

Suffer!

by

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"Where in the world is Roxy DeVine? The actress who plays Marcia Suffer on the hit TV drama Suffer has not been seen or heard from since the show's season finale last week."

—Billy Backwick, Host of TV's *Hollywood Bytes*

"Never meet your heroes, lest they be found to have feet of clay."

—Unknown

PROLOGUE

At the very edge of her consciousness, barely perceptible, a dull awareness made itself known. Thick. Heavy. Slow. Her eyelids felt like iron gates as she began to surface. They fluttered open, once, and then slammed shut again. The throbbing — yes, that's what it was — a throbbing at her temple. *Where was she?* Come to think of it, who was she? Her eyes snapped open, and she was awake.

My name is Roxy DeVine. That was her first thought. With that question settled, she returned to the first question: *Where am I?* She was flat on her back, a lumpy queen bed covered with a pink chenille spread beneath her. Her body felt like it belonged to someone else; she had no agency over it. Roxy DeVine needed to regain control now, and she struggled to get vertical. Something stopped her. It wasn't just the pounding in her head; there was something foreign attached to her — that's when she saw a colorful rope wound around her right wrist, tied to headboard above her. Roxy pulled her left arm and discovered it, too, was bound. As she moved to swing her legs off the bed, they, too, were impossible to free. Her stomach tightened into a ball, a primal response to a primal fear. *I'm captive.*

Where am I?

The room was a mystery. Faded wallpaper, venetian blinds, a painted dresser across from the bed and over it a mirror. Roxy blinked, craning her neck to get a glimpse, and there she saw it: her own body prone, immobilized with restraints. She was about to scream, but no sound escaped.

Where am I?

And then, tiny beads of memory trickled into her awareness, like drops of gentle rain falling from the sky: one, and another, and another, until the skies opened and it all came flooding back. She remembered. That's when Roxy DeVine fainted again.

PART ONE

TWO MONTHS EARLIER

"Where the hell's Sam with that fizzy wine?" Dotty shuffled into the living room holding three plastic champagne flutes, the disposable kind most people throw out after one use. A fistful of napkins peeked out from the deep pocket of her green terry housecoat.

"Theo? Theo!"

Theo was in her bedroom, upstairs from the living room, or what her great aunt Dotty called the "parlor," and she could hear her calling out. Theo had lived in this tumble of a bungalow with her grandmother's younger sister since she was four years old.

Back then, Dotty was in her sixties, retired, and living alone, until the day her newly widowed niece Lois appeared on the doorstep with her adorable daughter Theo, whose afro-puffed hair was tied with pink ribbons.

The years flew by in a blink. Theo was now twenty-three and in her third year at Cal State Northridge, studying to be a social worker. Her mother, Lois, had moved out ages ago.

"Theo! Chrissakes!" yelled Dotty.

Theo just needed a minute more to put the final touches on a midterm paper for her Social Work Ethics class, due today. Today still had three more hours left it in, but Theo needed to get this paper turned in *now* because the rest of the night was spoken for.

"The hell are you, girl?" Dotty asked.

"She's in her bedroom," said Pris, Theo's sixteen-year-old half-sister, who was visiting for the evening.

"I know, baby girl. I know where she is located. That's one of them questions that don't need an answer," said Dotty.

"A rhetorical question then," said Pris.

"Theo! You coming?"

Theo saved the project and, having barely proofread the thing, hit upload.

"Be right there!" she said, rushing down the stairs.

"And Sammy?" Dotty asked.

"Just texted, he's on his way," said Theo.

"You kids, always late," Dotty said.

Midway through her sophomore year, Theo switched to part-time attendance. Expenses were mounting faster than she could pay them down, so she gigned wherever she could: driving for Lyft and for Postmates, dog-walking, babysitting. There wasn't a side hustle Theo wasn't willing to try. At least her rent was free here at 3151 Beachy Avenue in Arleta, California, a diverse blue-collar neighborhood at the northern edge of the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles.

Some city planner surely had a giggle back in the day when they had given this street its name. Beachy Avenue was probably the unbeachiest location ever — the Pacific Ocean was a good eighteen miles away, but it could have been a thousand.

The house they shared needed work: chipped paint, peeling wallpaper, linoleum floors with curled edges. A few years ago, they got hit with some massive expenses when their sewer line became overgrown with tree roots. Theo thought it would break them financially, but Dotty assured her it was handled. Her aunt had dipped into her "secret emergency fund" and the crisis was averted.

Theo acted as the resident handyman and caregiver: light repairs, grocery shopping, and generally keeping her great aunt company. It was a fair trade, but

that didn't even matter to Theo; she'd have done these things anyway — that's what family does. That's what love is. Dotty had her persnickety moments, but most of the time she was a hoot.

This house, this home, with all its imperfections, was Theo's foundation, her security, the one solid, steadfast guarantee in a life filled with unpredictability. It was everything.

Dotty eased herself into her indispensable burgundy Barcalounger.

"Count down, Prissy," she said to her other grandniece, already curled in her usual spot — a tan bouclé upholstered chair, the arms of which were covered in crocheted doilies to hide their threadbare bits.

"Ten, nine, eight, seven..." announced Pris obligingly.

As Pris counted down the numbers, Dotty placed a rubber cannula into her nostrils and attached the tubing to a portable oxygen concentrator — treatment for her COPD condition. When Pris hit zero, Dotty pulled the side handle on the chair, which reclined her backward, launching her legs parallel to the floor.

"And we have liftoff," Dot yelled.

Theo rolled her eyes but couldn't help cracking up.

Thursday nights here at Chez Dotty were filled with ritual, and this corny comedy act was just one part of it. Pris lived with their mother, Lois, a few miles away in North Hollywood. Every week, Lois dropped her youngest child off for a night of TV watching with her sister Theo; Pris usually slept over and would be driven home in the morning.

Diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at age seven, Pris was on the high-functioning side, and she thrived on consistency and routine. She was also a keen observer of behaviors and details, appearing to catalogue it all in a brain that, to Theo, was mysterious but mostly marvelous.

"I don't think Sammy's gonna get here in time," Dotty said, a hint of *I told you so* in her voice.

Theo poured some off-brand mini pretzel twists into a faded red Pyrex bowl that had seen better days a few decades ago.

"Relax. We have ten minutes," said Theo.

"We actually have nine minutes and forty seconds," Pris said.

It was Thursday night, 9:50 p.m. ... actually 9:51, and an episode of Theo's favorite TV show, *Suffer*, was about to begin. It was appointment TV for her, Pris, and the still MIA Sam. Although Dotty claimed to find *Suffer* "dumb," she, too,

would never miss an episode. Maybe it was the company; maybe it was that fizzy wine.

The foursome gathered weekly to soak in the justice meted out by their favorite female savior, Marcia Suffer — a victims' rights attorney who moonlighted as a vigilante.

Marcia was a different kind of female protagonist: ethical, fearless, smart, and committed to fairness. Well, that part wasn't new. Ms. Suffer was also willing, when necessary, to resort to violence to achieve justice. In the world of *Suffer*, that necessity happened in every episode. She made for an unlikely heroine. On the one hand, she was a well-respected lawyer fighting for the downtrodden. On the other hand, well, she was a serial killer. The character hadn't started out whacking people — the show's creator, Marelle May, knew that might be a bit off-putting. She first had to get the audience invested in the goodness of Marcia Suffer. Only then could the character break bad.

In the first season of *Suffer*, Marcia's violent tendencies were barely hinted at. A slashed tire here. A broken window there. But as time went on, her ethics became more questionable, her actions more illegal, and by the season 1 finale, Marcia Suffer had committed her first murder. Fans ate it up.

When season 2 rolled around, Marcia went full Gloria-Allred-meets-Dexter — executing bad guys left and right: no guilt, no consequences. The audience forgave her for her atrocities because the crimes were justified. Marcia Suffer, like all antiheroes, was a flawed person but so was everyone watching, and maybe that's why it resonated so strongly.

When Marcia was unwinding from a hard day of taking the law into her own hands, she'd relax with a crystal flute of prosecco and a bowl of pretzels in her stunning loft overlooking a never foggy San Francisco Bay. It was her character's *thing*.

A savvy marketer at UNC, the television network that owned *Suffer*, had seized upon the idea and promoted it on *Suffer's* social media channels as a way to engage fans. It worked. A massive cult numbering in the millions was born, with superfans holding simultaneous viewing parties across the world. They called themselves "Sufferettes." Ratings soared, and sales of both mini-pretzels and supermarket prosecco skyrocketed.

Suffer had grabbed Theo right from the start seven years ago, when she was still in high school. The show had debuted to middling reviews. Critics called it an overblown, overacted, "car wreck of a series." Theo didn't care; to her, it spoke the truth.

Theo's truth: she despised bullies. If she were being honest, she didn't merely *despise* them, she wanted them tortured, shattered, gutted, decimated, flayed, crushed, pulverized, razed, and eradicated forever. That is, if she were being honest. But dark thoughts like these made her belly flutter in a way bordering on nausea, and so she pushed those thoughts away when they arose.

Instead, Theo saw herself as an empath, a caretaker, despite having been on the receiving end of bullies' meanness for as long as she could remember. Or maybe because of it. Above all, she lived for fairness.

But there was something thrilling about seeing the hyper-empowered destroy society's enemies. It satisfied the side of Theo she liked to keep in the shadows. Watching someone else doing the dirty work. Vicarious. It felt safe.

The front door swung open.

"We start yet?" Sam said.

"Well, lookie what the cat blew in," Dotty said.

Sam, still in his nursing scrubs from his shift at the hospital, kicked off his white clogs, removed the shoulder bag slung across his broad chest, and passed a plastic bag containing a single bottle of prosecco to Theo in one coordinated motion. His hair color, always changing, was blue this week.

"Cutting it a little close," Theo scolded, freeing the bottle from the BevMo bag.

"I was halfway to my car when I remembered I forgot," Sam said, settling into his spot on the left side of the sofa.

"Remembered I forgot," Pris repeated, calling out the blip in logic.

"Pristine, good sir." Sam tipped an imaginary hat in her direction and grabbed a fistful of pretzels. "I am *hangry*."

Theo twisted the screw cap off the wine and poured three glasses, its carbonation tickling her nose. She handed them to Sam and Dotty. Pris raised a glass of generic lemon soda, and the four toasted one another, being sure to make eye contact. "The French say it's bad luck not to," Sam had once told them.

"*Les yeux*," Pris declared, but it came out more like "Lazy O."

"Lazy O," they all responded.

"Coming up next on *Suffer*." The gravelly voice-over on the promo began. It was a trailer for the upcoming episode.

"Shh!" Theo said. "It's starting."

Marcia Suffer was about to exact some sweet revenge.

The promotional spot showed images of an urban alley, steam rising from the wet pavement. A black Mercedes, all shine and menace, stood at the far end.

Suddenly, a silhouetted female marched into frame with scenery-chewing

fierceness, the red soles of her four-inch Louboutins reflected in art-directed puddles of water. Say hello to Marcia Suffer.

The announcer's thundery basso rumbled: "When a pedophile goes free, there is no justice, but there will be REVENGE!"

From the pocket of a stylish red leather trench coat, Marcia's delicate hand extracted a black Walther pistol custom-fit with a blood-red handle, her manicured finger twined around the trigger.

A man exited the black Mercedes and turned to camera. It was the defendant from the previous week's episode. That vile scum. He had walked out a free man at the end of the hour. The Bad Man turned to face the luminous Glamazon moving toward him, her weapon aimed straight at his heart. His eyes widened.

"Pl...please. Please," this week's bad guy sputtered as the realization of his fate hit him.

"It's too late for sorry," said Marcia, delivering her character's signature line with extra cheese.

A gunshot pealed out, and the screen went black. The Sufferettes held their breath, the tension thick. And just like that, the music changed, an upbeat pop tune blasted from the TV, and the dead-serious announcer brightened, his voice dripping with schadenfreude:

"Because tonight, Marcia is going to: Make. Him. Suffer! So bust out the pretzels and prosecco, Suffergettes, for an all-new *Suffer!* It's coming up right now on UNC."

"Holy cannoli," Sam whispered with reverence. "This is going to be one hell of a ride."

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The hour of television flew by in a flash, and what a ride it was! Theo smashed the mute button the second the show ended and slumped into the sagging sofa cushions, emotionally drained. Marcia Suffer had ruthlessly avenged the kidnapping of an innocent young girl. The plot twists in *Suffer* were always fast and unpredictable — and tonight was no different. More than once, Theo had found herself gripping her sister's hand during the more heart-stopping moments — not only for Pris's sake but for her own sake as well. The two sisters needed each other, but it didn't take a TV show to tell them that.

"Oh, queen, snatch my wig," Sam said.

He tilted his head and drew the index and middle fingers of his right hand to his carotid pulse point and checked the wristwatch on his left, exaggerating the

action for added drama. A nurse on the day shift at San Fernando Medical Center, Sam knew in a literal heartbeat how to check vitals.

"I am shook, shook, shook!" Sam said.

Pris reached out with both arms from under the weighted blanket that covered her and mimicked Sam, drawing a finger to her own neck while checking a wristwatch that didn't exist.

When the world felt overwhelming, Pris struggled to keep calm. Loud voices, the sound of helicopters, or drag-racing cars, so common in this neighborhood, would make Pris's entire body quake, and she'd clamp her hands over her ears. Nothing would soothe her until the unbearable noise ceased. Sam had given Pris a weighted blanket as a Christmas gift a few years before, which proved to be a miracle in quilted fabric. Now, whenever her mother, Lois, dropped her off at Dotty's for these viewing parties, Pris always had the twelve-pound blanket in tow.

Theo was quiet, her mind already occupied with part two of this weekly ritual: recording their YouTube aftershow: *The Sufferettes of Arleta*.

"Best. Episode. Ever," said Theo, finally. But then again, she said this after just about every episode.

Pris got busy writing in a yellow-and-white composition book labeled *Suffer Fan Book*. Pris acted as the official fact keeper for the group and could summon up a staggering amount of trivia at a moment's notice. That proved invaluable for Theo and Sam as they concocted content for their aftershow.

There were dozens of *Suffer* aftershows on YouTube, but The Sufferettes of Arleta was arguably the most analytical one out there, setting them apart from other fans' efforts. Too bad no one was watching.

"Did you know that in season seven, Marcia exacts revenge against her enemies at a rate of 94.7 percent compared with 86.4 percent in season 2?" Pris said.

"Super interesting," Theo responded. "Why do we think that is?"

Pris paused a moment, then, precisely matching her sister's syntax: "*We think* she's growing angrier. Or more efficient."

"Speaking of efficient, Prissy, why don't you pass me that fizzy wine?" Dotty said, wagging her empty flute. "You ask me, the FBI on this show don't know their arses from holes in the earth." Dot, retired from the LAPD where she worked as a civilian administrative assistant, had strong opinions on the police work on the show. "I mean, it's plain as morning she's the dang killer they're looking for. Stupid show. Jesus Herbert Christ. Prissy, the bottle!"

Pris lofted the dark prosecco bottle and held it up to the lamp at an angle, eyeballing it. "Sorry, Aunt Dot. Looks like exactly oh point five milliliters.

Technically speaking: it's empty."

"Give it here, baby girl. There's a corner in that baby. Waste not, the lord once said."

Dot took the bottle and emptied it into her flute, giving the bottle an extra shake. Pris scrutinized the contents of Dotty's glass.

"Correction," Pris said. "Oh point six. A cognitive mis-calc on my part."

Theo began to tidy the living room in preparation for the aftershow recording. They were going live on YouTube in fifteen minutes. She stopped in front of a wicker basket filled with unopened mail on a small buffet table by the door to the kitchen. In it was a padded envelope stamped with a Drama Con LA logo. Another official-looking envelope from a mortgage company sat beside it, addressed to Dotty. Theo grabbed both.

"Where's my brain? Almost forgot! Badges." She dumped the contents of the envelope onto the coffee table, revealing three plastic lanyard badges with the letters *V-I-P* emblazoned on them.

"VIP! Well, launch my tits into orbit," Dotty said. "Fancy-fancy."

"Did you see this, Dotty?" Theo asked, passing the mortgage envelope to her aunt. "Looks important."

"It's nothing. These people are one pain in my bee-hind," Dotty said.

"Big day tomorrow, lady, gent," Theo said, nodding to Pris and Sam.

"Sufferettes fan summit at nine. *Suffer* cast panel at eleven. Red Carpet meet and greet at two, at which point we will get autographs." Theo winked at Pris, who clapped her hands, delighted.

"And by 3:00 p.m., Roxy DeVine's our motherfucking bestie." Sam raised his right hand, pinkie aloft.

Roxy DeVine was the luminous actress who portrayed their beloved Marcia Suffer. Theo raised her hand and interlocked pinkies with Sam, a show of solidarity they'd been doing since middle school.

"We should get the show going," said Theo.

As Theo ambled over to an older model laptop to set up for their aftershow, Dotty tore open the thick white envelope with the word *URGENT* in bold red letters across it. Inside was a letter addressed to her with the subject line:

MORTGAGE IN ARREARS. IMMEDIATE RESPONSE REQUESTED. Dotty folded the letter and shoved it in the pocket of her housecoat. No need to share this with Theo; the girl was preoccupied, Dotty decided.

Thanks so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed this sample.

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