



IF
DIAMONDS
COULD TALK

The price of love is unimaginable

Stephanie Van Orman

Sequel to His 16th Face

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CHAPTER ONE

Screaming Through Glass

I was in the changing room of a high-end clothing boutique. Christian was choosing clothes for me. This time, he was buying me a dress. The frock I was trying on was pink blush with thousands of sequins and feathered material in the skirt. The price tag read that it was forty-six thousand dollars, but I was choosing a dress to wear to an important event, so the price tag didn't matter.

I parted the curtain of the changing room and stepped out into the open. It was the most luxurious clothing store I had ever been in. Sunlight came into the room from a skylight and reflected on the mirrors that surrounded me, giving me a perfect view of what I looked like in the dress.

Christian entered the room with a steady stride holding a white dress that could only be a wedding dress. For once, his face was not a disguise. His nose was so pointed, he looked like all his lies had caught up with him. His hair was blond and spiked like he still wanted to do his hair like Rogan. With his characteristic careless smile, he asked me to try the dress on.

I took it from him, smiling too because I couldn't help it. "You want me to try *this* on?" I took the dress from him and examined its folds. "Are you asking me to marry you?"

His expression changed to the smirk that dared me to be different. "I'm asking you to try it on." He took a step back from me and leaned against the doorframe.

I turned my back on him and was about to slip behind the curtain when his voice stopped me.

"You don't need to hide."

"Excuse me?"

"I said, you don't need to hide." He looked at me with eyes that were both patient and curious. He sought to test my limits.

"I don't want the shop girls to see me," I replied smoothly.

"I wouldn't worry about them," he said. "They've seen women without their clothes. They're dressmakers. Besides, they're too busy to bother popping in here. We're alone. It's fine. Take your clothes off."

I was uncomfortable, but I didn't like to balk. I wanted to marry him. I had told him so. Certainly, I had meant it. Swallowing a lump in my throat, I undid the concealed zipper in the side of the blush gown and allowed it to fall to the floor. Standing there in my bra and panties, I reached for the wedding gown.

Christian was smiling at me, but it wasn't a smile I had seen lately. It was a smile reserved for when he placated an innocent child. I was the child in this scenario.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"This isn't what I meant when I asked you to show yourself to me."

I hesitated.

He cleared his throat and clarified. "I meant for you to strip, not down to your underwear, but down to the bone."

Glancing at one of the many mirrors that faced me, I now saw the skin above my breasts was gone and I was staring at my bare ribcage, and the heart inside me pulsed behind ribs like prison bars.

My panic was interfering with my judgment. The grin that played on Christian's face was one I'd never seen before.

What did a smile like that mean? It wasn't the smile he wore when he dared me to be something more. It wasn't the smile he wore when he said goodbye. What was that expression? Was it pride?

My hands reached for my chest, but I could feel nothing as I tried to slide my fingers between my ribs, feeling for his heart inside me like I was reaching for a star—nothing I could hold in my hands.

At that point, my dream had become too far-fetched for me to accept as reality. I woke up, replacing my inner vision with the blackness around me. This chair here, the bed pointed in this direction, and squares of soft light coming in patches from recognizable locations.

I was on Tombstone Mountain in the castle made to test immortals. In my bed, I was dreaming of a Christian who did things the real Christian would never do. He didn't tease me about stripping for his amusement or suggest that having his heart made me his possession. My brain was making up garbage while I was asleep, which meant I was having a nightmare.

In the dark, I felt the metal ring that kept me a prisoner. It was not around my ankle the way it had been when I first arrived. Instead, it was pierced through the skin between my Achilles tendon and my ankle bones. Using the Red Forest, I had been able to push it through skin, vein, and tendon, but pushing it through the bone was impossible. I knew now that was why my body had directed the bullet in my brain down my throat when I had been shot in the head. There were pathways there that didn't involve penetrating bone.

My inability to manipulate bone also meant that the hole in my head where the bullet went in was not completely healed. Everything was where it was supposed to be, but the bone wasn't intact.

I didn't understand why bone should behave differently than the other parts of my body, all of which seemed to be at my command. I had considered breaking my ankle more than once to remove the ring, but I knew Brandon, my captor, wouldn't stand for it. I'd wake up with the ring on my other ankle and have to start all over again. The ankle I'd broken would still be broken like the dime-sized hole in my head I hadn't been able to fill.

It was dark outside. It was dark almost all day, every day. I had to be very far north to have so few hours of daylight. Christian had not come to rescue me. It was like waiting for him in the hotel when I ran away from boarding school to get his attention, except less fun because I had visitors.

Sometimes, Brandon and Pricina came to see me.

The immortals were not normal and they enjoyed showing me their grand abilities. Pricina would raise a piece of glass in the middle of the room and once it had filled the whole space from wall to wall, from floor to ceiling, she and Brandon would enter the room and sit on the other side. Sometimes, they just came in through a door. Sometimes they had to move stones in order to make a doorway for them to enter. Each block moved smoothly and nonsensically, exactly the way I ordered my cells around in the Red Forest. Once they had made themselves comfortable, Pricina would make holes in the glass. Tiny little holes for us to speak through and Brandon would begin.

It was always the same.

"Have you been going to the Red Forest?" Brandon would ask briskly.

"You've been watching me, so you must know that I have been," I would reply.

I probably spent half of each day sitting on my ankle bone in the Red Forest. In my mind, it looked like a bridge made of bone. I could see the whole silver ring from my place in the Red Forest, even though only a small portion of the ring was actually in my body. The ring was laced

through the bone bridge. It hung over brown bloodied land and a river of sparkling ruby waves (my body's depiction of a bloodstream). I spent my time there trying to find another way to get the metal ring through the bone rather than the one Brandon was about to suggest.

"Why won't you go to the heart?" he asked, forgetting all about his old Scottish accent. Now he spoke with an accent so strange I couldn't identify it. His new voice made him seem like more of a stranger than when he was mute. Alien to me, he continued, "It is the entrance to all of Christian's knowledge."

I would roll my eyes. This line of conversation was difficult to listen to because he and Pricina didn't want Christian. That was why Brandon had left him behind when he kidnapped me by the side of the road. They didn't want him because the important part of him was inside me, riding around in my chest like I was a fancy safety deposit box. Without his heart, it seemed, Christian did not know who he was. He knew he was immortal, but he didn't know the details. How did he become immortal? He didn't know. How do you make another person immortal? Still, he didn't know beyond an educated guess. He didn't know the inner workings, and Brandon and Pricina wanted answers to more difficult questions than those.

"If you open his heart and go inside, you'll learn everything you need to know," Brandon said, attempting to sound persuasive.

It didn't sound persuasive to me. We had been doing this for months. That was why there was so little light in the castle. It had been the end of summer when I had been kidnapped. We had slipped into autumn, passed the equinox, and my birthday. Now as we came closer to the winter solstice, the night was so deep, it was practically outer space.

I hated them.

I hated Brandon and how I had once trusted him. Christian had trusted him!

In my rage, I had attempted to break the glass between us more than once. I threw a chair. I threw lamps. I threw myself.

It didn't matter what I did, Pricina could do more than alter her body. She could alter the matter that surrounded her. Any glass I broke would immediately reform into a glistening sheet. She could do it so quickly I couldn't even reach Brandon to slap him across the face before the glass was remade.

Otherwise, she leaned back in whatever seat she occupied and smoothed her brown skin like a cat grooming itself. She was a lot like a cat. Her face did not show that she felt one way or another about the interviews she oversaw with Brandon and me. She never spoke or took a side. Her sole purpose was to keep the glass in place. She was elegant and beautiful far beyond anyone I had ever seen. Her creamy beauty made Felicity-Ann (who I had once envied for her appearance) look crude and tacky. It was tempting to hate her as much as Brandon, who I thoroughly hated now, but it was impossible. She didn't do anything hateful. She merely protected Brandon by keeping the glass up.

Slowly, her presence helped me understand. "Why do you bring her?" I asked Brandon in a tone that was accusing. "Can't you keep the glass up yourself?"

"Uh," he replied, taken off-guard.

It was true! He didn't have the ability to manipulate the glass or rearrange the stones of the castle himself.

"She's here as an example for you," he replied, trying to sound reasonable.

I nodded, not like I believed him, but like I thought he was more full of crap than any other person on earth. From experience, I knew I wasn't going to like the next thing he said.

“You shouldn’t be afraid to go into Christian’s heart inside the Red Forest,” he said, his accent getting a little thicker. “I told you, you are allowed in that sacred place. You’re his wife.”

It was this little tidbit that had kept me out of Christian’s heart in the Red Forest. Whenever Brandon brought this up, I was filled with a little more rage.

“He didn’t marry me!” I would yell back. “He *asked* me to marry him and if you had left us alone for four more hours, I would have married him, but that didn’t happen!” If my screaming became deafening, Pricina would close the holes in the glass to keep the sound to a minimum.

Brandon continued trying to persuade me. “A marriage ceremony with only vows spoken would have meant comparatively little. I told you. I performed the marriage ceremony when I performed the surgery that gave you his heart.”

“There’s this neat thing called consent,” I bit back frostily. “You can’t marry a fourteen-year-old girl to an ancient, immortal man without consent.”

“Consent had been given,” Brandon replied calmly. “No matter which way you want to look at it. You were sleepy, but I asked you if you wanted to die or if you wanted to receive Christian’s heart, become his wife, and live forever. You replied that you understood and you never wanted to leave him.”

I hated it when Brandon mentioned this because I did remember waking up on the operating table. I just didn’t remember him talking to me. He did wake me up, but I had no idea I was agreeing to anything. If I had been completely awake, I knew I wouldn’t have believed him, but I would have agreed to anything. I had three days to live. In retrospect, it seemed unforgivable to tell a child if they didn’t agree to get married, they’d die.

Of course, when thinking of it that way, you don’t really get the idea that the groom could be a man like Christian. He was as reckless as he was attractive and a perfect gentleman.

No matter what Brandon said about true marriage being ‘bone to each other’s bone and flesh to each other’s flesh’, the mandatory trading of body parts among immortals to bond them together, and not a simple promise to love one another for the rest of your lives, I didn’t believe for a second that that was how Christian felt about it when he gave me his heart.

“You can’t have a true union between two immortal beings without the exchange of body parts. Among us, it has different consequences than if your lover gave you their kidney and you gave them yours. With humans, nothing special would be transferred but an organ meant to filter blood and discard waste. Yes, Christian gave you his heart, but so much more. He gave you himself. All those things he can’t remember... all the blanks he can’t fill... you will be able to fill them. It was a gift he gave to you on top of everything else he gave you: life, immortality, healing, beauty, agelessness. Through his heart, you can unlock the secrets of universal creation.”

I hated Brandon’s guts. The more he talked, the more he made it sound like he had performed the surgery in order to gain Christian’s knowledge for himself. He couldn’t take a part of Christian’s body and he knew I’d be an easier lock to pick than Christian. If anything, it sounded like Brandon had convinced his friend to take his treasure out of his vault and put it in a cardboard box.

I was the cardboard box in that simile.

I clenched my teeth.

I wouldn’t let him get anything.

I fought Brandon in every way I could, contradicting him, mocking him, and arguing with him every step of the way. He couldn’t make me do it, but he had a lot of energy for debate and all the time in the world.

“I couldn’t give consent. I was fourteen,” I’d argue.

“Your legal guardian can allow you to get married before you’re eighteen if you have their consent. Your legal guardian agreed to it.”

Brandon was talking about Christian, my legal guardian at the time. He was desperate to save me. He would have agreed to anything. Christian obviously knew that Brandon considered us married after the operation, but it didn’t mean the same thing to him. Even after the dust had cleared and Christian and I started living our lives with me living at the boarding school and only staying with him for holidays, Christian never told me what joined us or asked me for anything that signified that he considered me his wife. There were sparks, glances, and hidden longing, but it was covered in a thick glaze of propriety.

No matter what Brandon said, Christian did not consider me his wife and what violation would I be guilty of if I stormed into his heart without his permission?

I didn’t know what could happen. I’d never visited Christian’s heart inside the Red Forest for fear that it would interest me too much. I had explored the rest of my body. I knew how the Red Forest twisted and turned, how it looked completely different in my hands, compared to my neck, compared to my thighs, and compared to my gut.

More than anything, I did not want to allow Brandon even one concession. His logic sickened me. I could not be a man’s wife unless he declared me so with his own mouth.

“You should bring me Christian,” I said, practically spitting through the holes in the glass. “If he says I’m welcome in his heart, I’ll go. I’ll go. But he has never claimed me as his wife, so I don’t believe anything you’ve said. Bring him here. Have him marry me in a ceremony I can understand and I’ll do what you ask.”

This was when Brandon would look uncomfortable. If he and Pricina knew where Christian was, which I doubted, they would not bring him to me. He was not a part of their plans. Whatever information was stored inside his heart, Christian himself didn’t have it on him. They didn’t want him. They wanted me.

And I wouldn’t give them anything.

CHAPTER TWO

The Way Down to the Heart

All the screaming was about the bone in my ankle. Brandon told me repeatedly that the information they sought from Christian's heart was specifically related to getting the ring around my ankle through the bone. If I would stop being so difficult and go to the heart, I would find the information, and then any chains placed around me now, or in the future, would be meaningless. According to Brandon, I'd learn how to escape from anywhere, even the castle that surrounded me.

Aside from escaping their awful castle, I had no idea why they wanted me to gain that ability. Brandon didn't explain anything. He just sought to persuade me to go to the heart.

"Go to his heart."

"Beat the door down."

"Burrow inside."

"Eat what's there."

"It's your heart now."

I felt sick.

As I mentioned, I celebrated my twenty-second birthday alone in the castle. At least, I guessed I'd had my birthday. I wasn't overly interested in what day it was anymore. Brandon didn't mention it and it didn't matter much.

Even without going to Christian's heart, I gained piles of knowledge from the Red Forest. Since I realized my power over my body, I changed anything about it I didn't like. Moles disappeared, hair fell out or grew more plentifully, as I desired. Muscles grew and fat disappeared. While I made modifications, I found it was actually impossible to hit the nail on the head. I had been given perfect control over my body and I couldn't decide what was actually perfect when I looked in the mirror. I fiddled with my appearance constantly, especially my upper arms. What looked good when I looked down at them was a lot different than what looked good when I looked at myself in a mirror.

Aside from fiddling in the Red Forest, there wasn't much to do in the castle. There was a bathtub with a skylight over it, so I often filled the tub with hot soapy water, turned off the lights, and gazed into outer space.

Of all the rooms I could access in the castle without moving stone, the kitchen was the least thrilling. It wasn't because it wasn't beautiful. It was. It was just that it had been stocked with food that did not make anyone's mouth water. There was powdered milk, condensed milk in cans, rice, flour, and other canned food. The canned food was as exciting as canned food got, meaning I ate olives out of the bottle, mandarin oranges, and pie filling. I supposed I had the ingredients to make a pie. If I had known how to make a pie, that probably would have been the best thing I could have made.

Except I didn't know how to make anything with the ingredients they supplied with no recipe books, so I watched the snow fall and ate pickled beets from the jar.

I was very bored. I would have started writing on the walls in blood if the walls hadn't been hewn out of rough stone. It wouldn't have had any effect on Brandon or Pricina anyway. Pricina could change anything she wanted.

That morning I had cream of wheat, made with water and I really hated it. I ended up opening a can of pears that I had been saving because it depressed me so much.

When I was finished, I tugged my chain, dragging it noisily across the polished marble, and got back into bed. I wrapped the blankets around me cocoon-style and closed my eyes. I wasn't going to sleep. I was going to try again with my ankle in the Red Forest.

I went there every day without fail. I closed my eyes and disappeared into the place behind my eyelids. It was a place where the sky was brown. The trees grew with slick red bark and no leaves. I wore a black dress that fell over my shape as comfortably as a nightgown. It was the place I went for a split second before I died, and because I was willing to make sense of what I saw, I was able to stop a bullet from killing me—the Red Forest.

At the spot where the ring pierced my ankle, I sat on the chrome ring. I swung on it like it was a circus swing and pounded my figurative fists against the ivory wall that was my ankle bone like it was a door that would not open. I asked blood insects that floated by what they knew, but they only knew what I knew: bones were not blood. Bones were blood factories.

That was the problem I had been contemplating when I went to sleep and dreamed of the dearest man in the world, Christian, asking me to undress for him. The dream had not been inspiring. That was not the way Christian ever treated me. My subconscious made him that way because I had been trapped for so long.

What was Christian like again? Could I remember? Sometimes he felt like something I had imagined because everything in the real world sucked.

When I tried to ask the Christian in my memory what he would do about Brandon, he didn't say a word. He only looked at me levelly with that look in his eyes as if to ask me if there was anything he wouldn't do.

That was the crux. Christian would do anything. Cut off his hand? Cut out his heart? He would do absolutely anything. He had no limits.

If I was going to be like him, would I have to give away my limits too?

I often thought about escaping the castle. It was probably possible... to a certain degree. I could break my ankle to get the ring off. Perhaps breaking the chain the ring was connected to was a better way, but I had every reason to believe that if a link was broken, it would bring Pricina down on me. Breaking my ankle would probably work better, but would I be able to heal it, escape the castle, and make it to safety before Pricina caught me? My chances were poor.

The terrain outside the castle was the harshest on the planet. A bullet to the head was one thing, but hundreds of miles of snow-capped mountains were something else. I couldn't open a window and the outside temperature was a mystery. It could be the sort of weather wherein people lost fingers and ears.

Brandon and Pricina had orchestrated this scenario so that I had no other way forward, like a mouse in a tunnel instead of a maze.

If I continued to resist going to Christian's heart, what end would there be?

This was damnation. As long as I was in the castle, I was damned.

When I looked at the remaining roads ahead of me, I saw three paths. Christian might try to rescue me. Without the secrets he hid in his heart, there was no part of him that was as powerful as Pricina. If he had once had power like that at his disposal, he wouldn't have needed me to help him retrieve Brandon's head from the compound. He would have been able to do that himself without losing a hand. He wasn't strong enough to rescue me.

Secondly, Brandon might give up on me and let me go. I snorted. He wasn't going to get tired. He wasn't going to think it wasn't worth his effort to keep working on me. He was immortal. He had time to spare and he'd steal all of my time if I let him keep me locked up.

Thirdly, there was chaos. Something unexpected might set me free.

When I thought that, I realized that I had reached the end of possibilities, except the one Brandon suggested.

I had to do what Brandon said without letting him know. I had to sneak into Christian's heart and when I was free, I'd chop off Brandon's head again. It turned out that I liked him better without it. Rolling my eyes, I amended my thought. Perhaps taking his whole head was overkill. I'd cut his tongue out at least. I wasn't a barbarian.

I swung up and leaped off the ring. Gravity was like a dream in the Red Forest, and I floated until I landed on the pads of my unchained feet on the bone bridge. Swinging my steps like a little girl who wasn't in a hurry, I walked the long way through the Red Forest, all the way from my ankle to Christian's heart. The walk, though imaginary, did me good. It gave me time to think.

When I arrived at the place of Christian's heart, the sky above was almost stormy. Clouds made from the hot air in my lungs also made this part of me darker than the rest. The first thing I felt was a hot wind. The world inside me was a humid forest where I was the queen of everything. I saw insects, sometimes small animals scurrying on business of their own, a perpetual crimson night with no moon and no stars. The black flounces of my skirt flapped around my legs like flags in the wind. I stood on the outskirts of the Red Forest, gazing into a clearing.

I stood outside Christian's heart. Before I arrived, I imagined his heart appearing as a forest inside a forest, denser and darker. It was nothing of the sort. It was a building like a shrine or a temple. It had a sloped tile roof and no windows.

In front of me was a stone path of flat black stones. They seemed to be floating in a pool of blood surrounding the shrine. The blood stirred like it couldn't stay still because it lived to form little peaks on the surface of the pool.

I placed my black ballerina slipper on the first stone and stepped forward onto the stepping stones that made me cross blood.

As I got closer, the wind came hotter and faster. I was feeling my blood pump, not a wind, but it felt hot as I breathed it. Again, I was in a place I should not have been. I had become a person who lived exclusively in places humans did not go. A normal person is not allowed to look inside the heart of their lover, as it is their core, and no place could be more sacred or holy.

It had to be mine now.

As I stood there, I felt a fresh wash of hatred toward Brandon. He was forcing something that never should have been forced. If Christian meant me to have access to all of this, he never got the chance to tell me.

I may have been justifying myself, but I told myself that if Christian loved me so much that he was willing to give up his heart so that I could have life, I knew he was willing to give up even more for my freedom. I had to put aside the imperfection of the situation and swallow or I'd be a prisoner forever. I knew, without a doubt, that living in the castle was not what Christian wanted for me.

I stepped over the threshold into the first chamber of his heart.

Black beams stretched across the ceiling. Heavy black posts held up the roof. The floor was carpeted with layer after layer of luxurious red carpets. Following the lengths of carpets, they led to a throne. Christian occupied it.

In my excitement, I called his name, but immediately I realized he couldn't hear me. His eyes were closed. He was dressed completely in dark red: red shoes, red trousers, a red vest, and a

slightly open red shirt. He wore a crown on his head, a single circlet of pewter that contrasted this blond hair. It hung loosely, tipping toward one eye.

I wanted to wake him and speak to him, but suddenly I felt it was better to understand every room before I disturbed him. I held my peace and proceeded further into the shrine.

In the second chamber, I was surprised to see Christian again. This time he was lying on a slab of black stone. He wasn't dressed but had an incredibly long piece of black silk draped over his groin that fell to the floor on either side. He had round black stones arranged in patterns across his chest, arms, and face. Two stones rested on his eyes and another over his mouth.

The room had a mirror on the wall. I looked at myself in it. I was thrilled with what I saw. It wasn't the way I saw myself when I looked into a mirror. Those mirrors always showed me what was wrong with me, what was incomplete. My reflection here must show the way Christian saw me. This mirror showed love. I swelled with emotion. The dream I had earlier was a distortion of the greatness of the man I loved.

I continued on.

By the third room, I expected to see a new version of Christian there. He was hanging from a rope from the ceiling. Not by his neck, but by his right arm. The rope wasn't tied to him. He was not hanging there because he was trapped. His fingers were knotted tightly around the rope like he wouldn't let go no matter what happened next. He was tattooed everywhere with words. I couldn't read them and I couldn't find a part of his body that was not written on. I had to circle him to find his face. It was marred by hundreds of words tattooed in black ink. I could make out a few of the letters, but I could not distinguish even one complete word. He wore trousers like a doctor's scrubs, with a white cotton undershirt marked in the occasional bloodstain.

A pool of water was under him. If he let go of the rope, he would fall into the water. What was bad about the water? I got down on my knees and dipped my fingers in the dancing ripples. I understood less than I had before as I shook off the water. How deep was it? There didn't appear to be a bottom. Thrusting my arm in the water up to my shoulder, I couldn't find the bottom. I thought of jumping in but refrained. This was a sacred place, not a place where you splashed around for fun or curiosity.

In the last chamber, there was a pole in the center of the room. Christian was tied to it. His arms were wrapped around the mast and his wrists were heavily tethered. His ankles were tied too. There was a gag in his mouth and a blindfold over his eyes. He wore weathered jeans and a white dress shirt that was barely done up. With so many cords wrapped around his wrists, it was difficult to tell which ones were holding him captive and which were a fashion statement.

None of the versions of Christian moved. None of them fluttered an eyelash. I walked back through the chambers of his heart and wondered what each of the figures meant. If I were guessing, I would say that he had to be strapped down, silenced, blindfolded, and unconscious in order for him to live forever. He told me he had to forget who he was in order to bear the pain of immortality. Did these men represent lives he'd lived? Or something else entirely?

As I reflected on the problem, I found myself in the second chamber. I saw the version of Christian that lay on the altar with shining river rocks placed strategically over his eyes and down his body.

All at once, I thought that I ought to try to wake him.

"Christian," I said.

Nothing happened.

I tried his real name, "Damon."

I was about to yell when I realized that if my presence and my voice didn't wake him, then my screaming certainly wouldn't.

He had rocks all over him. What if I took them off?

I reached forward and plucked one of the stones off his abdomen. It uncovered the prettiest patch of tan skin and curved muscle beneath. I turned the rock over in my hand and saw there was a word etched in gold on the underside. It resembled one of those pretty inspirational stones I'd seen in gift shops that moms bought that had words like *faith* or *love* written on them. Christian's stone bore the word *control*.

Instantly, I felt that I should not have picked it up.

I tried to put the stone back, but it would not go back. There was an invisible force preventing me from returning it. I turned the rock in my hand and tried to figure out what I ought to do with it. On the side that had been blank new words appeared. The words read *swallow me*.

That honestly seemed like the worst thing I could do or ought to do. I shouldn't swallow a rock.

I tried to set the stone down in a different place on Christian's skin, but each place repelled the rock even harder. I was starting to panic. I tried to drop it on the floor, but it stuck to my fingers like a magnet. It slipped all over my skin without letting go.

I pulled at it with both hands and when that failed, I tried to use my chin to push it free and was immediately more successful than my hands had been. Yet, not completely. It was coming free, but it hadn't let go. In my frenzy to push it off, my mouth was a little open and the stone brushed my lips. Realizing my mistake, I dropped my hands and licked my lips as a reflex, only to taste something I'd never tasted before.

Impossible to describe, it was sweet, but also savory. I probably would not have been so interested in the taste of that stone if I had been given anything better to eat by Brandon and Pricina. They knew the trials I faced and they fed me lackluster food in order to make me crave something delicious. The emptiness in my stomach, which hadn't bothered me much since I came to the castle, was suddenly unbearable.

I wouldn't eat it. It was a rock. It was not food. I should not have picked it up, but I couldn't put it back. I told myself that the rock would drop off me if I tried to leave the building with it in hand. I went to the door and flung it open. The rock went with me as I stepped onto the first stepping stone. Dropping to my knees, I put my hands in the pool of my own blood to break the bond the stone had with my skin.

It didn't work.

I'd failed and the stone consumed my mind so that I could not concentrate enough to leave the Red Forest and wake up in bed.

I went back inside the shrine.

What I felt was all wrong. I shouldn't want to eat it.

I don't know how many hours passed as I sat alone in the second chamber of Christian's heart before I caved. I didn't want to, but I never felt so satisfied in my life as I was the moment I put that rock in my mouth and bit down on something soft and scrumptious. Control tasted better than anything else I'd ever tasted. I felt warmth slide down my throat and the moment it hit my stomach, something surprising happened.

I knew how to move bone.

I ran from the building and I didn't stop running until I made it to my ankle where I saw the chrome ring exactly where I'd left it. Stepping up to the place in my bone, I took my finger and scored out the section that needed to move. When I finished I stepped back and snapped my

fingers. The section of bone fell apart like lego blocks. I ordered my tendons to push the ring through like the strings of a suspension bridge moving in all the wrong ways.

Then I dropped to my knees and slowly, by hand, I rebuilt the bone bridge piece by piece. It was not like the other parts of the body that could bend and change. As a bone, its function was to stay still, not to move. I had been right. If you wanted bone to move, you had to break it, but not the clumsy way I had been thinking of going about it. You had to do it carefully.

There were two bones that needed to be rebuilt. It was not the quick fix it had been when my father shot me in the head. It was a careful rebuild that took hours, maybe even days.

When I slid the last piece of bone into place, I returned to my senses in the castle and found the ring that had kept me captive abandoned between the sheets of my bed.

I grabbed it triumphantly. Then I panicked. I shouldn't have taken it off. Brandon would know I'd made progress. He knew I couldn't figure it out on my own, and I hated to give him the satisfaction.

I grabbed a scrunchie from my bedside table and twisted it around the ring. Then I slipped the loop of the scrunchie around my ankle. Then, at least, the chain would move with me until I could put the ring back through my ankle. If I was lucky, Brandon wouldn't notice my progress.

I was so excited. Brandon wouldn't know if I repaired the bullet hole in my skull. Knowing it was there had made me quite uncomfortable. Sadly, I couldn't do anything just then, I was too tired.

I fell asleep and as I slept there was a moon and stars in the Red Forest of my dreams.

CHAPTER THREE

The Taste of Control

When I woke up the next morning, Brandon and Pricina were in my room. They were on the other side of the glass partition Pricina created. They stared at me with faces as still as masks.

I tucked my ankle with the scrunchie around it under my bottom and resolved not to leave the bed until I had put the metal ring back through my ankle. I could not let them see the progress I'd made... unless they already knew.

"Have you found Christian yet?" I asked snarkily.

They didn't answer but continued staring. Did they know what I'd done?

"Are you even looking for him?" I tried again.

Brandon cleared his throat and said, "I think we've made a mistake not explaining the bigger picture to you."

I nodded impatiently. "Can we *not* talk today? Would that be even a little bit possible? Could you two just leave and maybe not come back ever? I'm pretty sure I'd rather die today than talk to you again, Brandon." This was not how I usually spoke to them. I had never before mentioned dying or that I'd like to die.

It made Brandon's eye twitch.

Pricina had a different reaction. For the first time, she smiled. I couldn't tell what emotion accompanied the expression. Was she happy? Or was it something else?

Brandon stuttered, his eyes wide in horror. "After you took a bullet to the head and lived? How do you plan to die? Are you thinking you could die if we never came back and you ran out of food?"

"The food you guys gave me sucks. I haven't complained because I thought that it was part of your grand design. Give me yucky food, make me desperate, and get me to do what you want. I want you to leave. I'll eat the food or I won't, but with my access to the Red Forest, I'm pretty sure I don't have to eat anymore. It's merely a luxury and with luxuries like powdered milk and quick oats to be had, who would care for your generosity?"

He clicked his tongue. "I see. We've been too hard on you. We should have done more to show you that we're your friends."

I snorted when he said the word 'friends'. Nothing about what the two of them had done since I arrived smacked of friendship. They had subjected me to the most humane form of torture, but they'd also separated me from Christian, which pissed me off.

"It's just that we're in a remote location and getting supplies here is tricky at best," Brandon said, still prattling on about the food.

"I don't care about your excuses or your pathetic offer of friendship. We are not friends. I don't need to eat and you don't need to come back here. I hate listening to you talk," I said with only the tiniest sprinkling of malice because I'd already tried throwing tantrums with very little success.

"Would you talk to her?" he asked, pointing to Pricina.

"If she's going to say the same crap as you, I'd rather not," I said bluntly.

"I won't," Pricina said crisply.

She glared downward and used her matter manipulation to drop the stones that made up the floor under Brandon and without warning, he fell through the cracks, chair and all. He screamed, but she sealed up the hole and blocked the sound.

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