

# RUBY RED SKIES

a novel

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an imprint of Fernwood Publishing  
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*For my three sons,  
Anjay, Alek, and Augustyn Burkowicz,  
without whom I would not have written a large portion of this  
book in the driver's seat of a car between drop-offs and pick-ups.  
I also would not have had to break up fights between edits,  
offer an array of car foods, and hear about their day.  
And I wouldn't change this for anything. xxx*

Excerpt

When, far down some glade,  
Of the great world's burning,  
One soft flame upturning  
Seems, to his discerning,  
Crocus in the shade.

— Ebenezer Jones, from the poem  
“When the World Is Burning”

## Mughal Family Tree

Babur (1483–1530) m. Maham Begum  
(b. unknown–1556)

|

Humayun (1508–1556) m. Hamida Banu Begum  
(1527–1604)

|

Akbar the Great (1542–1605) m. Miriam-uz-Zamani  
(1542–1623; known later as Jodha Bai —  
also the aunt of Maharaja Man Singh of Amber Court)

|

Jahangir (1569–1627) m. Jagat Ghosain (1573–1619) m.  
— Nur Jahan (Mehrunissa; 1577–1645;  
aunt of Mumtaz Mahal)

|

Shah Jahan (Khurram; 1592–1666) m. Mumtaz Mahal  
(Arjumand Banu; 1593–1631)

|

Aurangzeb (1618–1707; he and his brother Dara Shikoh  
were kept as hostages by Nur Jahan and Jahangir until  
Shah Jahan took the court.)

### *Notes on the Mughal Family Tree*

For simplicity, this tree only mentions the ruling kings and their wives (other wives and siblings are not listed).

Maharaja Man Singh of Amber Court (1550–1614) m. Bibi Mubarak (1564–1638). He ruled Amber Court, and while he had a good relationship with King Akbar the Great, he had a fraught one with his son, King Jahangir.

Jahangir's brother Daniyal (1572–1605) was Akbar the Great's favourite son, and the royal chef in this novel was named after him.

Persian was the official language of the Mughal Empire; however, Hindustani (a precursor to Urdu, which did not exist yet) was widely spoken. Hindustani and Urdu were influenced by Persian, Dakhni, Turkish, Arabic, Sanskrit, and others.

Though it went through many name changes, the place in this novel referred to as al-Qandahār (which was formally referred to as such in the second half of the ninth century) is what we know to be modern-day Kandahar.



# Ruby's Plan for Driving from Vancouver to William's Lake

#Active Fire Zone #

William's Lake (approx. 6-hour drive to reach  
destination)

#Active Fire Zone#



100 Mile House

#Active Fire Zone#



Whistler



Garibaldi Lake (19 km south of Whistler)



Squamish



Vancouver (Start point)

# Chapter 1

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2017

Trevor sighed heavily. Low and grey as it was, Ruby felt like the sky was closing in on them. Tree shadows decorated the back window of the car in moving patterns of vintage lace.

The rain had just started to fall, syncopating with the rhythm of the classical music emanating from the speakers. The drops splattering against the windshield added a dulled drum beat.

“It’s getting late, all right,” he said. It was a fact. The drive had run its course.

Ruby glanced over at her husband. He had one hand on the wheel, the other clasped a cup which he periodically tipped to his lips. They had started taking these long drives when Leah was a baby to put her to sleep. Back then, when they were alone in the car, Ruby hadn’t felt like they were just teens who had had a shotgun wedding, forced to live in Trevor’s mother’s rec room. She continuously chased after that feeling these days. Even though they lived in a house of their own now. Even though Leah was already nineteen.

“But,” he offered, “happy anniversary, and all. *Cin cin.*”

*Cin cin, salud, cheers, and all that jazz.* Trevor’s toast at their wedding. Ruby turned to look out at the scattered rain. It seemed like only yesterday Ruby was choosing her wedding gown with her mother-in-law. Eleanora liked the buttercream colour. Ruby, the white. In the end, Ruby went with Eleanora’s choice. Ruby was a

chesty bride and had already begun to show just a few months into pregnancy. The champagne colour Eleanora had chosen washed out her skin tone, and the piece itself — bought to hide all of Ruby's bumps — made her look as if she was encased in a frilly, lacy potato sack.

If Ruby wanted to be more in charge, maybe her father should have been around to offer to pay for the wedding, or perhaps she should have waited until she was the right age to marry another South Asian, not a white person. People were supposed to marry people who matched them; hadn't Ruby ever played Pick Up Pairs? It went without saying that she shouldn't have gotten pregnant in grade 12. These unspoken thoughts had bounced around that cheap bridal salon Eleanora had driven Ruby to while all the other girls Ruby's age were scrambling about, trying on last-minute grad dresses. Eleanora, terrified that Ruby would ask to include an Indian custom in the wedding, had suggested her future daughter-in-law try on some of the ridiculously ornate jewellery pieces on display, advertised as being "made in Morocco."

"Just the perfect cultural touch from your side," Eleanora had exclaimed. Ruby had asked for satin gloves instead.

Ruby had not been planning on having pakoras or saris or even Bollywood music at the event. Ruby's own mother, lips drawn in a permanent straight line after her daughter's pregnancy revelation, had no interest in inviting a single person, Indian or otherwise, to the celebration. Trevor favoured gangster rap at the time, but Ruby's interests in the nineties was confined strictly to what her mother called "white people music," and picking out the playlist (Radiohead, Soundgarden, Counting Crows) had been her favourite part of the wedding. A rushed, embarrassing event filled with teenagers getting drunk in the bathroom, Ruby's wedding had concluded with Coolio's "Gangsta's Paradise" playing on repeat. Now that she thought about it, her playlist had been largely ignored on

her wedding day.

Ruby giggled in the car — eliciting an enquiring look from Trevor — as she remembered the extravagant top hat Trevor had worn that night. Hadn't he talked in slang those days — an urban drawl that had clashed with his skinny, white frame? She thought of the modest rose bouquet she had tossed into the crowd. Most girls, having just celebrated graduation, had jumped away from the bouquet like it was an incoming firecracker. Her best friend Belle had rescued it off the floor and held it up like the Olympic torch to Ruby as if to say: *Look, this isn't mortifying at all — see?*

"Hey Trevor," Ruby said suddenly, "do you remember my bridal bouquet?"

"Not specifically."

"Well, Belle scooped it up. Isn't it funny that she never married?"

He turned to her with a cocked brow. "Back then, Rubes, our friends were busy being teenagers. Don't tell me you believe that bullshit about whoever catches it first, marries next."

"Yeah," she said, not bothering to explain that Belle had snatched it off the floor and never caught it. "But we aren't teens anymore," she mumbled. "Belle's almost forty ..."

"She just turned thirty-eight. What's your point?"

"Nothing."

She turned away from Trevor to gaze out the car window. The sky was blotted out by spongy grey clouds. The stormy skies reminded her of the fantastic scenes in the bedtime stories her mother once told Ruby. Her mother had spent a lot of time describing details to her — the million shades of sky, or the way people in medieval India dressed. It had been years since Ruby had thought of those tales — slices of India's past studded in the *sultanat's* rubies and topped with roses from the harem's garden. Out of nowhere, today of all days, snippets of the stories were coming back to her. The stories, invented to distract Ruby from the dysfunction of family life, stopped when

Ruby disappointed her mother just as much as her father had.

There hadn't been much happiness in her childhood days, Ruby reflected now, watching water pool into the dips in the concrete, what with Ruby's father having left her mother for a white woman named Julia. The stories that Ruby's mother told had quickly filled the space where her father's box of premium brand cigarettes had once sat right next to his fake Coca Cola, both of which had been purchased at a fraction of their regular cost from a vendor across the Vancouver border, somewhere in Bellingham. There were no trips to Bellingham after Julia, but her father had sent Ruby CDs in the mail every year for her birthday, up until the very year she moved to Trevor's rec room. Ruby had put them in a shoebox she labelled Julia's Choice. While Ruby preferred alternative rock bands, Julia sent her CDs of frazzled white female vocalists who were finding a space for themselves in the world. The Virginia Woolfs of the nineties as Ruby liked to think of them. Sarah McLachlan. Tori Amos. Björk.

The car suddenly jerked, bringing her jolting back to the present.

"Fuck!" Trevor had dribbled coffee on his beige pants, sprinkling them with milky brown drops.

Ruby, thinking of Julia's burgundy and plum lipstick, didn't attempt to dab the spots clean, nor assure her husband she'd take care of them later. "Are you okay?" she said absentmindedly.

"Ruby, it's getting dark." Trevor wove a sigh through his words.

"Hmm," she replied. Indeed, the sky was changing colour. Her mind drifted to the descriptions her mother had given of the skies of medieval Agra. Rubina was the starlet of those stories Ruby was told after her father packed his bags and left to live with Julia. Her mother had claimed lineage to the dancing legend, one who had captured the hearts of the members of the royal court in early seventeenth century India.

Looking up now at the pregnant clouds, Ruby embraced her resurfacing memories of Rubina, recollecting the strong rainfall in

the last story her mother told. There had been a battle. Rubina and Empress Nur Jahan had been fleeing on an elephant. Nur Jahan had held a baby while riding it and had shot weapons at men. Wasn't there some great love of Rubina's there too? Some man who tried to save Rubina when she fell into the fast-flowing river? And Rubina had to fight to save herself? How had Rubina become so close to the empress? Rubina had always been presented as brave and fearless in her mother's stories, and Ruby, tucked into her soft bed, had felt quite the opposite. Her mother's voice, warm and buttery, had transported her to past days where majestic elephants battled one another in sport. Words had whizzed out of her mother like the arrows raining down on the enemy below, and Ruby had been able to see the past as clearly as she saw her own life.

Ruby sat up straighter in the passenger seat. She could suddenly, with absolute clarity, remember details about the building of the crimson Agra Fort, of how the castle's red sandstone and white marble walls were precisely carved by skilled masons, but constructed offsite to avoid disrupting royalty's lives. About how the city of Agra had formed a perfect square, protected on all four sides by high banks erected to ward off raids.

"Are you even listening to me, Ruby?"

Where were all these memories coming from, so tactile she could taste fire-roasted nuts on her tongue and feel the dusty plains between her toes? While Ruby couldn't explain her sudden interest in Rubina this evening, she had to admit it was a welcome distraction from the monotonous routine that had, over time, consumed Ruby's life: laundry, dishes, sweeping, mopping, obligatory acknowledgement of her spouse, repeat. No matter how she tried to kid herself, romance between her and Trevor was nearly dead.

"Rubes?"

How intriguing to imagine an era where cities changed rulers over and over again as Mughal conquerors and sultans swept through!

Where the royals that went to battle had plain-clothed servants ride behind them to show off their majesty's jewels — heavy gold pieces covering them from head to toe. One sultan invading Agra and levelling the land, destroying the Hindu temples and sculpted gods. Another building ornate mosques and tombs with overlooked treasures left behind by those fleeing the new invaders. A new leader, once again destroying monuments to rebuild yet more in their place. Some of these structures had stood the test of time though Ruby had never visited them: Akbar's Mausoleum, the Agra Fort, the Taj Mahal. How unsettling it must have been to live through a time of such fragility!

She turned up the heat in her excitement and watched as Trevor, annoyed, turned it back down. The driver decided the car temperature, an Andrews family rule. Ruby's reign was restricted to the laundry room. When they got home, she still had to throw clothes in the dryer, she thought flatly, taking a sip of her coffee. After that, while the heavy rains of Vancouver fell, Ruby would have the company of cable television, thick blankets, and pearly milked Earl Grey tea. No crazy adventure here. Her mortgage was paid monthly by her husband of twenty years, garbage brought out properly to the curb by him on the right day. In a dispassionate life, she had the passion of stability. Stability and Ruby were having a hot love affair.

"Jesus. You're lost in your own world again, Ruby. It's like driving with a goddamn zombie."

"Pardon? Ah, yes, I'm not sure that it is my world, per se," she said chuckling, wondering whether to bring up her mother's stories. She had mentioned them in passing but never gone into details with Trevor. "But I suppose I'm lost somewhere."

"Such a fucking daydreamer. Unicorns and rainbows taking up your thoughts, Rubes?"

She winced at the open mockery. "It's hard to put into words, but I guess I'm thinking of the rains. They're reminding me of medieval

India. And I'm thinking of what a crazy time all of it was in contrast with how predictable my life is. *Our life*," she corrected quickly. "I'm wondering if predictability is such a bad thing."

"Yes, I see the connection."

Ruby ignored the thick sarcasm. Trevor had always told her she wasn't particularly sharp at catching it, but when she did, it made her flinch as did the scent of cheap cologne. Ruby looked out the windshield, each swipe of the wipers clearing away the old view and replacing it with a sparkly new one.

Trevor snapped his fingers in front of her face with his right hand to make his point, left hand still on the wheel. "What I've been asking is, are you okay with ending our anniversary date early? I'm running low on gas."

Thunder echoed in the distance. Ruby looked out the window, watching the summer rain hammer the pavement. "Sure, we can go home," she said, trying to keep the hurt out of her voice. Trevor logged his hours with her like he was punching in at work.

After a while, she said, "Do you like your anniversary present?"

"Yes," he answered, tapping the breast pocket on his trim blazer.

"It's kind of cheesy to get you an engraved pen ..."

"No, I like it; no one will steal a pen that says *Happy 20th, Sugar Bear*."

"You hate it."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Ruby, how much reassurance do you need?"

Dollar store chocolates sat on her lap. She was supposed to have gotten china for this milestone, but who had the patience for finicky dishware? She shrugged to herself, opened her gift box, and popped a sugary chocolate seashell in her mouth. It didn't dissolve easily, so she began to bite at it.

"Is this piece by Handel?" she asked, mouth full, pointing to the stereo. As usual, it was up to Ruby to change the mood. In all honesty, if she had control of the stereo, she would have put on Nina



Simone's "My Baby Just Cares for Me." She loved the lyrics, the catchy piano riffs, the perfect pauses.

"It's Ravel's 'Bolero,'" he answered, bored. His lip was upturned, his face showing the strain of annoyance.

She shrugged. She probably got the century wrong. The music layered itself in flutes and violins. Or maybe it was trumpets and trombones. Ruby had no idea. The piece made her feel anxious, like she was climbing a tall mountain on the way to fighting a battle, but she wanted to contribute something positive to the conversation. "Well, it's interesting all the same."

Trevor tapped his finger on the wheel, veins of irritation in his forehead now visible. "But it's not all the bloody same, Rubes, is it? That's the point. Ravel is impressionism, Handel is baroque. Two totally different styles and time periods."

"Which came first?"

"Pardon?"

"I mean which period came first?"

"Oh. Well, obviously baroque came before impressionism." A sharp turn.

"OK," said Ruby measuredly, "so Ravel could have been inspired by Handel and thus sound like him."

"What?"

"I said, Ravel might have been influenced by baroque ... couldn't that be possible? The type of music is called impressionism, after all."

"I don't think you even know what impressionism means."

Ruby sucked air in, watching her belly contract inward under the lap belt, skinny if only for one second. Trevor talked about classical music as if he was the only one allowed to discover a new interest; as if he was the only one ever to drink sour white wine and eat under-salted nuts in a symphony lobby; as if Ruby's best moments had passed in high school, and so now she should accept herself as the woman who dressed in mom jeans and loose blouses to hide the

pregnancy weight she had held on to. It was as though she was literally carrying around her past with her, unable to transform into a new person like Trevor had.

If Ruby could have chosen to be anyone she wanted, she would have picked a Paris lounge singer in the 1920s. She'd be a charm of a woman who would be able to do many variations of the Charleston, drink champagne on Tuesdays, and wear faux fur coats for no reason at all. She liked having something to love that was all her own. After a while, she had stopped feeling the need to tell Trevor she liked things other than reality shows and romance novels. She stretched her arms out in the car now, imagining wearing gossamer gloves so fine her skin would show through.

"Isn't it funny how thunder sounds just like a standing ovation? It's like we are at our own private concert." She dug her tongue into the groove of her back teeth, dislodging the cheap chocolate. Ruby imagined this to be an intelligent observation; Trevor usually went for this kind of cheap poetic metaphor when someone else made the comment.

"Ruby, if you please don't mind, I quite enjoy this part in the piece. You're welcome to retreat to your dreamland. As romantic as the rain may sound to you, the lightning is probably starting up wildfires in BC forests. Besides, classical music demands silence to be best appreciated."

A minute passed between them.

And then Ruby could not resist pitching in, "But that makes no sense. Wouldn't the rain put out the fire?"

Trevor looked at her.

"What?" she said, inspecting her teeth for chocolate using her cell phone.

Trevor shook his head. "I just can't understand if you're pretending to be dumb because you think it makes you look cute, or if you really don't understand how weather works. If you assessed the

weather with a more careful eye, you would see that this is merely a quick flash rain. In the mountains, where the clouds are closer to the earth, there won't be enough moisture to put out any fires. Think of the forest bed as a blanket of dry matches just itching for a spark to light it."

Ruby bit her lip. "I thought people started fires."

"People cause climate change. The storm is a result of that, as are the dry conditions. You'll hear people argue that forest fires have natural cycles and burning clears out decaying matter and prevents larger catastrophes. I guess humans are the idiots for changing from wandering peoples to the type of species that build large resorts or hometowns on forest beds and then cry later about everything burning down. But the sheer number of fires happening now are a direct result of climate change. However, I'm sure lots of assholes will light bonfires and fireworks in the forest anyway and add to the problem."

"Yes, that makes sense ..." she said falteringly.

"Interesting how the one thing humans have that differentiates us from other animals is our ability to make fire, and yet we have used that very gift to burn the whole world down. It's going to be a hot, dry, long summer, mark my words. Don't be fooled by this short piss of rain. 2017 isn't going to be any different from the last few summers."

"Well, I hope this summer we stay fire-free. It's still only the beginning of July."

Trevor made a strange noise through his nose — his reply to anything stupid Ruby said whenever he lost his desire to school her.

Five minutes later they were in their driveway. Trevor was already slamming his car door shut and running inside, tenting a newspaper over his head as protection against the elements. He left the main door open, the mouth of darkness gaping at her.

# Chapter 2

---

## 2017

Inside, the house was pitch black. The storm had knocked out the electricity. Trevor searched through a drawer and lit a few candles. His face glowed and, for a second, Ruby remembered him the way he was at eighteen — his face marked with acne, his unsure gaze. But when she looked again his skin was smooth, his suit jacket crisp, save for a couple of raindrops on the shoulders. Straight sandy hair complemented his tall, lean physique. *Time is a funny thing*, she thought. If she chiselled away at him with a trowel like an archaeologist, would she find that sweet boy from high school hiding underneath?

“Darn,” Ruby said, placing her empty coffee cup and chocolate box on the counter. As she did, her arm brushed against her own waist. No doubt Trevor would regret the chocolates he had gifted her. But chocolates were meant to be enjoyed, not saved, and besides, she never understood what men saw in skinny, hangry, self-obsessed wives. A whole life filled with salads and calorie counting was depressing. “I hope Leah is okay.”

“She isn’t a kid anymore, Rubes. I’m sure she can handle a small power outage.”

“Hi guys,” Leah navigated toward them casting a cone of light.

“Leah,” Ruby hugged her close. “You’re okay, right?”

Leah pulled away. “Course I am.”

"In a way this is perfect. We can play board games tonight over wine. Leah, you're old enough to have a glass."

Leah shrugged, glancing at Trevor. "Not much to do, now that you can't watch *The Bachelor*, huh, Mom?"

Trevor's laughter pierced the air. "C'mon, Leah, don't make fun. You and your mom used to love playing Scrabble together at night."

"I outgrew three letter words."

"Leah," scolded Trevor. But his eyes shone with mischief in the candlelight; intelligence was something that only Leah and he shared, with Ruby just looking in.

"It wasn't always this way," Ruby spoke her thoughts aloud. She was thinking that when she first met Trevor, she had been the smart one; the one who knew all about bands, the one who had impressed Curtis Simmons, her first boyfriend in high school. Curtis had been in a band that landed opening acts in garage rock shows. Trevor had been just a pimply white kid who thought he was Black, working as a stock boy at the local Green Savers store, listening to Dr. Dre on his Walkman.

"God, Mom, people grow up," sputtered Leah, as if she had read Ruby's thoughts. Trevor massaged Leah's shoulders gently. "I'm going to Rick's to work on a paper."

"Is that such a good idea? Don't you have a crush on him? It might not send the best message, studying together after dark."

Leah's pale face coloured pink. She played with a stray blue-black hair that had escaped from her ponytail. "A crush? Don't study after dark with a boy? What are you, a 1950s housewife? Where's your crinoline dress?"

Ruby gazed down at her pilled pullover. She wanted to say she preferred vintage looks, not vintage values, but it wouldn't make sense given her current choice of clothing. "I'm only looking out for you. Is that such a crime?"

"Mom, back off. Leah's old enough to make her own choices,"

said Trevor.

Mom. Trevor had actually called her mom.

Ruby's back stiffened.

"I'm going to drive down to the office to catch up on some last-minute work. I'll give you some gas money, Leah."

"Dad, that's okay. I'm teaching soccer camp again this summer. I have money."

"Just wait by your car. You're my little girl. I got you. I'll be right out." Trevor rushed over the words, as if by speaking quickly he could erase the reality that he was walking out on his anniversary date.

Ruby knew a blackout did not mean courtly behaviour on Trevor's part. Once again, she reminded herself that Trevor paid bills and put out the trash, including the organics.

"Thanks, Dad," Leah was saying. "I think I need an oil change, too."

"Well, I'll check it for you," he said, rifling through his wallet to find money for Leah.

"What do you think I should do about the dinner party tomorrow?" Ruby cut in. "I was going to prep dessert tonight."

Trevor stared at Ruby by candlelight as Leah walked out. "It's your idea to host these mundane events where no one discusses anything deeper than the fucking weather."

"The dinner party will be fun ..."

"Making balloon animals is also fun. Doesn't mean it's my cup of tea."

"What am I supposed to tell Belle and John?"

Trevor looked rattled for a second. Belle's newest boyfriend challenged Trevor on every point, be it details of fine liquor or historical facts.

"We can order in. Eat by candlelight." Trevor had veered off script.

"Okay, good idea," Ruby said, relieved to have a backup plan if the electricity didn't come on. "Maybe Chinese or Thai, not pizza."

“Belle hates pizza.”

She looked at him, puzzled.

“On account of her throwing up in the high school cafeteria. She swore she’d never eat it again. Who could forget that? What did you guys drink the night before? Gin, was it? Poor girl still can’t look at the stuff.” He jingled his keys, signalling that he was ready to go out again.

“She’s *my* best friend. Of course, I remember that.”

“You guys were so dumb, drinking in high school. Thank goodness Leah is nothing like you. She hasn’t even got your colouring.” He smiled, attempting to soften the blow.

“Back then my *colouring* used to be the thing you liked best about me. Made you feel pretty damn special dating a girl who was *exotic*.” She surprised herself. “Although in those days you used to confuse Black and Brown as being the same thing. Remember how you used to say that Lenny Kravitz song ‘Black Girl’ reminded you of me? You *loved* that song. It was the only non-rap song you tolerated.”

He flushed, the tinge visible even in the dim lighting. “What does that have to do with anything? I was just a kid; my tastes weren’t developed yet. You’re the one who hasn’t changed much, Rubes. In those days you used to follow Belle around like a puppy dog, and you still do.”

“That simply isn’t true. Belle used to admire my intellect ...”

“God. Do you guys, like, always have to argue?” Leah had returned. “Come on, Dad.”

“Coming, Leah. Anyway, you’re going to be okay on your own in the dark, right Rubes? The gas barbecue is on the patio if you get hungry.”

This was such a stupid comment that she couldn’t answer. Her diet didn’t differ much from a ten-year-old girl’s: Skittles, gummy bears, and ice cream — none of which needed to be cooked outside. Chewing the inside of her cheek, she tried to think of what kind of

food would comfort her most right now.

"Bye then," he said, kissing her on the cheek. His lips felt like paper brushing against her skin.

"No time like an anniversary date to catch up on work," she snapped. Sarcasm. She could use that just as well.

He didn't respond.

Ruby scanned the countertop for her phone. *Do you have a power outage too? If not, maybe I could come over and watch The Bachelor*, she texted Belle. Once this season of the show ended, another chapter of her life would also be over. Another day of Trevor telling her she was getting fatter gone by; another day of pretending Trevor still loved her; another day where she was no longer young Ruby Malkhana, whom Trevor had looked at wide-eyed with fascination. Where had that wild, free Ruby gone? And why had everyone forgotten she had been something interesting once upon a time?

*Trevor has a deadline and our anniversary plans ended early*, her thumb rapidly selected the letters on her phone, feeling the need to explain. *But it was still romantic*. She set the phone down. Over the years, Ruby had learned to omit her marital arguments, inflate her happiness.

Her phone buzzed with Belle's reply. *I still have power. Romantic in a physical way?*

She ran a finger over her lips. She could imagine Belle's exact expression as she teased her. Belle loved to discuss sex and her candidness sometimes took Ruby by surprise. *Did a thin-lipped cheek kiss count?* Ruby wondered. *Superhot kissing!* She typed in, before she could regret it, and hoped that Belle would at least laugh at this. *Martinis and The Bachelor: yes or no??*

Her phone remained silent for two minutes. When it buzzed on the counter in the dark, she jumped.

*Grrrrl, you know I don't watch that trite bullshit. But I could use the martinis...*



*Trite? Since when? Ruby fingers danced over the letters. You watched the whole freaking last season with me.*

*I'm trying to refine myself.*

*Yoga pants 24/7, you're so refined,* Ruby wrote, a small smile tugging at her lips.

*Rubes, take note: a nice ass is timeless. Audrey Hepburn's cigarette pants were glorified leggings. You had me at the martinis, though. Especially if you brought something top shelf. That's refined, right? Too bad I already have plans. With John. My boyfriend-of-the-week! ☺*

Ruby placed the phone face down on the counter.

Alone.

Again.