



The Red Diary Preview

"You're empty. Let me get you another." His fingers covered hers on the stem of the wine glass.

She let go, leaving it in his possession. "No thanks. I have to drive."

Chad tilted his head and flashed a perfect pick-up smile. The blond, tan lifeguard was God's gift to women, but his gaze held a hint of used car salesman and his touch felt too familiar. "I'd be happy to take you home. What are you drinking?"

Now that Lauren thought about it, *everything* about this night seemed too familiar, yet she forced herself to smile back anyway. "Nothing. I'm drinking nothing. Thanks, but excuse me."

It was time to go, before her own life swallowed her whole.

In the next room, her best friend, Carolyn Kraus, swayed to a seductive song as a man's hands roamed her slender curves from behind. Carolyn's auburn hair fell about her face when she turned her head to welcome his slow, rhythmic kiss, and Lauren's chest tightened. Then her gaze narrowed on the low V-cut of Carolyn's fitted velvet pants, where three blue dolphins swam in a

circle around her belly button. Lauren had heard at least a dozen men say it was the sexiest tattoo they'd ever seen.

She'd been tempted to get a tattoo of her own - before remembering she thought sexiness came from the inside and that she didn't necessarily want to be sexy for the whole world anyway. She didn't want to be sexy for the countless Chads who flitted in and out of her life. And because the Chads seemed to be the *only* men who entered her life, she supposed she didn't really want to be sexy for anyone.

Carolyn's dance partner was another blond surfer type, this one sporting a ponytail and a swarthy I-live-in-the-sun complexion. Lauren watched, along with everyone else, as one of his bronzed hands skimmed Carolyn's breast. The other flirted with the V of her pants.

Lauren turned abruptly - she'd intended to say goodbye to Carolyn, but now abandoned the idea. She nearly collided with a handsome guy in a business suit, his tie undone. His eyes glimmered a bit too much, especially when his hand closed around her wrist. "Wanna dance?"

"No thanks," she said firmly, pulling away. Stopping in the front room to retrieve her purse from beneath a couple making out on the couch, she made a beeline for the door and didn't look back. This was her life. And she hated it.

Poor little rich girl. She smiled wryly to herself, dismayed at how very well she embodied that particular concept. *Great, I've become a cliché.* But that didn't change the fact that money couldn't buy happiness.

Moments later, she sat behind the wheel of her silver Z4, the headlights carving a path through the darkness on a road that edged the Gulf Coast. The Sun Coast, tourists called the shore that ran from north of Clearwater Beach down past St. Petersburg, but right now all Lauren could see was a bright sliver of moon, and the taillights of the car in front of her, preventing her from going as fast as she wanted. Still, the fresh salt air cooled her face, and the breeze whipping through her hair delivered a sense of freedom. At least for right now she was free of her life, free of the night.

No more parties with Carolyn, she lectured herself.

Of course, she made this vow all the time, but Carolyn always prodded her. "It'll be fun. What better do you have to do, sit behind that desk and work all night?" Carolyn was her best friend, but over the years they'd grown so different from each other.

There were two kinds of women: those who could have meaningless sex with countless men and consider it casual fun, and those who could not. Carolyn could, and Lauren supposed it was

probably nice to be so free, so much like a guy - but it also embarrassed her when people assumed best friends had *everything* in common.

Lauren definitively fell into the 'could not' group. She'd slept with only three guys in her twenty-seven years - each of whom she'd been in love with, and each of whom had left her heartbroken. Add to that a number of other relationships that had ended painfully, even without sex involved, and slowly but surely, she was getting wiser. Every time another guy with sexy eyes and a seductive smile crushed her heart a little flatter, she understood the injustices of life and love a bit more. In those moments, she *longed* to be like Carolyn, *longed* to have the ability to separate sex and emotion - but her soul wouldn't let her. One kiss was all it ever took. Either it felt wrong and she knew immediately that nothing more could happen, or it felt so deliciously right she'd be lost to the guy, that quickly, with no hope of coming back up for air - until it was over.

Turning left off the bridge that led from Sand Key to Clearwater Beach, she shifted her gaze from the dark, sparkling water to the couples and families dotting the sidewalks beneath the streetlamps. A summer evening on the south end of Clearwater Beach meant ice cream cones and hand-holding. Watching made her lonely.

Exiting the roundabout onto the causeway, she pressed down on the gas for that blessed sense of freedom again and the warm tropical wind enveloped her. *No more parties with Carolyn*, she repeated inside. *No more of these hungry-eyed guys who think if you wear form-fitting clothing you're ready to play mattress tag*. She meant it. She was done dealing with these jerks, once and for all.

Yet it would be hard to escape, because it wasn't just Carolyn's crowd who made her feel so awkward and sensitive. Lauren's own father dated women her age and expected her to think it was normal. And although she and her dad never discussed sex (thank God), if she asked him, he'd probably guess she slept around a lot and would think that was normal, too. And she might be able to stop going to parties with Carolyn, but what about her father's business parties? Or the parties his partner, Phil, constantly threw? As a high-ranking employee at Ash Builders, she had certain obligations, whether she liked it or not. Her life was one big pseudo-Hollywood bash.

After taking a left through downtown Clearwater, she soon traveled the palm-lined boulevard that would lead her home, the bay once again shimmering in the dark alongside the road. Closing the garage door behind her minutes later, she entered the house to find Isadora stretched across her pink velvet pillow on the white sofa. "Hey, Izzy," she cooed, reaching down to scratch the snowy Angora under her chin. But Isadora only shifted in sleep, seeming to say, *Leave me alone*. So she couldn't even depend on her own cat to keep her company in her time of need. "Well, pooh on you."

Glad to be in the cozy safety of her own home, she headed upstairs, then quickly showered off the smell of smoke. After combing through her wet hair, she slipped into a jade green chemise that suddenly struck her as far too alluring for a woman sleeping alone, but she liked the feel of silk next to her skin.

Venturing to her office, she settled in the soft leather chair behind her desk, checked her e-mail, then turned off the computer, glad no big accounting crises had arisen at Ash Builders since that afternoon. She was just about to flick off the lamp when she caught a glimpse of a satiny red book peeking from between a corporate report and a ten-pound dictionary on her bookshelf across the room.

It was her sex journal.

Not that she'd *had* sex in awhile - in fact, it had been two years since she'd broken up with Daniel, the last man she'd made love to. Maybe that was why she *needed* a sex journal.

She kept it in her office to prevent any prying eyes, like Carolyn's, from curiously snatching it up to see what was inside. The office was her own private domain; rarely did the need occur for anyone but her to be in the room.

Although she normally thought the book blended better with its surroundings - tonight, for some reason, the red spine leapt out at her.

She chuckled cynically and shook her head. If people only knew; the irony was too rich. The girl they assumed was a bad girl was really a good girl, but the good girl had a dark side. A side no one else saw. A side that wished she could be like Carolyn - almost.

Yet she needed so much more than Carolyn when it came to sex. She needed the *after* part. Without it, the rest was nothing.

She recorded her sexual fantasies in the red book, though she hardly knew why. Moments like this, when the idea of sex practically repulsed her, writing down her fantasies felt almost dirty, immature.

But maybe it was just a reminder that she *had* fantasies, that she was a healthy, red-blooded woman, not just this person who ran from every sexual situation she encountered lately.

Or maybe it was because she dreamed of finding a man who could make every word she wrote feel good and right, instead of merely risqué.

Sighing, she padded to the shelf and reached for the book. She didn't open it, merely ran her hand over the smooth cover. The deepest, darkest part of her heart lay hidden in this book, her most intimate desires. It was the one secret she kept from the entire world; not another living soul knew about it.

Maybe *that* was why she had the journal, she thought. Because no one else knew. Maybe she just needed to acknowledge that this part of her existed.

Returning the book to its place, Lauren turned off the lamp and headed for bed, still feeling quite alone in a world where people probably thought she had it all.

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Nick simultaneously checked the clock on his dashboard, shoved the last bite of a cruller into his mouth, and flipped on his turn signal. After swinging his van onto Bayview, he washed down the cruller with the final drink of orange juice from the carton he'd grabbed at the 7-11. The Stone Temple Pilots sang "Sour Girl" on his radio, turned down low; he generally liked his music loud, but not this early in the morning. He figured subtle changes like that were the first signs of getting old. At thirty-two, some days he felt all of nineteen, and other days he felt more like a man approaching seventy. Today, he sensed both ends of the spectrum encroaching.

After leaving the mansion-lined boulevard that ran along the bay, the air coming through his open window changed, thickened. It got hot early this time of year. But if he was honest, that probably wasn't the only reason he was starting to sweat a little.

Something tightened in his chest when the Ash mansion came into view. Henry's house. He'd hadn't seen the man up close in twenty years and had barely known him then, but that was how he thought of him, as Henry.

Lauren Ash's house set next door to Henry's, on what Nick thought of as the Ash Estate. It wasn't as opulent as her father's, but five times larger than any home his family had ever lived in, a scaled down version of her father's Greek temple stucco. He recalled hearing the story from other crew workers a few years back - she'd decided she wanted a place of her own, so Daddy had built his little princess her own mini-mansion complete with a small fountain in front. He grimaced, realizing his own sense of size was getting distorted. The fountain was small compared to the one in front of Henry's place, but it would do any city park proud.

The van's brakes squeaked lightly as he slowed to a stop before her house, separated from Henry's colossal palace by a large stucco wall. They'd saved a couple of enormous live oaks in front when they'd built, then sprinkled the yard with a few palm and banana trees, adding color with tall snapdragons and bougainvillea.

He couldn't help thinking it was the type of house Davy would notice - the same way Davy would notice a palm tree that had been bent by hurricane winds or a pelican diving for fish in the ocean. They were things Nick often no longer saw. Davy, though, still saw everything.

Well, Nick thought as he pulled into her pale brick driveway, he hoped the Princess of Ash Builders was awake. He knew she worked at home and probably slept in, but *he* started work at seven and didn't change his schedule for anyone, not even the boss's daughter.

This was just another job, so he wasn't sure why he suddenly felt twisted up inside. Although when the opportunity to work at the princess's house had presented itself, he'd accepted it while remembering all the Ash family had taken from *his* family. Maybe the truth was that he wanted, even *needed*, to look inside her world. He needed to see what could've been his, should've been his. What should've also been Davy's and Elaine's.

Just another job. Right.

Perhaps such immature aches were what had him feeling nineteen this morning, yet the old man inside him couldn't let it go. He'd seen too much and felt too much and knew how unfair the world could be.

In ways, life was mostly settled for his family now, but scars had a way of opening up sometimes when you least expected it. And when he thought of the Ash family, an all too familiar fire gathered in his gut. It was the same fire that had forced him to take up for Davy in the schoolyard when they were young, the same that had welled in him when his father would belittle Elaine, the same that had taught Nick to use his fists.

It was a more *controlled* fire, now, though - he'd worked hard *learning* to control it. So it was time to put those old feelings away and do what he'd come here to do. Paint her house. That was all. Well, and maybe look at her life a little. Just to see what his life would have been like.

No big deal, he told himself.

Yet somehow he couldn't extinguish the slow burn inside him when he realized he was standing on the doorstep of the future he'd lost.

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