

No History To Speak Of

A teaser to Sympath – Sentinels of Eden #3 by Carolyn Denman

The envelope fell to the floor, ignored in favour of its contents. George Durante let his eyes blur, feeling his heart thud against his ribs, but when he focussed his vision again, the numbers on the letter in front of him hadn't changed. Must be a mistake. Too many digits. He opened the locked file behind the till, flicking through the files to 'D' and drew out the valuation certificate he'd arranged weeks ago. Fingers that had been trained to remain steady while setting the tiniest of jewels, trembled just a little as he laid the certificate next to the letter on the counter. His cousin's signature embellished the certificate with inked promise, clearly stating that the gemstone was worth \$28,400. Jimmy had never been wrong or unreliable with his valuations. George trusted him. That figure seemed right for a ruby of that size and clarity, and the client had been very tempted to part with it for that price, although she had denied it, and left his shop muttering that she would never sell her husband's wedding gift. He was not one to push, and after eleven years of working in Nalong, he knew he didn't need to. Mrs Doolan would be back once the bank sent another foreclosure notice for her farm.

She'd need a lot more than \$28,400 to solve their financial problems though, which was why George had asked his cousin to send out a few extra enquiries. He'd hoped that some of his family contacts might have yielded a better offer for her. If he could find a buyer willing to pay a bit extra for the gem, she might just be able to tip the balance with the bank. Just enough to hold them off for another season. Just long enough for the rains to return.

The ruby was stunning. It had been a joy to work with when Geoff Doolan had brought it to him eight years earlier. George had polished the stone, bringing out its deep crimson shine the way blood returns to chilled fingers when you rub warmth back into them. And the setting Geoff had requested suited it perfectly. A heart-shaped 8.17 carat ruby, just under 12mm diameter, cradled by golden angel's wings – the ideal wedding gift for a girl named Ruby. The piece was pretty enough to sell for well above its value if he found the right buyer, and according to the letter he'd just received, it had apparently attracted someone's attention.

George picked up the typed, unsigned letter again and almost lowered his magnifying glasses from his forehead to examine it, as if he could pick out the flaw by staring at the ink more closely. His extended family in Melbourne had some...dubious contacts. Could he trust this? Celarsi Holdings. Never heard the name before, but he also knew better than to pry into it. If they wanted to offer that much for the necklace, then he should do his job and arrange the transaction. Just how much of a cut should he take? The valuation certificate was genuine, as far as he could tell. Jimmy wouldn't risk his reputation by faking it, but it had taken longer than expected to receive it. Had the gem been sent for a second opinion? If so, he hadn't been advised of the result – no, he couldn't think too hard about those implications. Ruby Doolan wouldn't know how much he was selling it on for. He genuinely wanted to help her, but this was business, and there was nothing legally wrong with buying her jewellery at whatever price she was willing to agree to. If some rich lady had fallen in love with the necklace after seeing the photos he'd sent, and wanted to play games with her husband's money, that was not for him to judge.

His hand hovered over the receiver for a few seconds before he picked it up and dialled.

'Hello, Ruby Doolan? This is George from Durante Diamonds. I've been thinking about your situation and I'd like to help. I've been studying the current market and I believe I'm in a position to be able to offer you a slightly better price than the certified valuation. Is there a convenient time we can meet to discuss it?'

She'd crossed a line, for better or worse. There was no going back. Old paint flakes nicked at Ruby's fingers as she gripped the metal gate, left over from a time when the gate had been decorated as the entrance to the home paddock. Now it had been recycled to replace yet another damaged sheep yard. Too many makeshift repairs. It had gone on for too long but that would change now. Ruby's fingers drifted to the base of her throat again, searching for treasure... and meeting nothing but sweat. She never used to take it off, not even for the heaviest of farm jobs. Never once had she worried about losing it because she would have noticed in an instant if its comforting weight had disappeared. Her wedding gift. The promise and reminder of the connection she had to a land that she'd never seen. Her most precious possession, sacrificed, replaced with a few vital bank documents and a hundred skinny sheep that didn't seem to appreciate the abundance of their new home.

She prodded another wanderer with her foot, guiding it back through the gate to follow the others. The animal's piteous bleating filled her ears with mourning. She was tempted to scream at the creatures to move. Didn't they understand what she'd given up to be able to buy them? So they could crop at the sweet autumn pasture and fatten and grow? *Start eating*, she wanted to growl. *Eat yourselves silly. Grow and thrive and make new lambs so we can recoup your cost and get back on our feet. You owe me.* Instead she remained silent, and listened to the bleating rebuke of each animal as they passed by her worn-out boots. Even their gentle golden eyes seemed filled with condemnation. The guilt felt like acid in her chest. Her wedding gift. Gone. Who was she? Was she the woman who valued money over her husband's gifted heirloom? Or was she the woman who would give up her prized possession to secure her family's financial future? To ensure her son would retain custody of the land they were all bound to? Guilt was a healthy thing. It helped guide a person's choices. But what if both choices led to sickening guilt? What then?

Ruby felt his eyes on her. Geoff was well behind her, coaxing the last of the stock into the chute for tagging, but she felt his presence as clearly as if she was looking right at him. Was he watching her with the same disappointed expression as the sheep? Disappointment and regret. She could handle those. She could take his admonition and bundle it in as part of the sacrifice she had offered for the sake of her duty. Except that admonition was not what she saw in her husband's eyes these days. Instead, she saw her own guilt reflected there. He felt responsible. As if he should have done more to keep the finances from tearing at their sacred ties.

As the last ewe trotted through the gateway, Ruby hoisted the sagging gate and closed it. She turned to face her husband but Geoff wasn't looking at her at all. His eyes were on the hills to the west, clearly lost in thoughts of a simpler world. A world where the word 'foreclosure' didn't exist. Ruby Doolan lifted her chin. That word didn't exist here either. Not on this farm. Not while she had a say in it. Two guilts to choose from. She had rejected one, and embraced the other. Embraced and swallowed it down to swirl as acid in her chest until it had become something more than guilt. Something far less healthy. *Shame.*

Ruby had never heard the two of them argue before. They were terrible at it. Someone should show them how it was done. Maybe they should spend more time with her aunts and uncles. Uncle Willie could show Geoff a thing or two about how to properly dig his heels in. Ruby was tempted to intervene, but since the whole situation was her fault, it would only make things worse. So instead she waited among the sugar gum saplings, watching her husband and his best friend bickering as they paced along the riverbank. They hadn't noticed her arrive – too caught up in their mutual fretting.

'We have to get it back, Geoff. It feels wrong.' Kiah was twisting her wedding ring around her finger.

Geoff rolled his shoulders back, easing the tight muscles in his neck. 'How? Even if they returned my calls, it's unlikely they'd agree to sell it back to me. And if they did, how would I pay for

it? Our debts might be back to a manageable level now, but that doesn't mean the bank would be stupid enough to lend us more. Especially not for buying jewellery. What would you have me do, Kiah? Sell the farm?'

Their neighbour paused to glare at him for a moment, and then resumed pacing. 'That can never happen. We'll find another way. Ruby should have found another way.'

'She did. It was a logical solution. You need to stop blaming her for doing her job.'

'Her job? Her job is to keep you safe so you can do yours. Your job – and mine – is to not let things like this happen! That gem doesn't belong here. I've never been comfortable with her wearing it out in public, let alone sending it out into the world. We need to get it back.'

'Why?'

Kiah stopped and put her hands on her hips. Her ponytail kept swinging as if it couldn't stop its own agitated pacing. It reminded Ruby of a cat's tail, announcing Kiah's irritation to any who would dare to argue with her.

'What do you mean, "why?" Its origins are not Earthly. Who knows what trouble it could cause? What if people come searching for more rubies?'

There was no reply from Geoff. His lips parted and he watched Kiah with an avid expression, as if he was waiting for her to do something.

She frowned, leaning away from him. 'What's that look for?'

Geoff sighed. 'Nothing. No one's likely to come looking for more. I made certain Mr Durante knew the gem had been in my family for generations. Then I reminded him that not all of my family have First Nations heritage. He would have assumed I was telling him the ruby had come from distant family in Europe.'

'You lied?' Kiah laughed. 'Really?'

'Technically, no. But what difference does it make? We lie all the time, Kiah. Our main purpose in life is to deceive people.'

'That doesn't mean it suits you.'

'Probably not, but I'm pretty good at it. I managed to deceive George Durante without using an outright lie that could be caught out. Just like you're deceiving Anthony's family into believing you actually intend to move out of Nalong to live closer to them.'

Kiah looked away from his challenging gaze, her eyes drifting instead to the water flowing past them. 'That was Anthony's idea. Not mine. It isn't going to end the way he thinks it will. Chances are it will push them further away, not bring them closer. How am I supposed to argue against his sanguine attitude? He always believes everything will work out fine. "All will be well". He's the most laidback Guardian I've ever known. Total opposite to your Guardian who seems to think you need protecting even when you're just chatting to your neighbour down by the river.' Her next words were louder. 'Do you really think we don't know you're here, Ruby?'

She should have known. Proximity to the river always seemed to heighten Cherubim senses.

'I just didn't want to interrupt. I wanted to see who won. I think Geoff came the closest. He almost had you believing it, Kiah.' Ruby stepped out from the tree line and approached them, one hand almost straying to the empty place on her neck before she caught herself.

'Believing what?'

'That magicking my necklace back was necessary to protect Eden.'

With a groan, Kiah stepped off the rock she was balancing on and plunged waist-deep into the icy river. 'If only those tales were true,' she said, before splashing her face and hair. She didn't look at all uncomfortable. As if the river were a warm bath she'd been looking forward to. 'Then I could just hold out my hand and command the necklace to land in it.' She held her arm out, palm up, with an expectant look on her face. Nothing happened.

'Then what?' Geoff asked, turning his back on her splashing and apparently not interested in her answer. Instead he took Ruby's hand and started walking backwards, playing his favourite game. He locked his gaze on her and walked faster. Backwards. Right towards a bunch of uneven river stones. Ruby's jaw clenched, and she tried to look away. He was going to trip, roll his ankle and then

land on his arse. She was supposed to stop him. *Don't be afraid*, his brown eyes assured her as they kept walking. *All will be well.*

It wasn't. He tripped, and Ruby took over the dance, reflexes kicking in to take his weight before his sideways foot could touch the ground. She twisted. He laughed, and relaxed into her care. It was all over in a moment. He was standing, supported by her arms locked around his waist as if she was ready to pick him up altogether. With a kiss, he convinced her to relax her grip.

'Monster,' she called him.

'You never let me fall,' he said. 'Just once, don't you think it might be fun to fall? Together? A tangle of limbs and bumping collarbones?'

With a dubious look at the tumbled river stones at their feet, Ruby let out a short laugh. 'Sure. Then I can heal you while you carry me back to the house with my two broken ankles. So romantic.'

'Or I could just carry you back to the house anyway. Where's Harry?'

'Last I saw, he and Annie were stocking their hidden cubby under the back porch with snacks and comic books.'

'Snacks? So they might not come out for hours.'

Ruby felt a warm flutter in her belly at the look in her husband's eyes. Almost enough to dislodge the guilt. Almost. Until the warm flutter was replaced with an icy splash.

Kiah grinned at them both as she splashed them again. 'Go on then, Geoff. Pick her up and carry her up the hill, *all* the way to the house. You sound romantic, and Ruby weighs practically nothing, but I'd love to watch you try to make it the whole way without dropping her on her head.'

'What a humiliating end to a Guardian's life,' Ruby said. 'Being dropped on my head.'

Of course, then Geoff had to prove to them both that he was manly enough to make it up the hill with her hoisted over his shoulder. Not so romantic, but fun enough to distract all three of them from the unformed compulsions that buzzed in the roots of their teeth.

The barking from the aged blue heeler echoed off the tin machinery shed as the sedan crunched to a halt on the loose gravel. Ruby rubbed her elbows to sooth a prickle of apprehension. Geoff was in the shed, searching the dusty shelves for the right sized ratchet-head she'd asked for so she could fix the hot water service. Harry was in the kitchen, doing what all nine-year-old boys do an hour before lunch – hunting for snacks.

A stocky man in a business suit emerged from the sedan, tossing his sunglasses on the driver's seat. He appeared to be in his thirties, with dark hair, thick eyebrows, and a strong jawline that spoke of Italian descent. The man gave the yard a quick appraisal, and then checked his watch, a gaudy thing designed to impress clients.

Ruby met him at the front door.

'Mrs Doolan? My name is Paul Dashner. I've been asked to make some enquiries on behalf of Celarsi Holdings about an item you recently sold to them. May I come in?'

Guardian instincts barred the doorway. The man wasn't a threat, and yet he made her very uncomfortable. Whatever he had to say, he could say it where he was.

She crossed her arms. 'My husband tried to call the company. Couldn't even get a call back, and yet you've driven all the way up here from, where, Melbourne? What is it you want to know, Mr Dashner?'

The man licked his lips as if assessing her attitude before framing a reply. 'We were advised that the ruby had been in your family for a long time. The new owner is curious about its origins. Can you tell me its history?'

A tug at her instincts told her that Geoff had emerged from the shed and was heading towards them.

'The history of my ruby? It has no history to speak of.'

The man waited for more. His expression almost stern.

'What am I supposed to tell you? Geoff's father gave it to him. I don't know exactly where it came from originally.'

Paul Dashner gave a cool smile. 'Perhaps Geoff knows more.'

'More about what?' her husband asked as he stepped up onto the porch with his arms laden with tools. He dumped them at her feet like an offering to the Goddess of Broken Things.

'Nothing. He was just leaving,' Ruby said, stepping forward over the tools and closing the door behind her. She gestured for the man to start moving back to his car, but he ignored her.

'Geoff Doolan? My apologies for not returning your calls. My employer is curious about the ruby you sold us. Was it mined locally?'

Geoff's face paled and Ruby's heart sank. This was exactly what she had repeatedly assured him wouldn't happen. Why would they care about the origins of one ruby? It had great clarity, and excellent colour, but it wasn't exactly a museum piece.

Her husband's voice held no trace of the swallowed-tongue guilt she knew he felt. 'Not locally, no.'

'Can you tell me anything about its history? For insurance purposes, you understand. If the owner ever needs to replace it, he would like to get as close a match as possible. Even just the country it came from would be helpful information.'

'I'm sorry, but I never asked.' Geoff started walking to the man's car, and Ruby followed, hoping the man would take the hint.

'Do you have any more?'

And with those words, the air became still. Ruby stared at her husband. Geoff stopped walking, closed his eyes and pressed his lips together. His hands were clenched into fists and Ruby's Guardian heartbeat raced to catch up to his. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed the kitchen curtain twitch as her son's concerned face looked out to see what was happening.

Everything waited. The breeze paused. The birds watched on, silent. The old dog stood, tongue hanging and eyes more alert than they had been in years, as if waiting for a command. She waited for it too. She could feel the authority in the space between air particles. The whole world was frozen in anticipation of a spoken word, a decree to tell it what to do, how it could serve.

Geoff turned, stepped up to Paul Dashner and looked him right in the eye. 'There are no more gems. You will tell your employer not to enquire further, and you need not be afraid of his reply. There is nothing to be afraid of.'

Instead of the confusion Ruby expected in response to Geoff's words, the business man's shoulders relaxed, and he smiled. 'That is good news,' he said. 'I'll tell him there are no more gems.'

Ruby looked on, astounded, as the man got back into his car and drove away. How long before Geoff's influence wore off and he began to question what had just happened? Would he come back, demanding an explanation?

'Geoff. Why would you say that? "Tell your employer not to enquire further?" You know that will only make them think we have something to hide.'

Her bonded charge turned to her and held out his right hand, still clenched into a fist. His eyes were haunted, shining with a sacred light that held both terror and beauty.

'We do have something to hide, and I don't know that I did the right thing,' he whispered.

'Well, I understand exactly how that feels,' she said, ready to comfort him, but just as she was about to take his hand, he opened it, and she gasped.

There, resting on his palm was a ruby cradled by angel's wings. Its light pulsed in resonance with Geoff's heartbeat – the rhythm of his life-blood that she always felt more clearly than her own. Sunlight sparkled from the jewel like tiny secrets escaping from its core.

Yet more heavy secrets that they now had to guard with their lives.