

Red Embrace

I shudder as I stare at his maniacal grin, thinking about how I got here and dreading what may happen next. My name is Diane Hananger and I am being held against my will.

Today started off like any other day. I woke up, contemplated whether to have a grapefruit or donut for breakfast, took a shower and got ready for my shift at Bambi's where I have been waiting tables for the last 7 years. The restaurant was busy as usual during the lunch rush. There were a few disgruntled customers – aggravating, but nothing I haven't dealt with a thousand times before.

As I approach my last table of the day, a sigh of relief escapes my mouth. Jim has been coming to Bambi's every Wednesday at the same time, same order, for two months. Although almost twice my age, at 49, he was surprisingly attractive. He was about 6'1" with a slender, yet muscular build, deep, gray – blue eyes, with a look that made you feel like there was a secret that only the two of you shared, black hair with specks of gray and a disarming smile that would make most women melt.

“Hey Di.” Gosh, that smile.... “Hi Jim. Your usual today?”

“You know what? I think I'm going to change it up today. How about the chefs special?”

“Don't you want to hear what it is first?”

“No, I'm feeling adventurous. Today is a special day.” Again with that smile.

“What are you celebrating?”

“I'll tell you later. It's a surprise,” he says. For a moment, I thought I saw a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Alright, I'll get that in for you right away.” I hope he finds my smile equally charming.

I'm not too hard on the eyes myself... not a knockout, but definitely above average. Being only 5'3” I try to run everyday, my mother's words still ringing in my ears. “A few pounds on that frame is like 30 on a regular sized person.” I hated that, how she always talked about me like I was less than human. Growing up, she always kept my hair short, “to keep the boys at bay.” Other than a trim, I haven't had a haircut since I moved out of my mom's house, when I turned 18. My dark brown hair is layered, framing my face and cascades down to the small of my back. One thing I wish I had inherited from my mother was her deep, green eyes. Mine on the other hand, were a rather plain shade of brown. Alright, time to stop thinking about my mother and get the order in.

15 minutes later, Jim's order is ready. He watches me as I walk up to the table. “Here you go, enjoy!” As I carefully put his plate in front of him, he grabs my hand. I freeze. “Di? Come by my place dinner tonight.” What?! Did He really just ask me out? I glance around nervously. “ Uh, s – s ure, I think I might b – be free tonight,” I stutter. I know I should be more cautious, I mean, I barely know him, but I would clean dumpsters with this man if he asked. “7 o'clock, don't be late.” I won't.

After changing my outfit 6 times, I finally settle on a casual knee – length orange summer dress and brown sandals with ankle straps. As I am heading out the door, the phone rings. It's my mom. I forgot about our “mandatory” dinner we have every Wednesday night. “Hello, mom? Sorry, I forgot about dinner... I'm going to have to skip it, I have other plans tonight... how about tomorrow?” “What is more important than your mother? This isn't about a guy, is it?” Busted. “Yes mom, I have a date tonight.” “Don't dress like a whore, no guy wants to marry a slut.” Typical. “I'm 26 mom, I don't think it's any of your business how I'm dressed,” I say, proudly.

“Where is he taking you?” I should just make something up, but being in a good mood, I am especially brave today. “I’m having dinner at his house. I have to go now, bye,” I say, rushing off the phone, before she has a chance to reply. I guess I am not feeling as brave as I thought I was.

I arrive at 8:59. As I walk up to the door of his ranch style house, I notice that his lawn is perfectly landscaped. I knock on the door, quickly trying to think of what to say when he answers. “Di? Doors unlocked, come in.” Deep breath. His place is immaculate. Hardwood floors, black modern furniture, tasteful artwork and white walls. I already feel inferior. I find him seated in the dining room; modern black table, white rug, white walls. The meal he has prepared looks divine. Filet mignon, asparagus and mashed potatoes on a square, white, ceramic plate with a glass of red wine. “The food looks delicious. So...are you going to tell me what you're celebrating today?” He pulls my chair out for me, as I try to gracefully sit down. Hoping that I am holding the glass correctly, I sip the wine. I am more of a beer girl. He stares at me for a moment. Instead of answering my question he says, “You look lovely tonight, by the way.” I blush. He sits at the opposite end of the table. Odd. I hope I didn't offend him. I take a bite of the filet mignon. Mmmm, so good. Another sip of wine. Silence. “Your home is beautiful. Did you decorate it yourself?” What a dumb question. “ Yes, I did. I'm glad that you like it. I want you to feel at home here.” I wonder if he meant that. More silence, wine. I start to feel a little nauseous. “Are you feeling okay, Di?” I'm not, but I lie. “Yes. Is it alright if I use your restroom?” I ask. “Sure, down the hall on the right.” I get about an inch off of my chair when I have to sit down from dizziness. He smiles. Wait... no, it's a smirk. As my vision blurs, I look at his eyes. What is that look?

I slowly enter into consciousness. Everything is so dark. As I look around the room I see a single light hanging from the ceiling. It appears that I am in a basement. When I try to get up, I

realize that I can't move my arms. My arms are tied behind my back and there is a rope tying my legs together. "I see you've woken up." A figure emerges from the shadows. Jim. "Untie me now! This isn't funny!" He just stares at me, watching me struggle against the ropes. "Are you hungry? You didn't eat much of your dinner," he says with a smile. I am suspended in disbelief, not sure what to say or do. He runs his hands on my side, along the curves of my body, causing me to shiver with disgust. "Don't fucking touch me!" "You're right, I shouldn't touch you until I tell you how I feel. A woman of virtue... I like that." He pulls up a chair. "I'm in love with you. Not to sound cliché, but I have loved you from the first moment I first laid eyes on you." He slides off his chair and gets down on one knee and produces a ring. "Di, will you marry me?" Looking at him now, I can't believe that I was ever attracted to him. What I once thought were deep, caring eyes, are now inundated with obsession, his smile that of a crazed jackal about to devour its prey. "What?! I am NOT getting married to you!" I shout. He calmly walks over to me and grabs my face, squeezing my cheeks. "You don't mean that. We were meant for each other. I know you feel it too." Stunned. "Shouldn't we get to know each other first? Why don't you let me out and we can finish our date together?" I ask, hoping that he is not as intelligent as he seems. His eyes narrow as he tightens his grip on my cheeks. "Don't play with me, it's insulting. I can see you need a little more time."

The next two days, he proposed to me when he brought me dinner. Both times I ignored him and the food. He only gave me three bathroom breaks a day. He would untie my legs and lead me to the bathroom with the rope. "Aren't you going to give me some privacy?" I asked. "Now, now, we will be married soon, no need for that level of modesty." I secretly hope that watching me use the bathroom, will turn him off to the point that he would want to let me go. It doesn't. Other than that, I was left alone. I tried screaming, but I guess everything has been sound

proofed, because no one came to my aid and he hasn't come down to stop me. Most of the day I just think about my life, how dumb I am for getting in this situation in the first place. I try to stay away from morbid thoughts, like what it would be like to die... but given the circumstances, that's easier said than done. Another thought strikes my mind. If I am going to die anyway, why didn't I pick the donut instead of the grapefruit? When I think about how important that decision seemed then, I start to laugh. I laugh until I realize I may never again, be able to make those type of trivial decisions. Then I start to cry.

The next day, when he proposed to me, I spit in his face. Rising, he back-hands me across the face. I did not see that coming. Up until now, he hasn't laid a hand on me. I just glare at him, refusing to give him the satisfaction of tears. He is steaming now, all traces of kindness gone from his face. He walks behind me. I feel a sudden pain in my neck before I pass out.

When I come to, at first I am disoriented. I have forgotten about the new hell that I have been thrust into. What I see when I look down startles me into coherence. I am in a wedding dress with white heels and it appears that I am also wearing a veil. My arms and waist are tied to the chair. Jim is sitting in front of me. "This isn't funny! Did you undress me?!" I start to panic when I think of what he may have done to me. "Don't worry. I didn't do anything. I would never defile you like that before our wedding night," he says. "What do you think is going to happen? That we will get married, have a couple of kids and live happily ever after? Is that what you want?" I ask. On the inside I am seething with hatred, but on the outside I smile. "If that is what you want, then fine. I will do whatever you want. I think you will be good to me." He looks me over for a moment, trying to gauge my sincerity. I try to control the look on my face. "I will do it, I'm glad you feel that way, because I would hate to lose you." I guess my acting has improved. He runs his hands through my hair then leans over to kiss me. When his lips touch mine, I involuntarily

shudder. He immediately pushes away from me. “You're lying to me. YOU LIED TO ME!” He jumps up. I wince, thinking he is going to hit me again, but instead he knocks his chair to the ground and starts pacing. “No, I was just nervous, I...” I could see that he wasn't buying it any longer, so I saved my breath. He picks up the chair and sits back down in front of me. “Since you like playing games so much, how about we try another one.” He pulls a quarter from his pocket. “Heads, we get married; tails, we break up.” He flips the coin.

“Looks like I will have to let you go.” Tails. I breath in deeply. Is he really going to let me go? Could it really be this easy? He pulls a knife from his pocket and walks behind me. Again, I panic, until he starts cutting the rope. The ropes drop. I jump up and spin around to face him. Why is he still smirking? “It's a shame... we could have been great together. See you Wednesday?” he says, as if nothing ever happened. Anger fills me as I walk past him towards the stairs. “You will NEVER see me again,” I yell, over my shoulder. “You are right. I won't,” he growls. Running up the stairs. I reel forward. Shaking. What is this pain? I hear his voice, “I said I would let you go. But I never said I would set you free.” When I look back, the knife is gone from his hands. I look down as I am fading out of consciousness. The once white dress, slowly envelopes in a red embrace.

I wake up to a white light. Am I dead? I hear my mom's voice. “Oh my god, your awake! She's awake! Nurse! Nurse!” I look over at my mom but I am too weak to talk. She runs out of the room. She comes back in with a doctor. “Hello Ms. Hananger. Do you know where you are?” That's when I remember him. “Jim... he is going to find me. I have to get away... I have to get away,” I say, feebly, frantically trying to get out of the bed. “It's okay honey, he won't be hurting you anymore.” I hear the words, but I don't comprehend them. I am having trouble breathing now. Dizzy, so dizzy.

It was a week before I found out what really happened. Apparently when I didn't show up to dinner the next day, my mom called my job. When she found out I missed work, she called some of my friends. They told her that I was fine, probably just "having a good time." When I missed work again, she went to the police. They told her she had to wait 48 hours to report me as missing. She told them that was bullshit, and started looking for me on her own. She got Jim's address from a girl that works night's at Bambie's. Apparently, I wasn't the only one he had his eyes on. Fortunately for her, she had a sense that something wasn't right with him and didn't accept his invitation. The next morning my mom went back to the police. When they showed up at Jim's house, he was standing next to his car in the driveway, blood on his shirt and hands. He tried to say he cut himself cooking, when an officer noticed the blood on his trunk. When they told him to open it, he tried to run away. He didn't get very far before they tased him. I am told that I died twice from the time when they found me in the trunk to when I arrived at the hospital. I don't remember anything after I was stabbed in the back and for that, I am grateful.

My mom told me what happened after I was released from the hospital. I was shocked when I found out what my mom did for me. Then she said something I haven't heard her say in 15 years. "I know I don't tell you enough, but... I love you. Please don't ever scare me like that again, I'm getting to old for this shit." We both laugh, our eyes tearing up. Then I realized... even though she may be a bit brash and condescending at times, she has always loved me. I vowed from that day on to never go to a strangers house, to always let someone know exactly where I am going, and most of all, to never miss another Wednesday night dinner.