

LAURA PAYNE BUTLER

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## RUBY RED

CHIPPY CHEWS PEPPERMINT GUM, popping it between her teeth. Joe turns the Cadillac slow, left, off the square. He drums his hands on the steering wheel, cuts his eyes at Chippy. “Stop that damned popping,” he growls at her a bit gruff, but she only tilts her head back and pops the gum again, smiling mean.

“Nervous, ain’t you, honey?” Chippy reaches over to Joe, puts her hand on his to stop the drumming, strokes his skin light with purpose, then takes it away as easily and gives him her sweetest smile. “We’ve done this a hundred times. Don’t worry about a thing. Chippy’ll make sure it all goes smooth as ice.”

“Smooth as ice.” Joe finally cracks into a smile. Chippy knows he is remembering the last time down in Wichita Falls. Everything had been fine until a police car lit out, chasing them all the way down to Possum Kingdom where they had been forced to ditch their car into the lake and hide out in the woods surrounding the west side for a full week. Chippy had hated it, every last moment of sleeping on leaves, swimming in the lake to get clean, breaking into folks’ places to steal food, salt, and utensils, only enough to get by so as not to attract notice. Joe had balked at her insisting on stealing calamine lotion, but he’d nonetheless rubbed it on the chigger bites that appeared around Chippy’s underclothes on the second morning.

When they finally crawled back to Vernon, hitching with a farmer, they snuck into their flat through a window. That night, in only the sheen of a street light, Joe counted their money, laughing, her crying, naked in their tub. Later, Chippy let Joe paint ruby red nail polish on each chigger bite, then kissing each one gently as she supposed he might a child.

“We’ll be just fine this time,” she assures him as he slows onto the gravel parking lot of the café right in the center of a town named Rule. Joe has been watching it for a week; it is the kind of place local farmers and ranch hands – even some boys off the rigs – drop in at noon to sip

sweet tea and have a plate of roasted beef and potatoes. The town appears in the middle of fields, right where West Texas starts, where cattle hills flatten out into crop lands. Those not married return at sunset to sip beers and listen to the jukebox or to programs on the radio, depending on the owner's mood that evening. It is the kind of place Chippy might have frequented to share some beer and perhaps meet a boyfriend. But that was before Joe had talked her into settling down, before this last time when she agreed to really try.

So, now she and Joe look at one another. The sun is in her eyes – not too bright – just enough to make them shine azure. She knows this. Chippy also knows that Joe appreciates her beauty more than any of the other men she has lived with. “Baby, your beauty is a mark, let it fulfill you,” he has said to her. It is Joe's language that Chippy loves. It is the way he strokes her hair as he tells her she is the red center of lightening for him.

Joe leans over to her, breathes in her scent deeply. Chippy feels her skin tingle with the intimacy. “You ready, baby?” He finally whispers into her neck.

She remains in the embrace, breathing it in as long as she can. Chippy is always afraid it will be the last of such moments; she is never able to stay true, Joe never able to stay around. Finally, Chippy pulls back and replies flip and light: “You bet your ass I'm ready. Ready steady.” She shifts the rearview mirror over to point at her face, pulls out her tube of Ruby Red and reapplies, then powders her nose, rubbing lightly down straight along the lines of her features. “Not bad – holding on right nice,” she mutters under her breath, all the time wondering if her thirtieth birthday has passed or if she's just rounding twenty-nine. As a child, it had bothered her that her mother claimed to never remember exactly when she was born. Lately, she had been less bothered.

The owner of the café's name is Agnes. She wears a tight, cotton shirt with her name embroidered on her breast. Chippy smiles at her sweet as pie, spreading her lips to reveal straight and true teeth. The woman nods politely enough, but without a smile. “What you-all wanting today?”

“Oh, we're just passing through. Hot as blazes, though. You think we can get us some beer here?” This time it is Joe who smiles, flirtatiously. The woman, Agnes, manages a half-smile at him and nods.

Chippy slides into a burgundy leather booth; Joe slides in opposite her glancing around at the men and women enjoying sodas and beers. It is the afternoon, late fall, before cotton harvest. Although Chippy had worried that it was too early in the afternoon to ensure a crowd, her fears prove unfounded. “Plenty of folks in here, huh?” she says to Joe, searching each one with her quick glance.

"You thinking about playing some tunes, Baby?" Joe asks her and presses her knees with his own.

This is the signal, so, as the owner slides two bottles of beer and two glasses onto their Formica booth table, Chippy stands up slowly, taking her time to stretch her legs out, then to adjust her stockings. Her wool skirt is tight and slightly damp against her skin. It sticks close as she smoothes it before sipping her beer long, straight from the bottle. The men all look at her; those sitting with women do so in passing, quickly averting their eyes as their women replace their gazes with less admiring stares.

Chippy knows this too well and walks boldly through the café to the jukebox in search of a tune to her liking. Joe does not watch. He smiles at the farmer sitting at the booth in front of him and strikes up a conversation: "This here town seems like a nice enough one," Joe booms loudly. The farmer looks up and engages into a diatribe about the niceness of crossroads towns and the difficulty of farming on rocky, arid soils.

Joe occupied, it does not take long for Chippy to stare a boy into joining her at the jukebox. "You like to dance, sweetie pie?" she touches his arm lightly, picking at the coarse brick denim of his cowboy shirt. As he takes her into his arms and shuffles his boots into a two-step, she breathes into his neck, just as Joe breathed into hers only minutes before: "You look like you might like to ride."

But before the boy can much answer past, "Yes, Ma'am," Joe is at them wheeling the boy around by the arm and landing a fist into his face. The café turns wild immediately, some farmers supporting Joe, others the boy. Women jump up onto their booth seats, and the owner, Agnes, rushes into the melee, yelling, "Don't you fools be smashing up my place. This here's a nice place."

Smoothly, without hurry, Chippy makes her way through the crowd and over to the cash register at the front door. She stands as if to ready herself to leave with her husband, placing worry on her face to only slightly cloud her features. Taking her time, she reaches over the counter, low, and pushes the sale button. The door slides open; no one hears the bell ring. Chippy scoops out the cash and exits the door as easily as she entered.

At the Cadillac, Chippy again reapplies her Ruby Red, noting that she needs another tube as soon as she and Joe return to Vernon, count out their money in the morning and pay rent, buy food. "Sure will be nice to have some new magazines and some whiskey in the house," Chippy calculates as the car door opens and she looks up to sweetly place her mouth for the kiss Joe will lay on those lips he claims always pout rubies.

Joe is not there. "Bitch," Chippy hears just before a blow from the flat side of Agnes' .38 smashes her true in the nose, knocking Chippy

out cold.

She wakes hours later in the eery half-dark of a full harvest moon, lying on the back seat of Joe's Cadillac. She does not know at this point that it has been driven into a field outside of town. The leather of the seats is cold against her skin—the windows are open—and the fall breeze slides into the car, just passing through.

Joe groans in the front seat, but Chippy feels unable to lift her head high enough to see to him. "Baby Doll?" She attempts to whisper but the words choke then drown in blood within her mouth. Chippy tries to cough, but cracked ribs constrict even that. Her eyes well up with the panic of pain that engulfs her. She wonders if Joe is hurt worse, and that panic lays itself like a woolen blanket shielding her with adeneline.

Her purse has been emptied; the contents strewn around her. She picks up the compact and opens the mirror. Her eyes cannot adjust to the dim moonlight, so she tries to rub them. The pain of fingers' touch on her skin flashes white across her vision. She closes her eyes, breathes deep. Her head falls back again.

Chippy does not know how long it takes to finally see herself in the tiny mirror of her compact. But as the sun begins to shift from greenish cast of moon to violet of sunup, Chippy focuses her gaze on the remains of her white skin, now covered mostly blue and red from the severe beating she has received. "My nose," Chippy whispers at herself, beginning to panic at the mass of blood and broken cartilage that had once been the straight and fine nose of which she had been so proud. She looks down at her fingers and licks them lightly, noting with wonder that she tastes both blood and waxy ruby red flowing through gaps where teeth had once been.

Joe groans again and begins to shift on the front seat. Chippy lies as still as possible, shivering and alone, waiting for Joe to discover her bent and broken body, to paint her ruby red, kiss her whole.