



Say
you're
Sorry

KAREN

ROSE

The Sunday Times Top Ten Bestselling Author

Karen
ROSE

say you're sorry

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HEADLINE

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Prologue

Sacramento, California

Saturday, 10 December, 11.15 P.M.

Good. She was waking up. *Took her long enough.*

He took a drag on his cigarette and blew the smoke into her face. A coughing fit ensued, and by the time she'd calmed down, her dark eyes were open and staring up at him.

She was scared. This pleased him. He smiled down at her. They were always scared and this always pleased him.

He sat back in his chair, watching as she struggled against her bonds. They always did that, too. But they never got free. He tied a very strong knot. It was one of his best talents.

He waited until she'd given up, until her gaze fixed on his face and recognition set in. 'You,' she whispered. 'From the diner.'

'Me,' he replied agreeably. From the tired old diner on the outskirts of Portland. Getting her home had been a pain in the ass. She took up much more space than he'd expected. She was curvier than most of the guests he brought home. It would be a nice change.

She yanked on her bonds again, a token effort only. Her lips trembled. 'Where are my clothes?'

'Burned.'

'Why?'

He stood up, pulled lazily at his tie, aware that she was following his every move. 'Because you won't be needing them anymore.'

She shook her head, appropriately agitated. 'Why are you doing this?'

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He unbuttoned his shirt as her eyes flicked all around the room, looking for help. Looking for escape. There would be none. He grabbed her hand from where he'd tied it to the headboard and ran his thumb over her left ring finger, following the indentation that was all that remained of her wedding vows.

'Does he know you're gone?' he asked softly.

Her gaze flew to her ring finger and she tried to pull her hand away, but, of course, she couldn't. Slowly she nodded.

'Did he let you go?'

Another nod, but her eyes flickered away. He squeezed her hand hard enough to make her gasp. 'Do not *lie* to me, Miriam.'

He was surprised when her eyes flared with a sudden fury. 'That is not my name,' she ground out. 'My name is Eileen.'

'The locket says "Miriam".' He held up the heart-shaped silver charm, letting it dangle between them, watching it gleam as it caught the low light from the bedside lamp. He set it to swing, like a hypnotist's watch. 'Did you steal it?'

She swallowed hard, momentarily mesmerized by the swinging locket. Then her jaw hardened. 'No.'

'Then, if it's yours, you are Miriam.'

She closed her eyes. 'No, I am not.'

It was really immaterial at this point, but her little show of temper had intrigued him. 'Then who is Miriam?'

A tear ran down her cheek. 'Who I used to be.'

'Ah. So your husband is looking for Miriam. Not Eileen.'

She clamped her lips shut, giving him his answer.

Good. He hadn't been terribly worried that anyone would be tracking her down. The woman had a solitary, hunted air to her, like she always looked over her shoulder. Like she was hiding. That worked for him.

He ran his thumb over the locket, feeling the etched lines of the engraved *Miriam* on the back, then the symbol on the front. 'An olive tree, two kneeling children, all protected by these beautiful outstretched angel wings.' She'd winced at the word 'protected'. If it had been a talisman, it was a piss-poor one. It certainly hadn't protected her. 'What does it mean?'

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Again her jaw tightened and she looked away. He gripped her chin and yanked her back. 'Don't ignore me,' he warned.

She clenched her eyes shut, so he covered her mouth and pinched her nose closed. 'Look at me,' he growled, all fascination with her gone. He was angry again, which was how it was supposed to be. Her eyes flew open, terrified, as she began to struggle to get free. He removed his hand and allowed her to breathe, smiling at her frantic gasps for air.

He gripped her chin again, much harder this time. 'Say you're sorry, Miriam.' He gave her a hard shake. '*Say you're sorry.*'

Stubbornly she clamped her lips together.

His lips curved. Excellent. He'd make her say it before he was through and he'd enjoy every moment of the effort. Because they always said it, sooner or later.

Usually as they begged him to let them die.

One

Sacramento, California

Thursday, 16 February, 8.15 P.M.

'Daisy?'

Daisy Dawson flinched when Trish's finger poked her upper arm. 'What?' she asked, knowing she'd been distracted. She returned her attention to her friend, who'd stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, a worried expression on her face. 'I'm sorry. What did you say?'

Trish frowned. 'What's wrong with you tonight? You're jumpy. Is it because of Gus? Do I need to call Rosemary?'

Daisy rolled her shoulders, trying to relieve the tension in her muscles. It didn't relax her any more than it eliminated the tickle at the back of her neck. Because someone was watching her. Following her.

Again. *Thanks a lot for keeping your word, Dad*, she thought bitterly. She'd thought they'd had an agreement. She'd thought he trusted her. She'd been wrong. *Again*. She wanted to scream, to rage. To call him right now and tell him to stay the fuck out of her life.

A rough, wet tongue licking her fingers had her tamping down her temper. Absently she reached into the pet bag that she wore cross-body like a sling and scratched behind Brutus's enormous wing-shaped ears. 'Shh, girl,' she murmured, and the dog immediately settled. 'It's okay.' *I'm okay*. Which wasn't exactly true, not that Brutus would believe her anyway. The little dog knew when she was spiraling, knew when she was on edge, and did what she'd been trained to do – distracting Daisy before her spiral became a

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meltdown. Drawing a breath, she smiled tightly for Trish's benefit. 'No, let Rosemary go home to her family. She's earned it.'

Because tonight had been a hard night for all of them, especially Rosemary.

Trish's eyes welled with new tears that she didn't try to hide. It was just the two of them and Trish knew she didn't have to pretend around Daisy. 'Poor Gus.'

'Yeah.' Keeping one hand on Brutus, Daisy lifted her other hand to Trish's face to wipe away the tears. 'I guess he just couldn't handle the grief of losing his wife.'

'Maybe he didn't want to,' Trish whispered.

'I don't know. Maybe you're right.' All Daisy knew was that the man's death from alcohol poisoning had hit Rosemary hard. Seeing their sponsor cry like that as she'd told them of Gus's death had left Daisy shaken and feeling helpless. Daisy hated feeling helpless.

Trish bit at her lip. 'He'd been sober for fifteen years, DD. Fifteen years. He was a sponsor, even. He was Rosemary's sponsor. How can *we* expect to—'

Daisy cut her off by pressing a finger to Trish's lips. 'Stop. You cannot compare yourself to Gus or anyone else. He was grieving. His wife died. They'd been married for fifty years. You said it yourself – maybe he wanted to die. Maybe this was just his way.'

Trish nodded shakily. 'I know.' She straightened her shoulders and took a swipe at each eye with her sleeve. 'You're right.'

Daisy gave her a one-armed hug. 'I'm usually right.'

Trish snorted. 'You wish.'

Daisy laughed. 'If I said we needed hot fudge sundaes with extra nuts, would I be right about that?'

'Yes, but that's a given. We always have sundaes after a meeting.'

Daisy linked arms with Trish and they began walking toward the diner where their sundaes awaited. 'What were you saying before?'

'Oh. I wanted to know if you were volunteering this weekend at the pet store.'

'I am.' Daisy smiled up at Trish, who was at least five inches taller. 'Are you wanting to volunteer or adopt?'

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'Adopt?' Trish said it more as a question. 'I was thinking about a cat. Something to come home to, but not something I'd have to walk. Not with my crazy schedule.'

'I think that's a great idea. So does Brutus, don't you, girl?' Brutus popped her head out of the sling that doubled as Daisy's handbag, her tongue out in the cutest way possible. 'See? She says yes.'

Trish laughed. 'Of course she does. She's biased, though, coming from the shelter herself. You really lucked out, finding a Chion puppy at a shelter. She *is* a Chion, right? I looked up Papillon-Chihuahua mixes. That's what the article called them.'

'Some people call them Papihuahuas,' Daisy said. Whatever breed she was called, Brutus was perfect and necessary. 'My dad found her, actually, while I was in rehab. One of the therapists had a service dog that helped him control his anxiety, which helped him maintain his sobriety. Dad went looking for a dog that could be trained to do the same for me when I got out. She was the runt of the litter, which was why I named her Brutus. She was so tiny that I figured she needed all the help she could get.'

'I wondered about her name. Although she looks like a Gizmo to me.'

Daisy laughed. With her large bat ears, Brutus did look like the little creature from *Gremlins*. 'She does. Before the gremlins turned evil, that is. Gizmo was my sister Julie's suggestion when Dad first brought her home.'

'If I could find a dog this little and this cute, I might rethink a cat, but I couldn't bring a dog to work.'

'Well, not where you work now. Which we need to change,' Daisy said firmly. 'I couldn't work in a bar. You're not being fair to yourself, Trish.'

'I know. I'm looking. I've got applications out everywhere. It's not just having the booze all around me. It's also the drunken, grabby assholes who do not take no for an answer. I really hate them.'

Daisy frowned at that. 'Is somebody bothering you?'

'Not really. There was a guy today who was . . . belligerent. Just wouldn't take no for an answer. I stopped smiling when he

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'accidentally' brushed his hand over my ass. Told him that I'd have him thrown out. He got mean after that, insulting me. A real tool, you know?'

Daisy rolled her eyes. 'Oh, I know.' Because her cohost at the radio station was the same way.

Trish frowned. 'Is Tad bothering you again?'

Daisy shrugged. Trish was the only person she'd told about the smarmy Tad. 'Same old, same old. Little digs, meant to throw me off my game. I can handle Tad, for now anyway. If the time comes when I can't, I'll report him. Did you report this guy who bothered you?'

'I did. I had to. My manager finally did throw him out. The guy kept baiting me, like he wanted me to react. Normally I'd just wave that off, but I was on edge to start with. I had a big test this morning and I'm not sure how I did.'

'I'll help you look at the job listings when I'm done at the pet store adoption clinic on Saturday.' A new job for Trish didn't need to be permanent, just not at a bar. When she finished dental assistant school, she'd be able to get a good job. 'I checked again at the radio station, but they're not hiring right now.'

Which made Daisy wince, because she knew that she'd only been hired because her boss and her father were old friends. It was something that Tad never let her forget. Which was why she hadn't yet reported him. She didn't want to give him any more ammunition against her.

'I appreciate you asking anyway,' Trish said. 'I'll—'

A sound behind them had Daisy stopping abruptly once again. It was a shuffle, the scrape of a shoe on concrete. A quick glance over her shoulder showed a familiar-looking man wearing a baseball cap ducking into an alley. *Dad's losing his touch.* He used to be able to hire people she couldn't see or hear.

Trish was frowning again. 'What's wrong?'

Daisy lowered her voice to barely a whisper. 'My dad's having me followed again. I can hear the guy behind us.'

Trish's frown deepened. 'Again?'

'Yeah,' Daisy said grimly. 'He hired a guy to follow me when I

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was backpacking across Europe last summer. Pissed me off so bad that I came back early and Dad and I had it out. He promised never to do that to me again, but I guess he doesn't trust me after all.'

'He had you followed?' Trish asked, dumbfounded. 'Why?'

'He was worried I'd fall off the wagon. That's what he said, anyway.' Daisy still had her doubts, thinking it was more about her father's inability to break from a lifetime of paranoia. It had killed her sister. *It nearly killed me.* It had certainly stolen what had remained of her childhood. She wasn't going to allow it to ruin her life, no matter how well-meaning her father's intentions might have been.

Trish made a face. 'Pretty ironic seeing as the guy is following you from an AA meeting. Do you know who it is?'

Daisy rolled her eyes. 'Yeah. It's our old ranch hand, Jacob. We grew up together. He's like the brother I never had, but I'm still going to kick his ass.' Which she'd done when she'd caught him lurking in the shadows of a Paris alley, much as he was doing now.

Trish's lips twitched. 'Can I watch? My cable's been out for two months.' She made another face. 'The cable people apparently like to be paid.'

Daisy patted her shoulder in sympathy. Trish barely made a living wage at the bar. 'Go to the diner and put in our order. I'll meet you there.'

Trish shook her head. 'I don't care if he is your friend. I'm not leaving you alone.'

'I'll be fine. Jacob is like a cuddly lamb. A six-foot-two-inch, two-hundred-pound lamb. Seriously, he wouldn't hurt a fly. Go on. I'll meet you there in a few minutes.'

Daisy briefly considered confronting Jacob in the alley, but annoyance had her following the path Trish had taken, then veering off to quickly duck into an alley of her own. Jacob deserved to have the shit scared out of him for following her again. He'd promised to let her live her life independently, just as her father had.

She ground her teeth. *Damn them both.* She was not a child. *I wasn't allowed to be one.* She was twenty-five years old, living on her

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own and doing just fine, all by herself. Well, not by herself, but with the support of people she'd chosen for the job.

She heard Jacob's footsteps seconds before he passed by. Leaping from the alley, she grabbed a handful of his bulky padded jacket and yanked him back. He spun around in surprise, the brim of his baseball cap hiding his face.

'The Giants?' she mocked. 'That's the best disguise you could manage? You thought I wouldn't notice you because you're wearing a Giants cap?' Because he'd never be caught dead wearing a Giants anything. They were both Oakland fans.

She reached up and snatched the cap from his head, realizing only a millisecond later that she hadn't had to reach up far enough. He was too short.

Because he wasn't Jacob.

She took a step back, the gasp stuck in her throat, her pulse instantly going supersonic as the man glared down at her, his dark eyes barely visible behind the nylon stocking covering his face. Distorting his features.

She turned to run, but it was too late. His arm wrapped around her throat, yanking her to her toes, cutting off her air. Instinctively her hands went for his forearm, trying to sink her nails into his flesh, but there was too much padding in the jacket. She panicked, black dots starting to dance in her vision.

And then cold steel was pressing against her temple and he was dragging her into the alley where she'd waited for him. 'You'll be sorry you did that,' he rasped in her ear. 'You'll be begging my forgiveness before I'm done. They all do.'

Sharp barking cut through the fog in her brain. *Brutus.*

Her panic abruptly vanished, her focus clearing as muscle memory kicked in and she heard her father's voice in her mind, directing her movements.

Releasing her hold on the man's arm, she twisted her torso, gaining as much momentum as she could before striking his belly with her elbow. Hearing his surprised grunt, she sucked in a breath and grabbed the pinkie finger of his gun hand, yanking it backward. Ducking under his arm, she gripped his hand, digging her thumb

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into the fleshy area between his thumb and forefinger, just as her father had trained her to do. Ignoring his cry of pain, she shoved the gun away with her free hand.

Then she ran. She'd drawn enough breath to scream when he grabbed her again, covering her mouth with his hand before pulling her against his chest, back into the alley.

'No, no, no.' She tried to scream the words, but they were too muffled to be heard. She tried to kick back against his knees, but he was stronger than she was and she couldn't get a grip on anything.

Brutus continued to bark, but nobody came. Nobody heard.

He shoved her hard, her back hitting a brick wall, knocking the breath out of her. He leaned into her space, his forearm pressed into her throat once more, cutting off her air.

'You are too much trouble,' he hissed. He put the gun to her head, but paused, looking around in irritation. 'Where the fuck is that goddamn dog?' His gaze dropped to Brutus's bag, which she still wore across her body. 'Oh, for fuck's sake,' he muttered. He hesitated for the briefest moment, then seemed to stiffen as he pointed the gun at her bag.

Brutus. 'No.' Grabbing handfuls of fabric at his throat, she yanked him forward with all of her might. His hand skittered, the gun discharging with a soft pop. *Silencer*, she thought, as shards of brick rained down on her head. *Brutus.* But her dog was still barking. Fueled by desperation, Daisy brought her knee up sharply, connecting with the man's groin.

She barely heard his curses over the pounding of her heart. She shoved him away and ran for the street. For safety.

'Daisy? Oh my God, Daisy!' Trish was suddenly there, her hands on Daisy's face. 'What happened? Oh my God. Your throat. It's red.'

'Mugger,' Daisy panted, crumpling to her knees. 'He was going to shoot Brutus.' Her dog poked her head out of her bag and began licking Daisy's still-clenched fist.

But the man hadn't tried to take her bag. *He tried to take me.* She closed her eyes and tried not to throw up, vaguely hearing Trish on the phone with 911. *Safe.* They were safe. It would be all right.

Trish sank to her knees and wrapped her arms around Daisy's

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shoulders, rocking her gently. 'Shh, honey. Shh. It'll be all right. Don't cry.'

It was then that Daisy realized she was sobbing. And that a small crowd had gathered. And that Trish's hand was in her coat pocket. 'What are you doing?'

Trish pulled Daisy's phone free. 'Calling Rafe. The cops are on their way, but having Rafe here will make it easier on you. Here, unlock your phone and I'll call.' Voice halting, Trish made the call to Daisy's landlord, who was as much a brother to her as Jacob.

But unlike Jacob, Rafe was also a cop. *He'll know what to do.*

Trish's arms were around her again, carefully rocking her. 'Did you scratch him?'

Still crying, Daisy tried to remember. 'I don't think so. I don't know. Maybe?' She pulled back enough to look down at her hands, still clenched into fists. But dangling from her left fist was a silver chain and something was pinching her palm. Carefully she opened her fist and sucked in a breath.

It was a locket. A heart-shaped locket. Silver and engraved. Her bewildered gaze lifted to Trish's. Trish closed Daisy's fingers over the locket, trapping it in her fist again.

'We'll show it to Rafe when he gets here,' Trish whispered.

Sacramento, California

Thursday, 16 February, 9.55 P.M.

Frowning at the ringing of his cell phone, Gideon Reynolds paused the episode of *Fixer Upper* he'd DVRed. He wanted to groan as he reached for his phone on the end table. He was tired and didn't want to go back into work. Because it would be work calling. Hardly anyone else he knew actually used a phone for calling anymore.

His frown became one of worry when he saw the caller ID. Rafe Sokolov. His best friend always texted, never called. And never this late. 'What's wrong?' Gideon asked, forgoing a greeting.

'Maybe nothing but probably something,' Rafe replied. 'You know my new tenant? Daisy Dawson?'

Gideon sighed. 'Rafe, no. Just no.' Rafe's mother had been trying

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to fix him up with 'cute little Daisy' for months. He'd been avoiding the Sokolovs' Sunday dinners because he was tired of Irina Sokolov's unrelenting matchmaking. She'd been trying to find him the perfect mate for more than ten years.

Part of him loved her for it because it meant she cared. Most of him wished she'd just stop. 'Tell your mother—'

'This isn't a setup,' Rafe interrupted tersely.

Gideon sat up straighter. 'What happened to Miss Dawson?'

'She was attacked tonight, down on J Street.'

Gideon grimaced in dread. Rafe was a homicide detective. 'Is she . . . okay?'

'Yeah. She fought him off. Her and her little rat-dog.'

Gideon was confused. 'I'm glad she's okay, but her assault isn't my jurisdiction. It's not usually yours either.' Rafe had joined SacPD when they'd graduated from college and had been a homicide detective for a few years. Gideon had taken a different law enforcement path, heading off to Quantico and the FBI. His specialization in linguistics meant that more than half of his work was done from his office.

His recent assignment to Sacramento meant coming home – as close to 'home' as he was likely to ever get. 'What's going on?' he asked. Because something obviously was.

'She grabbed a chain from the guy's neck right before she kned him in the nuts.'

Gideon's wince was instinctive. 'Ouch. Good for her. Did he get away?'

'Yes,' Rafe said, disgust in his tone. 'He had a gun. Tried to drag her away.'

'God. She's got to be shaken up. But – and I don't mean to sound like a jerk, man – what does this have to do with me?'

'The chain she grabbed came with a locket. Silver, heart shaped. Engraved.'

Gideon stopped breathing for a moment, then sucked in a harsh breath. A shiver of foreboding prickled over his skin. 'What kind of engraving?'

'Two children kneeling under an olive tree—'

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'All under the wings of an angel,' Gideon finished in a whisper. He swallowed back the bile that burned his throat. 'With a burning sword.'

Rafe let the silence hang a beat or two. 'Yes. The only other time I've seen that design was on your skin, Gid.'

Gideon stared at the TV screen, the frame frozen. Just as he was. 'Gideon?' Rafe's voice was quiet. 'You still there?'

Gideon pushed out the breath he'd been holding. 'Yeah. Was there a name on the back of the locket?'

Rafe hesitated, his reticence palpable even through the phone. 'Miriam.'

Gideon lurched to his feet in terrified shock, his heart in his throat. *No. It couldn't be. Someone would have told me.* 'Where are you?'

'At UC Davis Medical.'

He shook his head to clear it. To focus. His Miriam was okay. *She has to be.* 'Why are you at the hospital? I thought you said the Dawson woman was okay.'

'She wasn't seriously injured, but he bruised her throat trying to shut her up.' Rafe sounded . . . brittle. Clearly rattled. Gideon wouldn't be surprised to find the entire Sokolov clan at the ER. They'd taken the woman under their collective wing since she'd moved into the apartment in Rafe's old Victorian.

Just as they'd done for Gideon when he'd been a lost, scared teenager. He was suddenly fiercely glad the young woman had the family of Russian immigrants at her back.

'We're getting her checked out to be sure she's okay,' Rafe went on. 'When the doctor's finished, I'll take her to the station to get her statement while it's fresh in her mind. Then my parents are taking her to their house for the night. Mom's going to keep an eye on her tonight because her attacker cracked her head on a brick wall. The doctor didn't think there was any concussion, but you know how Mom worries.'

'I know,' Gideon murmured. He'd been on the receiving end of Irina's worry many times. It had always made him feel like one of her brood.

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Rafe cleared his throat. 'I'd like you to come down to the station to look at the locket and tell me about it.'

No. No. No.

'I know it's not easy for you,' Rafe said quietly. 'I really need your help, though. He told Daisy that she'd beg his forgiveness. That "they all do".'

Fuck. 'You think he's a serial offender?'

'Maybe. Will you come to the station?'

'I'll be there in thirty minutes.' Gideon disconnected and stared at his phone for several painful beats of his heart. Then he hit a name on his favorites list. And waited while it rang. It went to voice mail. As it usually did.

He disconnected and redialed, which he rarely did. This time it was picked up on the second ring. 'What, Gideon?'

His breath rushed from his lungs at the sound of her voice. *Oh God.* Abject relief had his knees buckling. He locked them, remaining upright as he focused on steadying his racing pulse.

'What's wrong? Gideon? Hello?'

Gideon's stomach hurt, just thinking about how to frame his question.

His sister blew out an annoyed sigh. 'For God's sake, Gideon. It's after midnight here. I hope this is important because you woke me up. Tell me what you called for and let me go back to sleep.'

'I'm sorry. It is important.' He rubbed his left pec through his shirt, remembering how much it had hurt to get the tattoo all those years ago. But he'd been stoic and hadn't complained once. The girls had gotten off easy, he'd thought at the time, clenching his teeth as the artist's needle had marked his skin. They'd just gotten the lockets. How wrong he'd been. None of them had gotten off easy. 'Do you have your locket?'

There was a shocked silence. 'What?'

'Your locket. Where is it?'

'In my safe-deposit box,' she ground out, 'where it's always been.'

Gideon swallowed hard. 'Where's . . . where is hers?' he asked hoarsely.

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Another taut silence. 'In the box with mine. Why? What's this about?'

'A woman was attacked in Sacramento tonight. Her attacker wore one of the lockets around his neck. She pulled it off him during the attack. It has "Miriam" engraved on the back. I thought . . . it might be yours.' Nothing. Silence. He couldn't even hear her breathe. 'Mercy?' he whispered.

Mercy's answer was what he'd expected. 'I . . . can't, Gideon.' Her voice broke. 'I just . . . can't.'

'I understand,' he said. 'I needed to know if you'd gotten rid of it. Either of them.'

'No.'

A single word. How could one single word be filled with so much pain?

Gideon swallowed. 'I mostly wanted to make sure you were all right.'

Although he knew she wasn't all right. She would never be. Neither of them would ever be totally all right. How could they be?

'I'm okay,' she said, but he didn't believe her. She didn't sound like she even believed herself. 'You?'

'Same old, same old.' He hesitated, then murmured, 'Take care of yourself, Mercy.'

'You too,' she said sadly. 'Good night.'

The phone clicked in his ear and Gideon took a moment to calm his racing heart, to settle his churning gut. To fight back the tears that threatened every time he talked to his sister. To wish that things could be different.

He went to the shelf beside his TV, which was still paused on *Fixer Upper*. On the shelf was a polished box made of cherrywood, a gift that Irina and Karl Sokolov had given him for Christmas, at least five years before. Inside the box were his cuff links, a few ticket stubs, and a handful of photos. He riffled through the photos until he found the one he needed. Pocketing it, he retrieved his Glock from his gun safe, got into his car, and headed for downtown Sac.

It looked like he'd finally be meeting Daisy Dawson after all. At least Irina Sokolov would be pleased.

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Sacramento, California

Thursday, 16 February, 10.30 P.M.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. He drew his front door open wider so that he could slam it hard, but his hand stilled as he resisted the urge. No need to call attention to himself. The Neighborhood Watch group kept their eyes and ears peeled for loud noises and signs of domestic disturbances. The nosy neighbors were the only things he truly hated about living in his otherwise perfect little Midtown neighborhood. All he needed was for someone to call 911 on him for something he *hadn't* actually done.

He headed to the basement and slammed that door behind him, effectively closing himself off from the rest of the world. The basement was the one thing he loved the most about his house. It was tied with the fact that he didn't have to share space with Sydney any longer.

He'd soundproofed his basement, bricking over all doors and windows and installing enough insulation to create a little cocoon. No scream would reach prying ears, even those pressed right up against the outside wall. Not that he'd made that simple, either. His rosebushes had enormous thorns. He'd chosen the varieties for that very reason. Luckily, they were pretty, too. Nobody would be able to get close enough to put their ear to the wall, even if they wanted to.

Now he trusted his soundproofing and keep-away thorns to do their jobs because he needed to scream. He did, venting his frustration at the fucked-up mess this night had become. He screamed until his throat hurt and his head throbbed.

But it wasn't enough. It was never enough. Only one thing took off the edge, and one thing only. And that one thing had escaped him tonight.

He glared at the bed in the corner, neatly made up and ready for the guest that would not be partaking of his hospitality. Damn that blonde bitch. He hadn't expected her to fight back. At least not successfully. Someone had taught her well.

That fucking dog. Its yapping had distracted him. *I should have just*

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shot the stupid thing. His hesitation had ruined his plan for tonight, might even have put him in jeopardy. He'd need to take care of the blonde. He didn't think she could identify him, but he'd spoken to her. And she'd been way too savvy for her own good, no matter that she'd first appeared to be just another teenager.

She hadn't been that young, though. Close up, he'd seen her eyes. The grim determination that came from experience. She had old eyes. And she'd seen enough of him that he needed to be worried about her. He'd have to get rid of her.

Of course, he had to find out who she was first. He'd need to wait until the next morning to look at the log of all the calls taken by 911.

Stripping off his clothes, he shoved them in a bag to be burned. He'd already discarded the stocking he'd worn over his face as well as the coat and gloves. Those he'd soaked in gasoline and set on fire, burning them in the barbecue grill of a deserted park until they were stinking blobs of melted plastic.

The stocking mask had been a huge mistake. He'd known it in the back of his mind the whole time he was buying the stockings, prepping, and dragging the mask over his head. He usually carried at least one disguise in his duffel bag, but he hadn't had it with him when he'd left the house that morning to go to work.

It was just supposed to have been a staff meeting. No big.

But it *was* big. It was a disaster. He hadn't been prepared for the news. For how it would feel, everyone staring at him with pity because his own father was selling the company, putting them all out of a job. That his father hadn't even had the nerve to face them himself, sending his assistant to deliver the proclamation that the new owners would be replacing them with their own people, that the current employees would be receiving severance benefits depending on how long they'd been with the company.

He hadn't been prepared for how much it had ripped him apart. How his world had just collapsed. His rage had taken over and it was all he'd been able to do to escape the meeting without breaking his father's assistant into little pieces.

He'd needed something – or *someone* – on which to vent his rage,

say you're sorry

and he'd needed it right *then*. Hell, he needed it *right now*. Fucking blonde bitch.

He stepped into the bathroom he'd installed in the basement and stared at his reflection. 'Goddammit,' he hissed as the full impact of what he was seeing hit him hard.

Deep red scratches scored his flesh, which was bad enough. Forensics would have skin samples. *They'll have my DNA.*

But even worse . . . The locket was missing. The moment rushed back, stealing his breath. It had been when the blonde had grabbed for a hold on his coat, right before she'd kneed him in the nuts.

'Bitch.' She'd be so sorry she'd done that. Once he got his hands on her . . . He fantasized her on her knees, begging his forgiveness. She'd tell him she was sorry. They always said they were sorry. Eventually.

More pressing was the likelihood that the police would find his fingerprints on the locket. He'd caught himself rubbing the silver heart from time to time since taking it from his last victim. But he'd worn gloves tonight, so hopefully his prints had been rubbed off.

Either way, they'd have to catch him first before using the physical evidence against him. He wouldn't be popping up in any of their databases. *I just won't get caught. Simple enough.*

He started the shower and stepped under the spray, wishing he weren't on duty for the next few days. Otherwise he'd smoke some weed and calm down. But there was always a chance that he'd be chosen for a random drug test, which would pick that shit up.

He ran his hands over the scratches at the base of his throat, hoping whatever they'd scrape from under the bitch's nails wouldn't be too damning. He needed to figure out how much the cops knew.

He was edgy. Too jumpy. He needed to calm the fuck down. He needed a woman in the basement bed. Now he wished he hadn't dispatched the last one so quickly. He normally kept them alive for a long time, using them to slake his rage, but Miriam had made him so furious. *So get yourself another houseguest.* That he could do.

Tomorrow. After work. You can hunt tomorrow. Take off the edge. And then his mind would be clear and he'd figure out how to eliminate the blonde.

Karen Rose

He'd been operating under the radar for years. He wasn't about to allow a loose end to jeopardize that now.

Tonight, he needed to sleep. He left the basement, taking the stairs two at a time. Hopefully, a run would tire him out enough to sleep.

He opened the back door and clucked his tongue. 'Mutt,' he called softly. 'Come here, boy.' The Airedale mix trotted in from the backyard, dropping to sit just inside the kitchen door, lifting his paws, one at a time, so that they could be dried off. Mutt was very smart. He'd learned that trick within days of being brought home.

He wondered if Mutt's previous owner had done the same. It was a possibility. Seattle was known for its rain and the woman who'd been walking him had seemed the fastidious type. Janice Fiddler had been her name. He'd been unable to transport Janice to his basement guest room, finishing her off in her own basement instead, but she'd provided him with the best of souvenirs.

Mutt was good company.

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