

The Queen of Diamonds

By Todd Allen

“Honey, look.” Anamaria held out her smartphone for Jarvis to see. The screen lit up the backseat of the taxi as they rode down Park Avenue. She flashed the smile of a parent whose daughter had just landed a double axel. “Andrew Kirtchfield, forty-seven years old, died in his sleep Tuesday morning. Sudden onset COPD.” She clicked her tongue. “Wow, it took less than six months.”

“That’s extremely fast.” Jarvis tried to sound as excited as she was. He was horrible at it, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“Need to check, but I think that’s a record for COPD.” She shook her head. “People are getting off too easy these days.”

Jarvis wished he was immune to hearing his wife talk this way. “The man died.”

Anamaria dropped the phone into her purse, but didn’t let go of her smile. “You know he deserved worse.”

“Did he smoke?”

“How should I know? I only met him once.” Anamaria swatted away his question with the back of her hand. Against the backdrop of her dark skin and hair, her green eyes seemed to shimmer as she leaned forward and stared at the dashboard of the cab. “Driver, how much longer?”

Impossibly stuck in eastside traffic, the heavysset man threw up his hands. “Lady, your guess is as good as mine.”

Anamaria checked her watch, then stared at Jarvis until he did the same. “Isn’t there anything you can do? We have reservations.”

The driver cleared his throat. “Look, I gotta take the same streets as everyone else. Unless you got a laser beam transporter in your purse, it’s gonna be a while.”

Jarvis’ entire body tensed. He reached out and grabbed his wife’s shoulder before she could speak. “It’s okay, really. They’ll seat us when we get there, I promise.”

“That’s not the point.”

Jarvis pulled against Anamaria’s momentum as much as he dared. He hoped she couldn’t feel his hand shaking. “This one time, let it go. Okay?”

Anamaria stared at the taxi’s dashboard another second, then allowed her husband to pull her back into her seat. She nuzzled against his chest, warming him with the hot flesh of her cheek. “You’re right. Probably not worth it anyway.”

It never was, but that rarely stopped Anamaria. All of Jarvis’ friends thought he’d drawn the queen of diamonds when he married her. They appeared to have it all—he an account executive’s position at a Madison Avenue ad firm, she an exciting and lucrative modeling career. They owned a penthouse apartment that offered stunning views of Central Park. But it was all a lie. Jarvis knew they didn’t deserve any of it. For the last seven years he’d been playing along with Anamaria simply because it was the easiest thing to do. Playing along was also the safest option. But it was dangerous for everyone else.

Anamaria motioned for Jarvis to lean closer, then whispered in his ear. “His name is Jimmy DeFazio. Help me remember.”

“Please. I’m begging you.”

Too late. Anamaria sprang from her husband's chest too quickly for him to stop her. She touched her fingers on the driver's sweaty neck. "Sorry for being so rude and impatient. I'm sure you're doing your best." She closed her eyes and jerked her head toward the roof once, twice, like a nervous tic, then opened her eyes. "Pancreatic cancer."

The taxi driver stood on the brakes. "What'd you say?"

Jarvis covered his ears and hunched over. He didn't want to hear it, even though he knew the moment had already passed. There was nothing he could do now. Any responsible person would have yanked Anamaria out of the cab two minutes ago, but Jarvis wasn't a responsible person. He was a scared little man.

"Nothing," Anamaria said. "I was just thinking out loud."

Jarvis stared out the window, taking in the vast New York skyline while standing in his boxers. His wife kept the thermostat on its highest setting, and even leaning as close to the glass as he could, his body still glistened with sweat. The city that never slept looked so quiet and peaceful from the thirty-seventh floor. But there was nowhere on this island to hide from Anamaria's wrath.

She sat on the bed with her knees pointed toward the ceiling, wearing a pink nightgown frilly with lace. Without makeup she looked like a little girl waiting up for her parents to say goodnight. In her lap was that damn notebook, the one she was always scribbling in. "What was the driver's last name again, honey? DeBlasio?"

"DeFazio."

“You tipped him well, right?”

“Sure did.”

“Good. He’ll need it.”

Jarvis didn’t dare look at her while she was writing. Seeing her reflection in the window was scary enough. He focused on the nightscape again. Millions of people were out there, most of them good and decent, if maybe a little rude. Others were self-absorbed narcissists who didn’t care how their actions affected their neighbors. Many were parents with children who depended on them for survival. But none of them knew how close they came each day to suffering a long and horrible death—all it took was one terse word, one condescending look, one ill-timed step that somehow encroached on Anamaria’s personal space. They’d never see it coming. She always made a point to come across nicely even as her insides raged at whatever minor injustice she’d seen.

First came the touch, her dark, Romanian skin on theirs, then two quick nods while she conjured the black magic deep inside her, and finally the judgment that spilled from her painted lips. Jarvis had heard it too many times. ALS, Poliomyelitis, Muscular Dystrophy, Cerebral Palsy, Cystic Fibrosis—every imaginable debilitating or terminal disease, most of which she’d discovered online. She kept their names like an armory in her head. After each injustice, each perceived slight, Anamaria would dole out revenge on her unsuspecting target. Then she’d run home and record their name and punishment in her notebook. Later she’d check online obituaries, Facebook posts and #RIP tweets to see how many of her spells had taken effect.

“You silly man.” She hopped off the bed and skipped around the room picking up the trail of dirty clothes Jarvis had dropped on his way to the window. “What am I going to do with my messy sugarbear?”

He was married to the most prolific serial killer in history—one that would never, ever get caught. Jarvis figured she'd killed twenty-five strangers a month for the past seven years. That made over 2,100 victims since they were married—not counting the ones she sometimes let off with debilitating but non-lethal diseases. There was no smoking gun. Even her notebooks, which she proudly displayed on a bookshelf in their bedroom, couldn't provide enough evidence to convict her. The police would laugh if he brought her in. At most she'd be exposed as a sick and vengeful woman who liked to keep tabs on the misfortune of others. Jarvis, like everyone else, was powerless to stop her. And she'd never stop on her own. The woman enjoyed it too much.

Thwack!

A strap of leather whipped across his back, searing a line of pain into his skin. He fell to the floor. Anamaria's green eyes glared down at him. His belt dangled from her right hand. In her left was a white business card, pinched between her fingers. She leaned in close, showing it to him.

“Where did you get this?”

She must have pulled it from his shirt pocket. Jarvis' chin trembled when he spoke. “He's just a guy I met on the train.”

“A divorce attorney? Really?”

Jarvis threw his hands up between them. “He was picking my brain about a commercial his firm was shooting. I swear, I was just being polite.”

Thwack!

The belt struck across his bare chest, bringing another wave of stinging pain. The buckle caught him in the ribs. It felt like a cobra bite.

“You’re trying to leave me—admit it.”

Anamaria was right, but not about the divorce attorney. He really had been just a guy on the train. He was nice and charming and genuine, the kind of guy you’d want as a friend. Talking with that lawyer gave Jarvis the best feeling he’d had in years. It was the first time in forever he could truly relax and connect with someone without worrying if they might accidentally offend his wife.

They didn’t talk about each other’s marriages. Jarvis could never divorce Anamaria anyway. By the time the papers were ready to sign, he’d be too sick to hold a pen.

But he did want to leave her. Jarvis wanted to hop a plane and fly ten thousand miles away to somewhere she’d never find him, someplace her dark, slender fingers couldn’t reach.

He looked at her through sheets of tears, and forced a smile. “Why would I ever want to leave you? I’m happy. I’m so happy with you.”

Anamaria focused on the card. “Albert Soren, Attorney at Law. Hartford, Connecticut.”

“Just a guy on a train.”

She put her belt-hand on her hip. “You know what would happen if you ever tried.”

He knew. Jarvis definitely knew. He was as trapped as a circus lion. “I want a long and healthy life with you by my side.”

“That’s what I needed to hear.” She tucked the card into her nightgown, and smiled like nothing had happened. “Let’s go make up.”

Jarvis climbed to his feet and let his wife lead him to bed. He watched her place the business card on her nightstand before she pulled back the sheets. After he lay down, she ran her fingertips along the welt she’d branded across his skin.

“Still hurt?”

“Just a little.”

She giggled like a teenager. “Didn’t your mother teach you not to take things from strangers?”

“I guess she forgot.”

“That’s okay. I forgive you.” She pulled herself closer, wrapped her legs around him like a snake. “Let’s try to make this fast. I’m taking an early train to Hartford tomorrow.”

Jarvis couldn’t close his eyes all night. Fear and guilt battled nonstop in his mind, rattling swords, striking at his insides, reminding him with every second how much of a coward he’d become. He stared at the notebooks on the shelf, thinking about all the people whose lives Anamaria had cut short. There were too many names to count. Some he knew only as stories she’d tell after returning from modeling trips overseas. He’d tried to argue that he wasn’t the bad guy, he wasn’t the one casting hexes and wishing people harm. But day after day he stood by and let it happen. Anamaria viewed him as an equal partner in her little game. And soon the friend he’d made on the train—a person who had no idea someone like Anamaria even existed—would receive a judgment he couldn’t possibly deserve.

There was no gray area here. Albert Soren’s blood was on Jarvis’ hands. By taking that business card he’d sealed the poor man’s fate.

The realization caused him to inhale sharply, and his movement made Anamaria stir. He tried to remain still, and even held his breath, hoping to hear her soft purr again.

Even with his senses in this heightened state, he barely felt it when her fingers caressed the curve of his back. Her touch was feather thin, so light he couldn't tell if it was really her or not.

The mattress shook slightly, then again, each tremor lasting less than a second.

Then, a whisper: *Shingles*

As soon as she said it he felt the sickness crawling over his skin, walking on legs sharp as needle points, pricking his nerve endings as it charged across his torso. He fought the urge as long as he could, but he was too weak. He shifted onto his back and scratched at his stomach with both hands.

Anamaria lifted her head. "You okay, honey?"

"It's nothing, sweetheart."

The woman couldn't help herself. Anyone who even *breathed* on her applecart needed to be punished. Even Jarvis wasn't immune. This wasn't the first time she'd hexed him, but it was her harshest one yet. His skin would sting like it was on fire for a month, but at least he'd survive. Albert Soren wouldn't be that lucky.

How much longer could he wait? How many more did Anamaria need to kill before Jarvis finally grew a backbone and stood up to her? They were both going to Hell, he just knew it. The only question was which of them deserved it more.

He counted his options as the virus worked its way through his nervous system. Running away would only save himself, and even then he'd spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder. She'd probably become even more deadly without him, feasting on the city's endless supply of mildly-rude residents. His conscience—or what was left of it—wouldn't stand for that. There was no point in reasoning with her. He'd already tried, already been punished enough

times to know not to try again. He couldn't call the cops, or anyone else. Jarvis shut his eyes so tight he could feel his muscles straining. There was only one way to make sure Anamaria never killed again. Sooner or later, Jarvis needed to make a stand.

Anamaria usually enjoyed a dreamless sleep, but tonight was different. She was floating on a magic chariot over Central Park, watching the crowds below as they waved and cheered for their queen. When she saw anyone who wasn't smiling, or not cheering loud enough, or who looked like they were faking it, she pointed her finger and zapped them into fairy dust. Each time she disintegrated someone the crowd cheered even louder, as if thanking her for thinning the herd. Anamaria was busy cleansing the city like only she could, creating the perfect Utopia where everyone was nice and considerate. It was a joyous procession, but one she recognized as nothing more than a dream. She curled her lips into a smile as she climbed back into reality.

When she opened her eyes, Jarvis was on top of her. His skin was red and covered with sores. His hair was drenched with sweat, and a few drops fell on her stomach. They burned like acid on her skin. "Jarvis!" She tried to move, but he'd pinned her down. "Jarvis, what are you doing?"

"It has to stop, Anamaria."

"Get off me!" She'd never been treated this way before, especially not by her own husband. Apparently he hadn't learned his lesson from last night. "Get off me right now!"

"I'm sorry, but it's over."

His hands were pressed hard against her shoulders, sinking her into the mattress. His face was twisted and strained, like he was fighting something from within. Something was seriously wrong with him. Maybe the shingles had seeped into his brain.

“I’m going to count to three,” she said.

Jarvis let go of her left shoulder. He reached behind his back, then pointed a gun in her face.

“You can’t be serious.”

“There’s no other way. I’m sorry.”

She reached with her left hand, and stuck a finger behind the trigger. “Put this thing away and we’ll talk.”

Jarvis pulled heavy breaths in and out of his nose. His putrid scent blasted her face. “He was just a guy on a train! Why can’t you let it go? Why do you have to be ... such a *bitch*?”

He might as well have pulled the trigger. That word ignited a rage Anamaria never knew was inside her. She bucked her hips wildly, pumped her knees into his back with all her strength, squirmed and twisted her shoulders in a last-ditch effort to wiggle free. But Jarvis kept his balance and held her down, as firmly as he held the barrel of the revolver against her nose.

“Fine.” Anamaria stopped fighting when her last ounce of strength left her. “Go ahead, I dare you.” She pulled her finger from behind the trigger and rested it on his forearm.

“You’re never gonna stop.” Tears ran out of his eyes and dripped down his nose. “I have to do this.”

Anamaria closed her eyes and listened for the click of the hammer. Part of her thought he might have the stones to do it. But as each second ticked by her confidence grew. Jarvis wasn’t a killer, but he was in love with one.

She jerked her head. Once, twice. And opened her eyes. “Myocardial infarction.”

The energy jumped through her fingertips and ran up his arm faster than lightning. The gun wavered and shook, then tumbled from his hand and fell off the bed. Jarvis grabbed his chest and rose up slightly, giving her enough room to wedge herself free.

With both hands she shoved him away, sent him flying over the edge of the mattress. His head hit the floor with a heavy thump. She leaned closer and checked to make sure. His eyes were still open, but Jarvis was gone.

She climbed out of bed and reached for the nightstand. Picked up the business card and read it again. Then she skipped into the bathroom and turned on the shower. It was late, and she had a train to catch.

THE END