

The Queen of Diamonds

“Honey, look.” Annamaria held out her phone for Jarvis to see. The screen lit up the backseat of the taxi as they rode down Park Avenue. She flashed the smile of a parent whose daughter had just landed a double axel. “Andrew Kirtchfield, forty-seven years old, died in his sleep Tuesday morning. He suffered from a recent onset of COPD.” She clicked her tongue. “Wow, he only lasted six weeks.”

“Six weeks?” Jarvis tried to match his wife’s enthusiastic tone. He was horrible at it, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“Need to check, but I think that’s a record for COPD.” She shook her head. “People are getting off too easy these days.”

Jarvis wished he was immune to hearing his wife talk this way. “The man died.”

Annamaria dropped the phone into her purse, but didn’t let go of her smile. “He deserved worse.”

“Did he smoke?”

“How should I know? I only met him once.” Annamaria swatted away his question with the back of her hand. Against the backdrop of her dark skin and hair, her green eyes seemed to shimmer as she leaned forward and stared at the cab’s dashboard. “Driver, how much longer?”

Impossibly stuck in eastside traffic, the heavysset man threw up his hands. “Lady, your guess is as good as mine.”

Annamaria checked her watch, then stared at Jarvis until he did the same. “Isn’t there something you can do? We have reservations.”

The driver motioned toward the stopped cars like a lawyer pointing at evidence. “Even David Copperfield couldn’t make this disappear. Unless you got a laser beam transporter in your purse, it’s gonna be a while.”

Jarvis’s entire body tensed. He reached out and grabbed his wife’s shoulder before she could speak. “It’s okay, really. They’ll seat us when we get there.”

“That’s not the point.”

Jarvis pulled against Annamaria’s momentum as much as he dared. He hoped she couldn’t feel his hand shaking. “This one time, let it go. Okay?”

Annamaria stared at the taxi’s dashboard another second, then allowed Jarvis to pull her back into her seat. She nuzzled against his chest, warming him with the hot flesh of her cheek. “You’re right. Probably not worth it anyway.”

It never was, but that rarely stopped Annamaria. All of Jarvis’s friends thought he’d drawn the queen of diamonds when he married her. The couple appeared to have it all—he a creative director’s position at a Madison Avenue ad firm, she an exciting and lucrative modeling career. They owned a penthouse apartment with stunning views of Central Park. But it was all a lie. Jarvis knew they didn’t deserve any of it. For the last seven years he’d been playing along with Annamaria simply because it was the easiest thing to do. Playing along was also his safest option. But it was dangerous for everyone else.

Annamaria motioned for Jarvis to lean closer, then whispered in his ear. “His name is Jimmy DeFazio. Help me remember.”

“Please. I’m begging you.”

Too late. Annamaria sprang from his chest too quickly for him to stop her. She slipped her hand through the access window and touched her fingers on the driver’s sweaty neck. “Sorry

for being so impatient. I'm sure you're doing your best." She closed her eyes and jerked her head toward the roof once, twice, like a nervous tic, then opened her eyes. "Pancreatic cancer."

The taxi driver stood on the brakes. "What'd you say?"

Jarvis covered his ears and hunched over. He didn't want to hear it, even though he knew the moment had already passed. There was nothing he could do now. Any responsible person would've yanked Annamaria out of the cab two minutes ago, but Jarvis wasn't a responsible person. He was a scared little man.

"Nothing," Annamaria said. "I was just thinking out loud."

Jarvis stared out the floor length window, taking in the vast Manhattan skyline while standing in his boxers. His wife kept the thermostat on its highest setting, and even leaning as close to the glass as he could, his body still glistened with sweat. The city that never slept looked so quiet and peaceful from the thirty-seventh floor. But there was nowhere on this island to hide from the wrath of Annamaria.

She sat on the bed with her knees pointed toward the ceiling, wearing a pink nightgown frilly with lace. Without makeup she looked like a little girl waiting up for her parents to say goodnight. In her lap was that damn notebook, the one she was always scribbling in. "What was the driver's last name again, honey? DeBlasio?"

"DeFazio."

"You tipped him well, right?"

"Sure did."

“Good. He’ll need it.”

Jarvis didn’t dare look at her while she was writing. Seeing her reflection in the window was scary enough. He focused on the nightscape again. Millions of people were out there, most of them good and decent, if maybe a little rude. Others were self-absorbed narcissists who didn’t care how their actions affected their neighbors. Many were parents with children who depended on them for survival. But none of them knew how close they came each day to suffering a long and horrible death—all it took was one terse word, one condescending look, one ill-timed step that somehow encroached on Annamaria’s personal space. They’d never see it coming. She always made a point to come across nicely even as her insides raged at whatever minor injustice she’d seen.

First came the touch, her dark brown skin on theirs, then two quick nods while she conjured the black magic deep inside her, and finally the judgment that spilled from her painted lips. Jarvis had heard it too many times. ALS, poliomyelitis, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, cystic fibrosis—every imaginable debilitating or terminal disease, most of which she’d discovered online. She kept their names like an armory in her head. After each injustice, each perceived slight, Annamaria would dole out revenge on her unsuspecting target. Then she’d run home and record their name and punishment in her notebook. Later she’d check online obituaries, Facebook posts, and #RIP tweets to see how many of her spells had taken effect.

“You silly man.” She hopped off the bed and skipped around the room picking up the trail of clothes Jarvis had dropped on his way to the window. “What am I going to do with my messy sugarbear?”

He was married to the most prolific serial killer in history—one that would never, ever get caught. Jarvis figured she’d killed twenty-five strangers a month for the past seven years.

That made over 2,100 victims since they were married—not counting the ones she sometimes let off with debilitating but non-lethal diseases. There was no smoking gun. Even her notebooks, which she proudly displayed on a bookshelf in their bedroom, couldn't provide enough evidence to convict her. The police would laugh if he brought her in. At most she'd be exposed as a sick and vengeful woman who liked to keep tabs on the misfortune of others. Jarvis, like everyone else, was powerless to stop her. And she'd never stop on her own. The woman enjoyed it too much.

Thwack!

A strap of leather whipped across his back, searing a line of pain into his skin. He fell to his knees. Annamaria glared down at him with her green eyes. His belt dangled from her right hand. In her left was a white business card, pinched between her fingers. She leaned in close, showing it to him.

“Where did you get this?”

She must have pulled it from his shirt pocket. Jarvis's chin trembled when he spoke.

“He's a guy I met on the train.”

“A divorce attorney? Really?”

Jarvis threw his hands up between them. “He wanted to pick my brain about a commercial his firm was shooting. I swear, I was just being polite.”

Thwack!

The belt struck across his bare chest, bringing another wave of stinging pain. The buckle caught him in the ribs. It felt like a cobra bite.

“You're trying to leave me—admit it.”

Annamaria was right, but not about the divorce attorney. He really was just a guy on the train. The lawyer was charming and genuine, the kind of person you'd want as a friend. Talking with the man gave Jarvis the best feeling he'd had in years. It was the first time in forever he could truly relax and connect with someone without worrying if they might accidentally offend his wife.

They hadn't even talked about his marriage. Jarvis could never divorce Annamaria anyway. By the time the papers were ready to sign, he'd be too sick to hold a pen.

But he did want to leave her. Jarvis wanted to hop a plane and fly ten thousand miles to somewhere she'd never find him, someplace her dark fingers couldn't reach.

He looked at her through sheets of tears and forced a smile. "Why would I want to leave you? I'm happy. I'm so happy with you."

Annamaria focused on the card. "Albert Soren, Attorney at Law. Hartford, Connecticut."

"Just a guy on a train."

She placed her belt-hand on her hip. "You know what would happen if you tried."

He knew. Jarvis definitely knew. He was as trapped as a circus lion. "I want a long and healthy life with you by my side."

"That's what I needed to hear." She tucked the card into her nightgown, then smiled like nothing had happened. "Let's go make up."

Jarvis climbed to his feet and let his wife lead him to bed. He watched her place the business card on her nightstand before she pulled back the sheets. After he lay down, she ran her fingertips along the welt she'd branded across his skin.

"Still hurt?"

"Just a little."

She giggled like a teenager. “Didn’t your mother teach you not to take things from strangers?”

“I guess she forgot.”

“That’s okay. I forgive you.” She pulled herself closer, coiling her legs around him like a snake. “Let’s make this fast. I’m taking an early train to Hartford tomorrow.”

Jarvis couldn’t close his eyes all night. Fear and guilt battled nonstop in his mind, rattling swords, striking at his insides, reminding him with every second how much of a coward he’d become. He stared at the notebooks on the shelf, thinking about all the people whose lives Annamaria had cut short. There were too many names to count. Some he knew only as stories she’d tell after returning from modeling trips overseas. He’d tried to argue he wasn’t the bad guy, he wasn’t the one casting hexes and wishing people harm. But day after day he stood by and let it happen. Annamaria viewed him as an equal partner in her little game. And soon the friend he’d made on the train—a person who had no idea someone like Annamaria even existed—would receive a judgment he couldn’t possibly deserve.

No gray area here. Albert Soren’s blood was on Jarvis’s hands. By keeping that business card he’d sealed the poor man’s fate.

The realization caused him to inhale sharply, and his movement made Annamaria stir. He tried to remain still, and even held his breath, hoping to hear her soft purr resume.

Even with his senses in this heightened state, he barely noticed when her fingers caressed the curve of his back. Her touch was feather thin, so light he couldn't tell if it was really her or not.

The mattress shook slightly, then again, each tremor lasting less than a second.

Then, a whisper: *Shingles*

As soon as she spoke he felt the sickness crawling over his skin, walking on legs sharp as needle points, pricking his nerve endings as it charged across his torso. He fought the urge as long as he could, but he was too weak. He shifted onto his back and scratched at his stomach with both hands.

Annamaria lifted her head. "You okay, honey?"

"It's nothing, sweetheart."

The woman couldn't help herself. Anyone who even *breathed* on her applecart needed to be punished. Even Jarvis wasn't immune. This wasn't the first time she'd hexed him, but it was her harshest curse yet. His skin would sting like it was on fire for a month, but at least he'd survive. Albert Soren wouldn't get off that easy.

How much longer could he wait? How many more did Annamaria need to kill before Jarvis finally grew a backbone and stood up to her? They were both going to hell, he just knew it. The only question was which of them deserved it more.

He counted his options as the virus worked its way through his nervous system. Running away would only save himself, and even then he'd spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder. She'd probably become even more deadly without him, feasting on the city's endless supply of mildly-rude residents. His conscience—or what was left of it—wouldn't stand for that. There was no point in reasoning with her. He'd already tried, already been punished enough

times to know not to try again. He couldn't call the cops, or anyone else. He shut his eyes so tightly he could feel his muscles straining. There was only one way to make sure Annamaria never killed again. Sooner or later, Jarvis needed to take a stand.

By six a.m., he'd finally worked up enough courage to sit up in bed and gaze upon his sleeping wife. The skin on her forehead looked smooth and unwrinkled, like she'd never suffered a moment of worry or guilt. Her soft purr had returned. Her pupils danced under her eyelids like she was imagining a fireworks show.

He crawled out from the covers and walked into his closet. The skinny mirror on the door revealed how deeply her curse had penetrated. Red sores dominated every inch of his skin, from his forehead to the tops of his feet. Each one stung like birdshot. No amount of ointment would soothe his pain. His hair was drenched with sweat. He touched his neck with his fingers. Yep, he was running a fever. No wonder he couldn't think straight.

Maybe that was a good thing. He decided to act before his fear returned.

Back in the bedroom, he hopped on the covers and pinned Annamaria under the sheets with his knees. When she opened her eyes, he placed his hands against her shoulders and locked his elbows.

"Jarvis, what are you doing?"

"This has to stop."

“Get off me!” She twisted and jerked under his weight, but he held firm. Drops of sweat fell from the tips of his hair onto her chest. She reacted like they contained acid. “Get off me right now!”

“I’m sorry, but it’s over.” His hands pressed harder against her shoulders, sinking her into the mattress. Her eyes grew wider, like she couldn’t believe he wasn’t following her orders.

She blinked, then pursed her lips. “I’m going to count to three.”

Jarvis let go of her left shoulder. He reached behind his back, then pointed a gun in her face—the gun he kept in his closet in case of an emergency. The gun she’d bought him as an apology for giving him syphilis.

“You can’t be serious.”

“There’s no other way. I’m sorry.”

She reached with her left hand and stuck a finger behind the trigger. “Put this thing away and we’ll talk.”

Jarvis pulled heavy breaths in and out of his nose. Her refusal to take him seriously ignited a fire inside him. “He was just a guy on a train! Why can’t you let it go? Why do you have to be ... such a *bitch*?”

Annamaria bucked her hips wildly, pumped her knees into his back with all her strength, squirmed and twisted her shoulders in a last-ditch effort to wiggle free. Her skin reddened and the veins in her neck swelled. Jarvis kept his balance and held her down, as firmly as he kept the gun aimed at her face.

“Fine.” Annamaria stopped struggling. She closed her eyes then opened them slowly. “Go ahead, I dare you.” She pulled her finger from behind the trigger and rested it on his forearm.

“You’ll never stop.” Tears and sweat dripped from his nose. “I have to do this.”

Annamaria didn’t argue. Instead she lifted her head until her forehead touched the barrel. “Then what are you waiting for?”

He knew she wouldn’t hesitate if the roles were switched, but when he willed himself to squeeze the trigger, his finger wouldn’t cooperate.

She closed her eyes, and a faint smile formed across her lips. Annamaria never looked more beautiful than when she smiled. He opened his mouth to tell her good-bye, but then her head jerked backward. Once, twice.

She opened her eyes. “Myocardial infarction.”

The energy jumped through her fingertips and ran up his arm faster than lightning. Something inside his chest popped, and everything went fuzzy. The gun tumbled to the floor. Her image faded to nothing and all that remained was the rushing sound of blood past his eardrums and the intense pain in his ribcage—a pain so deep he could never touch its source. He reached for his chest, but he couldn’t feel anything. Not anymore.

Annamaria shoved with both hands, and Jarvis’s body toppled over the mattress edge. His head hit the floor with a heavy thump. She leaned closer and checked to make sure. His eyes were still open, but Jarvis was gone.

She climbed out of bed and reached for the card on the nightstand. Time to get moving. She stepped over her husband’s body, skipped into the bathroom, and turned on the shower. It was late, and she had a train to catch.

THE END