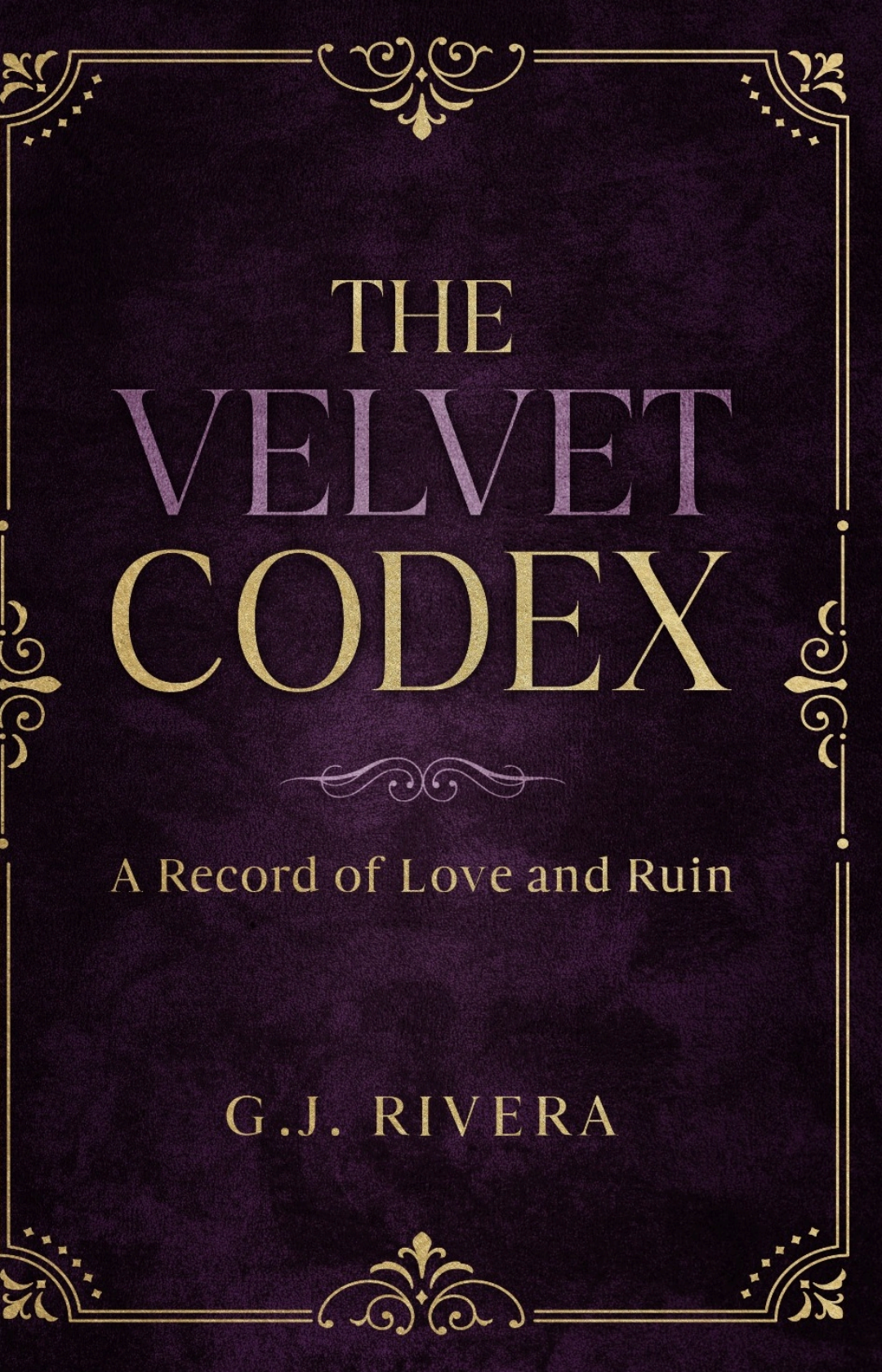




THE VELVET CODEX



A Record of Love and Ruin

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Chapter 5

The Love That Tried to Stay

September 9th, 2019

11:16 AM

Bertha's Mussels in Fells Point

"Intermission has ended. Please be seated."

Scarlett.

Scar.

I usually try to start with the who, what, when, where, and how. But she was all of that. So her name had to come first in this.

Most people in my notes take paragraphs to unfold. Their essence dances just out of frame. Blurry, poetic, and evasive. But Scar? Her name didn't need context. It needed surrender. You say it once, and you already know the shape she leaves behind.

And that's what she was... an imprint that stayed.

Pressed into me like a seal into hot wax.

Permanent.

Painful only if you tried to pull her out.

She is... not was... Scarlett.

Not like the color.

The mark. The warning. The reminder. I didn't choose her name. She handed it to me. Branded it into me.

I met her during the dullerest of days that turned into the dullerest of weeks. It seemed like stretches of my life would pass by as if I was just walking through them to get them over with. An emotional flatline buried in paperwork, routine, and pretending not to resent people for their small talk. I didn't dislike people. I disliked having to give more than I needed to.

I was hanging out... working nights... sleeping. The American Dream. I was eating silence for breakfast and washing it down with overexposure from others. I didn't think much about who I was anymore. Just the functions I served... Mr. Employee, Mr. Graduate... a shell, a vessel.

I was trying not to think of Marina on certain days. I did not want to say her name, much less imagine it. It was simpler to give myself the illusion she was just another person in my life. Have you ever pictured the thousands of ways things could have gone? The fifteen ways you said something different, the five ways you spoke up. How about when you're in the shower and every thought is about how you imagined your best self handling things differently? Daydreaming had become a setup, like my own mind had placed a trap for me to fall into, and I fall... and fall. Like Alice, but instead of Wonderland... it's just wandering.

But then I saw her...

A dreamcatcher in a nightmare shift. My flicker of neon at the end of a fluorescent tunnel.

Her red hair looked dyed over a blonde base. But she wore it like it was her truth. Green eyes that seemed to reflect what you wanted to see in them. Skin pale and sun-freckled in a way that said "I used to play outside before the world turned on me." She wasn't trying to be noticed. That's just how she was. Her whole presence whispered in a scream... *I'm tired, but I'll outlast you all.*

"Dori," my manager barked from across the dining room, dragging me out of my thoughts.

I can't believe this chud called me that...

"This is Scarlett. You're training her today. Try not to be weird."

She looked up just as he grinned, ready for his next joke.

"He stares off sometimes like he's planning to take us all out. Don't let that throw you off. He's good at this job."

I didn't correct him. I didn't smile. Just gave her one of those subtle nods that said I'm not interested in this either, but welcome aboard.

She extended her hand anyway, like assertion wasn't aggression. It was awareness.

"Nice to meet you, Dorian."

"Scar...? Mind if I call you that? I'm pretty lazy with names."

"Sure..." she replied the way someone does when they don't care yet but will fix this later.

We started our shift. I walked her through the steps of service I barely believed in. She took notes on the system. Actually took notes... Who does that?

—◆◆◆—

???

Me!

Uh... Anyway...

—◆◆◆—

She asked questions like she cared. I could see it, though... she was only trying, not because she wanted this job, but because she knew time wasted from not caring was no different from caring once the time was already spent. We were stuck in this life, and she was existing in it instead of resisting.

The register froze on her after she swiped a card, and the transaction screen circled and circled. I was wondering if she was going to ask what to do, but...

"Typical," she said out loud like she wasn't the new employee.

She stared at it, sighed through her nose, and knelt down to mess with the cords. A plug pull, a reset, and the screen lit back up and printed out the receipt like it owed her money.

“No way,” she muttered, almost proud. “Your computers suck like my last job. Perfect!”

I didn’t say anything at first. Just watched the way her fingers hovered and danced to grab the receipt. Calm, practiced... just someone who had confidence in each next movement.

After she dropped it off and cleaned up her area, I decided to talk to her like a human for once that day, with the most inhuman interaction I could think of.

“You always fix what’s broken?”

She looked at me... caught off guard... not because I was flirting, but because I wasn’t.

“My brother always said, ‘Nothing is truly broken, Scarlett, just not fixed yet.’ I live by that.”

I nodded. That was the moment. You know that moment. Arrow to the heart? Butterflies in the stomach? Head rush? You can name the thousands of ways it’s described, and I swore I felt every single one in those fifteen seconds.

She mentioned earlier how her laptop was older than most kids on the internet, and I hadn’t thought much of it then. But seeing her with that register, the way she didn’t think twice once it rebooted... I realized. She didn’t replace things. She didn’t give up on things. She wasn’t a quirky tech chick I made up. She just kept things running. She made things *last*.

And for the first time in forever, I wondered if maybe that’s what I needed.

Not a spark.

Not a savior.

Just someone who saw broken things and stayed anyway.

We kept moving through the day. I watched her move through customers like she was sleepwalking, but functional. She wasn’t bubbly, but she played the part in a way that made people think she was. But she wasn’t cold either... she gave off this please-don’t-waste-my-time type of energy. She was existing in the most human way. Like someone who could

be mistaken for bored or apathetic... until you realized she was just watching everything, analyzing the room, and getting a feel for what the space was about. She didn't just jump in.

When our shift was over, I didn't even pretend to act casual. I finished up my papers and sprinted toward her as she packed up. I had to make sure I did this differently. I had to make sure I didn't just let things happen.

"Hey!" I said, stepping toward her as she clocked out.

"You're probably going to have like the whole workplace asking for your number by next week. I figured I'd ask early."

She blinked. Stared. Evaluated. Maybe even judged.

I rushed. "Not to be too forward, I just... don't usually enjoy people in the mundane the way I did with you today. And you seem like someone I'd want to know before everyone else does."

She gave the slightest smile. Lips still tight. But shoulders relaxed.

"Sure," she replied. "When you put it like that, I guess I could give Mr. Trainer my number before I become Miss Popular? Slightly better than being referred to as fresh meat or the new girl."

There were hints of sarcasm and seriousness in her voice. I just couldn't tell where either one landed in her statements.

I hurried into my next statement. "Maybe that was a little too weird of an approach? I'm just trying to figure out how to be—"

She pressed her finger against my mouth, and I felt like I could be quiet for the rest of my life just to feel her simple touch.

She grabbed an old receipt and her pen to write her number down.

"By the way, you're not as strange as you make it seem. Mysterious? Maybe. Short with words? Sure. Weird? No. Our manager, though? That guy is a creep. I've never had such a long orientation process." She looked to see if I cared and continued, "Unless he's your friend, then he's cool, I guess."

"No, he's not a friend of mine," I said.

“Perfect. Then maybe we can be friends.” She slammed her number into my chest playfully. “I want a text immediately the second I walk out. That’s what *friends* do.”

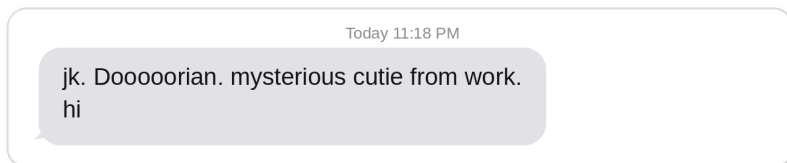
Yeah, but in my head, friends don’t stick around after work for thirty minutes just playing this game.

She said goodbye without words. She just waved, and it felt like passages of time happening in front of me. I could see her, after our first date, giving me the same wave. I could see her giving that same gesture to the attendees after our wedding.

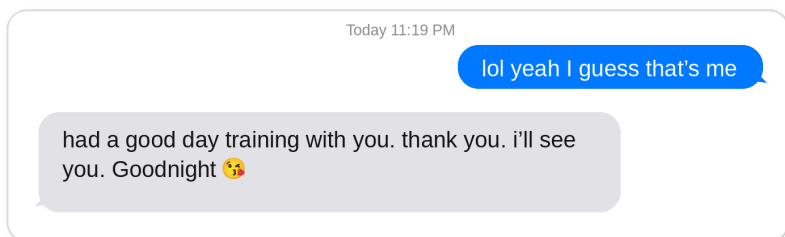
As she entered her car and the door shut, I sent her a text before she could even turn the engine on.



My heart dipped just enough to sting... until the next message came.



I laughed. Alone. In the dark. But I laughed because it felt cute. It felt nice to have someone joke with me.



I stared at that kiss emoji all night. I imagined her lips, probably red, maybe unpainted. Probably perfect. No... just perfect.

We didn't rush.

We would text before, during, and after shifts. Memes, dreams, and the money machine. We would mock our coworkers and send jokes that only she and I understood. I found excuses to pass by her during a card swipe or a table flip. She started lingering in the break room as if only she knew I was about to come in there looking for her.

"You guys are not obvious at all. Not a single person here assumes a thing," Brandon joked once while she was just wiping the walls in there.

"What do you mean? I'm just doing what no one else will and cleaning up these dirty walls," she replied innocently.

"Haha, yeah, so, I know Dorian, and my man would never... ever... get on the roof to clean the 'gutters.' Be for real here."

She sat there like the man had read her the way she read me.

"Pro tip, lovebirds. I'm not trying to tell you what to do, but maybe go make out in the parking lot instead of the walk-in or break room. I know that's what Vee and I did."

I walked in expecting her to be alone and tried to play it cool as if I were going to eat lunch... a lunch I did not have on me.

"Not obvious, like I said." Brandon laughed and then gave me a little playful combo punch.

"Great, everyone knows, huh?" I looked at Scarlett with this sarcastically defeated look.

She came up to me and looked up at me.

“Well, if everyone already knows... then... how about we just make out right here?”

I didn’t jump on that immediately. Obviously, I wanted to, but as soon as I leaned toward her lips... Brandon peeked back in through the doorway.

“Really, guys? Give me a break, we got a rush coming in... I’m not taking all the tables.”

We both laughed and headed out, but then all I could think about was... well, her. I took orders, and each item was... her. I got Romaine Scarlett and Diet Scars coming. I had two orders of the Scar Tartare and three sides of us.

She sent me a voice message of herself cackling. Actual, full-throated laughter about some show she was watching. I knew every bit of the show but had never seen a single episode. I would replay her snaps and lives more than once... just to keep seeing her. Just to keep hearing her. I wanted to be in her echo chamber.

* * *

October 2019

We got drinks one night, weeks later. It wasn’t a date in the formal way two people would agree it was. But I was wearing the best of my four shirts. She wore an array of matching accessories, and only one of us was paying... so let’s not lie. It was our first date.

She made fun of the place’s aesthetic for trying to win over our generation when it was owned by people ten years older than us. I listened when she went off about topics I clearly agreed with, and she would convince me of things I teetered on. We debated opposite viewpoints and even dared each other to prove our own stance on things. We weren’t afraid of testing boundaries with respect.

“Dorian, you’re telling me, the guy with all the words, perfect touches, and ears that listen to every word and every story, that you’ve never watched *The Last Song*? *A Walk to Remember*? *Dear John*?”

“Not a single one.”

“Don’t tell me all you do is read. I bet you don’t even read e-books, probably physical only, huh?”

“No, I don’t just... read. I barely read these days. I more so think.”

“Oooh, brooding. The sexy librarian who has read his whole shop?”

“Do you ever take things seriously? I swear half the time you hit me with a two-piece and then a kiss.”

“I have to. I’m a girl... a woman. I have to take the whole planet seriously. I have been serious most of my life. My parents made sure that I was good enough to get married and go out into this world, so I didn’t get to make jokes or be silly as much as someone should.”

I gave her an “mmm” and watched how she drank her next glass of red wine with a little more aggression than the last. Except this was not in a way that felt like she was mad, but more like “you’ve opened up something and you better be ready for it.” So she continued...

“So... yeah, I like you, I like feeling safe with you, I like... that you like my comedy and my weird little opinions. You make me feel like I can choose to be myself without the pressure to be a performer.”

I couldn’t explain it to her, but I knew she was a serious person. I guess I wanted to really know if she was serious about me, and I used her emotions to do it instead of just properly asking her.

“I appreciate you being honest. I shouldn’t have said you weren’t serious. I guess when I start getting questioned about random stuff... I feel attacked. Why you may ask? I assume mainly because I’ve never been questioned before.”

She gave me this look of a thousand questions being loaded up. She was ready to break that barrier. She was ready to write me like I wrote her. She saw the child in me who grew into the man before her. So she asked me a

question I've always hated because it was something I'd avoided asking myself.

“Where is your family?”