



**Unjust
by
Coincidence**

A Courtroom Mystery

LORETTA REDD

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by

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*“Justice has nothing to do with what
goes on in a courtroom; justice is what
comes out of a courtroom.”*

—Clarence Darrow, 1857–1930

Unjust by Coincidence

∞

§ 1

“SIT BACK, LADY...you makin’ me nervous,” the cabbie shouted through the mesh screen to his passenger.

Catherine Montague loosened her grip on the metal divider and reluctantly sat back against the cracked vinyl seat. Looking for a distraction, she checked her lipstick and makeup for the third time then tossed the compact into her handbag and wondered how many of its contents she’d need after the meeting. The cell phone, business and credit cards would soon be history.

The taxi driver swerved between lanes, missing pedestrians but not potholes. The jarring did little to ease Catherine’s anxiety as she mentally rehearsed her lines in search of the best way to broach the subject of her leaving. It had been four years since she offered her body, soul and innocence to Network Services; now she simply wanted her life back.

I can quit whenever I want, she rationalized to herself, fighting a bad case of butterflies as the cab continued threading through San Francisco traffic. Her decision was firm, the timing was right; only the mechanics of the announcement troubled her. That, and whether she’d really go through with it.

Lauren and Roger, co-owners of Network Services, had proven unpredictable over the years. They were occasionally encouraging, sometimes generous, and at other times hostile and demeaning; their only consistency was in the promotion of their own self-interests. That left Catherine wondering how they’d react to her wanting to leave.

This feels more like ending a relationship than quitting a job, she thought—though it had been years since she’d had a real relationship to even remember.

Fidgeting nervously, she fantasized her way through a variety of conversations as she braced against this Mad Hatter cab ride toward her destination. Regardless of the scenario that would soon unfold, Catherine knew that it was time to leave the escort business, fearing her ability to trust and love might otherwise be lost forever. In short, fearing she'd turn out just like Lauren.

The principle owner of Network Services was Lauren Trudeau, a woman of considerable presence, standing six feet tall with shoulder-length auburn hair and green eyes. Subtle yet seductive even at age forty-five, Lauren was anything but a tease, though her suits and soft silk blouses often hinted at expensive lace undergarments.

She ran a very profitable and carefully managed operation; most of her money had been reinvested, untraceable to its origins. Among her clients were some of the most respected and well-heeled businessmen, politicians and clerics that passed through the city of San Francisco.

She relished the irony of her 'illegal and immoral' services being provided to lawmakers, heads of state and spiritual leaders, and had intentionally selected "Network Services" as the corporate name to enable these *respectable* men to charge such recreation to their expense accounts without suspicion from bosses, wives or constituents. For those who reported to a higher power, however, there was only so much even Lauren could hide.

The rather bland name also kept her bank and its auditors free of qualms regarding the nature of her business, which never had the need to recruit new girls. Her employees would inform their friends about the lucrative potential of such a position, and Lauren's annuity stream was ensured. Most were like Catherine: college students or models out on their own for the first time, trying to finance their education or next photo shoot. They all considered being an escort as a part-time and temporary occupation. Simply a means to an end.

But the end was often not the one they'd had in mind.

As the taxi paused for a red light in the Tenderloin district, Catherine glanced down at her gold and silver Rolex, a 'sign-on' gift from her employers.

Small compensation, she mused, thinking back on what it had cost her.

Remembering her initial interview, Catherine realized that never once had the word 'sex' been mentioned, though somehow the entire

arrangement and method of conducting business was explained in detail. Lauren wasn't about to allude to the physical side of Network Services until she had a good sense of the person she was interviewing. She was a quick study as to whether or not someone was ready for "the life" and could be trusted to follow her explicit rules.

"As an employee of Network Services," Lauren had said so matter-of-factly in their first meeting, "you'll be given your assignments and any particulars each evening by my partner, Roger Franklin. He'll provide you with a credit card for hotels, cellular phone, cash for taxis or perhaps an occasional limo if the customer requests. I'll assess your wardrobe until I'm confident you know how to represent our standards. In general, we try not to draw attention to ourselves; our girls are to look wholesome and beautiful, not brassy, vulgar or overpaid."

On the one hand, Catherine couldn't believe she was having that conversation. On the other, it seemed so businesslike and professional that she could have been interviewing for a Fortune 500 corporation. It was her first taste of dissociation; Catherine's body was present, her senses were intact, but her emotional judgment—and, perhaps, reason—was suspended. She actually found herself wondering if she could meet the criterion to become a Network Services employee.

Lauren paused before approaching information more closely related to the physical aspect of the business. "Typically, our clients are to be satisfied in the better hotels and resorts in and around San Francisco. Residential appointments are very rare and carefully screened. Customers are charged by the hour, and you should receive payment on arrival—either cash or credit card. Price is non-negotiable, dear; *one second* over sixty minutes is charged as another hour. Any questions so far?"

Catherine unwittingly replied, "I don't think so."

Lauren was quick to respond. "My dear, 'I don't think so' is not an acceptable answer. Either you have questions or you don't. Hesitation is dangerous in this business, young lady. We want girls who are confident and self-assured." Lauren's moss green eyes stared directly into Catherine's as she repeated herself slowly, "Any questions, Catherine?"

Catherine straightened in her chair reflexively, as if answering the nun who taught second grade at her old Catholic school. "None whatsoever, Ms. Trudeau."

With that, Lauren smiled, leaned forward and extended her hand

with its perfectly manicured nails for the handshake that would change Catherine's life forever. There was only one thing left to do: meet Roger.

Roger Franklin was Lauren's only business partner. He had been a consistent client in years past, when she was still active as an independent escort. Rog, as Lauren called him, was something of a chameleon. Ask ten folks to describe him, and you would think they had met ten different people. There simply wasn't anything memorable about his looks. He was average height and had a muscular build, with medium brown eyes and thinning, brownish-gray hair.

Roger's display of emotions often left an impression, however. One moment, he was soft-spoken and blasé. The next, he was aggravated and seething. Anyone who spent enough time around him eventually experienced his volcanic temper. When Roger erupted, no one was left unscathed, but what set him off seemed as unpredictable as his recovery time. The only warning sign was his habit of pushing out the inside of his cheek with his tongue. It was a habit shared by his father, with equally ominous meaning.

Roger had been fascinated with computers since he saw an exhibit of the first dinosaur ENIAC machine of the 1950s, choosing to become a programmer and later specializing in encryption and software design. His Palo Alto firm was established long before the gold rush of Silicon Valley, and he and his partners had a solid reputation for an unfailing product. In this tiny corner of computer expertise, everyone agreed that Roger was a genius.

He first met Lauren while reluctantly spending a weekend in San Francisco at a computer convention. Normally Roger would have preferred to remain at the offices he helped to create, but one of his partners got sick and couldn't attend. As a gesture of appreciation, Roger's work buddy arranged for Lauren's services the first night of the convention. She proved to be entirely captivating, and he ended up paying a small fortune for her time and attention over the course of his stay.

Roger was older than Lauren and a bit shorter, but he looked up to her in more ways than simply height. She intimidated him with her sexual prowess and special talent for assessing a man's vulnerabilities. With capacity for both power and passivity, the sultry beauty seemed to know exactly when to submit and when to dominate. She delighted in issuing unexpected verbal challenges in the middle of their sexual encounters.

"Most men are just little boys with big parts," she'd whisper while

biting his earlobe and reaching for him under the sheet. “But maybe you’re not a little boy...maybe you’re a real man.” Roger loved the antagonizing and teasing complexity with which she kept him off balance.

“God, how I want you,” he blurted out within five minutes of their first meeting.

“No, you don’t,” she retorted nonchalantly. “You have no idea what you really want, because you *get* everything you want. You’ll learn that satisfaction isn’t an end result, Rog—it’s the process.” She paused as she moved even closer. “Tonight, you may not get what you think you want, but I’m going to give you what you really need.”

For the remainder of the weekend and many occasions to follow, Lauren managed to uncover, confront, tempt and satisfy his every twisted fantasy. She turned him over her knee and spanked him until he cried. Like many men, he secretly struggled with the male power assigned by society in the absence of any real sense of deserving. Deep down, he wanted to appear dominant, yet not have to be in control.

She made him detail his first sexual experiences, convincingly replicating each one until she had catalogued his entire libidinal history. Then she added a volume or two of her own.

Less than a year later, Lauren decided to establish her own escort business and stop seeing private clients. Roger was furious and refused to utilize the services of any of the alternates Lauren offered him. If he couldn’t have her, he certainly wasn’t going to pay for a substitute. The day he finally accepted that Lauren’s charms would never again be available to him, he walked into the office of his partner who had arranged their first meeting and cold-cocked him.

Lauren didn’t hear from Roger again for almost four years. He called one day to say he was leaving his company and offered to become her data base designer and business manager.

“I don’t particularly want to stay around Palo Alto,” he stated dryly. “I think we could work well together. I can show you how to hide assets from the IRS, how to scramble your customer files in case the cops investigate your business, basically disguise anything you want.” The one thing he couldn’t disguise was his relentless desire to be near her.

Lauren trusted no one. She’d never considered a partner, but there were qualities about Roger she appreciated. He wasn’t flashy or grandiose, and he had a leathery, self-protective character with which she could identify. And unlike most men, Roger seemed com-

fortable following the rules rather than making them. Still, a partnership presented its share of risks.

If he wanted to buy in, the price would be high and the terms would be hers. Besides, something about his current situation was less than believable; Lauren pressed for more information. She could read people instantly, even over the phone.

“You’re a little young to retire, Rog. Give me the real story why you’re bailing on your company. And, *mon cherie*, don’t forget—I know you better than you know yourself.”

She was right. He considered making up a story, but thought better of it. Lying to Lauren wasn’t a smart way to start off a joint business venture. In fact, it wasn’t smart in any situation.

“Okay, so I got into a little trouble with my secretary. Hell, she should have been complimented; she just didn’t know how to take a joke.”

Lauren interrupted him, “So, you were a bad boy, huh? You know, Rog, not all women like bad boys. I’m guessing she nailed you for sexual harassment...am I right?”

“As always,” he answered, excited by the fleeting image of another well-deserved spanking delivered by this sexy, mature woman. Roger could have stayed on the phone all day just listening to her voice with its commanding, deep resonance.

“So, how bad were you?”

Roger weighed his response. “Bad enough to be asked to leave the company as part of the settlement. They agreed to keep it quiet in order to avoid any bad press. My attorney, a female, proved to be tougher than the woman I supposedly offended. She negotiated a very decent retirement package, so I’m not exactly hurting for cash.”

He heard Lauren take a long, deep breath and hold it before exhaling into the receiver. Roger closed his eyes as if he could feel the air on his face.

“There are going to be conditions, Rog. Unarguable conditions. I’ll offer you thirty percent, and ‘buying in’ is not the same as being partners. We will work together when it’s necessary and convenient, but that’s the extent of our relationship. I’m not *anyone’s* girl anymore...for any price. One slip and you’ll be out faster than I can point to the door, and there won’t be any golden parachutes from this company. Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

“What time do we open, boss?” he asked, demonstrating his eagerness.

“Rog, you’ve got a lot to learn...Network Services *never* closes.”

Roger recognized the similarities between the escort business and the new dotcoms of Silicon Valley. Brokerage houses invested millions in tech firms whose products were more illusion than substance, while customers paid for the fleeting promise of satisfaction.

Like the high-tech startups, Lauren's business was also based on such fulfillment of fantasy. If done well, it would seem to the client that 'anything goes' when, in fact, what was permitted was a narrow range of controlled activity at a very high price. Rough trade, physical abuse, drugs or excessive alcohol were grounds to end any engagement, as was refusal of a condom.

Initially, Catherine believed those rules to be evidence that Network Services really cared about the well-being of its employees. Lauren's adamant warnings gave the *illusion* of concern.

"None of you will get pregnant or infected or have to put up with any jerk who doesn't play by the rules. New customers are never hard to find," she would tell the girls. But after watching the operation over the years, Catherine came to realize that the motivation behind most acts of protection was cash, not caring.

Roger proved to be a fast study, quickly assuming responsibility for the day-to-day operations of scheduling, accounting and communications. His programs encrypted client information and contained a poison pill that could purge files with a few commands, leaving no trace detectable.

In the first week of his new employment, he delighted Lauren by creating a computer catalog of descriptions for problem clients. For instance, '*refused party hat*' would indicate that the customer would not wear a condom. She enjoyed his cryptic analogies, whether it was phone numbers, quirks or personal tastes. All information was obscured in some way.

This pertained to the girls as well. None of the escorts working for Lauren was permitted to use her real name. Catherine had been assigned 'Monique' after disclosing she was somewhat fluent in French. These steps and others, like never carrying personal identification, were designed to protect the girls from curious or overzealous customers. Given the attractiveness and talent of these women, it wasn't uncommon for clients to become attached. Roger and Lauren realized all too well that this could be good for business to a certain point, and extremely dangerous beyond it.

Generally, they let the girls decide if they felt threatened by repeat requests for their services. But just to keep the business safe, Roger created a hierarchy of definitions for the files. '*Puppy love*' described

a customer with a particular affinity for one of the girls; ‘*doggedly determined*’ was a label assigned when a client refused to accept Roger’s offer of a different escort.

“Hey, I like this,” Lauren chimed in during one of Roger’s message creations. “How about we ‘*send them to the pound*’ if they’re over the top!”

“Okay, off to the pound they go,” he echoed. Lauren was aware that Roger would fit in that category, but he kept the depth of his own obsessions locked away. He had forever lost the physical pleasures of Lauren Trudeau; his only compensation was to work for her, impress her when he could, and feed his insatiable fantasy life with her occasional attentions.

There had been occasions with other women, but Roger rarely experienced more than rudimentary satisfaction. Sometimes Lauren instructed him to take a girl being considered for Network Services to bed to assess her potential. It was more business than pleasure for Roger but, as always, he did as he was told.

Those weren’t the only times the bosses interacted with their workers. Once a week, each escort was given an appointment to meet with their madam and manager, referred to in-house as an ‘M&M session.’ The girls would meet individually with Lauren and Roger to discuss any problems, turn over credit card receipts and receive pre-scheduled assignments for the coming week.

Today’s M&M sessions were being held in a thirty-fifth floor suite of an upscale Asian hotel in the financial district of San Francisco. Whenever they occurred outside the offices, Catherine knew Lauren and Roger were also interviewing for additional personnel. *Which could work to my advantage*, she thought.

The escorts of Network Services would also receive their payout during these sessions; after a forty-five percent cut for the house, each girl was written a check for the week. Today Catherine ‘Monique’ Montague was to receive a tax-free \$1,980, representing six hours’ work.

As her cab pulled up in front of the granite-clad hotel, the irony of the location struck her. “Can you believe it?” she said to the driver, who was more interested in his fare than in her comments. “This is the same place I got my start.”

“Your start in what?” he grunted.

“Doesn’t matter,” she shrugged, stepping out of the cab. “Today’s the end.”

When she began with Network Services at age twenty, she'd planned to continue working as an escort only until she paid off her tuition debt and saved some money. But Catherine found the work to be less offensive than she had originally imagined.

Much like her clients, she, too, was often lonely, and escorting was one sure way of meeting people in a new city. Plus the lucrative results were hard to deny. Over the years, she had managed to amass almost \$200,000 in a Schwab investment fund.

Of course, her family back in Minnesota knew nothing of her source of additional income. All they knew was that Catherine occasionally worked in advertising, was always too busy to come home, and had not yet found a husband. But she was starting to want to settle down now—and that was reason enough to call it quits.

She was also growing tired of the hypocrisy of her job: sick of the cheating husbands, sorry for the trusting wives and the kids waiting at home. She didn't want to be that girl anymore, the "dirty little secret" that men indulged in privately and derided publicly.

Though certain of her decision to leave, Catherine was curious why the thought of giving notice caused her so much anxiety; perhaps because she had never known anyone who left the business without being asked to do so by Lauren or Roger. The escorts were discouraged from socializing together, but a grapevine of gossip regarding hires and fires existed nonetheless.

Catherine braced herself for what could prove to be an unpleasant meeting and headed toward the elevator. She well knew the owners of Network Services didn't take orders; they gave them.

She checked her hair and makeup—her "armor"—one more time in the hallway mirror before taking a deep breath. "You can do this," she assured her reflection before starting down the hallway.

Her first tap on the door went unheeded. She knocked firmly and waited nervously until the door opened.

The suite was much grander than the guestroom in which Catherine had gotten her start. Lauren looked very much in her element, seated on an intricately appliquéd Chinese silk sofa. She gestured for Catherine to sit across from her. The red lacquered chair was uncomfortable, intentionally selected to keep business brief and the girls feeling more like subjects than valued employees. Roger sat nearby at a black and pearl inlaid desk, silent, as he was most of the time.

Catherine had every intention of simply stating that she had come to say goodbye, but it was Lauren who spoke first.

"So, how are you, my dear?" she asked as she looked directly into

Catherine's hazel eyes. Accomplished at the art of reading faces, Lauren could tell immediately if any of her employees was in trouble. The slightest twitch around the eyes, a forced smile or trembling hands brought about an inquisition: caring mixed with greater concern for the business.

She continued, "You look a bit tired, *mon cherie*. Are you getting enough rest?"

"I'm fine, thank you, Ms. Trudeau..."

Before Catherine could utter another word, Roger startled her by asking, "And how are things at home?"

"Actually, I just heard from my parents. Everything's fine, but they miss me. They want nothing more than to have me back on the family farm." She forced a smile. "I don't know what makes them think I'd like it any more now than when I left four years ago."

There was an overwhelming silence. Lauren sensed something more was at stake. She leaned back and glanced at Roger before addressing her troubled employee.

"You're trying to sound like you hate Minnesota, but you strike me as a bit melancholy. Could you be homesick? Perhaps it's time for a visit...see the family, clear the air, reconnect to your roots. Rog, we could give our Monique a little break, couldn't we?"

Catherine interrupted. "Ms. Trudeau, my roots have been permanently transplanted to the West Coast, I assure you." Catching herself being too defensive, she quickly added, "But I really appreciate your concern...and as a matter of fact, there is something I want to discuss with you."

There was no turning back now. Catherine's heart was blasting against the walls of her chest. "You've both been very good to me, but...I'm ready to quit this life."

Lauren studied the attractive young woman sitting before her. "You've barely begun your career with us. What's it been, two years?"

"Almost four," Catherine replied, thinking how odd it sounded to label prostitution as a career.

"Why, you've just gotten started," Lauren said with a discounting tone. "Did you know," she added while looking intently at her wine-red nails, painted to match the ruby and diamond ring she wore, "I was in the business for over fifteen years?"

Catherine shook her head.

The only sound was the swish of Lauren's imported stockings as she uncrossed her shapely legs and leaned forward, elbows on her knees and her palms pressed tightly together. She remained im-

mobile for what seemed to Catherine like an eternity before asking Roger, “After all these years, I still think I have what it takes. What do you think, Rog?”

Catherine glanced at him just long enough to notice the side of his left cheek protruding. *How weird*, she thought, realizing how he looked like her grandfather with a wad of tobacco stuffed in his mouth.

Not that Grandpa wore Armani suits.

§2

CATHERINE HAD TRIED to imagine every scenario to predict Lauren and Roger’s response to her leaving. The easiest, of course, was the one where they understood completely, wished her the best, paid her and said goodbye. On the other hand, she was also braced for a verbal blowout where she imagined tossing her phone and cards on the table and running out of the room toward freedom. What she was completely unprepared for, however, was the manipulation about to unfold.

At first, Lauren sounded deceptively sincere. “I must ask, *mon cherie*, what have we done to deserve this kind of treatment?”

“Nothing, Ms. Trudeau. Really, you’ve both been terrific. It’s just time for me to move on. Network Services wasn’t exactly my life’s ambition...” As soon as she uttered the words, Catherine wished she could have swallowed them back up.

Lauren’s eyebrows arched; her stare almost penetrated Catherine’s soul. The pace and intensity of her words increased, tightening around Catherine’s chest like a boa constrictor.

“You’re not working for J.C. Penney, my dear. You can’t simply walk in, quit and collect your little severance pay. There are obligations to fulfill and details to be worked out.”

“I understand...I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful.”

“No, of course you didn’t,” Lauren replied venomously. “You see, our girls leave for one of three reasons...they’re either pregnant, marrying a client or stealing money from us. Which of these would it be for you, *mon cherie*?”

Catherine suddenly felt flustered and afraid. She didn’t think Lauren would be thrilled with her decision to leave, but she hadn’t considered such a toxic response.