

Gold Digger

by Sheila Julson

Sophie hoped that Ryan would just stay in the bathroom and never come out. Her stomach turned just thinking about him, but wealthy nerds were easier to work than wealthy regular guys. No self-esteem, no experience with women...no problem.

Lightening cracked as Ryan stepped into the bedroom of the country cottage. Sophie slammed what little wine was left in her glass when she saw Ryan standing in the doorway, clad in a pair of silk boxer shorts. The flickering candlelight glared off his greasy hair. He forgot to remove his tube socks.

"You look great in that red dress, darling," Ryan's voice crackled.

"Thank you." Sophie headed towards the bed and contemplated which of her moves would turn Ryan on the most. She kicked off her vamp heels and crawled like a spider onto the four-poster bed. She wasn't sure, but she thought she saw drool at the corner of Ryan's mouth. Wearing a plastic smile, she motioned Ryan over with her forefinger.

Ryan dove onto the bed. While they made "love" Sophie closed her eyes and imagined that she was with Johnny Depp. She imagined the beachfront home she had looked at earlier that month, and imagined buying the house and property very soon. She envisioned a shopping spree on Rodeo Drive.

Ryan sat up and leaned against the headboard while Sophie wrapped herself in a red silk robe. She noticed that her crimson lipstick had smudged the rose patterned sheets.

"So, Ryan, how about some wine?"

"I'd love some."

Sophie, who already had *the* bottle of cabernet sauvignon cracked open and the wine poured, handed Ryan his glass.

"First, a toast." Ryan raised his glass. "All my life, I thought I'd never have the pleasure of meeting a woman as charming as you, dear Sophie. You have brought me much happiness these past three months, and for that, I thank you."

Sophie grinned.

"Also," Ryan continued, "I hope I can make your life as pleasurable as you have made mine."

Their classes clicked and Ryan swallowed a large portion of his wine, and then winced.

Sophie tensed. "Something wrong, dear?"

"Oh, no. Hearty wine, that's all." He smacked his lips and winced again.

"Well... I'm going to take my bath."

She saw Ryan's reflection in the mirror. He dreamily watched her as she walked into the bathroom. She closed the bathroom door and turned on the tub faucet full blast, and chose not to see or hear what she had created. Hypnotized by the rushing water, she dreamed of her new beginning. She leaned back into the sea of scented bubbles, and knew that she would bathe in luxury for the rest of her life.

After she nearly dozed off in the tub, she dried off, casually wrapped her robe around her, and walked back into the bedroom to find Ryan lying face down on the bed and half under the covers, motionless. She could not hear him breathe. She touched his arm, and jerked her hand back. He was a bit clammy, but he'd be cold soon.

"I'll be downstairs, dear," Sophie said. The arsenic, which was readily available at Ryan's pesticide plant that he made his fortune from, worked as expected. He never suspected a thing.

The plan was flowing perfectly. She would suddenly wake up next to Ryan the morning after an eventful first night on their honeymoon, and he would be dead! Oh, what a pity, Sophie would cry to the police, how her beloved husband died of gastric distress during the night. The symptoms would show gastroenteritis.

Sure, there would be some questions about his sudden death, especially since Sophie was his main beneficiary, but Ryan didn't have much family to debate the matter. If the pathology reports from the hospital showed traces of arsenic, Sophie would then suggest that his vengeful vice president-nemesis at the company may have

helped himself to some arsenic and slipped it in his coffee or something. And Ryan never did get any cards for Boss's Day.

She walked down the tiny wood staircase. The countryside cottage Ryan had rented for their honeymoon gave her the creeps. It was out in the middle of nowhere. Everything in the place was made of chunky wood stenciled with old-world European floral designs. No electronics except for a telephone — and not even a cordless — on the kitchen wall.

She went into the kitchen and opened the faded green cupboards stenciled with ducks and hearts.

"This place looks like the seven dwarves house," Sophie grumbled, and grabbed a bag of gourmet potato chips, not out of hunger, but just for something to do.

She then went into the living room before remembering that the place had no television set. There was a painting above the fireplace of some homely old lady. Sophie took a closer look. The painting's subject was frowning and her eyes seemed to bore into Sophie's. It was how Ryan glared at people who had crossed him.

Smith '58 was painted in the corner.

Sophie shuddered. "Well, Smith, your artwork sucks." She removed the painting from the wall and put it in the corner.

A loud crack of thunder echoed outside. She flinched.

There was a clatter from the kitchen.

Sophie slowly approached the sound, tripping over that damn oak step again. It got her the first time she went into the kitchen upon their arrival at the cottage.

What if the clatter was Ryan's ghost, avenging what she had done to him?

"Girl, you've been watching too many horror flicks," Sophie told herself.

It was only a shutter that blew open. She wiped a lone bead of sweat from her forehead and slammed the shutter, sealing out the outdoors.

Sophie sat on one of the wooden kitchen chairs and regained her composure. The cute cat clock on the wall only read 8:55. She

sighed. She had to spend at least ten more hours in that Hansel and Gretel house with a stiff upstairs.

After making sure all the doors and windows were locked, Sophie looked around for something to do. There was a small bookcase in the corner of the living room that contained only one book. The rest of the shelves were cluttered with wooden farm animal cut-outs.

No TV. No radio. Just one book.

Sophie grabbed the book and glanced at her choice of seating, either a large oak rocker or a plaid couch with a pine frame. She frowned upon both.

She made herself as comfortable as she could in the rocker and opened the book. She read the opening passage:

The rain beat upon the roof as the killer frantically looked for a way out after realizing what she had done...

Sophie gasped and slammed the book shut.

Wide-eyed, she stared blankly around the living room. Somebody, somewhere, seemed to know what was going on. Sophie returned the book back to its place. Perhaps she should check on Ryan, just to be sure...

No. He already seemed dead when she checked on him after her bath. Sophie clicked on another lamp at the opposite end of the room. It cast a soft glow that made her feel a bit better; more comforting than the eerie shadows of the dark that occupied the room moments ago.

Yet she couldn't calm herself. She paced, and ended up back in the kitchen. Just for something to do, she opened the cupboards and eyed the food that she and Ryan bought at the small town grocer on their way to the cottage. Never being a culinary artist or even a fairly good cook, she selected a package of instant cheddar and broccoli rice.

The water simmered in the kettle.

CLUNK! CLUNK! CLUNK!

Sophie felt her stomach drop. On shaky legs, she went to investigate.

There was nothing there. Yet she knew she had heard something.

Fighting off shakes, Sophie grabbed the bottle of Bailey's Irish Cream that chilled in the refrigerator. She swallowed what equaled to ten shots before mustering up the courage to face the living room again.

Sophie stomped up the stairs and went into the bedroom. She lit one of the candles and saw Ryan's lumpy outline under the covers in the same position that it was before.

She grabbed her overnight bag and sulked back downstairs. The door quietly clicked shut behind her.

10:45. She sighed and tried not to look at the clock. She finished making her cheddar and broccoli rice, dumped it into a big old ceramic bowl, and that's where it stayed. Nausea seemed to replaced her appetite.

Sophie ignored her jittery stomach and sat at the kitchen table. She opened the latest issue of *Cosmopolitan*. The articles on beauty, lust, and love usually intrigued her, but she just couldn't concentrate on them that night.

It was too quiet. She drummed her nails on the hardwood table. The ticking of the cute cat clock amplified against the silence. Sophie rose and strolled around the county kitchen and tried to think of gross adjectives to describe the place. It was something to do.

Sophie looked at the clock again. 11:38.

On edge, Sophie, accompanied by the bottle of Bailey's that was starting to give her a headache, went to the front door and looked out the tiny window. Rain splashed off Ryan's blue Mercedes Benz that was parked in the clearing in front of the cottage.

Maybe she could go for a ride.

No, what if someone spotted her? It could blow her whole story.

Yet, some fresh air would be nice.

Sophie flung the door open and was greeted by a damp breeze. She smiled as the rain splashed against her face.

Then she heard a scream in the distance.

The nearly empty bottle of Bailey's slipped from her grasp. Glass smashed against the slate doorstep. Sophie watched the rain wash away what little liquor' was left.

She wildly scanned the area and saw only the dead of night. The trees appeared to be dark, wiry shadows bowling in the breeze. Gray clouds nearly covered the crescent moon.

Sophie staggered back into the house and slammed the door. The scream she had heard outdoors replayed over and over in her head. She curled up on the couch and slowly rocked back and forth. Maybe she couldn't handle murder. After all, she had never tried it before. She looked at her shaky hand, which appeared yellow-ish in the lamplight.

The clock only read 12:15.

Sophie leaned her head against the back of the sofa and no longer cared that it was plaid. Feeling dizzy, she nodded off.

Sophie awoke at 5:30am. Her eyes felt glued shut, since she fell asleep without removing her eye make-up. Gray consumed the room as the dawn's rays cut through the curtains. *Good*, Sophie thought, *soon I can call the paramedics and end this whole thing.*

She tried to fall back asleep, but could not. Her heart thumped faster. Her stomach seemed to jolt up and down as if it were a basketball being dribbled down a court. Fighting dizziness, she headed towards the bathroom.

She rose from the bathroom floor a short time later, cursing herself for drinking too much. She knew she was supposed to keep a clear head while executing a murder plot, but her nerves got the better of her.

Still dizzy, she approached the bedroom door, which was open a tiny crack. She thought she had shut it.

Sophie slowly opened the door and was startled by the creaky hinges that were louder than she expected.

Ryan was still lying there. Still face down. Still motionless.

Slightly reassured, Sophie went back downstairs. She stumbled, as the stairs seemed to swirl as she walked. A numbing feeling ran through her legs, which gave out from under her. She made a mad grasp at the railing before she tumbled down the stairs like a rag doll dropped by a disinterested little girl.

She crawled over to the couch, feeling weaker every second. As she leaned back and watched the beamed ceiling spin, it all became clear.

Therefore, she wasn't surprised when she saw Ryan come down the staircase, carefully clutching the railing. He was still wearing those tube socks.

"Feeling ill, dear Sophie?"

Despite the wretched feeling in her gut, Sophie tilted her head back and laughed. What else was there to do? It was over.

"Subtlety is not one of your virtues," Ryan said as he trod over to the rocker and took a seat. He clutched his stomach and rocked towards her. "I watched you parade around my plant one day, collecting the poison samples. You, thinking you were being discreet. Surveillance is a wonderful thing. I thought about turning you into the authorities, but this would be more fun."

"Bailey's?"

Ryan nodded. "I knew you'd hit the bottle some time during the night, and the chocolate flavor would hide the bitter taste."

Sophie half-heartedly pulled the patchwork throw off the couch and pulled it around her. "So Ryan, what's your secret for digesting arsenic?"

"Dimercaprol," Ryan groaned. "Although, I don't feel as if I've taken enough of it, so I'm going to hospital to have my stomach pumped. You go ahead and die. I'll be back later with the authorities and my cover story."

Ryan, still shaky, made his way towards the kitchen.

"Ryan?" Sophie called desperately.

"Yes, darling?"

"Are you sure that was Dimercaprol you took?"

Ryan stopped and leaned against the wall.

"I knew that you were on to me," Sophie explained. "I found your stash of Dimercaprol, too. I had to do a switch. So, I still want to know...how do you digest arsenic? Are you immune to it from years at the pesticide plant?"

"You..." Ryan growled, and tried to lunge at Sophie, but stumbled into the pine end table instead.

Sophie forced a weak smile. " Better get to the hospital. You're not looking so good. I can see red veins all over your face."

Saying not one more word to Sophie, Ryan staggered into the kitchen. The phone receiver clicked as it was lifted from its base.

Sophie then heard the receiver bounce off the floor.

Seconds later, she heard a dull thud.

"There he goes."

As the phone's dial tone cut through the silent cottage, she envisioned herself on that Rodeo Drive shopping spree as she closed her eyes for the last time.

