.

"And put some Fifty Cents in there too, cos …" Mocha looked at Sia.

"…He a mudder fuckin' P.I.M.P!" they chorused.

So out went Brittany Spears and Christina Aguilera and No Doubt, and in came G-Unit, Missy, Ciara, Lil Kim, Tupac and a whole lot of rap. I just hoped my mother didn't get a hold of my iPod. Somehow, I knew she'd be very disappointed if she listened to the lyrics.

I felt really bad now – Michael Jackson bad and I loved it.

Wanting to appear even more hip, I bought a batch of fake tattoos and whenever I went out with the Sia and Mocha, I plastered them all over me.

Both of them laughed at me, but, having no choice, I confessed that I hated needles and couldn't stand the idea of one on my skin.

I think that because of the steady stream of dough I provided, they didn't tell anyone my secret but just sniggered behind my back.

I loved being with Mocha and Sia. In spite of them getting drunk every night and smoking weed and skipping school and getting into fights with other girls, life was always entertaining.

Sia had spent a year in Juvenile Hall a few years ago. Apparently, she knifed one of her mother's boyfriends who wanted to tuck her in at night, if you know what I mean.

That was why she was so sensitive to my plight – the plight about Harry that Mocha had manufactured.

Sia was a quiet one – she loved to get high. She lived for that. She just wanted to get high *all* the time and often, it was as if she wasn't in the room with us.

I didn't need to get drunk and high to have fun, I was just happy to be with people who wanted me around and who didn't make fun of me and treat me like crap.

Mocha, although she was sixteen, and just five months older than me, slept around with anyone and *everyone*.

She thought like a guy and wanted to just score, fuck any guy and then say, "See dat ass, been there, done dat."

She dressed like a slut – the tiniest skirts and the skimpiest tops, even though she was chubby and spilled out of her clothes. She had amazing confidence when it came to her body and always believed that hers was the best in the world. In her mind, everybody wanted a piece of her ass.

Later on I found out that had been abused when she was a toddler, but she never talked about it. As young as I was, I figured that her tough-chick exterior was simply a defense mechanism.

Getting out of the house at night became a problem. Not to Sia and Mocha – they just taught me to how to creep out at night through my bedroom window. How to keep a screwdriver under a shrub in case I needed to break into the house.

Because of that, I was able to attend to a number of wild parties at night with them, where I hung out with bikers, druggies and ex-cons. At first I was really scared of these men and women, who used the foulest of language, drank till they passed out on the floor, threated to knife each other for disagreeing about a thing as simple as to who was the original singer of *Wild Thing*.

But Mocha shoplifted me a penknife and together, she and Sia showed me how to use it if the situation arose.

"Don't forget now, you must hold it like *this* when you flick it." She turned to Sia to demonstrate, "And look here," she waved two fingers in front of her eyes.

Sitting on both my hands, I paid careful attention.

She held out the knife, her eyes bulging, her face twisted in a snarl as she slowly skirted Sia. "You wanna FUCK wid me, ma'fucker? Huh? HUH?"

"Nah, nah, nah!" Sia said in scared voice. "I'm sorry, man. Don't cut me, man!"

"See?" Mocha said, her face returning to normal. "Like that."

"And say things like, 'I gon' *slice* off yo nuts, ma'fucker!' See dudes don' like it when gurls talk 'bout cutting off der nuts or dicks. Not even in a joke. Dey keep'away from you cos dey think you're …" She whistled as she twirled her finger next to her temple.

"But you have to practice," Sia said as I was leaving. "In front of the mirror."

"Okay, I've got it," I said accepting the knife from Mocha and trembling with excitement over my new toy. I had barely ever used a knife, except maybe to cut an apple. I slipped it into my boots and strutted home feeling tough and invincible.

When I looked at me in the mirror, thrusting the knife, a crazed expression on my face, *I* got scared of me and I had to look away at first. But I continued practicing – flicking my knife and saying, "You wan' take me on, motherfucker? Eh, *ma*'fucker?"

When I showed up with a bandage around my thigh, they gaped at me.

"Who da fuck do you like dat?" Mocha asked, skirting me as if she's ready to kick the shit out of their cash cow, even though it was the cow that was injured.

"Yeah," Sia breathe in a husky voice, "Tell Ssssia." Whenever Sia got mad, she had a tendency to hiss.

"Hairy?" Mocha said. "Pussy ass hairy mudderfucking Harry?" Her nostrils grew as large as her ass. "Mudderrrfuckerrr!"

"Eh, no, no, no, I eh, cut myself while eh …eh, practicing," I said in a sheepish voice. "With the knife. You know, like, flicking it. Held it too low."

"Hairy…hairy…he do you like dat," Mocha, who thrived on drama, insisted.

"That ma'fuckin', cock sssssucking, son of a white whore!" That was Sia. "I'm going to sssslice his nuts and feed it to him, one by fucking one!"

I began to silently stress about Harry's nuts.

End of Excerpt

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About Eve Rabi:

Eve Rabi is the author of 28 crime and suspense novels, five screenplays and more than half a dozen short stories, due to be released soon.
Inspired by the likes of Sidney Sheldon and Gillian Flynn, her tales are bold, scandalous, controversial. They're also peppered with romance and humor. To quote an Amazon reviewer: "When you pick up an Eve Rabi book, forget sleep. She writes gripping page turners that will keep you reading till the very end."
In her spare time, Eve likes to dance like no one is watching. In fact, she also likes to eat like no one is watching.
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