

Black Satin Confessions Revenge Anthology

Empress LaBlaQue

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Black Satin Confessions

Revenge Anthology

Book One

By

Empress LaBlaQue



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Black Satin Confessions

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She

Chapter One

Outside, the well manicured garden had succumbed to winter's wrath. The marble statues were imposing as frost bitten foliage withered around them. Though I was deep in thought, I heard Ezra's footsteps as they padded gallantly behind me. He placed his arms around my narrow waist and kissed the top of my ear. "Good morning, Lyria," he whispered. "What's so interesting outside?"

Never breaking my gaze, I tightened the sash on my robe, and released a long sigh. "Nothing in particular." My continual gaze swept across the frozen garden.

After giving me a strong caress, Ezra placed his face beside mine, and then mirrored my gaze. "Pretty hard freeze last night, huh?"

"Yes, it was." To capture the brightness of the January sun, I parted the drapes even more. Though the sun's rays were muted, its warmth was causing the frost to melt.

Ezra lowered his face to nuzzle his low growth against my temple. "We've

been married for two years, Lyria. I know my wife pretty well. Something is wrong.”

Reaching above me, I cradled his face while it rested against my hair. “I don’t know, Ezra. I’m just not feeling this event.”

Ezra raised his face from its perch. “Why aren’t you in a state of jubilation?” He kissed the top of my head. I closed my eyes and reveled in his tenderness. “Your second book is coming alive on the big screen, yet you’ve toned-down that accomplishment.” On hearing his concerns I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. “I don’t understand all the misery you seem to be feeling.”

Finally, Ezra grasped my shoulders and turned me around. To avoid his stare, I cast my eyes toward the floor. “I don’t know Ezra. I just don’t feel like celebrating, this time.”

Shaking me gently Ezra acknowledged, “You’re Lyria Grayson, the famous author. Not everyone can say their book has been turned into a movie. Victorian Dreams is still pulling down millions. Now, your other book has also been selected.” He kissed my forehead. “You should be elated. Please tell me what’s wrong.”

As if a chill passed over me I stroked my shoulders. Sensing my shiver, Ezra’s strong hands passed over mine. “There’s something I need to do, Ezra.”

“What—Lyria? What has you so unhappy?” Concern changed his baritone

voice to a strained whisper. “Since you heard the great news, you’ve been awfully quiet. Something is on your mind and I know it.”

Ezra pulled me into his bare chest, wrapped his arms around me, and then stroked my hair. While resting my face against his skin, I noticed his muscle definition was strong and impressive. With a towel draped around his waist, his freshly showered body smelled clean and looked inviting.

He continued to stroke my hair. His voice echoed deep in his chest. “Look around you Lyria. All of this is yours. This massive two story home has six bedrooms, three living areas, a ballroom, a surround sound, state-of-the-arts media room, and an Olympic sized pool.”

Ezra turned me toward the window and pointed toward the garage. “Look out there. That white limo is yours. You have four other vehicles which point north, south, east and west. Your life has been a rags to riches story. There’s nothing you can’t have.” Ezra shook me gently. “Please tell me what’s going on. Saturday night, your movie will debut. Afterwards, there’s an enormous formal celebration. Everyone has worked hard, Lyria. Now, they’re ready to rejoice with you.”

He turned my chin so our eyes would meet. “What more do you want?”

I took in Ezra’s rich brown eyes, and then I noticed that his dark blonde hair was still wet. The hairs on his unshaven face seemed coarse and bristly. “I need one

more thing,” I said, my voice trembling.

“It’s Mark isn’t it? I told you to get another publicist years ago. What did he do this time? I swear I’ll fire his ass.”

To halt Ezra’s tirade I confessed quickly. “It isn’t Mark, Ezra.”

“Then you’re thinking about Aaron again. Am I right?”

“Um, yes.” I wrung my hands. “I must face my fears.”

After hearing my admission, he calmed his voice. “Sweetie-sweetie, just look at you. You’re shaking all over. Aaron is in your past. I know he abused you terribly, but you came out victorious.”

“You don’t understand,” I replied, dismissing his sound advice.

“Yes, I do.” He lifted my chin and our eyes met. “I’m not taking Aaron’s deeds lightly.” Ezra’s voice softened and compassion filled his eyes. “But, burning down that old house in Brighton is hardly the revenge you seek.”

I raised a brow, and placed my hand on his. “It will make *me* feel better.”

“Lyria. Although we’ve been married for years, I’ve spent countless hours trying to mend the broken heart of a battered woman. What more can I do?”

“Let me go home and burn my past.”

“Honey.” He cast his eyes about the room. “Your past made you the woman you are today—the woman I love unconditionally. Like the phoenix, you rose from the ashes and defeated the odds.” His shoulders swaggered with a defeated

motion. “Yet, you’re still clinging to the hurt and pain. Stop it, Lyria—just stop it.”

My brows knitted a frown. “Okay, Ezra. I’ll do that, just for you.”

“Atta girl. Now I know what happen last night.” Shrugging sheepishly, I realized my husband had sensed my mental absence in the sheets. “It was like making love to an underpaid hooker. No frills or thrills—you just weren’t there.”

Being mildly embarrassed, I threw my arms around Ezra’s neck and smiled. After staring into his eyes, I tiptoed then kissed his full lips. “You’re right, honey. I wasn’t there. My mind was elsewhere.”

The dormant towel draped around Ezra’s hips was beginning to strain into a dull point. “Do you think I could have a little of your fertile mind right now? You’re always delicious, but you’re excellent when you actually participate.”

I stroked his face, and then massaged his broad shoulders. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I promised I’d never take you for granted, but I did. Please forgive me.”

Amorous excitement danced in his eyes. “I’ll forgive you if you promise to forget about burning old houses.”

Giggling softly, I placed my lips tenderly on Ezra’s mouth. While churning in our passion, he discreetly untied my robe. Suddenly, it swung free from the sash. Despite the fact that he was kissing my lips, he glanced downward, admiring the nude build of his trophy wife. Though my frame was small in stature, Ezra appreciated the time I spent in our gym.

With a little urging, the robe fell at my feet, exposing my caramel body. Ezra snatched his towel away, and then tossed it aside. His mast stood erect and ready for duty. “Last night you made love to me with Aaron on your mind.” He gently urged me upon our freshly made bed. “Let that be the last time you make love to the both of us.”

“I’m so sorry,” I admitted, as Ezra ravished my body. “I’m just so...” Ezra swallowed my words with his masterful touch. He divided my folds uncovering my moist treasure. With eyes closed he inhaled, reveling in his find. As he massaged my swollen pearl he expelled sensual groans of anticipation.

My bud stiffened and my body quivered, Ezra sought only to please me. His tongue was an extension of his distended shaft. After opening my well, he swept his moist member around my orifice, biting, teasing, and causing it to throb with need. Once false move, and Ezra could bring my passions to an end. I cried out in warning for him to leave me—allow my body to temper its heat.

When Ezra heard my please, his breathing grew quick and ragged. He crawled upon my body, to lovingly extinguish the fires. He prepared his passion engorged mast to enter my silk laden cavern. Instead of plunging forth he teased my bud with a terrible spanking, then without warning he plunged deep into my chocolate center. His force was so great I tried to move from its power, eventually giving in by arching my back.

Simultaneously, Ezra made a horrid cursing sound in the back of his throat. I knew that sound. His determination to endure had been challenged by a hot passage having strong contractions. Immediately he withdrew and tossed his head. “Damn!” Perspiration beaded on his brow as he blew a sigh and waited for his needs to past.

I placed my hands around my husband’s waist and guided him back to his desired pleasure. “It’s okay, baby,” I moaned in a whisper. Devouring his needs with a shove of my hips, I let Ezra know there would be more. “Let it go, baby.”

He looked into my eyes. “You absolutely set my body on fire. How the hell do you do it?” he asked, straining against his own demise. Although Ezra had a strong constitution, he was no match for these caramel thighs and a tight rear. However, Ezra knew how to tip the scales in his favor, and he pulled his card.

Immediately I squealed to be released, and then felt my floodgates open to discharge my passions. At the sight of my trembling ruin, Ezra ejected his precious seed, and then broke into laughter. Kissing my moist belly, he then gazed into my eyes and beamed. “I gotcha again.”

Chapter Two

After an early morning book signing, I decided to have lunch with Ezra. His office was downtown in the Towers and I loved dropping in unexpectedly. I'd walk through his door; his expression was priceless. His brown eyes would grow large and seemly glisten. When I walked down the isle and took his hand, he had that same radiant expression. Although I had little experience with true love, I knew Ezra adored me.

His secretary was a gorgeous blonde with the body of a modified porn star. Even so, I felt I could trust him. They say you can never fully trust a man, but I had a strange connection deep in my gut. If he slightly twisted the truth, I could sense it.

When I reached the elevators I always had the same euphoric rush. They were elegant and sleek, with clean lines. Above my head, there were thousands of miniature sparkles. The soft music was absolutely superb. Yes, Ezra's family had money. *Aristocrat* Hotels were popping up everywhere and Ezra's father had given him over twenty-five. Old money ran through Ezra's veins, but he didn't seem snobbish in any way. I built my small empire by the sweat of my brow. My best

sellers had done well, and I refused to move. Ezra didn't complain, he said it was our starter house. He thought, eventually, I'd come around. What Ezra didn't know was: I had no intentions of moving. After one bad marriage, I didn't trust any man with my finances. My house, and everything in it, was mine!

I walked past Ezra's secretary and gave a soft smile. "Is my husband in his office?"

"Yes, Mrs. Grayson." Gina was well paid. In the past she had been reprimanded for her rude behavior, she'd better offer every courtesy. Clad in white apparel, I gently tapped on the door then opened it. Ezra was pecking away on his computer.

"Lyria!" His eyes softened and he turned his chair toward me. "How was your book signing?" With his sleeves rolled up, he moved from behind the desk to plant a kiss on my forehead.

The uniform for the hotel was a white shirt, a dark red tie, khaki slacks, and a blue blazer. Above the pocket of the blazer the nationally known hotel emblem sat majestically. Ezra always hung his blazer in the closet. "Oh the signing was fine. When things slowed down, I thought I'd catch an early lunch. Do you have time?"

"Um," Ezra narrowed his eyes, and then he gazed at his computer screen. "I'll make time. I can finish this after lunch."

“Sweetie, if you’re working on something important, I can catch you another time.”

“No.” He placed his arms around my neck, but continued to unroll his sleeves. “I wouldn’t miss an opportunity to take a bestselling author to lunch. Especially, a pretty one.”

Blushing, I stroked his back. “You’re so sweet. I can hardly believe you’re mine.”

“Believe it,” he said, buttoning his sleeves. “The first time I saw you I couldn’t get you out of my mind.”

“Did we properly thank the Sassy Girls Book Club? They were the ones who scheduled my book signing in your hotel.”

“Yes they did. And I was nosey enough to buy one of your books.” He pointed to his impressive bookshelf where my book was artistically displayed. “I read it over and over.”

“You didn’t. It was interracial romance. Not many men would read such trash.”

Ezra placed a few items in his desk drawer and closed it gently. “Maybe they should. I did, and I learned a little about women. But, I must admit, I’m glad they turned the book into a movie. Now the characters live and breathe. However, I’m disappointed by the person they chose to play Bint. She just wasn’t feisty enough.”

“Yes, I agree. But Edward was superb.” After securing his office, Ezra placed his hands around my waist and gave a strong caress. How sensual he was. “Mmm, you’re my Edward.”

“Yes I am. That Edward Coe was a sexy devil. They should have picked me to play that part. Then, I could make love to you with everyone watching.”

My mouth flew open. “You’re so naughty.”

“Sweetheart, you make me naughty. I’m feeling naughty right now.”

While holding me in his arms Ezra’s showed vivid signs of arousal. Feeling his protruding dilemma I asked, “Should we get a room?”

Ezra raised a brow. “Sure, just pick one.”

“I don’t feel like getting undressed right now. I’m genuinely hungry.”

“I’m hungry too.” He raised his face and looked at the door. “I’ll have Gina bring you a snack. It will give you enough strength to make love, then we can get lunch.”

“Ezra, you wouldn’t do that, would you?”

“Lyria,” he kissed my lips. “We’ve made love in these rooms numerous times. We could order an entire lunch, then lay in bed with sex up to our necks.”

“Oh, you are so nasty.” I pressed my forehead against his and toyed with his tie.

“You make me nasty, you vixen.”

I paused for a moment. “Let’s just wait.”

Ezra sighed and raised his head. “Well, if we must—we must. Let’s go to the Plaid Apple. I’m in the mood for something greasy and grilled.”

“Me too.” I patted my toned stomach. “I’ve been good this week. I’m feeling like a rabbit right about now. I need some meat.”

Ezra felt his muscle and chuckled. “I need a little protein myself. Are you sure you want to pass on my offer to get a suite?”

“I’m sure, sweetie.”

He opened the closet and removed his coat from a hanger. “You aren’t stuck in the burning house mode again, are you?”

“Nah,” I lied. “I’m just famished.” The thought of that torture chamber never left my mind.

Chapter Three

We dined at The Plaid Apple when we wanted to break our diets. Because it was still early, the restaurant wasn't as crowded as usual. "And, I'll have the soup with the grilled peppered corn," I informed the server while closing my menu.

Ezra's eyes brightened. "Let me have the same. But, add extra sauce to my ribs."

The server walked away grinning while Ezra addressed me. "I don't want to hear that spiel about my cholesterol. Today, I'm eating what I want."

I threw my hands up in surrender. "I'm not saying anything. You're a grown man." I checked my silver, then placed it back on the napkin.

Ezra leaned forward. "And don't you forget that either." He relaxed into his padded seat. "What are we wearing to the premier? I think you should wear that backless black dress with the plunging neckline," he stated, as a matter-of-fact.

My lips parted in horror. "Ezra. I'm not wearing that."

While contorting his face, Ezra replied, "Too revealing, huh?"

I sat back in my chair and folded my arms. "For your eyes only. It's a nightgown, Ezra. Not an evening gown."

“Oh, so that’s why you’ve never left the bedroom wearing it. You’d wear those cute little stilettos with the roses on the toe. I thought you were going out. Blame my libido for that mistake. I just couldn’t keep my hands off you when you were wearing it.”

Shaking my head I cajoled, “Come on, you can’t be serious.”

“Darling, if we weren’t in public, I’d show you how serious I am.”

While Ezra laughed at his own joke, my heart became heavy. Immediately, I closed my eyes against his words.

As soon as he noticed my silence, Ezra became concerned. “Look at me Lyria—you’re doing it again, aren’t you?” Ezra touched my cheek and I gazed into his soft brown eyes. “Don’t wallow in the past—Aaron was an ass and he doesn’t deserve your tears. Eventually, he’ll get what’s coming to him, but for now, don’t let him steal your joy.”

“I know,” I whispered thoughtfully. “It’s my day, right?”

“And don’t forget it. Lyria Grayson, I love every inch of you and I want you to be happy.” Ezra placed his hand on mine.

“That’s what bothers me.” I twirled my bracelet nervously. “After years of Aaron’s abuse, God rewarded me with an angel.”

Ezra’s eyes narrowed with humor. “I wouldn’t call myself an angel. You still cry-out in your sleep. If I were a real angel, I’d banish all those bad dreams.”

Appearing sincere, I widened my eyes. “But there were times I woke up fighting you. Yet, you stayed by my side.”

He pressed his cheekbone and winced. “You’ve got a mean right cross,” he kidded, “but you still need me.”

“I’m so sorry about that, sweetie. You poor thing. That lick was not meant for you.” I folded my arms reveling in shame. “It took forever for that bruise to disappear.”

Ezra reached out for my hand. I obeyed his unspoken wish. “If I could slay all of your dragons, I would.”

“I know, and that fact makes me misty. I know you love me and if Aaron walked through that door right now, you’d knock him out cold.”

“Beyond a doubt.” He smacked his fist into his open palm. “He’s caused you enough sleepless nights.”

Watching Ezra expression, I started to giggle then calmed my laughter. “I’ve crawled into your arms many nights, crying, hurting, and confused.”

“I know. It’s all over now. Your good years should outweigh your bad years by now.”

“It’s the scars, Ezra. It’s the damn scars.”

“I understand.”



The week flew by, and I wasn't excited. I just couldn't get that vile little house out of my mind. My hired detective brought word of Aaron's whereabouts and he also transacted other business for me. I told Ezra I had another book signing the day of the premier, and then I placed his tuxedo on the bed and left instructions for him to meet me at the premier. After packing a small bag, I instructed Dennis to prepare the limo for a brief trip.

Chapter Four

Despite the promises I'd made to Ezra, I felt compelled to visit Brighton. It was a frigid January evening. Although the sun was shining it would seem the warmth of its rays never kissed the earth. Willowy trees stripped of their beauty now trembled in the chilly winter's breeze.

Passing state after state my mind grinded my decision. After burning the house, was I truly going to feel vindicated? What is Ezra going to think when he discovers my absence? Ezra. He was perfect for me. No doubt, he was a gift from God. No other man would have tolerated my bouts of insecurity or my imaginary dreams of trepidation.

After pondering my future, the past settled in my mind and I smiled. It had been a hectic morning the day Ezra Westbrook changed my life. The hotel was packed and the conference room was filled with jobbers. The noise level was tremendous. Shoppers picked up displays, discussed their concerns and basically enjoyed themselves.

I sat calmly behind the table with my books displayed decoratively about me. On a clever note, my vivid flower arrangement matched the book's cover

perfectly. A feminine address book and various pens were at my beck and call.

Standing above me, a customer, a lovely Caucasian woman, was waiting for my autograph. After I signed her book, the line finally had an end. The woman stepped aside to write down her e-mail address. When she moved, the most beautiful male I'd ever seen had been standing behind her. He was dressed in a hotel uniform, I assumed he was a manager of sorts. I had no idea he actually owned the hotel, and many more.

With squared shoulders, he stood valiantly before me, gazing into my eyes. The corners of his lips stretched into a quiet smile. He raised a brow then picked up my book. After sliding his fingers across the glossy cover he then opened it, fanning the pages. "Looks like a really good book."

Immediately, I went into my sales pitch. "It's an excellent romance. I have several other books, if you'd like to visit my website." I offered him my card.

Ezra stroked his chin. "This hotel has a policy," he pressed. "Authors must discuss their works over lunch."

Although I had a good excuse *not* to leave, an uneasy feeling wafted over me. I paused briefly to mentally process his invitation. "I'd love too, but there's no one here to relieve me."

Ezra scanned the room and raised a finger. "Excuse me," he said, nodding his head. "I'll be back in a moment."

Within a few seconds, I noticed him across the room. Though I was signing another book, I could see he was talking intensely to a young woman who was also dressed in a hotel's uniform. He pointed toward my table and her eyes followed his lead. She nodded, smiled, and then walked away.

The back of my neck burned as stress settled in my body. I stroked my shoulders, fixed my hair, and then blotted excess oils from my forehead. This man evoked strange changes in my body. Inside, I felt jittery and wonderful all at the same time. Somehow, I knew my luck was about to change.

Shortly afterwards, the woman walked over to my table. "Ms Grayson," she said, while pulling out a chair. "I'm here to relieve you for lunch."

"Oh really." I drew back defensively, looked at her fresh young face, then I searched the banquet room for the handsome gentleman.

"Yes, Ms Grayson."

Seeing that she appeared capable, I stood up and walked toward the front of the table. While leaving a few instructions, I felt someone grasp my elbow from behind. Turning sharply, my surprised stare met Ezra's magnetically charming eyes. "I'm sorry," he said, stroking my back and smirking. "I didn't introduce myself? My name is Ezra Westbrook. We'll be dining in the Gold banquet room."

Was there a halo above his head and why did I trust him with my life? Immediately, I felt safe and protected. Extraordinary emotions were unfolding

inside my body, and I loved every moment of it.

Chapter Five

Ezra was more than the man I needed. He was vigilant of my health and my surroundings. Three weeks into our relationship, Ezra finally got his first taste of the real Lyria Grayson.

One Saturday evening, I was working in my study. I was deeply engrossed and didn't hear Ezra calling to me. "Lyria," he called. "Darling I've been calling you for a while. Are you so immersed in writing that you didn't hear me?"

I raised my head to acknowledge his presence as his silhouette darkened the doorway. Out of sheer determination, I moved my eyes back toward the computer screen. "I'm so sorry, sweetie. I've almost finished editing this manuscript." After removing my glasses, I took my thumb and forefinger, and then rubbed my tired eyes. "You know how driven I am when I'm near the end."

Ezra walked into my side view. Keeping my eye on the screen, I turned my cheek upward to get a kiss.

Ezra was glad to oblige. "Look at me, Lyria." When I turned around, I noticed that my new boyfriend was dressed in swimming gear. "I was about to take a dip in the pool. Care to join me?"

“Not right now, you go ahead.” I turned back toward the screen, placed my hand on the mouse then started to scroll downward.

In an instant Ezra squatted beside my chair and demanded my attention. “Lyria.” He removed my hands from the keyboard. “Stop writing and come for a swim. Just look at you. You’re totally exhausted. It’s a beautiful Saturday afternoon and you’re still in your pajamas.”

“I like writing in my robe and pajamas. It’s comfortable. I can think better.”

“Don’t you think you’d feel better if you had a shower and put on some shorts or something?”

“Mr. Westbrook,” I sighed loudly, “are you trying to break my train of thought?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “It’s time for a break.” He swiveled my chair to face him. “You can call the shots. Come swim with me.” His eyes held a pleading stare and I couldn’t resist.

“Okay.” I said, cupping his shaven face in my hands.

He placed his hand on top of mine and shook his head. “I don’t believe you.”

When I removed my hands, Ezra stood up, cocked his head to one side then folded his tanned arms. I stood up before him, stretched, and then yawned ungracefully. “I’ll meet you down by the pool in a few minutes.”

“Promise,” Ezra warned with narrowed eyes.

“Promise. No more work.”

Ezra caressed my face, and then stared into my tired eyes. “Ten minutes,” he said, then kissed the top of my head.

“Okay.” I nodded, displaying ten fingers. As soon as Ezra closed the door, I turned toward the computer and sat back down. “Now where was I?”

Before I knew it, an hour had passed. I didn’t see or hear Ezra when he walked up to the study. With a towel around his shoulders, he leaned against the door-facing soaking wet, his arms folded across his chest. His deep voice sliced through my thoughts. “That’s the longest ten minutes I’ve ever seen.”

The tone of his voice frightened me. I held my racing heart and tried to control my breathing. “I’m sorry.” My eyes grew wide and my voice was quivering. “I’m so sorry.” I leaped from my seat and nervously tied the sash on my robe. “I just got busy and forgot.” Shaking my head I admitted, “It won’t happen again. I promise. I won’t write anymore.”

Ezra walked slowly towards me. His brows were drawn tight and his expression was solemn. “Lyria, it’s okay.”

In my defense, I threw my hands before me to shield myself. As if Ezra had said nothing, I jabbered on in a state of panic while tripping over things. “I know I promised you I was coming out, sweetie. But I got carried away and I forgot. Please don’t get angry.” As Ezra closed in on my space I backed up, terrified of his wrath.

“Lyria,” he whispered softly. He raised his arm to place it around my shoulders; I cringed at his touch and let out a soft whimper. Ezra seemed surprised. “Lyria. What’s wrong?”

Suddenly, I tore from his grasp and bolted for the door. When I reached my bedroom, I ran inside and fumbled with the lock. Then, I ran to the restroom looking wildly about. I needed a place to hide. After locking the door, I crouched near the sink and made myself quiet and still. Beads of perspiration ran down the sides of my face.

Nine shades of confusion disturbed my mind. I didn’t want Ezra to get annoyed with me; I didn’t know what he was capable of doing. When he knocked on the door of the bathroom, my heart leaped into my throat. I drew myself into a tight ball, and rocked back and forth while gawking at the door. Then, I tried desperately to calm myself down. Why was I so afraid? Ezra had never hit me. We’d never had a disagreement of any sort.

While I sat panting, my mind was set on replay. Over and over my mind played through scenarios where Aaron had struck me for disappointing him. He’d torn up my writing and made me promise I’d write no more. Writing secretly had become a way of life. Now, I could write without fear, so why couldn’t I get him out of my mind? Ezra was not Aaron. I had to give him a chance.

From behind the door, Ezra called out, “Please Lyria. Talk to me. Tell me

what I did wrong.” As Ezra talked through the door, my nerves started to calm. Nausea filled my stomach; I held it tightly and gave myself a talk. Ezra is not Aaron, and I was going to be safe.

Finally, Ezra stopped talking and the bedroom became quiet. I stood up and walked quietly toward the door. Then, I listened. My hands trembled as I touched the doorknob. After turning the cold knob, I peered into the outer bedroom.

Ezra had put on a terry robe. He was sitting in my ez chair waiting for me to calm down. His fingers were interlocked as if he were praying. When he heard my movement he raised his concerned eyes. “We need to talk.”

My legs felt weak and I was a total mess. I preened my hair, closed my robe, then leaned against the door-facing. “I’m so sorry, sweetie. You just scared me, that’s all.”

“Lyria.” He raised his chin. “That was more than scared. That was terrified.” He beckoned me into his space. “Come here, sweetheart. Tell me exactly what happened. I couldn’t have scared you that badly.”

Shrugging my shoulders, I admitted. “I guess I was just writing something spooky.” There was no way I was telling this gorgeous man about my abusive past. “I’ll try not to be so skittish.” If Ezra knew my past experiences most likely he’d dissolve our relationship.

As I grew closer, Ezra got up and placed his arms around me. “You’ve got to

stop writing paranormal romance. It's affecting you in some way."

A soft smile swept across my lips. Ezra had bought my story. Even so, he eyed me suspiciously then closed his eyes with our embrace. "I'd never hurt you."

Although, I leaned against his chest, I tried to lower my heart rate. It's going to be fine, I kept telling myself.

Chapter Six

A month later, Ezra and I were attending the Diamond Ball. It was a grand fund raising event. All of the socialites displayed their best and most expensive gowns. They raised money for scholarships to be given to school where the population was predominantly African American. Our meals were one hundred fifty dollars apiece. Of course, we knew the plates were not worth it. It was a fun affair with drawings, and live entertainment.

Ezra looked dashing in his black tux, and of course I was a doll in my very impressive emerald gown. We had been dating for two months and I couldn't have been happier. Ezra made sure that all of my needs were met. I loved the way he held me in his arms as we danced the night away. The shimmering decorations and sultry music reminded me of grand galas in the movies.

While dancing, Ezra bent his head and whispered in my ear. "We've eaten that lousy crap and drank their watered down drinks, so let's say we blow this joint."

"Are you sure? I'm having a sensational time."

"Sure, we can stay, if you don't mind making love in front of these people."

“Why Mr. Westbrook, are you saying that you’re amorous this evening?”
We swayed in unison as we danced along.

“Have you looked in the mirror? I can hardly keep my hands off you. Your hair is gorgeous in that up-do, I love those little pearls throughout your hair. Stunning.”

I fluttered my lashes and smiled. “Thank you.”

Ezra’s left hand was wrapped around mine, while his right hand sat comfortably on my waist. We moved gently to the soft music. Ezra’s cologne lulled me into a calm euphoric stupor. “Did you see the way the Senator was looking at you?” he said, mildly aggravated.

Leaning my head against his lower chin, I admitted, “No, I didn’t notice,”

“I say, get your own dark meat. This bird is mine.”

Laughter erupted between us. “You’re so silly.”

“But, I’m silly over you. I think about you so much that even when you’re with me, I’m thinking about how to get you alone.”

“Oh stop,” I said, blushing.

“And that mean old Mrs. Elgin—the nerve of her thinking you were the entertainment. I should kick that old bag in the knees. She should stop getting her hair done at her dog’s kennel. That hair style is *not* working for her.”

“Ezra. I can’t believe you’re bad-mouthing Mrs. Elgin. She just wasn’t

expecting to add a little color to her affair.”

“The next time she asks me for a large donation, I’m going to tell her to bite my ass,” he bantered playfully. “Nobody insults my woman.”

I drew back defensively. “Ezra, you wouldn’t.”

He scowled, and then smiled. “I’m sick of people like her. If her world was entirely Caucasian, she’d separate us by eye color.”

I widened my eyes at his statement. “What’s gotten into you? You can’t possibly mean what you’re saying.”

Ezra paused, and I missed a dance step. “Why not? You don’t know these old gals. I’ve been around them all my life. Her side-kick Mrs. Munson, she wishes she had your gorgeous hair and tight body. Her tan is so dark she looks like a crumpled paper bag.”

I slugged Ezra on the shoulder, and looked into his eyes. “Stop that.”

He gazed down on me. “You’re in my life to stay, so they’d better get used to it. This is not a fly by night affair. When I met you, you stuck your little finger into my heart and gave a twist.”

A warm smile stretched across my face. “You’re kidding.”

“I’ve been your pet every since then. I waited in line almost thirty minutes to get your autograph. And, I had work to do.”

“Why didn’t you just leave and come back later.”

“What. When I want something, I stick with it. I’ll go to any length to get it.”

“I see.”

“Yes, and right now, I want to see that beautiful dress in a heap around your pretty little ankles.”

Blushing, I sighed.

Ezra lowered his head again. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Your wish is my demand, Mr. Westbrook.”

“Cute. I’ll get the car while you get your things. Is that a deal?”

“That’s a deal. I’ll be waiting.”



The banquet room was crowded. I decided to stand on the porch while Ezra got the car. People came and people went, but there was still no sign of Ezra. I opened my cell phone and checked the time. It was one o’clock and Ezra still had not come to pick me up.

With my wrap draped around my bare shoulders, my dress flowed elegantly about me. I clutched my shimmering bag in my hands, walked toward the edge of the sidewalk and waited. Suddenly I heard the gunning of a car’s motor, then I saw Ezra’s car speeding up. It stopped abruptly at my feet.

When I reached for the door’s handle, Ezra reached into the backseat

without placing the car in park. The car lurched forward. I drew back my hand cautiously, and paused. When Ezra turned around the car lurched again, and I panicked. Ezra was getting out of the car to get the door, but I had no idea. “I’m sorry, darling. I was placing your books in the backseat. I’m just not quick enough. Let me get that door for you.”

When Ezra opened my door, he tried to put his hand on my shoulder and I snatched away. “I’m sorry, I think.”

“You did that on purpose,” I yelled.

“What did I do on purpose?”

“You know.” I pulled my dress inside the car and slammed the door.

“No. Lyria. I’m stumped. Some guy needed a boost on the parking lot. I know it took a minute, but I didn’t think you’d become incensed.”

“It’s not that!”

Ezra shrugged. “What is it then?”

“Ttthe thing with the car. Making the car lurch when I touched the door handle. That was so rude.”

“I’m sorry. I had no idea. My foot slipped off the brakes. I should have put it in park anyway.”

I reached for a tissue and sighed loudly. “Never mind.”

“I guess it’s just that time of the month,” he kidded.

Ezra had no idea; the accidental placement of his foot had triggered hordes of bad memories. Although Ezra was loving and kind, my past was eating me alive. The more I dwelled on it the more it vengeful I became.

Chapter Seven

I was about to reach my destination. As my limo slinked down a tar paved street, I pulled down my dark shades and stared out the tinted window. Yes, my promise to Ezra had been a lie. My desire to burn the past consumed me. If left uninterrupted, that goal, I'd soon accomplish.

I lived in Brighton many years ago. Although age had taken its toll, the neighborhood had changed very little.

Gasping with surprise, I examined the old house where my best friend once lived. Now, the house was painted white with light-green shutters. Children's toys were scattered over every inch of the yard. It was very unlikely that Joyce lived there anymore.

As my limo rolled silently toward a stop sign, my stomach quickened. We were almost there. Turning to my left, I finally saw it—a vacant, shabby, two bedroom frame house. Originally, the house was painted white. Under my scrutiny, the paint seemed almost grayish-tan. The finish was chipped and curled from years of neglect. Faded yellow shutters hung loosely from the unstable structure.

A low-growth of dried brush accompanied the dreadful little house. Although the porch was still attached, it was strained by its own weight and held together by large nails. Dennis, my driver, pulled in front of the house and parked on the street. When he turned off the key, he remained silent. After a few moments, he got out of the limousine and opened my door. "Shall I get the gasoline can now, Mrs. Grayson?"

I sealed his lips with a sweep of my lashes. Like a regimented soldier, he stood still. After placing my feet on the old pavement, I saw that the street had aged as it crumbled beneath my weight. White stiletto boots, made of the finest leather, adorned my feet. When I stepped completely out of the limo, a brisk wind almost stole my breath. My signature style was dressing from head to toe in white. White is innocent, clean, and pure. It's an angelic color I found most comforting. The wind gently lifted my white fedora revealing my sun kissed skin.

After raising my fingers, I grasped the brim and held it firm. Stark white slacks hugged my shapely rear with tailored perfection. Atop my white sweater, an off-white knee length poncho fluttered calmly in the breeze.

Neighbors were watching, but I didn't care. Yes, I was mysterious, eccentric, and prosperous. When they started to whisper, I held my lips taut. I was on a mission and they were of little concern.

Pulling down my shades slowly, I then stared at the structure. The sight of it

made my blood run cold. Disgusted by years of memories, my face froze with rage. After replacing my glasses, I walked toward the large realtor's sign without hesitation. My poncho took flight—my surefooted steps fraught with power and authority. While admiring the large red banner, the words 'sold' brought joy to my heart. Evil thoughts filled my head and I curled my lips devilishly.

Straightaway, I moved toward the house as one on a mission. Years of decay had worked their magic, claiming the very steps I stood on. The house represented years of anguish and torture. Though Ezra tried to erase the scar, my heart still burned in memory.

Dennis retrieved the gas can from the trunk of my car. He placed it on the pavement, and then leaned against the limo with arms folded. Like a loyal employee, Dennis would accommodate my every whim. Now, I wanted him still and patient.

Chapter Eight

My legs took familiar strides as I started up the steps. When I reached the porch, rotted wood splintered, disintegrating beneath my feet. Nevertheless, the remaining wood supported my small frame. After opening the wooden screened door, I raised my foot, and then forcefully kicked the door open. Turning my face toward the limo, I winced as Dennis looked on. For my labor, his somber expression hailed a round of applause.

As soon as the door swung open, the opposite side met the wall with a thunderous crash. Although, the house was in disrepair on the outside, inside it showed remarkable condition. Even so, the odor of aging wood assailed my senses. My nostrils flared as the odious scent ignited my brain with memories.

Removing my dark shades, I then placed them in my pocket. With a flip of my wrist, I swept raven tresses behind my ear. I knelt toward the floor balancing on high heels. Using two fingers, I pinched a strip of linoleum and started to pull. A horrible noise filled the cold room as the flooring reluctantly gave way. Beneath the covering, worn linoleum concealed its fragile life. The pattern was a quaint mixture of dark and light-gray stones. Years ago, it was stylish, shiny and lovely. I

arched a brow at the sight.

Darting my eyes sharply, I surveyed my dank surroundings. From corner to corner and ceiling to floor, coldness encompassed my being. Trash and debris were scattered throughout the dismal abode. Dismissing a chill disbursed throughout the dwelling, I stroked my arms, noting that the house was squalid, bitter and unfriendly.

Hearing the slamming of a car's door, I turned my gaze toward an undressed window. Judging from his medium build, it had to be Mark. Mark had been my agent and publicist for almost five years. Though he wore an overcoat, he was dressed in formal attire. In my heart, I knew what he wanted.

After taking in the dreary neighborhood, he then buttoned his coat and shook his head. When challenging a small ditch beside his car, Mark's mustache twitch anxiously. As soon as he had his footing, he cautiously trotted along the edge of the street. Rushing with urgency, he finally reached the overgrown walkway. With an agile sprint, he vaulted upon the second step, and then leaped into the open doorway. "Lyria! Don't do it!"

Mark's eyes were wild with concern. His dark Italian skin enhanced his masculine appearance, while thick brows embellished dark round eyes. Mark parted his ample lips and calmed his voice. "I knew you'd come here. My secretary told me you were driving to Brighton, so I caught a flight out."

Mark paced the gritty floor, scattering trash with his expensive shoes. Unexpectedly, he threw up his hands and yelled, “You are— Lyria Grayson, a well known author.” He turned his back, massaged his temples, and paced the floor. “Help me understand what you’re trying to do, here.” Mark unbuttoned his coat and placed his hands on his hips. “I’m just not getting this, babe. Some people would appreciate having a best seller turned into a movie.”

I understood his point of view, but my heart was calloused and I didn’t care. He nervously stroked his chin, then folded his arms. “How could you *not* show up at your *own* premier?” After making his statement, Mark opened his coat and pointed to his expensive suit and bowtie. “Everyone worked hard to make this happen for you.” He twirled his wrist in the air as if it helped define his point. “They were all there. And dressed to the teeth, but where was Lyria Grayson? Where? Where?”

He shook his finger in my face then turned from my view. “You’re so damned selfish, you never showed up! Then, you drove all the way up here just to throw away five years of success.”

Mark turned, his hands came down on my shoulders and he gently shook me. “What did Ezra say about all this? This is so, not like you.”

A cynical smile spoke louder than my words. It was clear I didn’t care what he or Ezra thought. Because Mark was fuming, I allowed him to have his say. Now,

it was my turn. “Why not, Mark?” I cocked my head to one side, and then narrowed my eyes. “So, you’re trying to protect my image in the public’s eye? Or, did you come because I have a Pulitzer. Perhaps, you came because my last book has also been selected for the big screen?”

Tapping my finger lightly against my temple, I squinted my eyes pretending to be deep in thought. Suddenly I gasped, snapped my finger and pointed at Mark. “I know why you really followed me here—you came to help with the dirty work, right?”

With frustration resting on his brows, Mark ran his fingers through his dark-brown hair. “It’s neither, Lyria.” He shook his head. “I’m concerned about you.” While plowing designer shoes through debris left by the last tenants, Mark’s voice escalated. “Suddenly, you got this wild hair in your butt and left town.”

“I was going to come back, Mark,” I whined playfully. Shrugging my shoulders I confessed, “Just as soon as I finished my work here.”

Mark shook his head in denial. “You brought gas, didn’t you?”

I brightened. “Very perceptive of you. Not only do I have gasoline, I also brought my fireplace lighter.” Kicking a pile of trash, I then burst into sardonic laughter.

Mark frowned. “You wouldn’t.”

“Oh, wouldn’t I?” Staring directly into Mark’s surprised eyes, I gritted my

teeth. “I’m going to torch this sucker. I’m burning every inch of it down to the ground.”

Mark threw his hands in the air while pacing in a neat circle. “I knew it—I knew it. Lyria, you can’t just go around burning real-estate. It’s against the freakin’ law.”

I grinned, folded my arms, then whispered, “FYI, Mark. I bought this fire trap.” I swept a stray curl from my eyes. “And, I’ll do whatever I please.”

Mark’s mouth twisted, then turned downwards at the corners. “Burning this place—its bad publicity, I tell you! Lyria, right now, you don’t need bad press.”

I placed my hands on my hips and smirked. “After I’ve finished my task...” I glanced sharply around the room, “let the chips fall where they may.”

Chapter Nine

When I turned to walk toward the tiny bedroom, my poncho fluttered in the breeze. Although my boots created a hollow tapping sound, I was keenly aware, Mark was following me. “Tell me freakin’ why?” he pleaded. “Why are you flirting with fire and bad press?”

I stopped walking and sighed. After turning toward Mark, I saw the steeple he had formed with his fingertips. At the sight of it, a snicker rolled from my gut, and I pursed my lips. Mark was supposed to be a religious man. However, he was only spiritual when it was advantageous for him.

“Come here, Mark.” Although his shoulders were slumped, Mark walked over to me. I raised his chin and looked into his eyes. Out of the blue, I blasted, “Leave me the hell alone!”

His eyes widened, bulging with acknowledgement. Obviously my unpredictable behavior had stunned him.

Mark strained to keep his composure. Stroking the back of his neck, he cursed. “What’s gotten into you? I paid good money for this flight and...”

Oblivious to my rude gesture, I demanded, “Come with me.” I beckoned him

with my finger. “I want to show you something.”

My words pulled Mark toward the kitchen. The sole of his shoes slipped, snagging on the jagged linoleum. As if intoxicated, he tumbled forward, and then reached out to break his fall. “Lyria,” he wailed. “Why are you trying to punish me? I don’t know what this is all about—I’m a peaceable man,” he begged.

Standing in the kitchen I instructed, “I want you to take a good look around.”

Mark gawked, his eyes red with confusion. He glimpsed the empty kitchen. There were open cabinets with the doors hanging from the hinges. A filthy sink had small spiders crawling in and out of the drain. Piles of trash and debris were swept into the corner of the room. “There’s nothing here,” he said, shrugging his shoulders.

I raised the rim of my hat and nodded. “Yes. There is something here.”

“What,” he exclaimed, exasperated by the riddle. “Please tell me why I flew out here. What’s so damned important about this run-down shack?”

Under my poncho, I shoved my cold hands in my pockets. “Memories, Mark.”

“You drove out here for freakin’ memories,” he asked wildly, scratching his head.

“No,” I paused. “I drove out here for revenge.” Staring out the kitchen

window I revealed, “I’m going to burn my past.”

Rolling his eyes toward the ceiling, Mark then shook his finger in warning. “That’s just freakin’ great, babe! Freakin’ great. Bad press!”

I turned sharply, my stare menacing. “You want to know what happened in this house.” I started to crowd Mark’s personal space. “Not many women could have survived a typical day in the life of Lisa Gray.”

As I talked, I strolled about the small kitchen, memories flooding my head. “Against the odds, I survived an abusive relationship. With hard work, I became who and what I am.” I shook my finger at Mark. “I made a solemn promise that when—I said when, I became successful, I would torch this damn house.” My deep set eyes became narrow and evil. “If it didn’t exist, I would build a replica on this very site and burn *it* down.”

I made my voice soft and feminine. “When I finish explaining my reasons for wanting to burn this house,” I paused, then gnashed my teeth and spewed, “Get outta my damn way!”

“Lyria.” Tugging at his earlobes Mark pleaded, “Grant it, this house *is* old, and it’s hardly livable. But, if you can prove this house should be destroyed, then I’ll freakin’ help you.”

I drew in a ragged breath, then pointed to my repulsive surroundings. “Aaron had promised me a good life, but if this was a good life, I wondered what

hell was like.”

Suddenly, my attention was pulled toward the activity outside the kitchen window. Another car pulled up behind Mark’s rental. Beyond a doubt, it was Ezra. When the door swung open Ezra stepped out. Though I had been missing all day, Ezra was also dressed for the gala affair. He was handsome to no end, however his face was void of emotion.

Mark bantered behind me as Ezra engaged Dennis in conversation. Their exchange seemed more than casual as Ezra’s voice cloaked a tone of sheer annoyance. Dennis did as instructed. It was not his fault. I had him drive to Brighton. Then, Ezra gazed through the window where I was standing. His thick brows were tightly drawn, but I didn’t flinch. He walked toward the house with an irritated stride.

Chapter Ten

When Ezra opened the door, his expression was laced with anxiety. “Lyria,” he said quietly. “I’ve come to take you home.”

I loved Ezra with all my heart, but looked right through him. A trancelike state had created a false sense of calm. In my clouded background, Mark threw up his hands and marched angrily toward the door. With a mumble caught in his throat he muttered, “Five years—five freakin’ years.” As soon as he reached the wintry chill he pulled his collar around his ears and walked toward his car.

With a hardened expression, I cast my gaze toward Ezra. “The night I walked out of this house, I promised I *would* return. Now, vengeance is mine. Please allow me this pleasure. The last week I spent in this house was more terrifying than anyone could imagine. I had reached rock bottom and life had no meaning.” Ezra reached out to me and I held him at arm’s length.

“Not until you hear what I have to say, Ezra. You must hear it!” I grew quiet, looked around the kitchen then spoke. “I’d stand right there and watch the sun set while washing the dishes. That— was my simple pleasure. Imprisoned in this house, I’d gazed out the window and wonder what life held on the other side of

the glass.

Standing in this window, seasons came and seasons went. I'd watch my neighbors as they roamed freely about. They could go to the store, visit or go shopping for that matter. As for me," I gave a sarcastic blast. "Aaron had placed a padlock on the door. He locked it each day before he left for work. The backdoor and all of the windows were nailed shut. If there was a fire, I could have perished."

Ezra lowered his eyes toward the floor, and then gazed into my eyes. "I had no idea."

Ignoring his sympathy, I shrugged, and then leaned against the sink. "In the evening, my dish water would get cold. I'd rub the greasy film between my fingers. See Ezra," I shook my head. "I had no fire to heat my water. The gas had been turned off. But, if I placed a jug of water in the window, the sun would heat the water."

Thrusting my thumb forward, I showed Ezra a jagged scar that wrapped around my entire thumb. It had been cut to the bone and I received no medical care. Although healed, the scar tissue was unsightly and crude. Ezra winced at the sight of it. "Do you see this cut?" He nodded. "I had to hold my thumb above the dishwater until this healed. You see—Ezra. I had to use a knife to open my canned food. One day, the knife slipped, as hunger had driven me to agitation. Perhaps, I was not as careful as I should have been.

Again Ezra reached out to me. “Lyria, you don’t need to do this. I do understand. Darling, let’s go home. ”

Ignoring his demands, I paused pensively. “A cold can of corn and a stale cup of water didn’t rest easy on my stomach. You see Ezra, my next meal was never promised.”

Looking over my shoulder I recalled where the water jugs once sat. I sighed mournfully and raised a brow. “By the end of the day the water jugs were almost empty. Hopefully, Aaron would remember to fill the extra jugs at work.”

Giving Ezra a sidelong glance, I looked into his curious brown eyes. “Aaron had promised to pay the water bill, but evidently, drinking alcohol was more important than drinking water. Out of sheer routine, I’d flip that light switch every evening.”

I shook my head sadly. “In this house, electricity had lost its magic. Then I’d always remember—there would be no light tonight. With mounting remorse, I’d pray that the last candle would give light ‘til morning.”

Ezra’s compassion seamed his face and I turned from his loving gaze. “Aaron had promised to pay the light bill,” I admitted. “But drugs and women had stolen the light that sustained our meager home.”

I leaned over and picked up a random piece of broken glass. Staring deeply into the shard, I said, “When I bundled the trash, a shard of glass shimmered near

the edge of the stove. I wondered how I could have missed such a large piece.”

Holding the glass between my fingers, I stared into the delicate etching. Immediately, my mind took flight. Back-back to the night the glass had been broken. I tossed the glass into the corner with the other trash with vengeance.

Chapter Eleven

“Aaron had used his belt that time—leaving bluish-purple whelps across my back. With my back turned before the bathroom mirror, I used a hand mirror to view Aaron’s wrath. His disapproval was brutal and engraved on my back forever.”

Using my fingertip, I drew a line across my back to indicate the worst scar. “A longer welt wrapped around my right breast. What an agonizing price to pay for leaving the house without permission. When his words couldn’t keep me inside, a padlock worked nicely. After I was beaten, Aaron tossed the glass at my head. That stemware was a gift from my mother, and she must never know. I tossed the glass into the trash and tied the bundle tightly.”

I peered out the window of the back door. The rotted screen torn by age, vibrated in the wind. Outside, tall weeds surrounded the door. Because it was winter, it was sparse, dried, and wavered against the chill. With manicured nails, I fingered a tattered curtain that hung from a rusty curtain rod. I looked at Ezra and took his hand in mine. “Aaron promised he would come home that night, but like the fuse of his temper, his memory was short lived.”

Turning my gaze toward the room adjacent the kitchen, I continued my

vivid memory. “I’d dry my hands with a sour dish rag then turn to check the refrigerator.” The tone of my voice deadened. “The contents were always the same: an onion on the verge of spoilage, a stale pat of butter, a withering potato, and a plastic container of watered-down mustard. A remnant of thawed hog sausage lay graying, no doubt, of ruin.”

Facing the empty living room I spoke quietly. “Even though some nights were warm, the house always felt unusually cold.” The memory seemed real. A shiver encompassed my body. After looking down at my clothing, I raised my poncho, and then shook it. “I wished for finer threads. Instead, I wore Aaron’s old shirt, fraying jeans and sneakers worn with tiny holes. Once I had beautiful clothes. After being married to Aaron, my best was not fit for beggars.”

When I lowered the poncho the large diamond on my ring sparkled in the evening sun. “I’d raised a torn pocket from the shirt vowing to sew it back. Before we were married, my closet was filled with stylish clothes.” I shook my head. “However, Aaron didn’t like any of my garments and took a knife to them.” My face became grave at the thought of the shredded fabric. “Finally, my entire wardrobe met its demise, then Aaron’s clothes became my clothes. He didn’t like the way his jeans fit my hips nor did he like the way they showed my curves.”

Folding my arms I seemed distant with my confessions. Ezra stood silently as my mind wandered back to that terrible Friday night. “Once, I had a job,” I said,

speaking loud and clear. “It happened on a Friday night. Eleven o’clock ended my shift. I was standing outside the restaurant in the parking lot. It was after 2:00 a.m. when Aaron finally came to pick me up. As usual, he was late. With squealing brakes and the strain of a roaring motor, Aaron sped into the parking lot. The passenger’s side, rolled up beside me and the window slowly descended. Aaron’s loud music ceased.”

With a glistening stare I whispered, “I learned not to look into his face. Grasping the cold door knob, I discovered it was locked.”

I stared at the wall where the refrigerator once stood, my voice elevated, echoing against the emptiness of the vacant kitchen. I slowly closed my eyes and in a tremor I reflected, “He informed me that he was about to run out of gas and asked to see my check. Reluctantly, I pulled my check from my purse and he snatched it.

After Aaron saw how small the check was he chortled, ‘You need to work more hours, woman.’ Then he laughed while tossing my check in the front seat.

I depressed the door’s handle, but found it locked. While rolling up the window, Aaron grinned. My knuckles whitened as I snatched against the locked door. Reality opened my eyes and my heart cried out. ‘Not again!’ He was going to take my money and leave me stranded- again.”

Casting my dark-brown eyes toward the floor, I sighed. “He ignored my

pleas. His sarcastic chuckles were muffled inside the car. After turning up his music, Aaron gunned the motor and the car lurched forward. I felt my feet being dragged against the pavement as I held onto the door.

Laughing wildly, Aaron pressed the gas pedal, then the brakes, causing the car to lurch and jerk.” I picked up an old spoon resting on the kitchen floor and tenderly placed it into the drain.

“After he grew tired of jerking me back and forth, the car gained speed dragging me along. Finally, I succumbed to its power and gave up my fight.

Aaron’s taillights disappeared into the darkness. Then I realized this night was just like all the others. How I hated to walk home at night.”

Chapter Twelve

I leaned against the wall, perched my foot against it, and folded my arms. “The walk across town was frightening in the darkness. Headlights would light the path before me, only to circle the block and return. Voices of unknown men rang-out in the shadows, taunting me, as if my sacred body was offered for a price. I’d fold my arms tightly and scurry along.”

Staring off into space, I bantered, “Just another night, like many nights before. I wondered why I even wanted to come back here. Home had neither lights, gas, or water. It had neither television, radio nor music of any kind. This house was the dank prison, where dirty secrets were made, kept, and hidden.”

I chuckled sarcastically, almost frightening Ezra. “Smiles were worn as a mask to deceive the public. Aaron had promised me a good life.” I glanced at Ezra. “If this was the good life,” I frowned, “what would hell be like?”

I stopped talking and stared into space. It was obvious I was lost in thought. Seeing the chill of my stare, Ezra pulled his coat together. As he stood gawking, a sympathetic expression coated his rugged face.

Suddenly, I glanced upwards, shook my head, and gathered my thoughts.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said, smiling softly. “What was I saying?”

Ezra grinned wryly. “That’s quite alright, Lyria. Please. Take your time.”

“I was telling you about one thing then I skipped to another.” I cleared my throat. “Let me get back on track. When I’d got home, I’d wash dishes by candle light. Then, I’d light my favorite candle. A Christmas candle.” I inhaled and smiled sweetly. “Scented with bayberries of many Christmases past. That candle was my light in the darkness.

With a steady hand, I’d guard the precious flickering flame. As I entered the small living-room, the light would dance and threatened to be no more. Pulling up an old chair I’d placed the candle tenderly upon it.”

I pointed to an unoccupied area in the living room in front of a window. “My sofa was old, but it was all I had. I’d sit down and pull a chair before me. A ballpoint pen and an old writing tablet held secrets of my sanity.”

I laughed out loud and shook my head. “What would I have done if I couldn’t write stories about husbands who were loving and kind?—Husbands who were grander than life. My writing trances killed the present and took me far away. Many times I laughed aloud while writing.”

Hysterical laughter drove my words. “When I was writing, I could go *any place* I wanted to go. I could be *anyone* I wanted to be. I could love anyone I wanted to love. I created as many Ezras as I needed.” My voice grew quite.

“That night, I made myself comfortable on the old sofa, picked up my pen, then wrote this poem.” I started to walk as I recalled the poem. “He promised life would be so grand, walked down the isle and wrenched my hand. He promised to be kind to me; pad locked the door and took the key. He promised he would never leave; had other plans hidden up his sleeve. He promised there would be no pain, still tears flowed just the same. He promised he would pay the bills, soon I found, he never will. He said you can’t do nothing right, he’d break a dish then start a fight. A frightened rabbit I had become, sightless, helpless, deaf and dumb. Tomorrow he’ll be home to stay.” A single tear ran down my face. “I’ll pack my bags and hide away.”

Ezra’s heart went out to me and he offered his handkerchief. I sniffled, and then blotted my eyes.

He put his arms gently around me. “How did this monster get away with this type of abuse?”

I gazed out the window. I recalled familiar sights in the neighborhood. Shaking my head I admitted, “I don’t know. The abuse didn’t start right away. It started when Aaron needed to see other women.”

“Needed to see other women?” His lips parted in surprise.

I searched Ezra’s eyes for understanding. “See, Aaron had a ravenous sex addiction. It was so bad, that I could not, and did not, want to fill his needs. As a

result, sex came on the wings of a brutal beating.”

Ezra winced. “That’s hard to believe.”

I pursed my lips. “Believe it Ezra. I was given sexually transmitted diseases that Aaron didn’t bother to explain anymore. He would break my plates against the wall, start an argument, then leave to be with his lovers. Aaron’s beatings were linked to alcohol, drugs and his sexual addiction.”

Chapter Thirteen

I blotted another tear forming in my eye. “Before I went to work on a public job, this house was my prison. I was not allowed to leave for any reason, not even to get mail from the mailbox. He would take the phone and lock it in his trunk as he left the house. There was no communication what-so-ever—no access to computers or cell phones.”

I gazed outside. Although it was getting dark, Dennis still stood by my limousine. I smiled. “When Aaron’s friends came over for a drink, they’d turn their faces whenever he struck me.” I elevated my voice, removed my hat, and then dug into my hair with claw like fingers. “He’d snatch out my hair, drag me through the house, then berate me. Aaron didn’t know that one of his friends apologized to me for *his* abuse. He said Aaron didn’t know how to appreciate a good woman.”

I walked into the bedroom gazed around the walls and smiled through my tears. “Bruises would heal, and new bruises would replace them. Often, my arm was twisted behind my back until finally it became weak. I would drop and break things unintentionally.”

Spotting a child’s doll on the floor, I picked it up and absently toyed with

the tousled hair. “Thursdays, started my dreaded weekend. Trying to avoid the abuse, I charted everything I was doing to cause such maltreatment. If I was the problem, I was willing to change.

Soon, I discovered that Aaron’s abuse was a cover for his affairs. In his mind, an altercation was a good reason to leave home. His pretense.” I paused thoughtfully. “His pretense was to cool off. One day, Aaron turned over his plate and started for my throat. I smiled and told him—not necessary. I’ll see you in the morning.”

My gaze encircled the room. “I loved this house, when Aaron wasn’t in it. But you know what, Ezra? When I started telling Aaron I’ll see you in the morning, he actually stopped his fighting. Then he would grin, and leave the house smelling of his favorite cologne.

The payroll checks he took from me, paid for sexual favors. He wouldn’t come home for days. I’d look out the window for hours. My transportation to work depended on Aaron. There was no way to phone in or call anyone for a ride. As a result, I lost many jobs.”

I leaned against the wall, still holding the doll. “During vacation, Aaron would lock me in the motel room. He’d go out and solicit sex from prostitutes. To insure that I couldn’t leave the room, he would take my clothing and purse, then lock them in his trunk. There I would sit, naked and trapped inside the room.

When Aaron returned from his sexual encounters, he would taunt me by telling me how delicious they had been. I'd hold my ears and scream for him to stop talking. It wasn't because I loved him. He had killed my affections long ago. It was simply the principal of the thing.

Aaron would sit on the side of the motel bed drinking beer. Once, he told me about this girl named Passion. "She was as black as my shoe," he said. "And she had long curly hair down to her waist." He stroked his crotch in memory. "She had nice breasts too—the kind that jiggle up and down when she walks. And, fine! She has a nice round rear. The minute she walked in the room, my boy stood at attention. He knows what he likes. "My name is Passion," she said.

"I licked out my tongue and swept it across my lips. "And that's exactly what you're gonna get."

Well, Passion dragged me to a room upstairs. She was wearing a black lace bra, a short leather skirt and had a whip in her hand. She slapped that whip against her palm and I almost messed in my pants. I knew she was gonna give it to me good. Passion didn't need to strip she wasn't wearing no panties no way. She said, "Come and get it Daddy."

And, my boy rolled out in full force. Passion knew how to take a man's nature," Aaron recalled fondly. "Bam! In two seconds She had juiced me like a milking machine."

Aaron was proud of his sexual appetite. The fact that Passion had juiced him was only the beginning of what Aaron required.” I cast my eyes toward the floor in shame. “Time and Time again, Aaron told me of his sexual encounters. I was a prisoner no matter where I was. Aaron held me captive mentally and physically and I allowed it. Instead of fighting back, I would write. I wrote on anything, including motel stationary. One day, I realized my life had become much worse than I could have imagine. At this point I’d given birth to no children, and only God knew why.”

Chapter Fourteen

I opened the back door and spiders scurried from the doorframe, then I walked outside into the crisp air. Ezra followed and listened. “One fall, my childhood friend moved back to town. She needed a place to stay and I couldn’t turn her away. Jessie was an Amazon beauty. We had a wonderful time together. She was the fresh air I needed, and Aaron was smitten by her. His desire to have her consumed him. However, being streetwise, Jessie spurned his advances.

One night, Aaron managed to get Jessie drunk. Behaving kindly, he bought her a bottle of her favorite liquor. Afterwards, he drove away. We had no idea he had poured out half the liquor and laced it with something potent. Eventually, Jessie passed out. Because I had nothing to do, I finally got dressed and went to bed.

That night, Aaron came home to the feast he had prepared. Jessie’s lifeless body was just what he’d dreamed of. In this state she was unable to defend herself. Aaron knelt beside her and started to remove her clothes. He also removed most of his own clothes.”

I held up a finger to make my point. “Now, I was sure I heard Aaron come in,

but now there was silence. A warning ran through my body. I reached under the bed and got the gun. Aaron was so busy that he didn't hear me when I crept upon him.

He had pulled back the curtains and Jessie's naked body glistened in the moonlight. Aaron was on his knees licking her breast, his other hand he had buried between her legs. She didn't respond to his touch and I knew she was unconscious.

I'd caught him in the very act, and denying the obvious was to no avail. Pointing the gun at him, I told him to leave. Like a scared rat, he was so busy pulling up his clothing that he didn't argue. He hit the front door with a thud. Shortly afterwards, I heard his car speeding away.

At the sight of Jessie's nude body, I sank into a heap. It took several wet cloths to wake her. After waking her, I poured several cups of black coffee into her, then explained what happened. I knew we should leave, immediately. We set out walking in the dark. As we braved the darkness Jessie swore and cursed at the thought of Aaron putting his filthy hands on her body.

I left Aaron a number of times. But, to take advantage of a woman who couldn't defend herself—this was the ultimate insult. Then, I realized just how vile Aaron was.”

When I finished my story about Jessie I was back inside the house. “Each

time I tried to start my life over, Aaron would find me. I was walking down the street one evening when he tried to coax me into his car. He was very kind, spoke softly, and offered to buy me dinner. When I refused his invitation he opened the door and snatched me inside the car. Saying he only wanted to talk, he locked the doors and told me to keep still.

I had jumped from his moving car before, so he knew I would run. Aaron drove into the woods and tried to force me to have sex. When I refused, he put me out of the car in the middle of the woods. It was almost midnight. I was scared and tried to find the highway. I had no idea how deep in the woods I really was.

Animals made haunting noises in the distance as weeds rustled beneath my feet. After many hours of crying and wandering through pitch black woods, Aaron finally returned. Laughing, sarcastically, he picked me up, beat me unmercifully, then dumped my body near my parent's home."

Kicking at a piece of trash stuck to the floor I confided, "Finally, I was successful at leaving Aaron. By the time I started my new life, I was scarred mentally and physically. I didn't know *how* to love a man. I wanted God to give me a man who would love me the way he intended. And that's why," I blinked coldly. "I must burn this house down. I have been blessed with you and much success. I have helped many women take that first step. But, I myself still carry around the bitterness, and hatred I should have burned years ago. It isn't about the house,

Ezra. It's what this house represents."

Ezra reached out to me. "Lyria. You are successful. You're beautiful and you're happy- if you allow yourself happiness. You can walk away and leave this house standing."

I shook my head. "No, Ezra. There's one more thing I haven't told you." I strolled down the hallway toward the back room. Once there, I walked over to the wall and slid my fingers across the peeling finish. When I felt sure of my location, I raised my foot and kicked a hole in the wallboard.

Ezra was livid. "What are you doing?"

Without speaking, I raised my foot and kicked the wall again, and again, making the hole wider. Ezra started to tug his hair. "Lyria! What on earth..."

When the hole was large enough I tore the rest open with my hands. Ezra reached for my shoulder and I shrugged his grasp. "Have you lost your mind?"

Suddenly, I stopped. Then, I stood back to admire my work. After I pulled off a little more of the wallboard, I stuck my hand inside the wall. Fishing around inside the cavity my hand caught on something. While Ezra looked on I pulled a long cardboard cylinder from the wall.

Ezra was furious. "Shit Lyria! I didn't know you were going to destroy this place with your bare hands."

Though I was breathing hard, I grinned with satisfaction. "I had to come

back and get this.” I opened the top of the tube and reached inside. When I was positive of my grasp, I pulled out several writing tablets that had been rolled up and stuffed inside the tube. “I must have this.”

Looking at the mess on the floor Ezra stormed, “This is totally insane.”

I tilted my head to one side. “Is it?”

“What is that?” he asked, finally taking an interest.

I shook the aging tablets before his face. “This is my life, Ezra. These are the stories and the poems and the letters I wrote, when I was in bondage.” I unrolled an old notebook and it recoiled with age. “If Aaron caught me writing he would beat me, and destroy my work. I hid my work inside this wall. I knew that, one day—one day I would become a successful writer. I made a promise that when this day came, I would buy this house, and burn this mother down!”

Immediately, Ezra turned. He walked toward the front door. “I’ll tell Dennis to bring the gas.”

“Good,” I tossed him a butterfly kiss. “I have the lighter.”

Dennis walked into the house. His eyes scanned the ceiling and floor. Finally his eyes settled on me. “Ms. Grayson, are you ready?”

“Yes, Dennis.” I pointed to the area around me. “Start with the back bedroom. Sprinkle every room and don’t forget the bathroom.”

“Yes, Ms. Grayson.”

After Dennis poured the gas through-out the house, he poured the last of it on the porch. I placed the tube in the limo and walked back to the house.

Neighbors had gathered in the chilly air. It was obvious they were curious. I instructed, "Dennis, back up the limo." While I walked toward him, he did as instructed.

Walking past the steps, I looked over the horrendous little house. A house that made me want to slit my wrist. A house that made me feel there was no way out.

Just as I raised my fireplace lighter, Ezra tapped me on the shoulder. "Allow me," he said removing the lighter from my grasp. He clicked it playfully. "I can't help but to wonder—whatever happened to Aaron. I felt he should have bared the brunt of your vengeance."

I was walking toward the car, but looked over my shoulder at Ezra. "Oh, didn't I tell you." I turned around and faced him. "Aaron has been jailed for aggravated rape of a child." I nodded. "He's earned his time."

Ezra grimaced. "Let's proceed."

"On second thought, Ezra," I removed the lighter from his hand, "it wouldn't be the same if I allowed you to enjoy my vengeance. I've waited years for this day to arrive."

With all the poisonous venom of a deadly snake, I clicked the lighter then

touched the gasoline soaked porch. Immediately, the house made a loud swoosh as the fire climbed through every room. Within seconds, the house was totally engulfed in flames. Soot and ashes floated on the winter's breeze.

I held Ezra's hand, and watched the colorful flames for a few moments. When the house had succumbed to the fire, I then turned toward my limo. "Dennis, you may call the fire department."

Dennis reached for his cell. "I'm calling them right now, Ms Grayson."

The house crackled, sputtered and fizzled. Black smoke billowed high into the sky. Fire licked violently from the windows as it mocked the years I spent in captivity.

The living room started to collapse as the wooden frame gave way to the powerful flames. I put on my shades, folded my arms, and smiled. My glasses mirrored the embers that glowed hot while sparks and ashes floated all around us.

Before Dennis could lower his phone, I heard sirens in the distance, several in fact. We stepped away from the heat of the flame and leaned against the limo. The reflection of the ferocious flames danced against the tinted glass of the limo. Grasping the brim of my hat, I pulled it over one eye in a reverent nod. "I wish I had a cigarette. This is sooo good!"

When the police and fire trucks arrived they rushed to put out the blaze. Standing firm, I put out my hand to halt their mission. "No," I insisted. "You're

only here to see that the fire doesn't get out of hand."

"Miss," the fireman called, pointing toward the crowd. "These people said you started this fire."

I saw cameras flashing all around me while Mark shrank with embarrassment. "Yes. I did," I replied mechanically.

The fireman secured his hat. "Lady. That's against the law, you know."

Nodding absently I admitted, "Yes, I know." I reached into my pocket. "I have a city permit to burn *my* trash."

The End

No matter how we try to hide it, domestic violence is all around us. There are many SHE'S in this world. I was successful enough to get out, and stay out. There is help for you. Contact the Family Violence representative in your area. Love, doesn't hurt. If you have questions or comments please email me at EmpressLaBlaque@aol.com, or empresslablaque.com.

Family Violence Resources

Break the Silence, Make the Call

The National Domestic Violence Hotline – 1800 799-7233

Domestic Violence Awareness Handbook

<http://www.usda.gov/da/shmd/aware.htm>

Women's Law

<http://www.womenslaw.org/>

Provides legal information and online support for victims of domestic violence or sexual assault.

Domestic Violence Support

<http://www.cafemom.com>

www.myspace.com/empresslablaque

Author Bio

To escape the harsh reality of domestic violence, Empress LaBlaque would write about men who were romantic, devoted and affectionate. As a result, many of these stories were published. Empress considers herself a connoisseur of fine romance and enjoys writing across genres. She is also an advocate for Prevention of Family Violence.

Red Rose Publishing

Chronicles of the Paranormal

Love Among the Thorns

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Black Satin Confessions, Revenge Anthology-Book One

Black Satin Confessions, Revenge Anthology-Book Two-coming

Black Satin Confessions, Revenge Anthology-Book Three-coming