

RUBY RED HERRING

TRACY GARDNER

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ONE

EVERY AYERS RUSHED through the kitchen of her parents' upstate New York home, grabbing a bagel from the spread Aunt Midge set out every morning. She couldn't be late today. Briefcase in one hand, she rounded the corner of the kitchen island and clenched the bagel between her teeth as she poured coffee into her travel mug and replaced the lid one-handed.

She hip-checked her younger sister on the way to the sink. "Tilly. You did send your admissions essay to the conservatory last night, didn't you?"

"Yes! Sort of. I'll do it today, I promise!" Tilly looked from Avery to Aunt Midge, both now staring at her. "I'm having trouble with the closing paragraph, all right? I'll take care of it."

At twenty-five, Avery was seven years older than Tilly, a high school senior. Tilly had definitely inherited the procrastination gene from their mother Anne, just one of several reasons Avery was so glad Aunt Midge lived with them now. Her little sister had better get her admission requirements taken care of, or the London Conservatory of Music would move on to the next voice candidate.

Aunt Midge spoke up. "*We* will take care of it. Right after school, my dear. No excuses." Midge waved a hand covered in sparkling rings at Avery, her long, feathery chiffon caftan billowing around her as she moved. "Go.

Give Micah a kiss for me. Be safe,” she said, almost as an afterthought.

Avery nodded, meeting Aunt Midge’s gaze. It was something they said to each other now, these last several months. *Be safe*. How many times in her life had her parents taken off in their cars without a thought in their heads about staying safe on the road? Would it have made a bit of difference if Aunt Midge—or someone—had uttered those words a year ago when they’d all driven away from Bello’s? Would the words have somehow stopped her father from losing control and the car from plummeting into that ravine? Sometimes, when she recalled the crash, Avery still felt the heat that had reached the back seat before she and Tilly were pulled from the wreckage.

She straightened the neckline of her blouse and donned the cropped blazer she’d chosen to go with her slim-fit navy pants. The Museum of Antiquities curator was expecting her in less than an hour. Micah was meeting her there. She knew she was spoiled, usually working from her home office at the back of the house. She didn’t mind the trips into Manhattan when she needed to be on-site for an assignment. Lilac Grove was a small, quaint suburb forty minutes or so outside the city. Avery always had the option of taking the train, but she enjoyed the drive.

“Love you both!” Avery put a hand on the front door handle, a plain white envelope on the foyer floor catching her eye. Someone must have slipped it through the mail slot, which was odd, as their mail only ever came to the mailbox at the end of the driveway. “Tilly!”

“I told you I’ll do it today—stop nagging me!” Tilly slid into the foyer, followed closely by Halston, Aunt

Midge's large black Afghan hound. Tilly's features were scrunched into a scowl under the mass of blond hair piled into a messy bun on top of her head.

"No, I think one of your friends dropped this off." Avery handed the envelope to her sister and pulled open the front door.

"Ooh, what is it?" Tilly tore it open, going silent as she read. The single white paper slipped from her fingers and floated to the floor. Tilly's hand covered her mouth. Her face went pale.

Ugh. Her sister could be so dramatic. Avery bent and picked up the letter, scanning the few typed words across the middle of the paper. "Oh. My God."

Aunt Midge appeared in the doorway. "Another grad party invitation?"

Avery silently handed the letter to her aunt. Her mind was reeling. It couldn't be. It wasn't possible. Was it?

"*Roo,*" Aunt Midge read aloud. "*You must decline the contract. Your life is at stake. My love to you and Lamb.—Dad.*" The older woman appeared to have stopped breathing.

"Auntie?" Tilly moved to her side.

Midge looked at them. "What does this mean?"

Avery shook her head. "I have no idea."

"It's him! He's alive!" Tilly beamed, tears rolling down her face. "Dad's alive!"

"I... I don't know," Avery said. She took the letter from Midge, studying it. "We don't know that, Tilly."

"What do you mean? He used our names! No one else would know what he called us. Why would someone leave a fake letter from Dad?"

"I don't know," Avery repeated. "But we were all there the night it happened. The doctor told us—" She

hesitated. The night their parents were killed had been almost exactly a year ago. A year was enough time for it not to still be so sharp, so cutting, wasn't it? Maybe not. Her eyes stung. She spoke the words she didn't want to say, because she had to. She didn't know what the letter meant, but there was no way it was from their father. "You remember. The doctor told us he couldn't save him. We went to his funeral. Their funeral."

Tilly's jaw was squared. She glared back at Avery, the color now high in her cheeks. "I don't care. I don't care! Who else knows he called you Roo and me Lamb? You don't know everything, A. There's got to be some explanation, and I don't even care what it is. Dad's alive!" She was shouting now. She spun around and stormed up the stairs, her bedroom door slamming loudly seconds later.

In the silent foyer, Avery stared at Aunt Midge. She felt awful. She understood—truly, she did. She wanted their father back as much as Tilly did. This house without William in it was not the same. Even with his sister Midge, fabulous, loving aunt that she was, the house had somehow lost its lightness. William had brought warmth and humor into every room, every conversation. Avery would love to believe he was alive.

"She'll be all right." Aunt Midge spoke quietly. "Leave this with me; let me reach out to some of my people, see if anyone has an inkling how we might find out who created this." She took the letter and carefully folded it, sliding it back into the envelope.

Avery nodded. Midge's "people" were vast and diverse. She had a wide network of friends and acquaintances through her travels and her interest in art and culture. At sixty, Margery Millicent Ayers had lived

many lives, as Avery's father used to say. A whip-smart, fiercely independent woman with boundless energy, Aunt Midge had been married once, years ago, but claimed it was the only thing she was terrible at. She'd always been a fixture in Avery's and Tilly's lives, whether it was whisking them away on an impromptu summer trip to Paris or delivering a massive modern-art piece to their Lilac Grove front porch "for the playroom." After the crash, when Avery had left her roommate Brianna and her little circle of friends in Philadelphia and moved back home for Tilly, Aunt Midge had joined the sisters without batting an eye, knowing without being told that she was needed. Her luxurious Upper East Side Fifth Avenue apartment in the city stood empty now except when they all went in for a play or when Avery stayed overnight to focus on an assignment.

"The warning," Aunt Midge said. "Do you know what it means? What contract?"

Avery shook her head. "Not sure. It could mean anything." It *could* mean today's contract. She didn't say that to Midge; there was no reason to worry her further. Antiquities and Artifacts Appraised, her parents' business that she was still adjusting to running, normally had a couple of contracts in progress at once. She didn't see how authenticating a ruby for Manhattan's antiquities museum could endanger her life; the idea was ridiculous. Maybe the letter meant a job they hadn't yet been contracted on yet? Or maybe the letter meant nothing; maybe it was just a cruel joke.

"Well, be careful. Promise?"

"Promise. Thank you." Avery bent and wrapped her arms around her petite aunt in a brief hug before running out the door. Now she was sure she'd be at least a

few minutes late for her appointment with Goldie at the MOA—the Museum of Antiquities. She glanced back at the house in her rearview mirror before turning out of the long, lilac-lined driveway. Aunt Midge stood near the porch swing outside the large craftsman-style house, one hand raised in a wave, Halston at her side. The gray-and-ecru exterior contrasted beautifully with the lush green lawn and deliciously scented purple lilac bushes. Avery knew Tilly would be fine; she was in good hands.

On autopilot for the drive, Avery's mind dissected what had happened this morning. The letter couldn't be genuine. So, who knew their father's pet names for them? Avery had been Roo since seventh grade, when she'd broken the long jump and high jump records at Lilac Grove's middle school. The nickname had been cemented in the next few years as she continued to break regional and state records, eventually transitioning to track, which had been an even better fit. She still tried to run every day; even a quick few miles was better than nothing. And there was no way she was going to finish well in the marathon this fall if she didn't stay on track with her routine.

Tilly's nickname was tied to her attitude rather than a physical trait. She must have been only three or so when William began calling her Lamb, a bit of a sarcastic nod to her boisterous spirit. Tilly was a dynamic force. She had been her own best advocate since before she could form a full sentence, and she made sure everyone around her knew it. William would scoop her up and cradle her when she was small enough to do so, cooing, "Oh, my little Lamb. If only you'd learn to be assertive." Their mother would laugh, saying, "Good Lord, Bill, don't egg her on!"

Of course, the family all knew about the pet names—William's sister Aunt Midge, Anne's brother Warren, the Ayerses' longtime friend and business partner Micah, their other partner, Sir Robert, and probably Micah's son and Avery's ex-boyfriend Hank. After all, their families spent plenty of time together.

But none of those people had any reason to want Avery to believe her father was still alive. And on top of that, none of them would stand to benefit from forcing her to drop the new assignment with MOA. She hadn't even seen pictures of the potential new acquisition yet, but Goldie had told her the ruby was striking and quite large. She'd hinted that a competing company had been interested in handling the authentication, but she'd chosen Antiquities for this assignment. Goldie had made it clear how highly she'd thought of Avery's parents and of the business as a whole since the museum had begun using them last year.

The business had suffered after William and Anne died. Avery was much more comfortable now in her role as head of the company, but the first few months had been dicey. Her graduate degree in cultural anthropology with an emphasis on gemology made her a perfect fit intellectually, but Avery had big shoes to fill. Micah had been invaluable in showing her the ropes, immediately deferring to her as if she were an extension of her parents. Sir Robert was a bit trickier. She couldn't fault him. Losing the Ayerses had been a terrible blow for all of them.

Antiquities was now finally starting to make enough money to pay the bills again, but they had a long way to go to restore the company's standing in the community. The contract starting today at the MOA could

lead to even bigger things if the jewel was as valuable as Goldie had made it seem. There was no way Avery could drop the assignment. Plus, if she even tried, Sir Robert's head would explode. While Micah was Avery's hands-on partner during projects, Sir Robert handled the finances and marketing. He'd already called her this morning, hyped about the MOA job.

Avery made it to the parking structure with only minutes to spare. Micah had called on her way in, saying the trains were delayed—another reason she was happy to be in control of her own transportation—and he'd have to meet her at the shop later. She had already cleared security and sprinted to the elevator up to the third-floor lab by the time she realized she'd left her bagel in the car, barely touched. She groaned; lunch was hours away. She power-walked the long hallway, hoping Goldie wasn't already there waiting for her. She pushed through the door to find two security guards on their way out and the MOA curator, Goldie, smiling at her.

The moment Avery laid eyes on the brilliant, uniquely cut large red ruby on the long marble counter top in the diagnostics lab, she felt a tingle of anticipation. *Possible ruby*, she corrected herself silently. She wouldn't know for certain until she got to work verifying it.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Goldie Brennan spoke as she watched Avery's reaction.

Avery met Goldie's eyes. "It's gorgeous." She turned the black velvet cloth the jewel was presented on, bending down to examine it more closely with her handheld loupe, a ten-power magnifier. "Where did you say the collector acquired it? Nothing about this is a standard cut. And the transparency is incredible."