

Pink Slips

Also by E. A. Emerson

Real Moms Love to Eat

Pink Slips

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To my family, for giving me countless reasons to smile.

CHAPTER ONE

I lied. As the weeks pass the truth will come out. But he'll get over it. He always does. Sometimes a lie is better than having to argue your point. At least that's what I tell myself.

A recorded message blares over the loudspeaker, announcing the incoming train's arrival. The Metra clanks down the rails and makes a scraping halt inches from where I'm waiting on the gusty platform. In my peripheral vision, I catch a glimpse of a tall man wearing a dark bomber jacket and knit hat, staring right at me—giving me a chill. His random screams, directed up at an indefinite spot above us, cause me to jolt in place. The other people on the platform are ignoring him, too, knowing that when you engage with a crazy person, it only incites a conflict.

Don't look at him, Betsy.

My heart is hammering as I avoid eye contact. I turn to face the train and pause, waiting for the doors to open—keeping my senses vigilant.

Sheets of heavy rain whip past the wall of the station house and the tracks, flecking my pant legs like bullets. I scan the platform, trying to locate anyone of authority just in case this person decides to attack. Not sure I can count on my fellow passengers.

I clutch a folded slip of paper containing a phone number, protecting it from the stray droplets. My call to the dog breeder earlier today went to voicemail, so I need to keep her information handy to call her from the train. I don't want to lose this puppy to another family who calls her first. Despite the chill in the air and my concern about the screaming man watching me, the warmth inside my heart gives way to giddy butterflies, anticipating our new arrivals. Soon I can share the truth with Steven. Two newborns will be joining our family—a puppy to surprise him and in seven months, our new baby. Once he gets used to the idea of the pregnancy,

he'll come around. He always does. He's been on the fence about starting a family, but now is as good a time as any.

The moonbeam reflects off my kitchen ID badge hanging from the handle of my bag as I step into the train car and over the gap exposing a strip of trash and soot-laden gravel below. Joining a handful of other late-night riders, I settle far from spying eyes, in a back-row seat, before the jagged jerks of the ride begins.

The sliding door behind me swoops open, allowing a gush of damp air to spill in from the vestibule between train cars. The man in the dark hat thumps his heavy boots down the aisle, his shadowy gaze fixed downward, mumbling. When he reaches the other end of the train car, he turns back to stare at me. I shift my attention to the bag sitting on my lap before he catches my glance. The whoosh as he exits sends a chilly rush of air whirling up the bottom of my chef pants. I rub my arms to erase the goose bumps forming under my shirt and push the thought of him out of my mind. After dialing the number again, I slide the phone number in my coat pocket... only to hear a recording, asking me to leave a message.

As the train comes to a halt at my stop, I race out of the station and down the escalator to avoid being followed by the man who freaked me out on the train. I'd prefer to avoid any contact with him this late at night, with so few people around.

The dimly lit parking lot on Canal Street, not far from the Ogilvie station, is eerily quiet this time of night. I concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other.

The forceful blow comes out of nowhere as he grabs me from behind, the same way a great white shark barrels into an unsuspecting seal floating on the surface of the ocean. The incensed, loathsome constriction around me tightens.

"Help, someone! Please, I'm being attacked!" I wail.

I can tell the veins in my neck are bulging underneath my turtleneck. I think of my wallet containing the large cash withdrawal from my bonus check, tucked under my chef's coat and apron, deep inside my bag—sheltered from the sheeting rain and prying hands. I knew I should've waited to cash that check until tomorrow. What was I thinking? I was so proud to earn that money after working hard all year long. I'll be damned if I'm going to let some vagrant steal it, unless it means my life.

My screams for help may fall on deaf ears, given the lack of foot traffic, but I continue. It's worth a try.

“Gimme your money or I'll cut you.” His voice is raspy, his breath overbearing. As he yanks me, I tighten the long muscles of my legs to maintain balance. *I wish I remembered to bring my pepper spray today. I could really use it right now!*

I avoid looking at him as I see his distinct image in the reflection of a car window. I take note that he's wearing a black ski mask and a bomber jacket, is at least a foot taller than me, and is solid. His grip confirms his muscular strength. He looks like the guy from the train, but I can't see his face through the mask.

Unrelenting, he shouts, “Give it to me now! I got a knife.” He's poking me with a pointy edge through my raincoat.

He continues his fury, determined to get what he wants as I try to distract him from what's deep inside my bag. “I don't have cash,” I whisper, my voice lost in my throat. “Take my watch” is all I spit out as he pulls me closer to his chest. I can replace the treasured gift from my husband five times over with the cash in my bag.

I lift my arm and show him the shiny gold face and burgundy leather strap. The pressure from his twisting grip hurls pulses of pain up my arm with numbing force. *It's not worth keeping if the alternative is a knife piercing my back.*

He's not buying it. The heat from him intensifies, forcing his energy to cave in harder.

He yells, "Bull! You paid for the train. I tracked you... rich urban scum."

"I used my pass and ID, not cash."

Thank God I leave my wedding ring at home on work days.

As he pulls on my shoulder bag, a muted voice in the distance calls out, "Hey! Hey you! Is everything okay?"

I shake my head as I hear the faint steps of the Good Samaritan picking up his pace and heading in our direction.

The attacker seems to sense a losing battle against whoever may be coming our way. He throws me down, my hip and cheek slamming to the cement, and hurls the steel toe of his boot into my midsection. The kick lands inches from my pregnant stomach. A wail escapes my throat as the searing pain shoots through me like a bolt of lightning. I retighten my grip on the bag with one hand, preventing him from whisking it away; the other clutches my belly, attempting to shield my unborn baby. The cherished watch is still on my wrist, but the warm blood coming from in between my legs indicates he's stolen something much more precious.

My screams echo throughout the parking lot while I roll onto my back, begging my baby to "stay, hold on." Quiet sobs follow my rage as I lie in a puddle, whimpering. The attacker disappears in between cars through a heavy veil of rain, and my baby finds a way out of me. The distant sounds of sirens merge with my moans as the kind stranger holds my head in his lap.

In the ambulance, a paramedic peels open the crunchy paper covering a panty liner to catch the clots. Another medic wraps a stretchy, beige bandage around my waist to secure my ribs. The ice pack I'm holding against my cheek is causing my fingers to tingle. The frost around my heart is numbing. The ambulance drives through jarring potholes on the gloomy downtown streets headed toward Michigan Avenue on our way to Northwestern Memorial Hospital. The seasoned officer, who wasted no time taking my statement in the drenched parking lot, averted his gaze from my bloody chef pants—respectfully, for my loss.

The throbbing beats in my head, my wrenched neck, and the searing pain in my abdomen dominate my consciousness as I offer a silent prayer to my baby. My white turtleneck has stains of mud and blood like my pants, proof that the horrible evening took place. The bumpy driveway leading to the ER entrance jiggles me in place on the cold stretcher, magnifying the gravity of my injuries. The loading zone is deserted at 1:30 a.m. on a Thursday, so I'm wheeled directly to triage. My bag sits on top of the itchy blanket partially covering my body, hiding the growing bloodstain by my groin.

The nurse – who's a spitting image of my younger sister Brenda, with emerald eyes, radiant skin, and long legs – takes my ID and insurance card and processes my forms while I wait for the doctor on call. My work badge, which is usually connected to the outside of my bag, is missing. I pray to God that jerk didn't take it.

I continue to cradle my empty stomach, soothing the phantom baby, fixating on a blurry spot of blood on the floor. The nurse's pale blue scrubs and scuffed white clogs appear worn and washed too many times. Blood has a way of staining things. I'm going to rip up and burn these pants when I get home—these horrible, bloody pants.

The nurse pulls the pen from the base of her curly blonde ponytail and notes my details. Because of the attacker's swift kick, I'm confident I broke a rib and have a shot uterus—hopefully it will repair before I try to get pregnant again. *That man... he stole my baby.*

“Name.”

“Huh? Oh...um, R-Y-A-N, Betsy Ryan.”

“Age?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“Height and weight?”

“Five-four and about one pound lighter.”

She shoots me a curious smirk, glances, and sees an area of my pants not covered by the blanket, then nods, agreeing to skip that question. Her sorrowful response reminds me that I miss my sister, who's traveling the world. I need to hug my sister, my baby sister.

With a much-needed prescription for pain medicine, ample bandages, maxi pads, and an instruction sheet in hand, I am finally wheeled to the waiting room where Steven is sitting. I can't look at him. I stare at the ground as he leaps to his feet and rushes to my side.

“Oh, my God, honey! I am so sorry this happened to you... to us. I didn't know.” He slides a single curl from my forehead and kisses it as he floats his hand on mine—already on my belly.

The nurse turns and leaves me sitting in the wheelchair so we can talk in private. I glance back at her and say, “Thank you for all of your help.”

“You will be okay, just take it easy this week,” she calls out as the doors to the ER close behind her.

My attention drops to my red, scraped hands clasped over the vacancy as I inhale with bitter confidence, determined now more than ever to focus on the future. “We need to revisit our conversation about moving to the suburbs.”

His silence tells me he’s open to listening to my point of view this time, so I continue. “Steven, we have to try again to have a baby. This time I will tell you when I get pregnant. I won’t keep it a secret.” The rush of air escaping me is a silent exclamation mark. One he can’t ignore any longer. He always listens to my point of view, but we end up doing what is best for him every time.

I won’t give in. I want a baby to love. I know if we get a puppy, it would add to the happiness around the house while we try to have another baby.

A year after we were married, Steven’s old cocker spaniel, Benny, peacefully passed away in his sleep, so when a good friend referred me to a cocker spaniel breeder south of the city—who will soon have a puppy available in her sought-after champion litter—I jumped at the chance to get in touch with her. The hole left in Steven’s heart from Benny’s passing is still raw, and I know getting another puppy would be good for him and for our marriage. The hole in my heart from losing this baby will be raw for a long time to come. I hope we can try again soon.

Through sobs, I tell my husband, “Steven, it’s time to settle down and try again, to grow a family—in the suburban bubble. I need leave this city and the crime that comes with it. I want to see more trees. Trees to hold a swing for our child and a treehouse and a place where our new puppy sits to chew bones.”

“You’re right, Betsy. I’m ready to grow our family.”

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