

OLD ENOUGH

THE AGE BETWEEN US (BOOK 1)

CHARMAINE PAULS

PROLOGUE

One month earlier, lunch hour

Jane

DAMN THIS PRETORIA BROOKLYN TRAFFIC. I should've made a reservation in Menlyn, but no other restaurant comes close to Kream in terms of cuisine. The maître d'hôtel knows me well thanks to the three-digit sums Orion Advertising spends on company lunches. He'll hold our table, but punctuality is Francois' pet peeve.

It's only spring, but a freak heatwave makes the car interior stifling hot. The full effect of the air-con hasn't kicked in. A trickle of sweat runs from my armpit down my side under my dress. I tap my fingers on the steering wheel, counting the traffic lights as I pass the stately embassy residencies. Six left to go. Francois will let ten minutes slide, but not fifteen. I hoped I wouldn't have to call, because he's going to sound irritated, which makes me nervous,

and our date will be tense even before it starts. Filling my lungs with positive vibes, I dial Francois on voice commands, but his phone goes straight onto voicemail. I leave a quick message, apologizing about the traffic, and for the next ten minutes my stomach is in a knot until I pull into the parking, right next to his Porsche. I don't relax until I'm inside and spot him in the booth at the back.

When my husband looks up, my heart sinks. His face is perfectly expressionless, which is worse than irritated. He's angry. As the waiter pulls out my seat, Francois flicks back his sleeve and checks his watch.

"Sorry." I sit down and offer the waiter a smile before he leaves. "The traffic was terrible. I left a message." I reach over the table to take his hand. "Did you get it?"

He doesn't pull away, but he doesn't close his fingers around mine like he usually does.

"I have to be back in the office at two," he says.

"I know." He's in the middle of a big architectural project. "We'll eat quickly." Letting go of his hand, I take the polka dot gift box from my bag and put it on his plate. "Happy anniversary."

He stares at it, eyes cast down, and frames his head between his hands while running circles over his temples with his thumbs. Several seconds pass. Disappointment dampens my mood. I've put a lot of thought and effort into the gift. Giving a man who has everything something meaningful isn't easy. We may not be the most passionate couple, but we have a solid, good relationship based on genuine friendship. Twelve years say something. It says we're making this marriage work and it deserves to be celebrated. Francois can be awkward and unresponsive when he's annoyed, but the way he leans back, opens his jacket, and wiggles loose his tie, confuses me. It's as if it's too hot in here when the air-conditioner gives me goosebumps on my arms.

"Hey." I force a laugh, my self-confidence slipping. "Let's not spoil this."

My husband never says what bugs him. He holes himself up and refuses to talk to me, even if I scream until I'm hoarse. We're not doing this on our anniversary.

I motion at the gift and say with renewed enthusiasm, "Open it."

With a firm motion, he puts the box aside and leans his elbows on the table, looking at me intently, but still he doesn't speak.

In three seconds, the tension will leave his face and his annoyance will evaporate. He'll smile and tell me he loves me as much as on our wedding day.

"Are we playing a silent game," I touch my shoe to his under the table, "or are you going to say something?"

Tapping his fingers together, he doesn't break our stare. He continues to delve deep into my eyes for four more heartbeats and then he says, "I'm leaving you."

The words come out of nowhere and everywhere. They're wrong, because he'd never do that to me. He'd never leave me. He promised. Our start wasn't easy, but I've tried my damndest to be the good wife for him, the wife he wanted. We have Abby. He won't do this to his daughter.

"I wanted to tell you before," he says, "but the right opportunity was never there."

Lowering my voice, I motion at the full restaurant. "This is?"

A shutter drops in his regard and his demeanor turns distant, inaccessible. "I thought it best to move as soon as possible. I don't want a drawn-out drama."

I can't process what's happening. There were no warning signs, except for his recent withdrawal, but he always pulls into himself when work gets stressful.

"I'll be out by tomorrow," he continues.

"Why?" My question has nothing to do with him moving out tomorrow.

He doesn't hesitate in his answer. "Debbie."

I only know one Debbie. "From your office?"

“She resigned.” He adds, “Obviously.”

As if that’s a consolation. “How did this happen?”

“We fell in love.”

Tears prick at the back of my eyes, but I blink them away, not wanting witnesses for my pain and humiliation. “How long?”

He gets that closed-off look again. “It’s not important.”

“The hell it is.”

“Jane.” His tone is chastising. “Your language, please.”

“Can we talk about this at home?”

“There’s no point. My mind’s made up.”

“Yes, there is a point. There are things to be said, explained. If you’re so certain of your decision as you say you are—”

“Jane, stop. It’s hard enough as it is. There’s nothing else to say.”

It feels as if my heart is going through a blender. Rejection and betrayal are the rotating blades in my chest. A masochistic part of me argues I deserve this for not loving Francois like he loved me when we started out, but our beginning was anything but normal. No one, least of all Francois, can judge me.

It’s hard to keep my voice even and not give in to the hysterics that hover beyond the threadbare limit of my self-control. “You owe me at least this.”

His answer is not to answer.

“You’ll break your promise, walk out on me, *and* deny me closure?”

Still no answer.

Suddenly, I know why he chose the restaurant over the privacy of our home. In public, he doesn’t have to deal with the breakdown I feel coming.

Pushing back my chair, I get to my feet. “Excuse me, but I don’t have an appetite.”

Relief washes over his features. “I understand. Maybe you should take the rest of the day off, and we’ll discuss the logistics tonight when Abby’s in bed.”

No. I fought for this career, which happened late in my life. I’m

not calling in with a family emergency to hide at home with red-rimmed eyes and a hole in my ribcage. If I ever needed to throw myself into work, it's now.

"You take the rest of the day off." I push the gift back to him. "It's a fruitcake with marzipan." Francois' favorite. It took hours to make the tiny Rubik's Cube—Francois' only weakness—that decorates the miniature cake. The Rubik's Cube is how we met. It's a perfect replica of our wedding cake. "Give it to one of the beggars outside."

With as much pride as a rejected woman can possess, I turn my back on the man who's given up on us. Every step I trace back to my car cracks and breaks under my feet, my world falling away.

How did this happen?

I don't know, and I do. It happened twelve years ago, with the tragedy that set the course of my life.

I just can't face it, yet.

Couldn't then. Can't now.

Brian

IT'S LUNCH HOUR. The restaurant is full. Golden globes serve as lampshades. The white tablecloths look heavy and rigid, like they've been starched to the tables in forty-five degree angles. A pianist plays an unrecognizable tune on a grand piano, the notes subtle enough to provide background music without hampering conversation. The dining room is surprisingly quiet. The hushed conversations are as inhibited as the soft clink of the silver cutlery.

Depressing.

Men in fancy suits and women wearing expensive dresses sip mineral water or wine, their gazes stealing over me as my work

boots thud on the shiny floor. The room, and everyone in it, feels fake. I should leave. I don't have time to piss, never mind to waste in a place I already know I'm going to hate. Instead of swinging back for the door, I press forward. This is the least I owe Mike for securing the job for me. I'm not going to kick him in the teeth after he'd put his ass on the line to hire me. The headwaiter's eyebrows pull together at the trail of caked mud I leave behind. They seem a lot like crumbs, in case I have to find my way back to who I am, which is not what's inside here.

I take a seat at the bar from where I have a view of the room so I can spot Mike when he arrives. A couple of blondes are staring openly. They're either twins or not far apart in age. When I boldly return the stare, both turn red and giggle. I'm not interested, but I'm not a circus attraction or fuck-toy to be gawked at. The woman across the table from them with the same wheat-colored hair, who I assume to be their mother, turns slightly in her seat, her eyes measuring me with cool hostility as she takes in my attire. Her gaze lingers on my hands, and then she looks away, leaning over the table and whispering to the girls. They lower their heads, but the giggling continues. I stare at my fingernails, black from grime that no scrubbing can erase, and shrug inwardly. Screw her.

The barman places a coaster in front of me. "What will it be, sir?"

He's dressed in a stiff white shirt and black waistcoat. Poor fellow must be feeling like he's in a straitjacket.

"Coke, please."

From my vantage point, I observe the floor. What's it like to be one of them, to order a meal without looking at the price? What's it like to say, 'Hey, let's have lunch on Friday at Oscars,' like it's grabbing a quarter pounder at McDo? Rubbing a hand over the stubble on my chin, I feel my troubles bone-deep. Fifteen grand deep, to be exact. Fifteen grand, or Sam doesn't go to school. She's my kid sister, and I'm all she's got, which is why I'm busting my

balls slapping bricks at the building site instead of taking notes in my Consumer Behavior class.

I check my watch. Mike's late. Staring out the window, I look beyond the sculpture of the applauding hands to the State Theater doors. I'll give it another ten minutes before I pay the outrageous price for the Coke and be gone.

A suave male voice speaks up on my right. "I bet you're the kind of guy who makes panties drop with the flick of your fingers."

I turn toward my neighbor. He's lean, regal, and tall. He wears a dark suit and white shirt with a silk scarf. His black hair is combed back, not a strand out of place. On his left hand, he sports a golden ring with a square onyx stone. If it weren't oversized, it would've seemed old-fashioned, like my grandfather's wedding ring. His nails are trimmed and clean, his hands soft and white.

He plays with the stem of his wineglass as he studies me. "That one over there, for instance." He motions at a brunette who I judge to be in her thirties. "I bet you can have her bent over the vanity in the toilet and fucked in less than ten minutes."

The bartender puts my drink down in front of me. I mumble a thank-you and take a sip.

"That one," the guy points a finger not so discreetly at a woman in the corner who meets my eyes squarely and gives me a broad smile, "will be on her knees under the table in under ten seconds."

I scoff at that. "I think you underestimate women."

"I know a sex magnet when I see one."

"Thanks, but I'm straight."

He chuckles. "I'm not hitting on you."

"Then what are you doing?"

"*Sussing* you out."

"For what?"

"A job."

I always need a job, but something about this guy makes my sixth sense stand on end. "I'm not looking."

“No?” He runs a gaze over my faded cotton shirt, torn jeans, and have-seen-better-days boots. “Are you sure?”

The asshole has me. Half of the time, I feel as if I have poor carved on my forehead, and the other half I feel like I’m naked, like everyone can see into my soul.

He faces forward and brings his glass to his lips. “Ten grand,” he says over the rim.

“Excuse me?”

“Ten easy grand to seduce a woman.”

He looks back at me without as much as a blink. The guy’s serious.

“You’re offering me money to seduce a woman?”

“That’s what I said. I’ll need proof. A photo.”

“Whoa.”

I push back my barstool, but his hand on my arm stops me with a surprisingly strong grip.

“Hear me out,” he says.

“No thanks.”

“Ask me why.”

I shake off his touch and fish for a bill in my pocket.

“Drinks are on me.” He flicks his fingers at the barman. “Put it on my tab.” Then he turns back to me. “Go on. Ask me why.”

Fine. I’ll play his game. I’ve got time to kill, anyway. “Why?”

“She was engaged to my friend. Had an affair not even a week before the wedding.”

Classic case of cold feet. Nothing I haven’t heard before. “Your friend caught them red-handed and it broke his gentle heart.”

He chucks back the rest of his wine. “Then he killed himself.”

Fuck. That’s heavy. Feeling like a jerk about my mocking remark, I utter a sorry-assed apology.

“It’s not like he put a gun to his head,” the guy says, giving a soft laugh. “He took off on his bike and crashed it on the highway.”

There’s nothing I can say to that, so I sip my soda, letting the guy get his friend and the cheating fiancée off his chest.

“Now you know,” he continues, “why I want revenge.”

“What are you going to do with the photo?”

“Nothing. I just need proof.”

“This will make you feel better?”

He looks at me again. “A whole lot.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I want her to fall off the high and mighty throne she managed to mount through the years. I want her to remember who she truly is, and that the fake life she created for herself is nothing but a fairy tale. I want her to remember she’s a whore.”

“You want me to make a woman feel like a whore,” I say with disbelief.

“As long as you fuck her, I don’t care *what* you make her feel.”

“I don’t want to preach, but—”

“So don’t.” He takes a photo from his pocket and pushes it toward me.

Despite my intention not to get further involved in whatever crazy fuck this dandy has going on, my gaze is drawn to the piece of paper lying on the counter between us. The woman in the picture is looking away from the camera, like she’s not aware of the photo being taken. Her gaze is proud. It’s fixed on the horizon and I have an overwhelming urge to know what she’s staring at so intently. Her short, blonde hair is the color of moonlight. It’s styled in waves around her face, accenting her good bone structure. Pale, glossy lipstick makes her full lips look lush. Between those lips and gray-blue Bambi eyes, I can’t decide which is her best feature. Whatever the case, she’s a looker. She’s also a lady. I can tell from the fancy dress with the matching jacket and nude-colored shoes, but most of all from the way she carries herself. She seems self-assured, wealthy, and cultured. Way out of my league.

“She’s pretty. I’m sure you won’t battle finding a gigolo to take up your offer.” My stomach churns at the thought.

He pockets the photo. “Ten grand.”

Fuck. Ten grand is half of my problems gone, and two thirds of Sam's school year covered. Still... "Nah."

"She's single, so it's not like you're risking breaking up a marriage."

I want to remain indifferent, but that changed the minute I laid eyes on her. I'm curious with an interest that goes deeper than what it should. It won't admit it, but I'll be damned if I don't feel it in my gut.

"How long ago?"

"That my friend died?" He blotches his brow with the paper napkin. "Twelve years."

"Why now?"

"She recently got divorced."

I want to ask if it's because of his consideration for her marriage that he didn't act on his plan before, but he speaks before I can utter the question.

"Go check her out before you make up your mind."

The idea of stalking a woman—*this* woman—makes my insides crawl, but this guy won't give up. This isn't a plan he concocted today. It's obvious he's been walking around with the fantasy in his head for years. It's taken root and grown in his soul. That's what revenge does. A man can't unearth it like a weed. It seeps into your heart until your blood is as black as your intentions. I want no part of his revenge. As I open my mouth to tell him so, he says, "Name your price."

I laugh. How easy everything seems for people with money. "Fifty."

I throw the word at him, meaning to end this game with the ridiculous sum, but he regards me with the same, unblinking stare from earlier.

"Done." Reaching inside his pocket, he takes out a business card, flips it over, and slides it my way. "Write down your name and email."

This time, my laugh is forced. "I agreed to nothing."

“Understood.”

His easy admittance catches me off guard.

He takes back the card, produces a pen from his inside jacket pocket, and scribbles something on the back before slipping it into my shirt pocket. “Her name and address. Go check her out and decide if she’s worth a fuck for fifty grand. When you send me a photo of the two of you naked doing the deed—and I want a clear shot of her face *and* the action—I’ll transfer the money. Don’t even bother with Photoshop. I’ll know.” He puts the pen on my napkin. “Name and email address. That’s all I need.”

It’s not a deal, not until I’ve decided, or so I tell myself as I pick up the pen and start writing.

“Good,” he says when I’m done, pocketing the napkin with my details. He holds out his hand.

After a second’s hesitation, I accept, returning his firm shake.

“It’s a deal.”

His smile is polished and toothy, reminding me of a crocodile, but there’s something melancholic about him, a presence of sadness that haloes his aura like a crown of thorns. I’m still gripping his hand when he gets to his feet.

He studies my face. “How old are you?”

“Twenty.”

His smile is knowing. “How many months before you turn twenty?”

The man is no fool. “Eight.”

“Perfect. I’m looking forward to hearing from you.”

He lets go first, leaving me sitting there with an outstretched hand and a business card burning in my pocket. My gaze follows him out of the restaurant to the street where a car waits. The chauffeur gets out and opens the door. A few pedestrians pass, obscuring my view, and then the car takes off and he’s gone.

Did this just happen? Did I man in a black suit just offered me fifty grand to seduce his dead friend’s cheating fiancée? Taking the

card from my pocket, I stare at the embossed print on the white paper. It's an email address. Nothing more.

I don't have to do it. Just because I said I'll check it out and shook hands on the deal doesn't mean I'm committed. Then again, I've done worse. I'm not going to pretend to be good man.

Mike walks up to me, his smile easy. "Hey, mate." He slaps me on the back and takes a seat. "Sorry I'm late. Got held up by one of the ever-complaining contractors. How's things?"

"It's a strange world, Mike."

"You're in a philosophical mood."

"Just saying that everything happens for a reason."

I do believe in karma. I believe what you think is what you get. Haven't I been thinking ten grand when I walked in here?

He motions at the card in my hands. "A girl gave you her number? Already?" He gives me a mixed look of admiration and envy. "I can't leave you alone for ten minutes and this is what happens."

"It's nothing."

I don't sound convincing, least of all to myself.