

## Chapter 1

Kimberly Ross knew what everyone thought of her, and sometimes wished she could let them all in on her secrets. Prove them all wrong.

She never burned out. She didn't buckle under the pressure of perfect grades and extracurriculars. Dropping out wasn't due to depression or anxiety.

She made a conscious choice to avoid the career paths that were expected of her and create a life of her own.

Kimberly wanted to be an entrepreneur. She never dreamed of becoming an astronaut or a doctor when she was a little girl. Not even close. When she'd imagined herself as an adult, she was always running her own business. Her sister and brother were relegated to the role of her employees when they played pretend. And as the oldest, she happily played the part of the mean boss with gusto.

The point was that she never dreamed of working for anyone, or of being anything other than solely in charge of her own life.

When she started college, she found it to be unbearable. All the focus on choosing careers and networking was boring, and she simply couldn't force herself to put in the effort.

The problem was that after dropping out, she didn't have the money to do anything about her crappy life. She was stuck in that rut where she knew she was messed up, but she couldn't find the energy to change. Maybe it was too much junk food, maybe it was too much wasted time arguing about politics on the internet. All she knew was that for almost a decade, she watched her dreams of being her own boss and retiring to Cabo with boatloads of money retreating into the distance. Like Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the hill and watching it roll back down, she never got more than a few steps toward her goal before slipping back.

Whatever it was that was keeping her from her dream life, Kimberly's assistant manager position on the night shift at the local grocery co-op was the most effort she was willing to put in while working for someone else. And Jason—who was fond of lying on her couch smoking weed and downing opiates after part-time shifts at the gas station—was the only caliber of man she'd ever be able to attract unless she pulled herself out of this depressing doldrum she called a life.

If she thought about it too long, it would push her even further into her misery, so she didn't let herself think about it at all.

Instead, she finally gave up on legitimacy and started her own little enterprise. It wasn't what she had dreamed about, and it certainly wasn't in an industry she'd ever thought she would take part in. But from the moment she'd taken the plunge, she had felt an undeniable sense of breaking the chains that held her to her boring existence.

She considered it as valid as any other career, though she knew her family wouldn't agree.

Kim walked through the door of her small apartment and went straight to the only bedroom, ignoring the lump of snoring meat that was her boyfriend. Though she really shouldn't judge too harshly. It was people like Jason that kept her new business going.

Early in the morning like this was the time of day she looked forward to the most. She usually got off work at around six, and she could start on her real passion directly after getting home. She only kept it at this point so she wouldn't have to figure out how to launder money yet. Her cash from her side hustle was piling up, and she hadn't spent a dime yet. At some point it would be time to get the money clean and begin living it up, but she hadn't reached that point yet.

She grabbed her laptop and turned the way she came in, hearing Jason stir behind her.

"Babe, where you going?" he muttered. Kimberly looked at his mousy brown hair, tousled and greasy from too much sleep and not enough showering, and had to suppress a shudder of disgust. Maybe she could do better than him. Or maybe it was better to be single than clean up after him even one more night.

He wasn't always this low, though, and the memories of who he'd been before substances had taken over his life kept her from tossing him out. Maybe someday he could make it back to the man he was before.

"Making us some money," she answered shortly. "You should try it sometime."

Portland was practically littered with small cafes and shops where Kimberly could park with her computer all day. All she had to do was buy a drink and maybe something to eat and no one would bother her for hours.

Moving from coffee house to specialty restaurant, a different one every day, meant two things. One, any law enforcement watching her wouldn't be able to

establish a pattern, and two, she wouldn't be using her own internet connection. It was much easier to conduct business that way.

Today, she chose a shop called Sensations. It was near the waterfront, sandwiched between the hoity-toity high rises of Portland, and certainly catered to the hipster crowd. The quirk here was the different colors and sensory items in each room. Kimberly chose the purple room; it made her feel like royalty, the lush lavender velvet booths with fat cushions.

She tried to cover her tracks the best she could when she conducted her business. She used all the proper technology that she hardly understood herself, like VPNs and Tor browsers and crap like that. Thank goodness for shady technologically-adept friends that were willing to help whenever she had a small taste of her products or a couple bucks to throw their way. It was too much effort to try to learn all that, and she would probably make a stupid mistake and get herself caught if she did.

What was important to her was the business side of things, and at that, she excelled.

When people think of the dark web, they think of things like child pornography. Hitmen. Weird porn. Snuff films. Exotic animal trades.

Kimberly didn't traffic in any of that. She'd never hurt a child, for one, and exotic animals sounded like much more trouble than they were worth.

What she did was much simpler. She bought drugs online at the black-market website, The Silk Road, and resold them to less savvy people for a tidy profit.

This wasn't the trade she'd imagined herself getting into. She never got into drugs, despite her mother's frustrated allegations when she dropped out of college to get a job in retail. Jason was a fan of weed and pills, but Kim partook in nothing more than a couple tokes here and there at a party or if she couldn't sleep. She didn't even drink much, and the only cigarette she'd ever smoked was freshman year of high school, and she'd puked almost immediately after.

But not being a user was a boon in this business. She never had to worry about losing control and dipping into her supply, and her profits never went up her nose or into her veins.

Kimberly didn't even have to do the dangerous part. All she did was take orders from the local dealers, ship the product to herself, and deliver it to them. No risking getting attacked by addicts who didn't have the money but needed their fix. No risking law enforcement busting a deal.

She felt like a genius when she figured out the safest way to ship the products. Her grandmother's neighbors were a very elderly couple who rarely left the house. Kimberly just had to set up her deliveries and pay a visit to dear old Gran then casually collect the packages as they were dropped at the old couple's home. No muss, no fuss, no way for it to be traced back to her. She didn't even have to feel guilty, because if law enforcement did figure out what was in the packages, the wife had dementia and the husband spent all his energy caring for her, so it was reasonable to assume he wouldn't notice that packages were delivered so frequently. There's no way they would face any legal consequences. And if that address was compromised, she'd figure something else out. There were all kinds of ways to ship mostly anonymously. She just had to get creative.

The payments were all made in cryptocurrency of course. Bitcoin. Which sucked, because the process of withdrawing cold, hard cash from the currency exchange was a pain for Kimberly. She was doing this to make easy money, not complicate things. But her profit was high enough to make the extra effort worth it.

None of her local dealers knew her name or face. They didn't even know her voice. They communicated only through burner phones in texts and used drop off spots instead of meeting in person, never the same place twice. She'd found her clients through friends of friends, but none of the people who'd connected them knew exactly what was going on. The less anyone knew, the less likely it was that they'd out her to the cops. Either accidentally or on purpose.

For the most part, her enterprise held almost no risk, and quite a lot of rewards. She'd heard stories of some sellers getting arrested, but she didn't put too much stock in them. It was 2013; it was a brave new world of cryptocurrency and commerce free from government interference, and she was going to get rich. Cabo San Lucas, here she comes.

Today her goal was to find a new supplier, which would be trivial. Her inbox was always full of messages from people eager to sell to her, especially as she became more and more well-regarded on the black market. Mainly, she needed to find someone with good heroin. She'd been bitching to Jason, the connoisseur of opioids and opiates, about the trashy suppliers who cut it with too much laundry detergent or Tylenol. The dealers had complained about the last batch she'd sent out. She needed someone with some quality product to keep her customers happy.

She idly read through a few messages, but she disregarded them after seeing their crappy reviews. This one apparently only sent half of what was bought. That one apparently sent out more baking soda than heroin. What did it take to find an honest supplier who took some pride in their product?

The next message she opened caught her eye.

*I have what you need.*

The subject line was intriguing, and the name of the seller even more so. *EmeraldHill*. She'd gone to high school at Emerald Mountain High. The name wasn't the same, but it was close enough to create a pang of nostalgia, and it encouraged her to open the message.

*Hello, BuyerBabe90210, I am looking for a buyer. I'm a street supplier who's trying to break into the dark web market. You'll note that I don't have a seller reputation to show you. Unfortunately, I am just starting out and you'll have to take me at my word that I am trustworthy. If you're willing to risk a small transaction, I think you'll be happy with your decision. Looking forward to hearing from you.*

She knew she shouldn't; she should keep looking for another supplier, one who had already proven they would deliver a good product promptly.

But what the hell. She could probably get a great price from a new seller trying to earn a reputation. She had the money to risk a small transaction to check them out.

So, Kimberly typed out a response and pressed send.

## Chapter 2

Three weeks later, Kimberly was pleased with her choice of new supplier. *EmeraldHill* was excellent. She'd done two transactions with them so far, the first small and the second large, and both had gone off without a hitch. The product was pure, the price was great, and the delivery was very fast.

Today she was expecting her third shipment. One of her locals had placed an order for two kilos of heroin. Nothing super high-grade. This dealer didn't like to spend the money for purity, as long as it didn't kill or piss off his clients. Luckily, *EmeraldHill* had a stash of cheaper product that would do the trick, and it was due to show up today.

"Did you get a little extra for me?" Jason asked as she prepared to go. She looked at him, standing shirtless in the kitchen, struggling to get the coffee maker

started. His flabby belly spilled over his torn and stained sweatpants, and she once again felt that disgust and disdain that overcame her more and more every time she woke up in the same house as her supposed partner.

She used to find him so attractive. His lack of ambition for the working world was a relief, considering she had her own goals that didn't involve climbing some corporate ladder. But in the last few years, he'd gone from a relaxed bohemian pothead to a lump of an addict. He'd gained weight while he lost hair. He'd gone from working a full-time, decent-paying job as an assistant manager at a fast-food restaurant to working a few shifts a week at a gas station. All the while, he'd doubled his alcohol consumption and tripled his drug use.

Maybe Kimberly didn't deserve better, but she certainly wanted better. Even a hardened dealer would be an improvement, as long as he didn't lie on the couch all day.

"No, Jason, I didn't get you anything," she snapped. "If you paid the power bill like you said you would, maybe I would have considered it."

Jay glared at her with red-rimmed eyes but shrugged as he turned back to the coffee maker.

Kimberly swore as she stepped forward and fit the basket into the machine, earning a grateful grin from Jason. That just made her resent him more, and she left before she could tell him what she wanted him to do. Take a shower, stop popping pills, get a better job, and die in a hole. Not necessarily in that order.

The drive to her grandmother's house was short. Before she knew it, she was sharing tea with Gran, her calico cat Whiskers on a table in between their rocking chairs, staring at a rerun of *The Price is Right*.

Gran was in her late seventies now, and she was content to spend her visits with Kimberly knitting in near silence, since she had very little in common with her wayward granddaughter. This suited Kimberly just fine. She would stay until she saw the delivery truck drop off the packages and be on her way until next time. Gran wouldn't care one way or the other.

"They always bet one dollar higher," Gran grouched as her elderly, but still nimble fingers danced, knitting needles catching the sun and sending flashes of light across the living room that had Whiskers jumping up in a tizzy to chase them.

"Well, it's the winning strategy," Kimberly said absently. She gazed out the window to the street, her heart leaping as she saw the delivery truck roll up to the

curb. She watched the driver walk up to the door with the package and leave it on the doorstep. Luckily, the Cramsteins weren't fans of their doorbell and had a note telling drivers to drop their things off on the porch. It was yet another thing that made them perfect for the business.

She said her goodbyes to Gran and ran to her car. This was the only tricky part. She had to get the package without good Samaritan neighbors reporting her for stealing. This neighborhood was quiet during the day. Most of the residents were parents with children and were gone from the early morning to the late evening. But there were a few elderly busybodies nosing around, getting involved in everyone's business. Thankfully for her, it looked like old Greta Mickelson wasn't home today. She was the main culprit. There was a time or two that Kimberly had to slip behind the hedge that separated Gran's house from the Cramsteins' to avoid Greta walking her dog on the street.

Today things went perfectly, and she was safely in her car with her package without anyone seeing her.

Kimberly was heading straight to the drop-off. It was a rule of hers. She never kept any products with her for longer than was absolutely necessary. She wasn't about to get pulled over for a busted taillight and end up serving ten years for distribution. Grab the stuff, drop it off, profit. No muss, no fuss.

There was a small city park a few blocks from Gran's. She didn't necessarily like having a drop-off so close to her pick-up spot, but it certainly was convenient. s, she never used the same drop-off location more than a few times. Soon enough she'd be moving on to the next one.

As she pulled into the parking lot, Kimberly watched for cop cars or anything else suspicious. Nothing. She was in the clear. There were no closed-circuit cameras in or near this park. She didn't see any cops or busybodies around. All she had to do was go into the men's bathroom and tape the package of heroin to the back of the toilet. After she grabbed the money that should be stashed there, of course.

She tore open the box, ready to test the product and stuff the bag of powder under her shirt, but something in the box made her stop and stare.

It was a bouquet of flowers.

They were wilting and petals were strewn about the box, but she recognized the species of flora immediately.

They were pink peonies, arranged with purple verbena and baby's breath.

The same type of flowers that had been in Kimberly's bouquet at her high school graduation, ten years prior.

Time stood still as Kimberly stared at the limp blossoms, the sweet scent filling the car as she tried to imagine what this could possibly mean.

Why would a random anonymous dealer send her flowers? Because she had "babe" in her username, and he was a weirdo?

And surely it was a coincidence that these were the type of flowers she'd been given by her father after she walked across the stage to receive her diploma? In fact, maybe she was mistaken. It had been a long time. Maybe her memory was faulty, and it was some other combination of purple and pink that made up her bouquet.

None of her attempts to rationalize made her feel better. Instead, they only made her feel worse. The creeping tingle started at the back of her neck and worked its way down her arms. Suddenly, she felt like she was being watched.

She twisted her body around in her seat, scanning the parking lot frantically, but all she saw was a frazzled mother wrangling a few small children into car seats in her minivan. Otherwise, the parking lot and park were completely empty.

There was no sign of anyone watching her. Of course there wasn't. The seller was just like any other weird guy online who creeped on anyone with a female username, no matter what website he found them on.

But some instinct within her screamed that all was not what it seemed.

Kimberly remembered a time in her early twenties where she was at a house party with friends. A real rager, where the floors were slick with spilled alcohol only a couple hours into the night and the house was so choked with the smell of weed and cigarette smoke that she could hardly breathe. She was so drunk on jungle juice and Jell-O shots that she could barely stand by the time she decided she needed to switch to beer.

A seemingly kind-hearted man had offered to grab her a beer. Sober, Kimberly never would have accepted a drink from the stranger, handsome as he may be. Or maybe it had been her beer goggles that had made his smile so cute and his eyes so kind.

Her instincts had screamed at her, telling her she was in danger and to get away from him. Get one of her friends. Shove him away and refuse to be alone with him.

But she ignored that deep, primal warning inside her. She didn't want to be rude; he was attractive and seemed nice, and she wanted that drink.

Whatever her reasoning had been, she'd let him grab her a beer from the keg. A half hour after downing the drink, she was blacked out, barely conscious, and being gently but firmly led out the door of the house and toward the parked cars on the side of the street. He'd almost been able to get her in the door of his car while she protested half-heartedly and tried to calm her whirling brain, but one of her male friends had seen what was happening and confronted the man. The stranger had jumped into the driver's seat and made an escape, and Kimberly was taken to the hospital. A trip to the ER had confirmed the presence of a date rape drug, Rohypnol, and Kimberly had sworn to herself she'd never ignore an instinctual reaction again.

And right now, everything within her was warning her that something was very, very wrong here.

Kimberly wasn't about to ignore this feeling. She'd deliver her drugs, get the hell out of there, and never use that seller again.

She quickly verified the purity of the heroin with a simple test kit she bought online and got results in seconds, keeping a wary eye on the rearview mirror for cops. This was by far the most dangerous part of her business when it came to getting caught. All it would take was a cruiser turning into the parking lot and it was game over for her. Twenty to life or whatever ridiculous penalty the state handed out for drug distribution.

The bouquet was still in the box, stinking up her car with its cloying scent. She picked up one of the petals and it crumbled in her hand, little pieces drifting gently to join the other detritus in the box. Creepy. She quickly disposed of the box in a nearby dumpster, wishing she could toss her uncertainty and suspicions as easily.

Thankfully today was like all the others before, and she made the exchange without incident. With the money burning a hole in her pocket, she made her way back to the apartment. This was another dangerous part, more to her pocketbook than to her person. It was legal for the cops to snag all her money if they suspected it was illegitimately earned, but she was fairly certain they wouldn't be able to get her on any charges. Jason knew to destroy her computer if she called from jail, and there was no other way to connect her to the drug trafficking. But she'd still be out a few thousand dollars. She'd never get it back from the cops.

Jason was still home and on the couch when she got in. Of course. Still shirtless, with his mouth hanging open and eyes only slits as he nodded off from the pills. She had to stifle that absolute disgust again. She really did need to put her foot down. Tell him to clean up and stop with the substance abuse or move out.

The only complicating factor was that if he chose to be vindictive, he could bury her. She'd started setting her business up before Jason had gotten this bad. When his benders only happened a couple times a month instead of a couple times a week. She had assumed she'd be spending the rest of her life with him, so he knew everything about her setup. If she dumped him now and broke his heart enough that he wanted revenge, he knew enough to put her in prison for a very long time. All he would need was a little chat with the cops.

She still held some fondness in her heart for him as well, even though it was now cloaked with a blanket of constant irritation.

So for now, he was going to haunt her sofa.

The bedroom was where she hid her money. Completely unoriginally, she had a hole in the underside of the mattress that she stuffed it in. She knew she needed a new hiding place—cops were known to tear up mattresses in search for drugs and such—but for now it would have to do. And to be fair, except for the tax evasion, there was nothing illegal about having a stash of cash in your house. Unless they caught her red-handed with the product or got hold of her computer, they'd have nothing to charge her with if they found her cash.

With the money hidden, Kimberly's work was done. She didn't even have to drag her ass to the stupid co-op today. She could relax, play a few video games, maybe call up a friend and go have dinner.

What she wasn't going to do was think about that bouquet. She wasn't going to think of the flowers they resembled, the ones her father had put into her hands with a proud smile as she accepted her honors as a salutatorian at Emerald Mountain High School. She wasn't going to think about the incident that happened after graduation, at that fateful party.

Kimberly wasn't going to think of that at all.



