

ROSE Red

A model from Sleeping Beauty Inc. will do anything...
...even paint your house



Stephanie Van Orman

Copyright © 2010, 2021 Stephanie Van Orman

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without written permission of the copyright owner except for the use of written quotations in a book review.

Any reference to historical events, real people or places are used fictitiously. Names, characters, places are products of the author's imagination.

Front cover image by Roman3dArt

Book design by Stephanie Van Orman

Author photograph by Alison Quist

<https://tigrix1.wixsite.com/stephanievanorman>

stephanievanorman.blogspot.com

tigrix@gmail.com

Rose Red

Stephanie Van Orman

Other Books by Stephanie Van Orman

His 16th Face

If I Tie U Down

Behind his Mask: The First Spell Book

Hidden Library: The Second Spell Book

Kiss of Tragedy

Whenever You Want

A Little Like Scarlett: A Partial Autobiography

ROSE RED

By Stephanie Van Orman

Table of Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty One](#)

[Chapter Twenty Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty Seven](#)

[His 16th Face by Stephanie Van Orman](#) Special Preview!

Chapter One

Harrison stepped through the glass doors and entered the waiting room of Sleeping Beauty Inc. With pink metallic chairs and faux snakeskin seats, it was obviously not his regular hangout. He sat down anyway, close to the door. From the least obtrusive seat in the room, he could see three monitors showing Sleeping Beauty Inc. success stories.

“She changed my life,” an immaculate businessman pronounced. “This was me before I hired Cynthia.” They showed a picture of a pudgy, freckled post-grad. Naturally, he looked pathetic and desperately in need of the makeover Cynthia gave him. “As soon as we were in the car, she started working out my new regime. She put me on an exercise program, changed my diet, and coached me on success. I have always been talented in business, but she brought me to the next level with her style and grace,” he beamed. “I’ve had Cynthia for six years now. She doesn’t cost me money. She makes me money.”

He disappeared from the screen as they displayed Sleeping Beauty Inc.'s business number over clips from last year’s fashion show.

Harrison's discomfort was palpable. He came to the office exactly on time for his appointment so he wouldn’t have to wait around. He didn’t want to see the other men stewing in the waiting room, and he certainly didn’t want them to see him. They were all staring at him, bug-eyed. One was chewing something with his mouth half-open. He looked several pegs below the success story they showed on the monitor, even before the transformation with Cynthia. Harrison hoped the gum chewer didn’t have his hopes up too high.

The next testimonial piped up on the monitor closest to Harrison. “My business life has always been exceptional. It was my home life that was lacking. I’ve had butlers, housekeepers, maids, gardeners, personal assistants, and everything else. You name it, I’ve had it. I didn’t have time to supervise my home. Now Roxanne takes care of all of that for me. She knows me inside and out, so everything is always done exactly to my taste. And she’s a stunning date on the fly,” the man confessed with a vomit-inducing wink.

They proceeded to show a clip of the beautiful Roxanne coming down a grand white staircase in an evening gown. She was every man's deepest fantasy.

Harrison smirked. The ads were making him feel more out of place. It wasn't like he was going to be able to afford a model who looked like Roxanne.

A moment later, a woman in a buff-colored suit popped into the room. She recognized him from his application and approached him. “Hi, Harrison? Thank you for waiting,” she said shrilly. “I’m Vivian, a client coordinator. My last meeting ran long. That client has visited our showroom five times and he still can’t make up his mind. There are so many excellent models to choose from.”

Harrison smiled and pretended he didn’t mind waiting. He had to be patient since he couldn’t afford the rates anywhere else.

The client coordinator made friendly chit-chat as she ushered him past the reception desk and into a private office. She wasn't a bad-looking woman, except that she was probably old enough to be his mother—like a lot of the other women he knew.

“Alright,” she said, seating him and taking her place on the other side of the desk. “Let's go over your specifications, shall we?”

Harrison nodded and tried to relax. After all, he wasn't in the absurd waiting room mixing with the fishbowl of strange buyers anymore.

The client coordinator reminded him that their consultation was completely confidential and got started. “Let's go over each category starting at the top.” She lit up her desk and displayed a copy of his application form on the surface. Then she pointed to the first category: beauty. “I noticed you didn't mark down a preference. Let me fill you in about each style. First, there's Snow White—”

“I get it,” Harrison interrupted. “I didn't put anything down, because I don't care about what she looks like. All the girls have to be presentable to qualify for a contract with you, don't they?”

“Of course,” the coordinator said without skipping a beat. “I can set your selection to be random. Your answers to our other questions might narrow the field a bit. Usually, it's the most important feature for our clients.”

“The girls aren't robots, are they? I was under the impression that they were real girls you chose to describe with fairytale names depending on their coloring.”

She laughed. “Robots? This isn't the twenty-fourth century. We still get girls the old-fashioned way. Then let's move onto the second category: function.”

Harrison's eyes ran down the list: Diva, Creative Princess, Domestic Goddess, Queen Rose, and Enchantress. His mouth was figuratively filled with tar as he read the titles. Why couldn't he have afforded a less cheesy agency?

“I wondered if you didn't understand the titles.”

“Because I chose the Domestic Goddess category?”

“Y-yes,” the coordinator stammered. “In the past, we've experienced miscommunications with that classification. The client thinks he's ordering something he's not. Due to misunderstandings, I'm obligated to explain each title.” She launched into an explanation. “The Diva is the kind of woman who looks great on any man's arm. She's always the pinnacle of fashion and style—”

Harrison interrupted again. “I read the small print. I don't need a woman who is the pinnacle of fashion. I don't want an artist, or a gardener, or a five-star chef. I need someone who can be a personal assistant and do a little of everything.”

“I see what you mean. Technically, the Domestic Goddess is our classification for women who are jacks-of-all-trades,” she said with a wink. “Now age? You marked under twenty-five and that seems perfect for you. You are?”

“Twenty-six,” Harrison supplied.

“Gorgeous. Lastly, if there are any special skills you’d like in a model, you can choose from this list.”

Harrison just about lost it. As if it wasn’t already embarrassing enough. “Can we skip all that and just get to the price?”

“Certainly,” she said, moving the file off the screen. At that second, Harrison knew she understood that he wasn’t going to be able to afford a nice model, but that didn’t seem to bother her and her attitude toward him didn’t sour. “Our lowest price bracket is between \$250,000 and \$280,000. Let me just check to see how many Domestic Goddesses we have in that price range.”

Harrison scratched his forearm. Even at this over-the-top, corn-ball agency, he couldn’t really afford it. Most of the models were leased out for only a year and Sleeping Beauty Inc. had not been very forthcoming about the price until he attended this meeting with Vivian. He hadn’t known exactly what to expect and the prices she was telling him were too high, even at this low-end dump. The price tag did not include the model’s room and board, her clothes, or anything else. It only secured him one year of companionship. He clenched his jaw and tried to look like it didn’t matter to him how the search ended.

Vivian searched on the screen on her desk and showed him the results. “There are three, but if you’re willing to go up to age 28, I can offer you two more to look at. Do you want to do that?”

“Don’t you have more girls available than that?”

“Not in that price range. If you were willing to go up to age 40, I’d have two dozen more for you to see. Or if you were willing to go up to \$350,000, I could offer you six more under 25.”

“That’s okay. I’ll see the ones under 28.”

The client coordinator got up from her chair and led Harrison back through the offices to a showroom that looked exactly like a warehouse, except that the metal brackets were painted pink.

“The first one is part of our Thumbelina line.”

“Thumbelina?”

“They’re girls under five feet tall.”

Harrison didn’t know how to answer that. He was not a tall man, but he didn’t have a complex about his height. That wasn’t why he was pathetic.

The client coordinator stopped at one pink crate and with a click on her remote control, she selected a long rectangular box. Enormous metal arms lowered it so that they could see inside. The lid was clear glass and a girl was asleep inside. Harrison peered in—taking note of the tubes keeping her alive that entered the box on the other side. She was in cryostasis.

“She looks like she’s twelve.”

“She’s actually twenty-six. Some men enjoy being with a woman who is definitely shorter. I didn’t think the Thumbelina line was for you, but I thought I’d better offer her anyway—just in case it was love-at-first-sight,” she beamed.

Harrison didn't believe her. She was trying to make a sale and his slightly shorter build and his lack of communication made her think a Thumbelina model might be his best match.

She moved the box back into place and started them off down the aisle. "The next one is a Repunzel."

"Does that mean she has hair from here to oblivion?"

"Yes. Rapunzels pride themselves on their hair. The price for this one is actually below the price bracket I mentioned."

"Why?"

The woman pulled out the box and Harrison saw why.

"She has beautiful hair," Harrison remarked timidly and the coordinator slammed it shut with a bang.

"The next one is a Rose Red."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic," Harrison remarked.

"Well, I'm not. This one is twenty-seven. She costs less than the minimum fee."

"Why?"

"Her memory has been tampered with. She doesn't remember anything since 2209—five years ago. She signed a contract with us and then she got her memory wiped before she went into cryostasis. She lost two years in the memory wipe and she's been here for three years. Experience-wise, she's 22. In looks, she's 24. In fact, she's 27."

"How does that work?"

The coordinator sighed. "Time stops once we put the girls in cryostasis, so they don't age. Good models are in cryostasis for under a month before they're picked up. This girl has been here for three years. The price keeps dropping. With that kind of time behind her, she's going to have a hard time fulfilling her duties. She's not up on the trends, new technology, or even current events."

"How much are you charging for her?"

Vivian almost refused to answer his question. "After this model, I have two models left to show you that are in perfectly good condition. I'm sure one of them will suit you."

"I'll look at them, but how much for this one?"

"Two hundred thousand."

Harrison nearly choked. "For a year?"

"No. For a lifetime investment."

Harrison couldn't believe his ears. No woman was sold for that little. There had to be more wrong with her than memory loss. "Why are you selling a lifetime investment? Isn't selling her whole life instead of one year considered slavery?"

Vivian breathed through her nose impatiently. "She broke the contract. She damaged her brain after she signed with us. That's a breach of contract. This might surprise you, but lifetime investments are not as difficult to come by as all that. I have sixteen models that are up for sale that will be sold for life. That is not my fault."

Harrison forgot his indignation and said, "Forget I said anything."

The coordinator pulled down the box and showed him the Rose Red. Harrison was pleasantly surprised. She had shiny light hair as long as the Repunzel.

“Is her hair so long because she’s been in there for three years?”

“No. They don’t age or grow at all after they’re frozen.”

“Why not switch her category? She has beautiful hair. She might sell faster.”

“It wouldn’t make any difference. Her memory is bad.”

Vivian moved to return the container, but Harrison stopped her so he could look at the model a little longer. Like the other girls, her makeup was flawless and her lips painted a perfect raspberry. She had a red rose over her left ear and a pearl necklace around her neck.

“She’s lovely. What else is wrong with her?”

The coordinator discreetly rolled her eyes and sighed. “You shouldn’t do this just because she’s a good price. She could have been involved in anything in those two years she doesn’t remember—crime, drug wars, anything.”

“What’s going to happen to her if she isn’t bought?” Harrison asked.

“We don’t keep anyone longer than three years and in three weeks, it’ll be her anniversary. It’s not cheap to keep these girls frozen like this. When she wakes up, she’ll have to work here until she pays off the cost of keeping her asleep for all that time.”

“So, she’ll be doing makeup?”

“Probably not. The staff members who do makeup are highly paid professionals who are worth every cent. Let me show you the other two.” She pushed the box in and took him down another stretch.

Harrison turned around to get the serial number on the Rose Red’s box. It was 85001.

When they arrived at the next box, the coordinator said, “This one is a genuine Sleeping Beauty.”

Harrison stared at the girl in the glass coffin. “How old is she?”

“Seventeen, but gorgeous, isn’t she?”

She was, but something didn’t sit right. She was nine years younger than him.

“Show me the last one.”

“It’s a Snow White.”

Down another aisle, Harrison stared at the Snow White. There was nothing wrong with her. She was twenty-two and pretty. The chart said she was excellent at housekeeping, cooking, cleaning, and hostessing. She looked competent and poised even when she was unconscious. The only downside was that she was the most expensive model he’d been shown. Vivian took him to the only reasonable choice last.

“I’ll let you think about it,” she said, as she left him to look at the sleeping girl.

Harrison didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t actually afford the Snow White. She was perfect, but if he bought her, he wouldn’t be able to even buy food without taking out loans and driving himself crazy. Besides, all that money only bought her for a year. After that, he wouldn’t be able to buy another girl for two more years... if he was lucky.

He turned away from the box and the client coordinator rushed up to join him.

“Can I do up the agreement?”

“Sure,” he said, trying to sound cool about his choice. “I’ll take the Rose Red.”

The woman frowned. “You shouldn’t do that. There’s a no-return policy attached to her.”

“Don’t worry. I like lost causes.” His voice sounded cool, but inside he knew he was a loser. He just couldn’t stand to live alone anymore.

The look the client coordinator gave him was unusual. He couldn’t tell if she was pleased with his choice or disgusted. She led him back to her office with a quick step and displayed the purchase papers on her desk for him to sign.

Sleeping Beauty Inc. disclosed all of the Rose Red’s personal information since he was buying a lifetime investment in her. Of course, her name wasn’t really Rose Red. That was just from the fairytale. Her real name was Paige Norfolk. He signed for her to be delivered to his home in two days. That wasn’t the normal chain of events after a purchase. This fairytale place liked their customers to wake their product with a kiss, but Harrison asked her to be delivered. He was not kissing an unconscious stranger.

Just before he signed the final releases, the coordinator put her hand over the dotted line to stop him. “Are you sure you want to do this? You’re a good-looking man. You’re only twenty-six. Can’t we talk about this? I’m sure lots of normal girls would love to be with you and give you the help our girls give, but for free. Girls who have had their memories wiped may have been involved in anything. Our bracelet will stop her from hurting you, but she will probably be more trouble than she’s worth.”

He answered by pointing to the address Paige was being shipped to.

The coordinator looked at it and frowned deeply. “Then I guess it can’t be helped.”

They both knew that no woman would go there voluntarily.

“I’m only raising these concerns because you seem like a nice guy. You have honest eyes and a gentle expression. You even seem embarrassed to be in a place like this. It’s a shame you won’t go with the Snow White.”

“She’d come back screaming after the year was up. Not everyone can live up there happily. The weather’s bad half the year, and the isolation drives everybody nuts.”

“Now I understand why none of our qualities were as important to you as other men. The only thing that mattered to you was the price. You said you didn’t want a woman who was the pinnacle of style. Just between you and me—you aren’t getting one.”

“It’s fine. That kind of woman wouldn’t last long where we’re going.”

Chapter Two

Paige expected to wake up with an unknown man's lips on hers. No such luck. Instead, she was awoken by a pink metal handcuff coming down on her wrist. She groaned. Had no one bought her?

It wasn't that she wanted to be sold into basic slavery, but if she wasn't purchased, she would belong to Sleeping Beauty Inc., which would probably be worse. They would get their money's worth out of her. When she came to their headquarters to be put into cryostasis, she had leafed through the pamphlets that advertised Sleeping Beauty models who came back, after serving their year, with diamonds, designer handbags, and goodies galore (all presents from whoever bought them). If Sleeping Beauty Inc. owned her, she would spend the rest of her life doing disgusting grunt work no one had invented a machine to do yet. It wasn't that Paige expected diamonds, but she did expect to be sold. Her disappointment made her lips an accordion of sadness.

"Oh, stop that!" the female guard programming her wristband snapped. "At least you're not going to have my job."

Paige blinked. "Does that mean...?"

"Yeah, sweetpea. You were sold. Hallelujah," sang the guard sarcastically. She was obviously a left-over Sleeping Beauty who had not been bought.

"So, where's the guy?"

"He left."

"He left?" Paige exclaimed.

"Yeah. He didn't feel like waking you with a kiss and took off. You're to be delivered."

Paige thought his busyness made him seem rich. Sleeping Beauty Inc. did not force their customers to kiss their product. It was optional, but he could have taken her with him when he left. His being so busy that he couldn't even spare the time to do that made him seem like a great catch, but then she remembered to ask what day it was. If she had been in cryostasis for a month, he would have paid a lot more than if she was close to her expiry date. "What day is it?" she asked rather feebly.

"March 2, 2214."

"Crap," she mumbled. He was less rich immediately because he had paid almost nothing for her. It was all her fault for getting her memory wiped. That invalidated her contract with Sleeping Beauty Inc. and instead of just selling her for one or two years, they were allowed to sell her for life. She couldn't keep her unhappiness from showing on her face.

"Why do you look so miserable?" the guard asked, throwing Paige's wrist away and typing something on her own, much larger, wristband.

"Because I'm probably bound to some ridiculous moron for the rest of my life," Paige moaned.

The guard put her hand on her hip haughtily. "I should be so lucky. Do you think I would be acting this grouchy if you were being taken away by a guy twenty years older than you with

whiskey breath and bruises on his knuckles? Oh, no. I'm acting like this because even though the man who bought you clearly has no money, he's young and... how should I put this? Cute face. Nice muscles. A total catch."

Paige didn't know what to say. Had her bad luck turned around?

"Ready for the bad news?" the guard asked, responding to a question Paige hadn't asked. "The bad news is that he's so broke that he didn't buy any clothes for you from our stores. He opted for you to wear the street clothes you wore here for the transfer. So that means no ball gown, no bathing suit, and no elegant heels. We're not going to give you a speck of makeup or a drop of perfume."

"I'll live," Paige said, swinging her legs out of the casket-like box.

"Personally, I think that's why he didn't want to leave with you when he left. He didn't want to be seen carting out a very ordinarily dressed woman from a place that is supposed to be selling runway models. Maybe we wouldn't let him. In any case, we'll need the nightgown back."

"Right now?" she asked, tugging the tie at the back of her neck.

"No. Go to the change room. It's going to be my pleasure to deliver you to his home, in the north."

"The north?" Paige gaped, doing a double-take.

"Yeah. I wasn't done telling you the bad news. That isn't a problem, is it?"

Paige rolled her eyes. She had to go wherever the man who bought her wanted her to go. She smiled sickly, "No. It's not a problem."

"Excellent. Get dressed, get fed, get in the truck and we should be there sometime tonight."

Paige pursed her lips. She wasn't sure if her purchase was good luck or bad luck, but whatever it was she had to accept it, so she got herself to a dressing room.

The truck the guard put Paige in was not usually used for transporting models from Sleeping Beauty Inc. It looked more like an army transport leftover from the war.

The guard smiled roguishly when she showed Paige which truck they were taking. "Sorry, Mr. Fox didn't spring for a company limousine. You know the ones. Pink all over and full of fruit and champagne, but look! The windows in this bad boy roll down. Isn't the fun almost too much?"

"Quiet," Paige huffed as she got in the front seat.

The guard got in next to her and they began the drive.

Paige passed the time by playing with the bracelet/handcuff around her left wrist. That was the one thing that she got to choose for herself when she signed her contract with Sleeping Beauty Inc.

They had every style imaginable: clunky bracelets that jangled around a girl's wrist, pretty beads hanging on tiny chains, some made of rubber, and some made of leather. Paige's was

made of pink metallic links an inch wide. It was pretty. Something about it reminded her of chains, which she also liked. She wanted to remember that she was a prisoner. That way she wouldn't have any grandiose ideas about the rest of her life.

The last thing she remembered before she had her memory wiped was the sight of the man she loved. Remembering him, she felt how her heart used to quicken whenever she saw him. Seeing him was precious and rare. His taking notice of her was almost impossible.

On the last night that she could remember, he offered to purchase her. It was out of the blue. Before that, she'd had almost nothing to do with him.

An offer of employment under the cloak of a purchase contract had to be sexual in nature. She'd read stories about purchased women in media outlets. The articles had all the good bits cut out. He could only be buying her because he wanted her the way she wanted him. As his eyes met hers, she felt her insides turn to water—the color of his eyes.

She should have known better. She should have listened to the things her father said about him behind his back. She should not have been seduced by his voice, his hand that crept up her thigh, or the money he represented. Being bought by him would ruin her reputation and the reputation of her family.

When she expressed her concerns to him, he waved them off like problems didn't exist. Her father would be happy. How much would her father need to retire? He kept raising the price he was willing to pay for her until she was dizzy.

The interview ended with her shyness as the victor. The amount of money he'd offered was so much, she already knew she couldn't refuse. She promised him an answer in the morning and stumbled back to her quarters, her legs were so weak.

She got into bed and imagined what life would be like if she accepted his offer.

When she woke up, she discovered that two years had passed. There was a note propped up on the nightstand explaining that she did work for him and it didn't work out. She had no family anymore. No friends. Nothing was left but debt and heartache. In the hope of being able to repay the debt she had incurred, she had decided to sell herself to Sleeping Beauty Inc., but she could not live with the broken heart she'd suffered, so she'd wiped her memory.

The sale to Sleeping Beauty Inc. would have been fine—only lasting a year—except the terms of the contract that protected her were void because of the memory wipe and she was sold as a lifetime investment. Basically, the new man who had bought her from Sleeping Beauty Inc. had bought all the work of her life for pennies, but if he hadn't bought her, the situation would have been far worse.

Paige shrugged her shoulders. She had no choice but to roll with it. She had to concentrate on her duty to the man who bought her. On the tiny viewscreen on her bracelet, it said, Harrison Fox. If she didn't do a good job, he could throw her into prison or sell her again. He could even rent her out if he wanted to. He owned her.

It didn't matter. If she was willing to gamble everything then she had to be prepared to lose everything.

And she had.

It was a long drive north. Flowers were blooming in her city, but as they drove, Paige saw fewer and fewer flowers opening. Mountains she had never seen before were growing in front of her. The weather got colder and it seemed that time turned back, making spring winter. She was being taken to the absolute middle of nowhere, but she didn't mind. She was too unhappy to be bothered by anything. Nothing could bother her.

Harrison stood on the dirt road outside his house and felt his shoulders sag. The earth spread out in endless snow-caked prairie before him and in ragged mountain ranges behind him. When he was in the city, he had seen so many beautiful buildings. Most of them were made of reflective mirrors that contained solar cells that powered the city. Cities like that one were built in careful designs so the sunlight was reflected between the skyscrapers to create the greatest amount of power possible. He had thermal tubing under his front yard that had been installed seventy years before. It was slightly more advanced than the septic tank.

It wasn't that his house was ugly. It was the contrary. His house was picturesque. It had walls made of stone, a beautifully angled roof, a delightful entryway with a little roof over it, and a dozen other features that made it worth looking at. From the road, it was practically a tourist attraction, but once someone got out of their vehicle and came up the walk, they saw the house for what it truly was—a magnificently designed rat hole. Not that anyone intentionally designed a house to be that, but after eighty-plus years, that was what it had become. The inside was in terrible disrepair.

He sighed. He had invited a purchased woman to live there with him.

He'd do what he could to make her room livable. That was the reason for the later delivery date. One of the beauty spots of the house was a second-floor turret. He planned to make the room up to be her bedroom. He had to clean everything. She would be there soon.

Paige and her guard wouldn't have arrived before nightfall if the guard hadn't been so serious about delivering Paige and getting her off her hands. She drove the abandoned roads like she was possessed, hardly stopping, speeding, and pressing forward. They had a long way to go. The drive lasted over ten hours.

On their way to Harrison's, they passed the middle of nowhere. Now they were on the edge of existence.

When they finally arrived, Paige's butt ached fiercely. She scooted off the seat and her feet hit the road where Harrison Fox lived. She looked at the house in the yellow light that bathed the countryside before sunset and didn't know what to think. The place was ancient—pretty, but ancient.

The front door abruptly swung open and a man came ambling out. For a second, Paige thought he might be drunk, but then she saw the reason his body was so unbalanced. He was carrying something heavy over his shoulder. It was a huge sack with strange things poking and stretching the plastic. One angle looked like someone's kneecap and another one looked like their elbow. The bag made a weird squishing sound as he dropped it on the ground just outside the fence. It could be someone's guts squashing and sloshing in the bag.

Paige and the guard winced in unison. They were thinking the same thing.

"Excuse me," the guard said in a nasal tone. She had stopped breathing through her nose.

"Are you Harrison Fox?"

"That's me," he said, wiping his oily work gloves on his dirty jean jacket.

Paige peered up at him under lowered eyebrows and followed the guard's example. There was something foul in the air. Was that what rotting flesh smelled like? Not only was the smell suspicious, but Harrison Fox couldn't have looked shadier. His black hair was all over the place and his neck and face were slick with sweat like he had no idea sweat was socially unacceptable.

Paige inclined her head toward him and looked disgusted and disappointed. Inside, she was scared stiff and any other emotion she could put on her face to disguise that was welcome, even disgust and disappointment.

"I'm here to deliver Rose Red: Model 85001. If you'll just present your keycard, we can finalize the transaction."

Harrison took off his work gloves and fished around in the front breast pocket of his jacket before he pulled out a pink and silver card. He presented it to the guard who scanned the card with her bracelet, then Paige's. After getting a green light, she let go of Paige and returned his keycard.

"She's all yours," the guard said, stepping away from the two of them and heading back to the truck.

Paige waved to the guard, but the woman was intent on leaving without any further communication and did not look back.

Harrison examined the empty ground by Paige's feet. "Excuse me," he called to the guard. "Didn't she come with some luggage or something?"

The guard turned reluctantly to answer his question. "Sorry, if you'll look at the packing slip and the package details, you'll see that no additional clothing or accessories were purchased with this model."

Harrison frowned and waved to the guard that she could leave. He stood silently next to Paige and watched the truck pull away and skid down the gravel road in a huff of dust.

After the air had cleared, except for the bag of rotting human entrails, Paige dared to ask, "You don't have any clothes for me?"

"Not a stitch," Harrison admitted. "I'm afraid you won't find this place very much like most of the homes Sleeping Beauty models get assigned to. We're fifty-six kilometers from the nearest town and, trust me, it isn't much of a town."

Paige looked at the house without a single solar panel on it, then at the man without a clean square inch on him, and then at the vomit-inducing bag lying a few feet away from her. It probably would have been the most depressing sight she had ever seen in her life if she hadn't already seen the note she wrote herself explaining that her sweetest dream had ended in misery.

"Can I see inside?" she whispered, sick to her stomach as to what he would expect once they were in the house.

"Yeah. Where are my manners?" He beckoned her toward the front door. Once inside, he gave her a tour. "This is the kitchen and in there is the living room. There's a bathroom there. Down that hallway are my bedroom and the guest room. This door opens to a staircase that takes you upstairs to your room and another bathroom. If you go down that hallway, it leads to the garage and out to the courtyard."

Paige did her best to hide the fact that she was pleased that he had given her a separate bedroom. She had been briefed about how most clients wanted to sleep with their purchase right away. Others never did. She realized now that when she saw Harrison, she worried he was going to bring her inside the house and expect her to act like a full-on prostitute. She eyed him suspiciously as he told her about their shabby surroundings in more detail. He didn't look at her. He was embarrassed. He stuttered, lost his train of thought, and fidgeted.

What kind of man was he?

He was dirty. Whether that was from the day's work or if it was his regular state of being, she couldn't say. He had fairly decent features, though she could not have said whether she personally found him attractive or not. The only thing she was concerned with was his expectations of her.

It seemed like they were alone. That, in itself, was unusual. She expected other servants to augment her services.

Her analysis was interrupted by the sudden removal of his coat, followed quickly by his boots. "Let me take you up to your room," he said, before bounding up the stairs like an elephant.

Paige quivered and steadied herself. She must have been ready for worse than Harrison Fox when she signed her contract at Sleeping Beauty Inc. It was a pity she couldn't remember what prepared her.

Following him, she made her way up to the turret room. Paige had to do a double-take as she found herself in the middle of a sun-drenched space. The west view was fantastic, but aside from the view, the room was crap. The blankets on the bed were frayed and the carpet was bubbling up in places. She'd be lucky if she didn't trip on it and fall down the stairs. The dresser was at least a hundred years old with ancient Spiderman stickers clinging to it in half-torn ribbons and the mirror attached to it was broken with a long crack down the middle.

"Here's the bathroom," Harrison said, opening a door for her. Then he paused and waited for her reaction.

She did nothing.

“Well, what do you think of it? Do you think you could live here?” he persisted with a nervous smile.

Paige tried to make her expression benign. Her expression did not reflect her feelings, but she didn’t think offending him was a brilliant tactic. “It’ll be fine,” she lied. “I should thank you... for buying me.”

Harrison smiled and edged toward the door. “I’ll let you clean up, and I’ll bring you a shirt to wear to bed.”

Paige let him close the door before going to the window once more to look at the view. The view was the one thing that would make the place livable if Harrison Fox kept his hands to himself. The view would have been less alarming if she hadn’t been able to see that garbage bag. He didn’t buy her just to murder her, did he?

Harrison came upstairs with a plaid shirt and asked her if she wanted something to eat. She declined, saying she was exhausted after the trip. He told her she was welcome to anything in the fridge, before leaving her to rest.

Paige sat down on the bed and coaxed her body to lie down. The bed was not as lumpy as she feared, but smelled unfamiliar, which had always been the most difficult aspect of being in a new place. Closing her eyes, she tried to sleep. It ended up being a waste of time. She couldn’t stop thinking about the garbage bag on the other side of the fence and how it smelled like something was rotting.

By midnight, she couldn’t take it anymore. How was she supposed to live in this house comfortably with that wretched idea boring a hole in her head? It was probably just her imagination getting away from her and if it wasn’t, then she needed to know that too.

She was wearing the plaid shirt Harrison had given her when she slipped on her pants and shoes before quietly making her way downstairs. The house was completely silent, so she guessed Harrison was already asleep. She paused at the front door and wondered if an alarm system was attached to it. Would a buzzer go off if she tried to leave the house without Harrison’s permission? The place looked positively archaic so she bolstered herself, undid the deadbolt, and turned the handle. No alarm sounded.

It was freezing outside as she stepped out onto the front porch. That close to the mountains, the air was dead frigid late at night. She hugged herself and reminded herself that her errand would only take a minute.

She ran down the path to the fence where Harrison had dropped the bag. It was still there. She took one sharp breath and tugged it open. As she undid the flaps, it was too dark to see clearly. The smell was overpowering, but she couldn’t leave until she knew what was in there.

Suddenly, there was a light shining on her hands. She whipped her head around to see Harrison standing in his pajamas a few feet away from her holding a flashlight. “What the hell?” his voice echoed through the cold air. At first, he sounded confused, but then he laughed

heartily. “And here I thought you were running away and instead you snuck out of the house to...” Here his laughing could not be repressed. He finally got it together and was able to finish his sentence, “to go through my garbage.” He hooted loudly.

“Well,” Paige demanded. “What is this?”

“You know—garbage!” He came over to her and shone his flashlight into the open bag. He showed her inside and she saw rotten potatoes, corn, mushy celery, and molded over oatmeal.

She plugged her nose and stepped back. “Good grief! Don’t you have a garbage disposal system?”

Harrison pulled the bag closed and tied it off. “No. Hard to believe, isn’t it? Honestly, baby, we’re lucky to have hot and cold running water.”

“If an alarm didn’t go off in the house,” she said, thinking out loud, “how did you know I was out here?”

“That bracelet of yours is pretty fancy. I’ve got a matching one. It alerted me,” he said, as he stood up straight and showed her the links on his wrist. “Come on. What were you expecting to find out here?”

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her hair and brushing herself off. She had forgotten all about the bracelet.

“Nothing?” he repeated. “Uh-huh. I’m going to believe that. Well, we’ll just stay out here until you feel like spilling the beans.”

Paige didn’t move. She knew from her contract that if she tried to disobey him and go into the house without his permission there were at least fifteen different punishments he could inflict on her that were totally legal. It was freezing. Her prickling skin would force her to answer him, even if her pride didn’t want her to.

“I’m an idiot,” she muttered, hoping he would accept that as an answer.

Harrison didn’t say anything, but leaned on the fence and waited for the rest of her story.

“I didn’t think it could be rotten food. I thought that maybe it was a dead body,” she admitted quietly. Then she moved to run back into the house, but Harrison grabbed her arm.

“You thought I was a murderer?” he asked, all the humor had run out of his voice. She got a better look at his eyes. They were nice, and she had admitted such an awful thing to someone who looked nice.

She nodded regretfully with her lips pursed.

His eyebrows were high as he sighed. “We’re off to a terrific start.”

Chapter Three

The next morning, Paige was awoken by Harrison. He was pinching both her cheeks and stretching her mouth.

She knocked him off and choked, "What are you doing?"

He laughed and jumped away from her.

"Do you have any idea how much that hurts?" she whined.

"Uh-huh, and do you have any idea how insulting it is for a Rose Red to accuse her buyer of being a killer?"

Paige covered her face with her blanket. "Yeah. Sorry about that."

"Apology... somewhat accepted. You know, before you were dropped off yesterday, I found myself inexplicably apprehensive. How was I going to treat you right? How was I going to make you happy? But ever since I found you rooting around in my trash, all my worries have melted away."

Paige felt the previous night's goosebumps turn into heat in her cheeks. Harrison wasn't filthy this morning. He'd had a shower and smelled like spice and prairie breezes, but that didn't exactly remove the sketchiness of his general appearance. His chin was stubbly and the bottoms of his jeans were frayed.

"I'm glad it was so freeing for you," she mumbled.

"I realized that what you and I need is to establish a bond of trust between us. You need to learn what kind of a man I am and I need to show you what will be expected of you. That way, you and I can work together for a common goal. You and I turn all this into a profitable business and we become like one of those lame Sleeping Beauty Inc. success stories. You're sold to me for the rest of your life. You don't want to work for a loser, do you?"

"Of course not, but how are we going to do all that?"

"We start like this," Harrison said, pulling a black handkerchief out of his back pocket.

Paige stared at him, one hundred percent puzzled. "Are you going to do a magic trick?"

Harrison gawked. "No."

"Then what's that for?"

"To blindfold you with, my dear."

"What?" she squeaked.

He got up and held it out to her. "We need to establish trust. Now, will you trust me enough to put on this blindfold and come on a little trip with me?"

There wasn't a bone in Paige's body that wanted to do what he asked, but she didn't have much choice. She reached out to take the handkerchief from him when he snapped it out of her grasp.

"I'll do it," he volunteered playfully. "Got to make sure it's tight."

Paige felt like she was going to die as the black material came over her eyes. "If we're going somewhere, shouldn't I change first?"

“Nope. Nothing to worry about. Probably no one will notice that you’re wearing one of my old shirts and the same pants from yesterday. I’ll help you get your shoes on when we get downstairs.” With that, he took her hand in his and helped her to her feet.

Since Paige couldn’t see a thing, she was forced to use her other senses. Harrison’s hand was smoother than she thought it would be, and the fragrance of his cologne more pointed. She heard the sound of his voice as he counted down the steps so she wouldn’t trip. His voice sounded competent as he gave her instructions, almost like a doctor or a pilot. Once her shoes were on, he put a coat over her shoulders.

“Are we going outside?”

“Yes. I keep my secrets outside my house. In order to dissolve further suspicion that I’m a freelance hitman, I’m going to show you what I do for a living. You’re not afraid of wide-open spaces are you?”

“No.”

“Are you afraid of loud noises? Do you have sensitive ears?”

“No. I used to dance right next to the speakers.”

“Are you afraid of heights?”

“No.” She had to fight herself from asking snottily, ‘Why? Are you taking a survey?’ but she managed to keep quiet.

“Well, I guess nothing I do will scare you too much.”

The chilly air hit her as he brought her out of the house and under the stoop. A step later, she felt the crunchy frost-covered grass under her shoes as he led her around the house. Then he let go of her hand.

“Hey!” she yelped as he suddenly picked her up and set her down in a seat.

“Calm down. I’m just going to put your seatbelt on. Don’t be alarmed, but this is a four-point harness, so I’m not feeling around you to get my jollies, okay?”

“Okay,” Paige agreed breathlessly as he secured her. She was totally confused. What vehicle had a four-point harness?

He placed a pair of headphones over her ears and patted her head in a friendly way before she felt the door on her side close. Harrison got into the seat next to her and with him came a collection of clicking noises. “Now,” he said, and she heard his voice through the headphones on her ears, “Try not to scream. It’ll spoil my concentration and may make for a bumpy ride.”

“What’s going on?”

A deep hum started and then a muted chopping noise began. Paige was okay until she felt them lift off the ground. She bit down on her lip and put her hands between her knees. She wasn’t going to act scared, but even if she tried to hide it, there was still hot sweat collecting under her blindfold.

After a couple of minutes of movement and a sick feeling swirling in her stomach, Harrison said, “You can take your blindfold off.”

Cautiously, Paige reached up and pulled the fabric down. She saw blue sky, and then the cockpit of a helocarrier. The floor was clear and she could see farmland shooting under them in white and yellow streaks.

Harrison smiled under his aviator shades. "For the sake of clearing your mind of any weird ideas you have about me, I want to spell everything out. I own a charter helocarrier business. I need an assistant. I've tried to hire girls before, but my hangar is too far away from town for anyone to commute. More specifically, I tried to hire my girlfriend for the job. No such luck. Not even she wants to live out here."

Paige swallowed the knot in her throat, but it just wouldn't go down. She was relieved and yet terribly cross. Was everything a joke to this guy? Why couldn't he have just told her bought her to help him with his chocker business immediately instead of letting her jump to wild conclusions?

"You have a girlfriend?" Paige asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "We're on a break. I told her I was going to get some help if she didn't agree to come out. She said that I should give up the business and move to town for her."

"Why didn't you?"

"Town? Let me tell you how it works here. The town is tiny. It doesn't even have a real name anymore. We call it Town. I have no way of making money there. She's being unreasonable and when we get to town, you'll see how impossible it really is. So, short answer—no girlfriend."

Harrison's explanation of why he purchased her was interesting. Paige wished she knew what kind of life she had envisioned for herself when she signed up with Sleeping Beauty Inc. She knew many of the women were hired out as personal trainers and stylists. He wanted a personal assistant. That made sense. If there was no one else out here, then he needed someone on the other end of the transmitter as a safety precaution when he was flying.

The thing was that one of the selling points at Sleeping Beauty Inc. was the romantic angle of their services. They were open about the fact that their models were intended for additional services. The men who bought from Sleeping Beauty Inc. were tired of the drama involved with real women. Real women wanted marriage, commitment, children, and a life with the man they loved. The men who hired models from Sleeping Beauty Inc. did not have lives to share with anyone. They were workaholics who wanted the steady care of a woman who would put his needs first. Care, included anything a man might need, including an intimate, sexual relationship.

Glancing at Harrison, it was suddenly obvious that he did not purchase her with that in mind. Even with the handicap of living on the outskirts of civilization, he didn't have the slightest problem getting a woman.

He had bought her because she was the lowest price model they had, and he *needed* help.

Refusing to feel the rejection, she guessed she was happy he wouldn't want anything more from her. It could have been worse. She could have ended up working at Sleeping Beauty Inc. until she paid them off, but once again, she asked herself why she signed herself up at Sleeping

Beauty Inc.? Had she wanted to have a romantic entanglement like the one described by the company?

“Are you upset?” Harrison suddenly asked her over the chopping sound of the rotors.

She didn't answer him. She wasn't all right and she didn't know exactly what was wrong. There was a ball of panic in her chest, but what was causing it? Unable to compute her distress, her brain started coming up with answers.

He had no money.

He had a bad sense of humor.

He was making her live in the middle of nowhere.

He was going to make her work, and if it was going to be easy work, one of the girls he knew would have volunteered for it.

She couldn't figure out what that guard at Sleeping Beauty Inc. had been talking about. He wasn't hot. He was sketchy and shady and his nose had a funny twist in the middle. She looked at him again to make sure she wasn't jumping to conclusions, but examining him was a slap in the face to her ego. She was accusing him of being lowbrow because of the state she'd found him in the night before with the garbage. Looking at him now, there was absolutely nothing wrong with him. He even looked cool. She bet he made most girls hyperventilate. Probably the only reason she wasn't swooning at his feet was that he wasn't the man she loved.

“You look sick,” Harrison persisted. “You're not going to throw up, are you?”

“No,” Paige said quickly. “I'm fine.”

“Good. We'll be touching down soon. See that puny cluster of buildings over there? That's where we're going.”

Paige nodded.

Even though she had been borderline okay during lift-off and flight, her stomach took a turn for the worst when the helocarrier touched down. It felt like her stomach had somehow ended up in her cheeks, along with its contents.

She swallowed and unbuckled her harness. “What are we doing here?” Paige asked. There was nothing around but old grain elevators and empty-looking warehouses.

“I brought you here to go clothes shopping,” he said.

“Are there clothing stores hidden in the hay?”

He laughed. “No. We'll have to walk a bit. This is the only place I can set down within the town boundaries.”

Paige waited for him to open the door for her. She felt rather touched. This was nice. He brought her out to buy clothes. That sounded like the sort of thing a purchaser should do. Day one: shopping spree! She smiled and hopped down.

However, he wasn't kidding when he said they'd have to walk a bit. They walked past silos and old colonial mansions.

“They used to be ranches,” Harrison explained. “Before it became illegal to eat beef.”

“They look expensive.”

“They were. They’re like my house—old tech. Some of them have automation systems installed. The best I’ve got is a doorbell.”

Paige didn’t know how to reply. He and his house sounded positively archaic. Well, when she got her run of his house, they’d get automated... but not before they got a garbage disposal system.

Once in town, Harrison took her down the main street to a tiny café.

“Is this where your girlfriend works?”

He rolled his eyes. “I said she’s not my girlfriend at the moment, but there’s nowhere else to eat, so get in and don’t say anything that might embarrass me.”

“Like what?”

“Don’t say I bought you.”

Paige gawked and clattered her bracelet at him. “They’re gonna know.”

Harrison untied the blindfold from around Paige’s neck and tied it around her wrist. “There. Satisfied? We’re not going to spend that much time in town anyway. There’d be no end of the harassment from the locals if they knew I bought you. Come on,” he said, grabbing her hand.

Inside the café was a lot like the inside of a waiting room of a mechanic’s garage, except you couldn’t pour yourself a coffee. At least, that was what Paige thought as she scooted her butt onto a bar stool. The floor needed to be retiled, the wall needed to be repapered, and the girl working behind the counter needed to be made over... badly.

“Morning, Keziah,” Harrison said pleasantly as he took a seat next to Paige.

She grunted a good morning before setting out a coffee cup for him and Paige, but Paige refused. “No. I’d like unsweetened orange juice. No coffee.”

“I don’t have unsweetened orange juice,” Keziah responded, flicking her dyed-too-many-times ponytail. “Do you see unsweetened orange juice on the menu?”

Paige glanced at the wall behind the girl’s head. “Well, do you have oranges? I’m sure it wouldn’t be that much trouble to squeeze them.”

“No. I don’t have fresh-squeezed orange juice on the menu either,” Keziah snapped. “Or oranges.”

Harrison was laughing between his fingers. “Just bring her the closest thing.”

Keziah disappeared into the kitchen and a minute later a glass with a sloshing orange-colored liquid was placed in front of Paige. She took a sip and gasped. “Are you trying to poison me?”

“What?” Keziah burst—outraged.

“What’s wrong with it?” Harrison asked levelly.

“I don’t know. It tastes like she put something in it. Something toxic.”

“Did you spit in it?” he asked Keziah.

“No!” the girl defended.

“Okay.” Harrison took the glass and tasted it. “That’s how it normally tastes.”

Paige frowned in dismay. “Yuck,” she said sadly.

“Keziah, just bring her a glass of water,” Harrison said reasonably.

“Like hell, I will,” Keziah said as she stormed into the kitchen.

Harrison hopped off his stool and chased after her. “Don’t be like that, honey,” he said as he ducked under the counter and followed her in.

If Paige had any hopes of being shielded from their conversation, they were soon dashed to pieces. She could hear everything and so could the two baseball-capped farmers who sat at the other end of the bar.

“Who is *she*?” Keziah hissed.

“What do you mean, ‘who is she?’” Harrison’s voice tumbled after hers. “We already talked about this. We’ve been talking about it for the last four months. I asked you to come work with me and you said no. Then you broke up with me. I warned you—repeatedly—if you wouldn’t help me, I would find someone who would. We’re done talking.”

“That brat?”

“That brat,” Harrison said evenly.

“She’s wearing your shirt!” Keziah wailed.

“So? You’ve worn my shirts dozens of times and what has that meant? Not much.”

“Well...” Keziah stuttered.

“Well, nothing. I’d go to a different café if there was one. Now, I know you need the business, so just be a good girl and bring us both a couple of pancakes. Can you do that, honey?”

“Stop calling me honey!”

“Get over yourself. I call everyone honey.”

“Even her?”

Harrison came out of the kitchen and held the door open as he threw his last words over his shoulder, “No. I call her Rose Red.”

Chapter Four

“What was in that sludge your girlfriend was trying to feed me?” Paige asked Harrison as they walked from the only café in town to the only clothing store in town.

Harrison rolled his eyes. “She’s not my girlfriend. It was juice crystals dissolved in water.”

“Juice crystals? What are those?”

He laughed. “You’ve never had juice crystals? Well, I guess if you’re used to unsweetened, freshly-squeezed orange juice then I guess you’ve never been subjected to the glories of flavored sugar water that never goes bad—ever.”

Paige didn’t say anything else, but she felt flat. The pancakes were good, but now her stomach turned since she had no idea what was in them. She hadn’t grown up anywhere special and her family wasn’t rich, but there was an orange tree in her backyard growing up. Looking out at the prairie, she knew there would be no more orange juice. It was stupid, but that fact hit her harder than anything else that happened since she had woken up. There was no going back and this new world was... dismal.

Her hopes had plummeted since breakfast and now she was feeling suspicious about the prospective shopping trip. If that was what breakfast was like, could clothes shopping be much more promising?

Harrison suddenly stopped her in the middle of the street. “Listen,” he said, turning to face her. “Before we go in, I have to tell you the conditions of your shopping spree so that you don’t get too excited.”

“I doubt I’ll be too excited,” she said, sniffing back a little condensation in her nose. It was cold out.

Harrison said gruffly, “I only have two hundred dollars for you to play with and that has to buy everything you need.”

Paige thought she was going to faint. It wasn’t enough money to buy a pair of jeans. “Everything?”

“Well, this is a discount store, so you can probably stretch the money a bit,” Harrison said positively. “You know how to do that, right?”

Paige scanned her memory. She didn’t know if she knew how to make money go further. She had no memory of handling her own finances. She did understand math, so she guessed that would have to be enough.

Harrison put a friendly hand on her shoulder. “Are you okay? Are you having a hard time remembering how to do normal things, like how to shop?”

Paige didn’t answer him.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Is there a woman who doesn’t know how to shop left in this world?” He chuckled.

“No,” she said, tugging on his sleeve. “It isn’t that. I was trying to remember the last thing I wanted to buy.”

“Diamonds?”

“No.”

“Rubies?”

“No.”

“Emeralds?”

“No! Quit with the jewels and let me think for a minute!”

Just as Harrison shut up, the clouds in her head parted and she remembered the last thing she wanted. Then she described it for Harrison. “It was a camel hair coat with massive flare sleeves and it was sort of double-breasted, but both buttons were only on one side of your chest. It cost a small fortune, but...”

Abruptly, Harrison grabbed her by the arm and hauled her bodily into the store.

“Hey! What are you doing?” Paige complained, just before Harrison spun her in front of the mannequin display set up in the entrance of the store. Paige couldn’t believe her eyes. There it was. Her coat! They had a huge display and they had it in red, gray, navy, yellow, white, and cream. They were on sale for thirty dollars apiece. “Wow...” she mouthed.

Harrison rested his elbow on the shoulder of one of the headless mannequins. Then he grabbed its empty sleeve and tossed it over the opposite shoulder playfully. “Except that these aren’t made of camel hair. These are made of old pop bottles and every old lady in town owns at least two.”

Paige’s shoulders sagged.

“I guess that’s what happens to high fashion after a few years have passed,” he said quietly. “You won’t find anything that’s the height of fashion here. That’s why I didn’t buy a diva. Just pick out what you can tolerate—even if it is eons out of style. No one will see it back at my place except me anyway. Buy what’s comfortable and will last long.” Then Harrison turned and headed off to a different department.

Paige stepped up to the display and touched one of the yellow coats. Harrison was right. But still, she’d wanted one badly before she’d lost her mind. She picked out her size in the yellow and slung it over her forearm. This was what her life was like now and she wasn’t going to cry about it.

After that, she pecked around the store smelling weird scented body wash, testing the elasticity of hair bands, and trying on clothes so cheap her skin felt strange after she pulled them off. Eventually, she made her way back to Harrison and showed him her purchases. He reviewed them without comment and paid for them on credit. She winced. He didn’t have the money in his normal account. She hoped it didn’t max him out, but she couldn’t do anything about it if she did. She had to have clothes.

Before they went back to the helocarrier, they stopped to pick up an order of food at the grocery store and a parcel from the post office. It was an awful lot to carry. He got a loading cart and pushed it all the way to the helocarrier landing.

“You can stay here while I walk the cart back,” he said charitably with a chipper grin on his face.

Paige smiled at him wearily and tried to look happy, or at least, not miserable. He was trying to be kind to her by not making her walk back to the store, so she made herself comfortable and rested.

The town spread out before her through the windshield, a pitiful cluster of unpainted buildings with pathetic clumps of yellow grass between them. Paige remembered how she hadn't seen a single flower on her way to this miserable town. How was she going to survive here? Even if she had never been rich in her life before, she was used to beauty.

She cast her eyes downward and picked at the peeling manicure she'd received at Sleeping Beauty Inc. before they put her to sleep. What had she felt or envisioned when it had been done? She didn't know. Whatever beauty or glamour it represented, it hadn't kept its promise. She wished she'd had enough money to buy nail polish remover. How long would it be before it chipped off completely?

Time passed and somehow Harrison snuck up and swung the door open.

"Oh! You're back!" Paige forced a smile on her face.

Harrison hopped up into his seat and suddenly he handed her a cluster of roses. They weren't real. They were made of ribbon and carefully clustered together with faux silk leaves coming.

Paige was speechless.

"Sorry, they're not real. We're in the middle of nowhere and not even greenhouses ship out here without an order, so it was all I could get. Don't worry. There will be flowers, just not for another couple of months."

Paige was so choked up she couldn't say anything, but Harrison seemed to get it and started the chocker.

"We'll talk at home."

Harrison did have something he wanted to talk to Paige about, but he didn't know how to broach it. To put it simply, it was bad news—for both of them. Ever since the orange juice, she had seemed down. It wasn't until he saw her shopping that he realized how messed up she was. She looked completely hopeless. As he looked at her across the cockpit, he understood what the coordinator said at the agency was dead on—she was damaged goods. He realized that he should not have laughed when he caught Paige going through his trash looking for dead bodies. She had her memory wiped. She could have been doing anything in those two years. Anything. Even murdering people and wrapping their bodies in plastic.

Well, the police couldn't be looking for her, because if they had been, it probably would have taken them thirty whole seconds to find her at Sleeping Beauty Inc. Not exactly good news, as that could mean that they'd just never pieced together what she'd done.

A chill ran up his spine. He'd heard of models who had killed their owners before. There were protections built into the bracelets to stop that nowadays, but argh! He had the willies.

He glanced at Paige again. She did look a little deranged. He'd never seen hair that perfectly long and undamaged on a girl before. The girls he knew usually wore their hair to their shoulders like Keziah. That way it was just long enough to pull into a ponytail. Paige's skin was practically transparent like she'd been locked up for years. Add that to her vacant expression and he wasn't sure if she was the ghost or if she was the one being haunted.

Harrison pulled his gaze away from her and looked at the horizon. *I am not forcing her to sleep with me. I am not beating her. There is nothing to worry about.* He chanted it over and over again in his head. He wasn't taking advantage of her or raping her or whatever those nasty guys had done to the models who went nuts. Nothing was going to happen. She slept on a completely different floor. He had to calm down.

Now.

It wasn't working, but eventually, it would. He would establish that trust between them that was so necessary for their future. Everything would slowly work out, he told himself as he checked his instruments and sped ahead.

Back at the house, Harrison and Paige unloaded the chocker and put their food away. It was such normal work that Harrison shook off his macabre suspicions and got on with it.

After that, Harrison got in his truck and took the helocarrier back into the hangar. As he crossed the yard, he saw Paige up in her tower putting her things away. That was as good a place as any to break the bad news, so he went up to see her.

He tapped on the door.

"Come in," she said and he came in.

She stood by the door, putting a shirt in the closet. The room was an irregular shape because a side of the circle had been shaved off for the stairs, the closet, and the bathroom. That put three identical white doors in a row. He hoped she was never too drowsy to forget which one was the bathroom in the middle of the night. Falling down the stairs would be a nasty surprise.

"Everything fit okay?" Harrison asked cautiously, as he moved over to the other side of the room and perched himself on the window frame.

"Yeah," Paige nodded, taking another hanger out and putting a tank top that cost a dollar on it.

Harrison sighed. He knew it cost only a dollar. She'd bought six of them.

He couldn't procrastinate any longer. "I got a transmission from Her Majesty's Bank. Does that name ring any bells with you?"

He watched Paige gulp down uncomfortably. "Yeah, that was where my debt was. Don't tell me the money that Sleeping Beauty Inc. transferred to my account wasn't enough to cover my debt."

Harrison nodded gravely.

Paige's face went from white to red and she stormed, "I was repeatedly assured that the payment would be enough unless no one bought me. Wasn't that true?"

"They said the principle was paid, but interest rates went up while you were in cryostasis and now they want another twenty-thousand dollars."

Paige stared at him, horrified and unable to speak.

He clenched his teeth together and gave her a half-hearted smile. "They say I'm on the hook for it."

Paige's shoulders sagged. "Sorry about that."

"Just let me ask one thing," Harrison said patiently. "Do you have any idea what you spent that money on?"

She shook her head weakly. "No. I was broke before my memory wipe, but I wasn't in debt. Back then, no one would have given me credit."

Harrison sat, pondering that. "Well, I'll ask HMB to send me your financial records for the past ten years and we'll see if we can figure it out. In the meantime, we need to come up with a way for us to earn twenty-thousand dollars by New Year's Day."

Paige shook her head sadly. "So you don't have the money?"

"I spent nearly all my available cash getting you."

Paige chuckled darkly. "Was I worth it?"

"Putting the topic of money aside, I think it might help us if you told me what you can remember about yourself. I might not be able to help, but I might be able to understand." He paused. "I can tell something's bothering you. Maybe you sold yourself so you could start a new life because something about your old life was unbearable. I bought you for the same reason. Living out here alone was intolerable and I wouldn't tolerate it any longer. I want to help you adjust to this new life, so let's talk."

Paige thought for a second then stuttered, "Talking about that old stuff won't procure twenty-thousand dollars. We need money. Even if you go through my bank statements, you won't be able to reclaim any of that money. It's gone. I have no possessions, and I feel sick."

"I can get a doctor on a video call if you want to talk to someone," Harrison offered.

Paige flicked her hair out of her face. "No. I don't want to talk to a doctor. It's not that kind of sick. I need to be different, give up on who I was, and I don't think a doctor can help me do that." She picked up a pair of scissors and went into the bathroom. Standing in front of the mirror she snatched a clump of her hair and put the scissors to the roots.

"No!" Harrison yowled, diving at her. He grabbed the scissors in one hand and in so doing, knocked her completely off balance. Reflexively, he grabbed her waist with his other hand and held her up.

Her eyes were wide as she stared up at him.

He breathed heavily and brought her back up to a standing position without letting the moment become any more awkward. "Whew! Don't cut your hair for nothing."

Paige looked confused and Harrison felt her eyes on him as he put the scissors away. "Harrison! I don't even remember the time that this hair grew. You didn't buy me to be your lover. Why should it matter to you what I do with my hair as long as I work?"

"You're right," he said, touching her hair. "I don't care if you want to cut it. I just think that if you're going to do it anyway, then let's cut it the profitable way."

"The profitable way?" Paige repeated.

“Yeah. I know someone who can pixie you right up.”

Chapter Five

Harrison sat in a strangely lumpy chair in town. He didn't like to make two trips to town in one day, but if he had thought for one second that Paige would be willing to chop off her glorious locks, he wouldn't have left town without having it done at the only hair salon they had. That was where his lumpy chair sat—at the only salon. Like the restaurant, it was more like a men's room at a truck stop than a beauty parlor, and he was letting one of his insane friends cut her hair.

It was Keziah's stepmother, Narissa, who held the scissors. She was only six years older than Harrison. In many ways, she was more Harrison's contemporary than Keziah who had just turned nineteen. Truth be told, Harrison would have rather dated Narissa than Keziah. There weren't that many women in the area to choose from. He had dated Keziah because Narissa was unfortunately and irrevocably taken.

She was the one who told Harrison to buy a girl. He hadn't known Narissa was a purchased woman until one night when she was closing the café and he was staying late because he couldn't bear to go home to the void that waited for him there.

"Listen, Harrison," she said, pushing her near-white hair out of her eyes and speaking levelly. "Give up on Keziah. She likes you to pieces, but if you make her live with you out there she'll hate you forever. She's never lived anywhere but here, and if she puts herself in your back pocket without ever experiencing anything for herself—there's going to be a problem. And it will be *your* problem."

Harrison twitched and refused to comment.

She wiped her soapy hands off on a tea towel and sat down across from him in the booth. "Unless I'm reading you wrong, you don't even like Keziah that much. It's just that she's the only girl around."

Harrison peered up at her. "There might be someone around that I like even better."

"It's no good, Harrison," Narissa said. She smiled wanly and put her arm in front of him on the table. "Even if I wanted to have an affair with you, it's out of the question. Do you see this?"

Harrison saw the sparkling wedding ring on her finger and asked, "Is that going to last forever?"

She saw his eyes on her wedding band and shook her head. "You're looking at the wrong piece of jewelry. The wedding ring doesn't mean much compared to this," she said, flicking the bangle on her wrist. "Divorces are easy to get. Those kinds of contracts are easy to make and easy to break. This isn't."

"What are you talking about?"

"Wystan bought me."

"Really?" Harrison exclaimed. He knew that purchased women were common among celebrities and playboys, but those kinds of sales went on in his little town? He didn't believe it.

Narissa reassured him that it was true.

“Does Keziah know?”

“Of course not! Wystan told her I was a live-in nurse.”

Harrison remembered the story. It was easy to believe since Wystan was chronically ill. It seemed natural when he brought someone to town to take care of him. Harrison had tried to date her back then, but she had told him immediately that she and Wystan planned to get married. That way she could help raise Keziah and look after the diner.

Harrison sighed in relief. As he relived the memory, he was strangely comforted by the revelation that she had not chosen Wystan over him. She had to be with Wystan because of their purchasing contract. Narissa didn't reject him because Wystan was better for her.

“Will you get anything from him when he dies?” Harrison asked callously. He'd never liked Wystan and he hated the idea of Narissa having to nurse him.

Narissa wiped her nose on a paper napkin and said, “No, and they have to do several tests after he dies to make sure that I didn't hasten it along. Besides, I have nothing to gain. He's already signed the papers. When he dies, I'll go back to Sleeping Beauty Inc., I'll be sold again and the proceeds will go to Keziah. That's what he decided.”

“Bastard!” Harrison swore crossly. “Couldn't he have given you your freedom?”

Narissa sighed. Her blue eyes always looked sorrowful and tired, but those same eyes flicked up and her lips curved into a smile. “You shouldn't feel sorry for me. I got myself into this mess and you know what? Wystan is a lot nicer than my last husband. Sure, he's crazy, and sure, he works me hard, but he's never once hit me. I'm fine with him. I hope he lives forever.”

Harrison rubbed his eyes. Hearing anything hinting at her affection towards Wystan was a little overwhelming for him. “So, you're fine. What should I do about my problem?”

“You need a girl to live out at your place?”

“I'd rather have a girl than a guy.”

“Because you'd rather have someone to cook for you, clean for you, and basically be your slave?” Narissa said casually.

“You make me sound like a pig, Narissa, but I'm really not. I'm just lonely.”

She crossed her arms, taking the proof she was a purchased woman with her. “Whatever. I think you should go to the city and buy a girl rather than mess around with Keziah.”

Harrison kicked the table. “I already know she isn't an option. She turned me down, and it's not like I am going to haul her off by her hair.”

“So, what about buying a girl? Have you got any money?”

“I never thought about it before. How much would I need?”

“I don't know. All I'm saying is that you should look into it.”

Harrison's curiosity was ignited. “How did Wystan choose you?”

Narissa pulled her hair off her sticky forehead and leaned back inside the booth. “He went in and asked them to sell him the cheapest one they had in the Domestic Goddess category. That was me.”

Harrison was astounded. Narissa was amazing. She was patient, beautiful, capable, and he thought she was the perfect woman as far as he could imagine. It was unthinkable that she had been the cheapest one they had!

It was then that he made up his mind to give it a try.

Harrison reflected on that night as he sat in a lumpy chair in Narissa's makeshift hair salon that was actually an unusable customer bathroom and he realized that he recognized Paige's brokenness much faster than he recognized Narissa's. He hadn't seen it before, but Narissa was messed up too. That was why she tolerated Wystan, who was clearly a rotten husband to her and a pitiful father to Keziah. As he watched Narissa's scissors snap shut in clumsy, irregular motions, he came to understand something else. Narissa might not be getting better.

Did that mean that Paige would not get better either?

Harrison grimaced and turned away.

He'd already thought about it a hundred times. He didn't *have* to buy Paige. He could have just waited for Wystan to kick the bucket. It might not have been that long of a wait. Then he could buy Narissa for himself.

It wouldn't work.

Who knew how long Wystan would take to die? He wasn't drinking himself to death in a huge hurry and his disease didn't seem to be taking a turn for the worst. Unless Harrison was mistaken, Wystan was getting steadily better since Narissa came into his life. Keziah told him Narissa was slowly petering down the drunk's alcohol intake. Well, good for her. The maniac would probably never die.

As for regretting buying Paige, Harrison hadn't decided to let his mind wander that path yet. If he was desperate, he could always sell her again. At least, that was what Harrison thought before he bought her. Now he didn't think he would have the heart to do such a thing. If he ever decided to let her go—he had to free her. He couldn't sell her. She might end up in the hands of the sort of guy who had beaten Narissa and Harrison didn't want that.

Besides, something was wrong with her.

She sat in the hairdresser's chair that had stuffing sticking out between cracks in the broken vinyl and looked at herself in the faded mirror. With her hair gone, she looked like a cancer victim. Narissa could give them a lot more money if she didn't spare Paige and cut off all her hair at the roots. Even though her appearance had been attacked heavily and she looked like a fairy doll before the doll maker put the hair on, she didn't seem to mind. She didn't cry. She didn't wince with each snip of the scissors. She didn't seem to feel anything.

She got out of the chair and Harrison awkwardly handed her one of his toques. "You can wear this," he said.

Paige reached out to take it from him, but her hand slipped and the hat fell on the floor.

Harrison stooped to pick it up. When he stood upright, he put it directly on her head. "I don't want you to be cold on the way back home." Then he turned to the hairdresser. "Thanks, Narissa."

She nodded and said, “I think I’ll be able to get close to three thousand dollars for it the next time I go to the city.”

“When is that?”

“Sometime next week.”

“Transfer me the money when you get it.”

“Will do,” she said. Then she turned away from them and wrapped the hair.

Harrison put his arm around Paige’s shoulders and led her out Wylan’s backdoor. She shivered slightly as they came into the yard where tiny snowflakes were coming down and settling on the heaps of abandoned appliances that Wylan stacked out there. Harrison suddenly grabbed one of her hands and shoved it in his coat pocket.

“Didn’t you buy gloves?” he asked, making an effort to keep the temper out of his voice.

Paige breathed steam in the cold air. “Sorry. I was dumb. I thought it was spring and it wouldn’t snow again.”

“The truck will warm up fast,” he said comfortingly as he pushed the gate open for her and gave her shoulders an extra squeeze.

Back at the house, Paige stood outside. Harrison had parked the truck in his hangar and Paige had decided to get a better look at Harrison’s land. There was more than just a house and she was curious to see what he had. When she told Harrison she wanted to look around, he laughed at her, reminded her the sun would set soon, and he gave her his scarf to tie around her neck. Then he went into the house to let her wander.

So she wandered.

Harrison’s house was an L shape. The long part of the L was the front of the house and the short part of the L was the back. The long part had the kitchen, dining room, great room, main bathroom, and a tiny wing off one side that had once been a conservatory. The back of the house was Harrison’s bedroom and his spare room. He had a bathroom that, for some strange reason, had huge windows in it that matched the ones in the conservatory at the other end of the house. Paige stared at it. Non-hazy windows in the bathroom? That seemed like a serious breach in protocol. Anyone could see inside, but then again—they were in the middle of nowhere. There was no one to see anything.

Paige’s tower came up in the corner of the L. The grassy bit was what Harrison called the courtyard. Paige supposed that it had been a beautiful, well-cared-for garden, but now it was in shambles. At least, it didn’t have old washers and dryers in it.

Paige sighed. She was starting to be impressed by the strangest things.

She walked up to a gazebo that stood in the corner opposite her tower. It was in pitiful disrepair, but it was pretty. That could be a good project for her, she thought as she circled it. She could fix it. But how? She was pretty sure the only reason she got assigned the category of Domestic Goddess was because... Here, Paige’s mind hit a blank.

Why was she in the Domestic Goddess category?

She scraped the sides of her head and put her fingers up Harrison's toque in a vain effort to remember. The raw edges of her freshly cut hair felt unfamiliar to her fingers. Her mind was blank. She didn't remember signing the papers at Sleeping Beauty Inc.

Even if she didn't have the skills of a Domestic Goddess, there was nothing she had not been willing to do for the man she loved. It was a shock that she had decided not to keep any of her memories of him. Didn't she love him more than anything?

Paige felt her scalp again.

He had liked long hair. She'd obviously grown it out for him. But for her, those long ropes of hair had seemed strange when she woke up. It made her feel like she was borrowing someone else's skin, borrowing someone else's hair, borrowing someone else's life. If she didn't remember the time the hair grew, it seemed wrong to have it. Chopping her hair off gave her a clean slate. With new clothes and a new haircut, she felt more hopeful.

Besides, Harrison wasn't such a bad guy. She could see him holding a mug in the front room. He was probably still laughing at her. Well, she didn't know that she wasn't funny for standing in an empty field just looking around.

She turned her back to him and came face to face with a gigantic cow. Her eyes went wide. It was humongous. Paige had never seen such a big animal that wasn't caged or tethered before. Its eyes were huge and so close she could see the veins in them.

What should she do? If she ran away, would it chase her? Paige stood perfectly still. That was what you were supposed to do when a wild animal came up to you, right? She didn't move a muscle, but flaming hot panic was racing through her whole body.

The cow took a step toward her.

She was paralyzed. Biting her lip, she tried not to scream. The cow didn't move. It just stood there, watching her.

Minutes passed.

It seemed to be sizing her up, but why? Cows were herbivores. Well, maybe it thought her yellow coat looked appetizing. Paige reached down and pulled up a pathetic little clump of dead grass out of the snow. The stalks weren't very long and Paige had to reach far to get it close to the animal's mouth. Her heart pounded. Then the cow chomped down the grass and almost chomped down Paige's hand with it. She pulled her hand away, trailing a puddle of cow slobber with it.

At that moment, Harrison came striding up with his hands in his pockets. He jumped on the spot and the cow seemed so afraid of him that it took off at a dead run.

Paige's shoulders fell.

Harrison chuckled deeply.

"Why was it scared of you and not me?" Paige demanded.

Harrison caught his breath, but he was still unmistakably merry. "You stood still. All you needed to do was make one sudden movement and it probably would have taken off."

"How was I supposed to know that?"

“You were so cute trying to feed it.” Harrison wiped away an imaginary tear. Then he pulled himself together and suddenly brought the indignant Paige into a hug. “You know what I’ve decided? This place is going to be good for you. You’ll see.”

Paige put her arms around him, too. He wasn’t the one she wanted, but under the circumstances, he would have to do.

“Let’s go into the house. I’m going to tell you what I bought you for.”

“Huh? I thought you already did.”

Chapter Six

“Right,” Harrison said, putting Paige on the couch in the living room. “Here’s the deal.”

Paige sat poised and ready. If he could be level with her during this conversation, then all her questions would be answered.

“As you know, I run a charter helocarrier service and I make good enough money doing it that it seems like a pretty dumb idea to switch it up for another career. Now the thing is, and this has been happening for years, I get customers up here to get a view of the mountains and the ice fields from overhead. They want coffee, sandwiches, snacks, and sometimes they even want a place to stay overnight. You should see how disappointed these people are when the only place I can recommend to them is the café I took you to in town. The other thing is that my house, though a run-down heap, is probably gorgeous under the grime. Sometimes people who are passing by stop to take pictures and occasionally I’ve had them come up to the front door and ask for a tour. But usually, they come halfway up the walk and then turn away because they realize that this place is only pretty from a distance.” Harrison took a breath and looked Paige straight in the face. “I thought that if I could fix these problems, I might be able to make more money and get more customers. I don’t want to use the words ‘tourist destination’ but that might be what I’m aiming for.”

Paige gaped. Her eyes unconsciously flipped to a spot on the wall where the wallpaper was torn off and she could see the drywall.

“If we do well with the first few phases I have in mind, we might be able to make enough money to build cottages on the property and expand the house with bigger facilities.” Harrison followed her eyes to the wreckage in front of her and specifically to the spot where the wallpaper was peeling. “I know what you’re thinking. It’ll take forever and it’ll cost a fortune to even bring this room up to snuff, but I’m not kidding that this place could make money. If we work hard at this, we’ll have enough to pay your debt by the end of the year, which is good, because your bank is demanding payment by then.”

Paige winced. “What happens if we can’t pay the debt by then?”

“If we’re making steady payments, even if they aren’t as much as the bank would like, they won’t bother us too much, except that they’ll still be charging us interest, so we’ll have to pay more.”

“And if we don’t make any payments?”

“They’ll repossess you,” he said shakily, like saying so was about as much fun as choking on his own tongue.

Paige didn’t know exactly what that could mean, but she would bet the situation would be even less favorable working off her debt with the bank than if she had never been bought from Sleeping Beauty Inc.

She sighed.

Even without him throwing in that last tidbit, she didn’t need any encouragement to help him. He was her owner. “Where do you want to start?”

“With this room. I think we should scrap the whole living room concept and go for something closer to a dining room in a restaurant. I want to put a window seat in that bay window and as many tables and chairs as can fit comfortably.”

Paige could see what he was talking about. It could be a very charming room if they changed some things... almost everything.

“With some work, this place could be the pretty little spot that becomes a couple’s favorite place to run away to for the weekend,” Harrison continued.

Paige nodded. “Sounds like it will make more money than if I made you over.”

Harrison smiled. “Great! Let’s start by going through the furniture and deciding what stays and what goes.”

Harrison and Paige’s Renovation Project Take One

“How can this thing be so heavy?” Paige gasped, trying to lift the massive tube that used to be the carpet in the living room. It felt like her shoulders were going to snap off.

“Normally, I’d say we should cut it up into manageable pieces and carry those, but I think it should go to a better place. Don’t you?”

“Don’t the words ‘a better place’ normally mean the garbage?” Her fingers were slipping around the carpet.

“Don’t let it drop! Come on, Paige! Toughen up! I want it on the floor in my workshop in the hangar. We’re going to use the workshop a lot during the renovations. You’ll be happy it’s there so you can kneel on the carpet instead of bare cement.”

Paige groaned.

Harrison let his side of the roll droop. “Okay. I’ll tell you what. Once we get this out there, you can start ripping down the wallpaper in the living room.”

“What?” Paige asked breathlessly, dropping her side.

Harrison paused and started tracing a little pattern on the backside of the carpet. “Well, I saw you eyeing it and I saw you kind of snarl. You think the paper is really ugly, don’t you?”

Paige felt transparent. How could he have read her expression so easily?

“You want to pull it down, don’t you?”

Paige knew he was baiting her, and with pretty pathetic bait at that, but what about it? He owned her. She had to do what he said no matter what and if he wanted her to let her rip down that hideous paper, who was she to argue with him? She heaved up the carpet and tried again with her second wind.

Take Two

WHACK! WHACK! WHACK!

“Harrison!” Paige screamed and ran to the staircase of the tower where all the noise was coming from.

He was there with a sledgehammer in his hand, pounding on the wall with complete abandon. He had white dust on his cheeks, and the shoulders of his navy shirt were turning baby blue.

“What are you doing?” Paige gasped in surprise.

Harrison stopped beating the wall and turned around to greet her. “Hi! Isn’t this a great idea? We don’t need this whole casing to the stairwell. Don’t you think it hides the beauty of the staircase? I’ve always thought it needed to go and now is the perfect time to get rid of it.”

“But I thought we were starting with the living room? We haven’t even finished taking out *all* the carpet yet.”

“True, but we should start with what inspires us, right? Like I let you work on the wallpaper. Right now, I wanna get rid of this wall.” He hit it again and a sheet of drywall came loose.

Paige stared at the ceiling doubtfully. “Are you planning on taking out the studs and everything?”

“Probably. Why?”

“Aren’t you worried there might be a load-bearer in there? What if you bring down the whole tower?”

Harrison smirked. “I’m not going to take down the load-bearer. Honestly!” He whacked one of the studs and something above them let out a nervous creak.

Paige shuddered.

“Well,” Harrison said hesitantly. “Maybe I’ll redo the drywall around that one and make a pillar.”

“Good,” Paige said, inching away. “I’ll still be able to sleep up there tonight, right?”

Take Six

“This stuff smells awful!” Paige whined through her mask.

Harrison pulled his mask down. “You said you thought these armchairs were worth saving if only they were refinished. Well, I told you how to refinish them and the first thing we need to do is get this grodilated paint off.”

“But the stripper doesn’t even take all the paint off it because there’s like ten coats of paint on it. How many times was this piece of crap painted? They painted it white, orange, brown, and we haven’t even found the wood yet. For all we know, this chair is made of paint.”

“Don’t be silly,” Harrison said, completely undaunted. “It’s too heavy to be made of paint.”

“Then metal, and then there’ll be no pretty wood to uncover. This was a dumb idea.”

“No,” Harrison said cheerfully. “It was a good idea, but if you’re tired of doing this you could go work in the conservatory.”

Paige shivered, tightened her mask, and got back to work scraping the brown paint off the back of the chair. She’d rather work on the terrible chair than work in the conservatory. Harrison kept reassuring her that they would have a few warm months where it would be nice to work there. Paige remained unconvinced because it wasn’t just the temperature that sent her

scrambling. There were also loads of smelly rotten plants that needed to be dug out, so the choice wasn't complex.

Paige smiled though. Harrison let her work on anything she wanted. It was just as well. There was no TV, or regular web access, or anything else to do.

Take Eleven

"Purple," Paige said, holding a color wheel up to the living room wall.

"Purple? Really?" Harrison asked doubtfully. "I know I said that I wanted the place to be romantic, but purple? I don't know if I can live in a house with purple walls. It's too..."

"Girly," Paige supplied, choosing another color. "What about cranberry, then? But that's not very summery and we will get most of our visitors in the summer, right?"

"White?" Harrison asked.

"Too boring," Paige hummed.

"Should we paper it again?"

"Only if you take my advice and do the lavender brocade."

Harrison took out his phone and pulled up one of the catalogs Paige had been leafing through earlier. He stopped at a page. "Is this the one you were talking about?"

"No." She flipped to another page and pointed. "That one."

"Huh? Well, I like the pattern. I think that wallpaper is a pretty simple way to make this place look done up, but why—for the love of all that's holy—does it have to be purple?"

Paige fanned her color wheel, showing him all the colors in the world. "If you don't like purple, what do you recommend?"

"Green." Harrison chose a forest green. "What do you think?"

"I hate it."

"What about one of the black and white ones then?" he said, showing her a wallpaper sample on his phone.

"Hmm. They're prettier," Paige conceded. "But I already went through the effort of scraping and sanding and staining and picking out new fabric for those miserable crap chairs and if I could have just slapped another coat of white paint on them instead, then—"

"Ah!" Harrison pretend-screamed. "I get it! Stop. Not white, but not purple."

"A color that would impress rich people. Rich!" Paige emphasized.

"Red?"

"Yuck, makes me think of pizza or a barn."

Harrison turned the page and both of them stared at the screen.

"Light green?"

"This green?"

They agreed in a second.

Take Fourteen

“Paige!” Harrison yelled. He had combed the house three times and he couldn’t find her anywhere. He scowled. He knew she was hiding from him. Ever since he showed her his cordless power sander with all the attachments, he hadn’t been able to get it away from her. She had been on the hugest sanding binge. She had already sanded four picture frames, two side tables, and believe-it-or-not, all the kitchen cabinets. Well, he’d had it! He could never find it when he wanted it and whenever he did find it, it was only because he followed the soft humming the gadget made.

He stopped and listened for the sound it made. He was positive he could hear something. It was up the tower. Slowly, he mounted the steps and went up. Paige’s door was open, so he stuck his head around the corner. He expected to find her doing some other ludicrous project, but instead, the room was empty. The sound was coming from the bathroom.

Harrison grimaced. He didn’t want to approach Paige when she was in the bathroom.

Then the humming stopped and Harrison heard Paige singing.

Harrison was about to turn away, thinking he had imagined that she was bathing, but when he saw the bathroom door was open a crack, he changed his mind about leaving. After all, who would be stupid enough to leave the bathroom door open if they were naked? She was probably in there doing some reno project that he hadn’t given her permission to do.

Well, he was going to confront her about it!

He swung open the door and there was Paige, wrapped in a towel with one foot up on the sink.

Harrison was gobsmacked. Embarrassed to his ears, he was about to turn away, but Paige was quite collected and asked, “What do you need?”

“Sorry,” Harrison said, still quite red. “I was looking for my... I heard a noise up here so I thought that you’d squirreled away my...”

Paige turned on her electric razor.

Harrison felt sick. That was the noise he had heard. He had caught her shaving her legs.

“Yeah, sorry. I’ll go now,” he said, pulling the door shut when suddenly, he saw his yellow sander on the floor of the bathroom. To be exact, it wasn’t on the floor. It was sitting neatly on a folded towel on the floor with a string tied to the handle of the sander and the other end tied to the towel rack. Harrison stooped to pick it up. “What is this?” he asked, his voice accusing.

“Your sander?” Paige supplied, biting her lip.

“Clearly. I mean, why is it tied to the towel rack? It isn’t a dog.”

“Well, I thought it might get away.”

“U-huh.”

Intermission

“Has that money from Narissa come in yet?” Paige asked, knocking on the door to Harrison’s bedroom.

He came out and shut the door behind him. “Yep. She finally transferred it.”

“What took her so long? Didn’t she know that we spent all our money on stuff for the house and we’ve been eating cardboard boxes?”

Harrison rolled up a piece of paper he was holding and whacked Paige in the forehead with it.

“Hey!”

“Don’t talk about Narissa like that. I’m sure it just took her a while to arrange things with her buyer, or maybe she needed to find a new buyer.”

Paige rolled her eyes. Harrison’s outburst was only the tip of the Narissa iceberg. When the power tools were silent he spoke of her endlessly. “You know what’s great about Narissa...”, “Narissa makes the best...”, or Paige’s favorite, “Let’s call Narissa. I bet she knows how we can solve this.” Paige knew Harrison didn’t mean to be tiresome. Actually, he wanted to keep his affection for Narissa quiet, since she was a married woman, but he failed miserably. Part of the problem was that Harrison wasn’t used to having his every word listened to. He was used to being alone and saying whatever was on his mind out loud. The other thing was that having Keziah as his in-town love interest was clearly part of his public image, but he never talked about her. He didn’t complain about the way Keziah got under his skin or act as though he missed her. It was obvious to Paige that even though Harrison didn’t want to go public with his feelings—Narissa was the one in his heart.

Paige got that easily enough. Narissa was willowy and very, very, very, blonde. Plus, she had this slightly lost look to her that just screamed to any nearby man that she needed protection. It was very natural for Harrison to respond to her that way.

To Paige, it seemed very different from the way he responded to her, the woman living in his house.

Paige rolled one shoulder. She was probably sitting somewhere between subordinate and friend in Harrison’s books. That was fine... for now. She knew the exact moment she wouldn’t be fine with it anymore. That would be the moment when he found someone he really loved. A man could own a woman and marry a different woman at the same time.

That time might never come. After all, Narissa was owned by Wystan as well as being married to him. Harrison didn’t have a single reason to hope he would ever get together with Narissa.

Take Twenty-one

Harrison came into the kitchen. “What’s that wretched smell?”

Paige was jabbing at the sink with a skewering stick and clearly losing her mind to panic. “How am I supposed to know? I didn’t do anything. It backed up on its own.”

“What are you doing to it?” Harrison said, looking over her shoulder.

“Well, what else am I supposed to do? The guck won’t stop coming out.”

“You could try a plunger.”

“A what?” Paige gasped. The water level in the sink was rising.

“Step aside, Rose Red. I’ve got this.”

Paige jumped back and Harrison jammed the plunger into the sink, completely saving Paige's day. She came up behind him and looked sideways into the sink. It was bubbling and the water was draining.

"Thanks," Paige said, grateful he had known what to do.

"What have you been running down the sink anyway?" he asked, but the look on his face was good-natured.

Paige smiled and put her hand on his shoulder. "Who are you blaming for what? I just got here. The question should be: what have you been running down the sink?"

"Whatever. Use this the next time it happens," Harrison said, turning away from her to rinse off the plunger.

It wasn't very much like a knight wiping blood off his sword, but Paige was just as grateful.

Take Twenty-three

"We should get the wrought iron patio set," Paige argued.

"But the table is so small," Harrison argued back.

"Yes, but we could put it in the gazebo in the summer," Paige whispered in his ear.

Harrison perked up. "Huh," he said, squashing his shivering ear into his shoulder. "I hadn't thought too much about the gazebo. If we're going to do that we should make an effort to make the garden better. How's your green thumb?"

"I don't have three thumbs," Paige replied.

"Never gardened before?"

"Well, I never hung wallpaper before and I did it. I never refinished furniture before and I did it. That isn't what bothers me. I honestly wouldn't mind gardening, if only it weren't so cold outside. I'm not used to it."

Harrison seemed to rethink his suggestion. "Actually, forget it. I want you to be in charge of the kitchen when we have guests. We'll start by offering muffins and sandwiches and stuff like that. You take care of that and I'll take care of the yard."

Paige paused. "Does that mean that we can have the iron set?" she asked quietly, pointing to the picture on the screen.

"Sure, Rose Red. Order it!"

Take Twenty-nine

"This one, this one, this one, and two of these."

Harrison followed Paige around the superstore with a shopping cart. It was the first time he had brought her to the city since he had purchased her. It was just a day trip to buy kitchen wares, and she was having a ball.

"Wait. Wait. Wait. What's that?" Harrison asked, halting her one-person party.

"Which one?"

"That," he said, lifting out a yellow floppy rubbery thing.

“A muffin tin.”

“A muffin tin? How so? It looks like a tent tarp that melted in the sun.

“You’re so negative!” Paige exclaimed. “Look, you take this little tool and you can reshape the cup. So, you can make muffins in the shape of squares, diamonds, or hearts.”

“How about circles?” Harrison asked dryly.

“It does that too! Isn’t it amazing?”

Harrison yawned. He thought it was adorable that she was so excited over heart-shaped muffins, but he had to keep that to himself. He’d never seen a woman so easily pleased. If someone showed that contraption to Keziah, she would have snorted her coffee up her nose and grouched saying it was a waste of time. Narissa would have smiled patiently and moved on. Unlike them, Paige was happy and the muffin mold didn’t cost much. Harrison hoped it worked well for her.

She tossed something that looked like a syringe in the cart and Harrison scooped it out to see what it was. Another doohickey for baking—for cookies this time.

Harrison looked into the cart. Everything, from the plates to the mixers was yellow. It rang a bell with him. Something else in their house was yellow.

“Paige,” Harrison said, grabbing her by the elbow and pulling her up to his chest so she had to look straight into his eyes. “I just noticed something about your shopping habits and I wanted to ask you a question.”

“Shoot,” Paige said, glancing at his hand curled around her upper arm.

“Did you buy all your kitchen-wares to match the power sander?”

Paige offered him a half-smile. “Either that or my coat.”

Take Thirty-six

“So, Harrison,” Paige said, stretching her legs out over one of his as they sat on the window seat in the living room he had just finished. “Now that we’ve finished the living room and the kitchen, I was thinking about what you said about guests staying over. What room were you planning on renovating for them?”

“I wasn’t planning on renovating anything,” Harrison said, casually resting his hand on her stockinged foot. “I’ve been saving the carpet in the guest room forever. It just needs to be aired out. I suppose that if you desperately want to do something in there, you could take the leftover wallpaper that we used in here and do one of the walls.”

“But Harrison, I’ve stuck my head in there. Isn’t that the most boring room in the house? If you want this to be a memorable spot, we should redo the tower. If we let our guests stay up there, they will never want to leave.”

Harrison rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I hear what you’re saying and don’t think I don’t agree with you, but we can’t do it now. We’re out of money. As it stands, my first trip of the season is next week. It’s a couple who told me I should turn this place into a resort that serves coffee and snacks, so I know they’ll be here for that. After that, I’ve got enough ice field tours booked to keep the furnace running during the winter, but we need to earn extra money if we’re

going to pay off your debt by the end of the year. So, stop thinking about renovations. I know it's liberating to make this old hellhole look new again, but if we don't pay that bill, the only renovation you'll be doing is installing wheelchair ramps."

Paige frowned uncomfortably. She didn't know if he was joking about the debt collectors breaking his knees or not.

"I got a history of your bank statements," Harrison said suddenly. "Do you want to look at it?"

"Wow," Paige said cynically. "They sure took their sweet time getting it to us."

Harrison took his phone out of his pocket and pulled up the statement. "It took them some time to find everything. Some of the records were very old. Apparently, they've already changed systems twice since then."

Paige took the phone away from him and scanned through the dates until she found what she was looking for. Then she said, "Okay, this is the day before I lost my memory."

Harrison peeked over her shoulder and commented, "And the next day someone deposited one-point-three million dollars into your account? Do you know what that was for? Do you mind me asking?"

"It shouldn't bother you. I sold myself. The original contract was for ten months."

Harrison whistled. "That's a lot of money for ten months."

Paige smiled and looked distant. "You know, at that time, the money meant absolutely nothing to me. I didn't care about the money and yet I made the buyer raise the amount over and over and over again." Paige absently withdrew her legs from Harrison's knees and tucked them under her.

He let go of her and his chin lowered an inch.

"After that, I naturally didn't spend any money at all until the contract was over ten months later. Then the withdrawal activity looks pretty normal. See? I was paying my bills, but because I earned so much interest in those nine months, I hardly touched the principle. Now as we get closer to the time that I sold myself to Sleeping Beauty Inc., it looks like I was traveling a lot, and my balance goes down accordingly."

Harrison leaned in closer.

"Now," Paige said, wetting her lower lip. "We get to the day before I had my memory wiped. I withdrew all my money, took my whole overdraft, and maxed all my credit cards! Why the heck did I do that? How much does it cost to have your memory wiped?"

Harrison shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, but I bet it doesn't cost one-point-five million. I thought the price of getting your mind wiped was pretty equivalent to getting a face-lift."

Paige sighed. "We'll have to research it."

"Can you think of a logical reason why you got your brain wiped?"

She nodded.

"Does it have anything to do with the guy you sold yourself to?"

She looked down to evade Harrison's gaze. "It has everything to do with the guy I sold myself to."

Chapter Seven

Harrison took the empty picnic supplies out of the chocker and put them in the cab of his truck. It was late and the sun had just dipped behind the mountains. A mystic twilight hung in the air as the first stars came into view. The air felt so clean, and the world so fresh.

It had been a great day. He had his first flight of the season. The couple he took over the ice fields had booked another flight at the end of the season and for that trip, they were planning to spend a night at the house. They had even taken several copies of his newly-printed brochures to give to a few of their friends and everything was coming out roses... Except for the one thing that should have been a rose—Paige.

Harrison had felt funny since he heard that little tidbit of information about Paige's former owner. He hadn't even considered that she might remember anything about him. Now he felt suddenly outclassed and outranked and he didn't even know who the guy was.

He leaned against the door of his truck and pulled out his phone. He knew there was a message waiting for him, but he hadn't had time to look at it while he was with his passengers, so he had waited to open it.

A photographer wanted to scout the area to find a location for a photoshoot. Harrison wrote his availability and sent it back. It was one more piece of evidence that things were starting to pick up, so why did he feel so blank inside?

He sighed. He didn't know how Wystan did it.

Harrison had been so curious that the last time he had been in town, he stopped in to see the old drunk and asked him.

Wystan had been lounging in a stained recliner in his front room. Narissa was working in the café and Keziah was shirking work, so he was alone. Harrison had never liked Wystan. He was thirty-eight, which meant that he had been a teenager when he had become a father. Sometimes it was like that in small towns. Keziah's mother had been a local girl and had died in the hospital from blood poisoning when Keziah was thirteen. The townspeople said it wouldn't have killed her if she hadn't been so exhausted. They said Wystan had worked her to death. They said he wasn't sorry she was dead because he hadn't wanted to marry her in the first place. Harrison wasn't sure he agreed with them. Wystan originally had brown hair, but it became white the day his shot-gun-wedding wife died.

Now the man half-sat, half-lied in his recliner, sucked on a beer, and watched boxing on TV. He hadn't shaved in days and his white stubble made him look even older. He barely glanced at Harrison as he came in.

Harrison took a seat on the couch behind Wystan and waited for the old man to tell him to get out. At least, that was what he thought Wystan would do. Maybe Wystan would be a trifle less hostile since it was well known that Harrison had a girl living with him, which meant that Harrison couldn't be poaching either his daughter or his wife.

Harrison wasn't sure how much time passed before Wystan abruptly turned off the TV and without turning around, asked, "You want something?"

It was hard for Harrison to describe exactly how uncomfortable he felt, but Wystan was the only person he could think of to ask, so he plowed ahead, even though he thought he was stupid. “How did you ask your wife to marry you?”

Wystan snorted and emptied his beer bottle. “I never asked a woman to marry me. The first one came begging after I knocked her up and the second one just said it like it was a fact. Like, ‘You’re with me, you marry me’. She was funny. Like, ‘It doesn’t cost you anything.’”

Wearily, Harrison shook his head and left. He shouldn’t have expected anything more eloquent or useful from Wystan.

The trouble was that Harrison wanted to move to the next level with Paige. After all the time they had spent together, he wanted to be with her, but how? How could he approach her and convince her of his sincerity? He couldn’t just go up to her and say, “You! Me! Now we’re a couple!” like a caveman and haul her off to his room over his shoulder. Instead, what he was faced with was worse. No matter what he did, or how awkward and stupid he was, or even if she didn’t like him even a little bit, she wouldn’t refuse him. The bracelet around her wrist guaranteed it.

He wanted to set her free and ask her out for real, but that wasn’t possible either. If he set her free, there was immediate backlash. For starters, he needed her to help him earn the money to pay back her debt. If he didn’t get it, he would be on the hook for it. The second problem was that she would probably turn around and sell herself again. She’d already done it twice, so what would stop her from doing it a third time? He couldn’t let her sell herself again.

He was planning to ask Wystan how he managed to fumble through that tunnel with Narissa, but it didn’t seem like Wystan did anything other than follow her lead.

Harrison wished Paige would take the lead.

When Harrison came out of the hangar at home, he saw her through the window, working in the kitchen. Something was steaming in a pot. Her cheeks were rosy as she stirred and added things to the boil. He watched her as she washed her hands and took things from the fridge.

How could he not love her?

As it happened, Harrison didn’t get a chance to tell Paige how he felt before their biggest customer arrived. It wasn’t that there weren’t chances. Harrison stupidly let them slip through his fingers.

Like on the night he arrived home after his first flight. He snuck up behind her in the kitchen and put his hands over her eyes from behind. She screamed slightly and put her hands in his. He had a single moment when he thought of kissing the back of her neck, but he just stood frozen for the second that the opportunity was there and before he knew it, she was laughing and turning around to face him. Then he thought of kissing her mouth, but she was already shaking her head and moving back toward her boiling pot.

After that, Harrison couldn't stop thinking about her neck. That was one thing for a woman with her hair cut short. A man could always see her neck.

She set their place settings at the table and chatted happily about how pretty they were.

He chewed on his bread while they ate dinner together, but never felt full. Not with Paige there.

Another day, he could have said something when he was helping her out of the chocker. He touched her hand, but once her feet touched the ground, he let her go. She walked beside him with her hands in her pockets and he could have cursed. All he wanted to do was hold her hand. That wasn't asking very much and he didn't have the guts to say what he wanted.

The third screw-up may have been the worst. He was at the city airfield picking up the photographer and he gave her a quick call before his passenger's plane touched down.

"Call me again after you finish your tour so that I'll know when to start cooking," Paige said on the other end of the line.

"Okay," Harrison said. "I love you. Bye."

He hadn't meant to say it. It was automatic. He didn't even realize he had said it until he heard a tiny scream on the other end.

"What did you say?" Paige squeaked.

Harrison slapped an awkward hand to his forehead. "What did I say?" he asked mindlessly.

"What did you say?" Paige balked like she couldn't believe that he didn't know full-well what he had said. "You just said that you love me."

For a second, Harrison was speechless. He didn't know how he had managed to say it either. Now there were only two things to do, either he could deny it, or he could make a joke of it. The idea that he could lower his voice and say it seriously didn't even enter into his head. Instead, he opted to make a joke out of it. "Of course, I love you, baby," he said with over-ripe warmth.

"Huh?"

He wasn't sure if he was making it less awkward or not. "You're my Rosy-posy girl—the girl who wears my bracelet. Right?" Harrison flinched. He shouldn't have mentioned the bracelet.

He heard her pause. "Yours to command," she replied somewhat icily. "Remember to call me. Bye."

She hung up and Harrison banged his forehead on the door of his chocker.

"Excuse me. Are you Harrison Fox?" someone behind him questioned.

Harrison turned around to see a well-dressed man with a lackey in tow. The photographer had a long face and hair so black it almost looked blue.

"Sorry," Harrison said, righting himself and taking off his sunglasses. "I'm Harrison and I'll be your pilot."

"Great. I'm Fallon. Can I lose this guy or do we need him to haul my stuff?"

"If you want him, we can have him and if you don't, he can go. If we're going to do a three-day tour we can accommodate both of you at our inn." Harrison swallowed a lump in his throat

as he said those words. If he had to give beds to both the photographer and his man, then Paige would have to sleep with him.

“You can go,” Fallon promptly dismissed, speaking to his lackey. “You can have the time off and I’ll meet you back here when I’m finished scoping the wilds.”

The non-descript guy ducked his head appreciatively and disappeared down the airstrip.

Harrison sighed inwardly. He didn't get much time to fantasize about where Paige would have to sleep if they had two guests who needed two rooms to themselves in a three-bedroom house.

Harrison helped Fallon into the front seat and then stowed the man’s luggage.

“Ready?” Harrison asked, getting into place.

When Paige first saw Fallon, she thought she was in serious trouble. She had to cook for a sophisticated man who looked like that? He was probably used to eating exotic, amazing things like pickled eels and deviled oysters. Not only did she not know how to make food like that, but ingredients were scarce in the prairies. Ever since it became illegal to eat beef, possible meals had been seriously curtailed. She feared she wouldn't be able to make anything good enough for him.

She prepared grilled acorn squash with parmesan cheese, fried mushrooms, and garlic bread. She felt lucky when she saw him eat with relish.

“Very good,” he praised as though he truly appreciated her efforts. He sat back in his chair and admired the room Harrison and Paige had worked so hard to make beautiful. “I’ve always wanted to film in this part of the world, but every time I investigated the logistics, I was told I would have to live in a trailer. I guess those people didn’t know about your inn, and I don’t know why not. This place is charming.”

“This is the first year we’ve offered accommodations,” Harrison said easily.

Paige thought Harrison was just the right amount of friendly to this photographer. He was neither too eager to please him nor too passive.

“Do you think you could put up a spoiled model and two staffers?” Fallon asked.

“Hmm?” Harrison had been smiling at Paige, but when his guest asked him a question, he carefully turned his attention toward him.

Fallon continued. “If I find a good location, I’ll need you to put up at least three other people; my model, his stylist, and my assistant. Do you think you would be able to find beds for all of us?”

“Right now, we’ve only got two rooms available. The room you’re staying in and our tower.”

“And there’s nothing else nearby?”

“Not really.”

“It doesn’t matter where my assistant and I sleep. We could sleep on foam mattresses on the floor if we need to, but the stylist and the princess... ahem... I mean, the prince will need actual beds. Is that possible?”

Harrison pursed his lips. “Perhaps. It will be cramped. You've already seen quite a lot of the land from your flight here. Did you perhaps see a spot to shoot that will suit you already?”

“Yes, but aren’t you even a little bit curious as to who my model is when I so openly insult him?”

Harrison and Paige laughed in unison.

“We’re not too curious about the celebrity scene,” Harrison explained.

Paige nodded. “Yeah, we’re way too busy.”

Fallon smiled, enjoying their companionship. “You know, I think in all my travels, you two are one of the happiest couples I have ever met.”

Both of them abruptly stopped laughing.

Fallon's gaze shifted between them. “You’re not brother and sister, are you?”

Harrison glanced at Paige, while she held her breath. It wasn’t her place to answer now. She stayed silent while he said, “No. It’s just that we’re not exactly a couple.”

“That’s a shame. You two would make a wonderful couple. Here's a picture of the model I'd bring with me if I decide to shoot our commercial here.” He pulled out his phone and brought up a picture which he projected onto the wall.

An image of an extremely handsome blond man came up. The picture was an advertisement for men’s shoes. It was a black and white photo with the model standing ramrod straight with his long hair flowing down to his waist.

Paige blinked.

“That’s right. It’s Zaphier Rawson,” Fallon said gloatingly.

Paige was so shocked, she fainted.

Chapter Eight

Harrison stood at the bottom of the stairs and gazed up the steps at the tower. He couldn't help noticing the discolored cracked paint. Paige was right. They did need to continue their renovation upstairs. He rolled his left shoulder and chuckled slightly. Even if the stairwell didn't look its best, it was nothing compared to the distress the drywall was suffering in his room.

He could hear Paige moving in her room. The floor was making the regular little creaking noises it made as she padded around getting ready for bed. One side of Harrison wanted to climb those stairs and talk to her. The other side didn't want to. His brain was rapidly formulating reasons to let the forthcoming conversation slide. One; he should wait until Fallon left. Two; it didn't matter who owned her before. Three; hearing her story probably wouldn't change anything.

He was being stupid.

Harrison uncrossed his arms and started up the steps. When he got to the door, he hesitated briefly but then gathering his courage, he knocked a crisp little knock. Running away wouldn't make the situation better. Whatever he felt, he needed to know what the situation was before the guy showed up at his doorstep.

Paige called for him to come in.

He opened the door and saw her. She had just emerged from the bathroom. She was folding a black towel and wearing a pair of oversized men's pajamas. Well, oversized on her. He recognized the pair. It was a set of his he had given her weeks ago that he told her were okay to tear into rags.

He was about to say something about it when he realized that she was wearing something he had worn for so many years, they were practically a part of him. Suddenly, he was happy she hadn't thrown them away.

"Can I close the door?" he asked wearily.

Paige nodded and sat down on the corner of the bed.

Harrison took a deep breath and said, "I take it you know this Zaphier Rawson guy? Was he your former owner?"

She nodded again and knotted the towel in her hands.

"Uh-huh. Would you like to tell me a bit more about that?"

Paige bit her lip. "How much do you want to know?"

That was the question of the hour. Harrison frowned and took the towel from her hands so that he would have something to knot to relieve the tension. "As much as possible."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Why not? It wouldn't matter if there wasn't a possibility that he would show up here. Since there is, I'd like to be prepared."

"I've known him since I was fifteen," she explained, her voice dry. "My family lived in a cottage on Zaphier's family's property. My father and brother were hired to help care for their trees. Zaphier had long since moved out, but he was around from time to time."

“During that time,” Harrison cut in. “What was your relationship with him?”

“I didn’t have one,” Paige shrugged. “He was the son of the house and I was less than a servant. I had a crush on him,” Paige grudgingly admitted.

“So, how did he happen to buy you?”

“It was pathetic, but I was still trying to catch his eye when I was twenty-two. Then one day, I did. He knew I liked him. It seemed that he knew I’d liked him for years and after two official dates with him, he asked to buy me for ten months.”

“He was *that* taken with you?” Harrison asked, completely astonished. “To offer you that kind of money?”

“It seemed too good to be true, which was why I made him raise the price so many times. Other than that, all I remember is being so lovesick over him I was sometimes literally ill. In the end, I couldn’t refuse him.”

Harrison didn’t reply. He could only deduce that since she fell on the floor after just hearing his name she must still be harboring feelings for Zaphier.

“I don’t have any idea what happened that made me want to forget the time I spent with him,” Paige continued. “From the bank statements, it’s clear that our arrangement didn’t go beyond ten months. That’s all I know.”

“You know you still love him,” Harrison said, betraying not even an ounce of what he felt.

Paige dropped her head and said quietly, “I guess I do.”

“Well, I’d like to make it clear that any request he makes of you beyond what is expected of a hostess will be looked down on by me. I don’t want to catch you lingering by his side. Other than a polite greeting, I want you to forget you ever knew him. Do you think you’ll be able to do that?”

Paige shook her head miserably. “You don’t know what he’s like. He’ll probably insist that I stay with him the whole time and because he’s so rich and powerful and the whole focus of their visit here—you’ll probably be forced to comply with anything he wants.”

“Like hell, I will!” Harrison fairly shouted. “Do you think one spoiled pretty boy can hurt this business I’ve built up? Even if this place isn’t as successful as I hope this year—the worst thing that could happen is that I would—”

“Have your knees broken?” Paige supplied.

He scowled at her.

“Look,” she said, “if things go badly, you could always rent me out to get the twenty thousand dollars we need to pay my debt off. That would be the fairest thing. After all, it’s not your debt,” Paige said stiffly. She had been wracking her brains for weeks, trying to figure out how she could help Harrison pay that debt if they didn’t make enough money during the summer. Renting herself out was the only thing she could think of.

For a second, Harrison looked like he was going to strangle her with the towel he was knotting. “You think I’d do that to you?”

Paige dropped her shoulders. “Well, what do you suggest?” she asked limply. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

Harrison bent his lips into the most unpleasant sneer. “Did you happen to have a renter in mind?”

“What?”

“Well,” Harrison went on, his voice as searing as liquid metal. “Since Zaphier Rawson is coming here, are you suggesting that I rent you out to him during his stay? He opens his wallet big for you. Do you think we could charge him twenty thousand dollars for a couple of days?”

Paige stared at Harrison incredulously.

“I guess you couldn’t make it worth his while without touching him!” Harrison spat, flinging the door open and storming down the stairs.

He heard Paige come after him, but he didn’t stop. He went straight to his room and slammed the door behind him. Then he locked it and raked his hair with his hands.

“Harrison! Wait! I didn’t mean it like that!” he heard Paige cry on the other side of the door.

Harrison had only been behaving like a lovesick teenager for two minutes and even though he would have liked to continue, he took a deep breath and opened the door. Standing in the hallway, Paige’s cheeks were red with embarrassment and her eyes wide with pleading. Harrison didn’t forgive her for what she said just because she looked sorry or because she was wearing his old pajamas. Her comment about renting her out meant that he didn’t mean anything to her. He was extremely embarrassed by his feelings for her. Not to mention how humiliated he was for reacting so passionately.

To make himself seem somewhat more sensible after his flare of temper, he said levelly, “I’m not renting you out.”

She wrung her fingers together and nodded.

“I don’t care what you did for that Rawson guy in the past—you’re not doing it again. Got it?”

She bit her lip, and Harrison supposed that the slight motion of her head meant she was agreeing with him. “I wasn’t thinking of that,” she finally said quietly. “I was thinking that maybe I could get a job in town, and...”

“There aren’t any jobs in town.”

“But Narissa always looks so tired at the café.”

Harrison crossed his arms and tried to ebb his frustration. “Even if I got you a job there, the pay for the rest of the year would not make a dent in what we need. There’s no point.”

Paige sighed and her shoulders fell.

“No, Paige. It’s no good,” Harrison said, sparing one hand to touch her arm briefly. “Don’t worry about the debt. I’ll figure it out.”

Then he sent her to bed, but that didn’t make him feel any better. At that point, nothing could make him feel better.

Paige sat in the café in town and watched Narissa. She was cleaning a soft ice cream machine and watching her was making Paige feel exhausted to the bone. The café was empty except for the two of them and the sound of Narissa's squeaking scrubbing tools.

Paige was taking a break sponsored by Harrison. He didn't usually leave her in the café to rest while he loaded supplies, but that was how things were rolling since the night she mentioned to him that he ought to rent her out. Paige didn't mean it the way he imagined. He clearly hadn't read his *Sleeping Beauty* handbook. If he had, he'd know that her bracelet would give out an electric shock intended to fry both her and the man touching her if the guy left his hand on her for an extended length of time—anything longer than two minutes. She explained it to Harrison in the morning. However, to her disappointment, it didn't seem to help with their misunderstanding.

Paige didn't like being left in the cafe to rest. If she rested, she'd think and thinking had to be avoided.

She couldn't go to Zaphier even if he wanted her. She wore a scrap of blue silk leftover from the curtains she'd made for the kitchen over her bracelet, reminding her who she belonged to. There was no point in regretting being with Harrison instead of Zaphier. She had no idea what drove her back into slavery. Whatever she felt, she couldn't change it.

Suddenly, Paige got the urge to talk to Narissa. After all, she was the only person Paige could talk to who *might* understand her feelings. "So, Keziah doesn't know you were bought?" Paige asked, scooping up her remaining salsa with her last chip.

Narissa tilted her head and didn't answer.

Paige didn't do anything to press her other than leave her ears open. Waiting for Narissa to respond was better than sitting around wishing she was free to belong to Zaphier again.

When Narissa finally did speak, her answer surprised Paige. "To be honest, I'm not very interested in keeping it a secret from her. You see, this isn't the first time I've sold myself and it isn't the first time I've lost years in cryostasis. If she doesn't know already—I'm not in the mood to go out of my way to keep it a secret from her. It has never come up in conversation."

Paige nodded and picked a piece of melted cheese off her empty nacho plate.

"Why? Do you care if it becomes public knowledge that you're a *Sleeping Beauty* model?" Narissa asked.

"No, but the idea seems to bother Harrison," Paige said breezily as she waved her blue silk like a little flag.

A wary whisper of a smile spread itself across Narissa's face. "I guess it would."

"Harrison says you're in your thirties. How old are you?"

Narissa blew a strand of her hair out of her eyes. "In a very real way, I'm only in my early thirties, but if you go by the calendar on the wall, I'm actually in my late fifties."

Paige's jaw dropped.

"How is that possible?"

"My last husband, owner, whatever he was, liked to put me in cryostasis whenever he was about to do something I wasn't going to like. He was always dipping his fingers into something

dirty and since he couldn't stop my disapproval, no matter how many times he punished me, he found it easier just to remove me from the situation until he had had his fun or made his money. Then when he came to get me, I hadn't aged a day and I wasn't angry because I didn't know what he'd done. Whatever it was, it was always water under the bridge by the time he unfroze me. He used to leave me in cryostasis for years on end sometimes. He's dead now. God rest his soul. And I still have quite a few good years left in me."

Paige was speechless.

Narissa went on. "I'll never forget the last time he came to get me. He'd aged terribly and his business had failed. It was his brother who had been paying to keep me in cryostasis for the past three years and he wouldn't pay for it anymore, so my darling husband had to unfreeze me."

Paige suddenly wanted to know. "Then you remember a lot about him?"

The smile disappeared. She nodded and came over to Paige's table and took a seat across from her. "I should. I was married to him for twenty-six years, but I spent around sixteen of those years frozen."

"Do your memories of him make you unhappy?" Paige asked, observing Narissa's lifeless expression.

The other woman raked the skin on her face from her temple to her jawline with her fingernails. "It's over and the memory of it is like a life that wasn't mine. You should know how lucky you are to have been bought by Harrison. He's a good man."

Paige was about to agree when Keziah suddenly burst in through the door. "Oh, it's you," she said accusingly when she saw Paige. Then she slid behind the bar and retrieved her phone from under the counter.

"I've told you a hundred times. Don't leave here without that," Narissa said crossly to Keziah. "Wy hates it when he can't get you on the phone."

Keziah smirked, "I'll remember next time."

It was an obvious lie.

"Has *she* already told you the good news?" Keziah called to Narissa across the café.

"There's good news?" Narissa perked up slightly. "Are you and Harrison getting married?"

"As if!" Keziah shrieked before Paige could answer for herself. "No! Harrison said he's getting a celebrity to tour the ice fields in his chocker. Guess who?" Keziah pressed a few buttons on her phone and within seconds projected a glamour shot of Zaphier Rawson on the wall of the café.

Paige ducked her head. Even looking at him was painful. How had she let him slip through her fingers? That night when she decided to sell herself to him, she had promised herself that their time together would never end. She would make him fall in love with her. How had it gone wrong?

Amid her discomfort, Paige couldn't help noticing Narissa's reaction to the picture. She didn't look the least bit impressed. She actually raised her eyebrow and let out a half-laugh that seemed to die in her throat. Then she got up and wiped her hands on her clothes like she was trying to brush off disgust that just wouldn't come off.

Chapter Nine

Paige sat in the courtyard and pulled weeds, which were promptly chewed up by a visiting cow. The cow didn't have a lot to say, but it seemed to like dancing. It took one step forward and then two steps back over and over again. When it got close enough, it ate the long weeds Paige offered it with what might have been a sideways smile, or it might have been cow-speak for, "You think this will stop me from eating your flowers after you go into the house?"

Paige sighed.

Harrison had left that morning to pick up Zaphier, Fallon, and the stylist in the chocker. Fallon's assistant had been making himself at home in the downstairs bedroom since Harrison had picked him up the day before with all the company equipment. Paige was left to do the finishing touches on her bedroom—which Zaphier would be sleeping in during his stay—and preparing the food. Paige was rather loath to do either of those things, so she was hiding in the yard.

For starters, she knew that Zaphier would not like the tower no matter what she did to it. The man was a millionaire and a snob. It wouldn't suit him to sleep in a bedroom with a springy mattress and a faulty paint job. Paige planned to make it as luxurious as she could by burning flavored bees' wax and replacing the sheets and blankets with new things. She had already unloaded all her personal items into two plastic boxes and brought them downstairs to Harrison's room. That was the only room that wouldn't be seen during their guest's visit, or so Paige thought.

She would have to start preparing the food, which she knew Zaphier wouldn't like either. He was the type of man to sneak illegal meat on the side and anyone who didn't serve it to him chopped really fine was below the standard. Well, Harrison didn't do that sort of thing.

Now Paige could feel the cow's breath on the side of her neck, but when she turned to look at it, it jumped eight steps back.

Paige stood up and watched the cow head back to the fields. It was getting fat because it ate off the green hills. Paige was like that cow, too. Her hair was long enough to fall on her forehead, and she'd become so comfortable with Harrison that she'd forgotten all about what she wanted and why she couldn't have it. Unfortunately, what she wanted was coming for a visit.

Unlike the cow, she couldn't run away.

Harrison believed he would be able to master his feelings of unease as he waited on the astroturf. He felt fine until he saw Zaphier, and then he felt immediately queasy. Zaphier stood a whole head taller than him. Harrison had to look up to him! Zaphier's height wasn't the only thing; everything else about him was hyper annoying. He was anorexic in his skinniness. His straight blond hair fell to his waist. His skin was white and flawless without a speck of stubble,

almost as though he could never grow a beard. He was wearing a fish scale coat that was barely legal and what for? Who was there to impress? They were in the middle of nowhere!

Annoying.

Harrison swallowed it and shook hands with Fallon.

Zaphier removed his smoky purple sunglasses and looked around the flight pad like a bored goddess, for lack of a better description. Harrison felt a whole new level of revulsion creep up his throat.

Then he introduced himself.

“Yes. I’ve heard,” Zaphier said breezily, staring out at the expanse of prairie before him. “About everything, so you don’t need to tell me how much effort has gone into my accommodations. I’m sure they’ll be below standard and that I’ll wish for death before I’m gone.”

“I’m sure I will, too,” Harrison mumbled to himself as he stepped toward the chocker.

“What was that?” Zaphier said, turning to face Harrison for the first time.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Harrison amended. “We can lift off whenever you’re ready.”

Zaphier opened his mouth to answer, but Fallon spoke up first. “That’s great. Let’s go.”

Once he started the chocker blades, conversation was difficult, and Harrison couldn’t have been more grateful. Unfortunately, it wasn’t long before they touched down outside the house. Harrison helped everyone down and Fallon said something about how they should all go on one of Harrison’s ice tours before they left if there was time.

“There won’t be,” Zaphier said, moving ahead of Fallon and the stylist. “I need every last minute to achieve perfection.”

Harrison caught up to Zaphier and walked a few paces in front of him, but to Harrison’s surprise, it seemed Zaphier couldn’t stand for Harrison to walk ahead of him and he sped up his steps so that Harrison was behind him. Harrison twitched and went ahead, but Zaphier jumped ahead of him again.

“You’re acting like you can’t wait to see her,” Harrison said, suddenly stepping right beside Zaphier.

“Who gave you permission to stand this close to me?” Zaphier spat. “And who can’t I wait to see? No one I know could possibly be in this hell hole.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Harrison exhaled and said sharply, “Listen, I don’t care if you want to act like this. That’s up to you, but I want to make something clear to you before you go into the house.”

Zaphier stopped in front of the door and brushed his coat away from his hip so that he could rest his hand haughtily on it. “What’s that?”

“Even if you used to own her, you don’t anymore, so don’t take any liberties. Am I making myself clear?”

When Zaphier heard that, he slowed right down. His face went from pale to bluish and clammy. Harrison moved to open the door, but Zaphier grabbed his arm. “What do you mean? I only ever bought Paige. Are you saying you’re her new owner?”

Harrison flicked Zaphier’s hand off his arm and said, “That’s what I’m saying.”

Inside, Harrison and Zaphier walked into the fragrance that could only be Paige preparing afternoon tea. Harrison loved the smell of bread baking, and he loved it even more when it was coming from his kitchen.

Paige came out when she heard them come in. When she saw Zaphier, her face fell. Harrison knew that was her shy face. It didn’t mean anything.

Instead of introducing them, he went up and put his arm around her shoulder and whispered, “Why don’t I show them to their rooms while you finish up in the kitchen? You can meet everyone later.”

Paige ducked her head obediently and went back to work.

Zaphier clenched his jaw and watched her go like he wanted to say something to her.

But Harrison stepped in front of him. “Shall I show you where your room is?”

Zaphier nodded, and Harrison led him past the kitchen and up the tower steps.

Harrison was expecting Zaphier to comment about how shabby the place was, but he was utterly silent as he moved behind Harrison, making occasional checks on the banister or the top of a picture frame for dust. He seemed satisfied that there wasn’t any.

“This is my room?” the model asked dully at the top of the stairs.

“Yes. The bathroom is through there. I apologize, but we didn’t think it would be right to unpack your luggage ourselves, so we’ve left it for your stylist to do.”

“That’s fine,” Zaphier said tightly.

“Luncheon will be served in about half an hour if you’d care to eat. Please make yourself at home,” Harrison said with a fake smile before turning to leave.

Paige watched their guests eat the luncheon she prepared from the safety of the kitchen.

Harrison stood next to her in front of the counter.

“How am I doing?” she asked nervously.

“Fine. They’re eating, aren’t they?”

“I guess,” Paige said, biting her thumb.

Harrison put a hand on her shoulder and said, “There’s no reason to be this nervous, is there?”

“We’ll see,” Paige replied. She knew dinner would be a difficult event. After all, Zaphier wasn’t even eating lunch. He was pacing in the conservatory.

When dinner finally came, Harrison didn’t force himself or Paige to eat in the kitchen. After they had served their guests soup and salad and offered them their main course, Harrison and Paige took their plates and sat down in the armchairs on either side of the hearth.

Once there, Zaphier took particular interest in a bottle of wine, which he had brought himself. He drank without tasting the food, refilling his glass over and over. After the third glass was emptied, he turned to reminisce with his long-lost slave.

“Paige,” he said, not sounding remotely drunk. “Do you know how many times I’ve wondered what happened to you? I’ve spent days and nights searching the internet and wondering where you might have gone. It seemed like you’d dropped off the face of the world.”

Paige colored, and after a glance at Harrison, answered, “Sorry, it was impossible for me to keep in touch.”

“Why?”

Paige didn’t even think before she answered. The fruits of years of training with her father to answer truthfully and immediately when asked a question were coming to bear. “I have been in cryostasis the past three years at SBI.” She turned it into an acronym hoping that then he wouldn’t know what she was talking about.

“Oh, I see,” Zaphier said, understanding completely as he swirled the wine in his glass. “You sold yourself to Sleeping Beauty Inc. That’s a fairly good company. My father had my aunt sent

there for cryostasis treatment after my uncle died. She was so tragic, but they kept her well for over ten years to my understanding. She was in the Cinderella category. What were you, Paige?”

She answered stiffly. “I was a Rose Red.”

“Huh? How interesting. Do you know the story of Rose Red? It’s not as famous as the story of Cinderella or Rapunzel. Would you like to hear me tell it?”

Zaphier didn’t wait for anyone in the room to say if they wanted to hear a spoiled model tell them a bedtime story and started telling it. “Once upon a time,” Zaphier said. His voice was low and practiced like an actor’s. “There was a beautiful young woman who lived in a prosperous kingdom. Her name was Rose Red. The king was wise and proud and the queen was the possessor of the most wondrous beauty and though I know it will surprise none of you—she was the fairest in the land. Rose Red was a serving wench in the castle, and the proud king began to have eyes for her as his queen aged. Time passed and soon there was nothing left to the old man but his desire for Rose Red. Naturally, this didn’t please the queen and she sent her most loyal general to kill the wench. When he took her into the forest, he intended to cut out her heart, just as the queen commanded, but as he stood with his knife poised over her breast—he found that he couldn’t do it. Instead, he sought to ravage her on the forest floor.”

Paige gasped.

“That was a fate worse than death for a virgin in those times, but luckily Rose Red’s screams brought help. A troll wielding a club found them and recognizing the situation, slammed the general with his club, shattering his skull against a tree.” Zaphier picked up an olive from his plate and dropped it into his wine. “Rose Red thanked the troll and asked him if there was anything she could do to show her gratitude to him for his kindness to her. Can any of you guess what he asked her to do?”

“Be his wife?” the stylist suggested with a tinny giggle.

“No. Though that was what he wanted, he lacked the courage to ask her to be his bride. Instead, he asked her to clean and repair his home, so that he might live more comfortably.”

“How does the story end? Does she fall in love with the troll?” the stylist asked.

“Alas, she does not. While cleaning his house, she finds a cellar full of gold. Seeking her independence, she steals the gold and leaves the troll with no companionship and no treasure. On her way home, she hears that the old queen has died and travels back to marry the old king who once lusted after her. She lives happily ever after.”

Paige sucked in her breath. That wasn’t the story of Rose Red. Rose Red didn’t have a story by herself. She shared her story with Snow White. It was about two girls who helped a dwarf get his beard out of a log. Zaphier wasn’t talking about fairy tales. He was talking about something else, but it wasn’t much of a riddle. Paige thought she knew what his story meant. It was obvious and insulting that he was casting Harrison in the role of the troll, but who were the other characters? Paige remembered a certain princess with blonde hair and knew that Zaphier was making her the queen and himself into the old king. If that were the case, who was the general? Paige didn’t know. That must be someone from the part of her life that she didn’t remember.

The meaning of the story made Paige shudder uncomfortably.

On the other side of the hearth, Harrison couldn't stand it any longer. He knew that Zaphier had made all that up. "That's not how the story goes," he said severely, flicking something off his pant leg into the fire. "You invented that just now. In the story, Rose Red and Snow White take money from a wicked dwarf who won't pay them for their services. There's none of the stank you suggest. Rose Red's story is as pure as a bar of soap."

Zaphier laughed heartily and swirled his wine again. "Who knew you'd be so well versed in fairy tales? Aren't you a fighter pilot?"

Harrison only knew the fairy tale because he had read it especially because of Paige, but he didn't find it to be a very spellbinding tale. There wasn't any romance or action in it. It was about forcing a cruel little rich man to pay what was due. Rather than admit any of that, he simply responded with, "Excuse me for being well-read."

After that, Zaphier tried to pick Harrison's brains about exactly how well-read he was, but Harrison excused himself by helping Paige clear away the dishes.

"Your friend is delightful," Harrison said to Paige when they were alone in the kitchen. "Was he always so charming?"

Paige forced a smile as she replied. "He's behaving better than I remember. He hasn't complained about the food and he brought his own liquor, so there was no whining about the fact that we don't have a liquor license. He hasn't sneered about the room, has he?"

"No, but that reminds me," Harrison said, siding toward her so he could whisper in her ear. "I've decided to give Fallon my room to sleep in. He plans to let the stylist bunk up in the downstairs bedroom and he packed two cots with his gear so he'll have his man sleep in the front room on a cot."

"So, where are we going to sleep?"

Harrison winced. "In the hangar. Sounds cozy, doesn't it?"

Chapter Ten

“We’re going to sleep in the hangar? Where?” Paige asked as they crossed the lawn toward the metal building.

“You’ll see,” Harrison said without the humor that usually dusted his voice.

The hangar was much larger than it needed to be to house the helocarrier. Paige thought that he could have fit a couple more aircraft inside. Harrison also used the hangar to park his truck, but it seemed small in the huge airy building. On one side, stairs led to a loft. Paige had gone up there a time or two to look at the chocker from above. Harrison led her up there now.

Paige always felt a swell of pity as she passed the chocker. It didn’t have a name. It had a sleek black paint job, but the only thing written on the side was its number.

“Are you ever going to name it?” Paige asked quietly as she set her overnight bag by the railing.

“No,” Harrison answered. He was pulling boxes down from the shelves.

“Would you like some help with that stuff?” she asked as he freed a blowup mattress from its packing.

He sighed. “How could I ask you to help? You already prepared the guest rooms, made lunch for everyone, cleaned up, made dinner for everyone, cleaned up, made dessert for everyone, cleaned up, and then tomorrow you have to do it all over again.”

“You helped,” Paige scoffed.

“Well, how about if I get our beds ready as a thank you for doing what I told you to do about Zaphier?”

“Okay,” Paige said, turning around to look at the helocarrier. She had been trying to shut possible thoughts of Zaphier out of her brain. She didn’t want to think about him. She couldn’t understand it. She remembered liking him so much. It was almost an obsession. She remembered her heart almost rupturing when he walked past her in the old days. She remembered how glad she had felt when he made the offer to buy her.

Her first thought when she saw him was, *Has it only been five years since I last saw him?* He looked ten years older. She thought about it more as she watched him through the day. It wasn’t that he looked old exactly. It was more that he looked purple and green like a bruise. His skin looked thin like it was barely holding his insides in. Had he been doing drugs, or was it just that the hardness of life had taken away his bloom? Paige didn’t know. Besides, how could Zaphier’s life be hard?

Since she woke up in Sleeping Beauty Inc., she had been operating on the idea that he was still the same as when she had known him when she was twenty-two, but when he told his version of the story of *Rose Red*, something inside her twitched. It wasn’t like a memory in her head. It was like all the cells in her body knew the way he made her feel during the time she couldn’t remember—a nauseated stomach flip, a feeling of sudden thirst, and a sharp desire to run.

The long and short of it was that her body didn't want Zaphier anywhere near her, even if her memory still said she did.

She also knew the point of his little story. It was practically like he had drawn her ear close to his mouth and whispered the words, "Find out where Harrison keeps his money. If you can steal enough of it, I'll take you back. You want to come back, don't you?"

Except that Paige didn't want to go back. She didn't know what life was like when she belonged to Zaphier, but if her current feelings were worth anything, crossing Harrison for Zaphier's benefit was lunacy. Harrison had been nothing but kind to her. *Besides*, she reassured herself like a fool, *Harrison doesn't have any money. Harrison is a troll with a cellar full of treasure? Ridiculous!*

It was at that moment that Paige, looking down on the floor of the hangar, saw a square of metal that was out of place. She might be daft, but it looked like a trap door within a larger door.

"Harrison, what's that?" she asked, pointing.

Harrison came up behind her and saw what she was pointing to. A huge grin broke out on his face. "Oh, that? Yeah, I have been meaning to show you, but the right time didn't come. Just wait until I get these mattresses blown up and I'll take you down."

Paige took herself away from the railing and waited for Harrison to finish. She clenched and unclenched her fists and snapped her fingers. There was no way Harrison had anything valuable down there. *What a joke!*

Harrison finished up and led her down the stairs.

On the floor of the hangar, he moved a tiny piece of flat metal off the floor to reveal a keypad. He covered his hand and entered a ten-digit number. There was a clicking sound from under the floor and Harrison closed the keypad. He reached down, pulled a handle and the door opened.

Paige stared.

No stairs lead down into the basement of the hangar. There was no way to get down at all. It was just a hole in the ground that opened to a large space below. Harrison flicked on a light and Paige saw something amazing—another helocarrier. This one wasn't black, but silver. It was missing its blades.

"What's this?"

"Excalibur. My other chocker," Harrison gloated.

"Why? How?" she stuttered. "How could you afford this?"

Harrison sighed. "I keep telling you that I make good money doing what I do. Why don't you believe me already? That chocker," Harrison said, indicating the black one, "has been in my family for years. My grandfather bought her for thirteen million dollars in 2173. Crazy, eh? This one down here is one that I've been working on myself."

"How much does this one cost?"

Harrison crossed his arms and looked at it thoughtfully like he was doing a rack of calculations. "I'm not sure. I started buying parts for the beast when my father got sick. I've

been working on it for eight years. There's not a lot to do out here, so I've had a lot of time to work on it."

Paige was on the verge of having a panic attack. "How much?" she nearly shrieked.

Harrison laughed at her. "Excalibur is worth a whole lot more than the money I put into her. That was what I wanted to tell you," he said, suddenly taking her shoulder. "You shouldn't worry about that twenty thousand dollars. I can just sell off one of her less important parts and we're in business!"

Paige thought she would faint.

"What?" Harrison asked, observing her not-so-happy expression. "No broken knees. I thought this would make you happy." He jokingly kicked the back of her leg.

Paige's knees did not buckle. She just stood there and stared into the gaping hole in front of her. Now she realized that Zaphier didn't need to see anything other than the black chocker to understand that Harrison had assets.

"Cover this up," she said quietly. She didn't want anyone coming in and seeing it.

She knew Harrison was watching her as she crossed the floor and climbed the steps, but she had to get away from him. She didn't want him to see her ashamed face.

Harrison had set out two double mattresses for them, but by the time he'd finished closing the hatch over Excalibur, Paige had already put sheets, pillows, and blankets on them. She was already lying on one mattress with her back to him and her eyes shut by the time he caught up.

Harrison didn't know what he did wrong. Didn't she like his handiwork? This was why he never showed it to anyone. He'd never even mentioned it to Narissa or Keziah. Besides, it wasn't like he was his dad. He'd only got the thing running as it should two weeks ago. It would have taken his dad under a month. It took Harrison eight years.

Pulling his jacket over his head, he proceeded to change. There was no point in being nervous about putting on his pajamas. It wasn't like Paige was going to turn around.

As he whipped off his shirt, he felt a chill across his shoulders. Maybe it was too early in the year to be sleeping in the hangar. He had a space heater on the main level, and it wasn't anywhere near where they were planning to sleep.

There was one blanket left on the shelf. Harrison got it and spread it out over Paige.

She clasped it and tugged it up to her chin without looking at him. "Thank you," she said stiffly.

"No trouble," Harrison said easily, as he reached for his pajama bottoms. "Let me know if you're cold during the night." Even though he said that he had no idea what more he could do for her other than give her the blanket he'd already given her.

With that thought, he buttoned up his red and black plaid shirt and hopped into bed.

Paige shivered. Not only was she suffering from the sleeplessness most people sleeping in unfamiliar beds face, but it was only the beginning of June and it felt like the frost had just come off the ground. She missed her bed desperately. There was a wheezing little worm uncoiling in the pit of her stomach when she thought about Zaphier sleeping in her bed.

It was cold. She hated the cold since she was from a warmer climate, but that night, it went straight through her bones. She had no idea what time it was, except that it was still dark out. How many more hours was she going to have to endure this?

Then she heard Harrison sort of snort and roll onto his side, and her brain clicked. She should go over and crawl into bed with him, but her brain revolted against the idea. What was this? A blanket scenario in a cheesy romance? She scoffed at herself.

But pride had its place and she soon realized the hangar after nightfall was not the place for it. She picked up both her blankets and dragged them over to Harrison's mattress. She laid both of them neatly on top of his blanket and slid her freezing toes into the bed beside him.

At first, she planned to stay as far away from him in the bed as possible, but within seconds she was repenting of her rash thinking and was snuggling into the warmth of Harrison's back. He made the sweetest, warmest pocket in the blankets and it was everything she wanted to be a part of. Even his feet were warm. And when she tucked her face into the nook between his shoulder blades, she was so comfortable she didn't even need a pillow.

For the first few minutes, she couldn't stop glancing at him to see how he would react to her presence, but he didn't seem to notice and soon she was too tired to check on his status. She fell blissfully asleep.

"How long are you planning to sleep?" A voice burst out of nowhere.

Harrison jumped.

To his astonishment, Zaphier was standing in the hangar and the only thing that Harrison could process about the situation was that the man was wearing orange plastic pants. "What happened?" Harrison mumbled. "Did you wet yourself?"

Zaphier tapped his top angrily. "These are one-of-a-kind Milwitch designer trousers sewn for me by Milwitch herself, but what would you know?"

"Ah, I see," Harrison said, still half asleep. "Are they for fishing? Is that how you got your coat from yesterday? Fishing?"

Zaphier huffed in response to Harrison's taunting. "It's pointless even talking to you."

"Well, why *are* you talking to me?" Harrison asked. "It's six twenty-three. Paige and I aren't supposed to have breakfast ready until eight o'clock. This is hardly sleeping in. What's the problem?"

"I want my breakfast early," Zaphier explained.

When Paige heard that, she stirred. It wasn't until that moment that Harrison realized she was in bed with him. Harrison wanted to be surprised, but at the same time, he remembered sleeping, waking, and sleeping the night before—never comfortable—never resting—hoping that Paige wasn't feeling the cold that he felt since she had the extra blanket. Then inexplicably, it was warm and he slept.

He grabbed Paige's ever-obedient shoulder and pushed her back onto the mattress. "She will serve you breakfast at eight o'clock, Zaphier. If that's not soon enough for you, then you should have brought your own food. And you should have called us on the intercom system. It's extremely rude that you have appeared here."

Zaphier smirked like he was amused. "Sorry, I just wanted to see how much of the fairy tale was real." He pointed to the other mattress. It was obviously mussed. And with a flick of his hair, Zaphier strode out of the room.

"Does that bother you?" Paige asked, covering the lower half of her face with the blanket.

"The model or the mattress?" Harrison grimaced.

"Either one," she answered, turning her back on him.

"Both."

Harrison got out of the bed and paced around the room for a second to get his thoughts in line. "I'll take the mattresses downstairs and put them in front of the space heater so that you won't have to do something like this tomorrow night. I should have got you an electric blanket or something. I apologize."

"It wasn't *that* bad," Paige reassured him.

Harrison shrugged his shoulders like he was trying to crack his neck. "Even so, I wasn't trying to manipulate the situation so that you would be forced to get in bed with me."

"I wasn't accusing you of that."

Harrison wasn't convinced, and he was sure it was written all over his face.

"Listen," Paige said. "I don't feel like you were taking advantage of me. If anything, I was taking advantage of you, and besides—nothing happened. I think we're close enough friends that we can just take this kind of necessary contact in stride and not let it affect us. It's not just me that feels that way, is it?"

"No. I feel that way." The next thing Harrison knew, he was back in bed with Paige. With her head tucked under his chin, he was breathing a bit of her short hair up his nose. He brushed it out and stroked her head at the same time. This was probably another example of the 'necessary contact' she had referred to.

It was true he had been ticked off that Zaphier had barged in and seen them, but now Harrison couldn't remember why. He only knew that for some reason, the wanker's appearance somehow made him closer to Paige... and he liked it.

Hi Ink Drinkers!

My name is Stephanie Van Orman and I am the author of this novel. The book you're reading should be called 'Rose Red' by Stephanie Van Orman, but I've had such amazing

problems with piracy that I have to say, if you're reading this book and it's not 'Rose Red' by Stephanie Van Orman, you are reading a pirated book. A lot of times, pirates take the whole book, without reading it, and put it up for sale under a different title, author, and cover.

If this has happened, there are a number of things you can do. First, you can tell the website who is hosting this novel that it has been posted without the permission of the author. Second, you could get in touch with me and let me know what has happened. Third, you could go find me on a reputable ebook store and buy another one of my books. That doesn't really do anything about the pirates, but it raises my morale... like a lot.

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoy the rest of the story.

*Carry on,
Stephanie Van Orman
Novelist*

Chapter Eleven

Fallon had arranged for the crew to stay three days and to leave on the fourth morning, but on the third morning, Harrison got word that they needed to take an unscheduled break. The revised plan was to rest on the third day, work again on the fourth day—get the shot they needed—and then leave on the fifth morning.

Harrison gave Paige a little grin when he told her the new arrangement.

“Why are you so happy?” Paige asked suspiciously. “I didn’t think you liked sleeping in the hangar.”

“I don’t,” Harrison explained. He was leaning against the kitchen counter as Paige prepared breakfast. “But they can’t change their booking without a penalty and Fallon’s willing to pay the extra charges. He gave me an extremely large tip in cash to help ease the pain of their continued stay.”

“It must have been a pretty big tip to make you smile like that.”

“It was.” He smiled again. “Here’s what I was thinking. You deserve a day off and one of us needs to drive into town to pick up another load of supplies, so why don’t you take the truck and go?”

Paige hesitated. Harrison had never offered her the vehicle before. “U-huh,” she stuttered. “You’ll have to do a slight modification on my wrist band. I can’t go as far away from you as town without your permission.”

“I know,” Harrison said, taking her arm in his and slipping a new information pack into her bracelet. The information pack was tiny, smaller than a memory card, but Harrison wasn’t clumsy and got in it the right slot on his first try. When he was done, he let go of her hand and looked at the floor rather than at her face. Paige knew that look. Was he still shy around her?

“Thanks,” she said, “but I don’t understand why you want me to go. Wouldn’t you rather I was here to see to our guests’ needs?”

“They don’t have any needs,” Harrison said simply. “I’ll make lunch for them and besides, you shouldn’t take all day. Just drive out, pick up the stuff and come back. Oh, but be sure to stop by the café and have a snack. The drive is unbearable if there isn’t anything fun to do at the other end.”

“This is really nice of you, Harrison.”

“It’s not as nice as I could be,” he admitted, suddenly grouchy.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I should be offering you a portion of the tip I got from Fallon, but...”

Paige knew what he was talking about. He was worried about how unfair it was for her not to get a cut of the money.

Paige smiled and got back to work. “Don’t think about it. I already sold myself to you, so you don’t have to pay me. You’ve already paid for all the work I have done and will ever do. The money is going to *my* debt anyway, so don’t worry about giving me anything extra.”

Harrison shrugged his shoulders and gave her the passkey to the truck. “I’ve already sent in the order, so they should have it all packed up for you by the time you get there. Go after you eat breakfast and I’ll stay here and keep the hooligans in line.”

Paige opened the door of the truck and got in at exactly the same time Zaphier got in on the other side.

Paige stared at his blond hair, tied neatly into a navy and white scarf in a ponytail at the base of his neck. Her eyes moved to his strange blue-tinted circular sunglasses and down his designer-clad body. For a second, she honestly couldn’t process that he had got in the truck with her.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

“Wherever you’re going,” he answered smoothly. “I have nothing to do today. I hoped you’d let me tag along.”

“I think you should get out,” she mumbled.

“I think you should let me stay,” he said as he reached into the front pocket of his shirt and pulled out an electronic money dispenser. “It’s not like I expect you to take me for free. I’ll pay you.”

When Paige was a teenager, she always thought Zaphier looked so cool when he flipped open his money dispenser. Back then, it seemed like a show of power. Now Paige felt the same way everyone he paid off felt—disadvantaged.

She bit her lip. Harrison had already made it quite clear that even though the two of them were in business to do business, that didn’t mean that they had to bend over every time something was asked of them. Some requests were too much, and Paige knew that Harrison would consider this request way too much. If that was what Harrison wanted her to do then why was she stalling?

There were two reasons. The first reason was that there was a part of her that wanted to question Zaphier about her missing years and the second reason was the money. The money they were trying to pay off was her money—not Harrison’s. She wanted to do more to help pay it off.

Finally, she found her voice and asked quietly, “How much?”

“How much do you need?” Zaphier countered, amusement lingering in his tone.

“Twenty thousand dollars.”

Zaphier whistled. “That’s more than Harrison is charging for this whole trip and you want me to pay that much for a simple ride to town?”

“I thought you didn’t know where I was going?”

“Fallon told me. I wanted to get out of that stuffy house,” he whined.

His calling the house she had slaved over and loved ‘stuffy’ was going too far. “You think the town is nicer? This place is a palace compared to town.”

“Anyway, twenty thousand is too much. How about a hundred?”

“How about you get out of the truck and find your own way?” Paige said stiffly. “You’d pay a shuttle in the city more than a hundred for the distance we’ve got to travel.”

Frustrated, Zaphier scanned the dirt road in front of them. “Well, I don’t see why I’ve got to pay you anything if I just refuse to get out.”

Paige reached for her door handle. “Then I’ll get Harrison.”

Zaphier grabbed her arm before she could get any further.

Paige’s whole body convulsed with fear.

“Say, what’s your relationship with that guy?”

“None of your business,” she breathed and tried to push him off.

He grabbed her other wrist and pulled her toward him. Paige could feel his breath on her from her ear to her collarbone when suddenly Zaphier’s door was opened from the outside. Harrison stood there, disgusted to the bone.

“I didn’t know you wanted a trip to town, Zaphier,” he said drolly. “What are you doing?”

Zaphier took his hands off her and stepped out of the truck. “Nothing.”

Paige looked at her bracelet. A pink warning light was blinking.

“Come here, Paige, and I’ll turn the alarm off,” Harrison said kindly as he beckoned her toward him. She obediently went and with his thumbprint on one of the links, the alarm stopped. “Zaphier, you shouldn’t touch other people’s property.”

Zaphier tilted his head to the side, still trying to look cool as he was reprimanded by Harrison.

“Obviously, I shouldn’t have touched her,” he said condescendingly.

Was that his version of an apology?

Harrison didn’t say one word back to him; he simply took Paige by the wrist and led her back to the house. Paige’s face was aflame as he neigh-on dragged her through the kitchen to the dining room. It was obvious from the way Harrison’s hawk-like head scanned the west wing that he was looking for Fallon. When Harrison couldn’t find him, Paige was lugged back down the hall and into the south wing. She saw the stylist’s little knowing smile and wanted to die, but there was no point struggling against Harrison, so instead of digging in her heels, she flapped around behind him like a kite on a string.

The door to Fallon’s room, which was actually Harrison’s room, was wide open. Harrison knocked twice on the door frame, but there was no answer.

Harrison groaned something inaudible that sounded like a plea for patience. Then he seemed to lose his temporary control and he practically spat, “Why did you let him touch you?”

Paige gasped in disbelief. “You think I *let* him touch me! Of all the...”

“What’s going on out here?” Fallon asked, suddenly emerging from the bathroom.

Harrison turned to him and started talking while holding a death grip onto Paige’s wrist. “We need to talk.”

Fallon’s head lolled back. “What has he done now?”

Two days later, Harrison stood on the helocarrier pad in town. He was on the threshold of finally saying goodbye to the guests that had plagued his house... if it wasn't for one stupid hitch. Against his will, he was forced to take Fallon and Zaphier to town before he took them to the international air dock, where he would be rid of them forever. He was in a foul mood because he shouldn't be there. There was nothing for Zaphier to see in town. The only reason they were there was ridiculous. When Fallon questioned Zaphier about his misbehavior toward Paige, the bastard wouldn't stop whining about how he truly wanted to see what the rural community looked like and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and so, as a consequence, Harrison was forced to make a stop there on their way back to the city and wait for them while they looked around.

He was half-finished charging the spare battery when he saw Wystan strut up to the side of the chocker.

Harrison took a deep breath and braced himself for whatever the old man would say. Inside, he was totally peeved. Why did it have to be sleazeball week?

Wystan's white hair fell on his gray face as he stopped in front of Harrison and wheezed his breath. He didn't say 'hello' or anything conventional, but instead, simply said what he came over to say. "Nessa told me about your situation with your woman."

Harrison looked neither surprised nor interested in anything Wystan might think. Even though that was his attitude, a part of his brain flickered. He'd never heard Wystan refer to Narissa as Nessa. It seemed too affectionate for the old coot and hearing it made Harrison feel weird. He should be angry or annoyed, because he liked Narissa himself, but instead, he felt nothing.

"All I have to say is that a purchased woman who has a past before you is a tricky thing, but it's even worse if you don't know what kind of past it was. I know this guy," Wystan started to say as he began rooting around in his grubby plaid shirt pockets. "He's a private investigator or something like that. He's resourceful. Last time I saw him he said something about memory recovery. Maybe you might want to get in touch with him." He finally found the card in his back butt pocket and handed it over to Harrison.

Harrison took it and looked at it, but before he could read it, Wystan had already begun limping away. "Hey!" Harrison shouted.

Wystan turned.

"Thanks!" Harrison called, and for one second he was grateful to Wystan.

All Wystan did was smile, but it was a twisted smile that seemed to say, "You *should* thank me! You have no idea the trouble you got yourself into." Technically, he didn't say anything and just kept on his way to his truck.

After that, it was just the wind and the sun until Harrison finished charging the battery. When he was done, he decided he'd go to the café, have a sandwich, and ask Narissa what she knew about the P.I. Wystan recommended. He'd find Fallon and Zaphier afterward.

As Harrison approached the café, he saw Zaphier sitting on one of the bar stools in front of the counter and did a double-take. Narissa was standing over him. It looked like he was the only customer.

Immediately, Harrison changed his mind about going in the front door. Instead, he circled around the building and went for the backdoor. It was locked, but he knew the key code from the days when he had been dating Keziah. After punching the numbers in, the door came loose and he went in. The kitchen was empty as he snuck around to the door to the dining room. He perched by the entrance and tilted his ear to listen.

He heard Narissa's voice. She sounded tired as she said, "I was thinking about you the other day on your birthday. Fessed up to being forty-six yet?"

"Shhh," Zaphier hissed.

There was a pause while Narissa chuckled. "I'm not going to tell on you. Besides, it looks like your surgeries are going well. You look scarcely a day over thirty. You were always fearless that way. No knife could ever scare you."

"Well, Aunt," Zaphier said like he had something stuck up his nose.

"Well nothing," she said, cutting him off. "I never thought I'd ever see you or any of your kind again as long as I lived, but since we have met again, I want to ask you one thing."

"What?"

"Was my husband really dead when you woke me up for the last time before you sold me to Sleeping Beauty Inc.? I always thought it was a ruse meant to get rid of me for good without killing me. Tell me, was he really dead?"

The air in the dining room seemed to weigh a thousand pounds while Harrison waited for Zaphier to answer.

Finally, just when Harrison thought he wasn't going to, he said, "No. He wasn't, but we didn't lie to you because he wanted you out of the picture."

"Oh, really?"

"He'd lost all his money again and he had like twenty loan sharks coming for his skin. He used the money he got selling you to pay them off. He was planning to raise enough money to buy you back, but he didn't make it before he died." Here Zaphier paused. Then he continued talking like he hadn't. "For what it's worth, I think he was being sincere. If he had the money, he would have spent it on you."

"When you darlings sold my contract to Sleeping Beauty Inc.," she clicked her tongue, "how much was I worth?"

Zaphier's voice became suave. "Who can judge a woman's worth?"

"I'm sure *you* can," Narissa said heartlessly.

"Well, enough about all that. You must know that none of that was up to me. Tell me about the man you're with now. Is he good to you?"

"And if he's not? Would you come help me out of it?"

"Certainly!"

Then Harrison heard the sound of a drink being poured. “Well,” she said icily, “I won’t hold my breath.”

After that, Harrison heard some insincere pandering to Narissa, but he blocked it out and pulled out the business card Wystan had given him. Osric Fountain was the name on the card. Harrison decided he’d give him a call.

Chapter Twelve

Harrison rolled his eyes. "Clean off the camera lens."

The guy on Harrison's monitor was choking. The private investigator Wystan recommended had spurted a mouth full of coffee all over the camera. It was gruesome to see the brown liquid on the screen that made the P.I.'s face twice the size it really was.

"What did you say her name was?" Osric Fountain asked after he paused to clean up.

"Paige Waters," Harrison replied with a heavy dose of patience.

The guy on the other end hooted. "That's tremendous! I thought I'd misheard you. She's the woman I've been looking for all my life! I should come down there in person. What's your address?"

Harrison's dose of patience had already worn off. "Excuse me. Do you mind telling me what you're so excited about? If it's just because she once belonged to Zaphier Rawson and you think she might have an interesting story to tell a magazine editor, you'd be dead wrong. She had her memory wiped."

When Harrison said that, the private investigator calmed right down. "Really?"

"Of course. I'm calling you to see if you can help me fill in the blanks of her timeline."

Osric sucked in his breath. "Of all the rat sh... Still, I'll come right down. What's your address?"

"Are you sure you'll be able to make it? It's on the other side of civilization," Harrison stalled. He wasn't positive he could trust someone Wystan had recommended before he made the call, and now that he'd talked to him, he wasn't reassured.

"Listen, I understand if you're getting cold feet about hiring me," Osric said rationally. "But the reason I'm interested in Paige has nothing to do with selling the fabulous story of a purchased woman. It's because she's been part of a case I've been working on for years. I thought she was dead."

"Dead?"

"I'll be there by tonight. I don't need your address. I'll meet you at Wystan's house," Osric said before he cut the connection.

Harrison clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth and turned the phone off. How could that maniac make it all the way to Wystan's by evening?

Then he heard Paige calling him down the hall. It was time for lunch. He got up and strode down the hall. The kitchen was empty and it took him a second to realize she was in the conservatory pouring drinks for them.

There was a white rosebud behind one of her ears. The water in the crystal made a pattern of light across her cheeks and made her eyes sparkle.

Harrison's heart ached.

What had that monster done to her?

Harrison revved the engine of his truck. He'd told Paige he was going to town to 'hang out with the guys.'

"Which guys?" she had asked skeptically.

He'd never left for a night out before, so he was honest. "Wystan."

"Wystan?" She laughed. She knew Harrison couldn't stand him. "Have a good time!"

Harrison smirked. "Don't you want to know why I'm going?" he called after her. She was already halfway up the stairs to her tower.

She leaned over the railing and said, "Not really. If it has to do with Wystan, then it means you can't get out of it. Unless..." She drummed her fingers on the banister. "You're actually going to see Narissa?"

That was when Harrison clued into the idea that Paige might know about his past feelings for Narissa.

Harrison waved her off playfully, but once he sat alone in the truck preparing for a bumpy drive to town, he hated himself. How had he given himself away? Was it obvious? Was that why Paige always seemed to regard him with unwavering platonic friendship? Did she think she would always play second-fiddle to a married woman? Damn.

When Harrison got to town, Wystan and the private eye were waiting outside the house.

Harrison shut off the engine and casually approached them. The stranger was Osric. He recognized him from their video call. Harrison mistrusted him on sight. His hair was too long. Harrison hadn't seen his ponytail through the teleconference. The P.I. hadn't shaved. It didn't add to his credibility that he didn't do up enough buttons on his shirt or that he was smoking something vile in a pipe.

"Greetings," Osric said cheerfully.

"Hi," Harrison said.

Osric tapped out his pipe on an old salon-style hairdryer that was sitting in the yard and opened his mouth to say something when Wystan suddenly roared, "Hey! I just got that for Narissa."

"Oh," Osric said, brushing the ashes off it. "I thought it was garbage." It was no wonder he would say that, considering the heaps of trash sticking up through the untrimmed grass.

Harrison realized that Wystan disliked Osric as much as he did.

Wystan scowled at both of them and indicated that they could come inside. Osric sat at one end of the couch while Harrison sat on the other and Wystan filled in his butt-print in his usual armchair.

"Before we begin, I should tell you that right now I'm working on a case for Mrs. Elizabella Rawson."

"Who is she?"

"Zaphier's wife."

"Excuse me," Harrison snorted. "He's married?"

“Yeah, it was one of the biggest weddings in celebrity history. Back when she married him she was not only an honest-to-goodness princess, daughter of a king, and everything, but she was also a very accomplished clothing designer.”

“What happened?”

Osric took out his phone and projected a series of images onto the wall over the television. They were pictures of Zaphier and an extremely stunning woman in a white wedding gown. Harrison had seen her picture before, but the personal details were blank. He never read the rags.

“Why would a princess want to marry him?”

“The Rawson family is rich. They are rich beyond your wildest dreams, but also the wildest dreams of the Thryn family. Elizabella was married to Zaphier for the sake of money, but she didn’t know the money was drenched in blood.” Osric continued. “They were married for three weeks before she realized that there was something wrong with him. I mean something more than multiple surgical procedures—something worse. By the end of the first three months, she refused to live with him and now they are considered by the public as permanently separated. He simply won’t sign for a divorce. Besides, at this point, there’s little point in pursuing one.”

“Why?” Harrison asked breezily. “If she dislikes him so much?”

“She’s dying,” Osric admitted gravely.

Harrison’s mouth hung open in silence.

Osric continued. “She believes Zaphier married her so he could become a prince. What is not commonly known is that three months into their marriage she was diagnosed with M.T.N.”

Harrison’s throat tightened at the mention of the illness. It was completely incurable. Someone diagnosed with it could not hope to live for longer than four years. Many people died much sooner if they didn’t have proper treatment. Harrison had seen the effects of the disease. Patients lost their hair, limbs hanging on by threads—a patient lay blindfolded and crumbling at the end. Both his parents had died that way. But, the disease wasn’t airborne. You had to contract it from something.

Osric cleared his throat and went on, “Elizabella believes that Zaphier deliberately infected her with it to secure his title and be rid of her.”

Harrison turned his head away. “Would he really do that?”

“She doesn’t believe this without reason. The Rawson family hasn’t exactly treated their women with equality in the past. Zaphier’s aunt was put into cryostasis repeatedly to get her out of the way.”

“No one would do that either.”

“Yes, they would. Why don’t you ask Narissa?” Wystan said.

Harrison twitched. He never dreamed that when he overheard Zaphier call Narissa his aunt that he had been telling the truth.

“Even though there has been loads of criminal evidence against other members of the Rawson family—Zaphier is clean. The reason Elizabella wants to find Paige is that she’s sure

that Paige knows the details of Zaphier's past crimes. She was so tight with him back in the day and he paid her off."

"She doesn't remember anything about that?" Harrison reminded him dryly.

"I thought about it on the way over. There are two ways of having memories wiped. One is through brain damage. If it's done that way, then there's no way of recovering the information, but there's another treatment based on hypnosis. They hypnotize a person and force them to close a door on a certain part of their life. The hypnotist closes neural pathways."

"How was Paige paid off?" Harrison asked, suddenly remembering his conversation with her about her financial transactions before she went into cryostasis. "If she was paid to keep Zaphier's secrets then why did she wipe her memory and sell herself? She was in debt when I recovered her."

Osric looked taken back. "Hmm," he said thoughtfully. "If that's the case, then the only answer that makes sense is that he didn't pay her off—he wiped her memory and sold her off instead. If she didn't consent, we wouldn't know, would we? Her memory of that conversation is gone."

Harrison clenched his fists and couldn't speak for a second. He hadn't even considered the possibility that Zaphier would have done it to her to protect his closet full of skeletons.

"How could we prove that?" Wystan interjected.

"We have to find out where she had her memory-wipe done," Osric said confidently, as he turned off the projection. "In the meantime, I'd like to talk to Paige. Will you allow that? Even if she got her memory wiped, she may remember something that can help me put the pieces together and get a little justice for a princess."

"Sure," Harrison said, raking a hand through his hair.

"Good. Can you bring her to the café tomorrow?"

Harrison nodded.

Chapter Thirteen

Paige came out of the shower and looked at the clock. It was after ten and Harrison still wasn't home. He had left her at home by herself plenty of times to do tours and other flights to the city, but this was the first time he had been gone at night. Paige found herself very lonely. Even though Harrison slept at a completely different corner of the house, she really relied on his company.

She sat down in front of her dresser with the mirror over it and shook the towel off her head. She was just about to comb her hair when she noticed a folded piece of white paper stuck between her mirror and her dresser.

Flipping it open was a man's messy scrawl. 'Miss me?' it said.

Thinking it was from Harrison; she smiled wanly. This was the first time he had ever left her a note. Notes were extremely old-fashioned. He could easily send her a message through her bracelet if he wanted to. She wasn't sure when he had a chance to deliver it. He hardly ever came upstairs.

She set the note down on her dresser and went on combing her hair. Reaching into one of her drawers she brought out a hairdryer. Another note was lying underneath it. Paige took it out and read it. 'I missed you,' it said.

Paige's eyes flicked around the room uneasily. The note wasn't from Harrison.

After Zaphier left, the first thing she did was strip the bed. She took all the bedding to the laundry room. Then she took all the towels out, even the ones he hadn't used, and washed them too. She put new blankets on her bed and forgot that he had been staying in her room at all.

A shiver ran up her body.

She needed to clean her room again.

After running downstairs to get her supplies, she started on it.

She found another note in the closet wrapped around one of the hangers. It said, '90-342-9325-00-3432.' Paige knew it was his phone number. It was the same number from when she spied it in his father's address book when she was seventeen. That number was intended for family use only.

She found another note in the light fixture above her bed. 'Did you find the money yet?'

Paige didn't stop there. She kept looking.

By the end, after having searched every nook and cranny, she found three more notes.

'Remember, I can get you out of this.'

'You don't have to stay a purchased woman.'

'I'm waiting...'

Paige arranged them on the floor. She didn't know how to respond. The ball was in her court. He'd wait for her to contact him, but the beauty and safety of her room were completely destroyed. How was she supposed to sleep knowing what he was thinking about while he slept there?

She felt itchy everywhere, especially in her hair, like there were invisible bugs crawling on her. Scratching, she chanted to herself that the feeling was just in her head, but it didn't go away.

Uncomfortable in the tower, she went downstairs. She had some thought of sleeping in the spare room. She opened the door to the spare room and looked in. It was depressing. Paige closed the door and went to the newer part of the house, but it didn't feel any better. The glossy black of the night coated the windows in the knowledge that someone could see in, but she couldn't see out.

She closed all the blinds, then she went into the kitchen and made herself a cup of cocoa. By the time she finished it, she hoped Harrison would be back.

As she sipped her cocoa, she thought of all the times during Zaphier's visit that Harrison hadn't let her former owner do as he pleased.

It made her feel safe.

Chapter Fourteen

Harrison made it back to the house a little after two in the morning. He had left Wystan's well before midnight, but he'd missed his turn on the way home because he had been concentrating on what he'd learned from Osric. By the time he realized that following the road had been stupid, he had wasted a lot of time.

Quietly, he crept into the house. A few lights were off. The lights in Paige's tower were off. All the same, he thought it right to at least let her know he had come home if she was concerned about such a thing. As quietly as he could, he gently mounted the staircase up to her room. He opened the door a sliver and it cast dull light across the bedroom floor. Before he opened his mouth to say anything, he realized the bed was empty.

He turned on the light. "Paige?"

No one was there.

Pouncing, he checked the bathroom. It was empty too.

With less concern for noise, he slid down the stairs on his heels and walked with deliberate strides into the common rooms.

"Paige," he called out.

He checked the bathroom, the kitchen, the conservatory, and the spare room, all the while becoming more and more worried.

"Paige!" he called out.

It was then that he remembered that he had changed her perimeter and she was now allowed to go as far as the town. She could have left while he was gone and he wouldn't have known.

He pulled out his pocket watch that corresponded with her bracelet and punched the call button. A channel opened and he said into the watch, "Paige, where are you?"

He heard a weak reply from the watch and from the direction of his bedroom simultaneously. "Harrison?"

He hadn't even thought to check his bedroom. Swinging the door open, he found her between his sheets, groggy from sleep and rubbing her eyes in the near darkness.

"You're in my bed!" he exclaimed.

"Huh?"

He lowered himself next to the bed and said softly, "What's going on? I know you and I have a really good relationship for a master and his slave, but if you get in my bed and wait for me to come home, I might not be able to maintain our status quo."

"What do you mean?" she whispered, amused.

Harrison thought of all the reasons why he had not taken Paige as a lover. He was worried if he forced things on her, she'd snap. Later, he hesitated because he thought she was in love with another man. After having met Zaphier and having seen her dynamic with him, it seemed clear to Harrison that whatever she used to have with him, it was very over.

Harrison cleared his throat to answer her. "I mean that I'm a lonely mountain man and you should watch yourself."

He meant it as a joke and she laughed. She reached for an old plaid shirt of his, with which she covered her tank top and bare shoulders.

Harrison flinched. The action was not meant to be seductive, but he found it so. Casually, she slid into his clothes, like they were the most comfortable things in the world.

“I’m sorry if my being here bothers you, but I didn’t feel safe anywhere else.”

“Why not?” he asked, kneeling on the bed beside her. He was going to make his move. He was going to kiss her. She was going to love it.

Except Paige was not looking at him. She had turned to the side table and was collecting a pile of paper scraps.

“What are those?” he asked, scarcely interested.

He took one of the paper slips between his fingers and read it. It said, ‘Did you find the money yet?’

“What’s this?”

“Zaphier left them for me—tucked in my drawers.”

“What does he mean, ‘Did you find the money yet?’”

Paige snatched it out of his grasp and crushed it between her palms with the other notes. “He’s a pig,” she spat.

Harrison stared at her strangely. She was acting weird. “He left all of those? Can I see them?”

“No,” she said. “He would only poison your brain and make you feel as bad as he makes me feel.”

“Why?”

“I think he wants to buy my contract from you.”

Harrison fell back on the bed next to her. “I won’t sell you.”

“I know you wouldn’t want to. He could offer you an insane amount of money for me and you’d still refuse. It’s just that... if he really wants me, he’ll find a way to make you miserable enough that you’ll *want* to sell me,” she said, flipping onto her back and expressing herself more to the ceiling.

It made Harrison resent the ceiling. “You know, Paige,” he vented. “If you didn’t belong to me, then you could deal with this on your own, but because you’re mine—you have to let me in on your problem. Can you show me the notes he left you?”

Paige relented and gave them to him.

Harrison didn’t like calling rank, but he took the slips and read them with a grave face.

“What money? If he wants to buy you, why do you have to find the money?”

“I don’t know what he has in mind... exactly,” Paige answered. “And I don’t care. I don’t want anything to do with that guy. I am going to burn these and forget I ever laid eyes on that sack of diffused crap.”

She paused and breathed. “Just think, Harrison. If I’d met you before I met him, don’t you think I would have fallen in love with you on sight?”

“You would have?”

She wasn't listening. She was too exhausted. Paige normally went to bed at eleven. It was almost three. Looking at her now, he could tell that she hadn't slept on schedule. She had probably only fallen asleep moments before he burst through the door. She had driven herself crazy looking at Zaphier's notes. Her exhaustion was making her say things she wouldn't normally say.

"I think I would fall in love with you if I didn't have all these weird fears about being betrayed, about being sold again, about being abused. If I love you and you resell me..." She paused and rubbed her chest with the palm of her hand to ease the pain she felt there. "I don't think I could take it. But if I act cool and like I don't care, then when you get desperate enough to sell me... I'll understand. I'll realize that I was only ever a thing to you. And in a very real way, you were just a thing to me. Not a person, but a way to survive."

Harrison paused before answering. She was clearly so sleep-deprived that talking to her about this now felt a little like taking advantage of a drunk person, but if he didn't talk now, when would he? He cleared his throat. "I don't think it matters *when* you meet people."

"Hmm." Paige turned her head and her eyes met his. "I shouldn't be talking to you like this."

"It's against the rules?" Harrison asked.

"Sort of. A Sleeping Beauty model is not allowed to convince her owner to free her. If my bracelet hears certain chains of words spoken together, I'll be in trouble. I can't even give an example of what one of those word chains sounds like because if I do, I'll be reprimanded. If a Rose Red becomes a liability rather than an asset, then the owner may return her for a partial refund."

Harrison smirked. "I should really read that manual some time. As your owner, I'm allowed to ask you to do anything, right?"

"You're not allowed to ask me to hurt myself or others. Hot dishwater is the limit for how much I'm allowed to suffer, but I'm sure an owner could think of a million legal ways to be cruel to their model if they put some effort into it. I'm sure that's how I was treated when I was with Zaphier. You know," she said quietly. "I don't love him anymore. All it took was one glance across the dining room and poof—I didn't love him anymore."

"That's good to hear," Harrison said—relieved that she said something like that before he launched in on all the things he'd learned from Osrice. "He's married, you know."

Paige tucked in her knees and mumbled, "That's just like him. I'll bet she's rich."

"Yeah."

"I'll bet she was beautiful, but now she looks like a washcloth that's been used too many times."

"Yeah."

"I'll bet he fools around on the side and she can't do anything about it and instead of getting ticked off, she just takes it."

"Maybe."

"I'll bet she used to love something about him, but now she can't remember what it was."

“Stop,” Harrison said sternly. “Come here,” he said, pulling her close so that she was tucked under his arm with her head on his chest. “Zaphier is not going to get you. It doesn’t matter how much money he offers me, I’m not going to sell you to him. The version of you that was with him doesn’t exist anymore. Tonight, you can let yourself unclench. You can sleep here and you’ll be safe all night.”

“Really?” she asked, raising her head to look into his eyes.

“Yes, but just for tonight. If you ever get in my bed again, I will interpret that as an invitation I can’t refuse.”

“What?” Paige asked.

“I’m not saying that twice. In the morning, I’m going to take you to town for breakfast. There’s someone I want you to meet. He’s a private investigator and he wants to talk to you.”

She paled and clearly forgot Harrison’s warning in the face of his plans for the next day. “I don’t think I have anything to tell him, and I don’t want to get mixed up with any of Zaphier’s messes.”

“What about me?”

Paige looked at him quizzically as if to ask how he was involved.

“I want you to talk to him,” Harrison said persuasively. “Zaphier is asking you to find the money? What money? Money here? Money that I have? Money from somewhere else? Will he be back expecting you to show him where you have hidden money from back when he owned you? What do his notes even mean? We need to find out.”

Paige’s cheeks were ruddy and Harrison’s heartbeat felt like a jackhammer while he waited for her to answer him. When she finally spoke, she said, “Whatever the story with that money is, we’ll never get our hands on it.”

“I’m not expecting to,” Harrison answered calmly.

“Then what are you hoping to get out of this investigation?”

“I’m hoping that the feeling you have will disappear. You know the one, the one where you’re afraid to love me. This whole master and servant thing cannot go on forever. You know it can’t. Deep down inside, you know that I didn’t buy you because I wanted an assistant. I want a partner in every sense of the word. I know me being completely in charge is comfortable for you right now. You have anxiety about so many things, and doing exactly what I say reduces your fears to sizes you can manage. You did what I asked perfectly, so everything must be fine... but it isn’t. The thing is, I will never ask you to love me with the firm order of a master.”

“Never?” she gasped.

“You were hoping I would?”

“A little,” she admitted.

“I won’t. You have to decide if you want a life with me and I won’t order it.” He felt his heart fall the way it falls when you say the unhappy truth you’ve been hiding.

“What will a life with you look like?” she whispered.

“Well, it will look a lot like the life we already have. Except there will be a few marked differences. For starters, the bracelet will have to go. Maybe we’ll get you another one, but not a

Sleeping Beauty linked chain designed to show everyone that you don't make your own decisions."

"What else?"

"What do you think? Bookings will come in and you'll decide whether or not we'll accept a booking without asking me. You'll decide on a renovation project and you will tell me what you plan to do, but this place will be your home as much as mine, so you'll do it or not based on what you want."

"When money is so tight, that seems like too much responsibility for me," she whined quietly.

"Eventually, you'll learn that what pleases you can please me too, even if I never would have thought of it on my own. I'll like things I don't like because pleasing you is more pleasurable for me than caring what color a wall is."

He realized she was crying. They were very quiet tears that he never would have noticed if the wetness hadn't soaked into his shirt. "Do you want to hear more?" he asked.

She nodded without speaking.

"When you're sick, I'll bring you soup and cover you with blankets. If you're hurt, I'll fetch and carry for you."

"And when we're alone?" she suddenly questioned.

"It will be better than it is tonight."

She clutched at him. "It feels very good tonight. Very warm. Very safe."

He kissed the top of her head. "Go to sleep and see if you can let your imagination uncurl wide enough to show you what I can't show you until I get your answer."

He slid his hand over hers on his chest and the two of them fell asleep.

Chapter Fifteen

When they put Paige to sleep at Sleeping Beauty Inc., they put her inside a display case looking like a princess. In the manual Paige read that accompanied her delivery, it said that they do this to make the girls feel safe. They dress the girls up in pretty dresses, do their makeup just right, curl their hair, and reveal the effect in one grand motion in front of a gilt mirror. They let the women gaze at their beauty and tell them they are the fairest in the land. Then they lead them down to a special room that has only one glass coffin in it, all the while telling them fairy tales they have known all their lives. It's a trick to make a woman feel safe, like a little girl on her way to dreamland. Slowly, carefully, they place her inside the coffin, telling them the part of the story where the wicked queen is coming for them and that the only place they will be safe is here, where she will trick the queen into believing she's dead. They tell her she's going to have to be brave. Gently, they close the lid on her and flood the chamber with sleeping gas.

Some girls find the experience terrifying. In one moment, it was like a reenactment of their mother putting them to sleep as a little girl, when all they dreamed about was becoming a beautiful woman someday. In the next moment, gray fumes have filled the chamber and a smell has overtaken them that their body rejects with the greatest urgency. They pound on the lid and ruin their perfectly set hair. Sometimes they scream and cry, ruining their makeup. After cryostasis has been achieved, company employees open the lid, correct the damage, and put her up for sale.

Sleeping Beauty Inc. was one of the first companies to succeed in getting girls to volunteer for servitude with this experience as bait. Apparently, a lot of women love fairy tales and love the idea of being a princess... even if it's only for a little while.

Paige had heard stories of women who were sold over and over who took a great deal of pleasure in monitoring how they were presented for sale. Eventually, they even learned to breathe in the gas without panic, and no correction was needed.

That was one of the things about Paige's experience that was unusual. It was her first time being frozen and she didn't bat an eyelash at the strange-smelling fumes that entered the chamber. She remembered the look on the face of the technician who was putting her to sleep. She stood over Paige with a look of amazement on her face. Paige saw the expression through the glass before she fell asleep.

That didn't make sense since it was her first time.

Because when Paige dreamed, she was not haunted by that woman's voice. It was a man's, his lips were chapped, stubble on his chin as his mouth moved so close to her ear that she could feel his breath, his skin, and his intentionally spoken words all over her. There was a smell, the smell of a man that both awakened her senses pleasantly and reminded her that she was in a place she should not be. It was his masculinity her body deeply desired, and it was being used against her. It confused her. She wanted him to stay close, but she also wanted to run. Just running forever because he had a body that would always catch hers.

It was a dream she had sometimes, like an awareness of something looming over her just before she woke up enough to remember that nothing was wrong and there was no reason to fear.

Normally, she brushed it off.

That morning, there was a man's voice in her ear. The same voice that terrified her.

He said, "How are you feeling this morning?"

And she screamed.

On their way to town, Paige and Harrison did not try to talk. Neither of them looked at each other, both puzzling what had happened between them that morning.

She had screamed and utter chaos ensued in a bedroom that had not seen chaos in years. Paige had yelled things. She'd thrown things at him. He'd caught her and she'd screamed and cried with tears streaming down her face.

"It was you!" she shrieked.

"I did what?" Harrison asked, blocking her hands that were flying at him in forceful slaps.

She stopped hitting him instantly. "You... uh... No." She began wringing her fingers, but she could find no words to describe what had been bothering her.

"I'm not Zaphier," he said. "I've never hurt you."

"I know you're not Zaphier!" she snapped, embarrassed by her delirium.

Harrison tried to hold her, tried to get her to calm down, but she begged him not to touch her, while she unpicked whatever had happened when he whispered in her ear.

By the time they were ready to go, she had no answer for him about what she was afraid of or why what he did had struck her as so completely terrifying.

In Paige's mind, she knew Harrison had done nothing to hint that he was not her friend. What owner in the world would cheerfully pay back a purchased woman's debt? No one. Anyone else would have rented her out until the money was paid off. Either that or he would just sell her for a profit as fast as he could and start again with someone new.

Paige looked out the window at the open prairie. He had bought her because there were no women around here. Harrison probably had no intention of taking a wife aside from her. He had been so desperate for someone to live with him that he had bought a woman when he didn't know whether or not they would love each other. The example of Wystan and Narissa had given him the courage to do something unconventional that had a low chance of working out. Paige had been the cheapest model on the floor, she was damaged goods if the unprovoked screaming meant anything, and Harrison had paid all the money he had in the world to buy her.

It was a bad situation.

Chapter Sixteen

Osric backed away from Paige, frowned, crossed his arms, and paced across the length of the café with determination.

Paige met Harrison's eyes across the table and mouthed behind her hand, "This is the guy who's going to sort out my past?"

Harrison put his forehead into his clasped hands without answering her.

Paige chuckled.

Osric stopped and stared at her with gawking eyes. "You think this is funny?"

She looked at him levelly. "You're acting like a chicken."

"Excuse me?"

"That's right. You're acting like a literal chicken picking its way across the coop. Haven't you ever seen one?"

"No!" Disgusted, he balked, "She's talking about chickens! I can't even!"

"What's wrong?" Narissa asked.

Cupping his hand around his mouth, Osric whispered something in her ear. Narissa glanced at Paige, nodded her head, grabbed Osric by the arm, and ushered him into the kitchen.

"This is utter rubbish," Paige said, picking up her flavor packet of orange juice by the lip and swishing it around to help the crystals dissolve. "How can he tell if I've ever been hypnotized by just asking me a few dumb questions, making some weird drumming noises, and looking into my eyes? It's stupid."

Harrison pushed his hair out of his face and withheld judgment.

No matter how chill Harrison was, her nerves were stretched like piano wire. Meeting with the detective bothered her. If he pieced together her past, would it make her better or worse? She had definitely seen Princess Elizabella before. She had been to the house for a special visit before Zaphier had bought Paige and Paige even had the chance to shake her hand. At that time, she didn't know that their families were hoping to marry them off to each other. In her mind, their story never began.

The thing that made everything real to her was what Zaphier said the night he told the story about Rose Red. He said that the queen sent Rose Red away to be killed. When Rose Red returned to the kingdom, the queen was dead. It came as no surprise that Zaphier had been referring to someone real. He wasn't just talking about stealing Harrison's money. The queen was Elizabella and she was going to die, just as Zaphier said, so he would be single again in the foreseeable future. Was he saying that he and Paige could still have a happily-ever-after?

Except that Paige didn't want it. Besides, she didn't believe him. Everything he said was a lie.

A minute later, Narissa came out of the kitchen alone and sat down at their table.

"Osric sends his apologies. He's a private eye and not a doctor," Narissa said quietly with her eyes fixed on Paige.

"What's that got to do with anything?" Paige mocked.

Narissa hesitated. For some reason, it was easier for her to take Narissa seriously than the weird detective with his shirt half unbuttoned. “He says that there are only two ways to do a memory wipe. One of them is for the patient to be hypnotized. That way, it might be possible to recover their memories. Most people who get memory wipes on themselves get it done this way because it's less invasive. The second way is to have your brain professionally damaged. The problem is... he says you're the type of person who is impossible to hypnotize.”

Paige froze momentarily and gazed at Narissa's hurt face. Narissa was saying indirectly that Paige was brain-damaged.

“It's okay,” Paige said briskly. “I wasn't planning on getting those memories back anyway.”

“You're not worried about what happened to you back then?” Harrison asked.

“Not really. When I woke up in Sleeping Beauty Inc., I decided that I wasn't going to worry about the kind of life I *had* and I'd only focus on the life I *have*.” Paige involuntarily glanced at the little scarf wrapped around her bracelet. She wanted to take it off and let everyone in town, if not the world, know the truth about her.

“Well, I *am* worried about the time you can't remember,” Harrison admitted. “I gave Osric my full permission to excavate your past.”

Paige shrugged her shoulders. “That's your business.”

No one spoke.

Narissa got up and went behind the counter to fill salt shakers. Harrison got out of the booth too and went into the kitchen, supposedly following Osric to have a word with him.

Paige sat in her seat and finding herself bored, started stacking the condiments on the table into a tower.

Then a man came into the shop. Paige knew it was Wystan on sight—his shabby clothes, his unshaven face, the sickly look about his body like his ribcage was caving in while his belly stuck out. Paige had never spoken to him. He came in carrying grocery bags. He gave them to Narissa.

“Better check them,” he said gruffly. “Just to make sure I didn't forget anything.”

Narissa fingered through them and said gratefully, “You remembered everything I needed. Thanks for going.” Then she planted a little kiss on his scratchy cheek and went to put the items in the kitchen.

Wystan poured himself a cup of coffee and slowly came around to the side of the bar that had stools and took a seat. Paige watched him pour more sugar into his cup than any human being had any right consuming when suddenly he turned to her and asked, “So, when are you and Harrison getting married?”

“We're not getting married,” she said evenly, thinking that their relationship was no one's business.

“Why not? Hasn't he asked you?”

“That's right,” she said slowly. “He hasn't asked me.”

Wystan took a sip from his cup. “Well, there's nothing like a woman asking you to turn your life around.” He got off the stool and followed Narissa into the kitchen.

Paige was dumbfounded as she watched him walk away. Did she have any right to ask for such a thing? The manual said she couldn't ask him to free her. Was it possible that it didn't forbid marriage proposals?

She drummed her fingers on the table.

Two days later, Harrison sat in his bedroom. It was past midnight and he was up looking at his phone because he couldn't sleep. He hadn't expected any messages, but he had been on flights and hadn't checked in hours. There was a message from Sleeping Beauty Inc. offering to repurchase Paige for twice what Harrison paid for her. He replied immediately, saying that he had no desire to sell her, but still, he was surprised. He wasn't surprised by the message, he had been waiting for it. The thing that surprised him was the amount. Zaphier had paid 1.3 million dollars for her the first time and now she was only worth a little over four-hundred-thousand for a lifetime investment? It was astonishing.

The other thing on Harrison's mind was Paige herself. She had moved all her belongings into the spare bedroom and gave up on the tower entirely. She threw away Zaphier's notes and gave Harrison more space than even a recluse needed.

One thing was certain. Harrison couldn't go on like this, so he had been arranging and rearranging battle plans. The most sensible plan he had come up with was to give her the papers to set her free and then give her an engagement ring in the same breath. If she didn't want to be with him then she'd just take the papers and leave. Harrison couldn't even think about doing that until the debt was paid.

On the other end of the spectrum, the rashest plan he'd made was just to grab her in the hall and kiss her. It was a gamble to lay one finger on her before the release papers had been signed because she could say that she had to do whatever he wanted. After all, he was her master.

Harrison was just about to throw down his phone in frustration when a new message appeared. It was from Osric. Harrison clicked on it. It read:

"Thanks for giving me clearance to check Paige out in more detail. Having access made all the difference. Here's what I found out so far. Paige was in the hospital three times in the nine months that she belonged to Zaphier. Once for a broken wrist, once for an all-out beating, and once for a sprained ankle (she fell down a flight of stairs). She also did a lot of traveling without him to some pretty strange countries. Some of which have been known to have illegal M.T.N. operations. She may have been asked to transport samples of the disease for him, which could be why he wanted her memory wiped. I'll let you know if I find out anything else in a few days."

Harrison got up to vent, but he didn't want Paige to hear so he clamped his teeth together and through his set teeth he hummed all the awful things he wanted to say about Zaphier while he walked a hole in the floor.

Then a knock came at the door.

“Yes,” Harrison said, forcing himself to calm down.

Paige opened the door a crack and put her face in. “What are you doing?”

“I’m always like this,” Harrison said. He moved to lean his arm on the dresser, missed, and had to catch himself to stop from falling. He brought himself upright and brushed off his shirt to help him regain his composure. “You just didn’t notice because you were always up in the tower and couldn’t hear me. Speaking of which,” he said, noting her bare legs. “What can we do to make the tower habitable for you again?”

“Is it making you uncomfortable for me to sleep down here?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he said, wishing she wouldn’t make him spell it out. Having her up in the tower made him feel like she was on the moon, but having her in the next room made her feel too close. Instead of mentioning any of that, he feigned, “I don’t want you to hear me talking to myself.”

She scrunched up her nose.

“Before you came, I lived here alone for six years and I learned to talk to myself.”

“Six years!” she exclaimed.

“Yeah,” he said calmly, sitting down on the bed. “Didn’t I tell you?”

Paige opened the door the rest of the way and came in. Sitting down on the bed beside him, she said, “No, you didn’t.”

Harrison didn’t normally talk about how he ended up alone in the middle of nowhere. It was mostly because there was no need to. The people in town knew what happened. They had been there for it. They had worked in the hospital, seen him around town, and gone to the funerals. Everyone knew. Since they knew, it wasn’t often that he had to talk about it.

He may as well tell Paige about his family. It would make her the first person he had confided in since he spoke to the mortician at the crematorium.

“My mom contracted M.T.N. when I was sixteen. After that, she only lived with us for six months before we had to take her to the hospital for continued treatment. My father got it two months before my mother died. The nurse at the hospital told me that he wouldn’t follow hospital regulations and he wouldn’t stop taking off his rubber glove to hold her hand. You know, skin on skin.” Harrison didn’t look at Paige while he spoke. He didn’t know how she would take such a confession or if he wanted to see how she took it. He kept his face averted as he continued. “My father died when I was twenty-one. The disease took him a lot faster. He didn’t try very hard once my mother was gone, and it’s not like I was a baby, so...”

Harrison stopped talking. Paige slid her hand under his. He couldn’t believe his eyes. It wasn’t like they had never touched. She had stretched her legs across his knees before and he had rubbed her shoulders, but those sorts of contact always felt like the mildest form of flirting or friendship—not like love.

He tried to keep talking. “I have an older brother. He left home when I was a kid. I haven’t heard from him in years and I’ll be surprised if he ever comes back...”

He couldn't concentrate on what he was saying. Paige's touch felt different than it had all those other times. She must love him. Something was holding her back.

Suddenly, he grasped her hand tightly and Paige tried to recoil, but he held on.

Their eyes met and their faces came closer together with their foreheads touching.

"I like this. Being here with you."

She breathed in and it was like she was breathing him in. "Being here with you makes me forget who I am. I like forgetting."

He moved away from her, only an inch, but their faces stopped touching. She was never going to forget that he had bought her and that was the real reason she was with him in the first place.

"Pretend I don't own you," he said, looking into her eyes. "Pretend you don't have to do what I say. Pretend you could walk out tonight if you wanted to and I wouldn't do anything to stop you. If all that were true, would you leave?"

Paige bit her lip hesitantly. "I can never go home."

"Pretend you could."

"I'm not trained to do anything."

"Pretend you are."

He was wearing her down. He could see it in her eyes.

Then it came out of her like a broken sprinkler suddenly coming on. "You could have bought anyone and you would have fallen in love with her! Anyone! I'm not special."

"You think that the fact that I bought you makes you ordinary? I had a choice. I could have picked another girl. I wanted you."

Paige was sniffing, but Harrison wouldn't let go of her hand and he wouldn't stop talking.

"Come on, I didn't buy you to be an object to me. And tomorrow I'm going to sell part of Excalibur to pay your debt. Until you came, Excalibur was the most important thing in the world to me. Now, you're all that matters."

"You're holding me too hard," she whimpered.

Harrison eased up, but he had one more thing to add, so he didn't let her go. "To say that it was love-at-first-sight is going too far, but I liked you when I chose you."

"But what if you don't feel that way forever and you marry someone else?"

He stared. This was what she had been worrying about! "I would never marry someone else."

From the look on her face, nothing had changed. He had to set her free if he wanted her to choose him.

He let go of her hand.

Chapter Seventeen

The next morning, Paige got out of bed, pulled a plaid shirt over her white tank top, and went into the kitchen. She got out her muffin tins and made blueberry muffins. While they were cooking, she poked her head in the fridge to see what she could make to drink. Most days they just drank water for breakfast when there weren't any guests around, but today she was thinking of making something.

When she looked in the second crisper, she found a bag of oranges that hadn't even been taken out of the shopping bag yet. Paige gasped. She could hardly remember the last time she'd had fresh oranges. Opening the bag, she found a plastic juicer inside. They had to be for her. It wasn't on their menu to serve real orange juice.

Whipping out a knife, she immediately started cutting, squeezing, pouring, and smiling.

After she'd squeezed two or three, she saw that her wristband was blinking. There was a message from Harrison. He had gone to the city and would be back later.

Paige felt slightly deflated. He wasn't going to drink the fresh orange juice, or eat the muffins. He had left to sell part of Excalibur. She had been planning on convincing him to forget about it when they had breakfast together, but he had already gone. Now there was nothing she could do to stop him.

She finished squeezing the juice and put some in the fridge for Harrison. Then she took the muffins out of the oven and arranged a tray of food to take into the conservatory. Even though the room was a drafty nightmare in the winter, now that summer had come, it was a miniature paradise and smelled like roses. In the warm weather, she ate every meal there.

As she ate, she made a list of the things that needed to be done that day. Thing number one was to fill the reservoir in the conservatory. It had a sprinkler system, but she had to fill it with water that collected elsewhere when it rained. Then she could start her housework and tidy up the mess she'd made at breakfast. Hopefully, by lunchtime, Harrison would be back.

She got her pitcher can and poured water from the drum in the yard into the reservoir. Then she began her rounds. In the conservatory, she noticed that Harrison had planted all the empty spaces with strawberries. In the garden, she noticed a new cherry tree. Though, she didn't know it was a cherry tree on sight and had to look it up on her wristband. The information page said it was supposed to be able to grow cherries the size of golf balls, but she didn't know if it would be able to since it was planted so far north.

While watering the daisies, something caught her eye in the window of Harrison's bathroom. Something moved. She looked out at the hangar to see if Harrison had come home. The pickup truck was gone and the hangar doors were closed, an undeniable sign that Harrison had come home, but still... she was edgy. She couldn't see inside the window from that distance, especially with the sunlight reflecting across the glass, so she went in for a closer look. Cupping her hands around her eyes, she stuck her face right up to the window and peered inside, thinking that she wouldn't be able to see anything.

Inside, she saw a man standing with his back to the window and a towel wrapped around his waist. He was facing the mirror and shaving. His black wet hair was dripping on his shoulders and down his back.

Paige backed away, nursing her embarrassment. She reasoned that she hadn't seen anything. There was nothing to be ashamed of. But what had she been thinking going up to Harrison's bathroom window and looking inside? What intruder was she expecting to find in Harrison's bathroom that she thought a breach in basic manners was necessary? She sighed. She looked because she was terrified that Zaphier had come back while Harrison was gone. It was irrational. If he showed up, the first place he'd go wouldn't be the bathroom... probably.

Even if that had been her reasoning, it didn't soothe the shame swirling within her. It wasn't like she hadn't seen Harrison without his shirt before. He always had a great back, tanned and smooth, she reflected grimly. It was always there, under his clothes.

Paige put her hand to her forehead. Things were getting out of control.

A vehicle was coming down their road. The trail of dust couldn't be missed. It came down their driveway and halted in front of their door. Paige walked around the house and met it.

Osric got out of the driver's seat and came around to talk to her. "Where's Harrison?"

"In the bath," she answered.

"Get him out," Osric said briskly. "I need to talk to him."

"Okay," Paige said hesitantly before she led him into the house.

After leaving Osric too agitated to even sit down, she knocked on Harrison's bedroom door. No answer. She opened the door and went in. He was probably in the connecting bathroom and it wasn't like he hadn't stormed in on her when she was grooming before. She knocked on the bathroom door.

He opened the door and came out. The towel he was wearing was gone. Instead, he was wearing a pair of black boxer briefs.

"What?" he asked as he towel-dried his hair—looking completely unruffled. Was he really completely unruffled? She remembered his awkwardness when he caught her shaving her legs. There was no way he felt as calm as he looked, but there was no time to confirm it now.

"Osric's here," she said breathlessly. "He's waiting to talk to you."

Harrison nodded. "I'll get dressed."

Paige ducked her head and moved to leave when Harrison suddenly grabbed her arm. "You look pink. Does seeing me like this make you nervous?"

"Probably not," she said as she evaded his gaze by looking over his head.

He smirked in a jerkish way that Paige, unfortunately, found adorable before he let her go.

"Please get him a glass of ice water while he waits," he instructed briskly. "I might be longer than a minute."

Paige went out and did as she was told.

Osric looked on the verge of a hissy fit right there in the living room. She handed him his water. "Thanks," he said, as he took out the ice cubes and crushed them furiously between his teeth. When they were gone and Harrison still hadn't come out, he poured the rest of the liquid

over his head with absolutely no regard for whether or not he splashed the furniture or soaked the carpet.

“Ah! Refreshing,” Osric said—obviously still aggravated.

Paige grunted. She took Osric’s glass and went into the kitchen to get a towel to clean up the mess when she saw Harrison pass her on his way into the dining room.

Harrison didn’t have a chance to say ‘hi’ before Osric lit in on him. Paige could hear him in the kitchen. “Why didn’t you tell me that Armand Fox was your brother? It would have made things a lot simpler.”

“Yeah, he’s my brother, but I don’t know what he has to do with this. He’s been out of touch with my family for over a decade.”

“So, you didn’t know he works for Zaphier’s father?” Osric asked angrily.

“No, I didn’t.” Harrison was defensive.

Paige ducked her head and took up a perch beside the open door so she could hear what they were saying. She knew Armand. She knew him before she’d had her memory wipe. He was Mr. Rawson’s helocarrier pilot. Paige had seen him hundreds of times, but she had rarely spoken to him because her father was only the gardener. Armand was one of the highest-ranked people on staff. Paige had seen him dining at the Rawson table because he was interesting and exotic. Paige had never thought to put him and Harrison together as brothers, but she felt stupid not having done it. They were both helocarrier pilots with the last name of Fox.

The thing was that Armand was excruciatingly attractive in an adult way that had nothing to do with her when she was still living with her father. Zaphier was attractive in a way a teenager could enjoy because his cheeks were dimpled and his blue eyes looked unassuming and friendly. Armand was the opposite. His dark eyes looked like they had seen everything so completely that he saw straight through a girl like Paige as though she were made of glass. He seemed like the type of man who knew how to break things.

Paige glanced at Harrison, and suddenly she saw him in a completely different light. Was that why she had a hard time giving Harrison all the love he wanted? Was it because he reminded her of his brother who set off her warning bells?

“You’re a helocarrier pilot, right?” Osric asked, sitting down on one of the sofas. “Have you ever researched helocarriers owned by famous people?”

“Why would I do something like that?” Harrison answered briskly.

“Because the one owned by Zaphier’s family is remarkable. It’s not powered by natural gas or electric battery cells or anything normal. You know power has always been mankind’s favorite foible. It’s powered by a ruptor. It can run for a sixty-hour flight without needing to touch down and then it only needs to rest for two hours before doing it all over again. Have you ever heard of anything like that before?”

“Mhmm,” Harrison hummed disinterestedly. After seeing Excalibur, she thought that he would be more than interested in new helocarrier technology, but he sounded bored to death. “Let me guess,” he said after a minute. “Armand has been trying to make a new one and he’s failed.”

“Yeah,” Osric answered, astounded. “How did you know that?”

“Wild guess,” Harrison said, sounding even more bored than before. “You see, my father invented the ruptor and when Armand left home, he took the only successful test product my father had. When you put all those pieces together, it sounds like the photoshoot may have just been a ruse to get Zaphier up here to see if my father had another one. I mean, I know the scenery up here is fantastic, but nothing that can’t be artificially generated.”

“Was Zaphier prowling around your hangar?”

Paige thought about it. Zaphier *was* in the hangar! He came in one morning and woke them up. Had he looked for the ruptor when he was there?

Harrison sounded cool. “He was in there, but he wouldn’t have found anything.”

“Why not?”

“I already told you. My father only made one and Armand stole it.”

Osric sounded surprised at Harrison’s mellow tone. “Aren’t you angry?”

“Sorry. It’s hard to rake up any enthusiasm. All that happened a long time ago. My father never talked to me about it, but I think he was sorrier to lose Armand than the ruptor. Eventually, he stopped working on helocarriers, and as far as I know, he took his secret methods to his grave.”

“He never told you about it?”

“No. He kept his work to himself. It was just as well, when I was that young, I wouldn’t have understood it if he had, but if that’s why Zaphier and Fallon came here, it would have been better if they’d just asked for it directly rather than...” Harrison spoke like he was coming to a realization. “...trying to get Paige to look for it. For Pete’s sake! Do you know how many requests I have had from Sleeping Beauty Inc. to sell her back to them? Like twenty. First, they were only doubling how much they would pay for her, and now the cost is getting into the millions. It’s idiotic. I’ve stopped answering them. Should we just contact Zaphier and tell him that I don’t have another bloody ruptor?”

Osric sounded weary. “If only they would believe you.”

“They wouldn’t?”

“Those people live and breathe lies. They lie so often, they can’t even imagine that someone else could be telling the truth. What worries me is that they may have just been coming here to get a feel for the place so they would know what the risks were for when they came back. Not everything can be figured out by satellite.”

“Listen, I know my father’s work. I have lived practically my whole life in his garage. There is nothing even hinting about the construction of a ruptor. There are no plans, no notes, and no strange material—nothing. Believe me, I’ve looked. If they rip the place to pieces they won’t find anything. So, what do I have to do to stop them from getting excited?”

“I don’t know. Let me think.” A couple of minutes passed where the only sounds Paige heard were Osric’s footsteps as he beat down the carpet. “Okay,” he said, stopping abruptly. “Solution number one—you make up some grayprints and tell them that they were your father’s plans and hand them over to Zaphier with great reluctance when he shows up. But that will only buy you

time once they try them out and realize that they aren't your father's because they don't work. Solution number two—you ditch this place and let them ransack it. Your place will be trashed, but you and Paige will be safe. Wait, that won't work either because they'll think you took the ruptor with you and come after you. Solution number three—you sell Paige back to Zaphier."

Harrison interrupted. "Why the hell would I do that?"

"I think they'll send her back to you," Osric said patiently.

"What do you mean?"

Osric sniffed. "I think if you sell her, she'll come back a week later saying that she ran away from Zaphier because she wants to be with you. In the time she's gone, they will have briefed her on what exactly she's supposed to find. Then when she reports that she can't find it, they'll sell her back to Sleeping Beauty Inc. and then you can buy her back from them."

"What a crappy idea! I'm not selling Paige."

"I'm not saying it would be forever. I'm just saying that it would be a fast way to prove what they are really up to. Not just with this issue that has just come up, but with Princess Elizabella, too. If they got Paige to smuggle once, then maybe they'll ask her to do it again. Then we could get proof."

Paige's heart was up in her throat as she listened.

"Look, I'd really like to help you with Princess Elizabella's case. I'm doing my best, but you can't ask me to sell Paige back to Zaphier. I won't do it."

"All right, but just to warn you—if you don't fork Paige over to him, he'll probably go after Narissa to do his dirty work," Osric said darkly. "If you don't sell, I'll wager that Narissa will be poking around here in two shakes."

There was a moment before Harrison answered. "Does Wystan know that?"

"How can he know that when I've only pieced it together now? Do you think he'd be able to resist millions upon millions of dollars for Narissa? Or do you think he'd be tough like you and refuse?"

Harrison was silent.

"Just to let you know, they'll probably let their bid get pretty high up there before they change to Narissa. It's not that Paige herself is valuable. It's that the ruptor technology is so valuable that once they figure out how to make them, the price for her will seem like pocket change. This is the kind of scheme that has made the Rawson family its money."

"Are you going?" Harrison asked.

"Yeah. I want to talk to Wystan, but I should probably warn you. They may also ask to rent Paige. You can think about whether or not you want to allow that."

"Renting her out is just as bad."

"Well, if we don't give them an avenue where they think they're getting what they want, they may get violent."

"I know, but I'm being honest. My father took whatever he knew to his grave."

"And so will you," Osric said ominously, "unless we do something about it. Later, Harrison."

Paige hid behind the counter in the kitchen just as Harrison and Osric passed her. She had to think about this, too.

Chapter Eighteen

Harrison sat around and stewed about what Osric said after he left. Truthfully, Harrison didn't want to send Narissa back to the Rawson family any more than he wanted to send Paige. He could tell that Narissa was working her way into Wystan's heart, but that didn't mean Wystan was willing to bypass millions of dollars to keep her for himself. If Harrison wanted to keep Narissa out of harm's way, he'd have to preemptively send Paige to Zaphier, which he simply wasn't willing to do. It was a trap either way.

That night, as Paige lay Harrison's supper in front of him she suddenly said, "I want to tell you that I overheard you and Osric talking."

"Oh?" Harrison said casually.

"Yeah," she said, sitting down across from him. "Thanks for saying that you'd never sell me. I was really touched."

Harrison sniffed. "I just keep doing things to make you fall for me. Is any of it working?"

Paige was quiet for a minute.

Harrison just assumed that she wouldn't answer and started eating.

Finally, she said, "It's not *not* working."

He paused. "Do you mean that?"

She nodded.

"Listen, I think I may have pieced together some of what happened. It's hard to tell you because none of it is good," she cried, "I think those guys might have infected your mom with M.T.N. on purpose."

Harrison backed off and stared. "What?"

Paige stretched out her free hand in front of her in a gesture of ignorance. "I have no idea why I think that. After you and Osric talked and I heard Armand's name, that idea popped into my head—almost like something I knew as a fact... like my bank account balance. It's just that I remember Armand. I hadn't remembered him in ages, but he worked for Zaphier's dad. He was practically one of the family, and he was a very dangerous man."

Harrison stared. He had been struggling to believe what Osric had told him. He shook his head to push the thoughts away. "None of that matters. The only thing that does matter is that I won't sell you to them and tomorrow—if you want to—I think we should get married in town."

Paige matched his emotion and said, "You don't understand. If they were willing to kill your mother, they wouldn't have any scruple coming after you. If I go to them—"

Harrison interrupted. "It won't make a difference. I don't have the technology. It's not here. I've looked everywhere."

"Your dad wouldn't have torched his life's work. It's got to be here somewhere."

"Then look for it. I dare you," Harrison said, throwing her hand away to signal the end of their conversation.

"Fine," Paige shouted. "I will."

Harrison scowled as she left the room.

What was he supposed to do? He didn't care about the ruptor or the plans to make one. It all seemed stupid compared with being with Paige. He picked up his watch and set her perimeter to allow her to go no further than the hangar. At the very least, he wanted to sleep soundly that night and he didn't want to be bothered with annoying notifications.

Paige yawned in the kitchen at one in the morning. She originally came into the kitchen with the idea of making some more orange juice but abandoned the idea when she realized she could just slice it and stuff the wedges in her mouth. Mercy, she was tired.

Harrison had gone to bed while she searched the house, looking for some hint about the ruptors. She believed Harrison when he said he couldn't find them. She just thought that maybe his father had hidden them somewhere in the house. They had already renovated big portions of the house. It was hard to know where to look. She was thinking that there might be a trap door in the floor, so she stomped everywhere looking for a hollow sound. Nothing! Then she started banging on the walls. It was a wonder Harrison didn't come out and bite her head off over the crazed banging, but he didn't budge from his room.

By three in the morning, she hadn't found a clue, but she couldn't discount the feeling in her heart. Something was wrong. Once she had known what it was, but now she hit a wall when she tried to think of it.

Harrison mentioned marriage, which should have made her happy, but it was hard for her to think of it when she had this weight on her chest. Long ago, she had done something wrong and it was coming back to haunt her. Something was wrong, and she couldn't think of anything except the horror that surrounded her heart whenever she stopped to think.

She ate the rest of her orange and went to bed in the spare room. She wanted to wait for daylight before she went to look in the basement of the hangar.

The next morning, Harrison stood in the kitchen. He was drinking a glass of water and looking out the window at the trees arching in the wind. Not only had Paige kept him up half the night with her illogical clatter, but looking outside, he had a sense of foreboding. It wasn't a good day to get married. It was the kind of day you stayed where you were and waited for the storm to pass.

Yet, even with the wind lifting the grass and dirt, an unexpected truck parked in front of the house.

Harrison knew the truck, but he couldn't have been more surprised when the owner of it got out and knocked on the door. It was Wystan. When Harrison opened the door for him, his white hair blew so that it almost stood on end. It was his face that surprised Harrison. He hadn't seen Wystan look that alive in years.

Harrison brought him inside and shut the door hard behind him. "What brings you out here?"

Wystan smoothed down his hair and tried to adjust his clothes. "I didn't believe it when Osric told me, but last night, it happened."

"What happened?"

"I got a request from Sleeping Beauty Inc. to sell Narissa back to them," he beamed.

"Bloody hell," Harrison groaned. That explained why the old codger looked so freaking pleased with himself. "Are you going to sell her?"

Wystan looked appalled for a second before he whacked Harrison up the backside of the head. Harrison nursed the smack like he was twelve again. "I'm not going to sell her. Dolt!" he added grouchy. "If I'd known you'd be such a moron about this, I wouldn't have bothered to drive out to tell you." He put his hands on his still-country-boy-hips and paced.

Harrison asked sincerely, "Really? How much did they offer you?"

"More than I made all the years of my life combined, but you know, when I saw it all laid out like that... it didn't look like a fair exchange to me."

Harrison was stunned.

Wystan looked around at all the renovations Harrison and Paige had done. "This is what your woman did to the place when she came?" He whistled. "Keziah never would have thought of all this." He looked at Harrison for a second, and for that second, Harrison thought he could read what Wystan was thinking. It went something like, 'Good thing you didn't take my daughter.' Then the old man broke eye contact and said, "I should shove off. I just wanted to see your face when I told you that I'm not going to sell Narissa. I've never had the chance to do something to show a woman that I... felt something for her. I should do at least one thing right in my life. See ya."

Harrison felt relieved as Wystan walked out the door into the wall of wind. Harrison hoped the man would keep to his plan.

Harrison had his own plan to keep to. He got his tools and went up to the tower to pull up the carpet so he could redo it for Paige. If he couldn't marry her today, he could keep another one of his promises.

Chapter Nineteen

When Paige woke up, she woke up to the sound of Harrison working in the tower. It was ironic after the night she'd given him. She rolled out of bed and dragged herself (plaid shirt and boxer shorts) up to see what he was doing. He didn't see her at the door, but one look at the ripped up room told her that wherever Harrison's father had hidden the plans, he hadn't hidden them in the tower.

She went downstairs to the kitchen and tried to eat something, but she felt like retching whenever she put a piece of food in her mouth, whether it be bread or water. She had to keep looking for a hint from Harrison's father. There had to be one somewhere.

Putting on a pair of slip-on shoes, she went out to the hangar. On her way, she saw the cow standing beside the hangar, sheltered from the wind. Seeing the cow made her feel even sicker. Its conscience was squeaky clean because it hadn't done anything wrong.

Inside, it took her a second to find the controls that Harrison used to open the hatch to the basement. When she found it, it was easy to work, and the floor came open. She took hold of the aluminum rail and went down. Once she was in the basement, she started the stomping operation she had figured out the night before, listening for a hollow sound. It had to be under the floor. Zaphier had said that the treasure was in the basement. He couldn't have meant Excalibur was the treasure like Paige thought at first. He meant something deeper.

As Paige stomped, a voice began playing in her head. Her feet stopped moving. She knew the voice. It was a voice that oscillated between smooth and rasping. It was a voice that did something to her and she couldn't stop doing what it instructed.

"When you turn on the light, go to your right. There's a picture frame on the wall. It has a mechanical engineering certificate in it. Take it off the wall. Under it, there's a series of five black switches. They're the breakers for the electricity in the basement, but the last switch is a fake. Flip it and step back."

Paige did what the voice said, but she didn't step back fast enough and the floor moved out from under her and she screamed as she fell. Her feet felt seared with pain as she landed on a cement floor. Her butt came down hard and it felt like she broke it.

Looking around, she had been plunged into complete darkness, except for the square of light that came from the hole in the ceiling.

Then the voice came again. "There should be a rope ladder to let you in the second level basement. Go down. When you're there, light up your wristband and use it as a flashlight. Take the goods and get out the way you came."

There was no rope ladder. How was she going to get out?

Paige felt like dying. She knew now that it was Armand's voice that played in her head. That was why she flipped out that morning when Harrison whispered in her ear. It was because his voice was like Armand's and it terrified her.

When she remembered everything, she knew her infatuation with Zaphier had lasted for less than two days after he bought her. He was a brat, entitled, whiny, and physically abusive whenever it suited him.

“Go with Armand to pick up Elizabella. She might need you to pour her a drink.”

“Bring me a drink.”

“Pick that up!”

“Give me a message.”

“Just do it! I’m too drunk!”

“Go with Armand!”

That was the worst command of all. Armand frightened her, but if she showed the tiniest bit of hesitation, Zaphier would beat her. She looked like a leopard with bruises like spots everywhere.

She spent a lot of time with Armand. Though she had been intimidated by him before her sale, after numerous helocarrier rides alone with him, she saw him behave as the perfect opposite of Zaphier. He was inspiring in a gritty, let’s-do-something-dangerous, way. He had the most beautiful chin, brown and cut. And the no nonsense way he piloted did Paige in everytime.

He never smiled and after Paige had been working for Zaphier for four months, she didn’t either. They never talked. He always looked through people like he found them below his notice if they weren’t the one paying his paycheck. Paige never spoke to him. He never spoke to her... until one fateful night.

The ruptor didn’t give out. They did not have technical difficulties. He landed en route for a scheduled stop.

Paige had asked him why they’d stopped.

He said they had a scheduled break.

She said she was a slave and didn’t get breaks.

He said he wasn’t and he had a scheduled break and since she was with him she got to have a break too.

Outside, she saw that they had landed at a town in the midst of a desolate tundra. There was an airport and landing strip, but little else. The wind blew hot air down her blouse and up her skirt. Armand pulled their bags out of the chocker and led her to a line of cabins off the tarmac.

Once inside, he messaged a local restaurant and had dinner delivered. Armand unconsciously undid the buttons on his shirt and peeled off the sweaty garment. Paige envied him as she undid the top button on her shirt.

He paused and noticed the motion of her hands. “Are we doing this?” he asked.

Paige had felt blisteringly attracted to him during their flight, but never in a million years would she have imagined he would have felt something that reciprocated her wild imaginings.

She undid her cuffs and explained to him with as little emotion as possible that nothing could ever happen between them because of her bracelet.

His eyes were dark and humorless as he looked her over. Then he explained that he could turn off the bracelet when they were at this particular location because of the positioning of the towers that monitored her. They were in a blind spot. It would be easy.

Paige didn't believe him, so she put out her wrist and let him tinker.

The whole thing fell to the floor with a clatter.

Even though it was only a few links of metal, Paige never felt so naked in her life as when she looked up into Armand's cut face.

They were alone in the middle of nowhere.

She squealed, afraid they wouldn't be able to get it back on her wrist. Checking the settings on the wristband, she saw that everything was online and fine.

He asked her humorlessly if she liked wearing it.

She replied no.

Did she want a break from being Zaphier's slave?

Yes. She did.

He took the bracelet from her and tossed it aside.

He stepped away from her, sat on the couch and proceeded to unlace his boots.

At that moment, he was dearer to her than any person had ever been. She found herself on her knees, bending to help him with his shoes, taking his brown hands in hers and kissing them. Then he kissed her. Then warmth. Then heat.

And silence.

The food was delivered and they ate without speaking. It was chicken burgers and fries. He dunked the fries in ketchup and fed her without saying a word.

When it came time for them to leave, he kissed her gently, kindly, before he replaced her bracelet.

In the months that followed, he brought her back to the cabin over and over.

It didn't feel like love. It felt like understanding for two people who were trapped. They didn't talk about how much they hated Zaphier. They didn't talk about what they liked about each other.

The most romantic thing Armand ever said to her was, "It won't hurt."

Back in the hangar basement, she looked around. She had been here before. When she had belonged to Zaphier, Armand had sent her here to steal a ruptor. Except, now she remembered exactly what was going on. She lit up her bracelet and saw the words marked on the wall.

"Perfecting M.T.N. Ruptor technology one day at a time."

Then she threw up on the floor.

Harrison stood in the back of his pickup truck as he threw the scraps of old carpet into the flat bed. He looked over at the house. Was Paige still sleeping? She had been up late. He'd let her sleep. After all, nothing terrible could happen to her. He'd set the perimeter so that she

couldn't go further than the hangar. He whistled and went back inside to get another stretch of carpet.

Chapter Twenty

Paige sat in the dark on her aching bottom and convulsed. All her memories came back. They came back when she remembered Armand's voice. He hardly ever spoke to her, so the impact of his voice awakened her memory.

Armand had known exactly where to find his father's prototypes. He and Zaphier had sent her to steal the ruptors.

What had been going on in Harrison's life on that day? Paige did the math the best she could and figured out she was around the time his father died. Once she worked that out, she realized both of them were already infected with M.T.N. before she arrived on the scene. That helped her to calm down and she began to breathe more normally.

But now she remembered Armand and everything he had meant to her. If he wasn't the definition of a hollow man then she didn't know what was.

During the months Zaphier owned her, she did everything the prince asked. When the time expired he turned Paige loose without a second thought.

She got a posh apartment and lived quietly for a few months. Her father and brother were disgusted with her for selling herself and she had been disowned. Her father even quit working for the Rawsons and had moved away to an unknown location. After that, there was no home to go to.

Armand did not come to see her. She was not sure exactly why. During the first few weeks at her new apartment, she expected him to show up and take her in his arms like nothing had changed. Didn't he miss her? Didn't he want her? When he didn't come, she hoped it was because he was flying on the other side of the world.

Confused and miserable, she tried to carve out a new life for herself, but she didn't fit anywhere. If she flaunted her money, it wasn't enough money to please the honorably rich. If she mentioned how she made her money, people were interested in her again, but only if she was willing to sell what she knew about Zaphier and Elizabella. Eventually, reporters who knew scant details about her and Zaphier wrote their own stories about her. They painted her as a conniving skank who had been trying to stop Zaphier from marrying Princess Elizabella when she didn't care two straws about what happened to Zaphier.

During those dark months, the only contact she received was from agencies like Sleeping Beauty Inc. or personal requests for her services from individual men. She read them all hoping one would be from Armand.

Wanting him badly, she gave up trying to be coy and called him.

When she couldn't get him on the line, she shouldn't have been surprised, but she was. She contacted the secretary and tried to get a legitimate job working for the Rawson family. Zaphier cut her off at the gate. He didn't want anything to do with Paige since the news outlets had run stories about his supposed affair with her.

Remembering everything in the hangar basement, Paige hated herself as she rocked back and forth on the cement floor in the hangar basement. She held her hand over her nose and tried to

ignore the vomit a few feet away from her. It was making her gag, but she wanted to throw up again when she remembered phoning Zaphier—begging him to give her a job.

She swallowed her pride because she had stopped wanting anything from life except to be back with Armand, feeling warm, and she couldn't live alone in an apartment if he never came.

In the end, she did the unthinkable. She found out Armand's flight plan and arranged to be at his destination. Much to Paige and Armand's mutual and individual humiliation, she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Armand had to tell her to get lost on the tarmac.

Stung and hurt, she tried to stay away. She tried to give Armand the breakup he clearly wanted. It was impossible with her reputation. She hung around cafes and bars, hoping to be picked up, but all the men did visual searches on her and found out who she was before they approached her. If they came up, it was because they were curious about her past, what she knew about the celebrities. There was no place for her, but working for Zaphier.

Finally, she threatened him.

She followed him to the Cies Islands.

There, she told Zaphier's secretary that if he didn't buy her again, she would go to the media and she wouldn't tell them about him and Elizabella. She would tell them all about the raptors. Where they came from, the origins of the technology, and everything else!

Within two hours, Zaphier agreed to meet her on a cliff face overlooking the water. She remembered the moment vividly. The sky was orange. The wind was hot and full of the stench of something that had died.

He had shaken his head, told her he couldn't give her what she wanted. He came closer. He touched her, and the very next second, he dragged her to the cliff edge and pushed her over.

In those half seconds, before she hit the water, she knew that he meant to kill her. He knew the fall into that shallow water would kill her.

She didn't die.

She came out of the water. Armand was there, running to her aid, and mumbling something about Zaphier's jokes.

"Liar!" Paige screeched. "Why didn't you come after me? Nevermind. I don't care. Before, this had been about you. That maniac tried to kill me. I'm going to the reporters."

Paige remembered Armand putting his muscular arm around her and saying, "Come into the house for a minute. I'm sure Zaphier wants to apologize to you. His apology will be good. You could use some more travel money and... he's very sorry."

Paige didn't suspect Armand of anything. He never spoke, so when he did, she had to listen to him. As soon as they were inside the house, he handcuffed her to a titanium bar that was drilled into the wall. She had no hope of breaking out.

Lucky her! She got to hear all of their discussion before they disposed of her. Zaphier wanted to kill her, while Armand insisted they take a different route.

"Think about it," Armand said persuasively. "You bought her for one point three million dollars. Certainly, she hasn't spent it. We should get her to transfer all that money to you. You

need it. We could take out her overdraft too, wipe her memory, and sell her again. That's three places to pull money from."

That was what he sounded like when he spoke? That was what he was like in his head? He was a monster! And she thought she was in love with him?

Zaphier had nodded in agreement. "I have a place we could dump her that won't ask us any questions and will give us a good price. They've already taken care of quite a few of my family's problems."

"Perfect."

"But can you really erase her memory?"

"I'm not a professional," Armand conceded. "But I can make it so that the hypnosis won't unravel without me—my voice."

"Do it!"

That was how it happened. He was the one who had wiped her memory. Armand had hypnotized her. Zaphier pointed a gun to her head while she signed all her money over to him, took out loans, sold herself to Sleeping Beauty Inc., and finally wrote the note for herself. That was the note she found that told her that the time with Zaphier hadn't gone well and it was just better to move on without knowing what happened. He hadn't needed to point the gun at her to get her to write that. Obviously, by that point, she already felt that way.

Paige felt sick remembering. She forced herself to raise her head and look around in Harrison's father's lab. Again, she read the sign on the wall: "Perfecting M.T.N. Ruptor technology one day at a time." She was such a ditz; she didn't even wonder what those words could mean when she ransacked this place all those years ago. It wasn't even the only place she went ransacking, doing everything he said, asking no questions. She thought of nothing except how much she wanted to be alone with Armand. The job in the basement of Harrison's hangar had been different. She had gone alone, and she didn't question why.

The room was lined with shelving units and clear glass boxes. They were still relatively free of dust. Everything had been preserved in the time it sat dormant. Each box had a round yellow ball inside that looked like a cross between a gemstone and a glowing orb.

Paige hugged her legs and thought about the M.T.N. virus. Had anyone ever used a virus as a power source before? Keeping the virus contained long enough to create a ruptor had to be delicate work. Both of Harrison's parents had died from being infected. How? Paige had been in the lab before and hadn't contracted it, but this time she felt as good as dead. There were broken cases and broken ruptors. She was scared of moving, just in case she got too close to anything.

The virus attacked a person's body in strange patterns. Sometimes the first thing a person would lose would be their sight. On another person, their legs might become so jittery that they'd be unable to walk. Some people couldn't flex their hands. By the end of the disease's term, they'd have lost it all. She could imagine herself lying in the local hospital Harrison's mother had died in, with the nurses keeping Harrison at bay.

She couldn't stand to think about Harrison. The reason she hadn't leaped into a romance with him was that somehow, deep down, he had reminded her of Armand, who did not allow her to

be killed, but who stole all her money and all the money she could ever get on credit, and when he couldn't get anymore, he sold her.

It wasn't that the brothers were alike. They didn't look alike. Harrison had a dazzling smile and humor in his eyes. Armand was what? When she thought of their time in the cabin, she felt a wave of hot shame. She had given him all that and given Harrison so little?

Harrison was not his brother and now suddenly, the deep loneliness he felt made perfect sense to her. She felt wrung with regret and fresh loneliness of her own.

She moaned into the hole over her head.

Harrison had no idea where she was.

The wind rose higher and Harrison decided to drive his truck into the hangar to keep the carpet scraps from flying out of the back. As he pulled in beside his helocarrier, he saw that the floor panel that exposed Excalibur was open. At first glance, he didn't believe it. He had to get out of the cab and stare down into the hole before it became real to him. He had no idea why it could be open and for a split second, he was terrified that someone had taken his treasure away. He calmed down once he saw the chocker's sleek silver paint job, but why was the hatch open in the first place.

Putting his head down, he yelled, "Paige."

"Harrison!" he heard her yelp, but she was too far down for him to see her. She sounded hysterical.

"Where are you?"

"I'm in your father's lab. You can't come down here. He was experimenting with the M.T.N. virus. If you come down here you might get it. You have to call the hospital and have the paramedics get me out safely."

Harrison didn't know what she was talking about and lowered himself onto the level that Excalibur was on. "Where are you?"

"Go away, Harrison. Call an ambulance!" she cried.

Harrison was skeptical. It seemed too ridiculous to say that his dad had been doing experiments with M.T.N.

Or was it?

Following her voice, he found the trap door she had fallen through. Harrison hid his shock at seeing her there with throw-up splattered across the floor beside her. Instead, he remembered everything the nurses had told him about M.T.N. at the hospital and asked her, "Did you touch anything?"

"No," she said, her eyes watery.

"Did anything spill? Any test tubes or anything like that?"

"No. I just fell down and I haven't moved," she said, as she got to her feet.

“Then you’re fine. M.T.N. isn’t airborne. Besides,” he said, grabbing the trap door and showing her how it fit into the floor up above. “This door isn’t airtight. If I was going to get it from merely breathing the air in the lab, I would have got it already. Hang on. I’ll get you out of there.”

Harrison lowered a rope ladder. It was part of Excalibur’s flight gear.

Paige took the rope in her hands. She did not feel like she should be coming out of a hole. She should be crawling into one.

When she put her foot on the ladder and it swung toward the broken ruptor cases, she jumped off.

“I can’t do this!”

“Paige,” Harrison said pleasantly. “I need you to get out of that hole.”

She took hold of the rope for the second time and, as he talked her through it, she came up topside.

He tried to hug her once she was out, but she evaded him.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I want to go to the hospital and get checked.”

Harrison frowned. Then he took out his pocket watch and typed in a few buttons. “Do you have any itchy spots on your body—like in your knees? Does your body suddenly feel like your clothes are wearing you raw?”

“No,” she answered, but then almost immediately, she began scratching her thigh. “Ack! Harrison, I’m itchy. What do I do?” she screamed.

Harrison scowled at her. “Wait a second,” he said calmly. “Be honest. Did you start getting itchy after I mentioned it or were you itchy when you were down there?”

“I don’t know,” she bawled, scratching the back of her head. “Before, I guess.”

He grabbed her by the shoulders and forced her to look in his eyes steadily. “Was it before? Really? Everybody gets itchy after you ask them if they are, and anyone would be uncomfortable realizing they’ve just fallen into a lab that was experimenting with M.T.N.”

She feebly pushed his hand away. “Don’t touch me. You’ll get it.”

“Answer me. Were you itchy before I mentioned it? Take two deep breaths and then tell me.”

When she was calm, she said, “I guess it wasn’t until you mentioned it.”

“Okay.” He let go of her and looked at his pocket watch. “The next test is one where you test the pH balance of your saliva.” He got a first aid kit off the wall. He was still opening it when Paige collapsed in a heap on the floor. “You shouldn’t be fainting, even if you got it.”

“I just had to sit down, and I didn’t want to sit on anything,” she huffed, wiping sweat and tears with her hands.

Harrison extracted a little slip of plastic and put it in her open mouth. “Keep that in there for at least thirty seconds and then I’ll read it for you.” Harrison sat down on the floor next to her and let her look at his watch to measure the time.

Thirty seconds later, he pulled it out and read it. “It’s within the normal range. You’re fine.”

Then she fell on her face with her forehead on the concrete and started crying even harder than before. “Harrison, I’m so sorry. I stole ruptors from your dad’s lab when I worked for Zaphier. I’m sorry.”

Harrison put a hand on her head and stroked her short hair. He listened to what she said, but he felt numb.

She said more things, but Harrison wasn’t paying attention. His mind was a jumble of everything he’d ever been told. The puzzle pieces were sliding together to form a picture, but it was foggy until Paige brought him out of it by asking, “Harrison, how did your mom contract M.T.N.?”

Absently, he reached over and pulled the trap door shut. “I don’t know,” he said quietly. “If she somehow contracted it from the ruptors, then that makes the most sense.” Then he shook his head like he was shaking off the problem. “Let’s go into the house, Paige. The storm is picking up.” He helped her to her feet.

Paige walked ahead of him.

“Stop,” Harrison said. “Wait for me. We’ll go together.”

Chapter Twenty One

"I think I always knew!" she cried, screaming at a pitch she'd never achieved before.

Harrison plugged his ear closest to her.

"I knew deep down that if you knew me, really knew me, you couldn't be in love with me. I trespassed on your property. I stole your father's life's work and when I first met you..." She just kept going on like that.

It hadn't made much sense, but she didn't make more sense as she went on.

To say that it had been difficult to calm her down after fishing her out of his father's lab was an understatement. She was hysterical. He had to agree that the whole thing was pretty creepy, but the last thing in the world he wanted was for his house to become the world headquarters of M.T.N. instead of a place to go for helocarrier tours. It wasn't that he didn't want to take her to the hospital. The truth was that he had early M.T.N. testing every time he went to the hospital to see his parents. He'd done it so many times, he knew the drill as well as the nurses at the hospital. From what he knew, it was obvious when someone contracted it. Their saliva turned yellow almost instantly. So, Harrison gave Paige the PH test a few more times only to comfort her. He knew she didn't have it.

Harrison rubbed his eyes. He had just finished putting Paige to bed. It had not been anywhere near as thrilling as it ought to have been. She was stressed out, guilt-ridden, and demented with fright.

Now he had the unfortunate job of going down to his father's lab to see for himself what was there. There were two biohazard suits in the back of his chocker and he put one on before going down. He wasn't sure if it was completely necessary to gird up his loins like that, but he planned to touch things and snoop, so better safe than sorry.

He stepped inside the hangar and opened all the trap doors and hatches.

In his father's lab, he turned on his flashlight and looked at the ruptors all lined up in their little boxes. They looked creepy as hell to him, but he couldn't ignore them. This was what Zaphier and Armand wanted.

Harrison ditched the science fair projects and went to the computer, which was still plugged in, and booted it up. He had some trouble accessing the files, but hacking his father's brain for a password wasn't as difficult for him as he guessed it would have been for Armand. Their father was a mechanical engineer. Harrison punched in the serial code from his father's first chocker and gained complete access. From there, he tried to use his phone to upload as much information as he could but there wasn't enough room. In the end, he had to use the pocket watch Sleeping Beauty Inc. had given him to upload the earlier files.

Once that was done, he shut everything back down, locked everything up, and returned to the land of the living. On the way out, he changed the password to the door that protected Excalibur to a five-digit number. He didn't want anybody else getting access to Excalibur or his father's third basement lab.

Back at the house, Paige was out of bed and sitting on the lip of the tub reading a pamphlet on M.T.N. that came with the first aid kit that they kept in the bathroom.

Harrison sighed when he saw her out of bed. "You still don't believe me that you're clean?"

"No. I believe you. I just can't relax and I thought that reading this would make me feel better."

Harrison sat down beside her and put his arm around her shoulders. "Yeah. I'm sorry. I just—"

Paige tensed up and interrupted. "I guess you know that photoshoot was all a pretense for those guys to come here."

"It was weird from the beginning."

She brushed off his hand. "I want you to know that I never slept with Zaphier."

Harrison was relieved, but didn't have the nerve to say more than, "No?"

"Yeah, but I was *such* a fool. I can't stand it and who knows, one of the ruptors I stole might have been the one that infected Princess Elizabella."

"Even so, you probably couldn't have helped that. I mean, you didn't get infected with M.T.N., so it's clear you managed to transport them safely. If she got infected after, how is that your fault?"

"I don't know. I just feel sick."

"You should sleep," he suggested calmly.

Paige got up and started pacing. "No. I can't stand it. Knowing all this stuff is too hard. I can't stand to be in my own skin. All the things I did—I don't want to know about them. Can't we go and get my memory wiped again?"

Harrison was appalled. "No! Tough it out! If you got your memory wiped now, you'd lose all the time that we had together too."

Paige let her head fall forward in dismay. "Sorry. I didn't think of that."

"Come here," he said, "let's go to bed."

"I thought you said I wasn't allowed to sleep with you a second time if we weren't going to get all hot and heavy?" she asked, her guard up.

He bobbed his head in agreement. "Yeah, I know I said that, but this is different. You're distraught. You need to sleep. I'll hold you until you fall asleep."

She stood up. "You aren't going to love me when you hear what I remember."

"What do you remember?"

"I remember falling out of love with Zaphier and falling in love with Armand."

Harrison paused. He looked at the bathroom floor, then at the mirror, and then at the door. It was hard for him to turn back to Paige and ask, "How did that end?"

"He was the one who wiped my memory and stole all that money. I was lucky though because he convinced Zaphier not to kill me... after he failed to kill me when he shoved me off a cliff," Paige said slowly like she couldn't believe the sequence of words she was using.

"Still feeling the love?"

"N-no," Paige stuttered. "He didn't exactly break my heart... more like I realized how little I meant to him. I was thrown away and frozen..." Paige did not tell him how agonizing Armand's betrayal felt. After all, how could she explain how Armand's rough chin had felt like love? She believed it was the only thing that could keep her alive after her contract ended. Harrison only needed to understand one thing, so she said, "I think I blamed you for what he did to me. You were familiar, like him, and I didn't want him, so I pushed you away."

Reviewing events from their past, it all rang true to Harrison who felt like he was fighting something inside her that he couldn't see.

"I'm not my brother. I don't even know him. Yes, I probably do sound like him, and from what Osric has shown me of him, your apprehension makes sense, but you're wrong if you think I consider you damaged goods because of what he did. I knew something was hurting you and now we know what. We're getting closer to setting this all straight."

"You're too good to me," she sobbed.

He put his arm around her and clucked his tongue gently. He had been planning to put her in the spare room bed, where she had been sleeping recently, but if she slept fitfully, then it wouldn't matter if he'd comforted her the first time. "Get in my bed. It's more comfortable than the spare room and if you wake up, I'll be there if you need me."

Paige fell on him and cried.

It was on the tip of his tongue to say something about how much she must love him for her to act like that, but he didn't. He didn't want to pressure her for an answer on a night when she was stressed.

He followed her into the bedroom and put her in his bed with his covers up to her chin and suddenly made a decision. He decided to give her the whole show. On a night like that night, the whole show was not much, but it was what he would have done if she had not been there.

He sat on the edge of the bed and undid the laces on his boots. He peeled off his socks and threw them in the laundry bin (something he hadn't done before Paige started living with him). He got up and turned to face her, steadily undoing the buttons on his work shirt. He revealed the white t-shirt he wore under everything. The work shirt went into the laundry too. Then he started pulling on his belt and a warm color spread across Paige's cheeks. Harrison was glad of it as he dropped his pants and gave her a good view of his underwear. He put the pants aside and pulled a pair of flannel pajama bottoms out of his drawer.

"That's the end of the striptease?" she joked.

He smiled and sucked in this breath in a disapproving way. "I know you were hoping for more, but I wouldn't want to expose my slave to anything she couldn't unsee."

Her expression fell.

He got into bed next to her and settled her in the crook of his arm. It was tense for a moment, with their bodies pressed up against each other.

Harrison broke the discomfort by saying, "If I had a dog, I'd let you cuddle up to him instead of me."

"I like cats," she replied.

Harrison made a delightful purring sound and Paige suddenly shrieked with laughter.

"Do it again!" she begged.

Harrison shook his head, not because he didn't want to do it a second time, but because he was laughing too hard to do it again. "Go to sleep."

"It's hard to stop thinking."

"Put your head right here and listen to my heart."

She obeyed and after a few minutes, commented on how good he smelled.

Once Paige was asleep, he turned on his phone and got to work reading his father's documents. He had to figure out exactly what had happened in the lab, what if his father had learned in the experiment that went right? Was it possible to reproduce it? Either way, both he and Paige were going to get chased down by Rawson mafia lords.

Paige rolled over in bed and the scent of a good man filled her nose. Harrison smelled so good, she felt her body melt before she opened her eyes in the semi-darkness to see she had woken up with her nose in his armpit. She liked him so much, even his armpit was amazing.

Paige took a more comfortable position and tried to go back to sleep, but even with Harrison beside her, she couldn't go back to sleep and the hours of darkness ticked away.

She thought about the nights she endured after Zaphier cut her loose. Alone in her apartment, she was like a corpse. Home decorating? She didn't have any interest back then. Her place had white walls; one white sofa in the living room. There wasn't a speck of dust or the length of a single hair to break the monotony. Since she'd been living with Harrison, she found that she loved decorating, renovating, changing out the old for the new. Why hadn't she thought to make her apartment as personal as the space she lived in now? Her apartment had been a good deal nicer than Harrison's house. She could have done a lot on her own, but she only thought about Armand.

Her hair was long when she awoke at Sleeping Beauty inc. not because her hair grew in cryostasis, but because she didn't have time to cut it when she worked for Zaphier. After her contract ended, she didn't even style it. It just hung down her back, limp... like her.

Life with Harrison wasn't like that. With Harrison, there was always something else that had to be done. She was important—vital. She couldn't even imagine how lonely Harrison's life must have been before she came. When they were together, he always worked so hard. She enjoyed working with him and even if they were taking the day off, she enjoyed being with him. They laughed together. Food tasted better. Everything was better.

Suddenly, she never wanted to leave.

She put her arms around the man next to her and promised herself she would give him everything he wanted because he was everything she wanted.

Eventually, Paige fell back asleep, which made her sleep late. When she finally did wake up, Harrison was gone. In the place in the bed where he had been sleeping were all the clothes he had been wearing. Peeking inside the pajama bottoms, she saw his underwear was in there too.

She smiled. Wake-up notes were dumb. He was hilarious.

She got up, searching the rest of the house for him, and finally concluded he must be in the hangar. In the kitchen, she picked up a few things to take Harrison for breakfast.

In the hangar, she found Excalibur had been brought up to the main level and Harrison was on top of it installing the propeller blades.

“Good morning,” she said, her voice echoing through the expanse of the hangar. “What’s going on?”

He stopped what he was doing and turned to face her. Then, leaning on his elbow, he said, “After you fell asleep last night, I found out that I’m not as bad at mechanical engineering as I thought.”

“Huh?”

Harrison dropped himself down on the floor. “I always thought that I was bad at this—especially compared to my father. I worked on building Excalibur from a plan my dad left in the workshop. Certain things didn’t line up and I always thought the building was so slow going because I wasn’t as good as my dad. Turns out—I may not be my dad, but I’m not dumb as a sack of hammers. The problem with the plans was that they were incomplete. Look at this.” He led Paige to the back of Excalibur and showed her where the gas tank was. Paige saw a glass box containing a ruptor. “As you can see, Excalibur was designed to be powered by a ruptor and not by fuel. I put in an electric battery because I couldn’t figure out what the old man was talking about, but it turns out that it wasn’t supposed to need one.”

“Wow!” Paige exclaimed, but she wasn’t sure if that meant that it worked. “But I thought Armand had the only working ruptor in the world?”

Harrison smiled. “Yeah, he has the only one that works the way my dad hoped, but all of these failed experiments still have a little juice in them. The problem now is that if I take Excalibur into the air and power it with only a ruptor, it will fall out of the sky like a stone when it runs out of power. A helocarrier doesn’t glide. I may have inadvertently solved the problem when I put in an electric battery. If it works the way I hope it can, I can use a ruptor until it dies and then my battery system will take over providing the power mid-flight.”

“Can you do that?” Paige exclaimed.

“Who knows? It might be a disaster, but…” He trailed off as he noticed the things she was carrying in her hands from the house. “Did you bring me food?”

“Yeah.” She blushed.

“Thanks. Are you feeling any better this morning?”

“I am a little surprised to see you all dressed this morning after finding all your clothes in the bed.”

“Just trying to open your eyes,” he said, opening a water bottle with a tug.

"Open my eyes to what?"

"To how great it would be if we got together. You know, if we *really* got together."

She felt Harrison's eyes on her as she peeled the wrapper off a muffin. "I keep rolling it around in my head and I don't know why you'd want to be with me. I'm a mess."

"Aw. Well, who isn't?"

She shook her head. "You don't have to act like that. I..."

He waited.

Which was a pity, because she was waiting for him to jump in at that moment and ask her to marry him with a fresh proposal. But he didn't. He just waited for her to finish her thought, and she couldn't think of what she should say because her tongue was tied in three knots and lodged in her throat.

Then abruptly, he took her hand and pulled her close to him. Paige jumped a little. It was a hug. His other hand was on her back and she was squeezed close to him before he let her go and smiled.

"Thanks for bringing me breakfast. I've been up for hours and I'm starving." Then he changed the topic. "Last night, when I started reading my dad's notes, the first thing I found out is that ruptors are made from the hearts of fetal bulls."

"What?" Paige was astonished.

"It looks like a heart inside the box, right?"

"U-huh."

"A full-sized bull heart is much much bigger. The ones used for ruptors are closer to the size of an adult human's."

"Why? How is that possible? I thought experimentation on animals has been illegal for almost a hundred years."

"It has been. Even eating beef has been illegal for almost fifteen years. I don't know about you, but before this came up, I didn't even question why it is illegal to eat beef. All the animal rights activists convinced me it was because cows are too smart to eat."

Paige had never eaten beef.

Harrison took another drink before he cleared his throat and said, "I read that a fetal bull has a chemical in its circulatory system that is highly concentrated in its hearts—cows have two. The chemical is called Q1. When the M.T.N. virus is exposed to it, the Q1 and the virus create a kind of a symbiotic relationship, but that's not it exactly since Q1 is a molecule and not a living thing. It's more like the Q1 both feeds the virus, allowing it to grow and live, and at the same time kills it, so that the virus is unable to spread. It's weird. The lifecycle of the virus moves so fast that it creates energy."

Paige was aghast. "Really? It creates so much energy that it can power a chocker?"

"Each transparent box in my dad's lab was an experiment. All of them have one heart of a baby bull that was infected with M.T.N. inside. Some of them have succeeded and made an ecosystem of sorts, but don't get me wrong. None of them have a perfect system and eventually,

they'll all run out of power. Only the one Armand took worked properly." Harrison paused. "Do you remember what you stole out of there?"

"I'm not sure. I think I took the two best raptors, but I don't know. At the time, I was just trying to finish and get out."

"Well, it doesn't matter. I'm sure Armand hasn't figured out the answer to the last problem our dad faced."

"Which was?" Paige asked curiously.

"What organism, or bacteria, or substance to add to the raptor to make it go on forever. If he had that nailed, neither he nor Zaphier would have come here. We have to figure out how to get them to lay off, but before that, I really want to give this raptor a try in Excalibur. Whoowee! My dad would have been proud!"

Chapter Twenty Two

Harrison sat in the hangar reading his dad's notes and comparing them with the information he'd found on the web about Armand's chocker. Armand told the press that his chocker could go five hundred kilometers per hour. Harrison scratched his head and messed up his black-brown hair to a ruffle. From what Harrison could figure, his father's calculations intended Excalibur to fly closer to six hundred. Harrison let his hands droop while he studied the propellers on Excalibur. He didn't know if the machinery could stand to move that fast.

Harrison scowled. He was going crazy. He had too many problems to weigh.

Ring. Ring.

Sleeping Beauty Inc. was calling him. Even though they were the last people he wanted to talk to, it was better to hear what they had to say.

"Hello," he answered.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Fox. I'm not sure if you remember me. I was the client coordinator you worked with when you bought Rose Red: Model 85001, Vivian."

"I remember you, but I'm not sure why you're calling me. I already informed your company that I have no plans to sell Paige."

"Yes. We know. That's why I'm calling you. I thought it only proper to let you know that the party that wanted to purchase her from you was most unhappy when they learned of your unwillingness to sell. A gentleman named Zaphier Rawson is on his way to your property right now to make you an offer in person."

"Did you give him my address?" Harrison asked. It hardly mattered now, since Zaphier had already been there, but still—Sleeping Beauty Inc. wasn't supposed to give that sort of information out. The problem was that he knew there had been an initial indiscretion. They shouldn't have accepted Paige's contract in the first place.

"Uh ..."

"I already know that your agency forwarded Zaphier my contact information after her sale. I could sue you for breach of our confidentiality agreement."

"I know," she said tightly on the other end of the line. "That's why I'm also calling to inform you that we're refunding her entire purchase price."

"Care to explain that in more detail?"

"Certainly. We would like to end our agreement with you by refunding the total cost of the model."

Harrison was supremely relieved, but he kept his voice unyielding. "When will the money be transferred?"

"In less than half a minute. I need you to waive your right to sue before going through with the transaction. Do I have your word?"

"Yes."

"Thank you." There was a pause. "The money has been transferred. Thank you for your patience. Please, take care, Mr. Fox."

"Thanks." He hung up.

He got out his pocket watch and called Paige into the hangar.

Harrison grinned when he saw her. She was wearing a yellow T-shirt, an old pair of his jeans, and a blue bandana around her neck. Pink-cheeked and out of breath, she panted with a little stamp of her foot. "What's going on?"

"Zaphier is on his way."

“Here?” she gasped.

“Here.” Harrison shoved the keys to his truck into her hand. “I need you to drive to town. I’m going to fly Excalibur to Wystan’s and meet you there. It’s okay if Armand and Zaphier get into the lab. I’ve already taken the important things out. So, get in and drive. I’ll follow you and make sure you get there safely. Okay?”

Paige took the keys from him, planted a swift kiss on his cheek, and got in the truck.

Through the open window, he put his hand behind her neck.

“I need a better goodbye than a peck on the cheek,” he said, pulling her toward him.

He paused just before their lips met, giving her the chance to push him off if she wanted to. Their eyes met and their breath mingled while he waited for her response.

“Don’t tease me,” she said before she kissed him.

The feeling Harrison experienced as Paige pulled him close almost undid him. He realized how much he needed her to want him, but he wasn’t prepared for how it set his nerve ending on fire and made his insides ache. How could he let her go?

He couldn’t and held her longer.

Finally, he broke free and said with more conviction than he felt, “Just start driving. I’ll catch up.”

She stalled the engine as she tried frantically to start it.

“Are you scared?”

“What’s the worst that could happen?” she declared, trying again and igniting the engine properly the second time. “I’m going to do exactly what you tell me and I’m sure it will work out all right. How bad could things be if we’re not where the killer virus is?”

“Point taken. Drive safely and slowly if you need to. Don’t put the truck in the ditch over nerves.”

“I won’t.”

He was completely satisfied. Not only had she kissed him back but she was so shaken she was fumbling with the gear shift. Her cheeks had the darkest rose flush and she was having trouble backing up. He smiled brilliantly as he watched her go around the corner. If that wasn’t ecstasy then he didn’t know what was. He put his hands in his pockets and strolled over to the glowing drafting boards. He had to pack up.

Then he turned around and stared at Excalibur. He’d just about made a *huge* mistake. He turned around and took off at a dead run towards Paige and the truck. He’d been thinking about kissing her, not about flying. *Damn!* Running like a mad man and screaming, he got her attention. She stopped right away.

Poking her head out the window she yelled to him, “What’s the matter?”

He was out of breath and panting, but he stopped and rested his hands on his knees. For a second he couldn’t bear to tell her his mistake and he just stood there like an idiot.

She honked the horn. “What’s wrong?”

He raised his head and smiled sheepishly. “I need you to pull Excalibur out of the hangar for me.”

Paige rolled her eyes and laughed. “Right.”

After Paige helped wheel Excalibur out of the hangar, she was about to head down the long driveway when she realized that Harrison wasn’t the only one who was forgetting things. She

wanted to get a few things from the house. The drive to town wasn't short and she would surely die without a bottle of water, and, she reflected sadly, the first aid kit. She knew she shouldn't want it. Harrison had told her repeatedly that she didn't need to check her PH levels every two minutes. He said that within a day or two a patient's saliva turned yellowish, so all she had to do was spit on the ground if she wanted to know if she had M.T.N. Knowing that made Paige spit into the sink ten times a day to see if her spit was yellow. Going into town was a different matter and she couldn't spit if she was driving, so she ran into the house to get a bottle of water and the PH balance test strips.

As she pulled the truck out onto the main road, she looked into her rearview mirror to spot Harrison walking around Excalibur making final preparations. She had to get a head start just like he said. He would be able to catch up to her lickety-split.

But he didn't.

She checked her mirrors and listened for the chocker blades as she drove on, but no sound came.

She was calm until she spotted a chocker hovering in the sky—except that it wasn't Excalibur. It was black and orange. Armand was overhead. If it was them, then there was no way Harrison could follow her. That meant that whether he was in the air or not, he had to run. Paige swallowed.

The only thing Paige could do to help was to be where he told her to be, so she kept driving.

The chocker didn't notice her and flew right over her head.

On the road, she came to the gravel roads that were never grated, never plowed in the wintertime, and degenerated to nothing but pounded down dirt. On these, she couldn't drive a hundred kilometers per hour. Her speedometer hovered around eighty and at that speed, she knew she was risking skidding out. The roads were narrow and some of them had deep irrigation ditches on both sides.

She dropped her speed down to sixty. Her heart thumped. It really wouldn't help anything to go in the ditch.

Then she was going thirty.

Then zero as she came to a stop.

There was a cow on the road.

Paige put the truck in park and honked the horn. The stupid thing hardly blinked in her direction. Paige didn't get it. Why wasn't it scared?

She got out of the truck and slowly approached it. As she got closer, she saw barbed wire twisted around the cow's back leg.

Paige stared up into the sky in wonder. Out loud she asked the universe, "Why in its back leg? You know that if I make a wrong move this old girl is going to kick me in the ribs. I'll be in intense, ridiculous, profuse pain and Harrison won't be able to pay the hospital bill? You know that, right?"

The universe stared back at her with that big blue expressionless expanse it always has and though she didn't hear its words she knew the answer. It went something like, "I know."

Paige pushed her sweaty bangs out of her face with a frustrated hand. This was far worse than feeding a cow.

Getting out of the truck, she approached it. Strangely, the cow seemed used to people and smelled her as she got closer. She patted its back and petted it gently before making her way to the hind end. She touched the barbed wire with the gentlest tap and the beast staggered

sideways. Then without thinking, Paige grabbed the fur on the cow's back with one hand and the barbed wire with the other and pulled the two apart.

The cow bellowed and bolted a dozen steps further down the road, but thankfully, did not kick her.

Paige mouthed a quiet hurray before discarding the wire in the ditch and heading back to the truck to get her water bottle to wash off her hands.

"You'd better thank me, cow," she said triumphantly as she rinsed the cow stink off her hands.

The cow moved toward her again, which Paige thought was strange. The thorn was out of its paw (figuratively). Shouldn't it be on its way? But it didn't leave. It came closer and closer, and then Paige noticed something that made her guts lurch.

The saliva dripping from its mouth was as yellow as pee.

Without hesitating, Paige reached into the cab of the truck through the window and seized the first aid kit. Ripping it open, she scavenged two PH tests. One was for her and one was for the puddle of spit on the ground.

She stuck one in her mouth and the other one in the saliva. While she waited for it to register, she asked herself if she was feeling itchy. She was, but she always felt itchy anytime the question of M.T.N. came up.

She picked up the tester in the puddle. It registered two ticks below dangerous for M.T.N. That was closer to the danger zone than any of Paige's tests had ever come out before. The cow tested positive for M.T.N.

She stuck a PH tester in her mouth and studied the cow. How far along was it? Could it see? She moved around and the cow followed her with its eyes. Then she stayed still and made some noises. The cow moved, too. Looking at the furry thing, she didn't understand what was going on. All its limbs seemed to be holding together. Had it contracted M.T.N. in the last twenty-four hours?

Paige's PH test was normal.

By this time, the cow had walked behind the truck, so Paige's path was no longer blocked. She put the truck in gear and got back on course toward town.

Well, she didn't care what Harrison would think of her. She was going to the hospital to be tested before she went to Wystan's. She couldn't risk getting other people sick.

That was what she thought until another horrible thing happened to her. Her bracelet started ringing. It rang incessantly. Harrison had changed the perimeter on her again and now she couldn't go as far as town without setting off the alarm.

It rang and rang until Paige thought she was going to lose her mind. It was so loud. It wouldn't stop. The sound was ruining her driving. She was going too fast. She swerved like a drunkard because she kept trying to put her wrist behind her back to muffle the sound and it didn't even help!

By the time she got to town, she would have been declared a certified mental patient if she'd gone to the hospital. Instead, she drove to Wystan's. It was closer.

As she drove up, Wystan was resting between an ancient Camaro and an old ping pong table drinking a beer. He heard her alarm going off, put a shirt on to cover his plaster-white chest, and came up to the truck.

"What the hell is that?" he yelled.

The alarm was too loud, she couldn't even hear him. She could only figure out what he was saying because, under the circumstances, there was nothing else to say.

She pointed to the bracelet and threw her hands up in the air in frustration.

Straightway, Wystan disappeared into his horde of junk and bought out a pair of bolt cutters. Paige stuck out her wrist and he cut the thing clean off her.

The infernal noise stopped.

“Wystan,” Paige said breathlessly. “You are the wickedest guy I’ve ever met.”

He smiled. “I know.”

Chapter Twenty Three

Harrison heard the blades of Armand's chocker before he saw them. Without hesitating, he threw the rest of his cargo into the back and got in the front seat. Harrison secured his five-point harness, put on his earphones, and started Excalibur up.

It was a no-win situation, even before Harrison realized what Armand was planning to do. It didn't matter where Harrison flew, they would be able to follow him with their satellites. The chocker itself was valuable. He, as the engineer and mechanic, was also valuable, but he had put all the servers and unused ruptors in the truck Paige was driving. Even if he lost everything in a fiery blaze, the most important information could be protected. She was driving straight to Osric.

Harrison's situation was bad because he wasn't sure if the battery power would be able to take over smoothly when the ruptor ran out of power. He wasn't entirely sure how much power the ruptor had. It might run for a month or an hour. If there was a significant break in the rotations of the helocarrier blades, he would crash.

Harrison had hoped he would be able to get to town so he could disguise and transport Excalibur before his brother caught him. After what Paige had told him, he half wanted to kill him. He'd sent Paige into their home to steal from their family. The relationship Armand had with Paige sounded like something that could only be described as a moment of convenience that ended in abuse. Harrison felt like sticking his head between the chocker blades.

Now he was in the air and the danger level had gone up. It was too late to test the chocker's power system. Too late to worry about whether or not it would work well or not. Too late to put the ruptors away and lock the door. Too late to even fly away. Armand's chocker was circling the area above Excalibur, blocking Harrison from lifting off.

Looking up through the top of the windshield he could see Armand in his aviator shades staring back at him. His jaw was set and his expression was ugly. Harrison glared back at him, stuck his own shades on, and got back to the controls finishing preflight.

Even with Armand waiting directly above him, preventing him from taking off properly. Harrison lifted off and hovered a few meters in the air, but Armand wouldn't back off. If Harrison's blades bashed into Armand's runners, they could both crash, but Armand didn't back off.

Harrison pushed forward, flying close to the ground, but Armand kept his chocker over Excalibur with ease. Harrison sped up. It was dangerous to fly fast low to the ground. Actually, that was one of the surest ways to end up a bag of bones in the incinerator, but Harrison couldn't let Armand get a hold of his chocker.

Damn.

Harrison sped up.

Armand had the advantage. The higher he was, the faster he could move, so it didn't matter if Excalibur could go a whole hundred kilometers per hour faster, it was suicide to do it that close to the ground.

Outrunning him close to the ground would only be possible if he knew the landscape better than the pilot above.

Harrison's outlook suddenly brightened. Even though Armand and Harrison had both been raised here, Harrison bet he knew the topography better than his brother did.

The path he decided to take took them in the opposite direction Paige drove, which made it better as far as Harrison was concerned.

“Come and get me,” he muttered, as he launched himself forward at speeds Armand had never even seen.

Later that afternoon, Paige sat in a booth at the café with Narissa and Wystan. After Wystan cut her bracelet off, he went with her to the hospital so she could get tested for M.T.N. Miraculously, she was clean. She didn’t understand it. She was sure the cow she had tested had the virus and had handled the animal. That would have been enough to spread the disease, wouldn’t it? Didn’t Harrison’s father get it just by holding hands with his wife?

Narissa played with Paige’s broken bracelet on the table. “You really shouldn’t have cut it off, Wy. It’s a felony.”

Wystan grunted. “If you heard the hellish high-pitched hullabaloo, you wouldn’t be saying that.”

She withered slightly. “I heard it. The whole town heard it.”

Paige shrugged her shoulders. “Harrison can take me to Sleeping Beauty Inc. to get it repaired or replaced or whatever. It shouldn’t be against any law. He told me to go to town. It’s not my fault he forgot to fix my perimeter settings. It doesn’t matter since I’m not running away, and Harrison should be here soon.”

“Do you really think he’s going to make it if Armand showed up at the house?” Wystan asked like he thought Paige was an idiot. “I’ll bet my digits, he won’t be here tonight. He’s not answering his phone.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Paige denied. “He rarely takes calls when he’s flying.”

Wystan didn’t say anything and instead of fighting with Paige, he concentrated on getting something out of his ear.

Narissa got up and took herself to the kitchen, leaving Paige and Wystan to wait for Harrison.

Finally, Paige asked, “When is Osric supposed to get here?”

“Any minute.”

Paige contemplated that if her life were a normal romance novel, Harrison or Osric would have strode in with a winning smile in under a minute if only to get the story moving, but neither of them showed up, and instead, Paige sat there staring at Wystan. Eventually, he got tired and yelled to Narissa that he was going home.

No one came to replace him and the time ticked on until dinner time. Narissa made Paige move to the bar to make room for paying customers, but she gave Paige a bowl of powdered onion soup on the house. Paige sighed and dipped her spoon into the dark liquid. It was the cheapest thing on the menu, even cheaper than the tea.

Partway through the evening, Paige went into the kitchen to wash dishes and help Narissa. Paige always thought customers there were sparse until she started cleaning their plates, then they seemed endless.

Osric arrived close to midnight.

He came into the kitchen and looked and sounded handsome and suave. It was ridiculous for a man to look so good in such thick glasses. It was also ridiculous that his charms did nothing for Paige. She wished Harrison had come instead.

Putting all that aside, she told Osric what Harrison had learned about M.T.N., the bull hearts becoming the cores of ruptors, and the cow she had met.

When she finished, Osric nodded, "Well, that certainly does raise some interesting questions. I'll go out to the fields tomorrow and see if I can find a cow to test."

"Be careful not to approach a bull by accident," Narissa said vaguely from the corner of the kitchen. "They're vicious."

"Right. I need to find solitary cows," Osric said cheerfully.

"Can you go stop by my house when you're out there? Harrison may have ended up back there and it would be good if you could find out what's going on. Can you?" Paige asked quietly.

Osric smiled like the tawny rogue that he was. "Anything... for a lady."

Paige blinked at him.

He sighed. "Not in the mood?"

She put her index finger between her eyebrows. "No. Not really."

That night Paige and Osric bunked up at Wystan's house. Osric made a bed on the living room floor since he was too tall to lie comfortably on the crumbling compact couch. Paige tried sleeping on it, but it was no picnic for her either, since she couldn't stretch out either. Her feet stuck out over the armrest. In the end, she rammed herself up on her side in the fetal position and looked at the top of Osric's head.

After everyone went to bed, they were alone. It was summer and the crickets outside the open windows were chirping. Paige looked out through the patch where the window's grime was thinner and peered at the liquid navy sky and the two or three white stars she could see twinkling. She wanted to see a chocker but saw nothing. She hoped Harrison was all right.

"Hey Osric," she whispered. "Are you awake?"

"It's only been three minutes since we shut off the lights. Of course, I'm awake. What do you need?"

"Can I borrow your phone? I want to try calling Harrison again."

He forked it out and Paige tried Harrison's number three times before she dropped it on Osric's pillow with a quiet, "Thank you."

"What's so great about that guy anyway?" Osric asked as he reached his hand into his pocket to pull out his lighter. When Paige didn't answer him, he began flicking a tiny flame on and off as a tell-tale sign of tension.

"Do you need a smoke?"

"Not really."

The moment lasted. It was a moment where Paige hoped that Osric would let his question slide without pressing her for an answer.

But he pressed. "Is it too uncomfortable a question for me to ask? I notice you're without your bracelet. Did he set you free or something? Is that why you're so worried about him?"

"No," Paige admitted. "Wystan cut it off me with a pair of bolt cutters."

"Which is illegal."

"Yeah," Paige said before she explained the deafening buzzer that wouldn't stop. "Besides, I'm not going to run away, so it doesn't matter?"

"Why not? If I were you, I'd run away." Osric's voice sounded full of melancholy and deep longing in the darkness.

Something in his voice sounded like he thought any man who would buy a girl was a monster. Harrison wasn't like that. She wasn't his slave. She had to make Osric understand. "You know, I imagine most guys who would buy a girl would be sleazy, but Harrison's not. In the case of belonging to him, it's really not that different from being employed by him. He's been a class act."

"Really?" The tone was sarcastic.

"Yeah. He wants me to marry him."

Osric let out a puff of air from his mouth like he was smoking. "I guess that's that. He couldn't be a bad guy if he wants to marry you. Most men wouldn't marry a woman they've paid. A marriage contract at least gives you a few rights when you've already voluntarily signed them away." He paused and still lying down, he began rummaging through his things. "You know, I really could do with a smoke."

He sat up and took the cigarette in his hands. He lit it and just as he did, Paige saw the light from the fire gleam off something on his wrist. Paige glanced at it and then she stared. He was wearing a long-sleeved collared shirt, and for the most part, it covered a very thick linked chain that was very tight around his wrist. It could only be one thing. People didn't wear wristwatches unless they were communicating with their slave. Paige had to see it up close to make sure.

After Osric finished his smoke, he put it out and rolled over to go to sleep. He slept on his left side, which was the same side that Paige wanted to check. So instead of going to sleep, she kept her eyes open and waited for him to turn onto his other side.

It felt like she waited forever before he finally did it.

When he did, Paige slid off the couch and tiptoed alongside him in her ankle socks. She crouched next to his hand and tugged gently on his sleeve.

BOOM! Osric snapped both her wrists into death grips and slammed her on the floor under him.

There was one breathless moment where they stared into each other's eyes, and their bodies touched before his wristband started giving him electric shocks. He flew off her and gripped his burning wrist with his free hand. It was so violent, he was trembling.

Paige wanted to do something, but couldn't. If she touched him again, it would no doubt trigger another shock. She could only stare at him in horror.

When it was over, Osric wiped his sweaty face with the sleeve of his shirt. "Find out what you wanted to know? You could have just asked."

"Princess Elizabella owns you?" Paige whispered.

"I work for her in name only. In actuality, I am owned by her younger sister, Princess Angelina, who doesn't treat me the way your Harrison treats you."

Paige swallowed a knot in her throat. "I'm sorry. That's awful."

"Awful? You haven't seen the half of it. My bracelet—" he showed it to Paige freely now, "makes a report and sends it to her. It'll say something like, 'Model 2098 was approached by a free woman at one hundred hours.' Then it'll make it sound like we almost had sex before it put the buzzer on me."

"But we didn't almost have sex. The thought never crossed my mind. Did you think of it?"

He didn't answer her. Instead, he said, "I'll tell you one thing. You are damn lucky you weren't wearing your bracelet because if you were, it would have connected you with the incident and sent a report to Harrison. It might have made him reconsider marrying you."

"Well, if you knew that all that was going to happen then why didn't you say something? Why did you drag me under you?"

Osric turned his head and stared off into nowhere rather than look at Paige. "I'm very attracted to you tonight."

Paige glanced at him cautiously. Was he?

"It came out of nowhere. I have met hundreds of purchased women. Mostly, they are despicable people who would do anything for their fees. They're saving up for the day when they're no longer young and beautiful. I have never once thought that one of them was an unfortunate person. I, myself, am not a particularly unfortunate man." He suddenly turned to face her and looking directly at her, he asked, "Do you know me? Do you know how I ended up like this? I bet you do. Guess."

Paige thought about what she knew about him. "You were working as a private detective, but your business wasn't doing so well. That's how you know Wystan—because you were in similar circumstances with the plummeting economy. Then one day, just after Princess Elizabella got sick, someone from Princess Angelina's staff came to see you. They interviewed you a few times, and eventually, you were invited to meet the princess herself. She offered you the job of hunting up information on Zaphier, but only on the condition that she would own you for five years? Did it go like that?"

Osric's shoulders sagged and he rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand. "You're nearly on the money."

"I remember a few things about the way Zaphier and his people do business. What's different?"

"She didn't hire me for five years. She purchased me until I figured out three things."

"They are?"

"I have to find out how Elizabella got the virus in the first place. Second, I have to figure out a way to prove that Zaphier's responsible so he can be prosecuted. I can't tell you the last thing she asked me to do."

"Why?"

"Because if she had only asked me to do only the first two things, then she wouldn't have had to make me her slave. I would have been able to do the first two things without a bracelet."

"Things must have been desperate if you were willing to sign away your freedom."

"They were." He frowned. "I thought it was a good deal when I signed up. If I can, then I'll earn fifteen million dollars, and if I can't, I'll be working for Princess Angelina for the rest of my life. I might not be able to fulfill her exact wishes, but I think that I can trump her list if I can figure out a way to save Elizabella's life."

"You're thinking of figuring out a way to cure M.T.N.? Holy cats! You're ambitious!"

He shook his head. "I don't think it's ambitious at all. Animal testing has been done away with for ages, but after what you said today, I plan to reinstitute it."

"I thought you wanted to run away."

"Of course, I want to run away. What I want and what I do rarely connect."

"Do they eat beef? I know Zaphier and his friends do, but the princesses do too? All of them?"

"All of them."

Paige looked around the room awkwardly. "Do you think that was where Elizabella got the M.T.N.? Do you think she ate a heart while everyone else ate steaks?"

Osric gasped and sputtered, "Maybe. I'll get a call from Angelina in the morning and see what she knows."

“Okay. We’ve got a plan,” Paige said. She stood up and went back to her place on the couch. She scratched her head and rested it on the pillow, this time with her back to Osric.

Then she felt his voice slipping over her shoulder like a hand. “I heard that Harrison pretty much gave up everything he had to buy you. It was no mistake on his part. A girl like you is worth everything a man has.”

Paige sighed into the darkness. “I don’t know about that. I’ve made so many mistakes.” She paused. “I love him, you know.”

“I know, but tonight, I can’t stop being attracted to you.”

Harrison tried to get comfortable in the pilot’s seat in Excalibur, but it was no use. A helocarrier just wasn’t designed to be slept in. His engine was silent and the power was off. There was still a bit of juice left in the battery, but for now, it was better to keep everything off to let the ruptor charge naturally.

He’d lost Armand. It was nothing shy of a miracle, but now, he had no idea where he was and he dared not send any messages to the satellites in case it gave away his position.

Thinking of Paige, he hoped she was all right.

Chapter Twenty Four

In the morning Paige rolled over, off the couch, and onto Osric's face.

"Ack!"

His alarm went off again.

After that, they didn't talk until they sat across from each other in the café eating the breakfast Narissa brought them. She heard the screaming that morning and her expression spoke of annoyance. There was nothing like waking up to a man shrieking like a banshee first thing.

Osric lit his cigarette and rubbed the crud out of his eyes.

"So, Osric," Paige wondered aloud. "What's your plan for the day?"

He glared at her. "My plan consisted of sleeping for another hour."

"Can I borrow your phone to call Harrison?"

Osric took out his phone and looked at it sleepily. "That would be one place to start. I can think of a better one. I'll call Angelina." He pressed two buttons and had her video feed projected onto the wall of the booth where we were sitting.

A grouchy blond butler answered. Paige was stunned. He didn't look older than thirteen. "This is Quinton. Who's calling?"

"It's Detective Fountain. Is Angelina available? I've got to speak with her urrgennttllly." The last word was drawn out because Osric was yawning.

When Quinton saw him, he yawned, too. "She's eating her breakfast, but I think I could point the camera at her."

He moved the camera and for a second, the screen was blurred as it moved. Angelina came into focus. Paige was stunned. The princess had a bedhead. There was a smudge of leftover makeup under one eye and she was stifling a yawn, but she still looked like a billion bucks. That was royalty for you. Her breakfast plate was in front of her and she delicately chewed a blackberry speared on her fork.

"Do you have news?" she asked.

"Yes." Osric pointed toward her with his thumb. "This is Paige, the woman I was telling you about. She's been most helpful, so I was hoping she could sit in on our meeting."

"That's fine. As long as she's no longer on top of you."

"Good," he said, unphased. "She and Harrison discovered a secret lab under the floor in Harrison's hangar. They found proof that ruptor technology is tied to M.T.N. and beef."

"What?" she asked, as she rolled something brown she was chewing into her cheek.

"Ruptors are made out of fetal bull hearts. That's their core. Paige did a PH test on a cow she met on the road yesterday. The test suggests that cows might be carriers for the M.T.N. virus."

Angelina spat what she was eating into a napkin. "Bring me a PH test!" she shrieked. "Hurry!"

Osric and Paige waited while Angelina did the test on herself and ordered all the food off the table at once. Paige groaned. The princess was eating beef for breakfast?

When Osric was again able to talk to her, he asked, "Where do you get your beef?"

“My father has a supplier in Old Montana,” she said with a PH test sticking out of her mouth.

“Does Zaphier have anything to do with what meat is shipped in?”

“No,” she pouted.

Osric sucked in his breath. “That could mean he isn’t responsible for Elizabella contracting the disease.”

Angelina looked like she might spit again.

Paige hoped it wouldn’t be yellow.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” the princess growled. “How can my father and I be responsible for everything that girl eats? I mean, really!”

“I have a question,” Paige interjected. “Armand and Zaphier have at least three ruptors. Is there any possibility that Elizabella touched one out of its glass case?”

Angelina shook her head. “I don’t know the answer to that. I’ll have to get back to you.”

“When you talk to Elizabella, be sure to ask her if she’s ever eaten a cow heart. We believe that’s where the greatest concentration of the disease would be present. Can you do that?”

“Indeed,” Angelina said acidly.

“Great. Then we’ll stop our meeting there. Harrison and Paige have samples. I might be able to get you a sample ruptor from Harrison—like you wanted. Then I’ll have done all three things you asked me to do.”

“What? No, you haven’t,” she denied.

“What haven’t I done? First, you wanted me to tell you how Elizabella contracted M.T.N. I’ve done that. If she didn’t get it from touching a ruptor directly, then it’s quite possible that she got it from eating flesh from an infected animal. Secondly, you asked me to prove to you how Zaphier was responsible. Depending on Elizabella’s answers to those other questions—you should have your answer. Our contract is almost complete. Once I have my final meeting with Harrison, I’ll see you tonight or tomorrow morning.”

Paige couldn’t help but notice how sorry Angelina looked. She looked distinctly pained before she said, “I’d like to make a new arrangement with you if that is the case. And soon.”

Osric’s jaw clenched in reply.

She shrugged her shoulders and turned off her phone and the wall went dark.

Paige turned to Osric and said, “Look, I don’t know what further information you’ll be able to get from Harrison.”

Osric didn’t flinch. “Who else were you and Harrison planning to give your findings to? Princess Angelina desperately wants to save her sister’s life. If we can find a way through examining the deconstruction of a ruptor, don’t you want that too?”

“Yeah, but—”

“But nothing. There’s no one else you can trust and Angelina has loads of money. She can afford to pay scientists to do the leg work. Trust me, okay?”

Paige frowned. As far as she knew, Harrison had all the usable raptors and plans for constructing new ones. They needed to find him if they wanted any of that info.

“Let’s go back to the house. Maybe some of the answers are there.”

Paige felt nervous as they got closer and closer to the house. There was one nice thing to look forward to though. There was no way that someone could hide a vehicle on Harrison's property. If a chocker landed, there were no trees to hide it. Except for a few decorative saplings in the garden, the place was flat ground.

When they got there, Osric drove his Jeep in a figure eight around the house and then around the hangar. Since the place looked deserted, Paige got out and opened the hangar. It was completely devoid of life—plenty of hardware though—so it looked hopeful.

"Great," Osric said as he got out and came into the hangar. "Let's get to the lab."

Paige opened the doors to the level where Harrison usually hid Excalibur. She and Osric strode down the stairs and stopped in front of the entryway to the lab. Paige put in the digit code she knew into the keypad and nothing happened.

"Harrison changed the password," she stammered.

"Well, what would he have changed it to?"

Paige screwed up her face. "I have no idea."

Osric popped the cover off the number panel and hooked his phone up to it, using a red wire and a yellow wire.

"Wow," Paige said as she watched him work. "I didn't even know you could still do that."

"It's only for emergencies and I won't be able to find out what the code is, just what kind of code it is."

"What do you mean?"

"You know. If it's all numbers or all letters, or a combination of the two, and how many characters. There we go. I got it. It's five numbers long. Does that narrow it down for you?"

"No."

"Wait a second. What's your number?"

"I don't have a number."

"Yes you do," Osric grumbled like he couldn't believe she didn't know what he was talking about. "What's your model number? The one Sleeping Beauty Inc. gave you?"

"85001."

"That's it." He punched it in and the hatch swung open. "Didn't you know that all females sold have a five-digit number assigned to them and all men have a four-digit number?"

Paige rolled her eyes. "Well, I'm not a private detective. Duh."

"Are you coming down?" Osric asked as he lowered another rope ladder.

"No thanks. I'll stay up here."

Osric dropped down. Paige watched him get his bearings and begin poking around.

"Be careful," she called.

"Or you might get M.T.N.," a voice said from above Paige's head.

Her chin shot up and she was staring at Armand. Paige was stunned at how old he looked. She had last seen him five years ago. He didn't get facelifts like Zaphier and the skin around his eyes and mouth had aged. His hair was cut painfully short. It looked like he cut it as recently as the last time he shaved.

Paige stared at him. "How did you get here? Where's your chocker? We checked everywhere."

Armand gawked at her. "This is my home. You think I don't know where to hide a chocker. It's in the coulee." He pointed a gun at Osric and her by turns.

"You know what I need."

For a moment, Paige's mouth filled with saliva, like nothing had changed, like being alone with him meant all the things it once had: silence, warmth, and the closest thing she had ever known to love. The second all that saliva pooled over her tongue, it tasted bitter: like loneliness, depression, and desperation - all emotions Harrison never let her feel.

She spat on the floor by his feet.

Armand jumped.

Then they heard the sound of an engine outside.

"Is that a chocker?" Paige asked in a whisper.

"No," Armand said, pushing Paige down the ladder with the gun to her forehead.

Paige submitted painfully. If it had been anyone else, she might have tried to resist them. It was impossible if the man holding the gun was Armand. She knew he was ruthless enough and strong enough to do whatever he said he would, so she let herself fall back into the lab. She was still terrified of the lab. She still didn't understand what she could touch and what she couldn't in order to avoid contracting M.T.N. She got to the bottom and stuffed her hands into her pockets.

Armand followed her, closing the trap door over their heads. "It's a truck."

Using his gun, he compelled Osric and Paige against the wall with their hands up. After forcing them to face the wall with their hands over their heads, Armand ran the barrel of his gun against the skin of Paige's arm.

"No bracelet this time?" Armand whispered into her ear.

Paige said nothing and concentrated on her breathing. In the past, they didn't talk and now Paige had nothing to say to him.

"Looks good on you," he said.

Over their heads, Paige heard someone in the hangar. "Anybody here?" It was Harrison.

Armand shut out the lights, knowing they might show through the trapdoor as a telltale sign that they were down there. Now it was completely dark in the lab. There were only four pinpricks of light that came from the corners of the trap door over their heads.

Then she heard Harrison. "You think you can hide down there? Idiot." The top hatch came open and the light poured in.

Armand was caught red-handed as Harrison stared down at them in the hole. Harrison had a double-barreled shotgun pointed at Armand's head. "How could you take Paige back down there? Now she'll take PH tests every five minutes for days. You monster."

"Look," Armand said evenly, not dropping his gun. "I just came to get a couple of old ruptors."

"To power your chocker?"

"Obviously," the older brother said drolly.

"Then you figured out that the crappy ones work, too? I know you guys are desperate for them, but do you want them only to power a chocker?" Harrison questioned sardonically.

"What are you talking about?" Armand snarled.

"I've been thinking about this and I don't get it. If all you wanted to do was power a helocarrier, why keep the reason a secret from me? Why not just show up, tell me what Dad was up to in his lab and ask me for the ruptors? Or even stranger, why send Paige to steal the ruptors all those years ago?"

"Dad wasn't selling," Armand said, aiming his gun squarely at Paige. "You've got the wrong idea about me. It wasn't my idea to send Paige to steal your stuff."

Paige flinched.

Harrison didn't. "All the same," he continued, "why didn't you just tell me what you needed once Dad was gone?"

Armand bent his head and lowered his gun.

Harrison waited and then finally answered his own question. "Because it was your fault that Mom got infected and you thought Dad told me. Were you fighting over the ruptors with him and broke one on Mom?"

Armand didn't answer. His face was hidden in shadow. The lines of his body spoke of fatigue he silently felt. He was tired. And Harrison was someone he absolutely did not want to fight.

"You thought I blamed you for our parents' deaths?"

Armand didn't reply.

The moment stretched.

"Drop your gun and get out of the hole," Harrison offered with a non-threatening click of his tongue.

Armand dropped the gun and at the moment the piece hit the floor, Osric whacked him over the head with a steel rod. Armand fell to the floor like a wash basket full of dirty clothes, skidding his face on the cement. Paige didn't even know Osric had a weapon. He must have grabbed it in the dark.

"I sent a message to the police. They're on their way," Osric said.

Harrison pointed his gun upwards and set it aside. "Was that really necessary?"

"I don't know," Osric defended. "He's kind of a wild card. "

Harrison scoffed his irritation and helped Paige climb out of the hole. She threw her arms around him. "Thanks so much for coming."

“It was my pleasure. I made it to town this morning, found the truck, and drove out after you and Osric in Wystan’s truck. Excalibur needs charging. It wasn’t safe to fly.”

He kissed Paige and once Osric was up the ladder, Harrison climbed down.

“What are you doing?” Osric gawked.

“Waiting for the cops to get here with my brother. I can’t leave him alone.”

Paige stared at him. She thought he was crazy. Armand was knocked out. He didn’t know if he was alone or not. Why did Harrison have to go back to that horrible place that made her convulse with fear?

Harrison looked at his brother like the sight both satisfied him and saddened him.

“Paige, maybe now we can arrange a few things to suit us without worrying about the crazies from your past ... and mine.” He glanced at the crumpled body of his brother.

“That would be good,” she sighed, feeling her throat constrict.

“And you’ll marry me?”

She crushed her eyelids together and hesitated. “Only if you get out that hole with a clean PH test.”

“You were down here too,” he reminded her. “And I’ll marry you even if your PH test is dirty.”

Chapter Twenty Five

Two weeks later, Harrison came to the jail to have a word with his brother. He sat at a little desk with a low-tech camera pointed at his face. After a couple of minutes, Armand came into the room and sat on a folding chair opposite him. Another camera popped out of the desk and bobbed up and down, following Armand with its lens.

Armand's hair looked shaggy and his face was horribly lined compared to the teenager Harrison remembered. His prison uniform was a grey wife-beater with navy scrubs. The only thing that set it apart from what Harrison wore when he played grease monkey was the bracelet around his brother's wrist. Harrison did a double-take when he saw Armand casually throw his hand on the table in front of him. It looked like Paige's, except it wasn't pink.

"How goes it?" Armand asked, grimly reefing on a cigarette.

"Pink as a peach," Harrison smirked. "How's prison?"

Armand picked something out of his teeth. "You might be surprised to hear it, but it's a hell of a lot better than working for Zaphier."

"That rings true," Harrison readily agreed. A moment passed and Armand didn't elaborate, so Harrison asked him, "Does that mean that you wanted me to catch you?"

Armand shrugged his bare shoulders. "I dunno. I'm tired."

"What do they think the sentence will be?"

"I don't know that either. I've seen the list of charges. It's not so bad. I notice you and Paige didn't report any additional charges."

Because of the cameras recording their conversation, he did not specify that he was referring to wiping Paige's memory, but Harrison knew what he was getting at.

"Care to explain that?" Armand continued.

Harrison rolled his eyes slowly. "Of course, I can still report it."

"Really?" Armand sucked on the end of his cigarette. "Why don't you?"

"I want to ask you something. Was I right about that box breaking? Is that why our mother got infected?"

Harrison felt like he had to wait forever before Armand finally said something. "Sort of," he said dreadfully. "A box did fall at her feet during a fight, but I didn't know it had broken. Dad told me afterward he found a crack in it, and then he told me she was diagnosed."

Then their mother's illness had been a result of that fight. It had been an accident, but it had been a careless place to have a fight. Armand should have known better and he knew it. He hated himself.

Harrison couldn't find the words to say that what happened didn't matter anymore. It did matter. The whole incident sounded so senseless that it made Harrison twitchy. If he wanted to be a rat, he could chalk it up to manslaughter and get the police to charge Armand for the death of their mother and maybe their father too. Harrison swallowed the disgust that welled up in his throat and said, "Thanks for not letting Zaphier murder Paige. I owe you one. Do you know if he's going to be charged?"

"I have no clue, but Harrison, don't be surprised if he somehow manages to get off scot-free. Elizabella and her family will probably help him get acquitted."

"Those little..." He left the thought unanswered and took a deep breath. "I don't understand royalty."

"You don't have to."

A few minutes passed in unequalled silence. Harrison was uncomfortable, but it was obvious Armand was even more so. Harrison tried to fill it by talking about what had happened to him since their standoff.

“You know, I haven’t been able to go home since we handed you over to the police. The house and hangar have been sealed off for M.T.N. testing. So far, no one has been diagnosed, but we had to trace every single person who stayed there overnight this summer and have them tested. There’s been a lot of testing going on and it turns out that all the cows in our neighborhood have M.T.N. They just have high enough doses of QI in their system to keep the virus in check. It’s pretty amazing. Paige helped a sick cow on the road that had a cut on its leg. Apparently, she cleaned her hands properly, because she didn’t get it. Lucky girl, huh? They found out that Elizabella got it from eating raw steaks. You know, the ones with the blood oozing out onto the plate.”

Armand looked bored. Maybe he hadn’t eaten any of their steaks, no matter how many times he ate at their table. Had he known better?

“I don’t know if my business will ever rise again, we’ve had so much press, and town is quieter than ever,” Harrison continued. “I’ve been thinking that it might be time to think of a new career, but I can’t think of anything”

Armand gave him a look. He didn’t want to hear about what Harrison planned to do with the rest of his life. Armand’s future was like a ripcord behind him.

Harrison hesitated.

Armand had taken all he could take, he smiled wanly and said, “I know all this, but you may as well say everything you want to.”

“Why?” Harrison asked suspiciously.

The older brother threw away his cigarette. “Paige.”

“Paige?”

“Yes. I heard from Osric that you’re going to marry her.”

Harrison nodded.

“I don’t want her as my sister-in-law. After today, I never want to see your face again. Are you done?”

Harrison nodded. It made sense if his brother was sore over losing her, but Harrison desperately wanted to tell his brother one last thing. Armand got up from his chair and the moment was slipping, and at the last moment, Harrison figured out what he wanted to say. “I’ll forgive you.”

“You’ll forgive me?” Armand snorted.

“Yeah. Some day.”

“Great,” he huffed bleakly. “I will never forgive you. It was never Zaphier who was trying to get you to sell her back to Sleeping Beauty Inc. I was trying to buy her. I was going to buy her.”

“What are you talking about? If she was left in cryostasis for another three weeks, she could have become the property of the company!”

“And I would have been able to buy her for half the price! You don’t get it! She was *my* loose end. I was the one who asked Zaphier to buy her in the first place. It was my money he gave her when he offered her that obscene amount of money! I was her owner. The paperwork was never even in Zaphier’s name. That was why I was able to remove her bracelet whenever I wanted. And she never knew that she didn’t have a choice about whether or not she should be with me. It was an excellent plan. She had this ridiculous crush on Zaphier. I knew working with Zaphier for a few months would clean that out of her system. It worked beautifully. He ran

her ragged by keeping her up all night doing stupid tasks, complaining about everything, and screaming at her.”

“She says he hit her,” Harrison pointed out.

“Of course, he hit her. Zaphier hits anyone who can’t hit harder than him when he’s blocked. That was the plan. He made me look good to her. After only having spent a few hours with me... she was in love. She was wildly in love... with me.”

Harrison grimaced. Armand had clearly been working with a younger version of Paige than he had. “Then what happened?”

“Our time expired. Zaphier had given her too much of my money and I couldn’t afford to renew her contract at that price. I needed her to come to me and tell me that she loved me.”

“Did she come?” Harrison asked.

Armand shook his head. “She called, but that wasn’t good enough for me. I wanted her to come... begging. She did come.”

“But it didn’t work out?”

“No. There had been some drama on the news outlets about her and Zaphier and people thinking there was more to their relationship. It was hot gossip and Zaphier was angry because the whole thing had been nothing more than a favor to me. She met us on the tarmac of New Hawking’s airfield at the same time as a horde of reporters and if I hadn’t ordered her from the place, I would have been fired and prosecuted. I tried to get in contact with her, but I wasn’t fast enough. She had her little interview with Zaphier on the cliff face before I could straighten things out with her.”

“How do you explain what happened afterward? You took all her money, sold her, and wiped her memory?”

“Yeah. I would have offered Zaphier much more to save her life. It was obvious that Paige thought I was selling her out. She didn’t realize that she was the bank for all the money I had in the world. That’s what I offered Zaphier to keep her alive—all her money and all of my money.”

“Weren’t you worried someone else would buy her for a lifetime contract during the three years that she was in cryostasis at Sleeping Beauty Inc.?”

Armand choked. “I was banking on them not finding out that she’d had her memory wiped.”

“For how damaged she was? Everyone could see it,” Harrison reminded Armand hotly.

“I was going to give her her memory back.”

“When?”

“As soon as I could buy her!”

“Would you have set her free?”

Armand looked at Harrison like he was stupid. “Why would I have done that?”

“Didn’t you say something earlier about how you needed to keep it a secret from her that you were her owner so that you knew when she came to you for love, it was sincere?”

He shrugged his shoulders casually. “She only had to do it twice: once when she came to me the first time and then again when she came after me bringing all my money back to me. She meant to give me what I wanted. It was just bad luck that she didn’t catch me at a better time.”

“Luck...” Harrison said slowly. “I guess it was luck that took her away from you and brought her to me.”

Armand didn’t answer. He had been talking, explaining his tactics, and the game he had been playing, but at that moment, he realized who he was talking to. At that moment, Harrison stopped being his brother and became the man who stole his woman from him. He would probably never be anything else.

Armand sneered and barked for the guard.

Chapter Twenty Six

Paige stretched out on a bed in a hotel room. She and Harrison had been staying in a hotel since the police took over the bed and breakfast. She was waiting for him to get back. Where he went, she didn't know, but she had a feeling of great anticipation. He had something planned.

She waited and thought about all the things that had been resolved.

Osric had met all three of the conditions to set him free. Paige got a message from him saying that his contract with Angelina was dissolved and replaced with a far better job. In short, no more electric shocks and twenty times more money. Apparently, Princess Angelina hired ten private detectives to help her solve her sister's case and the only one who came through was Osric. The rest of them were now up for sale at Sleeping Beauty Inc.

But, good news for M.T.N. sufferers. Now the scientists only needed to figure out how much Q1 to inject into a person's bloodstream and BOOM—the disease would be stopped in its tracks. However, they could only balance the disease, not cure it, so there were consequences. In other words, there was no helping the pee-colored saliva.

Thinking about that brought Paige's brain to the subject of Zaphier. His story was on T.V. and the time spent hanging out in a hotel room allowed for plenty of unbridled celebrity gossip. Once Elizabella found out that Zaphier was not responsible for her M.T.N. infection, she took him back, forgave him everything, wrote him back into her will, and helped him cover his past indiscretions so that he only had to pay fines for his crimes. The incident about pushing Paige off a cliff was not included in the news feeds. Paige's righteous indignation burned like hellfire, but she couldn't do anything about it, so she turned off the T.V.

Two minutes later, Harrison's swift knock came at the door, and shortly after, his body came into the room.

Paige kissed him instead of saying hello and made room for him on the bed since there was nowhere else in the room to sit down.

He touched her bare wrist. "We're going to have to do something about that."

"Why?" Paige balked. "I'm not going to run away and I'm more comfortable with it off."

"I know, but according to enslavement regulations, you have to wear a wristband to verify your identity, owner, and location. I don't make up the rules. Let's go get it fixed."

Paige got off the bed and slipped on her shoes.

"Are you going out like that?" Harrison asked, looking her over.

"Is there something wrong with the way I look? This is how I always look. I thought you liked me just fine the way I am," she said, eying him suspiciously.

"I do. It's just that where we're going, you might want to dress up just a little bit."

Paige glared at him evilly.

Harrison laughed. "It's not for me. I'm thinking only of you."

Actually, Paige had been on the verge of complying before he laughed. Now she wasn't going to change no matter what he said. "I thought you thought I was pretty with paint smeared across my cheek and nothing could damage my looks?"

"You're *especially* pretty with paint smeared across your cheek," he said, right before he laid a peck on her cheek. "And you look pretty with paint on your nose." He planted a kiss on her nose. "And on your forehead." He kissed her there too. "And on your neck."

She pushed him off. "That tickles!"

He fought her and pulled her into a hug. "Okay, you can come how you are, but really, you might be mad at me later for not insisting."

“No. I don’t want to go back to Sleeping Beauty Inc. lacquered up like a whore. I want to go looking like a workhorse,” she insisted, brandishing her blue jeans and grey T-shirt.

Harrison did a double-take. “You know, that’s almost exactly what Armand’s prison uniform looks like.”

“What?” Paige started. He could say anything—except that.

“I’m not joking. He was wearing a wife-beater and his jeans weren’t capris, but really—that’s what he was wearing.”

“I gotta change.”

Harrison caught her hand. “Actually, maybe it’s better that you don’t. I’ll take you shopping afterward and let you buy anything you want.”

“Anything? Are you crazy? Where would we get the money? Are you planning to take me for a shopping spree on credit?”

“No. I recently received a refund.”

Paige didn’t think to ask what he was refunded for. She only asked, “How much?”

“Plenty. Enough to take you shopping. Enough to finish the tower. Enough to redo my room. Even enough to add another wing onto the house if you want. So, how about it?” he asked, leading her out of the room.

Paige went with him. Was he always this nice?

They held hands as they left the hotel and got into a taxi. Once inside, Harrison said, “The courthouse please.”

The driver changed lanes and got into the flow of traffic.

“The courthouse? I thought we were going to Sleeping Beauty Inc.?”

“Nah. They terminated their contract with me, but that doesn’t mean you’re a free woman. Well, actually, I guess it does. It means you were a free woman—for me.”

“So, that’s where you got the money. They refunded the money you paid for me?”

Harrison nodded. “Gallant of them, wasn’t it? A little inconsiderate though, since we can’t go back to them about your wristband.”

“Whatever. What’s so special about the courthouse that I had to dress up? I’m sure that place is even less dressy than Sleeping Beauty Inc.”

Harrison shrugged his shoulders. “Don’t be so sure.”

The taxi let them off out front and Paige and Harrison walked in the mirror faced front doors. They came onto the polished marble floor, Paige took one look around and clutched Harrison’s arm. The place was vibrating with the sounds of high heels on stone. It wasn’t just female lawyers crossing the lobby, but brides; their trains billowing like a wind was blowing. There were men too—scads of them—and they were all in pristine suits.

Harrison was wearing dark blue jeans and a sweater. He looked better than her. She felt like a gooseberry in a berry patch full of blackberries.

But Harrison didn’t seem startled and instead crossed over to the reception desk. He said his name and mentioned the appointment he’d made.

“Yes,” the woman said through the tiny holes in the glass. Then, glancing at the monitor built into the desk in front of her, she said, “You’re a couple of minutes late, Mr. Fox. They’re waiting for you in meeting room C. I’ll let them know you’re coming now.”

“Thanks,” Harrison said,

Together, they crossed the lobby and ducked down a quieter hallway and down seven steps before stopping in front of meeting room C. Just before they went in, Harrison stopped and kissed her hand. “I love you.”

Then before she could answer, he threw open the door and hauled her in so fast she almost lost her balance.

Inside, there were three men in suits sitting on one side of a boardroom table. In front of every single chair, there was a monitor built into the table. Harrison pulled out a chair for her and let her sit down.

“Good to see you again, Mr. Fox,” the man in the middle said, rising to shake Harrison’s hand. Then he turned to Paige and shook hers too. “I’m Arron Billington. This is Graham Walters, and this is Michael Frost. We’re very pleased with your decision, Mr. Fox. An occasion like this doesn’t happen every day.”

“Purchased women don’t get their bracelets replaced every day?” Paige asked—completely confused.

Arron shot a puzzled look at Harrison.

Harrison sat down with a smile.

“I’m afraid there has been some mistake. We’re not here to replace your armband. Mr. Fox has signed the approval forms to have you released. You’re now a free woman.”

Paige stared at Harrison. He set her free? Paige’s brain didn’t even know how to compute that. “What does this mean?” she asked, looking directly into Harrison’s eyes and forgetting there were other people in the room.

“It means that I want you to marry me, but I don’t want you to be a prisoner. You can decide. If what you really want is to leave and try out life on your own again, I’ll give you the money to start again. But... If you are willing, I want you to marry me and stay with me. Will you?”

Paige had already been through this and she knew what she wanted. “I’ll marry you.”

“Wonderful!” Arron said on the other side of the table. “We have those forms ready too. But if you’ll just sign these forms first, we can bring up the marriage certificate right away.”

Paige took the pen within her sweaty fingertips and wrote her name in a diagonal line across the screen.

“Mr. Fox has already signed those, so we can move right onto the marriage certificate. Do you have vows prepared?”

Paige stared. “Uh, I didn’t know I was getting married today, so I don’t have any.”

“I do,” Harrison said without reservation. “I swear that I’ll do everything in my power to make you happy. I’ll listen to you and protect you and care for you. You will be the only one for me and I will love you forever.”

Paige had to squeak to stop her lip from shriveling up. “I don’t have anything ready.”

Harrison kissed her on the temple. He whispered. “It’s okay. The standard one will do. I have to repeat the standard one anyway.”

Paige nodded. “Okay.”

Paige’s vow was told to her out loud by Arron and she repeated it as follows. “I, Paige, take you, Harrison, to be my lawfully wedded husband, my constant friend, my faithful partner, and my love from this day forward.”

Harrison said his. “I, Harrison, take you, Paige, to be my lawfully wedded wife, my constant friend, my faithful partner, and my love from this day forward.”

Paige crushed her hands into Harrison’s in her lap, but the end of the talking came with, “You may now kiss the bride.”

Harrison drew Paige into his arms and kissed her.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Once upon a time, there was a woman who dreamed that when she woke up, all the things that had hurt her would be gone. She dreamed that all the things mothers accidentally tell their daughters when they read them fairy tales were true and not just stories.

Her fairy tale didn't end with a wedding that usually signifies the end of the story. It didn't end with her going to sleep and it didn't end with her waking up. Instead, it ended the moment that she realized her feet were warm, there was a glass of orange juice on the table next to her bed, and a very undressed man asleep next to her.

For Paige, there wasn't a better place to end the story because at that moment, he awoke and reached for her.

Weeks later, Harrison was wandering around the house when the doorbell rang. He padded over in his socks and answered it.

"Package for you," Wylan said with a grin.

"Are you delivering the mail now?" Harrison asked, moving aside to let Wylan in the house.

"Gotta take the work I can get, now that Narissa's expecting. The money has got to come in somehow."

Harrison took the box Wylan offered him and signed on the dotted line. "Congratulations. Wanna come in for some water or something?"

"Nope. Gotta get on to the next house. Later, Harrison."

Harrison chuckled and closed the door. That was one of the more miraculous developments in town ... and in life in general. Narissa, pregnant? Sheesh.

Harrison opened the box and inside was another box, wrapped in pretty wedding-style wrapping paper. Who on Earth could be sending them a wedding present? Harrison opened the card. "To Harrison. May our years together be bright and... smooth. Love, Paige."

It was from Paige? What was she talking about? Smooth?

He ripped off the wrapping paper.

It was a power sander. This time it was blue.

THE END

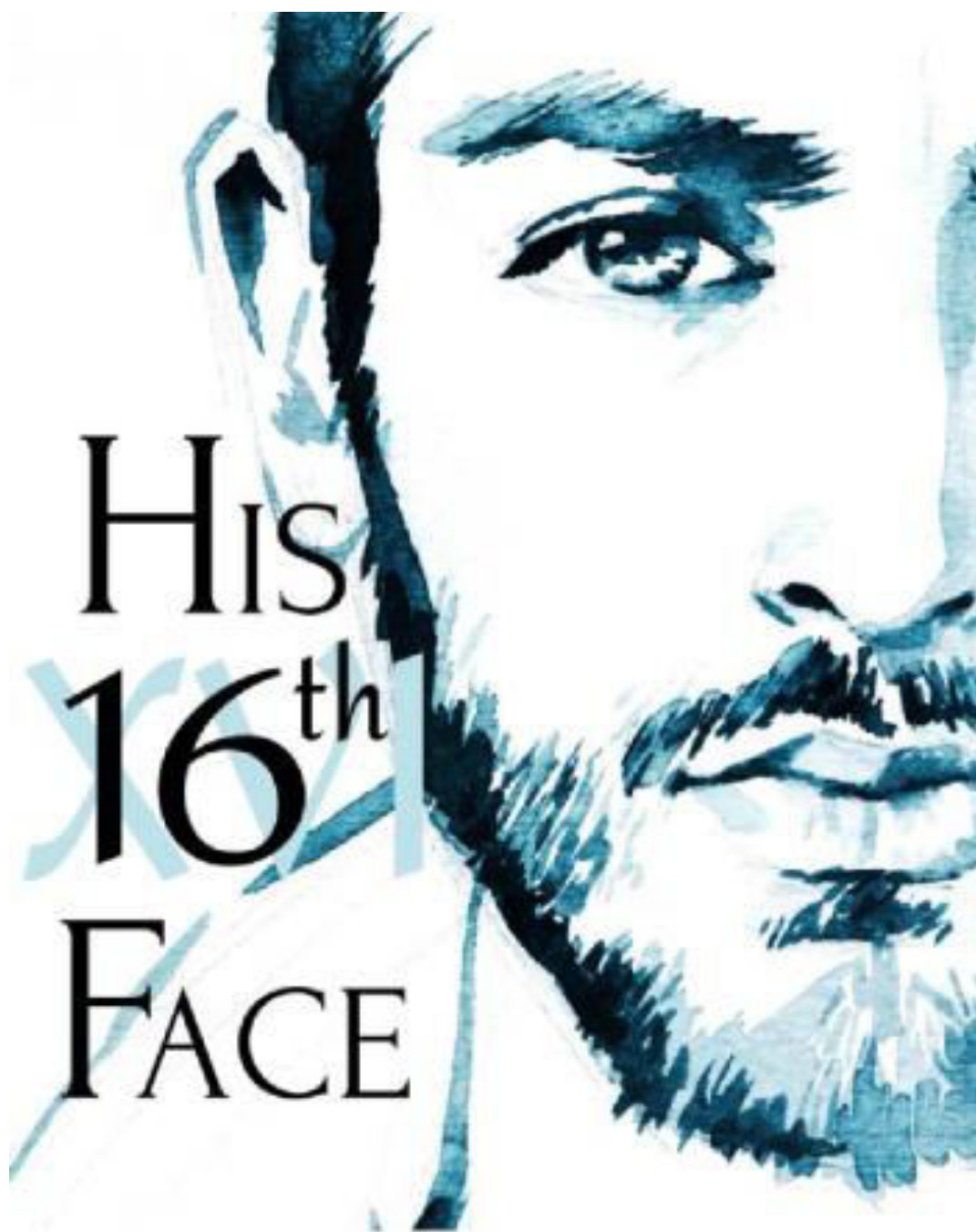
Dear Ink Drinkers,

It is a delight to write for you. I am an independent novelist. What does that mean? I'm a rebel without a publishing company. If you enjoyed this story, please consider supporting me in one of the following ways.

1. Leave a star rating. Go to the website you downloaded this and leave a star rating for this book. If there's any doubt, a five star rating is the most helpful for me.
2. Write a review. If you can take a moment to tell people how much you enjoyed this book, that's especially helpful.
3. Follow me on Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube (just search Stephanie Van Orman and you're in).
4. You could sign up for my quarterly newsletter or volunteer to be part of my ARC team on my website: <https://tigrix1.wixsite.com/stephanievanorman>
5. Follow me on my blog: <https://stephanievanorman.blogspot.com>
6. You could buy one of my books. Some of my titles are free. They're free because I wrote them a long time ago, and I'm no longer marketing them, but I have books that are newer that have small price tags attached to them. If you could buy one of those, that would be very helpful. In case you're curious, here is a list of my books.
 - His 16th Face
 - If I Tie U Down
 - Behind His Mask: The First Spell Book
 - Hidden Library: The Second Spell Book
 - Kiss of Tragedy
 - Whenever You Want
 - A Little Like Scarlett

As a special promo, I'll be including a preview of my novel *His 16th Face* for your reading pleasure.

All the love in the world,
Stephanie Van Orman
Novelist



His 16th FACE

The price of love is unimaginable

Stephanie Van Orman

His 16th Face by Stephanie Van Orman

Preview

“What's going on?” I whispered, startled in the darkness.

“I'm holding you,” Christian explained evenly.

Though he was familiar, the feeling of his arms around me was not. He lifted me clean off the bed as if I weighed nothing. In the rocking chair, he settled my head into the space between his chin and his shoulder. His breath feathered down my nose to settle on the moist curves of my lips.

I had to remain calm. If I showed I was excited, even with my heartbeat, the monitors would show it, the nurses would come in and the moment would be lost. I had to stay steady, pretend his warmth, his shape and his closeness meant nothing.

“Why would you do that?” I asked. Though I had never been given this much of him, already I wanted more—his voice. “Did the doctor tell you something about my surgery that he didn't tell me?”

“No,” Christian said, brushing my hair away from my face.

It was the blackest blue in the hospital room, but there were dashes of light everywhere: my monitors blinking my condition, the lights from the building across the courtyard, and the strip of yellow light under the door. We swayed in a waltzing rhythm in the rocking chair, almost like we were dancing. The chair was in the room because I was still young enough to be in the pediatric wing of the hospital. When I looked at it, I tried not to think about all the dead children who had been rocked, and felt their last moment of comfort, before they took those fateful steps into the world of spirits. I thought about the bodies they left behind and wondered how long children had continued to be rocked, even after they had left their fragile bodies behind.

Christian, my would-be guardian angel, held me like a princess in that chair, close to my monitors. He had never rocked me before, and certainly never visited me in the middle of the night. He should not have been there outside visiting hours, but he was there—the greatest gift I had ever been given. Nights alone in the hospital were the hardest. How many times had I dreamed someone was there with me, holding me? I shivered in my happiness. He pulled a blanket over my body and tucked me in like a little girl, except I was being tucked into his arms—enjoying every moment. He smelled expensive and like the grown-up man he was.

He was not holding me because of my girlish dreams. He simply didn't have the heart to stay away. Teenage girls dying of heart disease were irresistible, in that they couldn't be left alone. His feelings for me could not be what I wished. He sat in the chair and held me, a girl so perfectly on the cusp of womanhood, and rocked me as if to lull me to sleep.

If I had been dying under ordinary circumstances, perhaps he would not have visited me after midnight. My tragedy was deeper than the death that loomed ahead of me. Three months before, my parents had both been killed in a car crash. It was a thoughtless accident. My mother had been driving my father on a slick rainy night and while applying her lipstick, she slammed into the support beams of a bridge. She killed them both instantly.

The wreck never seemed real to me.

The problem was that I had never had much to do with my incredibly rich parents. I was always away from them, with nannies or tutors who tried to teach me ballet and how to play the piano. I was only mediocre at any of these paid-for activities. My mother wasn't good at

anything, except looking pretty, which she was skilled at beyond belief. Sadly, I contrived to look nothing like her.

The closest I had ever been to my parents was when they first found out I was sick and that my life was in danger. They pawed over me and petted me, making a fuss. It didn't last. It couldn't last. Not only were children incredibly boring company for socialites, but the gloom that came with the frequent hospital stays took an incredible toll on them. They couldn't handle it. I wasn't getting better and my decline was not fast enough to be a source of drama meaty enough to feed them.

That was when my father gave me a gift. He didn't understand much about me or my specific needs, but he understood that I shouldn't be alone. He asked an acquaintance who worked near the hospital, Christian Henderson, to look out for me. Dad needed my companion to assume guardianship since neither of my parents lived in Edmonton, where I was receiving my treatment. He needed someone he could understand, so he didn't get another nanny. He gave me Christian.

And Christian was glorious. He was patient, thoughtful, bright, so charming and heart winning, it was impossible to explain. I liked him better than all the doctors. He was a young man, not yet thirty. He wore button-down vests that suggested lean muscles underneath and had a habit of turning his entire body into nothing but angles. He would rest his elbow on his knee and place his forefinger on his temple to make triangles and diamonds of his limbs. Speaking through breaks in his fingers, his words always sounded better. Sometimes he'd place one finger on his nose bridge and the other between his eyebrows and look at me through the angle of his fingers like he was looking at me through glass that helped him see better. Truthfully, I realized that until he looked at me that way, I had never been seen. When my eyes shyly met his, I thought that neither my parents nor I were off to a terrible place in the hereafter. After all, there had to be a heaven since there was a Christian.

He took the news of my parents' passing hard. I knew that was why he had snuck in that night. I had surgery coming up in a few days and there was a very real possibility that I might not wake up from it. He held me and I couldn't feel alone, because he was there.

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and said to him softly, "You don't have to worry about me this much. It doesn't matter."

His eyes flicked toward me.

"It doesn't," I said, continuing listlessly. "I'm going to die soon. You know the odds I'll live through my next operation aren't good. That was why my parents weren't here. My mother couldn't stand to watch me die, and now she won't. Like the little match girl, there will be plenty of people to greet me when I slip out of this world. It doesn't matter, because I was hardly even here." I hoped my words would ease some of the pressure he felt, but I was only fourteen and didn't know how to spin it to make him feel the relief I wanted for him.

Christian looked at me and his eyes were all compassion and personal unrest. "And what if I was your fairy godfather and could twirl you around and make one final wish come true?"

I scowled. "The last thing I want is for you to be my father." My chest hurt and I put a hand to it.

Christian lifted my free hand and took my heart rate. He never paid attention to the monitors and insisted on feeling my heart for himself. My body betrayed me by showing my enthusiasm. Christian could feel the difference. He didn't like the result and reached for the call button.

"Stop it," I said, putting a hand to his chest. "Can't I have a different heart rate when you offer me a wish? What's your heart rate?"

He laughed slightly and offered me his wrist.

"Can I listen to your heart instead?" I whispered.

"Is that your wish?"

I nodded solemnly.

He smoothed out his shirt over his heart and allowed me to hear it. Listening to the soft pounding made my insides melt, but then another sharp pain flared in my chest.

I gasped and curled myself into a ball.

"Are you all right?"

"It's passing," I gasped, rubbing my chest. "It's passing. It's okay."

He put a hand to his forehead and tried to smooth out his concern. I had pains in my chest so often, and the small ones didn't mean much. "I'm sorry, Beth. When your father asked me to watch over you, I hoped I'd bring you flowers once a week, along with some contraband, and we'd laugh a bit."

"This level of tragedy was not what you expected?"

"No," he breathed. "This is exactly what I expected. Exactly what I've already gone through many, many, times. Only this time, it feels worse. Like you're mine and I should be able to save you. Like I should be able to stand as a fortress between you and death, and I can't. I can't do anything."

I had to think of something for him to do that would comfort him, and make him feel like he had done something for me. My brain settled on a thought I had every time I closed my eyes for a procedure. "If I can have one more wish. There is something I want. Something you can do."

Christian's fingers ran in little patterns down my arm. "Tell me."

"You could kiss me."

"I can't," he said, his voice clipped in the darkness.

"It's the middle of the night. No one would know. I would carry it to my grave. I don't want to die without being kissed and there is nothing else I want."

It was silent as I waited for his answer. Finally, he said, "If I do this, you can never tell anyone."

I gave my promise.

He shook his head slightly like he didn't want to before he turned, bent his head, and touched his lips against mine. At first, he stayed perfectly still with his lips sealed shut and the slight fluttering of our breath intermingling. Then ever so slowly, he began moving his lips, and it was completely wonderful. He understood! I didn't want a little girl kiss like a peck on the forehead. I wanted a full-blown, romantic kiss that would leave me windblown long after it was finished. I responded by kissing him the way he kissed me. It was only seconds before he had taken it too far and my heart was hammering out of control. My monitors began beeping wildly and Christian suddenly let go of me.

He looked at my flushed cheeks and the smile on my face.

"This is wrong," he said defiantly.

"I won't tell anyone," I reassured him and tried to think of something to say that would make him kiss me again.

Before I could say another word, I was neatly deposited back in my bed, Christian had flicked my bed lamp on and a nurse had entered the room to check on me.

"I'm going to be moving Beth to a different hospital," he informed her curtly.

"You can't," she stuttered. She had been my nurse for a long time. "She can only be moved by her legal guardian."

“That's me. I'll be removing her tonight.”

The nurse was appalled but took him to the front desk to make the necessary arrangements. There was a lot of work to do to get me transferred to a different hospital.

Something inside Christian had snapped. I had never seen him like that before. He had always been friendly. When my parents died, he had been both crestfallen and charming to make my pain less, but in those moments after he kissed me, he had changed completely to a man I didn't know. The boyish charm was gone in a single breath. Suddenly, he had become someone who knew all about action and even how to change the entire world.

My head was spinning as I was detached from my machines and bundled into the backseat of his car, where he had set up a bed for me. He buckled my seatbelt and closed the door. I pulled a gray wool blanket over my legs and gazed at him as he got behind the wheel. I had never felt so safe in my whole life. Then we were on the road with the stars being the only things moving as quickly as we were. Where we were going, I didn't know. Why he thought a different hospital would be better didn't make sense to me. I was already at a better hospital, which was why I wasn't near my family in Toronto, but in Edmonton.

It didn't matter.

What happened next has always been a blur in my mind. I don't even remember getting out of the car. I remember green walls and the operating room lights in my eyes. Then, nothing. In my haze, I knew they were going to cut me and I didn't know if I would wake up again. I looked around for Christian, but I didn't see anyone. There seemed to be no one there but the doctor. Then the anesthetic kicked in and there was blackness.

That was my last operation. I had another scar down the center of my chest to add to my collection, but I never closed my eyes on an anesthetic again. My recovery felt slow, but was fast according to the new doctors in Mexico when I awoke. To my astonishment, I was recovering at a private hospital in a tiny village on the coast and spent most of my days lounging on the beach and sipping something cold.

What treatment did these doctors have that the doctors in Edmonton didn't? Aside from my scars, I felt perfect.

The whole while, Christian was there, reading to me, then diving into the water for a quick stretch. He needed a lot of quick stretches.

I asked him questions in those days. What happened? How was I healed? He always pretended he didn't hear me and if I pressed the question, he would walk away, promising to be back soon. I was too weak to hound him and eventually I understood that he would never tell me what happened, or what he had done.

In his silence, I finally understood that he had done something unthinkable, possibly criminal, something he did not believe he could do to stand as a fortress between me and death. It was a secret. He would look at me across a room and I could feel secrets simmering between us, secrets we had together and secrets we kept from each other.

My secret was the love I felt for him because my feelings for him had to be caged. We couldn't be lovers. He was a man thirteen years older than me, and he had become my legal guardian. The reality of that fact meant that everyone believed that our relationship resembled parent and child, even if he was not my biological father. How unsavory it would be if the people around us got an inkling of my feverish longing. It had to be hidden from everyone: from him, from the world, and sometimes from myself.

Alone, I could acknowledge my true feelings. I loved him completely. I dreamed of the day when the secrets that stood between us would crumble to dust and only we would be left.

AVAILABLE NOW WHERE FINE EBOOKS ARE SOLD!