
SECRET SANTA'S BUSINESS

Retired Assassins Book One

EBONY ROSE



Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

©2020
All rights reserved.

No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The trademark Blushing Books is pending in the US Patent and Trademark Office.

Ebony Rose
Secret Santa's Business

EBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-752-3
Print ISBN: 978-1-64563-753-0
Audio ISBN: 978-1-64563-754-7

vi

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Chapter 1

Paige stares unseeingly at the tablecloth, feeling her eyes burn. Everything is white noise, except for the four little words that keep playing over in her mind, *Dean is leaving me.*

"Are you even listening to me, Paige?" Dean asks, refusing to give her an inch. "You must have seen this coming? Our lives are heading in two totally different directions. I am about to land my big promotion, and you..." his voice trails off as his gaze sweeps over her small shop, his face twisting in a sneer of contempt. "... you're a *baker*," he spits out, making the last word an insult.

Paige looks up then, her eyes flashing. How dare he speak to her like that? She loves what she does, and no one has the right to criticize her choices.

Rolling his eyes at Paige's reaction, Dean sits back in his chair, folding his arms over his chest.

"I don't get you, Paige, you're like some kind of genius and yet you bake cakes for a living. What sort of PhD student gives away their doctorate to become a *cafe owner*?"

Paige opens her mouth to reply, but no words come out. It's like a knot has formed in her throat, turning her voice to mute.

All she can do is stare up at Dean's angry blond features, his light blue eyes boring into hers.

"And what is with all these Christmas decorations?" Dean asks, his tone condescending.

Paige gazes around at her beautiful shop, seeing the green and red themed characters covering every surface. She'd painstakingly sewn and stuffed every one of them, loving the little snowmen, elves and reindeer now decorating her store. 'Turn the Paige Coffee Shop' was a dream come true for Paige, and one she'd foolishly believed she'd shared with Dean.

"I thought you liked Christmas," Paige finally whispers, meeting Dean's arrogant stare.

"Yeah, well, maybe once, when we were kids," he replies, his voice thick with sarcasm.

Tears spill over as Paige watches her ex-fiancé glare at her. When had Dean become such a callous asshole?

"Sorry I'm late, sweetheart," says a deep voice from beside her, making Paige jump.

Glancing up, Paige can see the outline of a man taking the seat next to her, his casual clothes and large frame visible through her haze of tears.

"I'm sorry, I don't..." Paige begins, but the man just wraps his arm around her waist, pulling her close.

"I got caught up in traffic, so I couldn't get here any sooner. Listen, baby, I know you wanted to do this on your own, but I think we should tell him together," the man finishes, leaving Paige speechless.

"I-I..." Paige can barely form a reply, too stunned for words. Shaking her head, she tries to speak, but it's impossible to think with this hulking man tugging her against his rock-hard body.

"I think you're..." Paige begins, but Dean interrupts.

"What the hell is going on here, Paige?" he demands, his aggressive tone making her shiver.

Swiping a hand over her eyes, Paige finally rubs away her

tears, long enough to stare up at the man who's decided to rescue her. And he is not some stranger, either, Paige realizes, as she stares up at him with wide green eyes.

This is the handsome customer who buys her coffee every day. The girls who work for Paige have dubbed him *McHottie Coffee Guy*, since he has such jaw-dropping good looks and a panty-melting physique.

Paige can't believe he's sitting next to her, with his arm wrapped around her waist and an intimate smile on his mouth. *Why is he pretending we're together?* she wonders, her brows drawing tightly.

Intending to ask him just that, Paige is stunned when McHottie bends forward, pressing his mouth to hers and effectively silencing the questions buzzing through her mind. When their lips touch, Paige freezes, shocked by the unexpected contact.

"Paige, do you care to explain what is going on right now?" Dean demands, his chair scraping the floor as he stands angrily.

Paige can't speak, can't even breathe, her lips parting in amazement as McHottie's talented mouth moves sensuously against hers. *Dear God, I'm going to faint*, Paige thinks crazily, her eyes sliding shut as sensations bombard her from his exquisite kiss.

When she feels a groan reverberate through McHottie's muscular chest, Paige pulls back, her eyes flashing open. She can't believe she's just kissed him, her mind scattering from the pleasure of his firm mouth.

"Listen to me, you..." Dean begins, but McHottie stands up, towering over Dean's six feet.

"Paige and I are together; we're sorry if that causes you pain. We'd appreciate it if you didn't make a scene, and since you don't have anything else kind to say to Paige, you can show yourself out," he growls, his deep blue eyes boring into Dean's.

"I'm not afraid of y-you," Dean stutters, eyeing the other

man warily. Still, he moves carefully toward the exit, bent on his escape. Just as Dean reaches the door, he turns to face Paige, his gaze malevolent. "What do you suppose your mother will say when she hears about this, Paige?" Dean asks, earning a growl from McHottie.

Paige stands up, turning to stare at Dean. "You wouldn't dare," she gasps, but she is pretty sure he would. Dean was always a sore loser, and he knows the easiest way to get to Paige is through her mother.

Giving her a nasty smirk, Dean opens the door, ignoring the stares of the other patrons as he says, "I'm sure she will look forward to meeting your new boyfriend at Cindy's wedding next week, since you'll need a plus one for the event now."

With that, he turns to leave, his lips twisting in a cruel line as he storms out of her life.

Paige can only stand and stare, her mind in a frenzy. *I am so fucked.* Dean will tell her mother that Paige had been seeing someone behind his back, making her out to be the bad guy. If that isn't enough, Paige is catering Cindy's wedding, so she has no way of getting out of the family function.

What am I going to do? Paige wonders, fresh tears filling her eyes. Everyone will hear about her new boyfriend; Dean will make sure of it! And when she turns up to the event without a partner? Paige's humiliation will be complete.

"Paige?" comes the same deep voice, this time in gentle enquiry.

Paige turns quickly to see McHottie watching her closely. She's actually forgotten he is standing beside her and has seen everything.

Fuck my life, Paige thinks desolately, wishing the ground would just open up and swallow her.

Elijah Novak watches as tears once more fill Paige Turner's green eyes. This time, it's his fault the lovely female is crying.

What the fuck do I do now? he wonders, admitting to himself he has no idea how to 'people'. Elijah has never really connected with anyone in his life, except the unit of men he commanded during his time in the service. Now, though, he tried this 'peopling' thing, and look where it got him. He'd taken one look at the hurt in Paige's large green eyes, and he'd seen red. So Elijah had intervened, intending to help Paige save face and get rid of that bastard in the process.

Instead, Elijah had just caused her more problems, and the worst part of it was, he'd broken his own rules to do it. Elijah had never intended to make contact with the curvy coffee shop owner, and now he was paying the price for it.

"I-I'm so sorry. I..." She couldn't seem to form the words, tears spilling over her lashes and onto those soft cheeks.

Aware that other patrons had begun eyeing Paige closely, Elijah wraps an arm around her shoulders and manoeuvres her away from prying eyes. He takes her to a small table, hidden in the corner of the shop, and directs her into the seat, before taking the seat opposite her.

"I don't know what to say," Paige eventually mumbles, her voice small.

"How about you tell me what was meant about your mother?" Elijah asks, his voice gentle.

Paige draws in a shaky breath, then admits quietly, "My mother has always been somewhat disapproving of me, but now she's going to be super angry. She thinks I made the wrong decision giving up my studies to become a full-time cafe owner."

Elijah can see how much her mother's opinion means to Paige, the brightness leaving her eyes as she speaks.

"My cousin Cindy is getting married next week, and I'm supposed to cater the event. Now I will have to show up on my own with everyone believing I cheated on Dean."

Well, fuck, Elijah thinks, grinding his teeth in frustration. There is a reason why he doesn't play well with others; case in point, he'd just screwed up Paige's whole reputation in the space of a few minutes.

"Paige, I'm so sorry."

Paige glances up at him, her expression surprised. Elijah had expected her to be upset, but instead, Paige looks grateful.

"Please don't apologize; no one has ever done anything like that for me before," Paige says, her tone earnest. "I'm glad you stood up for me, even if it was a lie," she finishes quietly.

Elijah blinks rapidly, entirely at a loss. The woman had just completely surprised him. It might not seem much, but for a man like Elijah, being surprised is a rarity.

"Thank you for your kind words, Mr., er..." Paige trails off, wondering what this man's name actually is.

"Elijah Novak," he supplies, his voice gruff.

Extending her hand, Paige says, "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Novak, I'm Paige Turner. I own 'Turn the Paige Coffee Shop'.

Elijah takes her hand, saying simply, "It's nice to meet you, Paige."

Later that day, Paige sweeps up her small cafe, her thoughts a confused mess. She should be fretting over her very recent breakup, not mooning over *McHottie Coffee Guy*, Elijah Novak.

But Paige just can't seem to get him out of her mind. The man is sex on legs, and the way he'd kissed her? *His lips should be illegal*, she thinks, her cheeks heating.

Fanning her hot face, Paige finishes with the broom and begins emptying the food display. She's got a long night ahead of her, since tonight, she starts the pastries for her cousin's wedding.

Collecting the uneaten desserts for the homeless shelter, Paige tallies up her day's takings and locks the shop. Tomorrow, she will shelve her latest book delivery, but tonight, she will focus on creating the specialized canapés Cindy has chosen as her entree.

Ignoring an embarrassed pang at the thought of facing her

extended family, Paige balances the box of baked goods on her arm while she walks over to her small blue hatchback, opening the boot and storing the box inside.

The clients at the shelter will be ready for their dessert, and Paige will have to get back to her apartment as quickly as possible if she wants to get a start on the fresh dough tonight.

"What's wrong?" Elsie asks when she arrives at the shelter, forcing Paige to meet her eyes.

"Nothing, I'm fine," Paige lies, pushing the food donation into Elsie's hands then turning back to face her car.

"Paige Turner, stop right there," Elsie commands, and Paige freezes.

Her best friend never misses a thing, especially as far as Paige is concerned. Paige slowly turns to face Elsie, her sweetest smile already in place.

"Don't flash me that 'I'm so perfect' smile," Elsie warns, her piercing brown eyes cutting right through Paige's forced expression.

Paige feels her smile fade, so she tries a different tact. "You have a lot of hungry mouths to feed," she reminds Elsie, knowing the other woman won't be able to resist her clients.

"I happen to have a few minutes before I need to start plating dinners," she assures Paige, her gaze narrowing. "And you know I'm not going anywhere, not until I find out what has stolen the spark from those beautiful eyes."

"Oh, Elsie," Paige says, her face crumpling as she begins to sob.

With a gasp, Elsie rushes forward, enveloping Paige in a warm embrace that just serves to unravel Paige further.

"I-I don't want to do this here," Paige gasps, her voice breaking over the words.

"I'm sorry, sweetie, just tell me you're okay, and I'll come by tonight to see you."

"I'm honestly okay," Paige says, and oddly, it's true. She's not crying over Dean, just the loss of her long-term relationship.

"Okay, honey, you take care of yourself, and I'll visit you later."

Aware that nothing short of a tsunami will stop Elsie from visiting her, Paige nods, wiping away her tears.

"I'll see you later," she says, before returning to her car.

Elijah stares at his computer, his lips pursed into a hard line. He's decided to do a little digging, to see what he can find out about Paige. He also wanted to learn more about her family and appease his curiosity about her mother. Now he is sitting at his desk, wondering how much more he could have done to ruin her life.

Using his fake media account, Elijah scans through the posts on Paige's feed. He doesn't want her to know he's Facebook stalking her, so he avoids making comments, just following links that lead him to her extended family.

His lips pull tighter when he follows one link to Dean's profile and notices the man has already changed his status to single. *That guy is a fucking asshole*, Elijah thinks angrily, wishing he could have done more than just embarrass the man at the coffee shop.

Following the next link to Paige's mother's account, Elijah takes in the realization of exactly who 'Paige Turner' actually is. Audrey Turner, Paige's mother, is a retired movie actress and current media socialite. Paige had not been kidding when she said her mother will be super angry with her. Elijah had worked with enough famous people to know how important it was for them to be seen by their fans as the perfect family unit.

And as if that wasn't enough, Paige's father was the late Patrick Turner, a billionaire businessman who owned 'Turner

Maritime Industries', the import / export business that still operated today.

Fuck my life, Elijah inwardly groans, his mood plummeting.

Shutting down his laptop, Elijah runs a hand through his thick, silvery hair, telling himself this is yet another sign he should leave Paige Turner alone. If he has any brains, he will move on with his life and return to the solitary existence.

Deciding not to dwell on his thoughts any longer, Elijah stands abruptly and makes his way to his en suite, not exactly sure what he intends to do. One thing's for certain, it will be a long time before Elijah stops remembering the kiss he shared with the beautiful Paige Turner.

Paige slides the last tray of pastries into the hot oven, wiping a palm over her face. She checks her watch and sees it's already after eight, aware that Elsie will be finishing at the shelter in half an hour. Deciding to run upstairs and shower, Paige takes the connecting door to her apartment, leaving her pastries to bake while she quickly strips off and steps under the steaming spray.

Washing out her thick auburn hair, Paige scrubs her body clean, the scent of lavender and citrus swarming her senses. Shutting off the heated spray, Paige wraps herself in a large fluffy towel, checking the time before padding back into her bedroom to collect a soft pair of pyjama pants and small white singlet.

Soon she is returning to her shop to pull the pastries from the oven, removing the tray and placing them on the metal shelf to cool. Shutting off the oven, Paige collects a few clean cloths and covers the pastries, before making sure all of her appliances are switched off.

It isn't long before her doorbell rings, and she runs over to let Elsie in, smiling when she raises her hands, clutching two bottles of wine.

"I brought our other best friends," Elsie says in a singsong voice, her sweet grin making warmth trickle into Paige's chest.

"How did you know?" Paige teases laughingly, stepping aside to let Elsie enter her lounge.

Soon the pair is sitting on the small couch, giggling together like co-conspirators.

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry Dean is such an asshole," Elsie says, her voice very serious.

"I know," Paige replies, her own smile fading. "I guess he can't help it."

Seeing her bleak expression, Elsie winks, making Paige wonder what she is about to say.

"Tell me again what happened when McHottie turned up at the coffee shop?" Elsie asks, her eyes gleaming with mischief.

Paige rolls her eyes, playfully elbowing her friend. When Elsie waggles her brows, Paige feels her shoulders shaking with laughter. Tonight, is just what she needs, not only to dull the hurt of her breakup but, also, to make Paige realize that she has missed a close call, almost marrying Dean.

"I still don't understand why he did it," she tells her friend honestly, feeling flustered from the kiss they shared. "He must have really felt sorry for me," she adds, looking down at her own full figure and thick, soft curves.

"Oh, yes, he felt oh so sorry for you," Elsie parrots in a mocking voice, her eyes rolling so hard, she almost falls off the couch. "The guy is obviously in lust with you," she says, a small hiccup undermining the seriousness of her statement.

Giggling at her friend, Paige takes another deep drink of her wine, raising her hand to mimic a toast.

"Fuck Dean," she says, lifting her glass.

"Yeah, fuck him," Elsie cheers, clinking their glasses together before both women swallow their drinks.

Elijah runs a hand across his scalp, glimpsing his reflection in the coffee shop window. He's never really worried about his appearance before, but now he wonders if Paige will find him an attractive male.

For most of his life, Elijah's looks have been just as much a weapon as the rest of his body. He's taken care of both, maintaining a strict regime through intense physical activity and an optimal eating plan. The results have been the athletic physique that now serves him well into his retirement.

Elijah eventually straightens and presses the doorbell to the flat-roofed apartment. If Paige likes men with silver hair and blue eyes, then he shouldn't have any trouble, he decides.

Elijah waits until he hears footsteps heading toward the front door. Schooling his features, he waits for Paige to greet him, his mind set on his plan to help her out of the bind he managed to land her in.

Pulling open the front door, a very tipsy Paige smiles at the person standing before her. When her mind computes exactly who it is, Paige feels her expression sag, all hint of welcome dropping off her stunned features.

Elijah returns her look of shocked awareness, his eyes dropping to the low-slung pyjama pants and a tight white singlet.

"Paige, who is it?" Elsie calls, her voice booming in the next room.

"It's McHottie Coffee Guy," Paige calls back, her voice distracted.

"Ah, I'm sorry?" Elijah asks, confusion replacing the lust filling his gaze.

Paige waves him off, explaining, "Oh, that's just what we call you," she says, her voice thick. "It's because you're so hot, and no one knows your name."

Elijah stares at the beautiful redhead, his jaw slack. "You think I'm hot?" he finally asks, not sure why this is the only information he's landed on.

Waving her hand in his general direction, Paige pulls a 'duh' expression.

"Why are you here?" she asks, suddenly realizing he is standing on her doorstep.

"I-I wanted to talk to you about what happened today," he says, peering around her and into her apartment.

"Oh, okay," Paige says, turning when another female stumbles into the hallway, almost barreling into Paige.

"Wow, it *is* you," she says, pointing her wine glass at Elijah.

"Ah, yes," he says, wondering if this was such a good idea. Perhaps he should go home and return tomorrow, when Paige is feeling more herself. Before Elijah can back away from the door, the second woman reaches forward and grabs him.

"You have to come inside," she says, pulling Elijah forward and up the small flight of stairs.

"Are you ladies here on your own?" Elijah asks, wondering how safe they will feel having a stranger in their home.

"Yep," they answer in unison, flopping down onto the couch together, leaving Elijah standing awkwardly in front of them in the small lounge room.

"Why did you come here again?" Paige asks. Then she snaps her fingers, leaning over to her friend to whisper loudly, "He's come to talk about what happened today."

Her friend makes an 'oh' expression, then focuses her attention on Elijah, as though they are both seated to attention.

Elijah can feel his face heat, another first for him. *What the hell is going on?*

Paige's friend raises her hand as though she is indeed in class, her voice slurring slightly when she says, "I have a question."

Realizing she is waiting for him to call on her, Elijah says, "Yes?"

"Hello, my name is Elsie," she begins, as though Elijah asked her to introduce herself. "I want to know, when you kissed Paige,

were you into it, or were you just acting? Paige thinks you felt sorry for her," she adds helpfully.

Paige, who had been in the process of swallowing a mouthful of wine, coughs the drink into her nose, her face flaming as she sputters with discomfort.

Elijah finds himself grinning, his eyes on Paige as he moves to sit in a comfortable chair.

"Why did you have to ask him that?" Paige demands, making Elijah bark out a laugh.

Grinning at her best friend's shocked expression, Elsie says, "I'm Elsie, Paige's best friend. She tells me everything."

Elijah is instantly intrigued, desperate to know what sort of things Paige has been telling this best friend of hers, but of course, he doesn't rise to the bait. Instead, he schools his expression, waiting for the ladies to speak.

"Elijah, I'm really sorry," Paige says, her face heating impossibly further. "I know you felt sorry for me today and—"

"I was definitely into the kiss," Elijah cuts in, his blue eyes gleaming.