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# HER SECRET ADMIRER

Retired Assassins - Book Two

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EBONY ROSE



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.  
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## Prologue

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### *Five Weeks before Valentine's Day...*

**T**he stranger sat quietly in his seat, studying the homeless people lining up for their meal. He'd visited this shelter a few times over the past few months, his keen gaze tracking the regulars. There were only a few short weeks left until Valentine's Day, and he was yet to decide on his next victim.

The young woman he'd been watching burst into the room, her determination telling him she was there to work. She took over from one of the harried staff members, a huge smile on her pretty face.

The stranger stiffened, this woman's presence having that delicious effect on him, where his body actually responded to hers.

Her hair was exactly that of his usual preferences, and her build was perfect for what he wanted her for. But still, the stranger wasn't quite convinced. There was something missing from this female, a certain quality that brought her suitability

into question. His Special Valentine needed to stand out, to have something that made him desire her above all others.

Watching as she swiped her sweaty brow, the stranger barely held back a shudder. Why did she have to be such a blue-collar worker?

Many of the homeless people who frequented this shelter talked about this woman as though she were a saint. They'd described her as different, saying that she cared about others less fortunate than herself. At first, the stranger had been drawn to the concept of such a magnanimous human being, one who fit his criteria as being different. Now all he could see was another inconsequential female, working her perpetual nine to five job, while struggling to make ends meet.

He continued to watch her for a few more minutes, eventually becoming bored with her meaningless chatter and repetitive activity. He'd been wrong to seek out his next victim, wasting his time over the last precious months surveilling her.

Breathing out a frustrated sigh, the stranger eventually stood. He still had a few weeks before Valentine's Day, and that gave him enough time to find a suitable candidate.

With his interest in the owner now diminished, the stranger pushed his way past the other clients, intent on leaving the shelter. He'd been wrong to believe this nondescript woman could ever fit into his plan. Now he had to find someone else, his mind already fixating on his other potential victims. It wasn't until the stranger was almost out the door, that his attention was caught by a commotion from behind the servery.

"Are you serious?" the owner said, her loud voice sending shivers all over the stranger's skin. When he stopped to turn back and stare at her, he was frozen to the spot by the coy smile splitting her face. Her reaction was so unexpected that he stood there for a moment, transfixed. When her hands flew up in mock surprise, he growled low in his throat. With a

twinkle in her eye, the woman flipped off her colleague, kissing her middle digit before waving it in a sassy salute.

The immediate zing of sensation that pierced the stranger's groin had his entire body filling with heat. Ignoring the bustle of homeless people pushing past him, the stranger stared at the woman, his gaze on fire as he felt all of the pieces fall into place.

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## Chapter 1

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**E**lsie finished packing her belongings, then she locked up for the day and headed down to her car. At this late hour, she could still hear the sound of crashing waves, her car parked not too far from the foreshore. She had always loved this time of night, when her hometown of Black Rock was asleep and all she could perceive was the balmy evening air and relaxing foreshore.

Elsie hummed to herself, navigating the slightly rocky terrain as she made her way toward her car, her large holdall balanced over one slim shoulder. As she walked, she found her mind wandering back over the busy week, the upcoming weekend bringing thoughts of her absent friend, Paige. Paige and Elijah were currently on vacation, the young coffee shop owner living her best life with her extremely hot new boyfriend, Elijah.

Elsie sighed longingly, finding her car keys and hitting the release button for her car. She wished she had a drool-worthy boyfriend who whisked her off to the Maldives for their first-year anniversary! Instead, Elsie had a struggling homeless

shelter to look after and a lonely apartment, no hot new men on her horizon!

When she arrived at her car, she walked around to the passenger side, opening the door and tossing her bag onto the empty seat. It really was an effort carrying around these huge ledgers all day, especially when her costs were going to be exponentially larger soon.

Elsie thought about the millions Paige was donating to the shelter, wondering if she shouldn't just bite the bullet and buy a laptop to help her manage the business. Once Paige's donation cleared its red tape, Elsie knew she would be doing a lot more work, balancing her books.

It wasn't until Elsie had slammed the door shut to the passenger side, that she spied the piece of paper wedged under her windshield. Cocking her head to one side, she walked over to the front of the car, eyeing the note. It didn't look like any sort of promotional flyer, and as a rule, no one left Elsie notes on her car. *Maybe it's someone's insurance details?* she wondered, giving her car a cursory glance. There didn't seem to be any damage, which was a relief.

Shrugging, Elsie plucked up the small note, opening it curiously. Her neutral expression morphed into one of horror as she read the message.

"Dear God," Elsie whispered, her hands trembling so violently that she dropped it, the soft white parchments floating to the ground just as the colour drained out of her face.

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Pal crouched down to peer into his pantry. He didn't seem to have anything too appetising in there for dinner. Since his best friend, Elijah, had taken up with the local coffee shop owner,

Pal had become spoilt for choice where his meals were concerned.

Paige Turner was one of the best cooks Pal had ever met, and since she'd started cooking for him on a regular basis, Pal had stopped making much of an effort with his food.

Settling on a can of beef and barley soup, Pal ignored the disappointment he felt and focused on opening the can. Maybe next time, he'd buy some of those frozen dinners, at least that way he wouldn't have any dishes to do after his meal.

Pal sighed, emptying the contents into a small saucepan, then turned on the burner to heat up the brown liquid. The colour sort of looked like beef, right?

Once the soup was steaming hot, Pal carried it over to the kitchen bench. It didn't smell too good, but what the hell, it wasn't as if he was going to get much nicer, at least not without Paige and her expert cooking. Grabbing his cell phone as he ate, Pal scanned his unread messages, opening them without interest.

There were two messages from Elijah, which were basically the man checking in, one from Andre, who must be working overseas at the moment, and one from an unknown number.

Pal tapped on the last message, and an electric current zinged through his body as he read the text.

Unknown Number: *Pal, I need your help. Please don't ignore my message. Elijah and Paige are away, and I don't know who else to turn to. This is Elsie.*

Pal stared at the random message, his gut twisting with a mixture of excitement and dread. Elsie must be in some sort of trouble if she'd bothered to contact him, since he knew he was the last person she'd ever ask for help. Still, it must be important if she wasn't waiting for Paige and Elijah to be home.

Pal: *Elsie, this is Pal. Is everything okay?*



Pal waited impatiently for Elsie's reply, wondering if he should just call her instead. He'd known Elsie for almost a year now, since Elijah had become involved with her best friend. Pal had known from the first moment he'd set eyes on Elsie, the sexy blond was off limits to him. Which, of course, hadn't stopped him from acting recklessly the first time he'd been alone with her. In short, Pal had basically fucked things up with Elsie, and now the woman avoided him at all costs.

The ding of his phone alerted him to her text, drawing his attention away from the unwanted memory.

Elsie: *I don't know if this is a joke, but I got a weird letter on my car tonight and it's kind of freaked me out. Are you able to take a look at it?*

Pal: *Can you take a photo of the letter and send it to me?*

A photo popped up on his screen, and Pal wasted no time opening it. He read the message carefully, his blood turning from red hot, to ice-cold.

*To my dearest Elsie,*

*It has taken me some time, but I have finally found you. Your blonde hair will look beautiful soaked with your blood, and that luscious body will soon bear the marks of my knife patterned across its skin. I plan to worship you slowly and painfully, our time together made unforgettable.*

*I will soon have you, my dearest Elsie, and you will know exactly how important you are to me.*

*Love, your Special Valentine.*

Pal read the letter again, shooting off another text to Elsie with his heart in his throat.

Pal: *Where are you right now?*

Elsie: *I'm home.*

Pal: *Lock all of the doors and windows and wait for me. I'll be there in fifteen minutes.*

Pal didn't wait for her reply, simply grabbed his keys and jogged out the front door, making his way to his waiting vehicle.

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Elsie tried to swallow against the bile burning in her throat. Her stomach was churning with a mixture of fear and dread, her nerves completely frayed. She'd done as Pal had suggested, locking her home, before sitting on her couch to wait for him, a glass of wine clutched firmly in hand. It had taken a lot of time to talk herself into contacting Pal, since he wasn't her favourite person.

But in the end, Elsie had feared the note more than she hated the hot as fuck ex-assassin, so she'd texted Pal's number.

The sound of a car pulling up in front of her apartment had Elsie shuddering again, her heart constricting with fear. What if it wasn't Pal? He'd said he would be here in fifteen minutes, which was still five minutes away! Elsie glanced at the time on her watch, hoping that Pal had just driven here *really* fast.

When her phone pinged with a new message, Elsie almost dropped her glass. Pal was waiting outside her home, his message telling her to open the door and let him in.

Elsie quickly unlocked the front door and searched for Pal, her body trembling. He appeared in her doorway, and she felt such a rush of emotion, she threw her arms around him, her body sagging against him in relief.

"It's okay; I'm here," Pal crooned, holding her close. He was so big, his strong frame pulling her into a tight hug, while he murmured words of comfort in her hair.

Elsie knew she was being ridiculous, but she couldn't stop

the sob that escaped her. She pushed her cheek against Pal's hard chest, absorbing his strength until she finally felt safe. After a minute or so, she pulled back, her errant thoughts focusing as she remembered how much she hated this man, even though she'd been forced to contact him.

"So, what am I supposed to do about this fucking creepy letter on my windshield?" she asked, not bothering with pleasantries.

Pal grunted, turning to shut the door and lock it before he answered. "First things first, where is this letter?"

Elsie strode over to the kitchen where her handbag sat, opening it and pulling out the note.

"Wait," Pal called, carefully reaching for her hand. "Best not to get any more prints on it, not until the tech can analyse the letter and let us know his findings."

Elsie ground her teeth, nodding and stepping back, letting the letter fall back onto the bag. Pal found a small plastic bag in her kitchen drawer, using it to cover his hand. He pulled the note from her bag and covered it at the same time with the thin plastic. Elsie couldn't even look at the letter as Pal collected it.

Bile rose in her throat again, and Elsie turned away, her whole body shuddering at the memory of the horrific words.

"I think we should ring the police," Pal said, his voice calm.

Elsie could feel her eyes widen, turning to meet Pal's gaze with an angry one of her own. "Well, excuse me if I don't agree with you," she bit out. "I don't have much faith in the police department, not since one of their detectives tried to kidnap and murder my best friend."

Pal rolled his eyes, his expression exasperated. "What happened to Paige was a one off; not all cops are dirty. That guy was just bad news. You can't judge everyone on the force by the actions of one bad egg."

"Bad egg?" Elsie shrieked, her mouth gaping. "I don't think kidnapping and attempted murder are actions that constitute a 'bad egg'. Either way, I don't plan on letting the police invade my life and take away my freedom, not when some weirdo just wants to leave me a scary message."

Pal sighed in frustration, causing heat to rise in Elsie's cheeks. "Look, babe, that note was not just some random crazy person, leaving you an offensive message. I've dealt with my fair share of psychopaths before, and believe me, this is a serious threat. This guy knows who you are, which car you drive, and where you work. He wants to hurt you, and if you don't get yourself protection soon, he'll find a way to get to you."

Elsie stared at Pal, her expression dumbfounded. She knew she couldn't just ignore a threat to her life, but she also wasn't prepared to hide away until the police tracked this guy down.

"Okay, fine," she conceded, her voice still short. "I'll agree to have protection."

Pal nodded, satisfied, retrieving his phone to dial emergency services. When Elsie reached out and snatched it from his hand, Pal glanced up, annoyed. "What the hell?" he demanded, staring daggers at Elsie. God, but she had a way of getting under his skin!

"I said I'd agree to protection, not that I wanted the police to protect me," Elsie explained, her expression mutinous.

"And who exactly do you expect to protect you?" Pal grumbled, his gut twisting with dread.

"Why, you, of course," Elsie replied with a triumphant expression. "You said I need protection, so you can protect me."

"I don't know how to break this to you, babe," Pal said, his voice derisive. "But I don't think you can afford me."

"Oh, really? Well, I guess my only option then is to ask

Elijah to come home early and protect me," Elsie replied, her voice saccharine sweet.

Pal's expression tightened, his anger barely under control. This woman didn't play fair, but Pal knew better than to be surprised by that. He'd known from their first meeting that Elsie Burns was a bratty girl, used to getting whatever she wanted.

"Sorry, sweetheart, try again. Elijah is on vacation in the Maldives, and he isn't contactable by phone."

Elsie smirked, and Pal felt his confidence fade. She looked as though she had him exactly where she wanted him, which wasn't anywhere Pal wanted to be. God, he hated manipulative women, so why did he find her so fucking hot?

"Ah, but if I email Paige and tell her what's happened, she and Elijah will come home and take care of me," Elsie said calmly, retrieving her mobile to do just that.

Pal snatched her phone away, his voice a snarl. "You can't interrupt their lives, just because you need something."

Elsie glared up at Pal, her expression unforgiving.

Pal stared back, refusing to back down.

"Look, I don't like you, and you don't like me. Believe me, if I had another option, I'd take it," Elsie ground out, flipping her hair in a careless gesture.

Pal continued to stare, wanting to refuse. Unfortunately, he had no other options, and Elsie knew it. Eventually, he sighed, tossing her phone back to her in defeat.

"Fine," he barked, "I'll protect you."

Elsie grinned, turning on her heel to head back into the kitchen.

"Fuck my life," Pal grumbled, annoyed.

"I'm not happy about it, either. But until Elijah gets back, it's just the two of us," Elsie tossed over her shoulder.

Pal ground his teeth together, his fingers scrolling through his daily schedule. He may not want to do this, but he sure as hell wouldn't let her fuck up Elijah's first holiday with Paige.

"And what exactly am I supposed to do all day?" Elsie demanded, her bratty face screwed up in an annoyed grimace. "Do I just drop all of my responsibilities? What if it takes ages before the guy is caught?"

"Maybe we will catch him before Elijah and Paige return, then no one has to know about the threat against you," Pal murmured, although he could tell Elsie didn't believe him.

"And if this situation goes on for longer than two weeks?" she asked, watching Pal grunt with frustration.

"Listen, babe, you're the one forcing me into this because you won't go to the cops. Stop bitching about how long it's going to take and start learning how to cooperate."

Elsie bared her teeth at Pal. "Elijah can't get home soon enough!" she said.

Pal simply nodded in agreement. He wanted his boss home as soon as possible, but his friend deserved a break.

"Well, first things first. I'll send this letter to a friend of mine at the lab and ask him to take a look at it for us. Chances are they will find something we can use to catch this guy."

Elsie eyed him suspiciously, before nodding. "So what do you need me to do?" she asked, her voice slightly shaky.

"You'll have to come to the lab with me tomorrow morning, so they can take your fingerprints. I'll put a rush on the results, so we get something the following day."

Elsie nodded again, draining her wine glass in one sip. "Okay, fine. I'll meet you at the lab tomorrow and—"

"Sorry, babe, no can do. Did you miss the part when I said you needed protection? If this guy knows your name, then chances are he knows where you live. I'm gonna have to stay here tonight and take you with me tomorrow."

Elsie did a double take, her eyes going wide. She knew the

letter was serious, but to have Pal stay here overnight? That was insane.

"No way," Elsie said, panic tightening her chest. There was no way she would sleep through the night knowing Pal was sleeping only feet away from her.

"No way?" Pal questioned, his brows drawing together. "What part of 'I plan to worship you slowly and painfully for days' don't you understand?"

Elsie barely suppressed a shudder, hating him. "Of course, I understand the risk. I just don't want you in my home for longer than necessary," she replied, noticing the flare of anger in Pal's whiskey gaze. Rolling her eyes at him, she crossed her arms over her chest. "Fine, I'll let you stay here and watch over me, but don't expect me to like it."

"I'm pretty sure neither of us is going to enjoy this," Pal grunted, his voice a low rumble. "That being said, I'm going to be sleeping in this house until this shit blows over, so you'd better learn to play nice."

Elsie gave Pal a withering look, walking off to collect his bed linens. Soon, she returned with fresh sheets and a blanket.

"You're going to have to sleep on the couch," Elsie said, dropping the bedding onto the cushions. "My spare room has been converted to an office, so I don't have anywhere else for you to stay."

Pal allowed his gaze to travel over the three-seater couch in her lounge room, nodding with satisfaction. He'd slept in far worse conditions during his service, so bunking down on a soft couch was scarcely a hardship.

"Fine, I'll just do a perimeter check, then I'll grab something to eat and get to sleep. Do you have any spare keys to your apartment? It will be easier if I can let myself in when I'm done."

Elsie collected a set of keys from her hallstand, tossing them at Pal.

"Okay, I'll head out now to do my checks. You can go off to bed if you like."

Elsie huffed out a breath, then made her way to her bedroom. Her mind was already on a hot shower, wanting to wash away the events of the past few hours.

"Help yourself to anything in the fridge," she said over her shoulder.

"Thanks, babe," Pal replied, his grin widening when Elsie's shoulders stiffened, right before she entered her bedroom.

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Pal kept up a slow jog around the apartment complex, his perimeter search completed without incident. Whoever this person was, he obviously wanted to provoke as much fear in Elsie as possible.

He reached the front door to Elsie's apartment, opening it and letting himself in before re-locking the dead bolt. Elsie's security was pretty low key, her home not really equipped to keep out a serious stalker. He knew he had to increase it as a matter of urgency; otherwise he would have no choice but to move Elsie into his own home.

A twist of sensation hit his stomach at the idea of having Elsie in his home, and it was not entirely unpleasant. Pal ignored the feeling and focused his attention on his hunger instead. He hadn't had the chance to eat dinner tonight, and it had been hours since he'd last had a few bites of the soup.

He made his way to Elsie's kitchen, opening the refrigerator in search of food. Unlike his own meagre supplies, Elsie had a veritable feast stacked inside her fridge. There were so many leftovers, he didn't know where to start, his stomach growling at the delicious morsels stacked inside.

Eventually, he settled on a large bowl of scallop mornay,



adding garlic bread and roasted peppers to the plate, before shoving the whole thing into the microwave.

With his meal heating up, he returned to the lounge to set up his bed, tucking the sheets in as best he could. He'd just gone back to retrieve a glass of wine when the microwave dinged, announcing his meal.

"Oh my God," Pal groaned, his eyes closing on the first fork full of food that hit his tongue. If he hadn't noticed the amount of leftovers in Elsie's fridge, he'd have questioned who'd cooked the amazing food he was eating now.

"God, this is good," he growled appreciatively, loading up his fork for another serving of the cheesy seafood dish.

"Is everything okay?" Elsie called out from the hallway, making him jump. He'd forgotten how small her apartment was, and he had been pretty loud, groaning over her food.

"All good," he called back, shovelling another mouthful of food into his mouth just as Elsie stuck her head around the corner. He froze, his eyes locked on the loose towel wrapped around her body as she stared at him with concern.

"Oh, you're eating," she sighed, her panic receding. "I could hear you making noise and I thought something had happened," she explained, oblivious to Pal's heated gaze.

Chewing slowly, Pal swallowed his food, his whiskey-coloured gaze on fire. "I was enjoying your cooking," he murmured slowly, his voice dropping to a low growl.

Elsie eyed him closely, then nodded, a strand of blonde hair falling loose from her bun. "Okay, well, enjoy," she said, turning away to retreat to her room.

Pal stared at the spot where Elsie had been, his cock rock hard from the sight of her almost naked body. "Fuck my life," he groaned softly, lowering his hand to adjust his massive erection. How the fuck was he supposed to sleep now?