

# INDELIBLE

*by*  
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## CHAPTER ONE

*Saturday, July 11*

Luna arched her back, stretching the muscles and releasing the tension built up over the past forty-five minutes. She inspected her work, taking the image in as a whole. It was good. With the buzz of the tattoo gun in her ear and the ink flowing, melding with the flesh, she never saw the whole picture, just the fluid transfer of color one needle point at a time.

“One more session and we’ll be done.” Luna disconnected the needle and dropped it into the sharps container.

“I could go longer today.” Her client smiled. Luna knew from experience that, for some clients, getting a tattoo was a walk on the wild side and an opportunity to show off to friends.

“It’s not a good idea,” Luna said. The chair was already booked for another client. “Let’s get together in another week, okay?”

She collected her payment, waved good-bye to her client, then dropped her head onto the counter. It hit with a satisfying thunk. Her head hurt, and not just from the blunt-force trauma of cranium meeting table.

“Tell me why I keep taking clients like her?” Luna always felt the sting of artistic sacrifice after a session with Susan. No matter how much ink she added, Susan would never truly understand the beauty of altering the landscape of her body. For her, it would always be a trendy rebellion intended to upset her parents, rather than the affirmation of life that Luna wanted it to be for all her clients.

Her apprentice, Perez, smiled wickedly. “Virgin flesh?”

“We need a bigger space.” A larger location would mean more chairs and fewer visits from women like Susan. Her session wouldn’t have to be cut short in order to vacate the one and only chair for another client.

“Indeed.” Perez placed a fresh cup of black coffee next to Luna. “Drink.” She took a sip from her own cup.

“Thanks.” Luna closed her eyes and inhaled the aroma—dark, slightly bitter, and so seductive. Perez was a goddess with a coffeemaker.

Luna took a small drink and the ritual relaxed her. “Eventually we’ll have to go through all the real-estate listings.” She nudged the neglected stack of papers next to the register.

“Yep.” Perez took another drink of coffee. She resisted the paperwork involved in relocating Coraggio as much as Luna did. Besides, her client was due in ten minutes, so Luna could forgive her for not diving in.

Like a well-timed distraction, Ruby shuffled across the room above them. About time, too. Luna thought Ruby might sleep all day. Of course, she had good reason, since Luna had kept her up most of the night before. The two of them had an ongoing challenge: who could make the other one scream the most. Luna was determined to win. Besides, Ruby didn’t have any other obligations. She was a trust-fund baby, living off the fat bank account that the hard work of previous generations had created. She was a lay-about, though a *hot* lay-about, and Luna could live with that.

Coraggio’s current location had one advantage—the living space above the tattoo studio. When Luna first started out, not having to pay rent on an apartment had saved her from going bankrupt. “Ruby’s up.”

“Ruby’s more than up, lover.” Looking every bit the femme fatale from a 50s pulp-fiction novel, Ruby appeared at the top of the stairs. She smoothed the fabric of her fuck-me red dress as she descended, one languid step at a time.

Perez scooped up her papers, grumbled under her breath, and escaped to the back room.

“She’s still scared of me?” Ruby ran a manicured nail—polish matched to her dress and her name—across Luna’s cheek.

“Must be.” It was easier to agree than to tell Ruby that Perez didn’t like her. Rather, she didn’t like Ruby’s role in Luna’s life. Perez wanted Luna to meet a nice girl, settle down, and raise 2.2 kids. Luna wanted that, too, but she wasn’t interested in being celibate until it happened. Wasn’t it enough that she no longer considered it a personal obligation to have sex with every lesbian in the greater Portland metro area? Ruby was the perfect solution for Luna—wild as hell in bed, didn’t believe in the word *no*, and wasn’t looking for long-term commitment. Which worked well since Luna couldn’t offer one, at least not with Ruby. All in all, it was a win-win situation.

“You *still* working on this?” Ruby flipped through Luna’s real-estate listings. She looked as though something sour had crawled inside her mouth and died there, and her normal honey-smooth voice cracked around the edges. Moving Coraggio seemed frivolous to her. Why fix it if it ain’t broken? Ruby obviously did not inherit her family’s go-forth-and-conquer attitude when it came to business.

As much as the process for expanding intimidated Luna, a large part of her—the foot-stomping, I-can-do-it part—wanted to prove to Ruby, and herself, that she could make this transition successfully. More than that, though, she needed to remind herself where Ruby fit. She was not her business partner, and Luna did not need to justify her decisions regarding Coraggio to her. Ruby was a fun time in bed, nothing more. Luna wanted to keep it that way.

Luna pulled Ruby in for a hard, brief kiss. As far as distractions went, slipping her tongue between Ruby’s teeth usually worked. It not only side-tracked Ruby, but usually left Luna wondering why she was trying to distract Ruby in the first place.

“Coffee?” Luna started toward the back office.

“No, you stay here. I’ll get it.” Ruby rolled away from Luna, her hips leading and the rest of her body following languorously. “Let’s see if I can chase Perez out of another room.”

A few moments later Perez scurried in, like a puppy scrambling to avoid Cruella’s reach. “Devil woman,” she muttered at the beaded curtain, then turned toward Luna. “I don’t get it. What do you see in her?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Anyone with eyes could see why Luna

was attracted to Ruby. Her appeal was all on the surface for everyone to enjoy. She was the perfect stiletto to Luna's combat boot.

"I know she looks good, but what about at the end of the day?"

That question was even more absurd. "At the end of the day she *feels* good." God, did she ever. Ruby could do amazing things with her body, and her buttermilk-smooth skin could almost make Luna forget that she didn't love her. But the moments after climax when reality slammed into focus made Luna want more than Ruby offered. Perez's questions were right on target. Luna wouldn't be satisfied with a surface-level relationship forever, and no matter how hard Ruby made her come, and vice versa, they weren't in love with one another.

"You're hopeless."

Hopeless? Such a final word, which left Luna emotionally tired. She had officially hung up her whoring-around shoes, metaphorically speaking. Still, it was impossible to go from race car to minivan overnight. Transitions like that happened by degrees, right?

"It's not like you're all tied up, Perez. When was the last time you went on more than two dates with the same woman?"

Perez wrinkled her nose and stuck out her tongue. "That's not the point. I'm still young." At twenty-six, she was closer to thirty than twenty, but Perez hadn't grasped that youth was rapidly departing.

Luna remembered the Peter Pan feeling of her mid-twenties. She had held on to it well past her thirtieth birthday.

"And I'm not?"

"You're thirty-three." Perez said the number with a frown. "At a certain point, you really should settle down."

"This conversation is over."

Perez started to speak.

"Ruby is thirty-four. Want me to tell her you think *she's* old?"

The color drained from Perez's face. "No."

They looked through real-estate listings in relative silence while waiting for Perez's appointment to arrive. The sound of Ruby riffing through the morning paper as she drank her coffee filtered in and mixed with the occasional flipping of pages as Luna and Perez sorted, considered, and discarded potential locations.

Frustrated and contemplating leading Ruby back up the stairs for a reminder of why she kept her around, Luna rubbed her hands over her

eyes and forced herself to exhale. A tiny bit of tension escaped with the breath and she thought again about taking up meditation, even if it was so damned boring to do.

“You need a nice girl like her.” Perez indicated a woman passing on the sidewalk outside.

The woman paused, face to the late-afternoon sun. Her hair fell around her shoulders, light drifting through the blond strands like a movie-perfect halo, and Luna wanted to trace the light dusting of freckles on her cheeks with her fingers. She imagined her shoulder—a crisp white cotton sheet falling around it—sun-kissed and dappled with freckles, each one begging to be kissed.

Before Luna could fall into the fantasy completely, Ruby stepped between her and Perez, steaming mug of coffee clutched in both hands.

“Yummy,” she purred. “In a pearls-and-angora kind of way.”

Luna mentally growled. Not that she didn’t agree with Ruby, but she was not in the mood to share. Naughty thoughts were best savored alone, then acted out with willing partners. She was still in the savoring stage and not yet in the mood to act it out with Ruby.

Another woman who wore tighter clothes and aggressive makeup wrapped her arm around Luna’s dream lover’s waist and squeezed her middle. They laughed together for a moment, then continued their walk.

The first woman was soft lines and Betty Crocker wholesome. The second looked the type to corrupt even the most innocent of the girl-next-door brigade. Luna wanted to intervene. She wanted to be the one doing the corrupting. Odd that she was jealous of an unknown woman separated from her by a sheet of storefront glass, but not of Ruby’s obvious interest. Despite the lack of emotional ties, they had a working commitment. They were casually exclusive.

“I’m heading out.” Ruby kissed her on the cheek. “See you later tonight?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Luna nodded. Her last appointment was scheduled for nine thirty that night. She was adding gold and blue to a full sleeve she had inked in the previous week. She planned to be done in an hour, an hour fifteen, tops.

Luna watched Ruby walk away, captivated by the generous sway of her hips.

“Focus.” Perez smacked her with a rolled-up property listing. “Coraggio won’t move itself.”

Luna put away her daydreams and picked up the stack of property listings. Only four more inches to sort through. Then the business plan. Then the loan application. She dropped her head to the table again. At this rate, the only thing to progress would be the size of her headache.

*Monday, July 13*

“It’s seriously disturbing to watch you eat that thing.” Angie Dressen wrinkled her nose before she carefully licked her nonfat frozen yogurt—the boring, safe cousin to Tori’s calorie-laden, sugar-coma-inducing treat.

Tori swept her tongue over the ice cream, collecting as much as possible. She waggled it at Angie before pulling it into her mouth with a loud slurp. “If it’s so disturbing, you shouldn’t watch.”

“But, honey, you know I like to watch.” Angie gave her best lascivious grin, complete with jiggling eyebrows. Since this was all the action she was likely to get tonight—or any other night, at the rate she was going—she wanted to make the most of it.

“Baby, I’ll let you do more than watch.” Tori’s voice dropped to an indecently seductive level as she moved closer to Angie.

Tori’s blatant sexuality used to shock Angie, even made her drop her frozen yogurt completely the first time she said something so overt. Now it just made her laugh. “Ain’t never gonna happen.”

Tori shrugged and took another long swipe of vanilla, letting her tongue linger.

“You have plans for this weekend?”

So they’d moved on to polite conversation already? Usually it took a little longer for them to reach this point during their walk. After all, Tori knew the answer to her question. Angie didn’t have plans. She never had plans beyond working, hanging out with Oliver, and trying to put a dent in her ever-growing list of chores around the house. “Not so much. You?”

“Could be.” Tori peered over the top of her sunglasses at a passing

woman wearing ass-hugging shorts and a barely there baby-doll tee. She stopped walking and turned to watch the woman until she disappeared into the next building. “Nice.”

Angie agreed. The woman had obvious charms, but what was the point of looking if she couldn’t explore further? “You have a date?”

Tori pushed her glasses back into position. “If I get lucky, yes. I’m going to the E Room. You should come.”

Tori invited Angie dancing every weekend and Angie always declined. “You know I can’t.”

Tori took another bite of ice cream. She was down to the cone. “Come on, Angie, by the time you get home, Oli’s already in bed. He won’t know the difference if you’re a couple hours later.”

No, she supposed he wouldn’t. But she would. Her priority since the day Oliver was born had been to be a good mom, not have a good time. She did date occasionally, but the pickup world that Tori lived in was so far away from Angie’s reality, she could barely imagine it. “I can’t. It’s not a good idea.” Angie finished her yogurt and tossed the cup into a street-side trashcan. Tori’s ice-creamless cone followed.

“We’re almost there.” Tori pointed at the business to their left.

“Are you *sure* you want to do this?” Angie paused at the far edge of the building. If they didn’t enter *Coraggio*, then Tori wouldn’t be able to do anything stupid. They walked past this building twice a day, but yesterday was the first time Tori had showed any interest in the business itself. Suddenly she was rushing to get a tattoo.

“Yes, for the millionth time, I’m sure.” Tori grabbed Angie’s arm and dragged her the last few feet. Without releasing her hold, Tori wrenched open the door and urged Angie none-too-gently through the opening. “Come on.”

“I just don’t get it.” Angie looked around the small shop. *Coraggio* was painted in loose flowing script across one wall. Line drawings and pictures of fresh tattoos covered every available surface. “Why would anyone *want* a tattoo?”

“I can think of a couple of reasons.” A woman with long, untamed, curly brown hair stood against the customer side of the counter, one hip resting comfortably against the edge. Her legs, lean and encased in supple leather the same color as her hair, were crossed at the ankles.

She smiled, the barest hint of a dimple popping out, and said, “I’m Luna.” Her gaze lingered on Angie, a sexy, slow appraisal.

Angie never realized leather pants could look that good outside of the movies. She subtly ran her hand over her mouth. Rather, she hoped she was being subtle, but how covert can one really be when checking for drool? She forced herself to take a steady breath and wondered how many tattoos Luna had. The only visible one was an angel on her right bicep. Rather than the soft, glowing angels Angie remembered from her brief stint at a Catholic grade school, Luna’s was in stark relief, bold with hard lines and sharp angles.

A second woman stepped around the counter, wearing just as much leather and more tattoos than Luna. “And I’m Perez.”

“I’m Tori.” Tori shook Perez’s hand, clinging a little too long in typical Tori fashion. She was quick to decide what—or who—she wanted, and just as quick to make it known. Angie envied her that ability. Tori threw an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. “This is Angie.” She nudged Angie toward Luna.

“Hi.” Angie wasn’t sure what to do. What was appropriate tattoo-parlor etiquette? Should she offer to shake hands? Bump knuckles? Grunt? She settled on a shy finger wave and immediately felt like an idiot.

Luna’s smile was like the hot sun on cool, fresh-from-the-swimming-pool skin, and Angie was captivated. She wanted to bask in this woman, which shook her. She usually kept her emotions tight to her chest. Extreme, immediate reactions didn’t fit into her stable, workaday life.

“I bet you’d look great with a tattoo.” Luna gestured toward the drawings on the wall and moved closer to Angie—close enough to touch.

“Uhm” was all Angie managed.

Luna took a hold of Angie’s hand, turned it palm up, and traced a circle on the inside of her wrist. “This is a great spot for a small, intimate tattoo. Something special, perhaps?”

Angie shivered. Between Luna’s captivating smile and her touch, Angie was trapped. She knew she should step back or respond. Anything. But she was completely vapor-locked. She just wanted to dip

her tongue into the dimple on Luna's left cheek. Every well-thought-out argument against tattoos evaporated with the heat of Luna's gaze.

"Or maybe here?" Luna's voice dropped to a lower register. Already whiskey rough, the tone promised all manner of naughty fun. She didn't release Angie's hand as she ran her fingers over the defined edge of Angie's bicep.

Angie's brain misfired, and she barely registered the sound of someone entering from the back room.

Luna released Angie. She took a step back and smiled—a sexy smile that melted a place Angie had all but forgotten about.

"Hello, lover." The woman had brown hair so dark it was almost black, cut in a perfect hard-lined bob. After she stole into the room and wrapped her arm around Luna's waist, she stared at Angie, her eyes flashing with unmistakable jealousy. Angie got the message loud and clear. "You almost ready?"

"I'm not sure." Luna gave the woman a brief, yet excessively intimate kiss. "Give me a few minutes and I'll let you know."

Angie's rush of envy was followed by relief. Luna had a girlfriend. The temptation was off the table.

The woman looked at Tori and Angie, her gaze lingering on Angie. "Well, if it isn't June Cleaver in the flesh," she purred, the words half threat, half invitation.

"June Cleaver?" The assessment torqued Angie. Yes, she looked like every other soccer mom she'd ever met, but she wasn't the one wearing pearls. The woman clinging to Luna had a string of obviously fake ones around her neck. Big and gaudy, they rested between the broad red lapels that framed her neck. Her shirt was open several buttons past decent, and her skirt, with its wide matching belt, swirled around her legs a la sexy pinup girl. She looked like the quintessential 50s housewife on porn.

"Honey, I didn't say it was a *bad* thing." The tone of her voice assured Angie that she thought it was terrible.

"Ruby." Luna placed a restraining hand on Ruby's arm.

Angie swallowed a growl. She didn't know what upset her more, Ruby's—her name was a perfect match for her cultivated harlot look—tone or Luna's physical proximity to Ruby.