

"An edge-of-your-seat ride." —LINNEA SINCLAIR



THE RULE OF LUCK

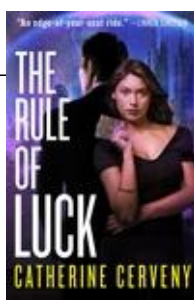
CATHERINE CERVENY

The Rule of Luck

Catherine Cerveny



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[Begin Reading](#)

[Meet the Author](#)

[A Preview of *The Chaos of Luck*](#)

[Newsletter](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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To Lily and Ellee, with all the love in the world.

Acknowledgments

I can honestly say I never thought I'd be writing something like this, so I wish I'd kept better track of things along the way. My husband always tell me I should write myself more notes and I mock him shamelessly for it, but in this case, he would definitely be right.

First, I'd like to thank my family for their love and support even if my mom was disappointed I didn't end up becoming a nurse, and my brother kept stealing my diary, reading it, and critiquing my entries. I'd also like to thank my husband, Steve, who reminds me about the mundane things like when it's tub-time, and maybe I should think about getting ready for bed before I get too caught up in the scene and forget I'm supposed to have a life too. He even built me my own library just so I could write in it. Not every girl gets that kind of lucky.

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Chapter One

I've always been a big fan of eyeliner. The darker, the better. Growing up, I'd heard the expression "Pretty is as pretty does" almost every day of my life—but I believe that sometimes pretty needs help. Since I've decided against tattooing my way to beauty or using gene modification; I do things the old-fashioned way. And as one of the only Tarot card readers in Nairobi, I've cultivated a certain look that is as much personal choice as mysterious mask. So the fact that I stood in the tiny bathroom of my card reading shop and scrubbed my face clean, opting for tasteful over flashy, made me feel like I'd been sold out.

"All for the greater good," I mumbled, examining my nearly naked face. "I can look straitlaced and respectable for an hour. Two, tops."

A quick time check showed it was nearly seven in the morning. It made me glad I'd decided to close up shop early at two and catch some sleep on the reception room couch. At least I didn't look like complete garbage, even if my sleep was more tossing and turning than actual shut-eye.

I hightailed it to the front door. I needed to be on the other side of the city by nine sharp. To do that in an hour using the unreliable Y-Line would take all the prayers and karmic brownie points I had to spare. Maybe if I lit some incense sticks and offered a prayer for guidance...but no, no time for that.

Then I had to stop, my hand frozen in mid-reach on the way to the doorknob. Standing in the entranceway of my shop was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. I know it's shallow to focus on looks since they are so easily bought and modified, and yet...

"I'd like a Tarot card reading, please," he said, his voice so deep, I was certain the windows rattled.

"I'm sorry, but we're closed. I can take your information and schedule an appointment for later this week." I infused my voice with as much formality as I could muster. Anything to prevent stammering like a drooling idiot in front of such a good-looking man. Even though "good-looking" barely covered it.

"This won't take long and I'm prepared to pay generously," he said, as if he'd already dropped gold notes into my account. Wonderful—arrogant enough to assume money buys everything and he thinks his time is more valuable than mine. Well, that was exactly the shot of ice water I needed to break the spell.

"I appreciate your offer, but I'm afraid you'll have to book an appointment." *Like everybody else.*

"Unfortunately, I'm leaving Nairobi today. This is my last stop before my flight. I've heard of your reputation as a card reader. My research says you're quite accurate."

And just like that, he pierced the proverbial chink in my armor. When people said they'd heard of me, I felt honor-bound to accept. If word got back to the source that I was ungracious or unobliging, I could lose business. Damn it, why had I let my receptionist Natty leave early? She could have dealt with this situation. Oh right, it was so I could sleep and get ready in private with no one the wiser. But why had I forgotten to lock up? I did not have time for this.

I studied him. He wore reflective sunshades that prevented me from getting the full picture, but there were still plenty of other clues to give me a sense of what I was dealing with. A well-cut carbon

gray suit and scuff-free shoes screamed gold notes and good taste. He was tall, very tall. He fashionably scruffy thick black hair brushed his suit collar and nearly met his very nicely broad shoulders. He was clean-shaven, with chiseled cheekbones and a slight tan that had to be Tru-Tan since no one exposed themselves to the sun anymore. Good tans cost a fortune. But his accent was the real giveaway. His deep voice carried a lilt that made it clear he was from the Russian Federation or the Islands. In a word—money. Lots and lots of money.

But I wouldn't reschedule my appointment for all the money, contacts, or goodwill in the trust system. I gestured toward the door, intending to walk him out. "I'm sorry, but perhaps next time you're in town."

He looked as if he hadn't the slightest intention of leaving. "If you're concerned about the time, many people can ensure you arrive at the fertility clinic before nine this morning."

I froze. "Excuse me, but that information is classified."

"And so it will remain. It would be a shame for One Gov to learn the true nature of your appointment, after all."

My eyes narrowed. "It's just a routine fertility consultation."

"Of course," he agreed. "I ask only for a brief reading. Surely you can spare a moment?"

I should have been both angry and terrified that he knew my plans. Hell, I hadn't even told my boyfriend, Roy! His words stopped just short of blackmail. And yet...I found myself intrigued, damn it. What would this Tarot reading show me? I had that odd feeling again—the one that hit deep in my gut and paid no attention to what I had lined up for the rest of the day, let alone my life. It demanded I follow through on whatever happened next. Over the years I'd learned never, and I mean *never*, to ignore that feeling no matter how pesky it might be.

He removed his sunshades and I was snared by blue eyes so intense I wondered if he had to hide them or risk turning people to stone—or women to mush. I peered closer, considering the whole package. The looks. The play of his muscles beneath his clothes when he moved. The symmetry. I wasn't sure why I hadn't caught it earlier: His MH Factor—Modified Human—was turned up high enough to scorch.

Out of my mouth came: "I can fit you in now with a short reading."

"Wonderful." He offered a smile that had no doubt removed numerous panties. Nice to know one of us was having a good time.

"I don't see many advanced stage Modified Humans in my shop. Are you fifth generation?" My question was beyond rude. Asking about genetic modifications was worse than asking how much money someone made. But if he knew my business, I didn't see why I couldn't know his. "I heard it's less invasive to upgrade technological modifications later in life rather than opting for full pre-birth gene manipulation. The t-mods are supposed to be less expensive too."

"Perhaps it depends on how many gold notes exchange hands and how natural you want it to look," he said, noncommittally.

So there was some genetic manipulation involved. I knew it! But how much? Some people were overboard with their upgrades and the results weren't always as advertised.

I waited for more follow-up from him. Instead, the silence stretched. Okay, then. "Is there a particular aspect of your life you want to know about? Or an issue that's troubling you?"

"I'm concerned about a meeting and its success. Should I continue on my current path, or cut my losses and run? You no doubt receive many similar requests."

He was right; I'd built my business on less. I had a steady clientele including a few minor celebrities, but nothing had really launched my career. Not that I wanted to be a card reader to the

stars, but I definitely wanted to ensure I never had to worry about money.

“Follow me,” I said, and with those words went my last lick of common sense.

I removed the c-tex bracelet I’d put on—so that no one could accuse me of skimming the Cerebral Neural Net and faking a reading—then led him through the shop. Gentle lighting flicked on as we entered the back room. Soft music began, the automatic soundtrack set to a Mars chill funk vibe. The room was decorated with thick Venusian carpets, decadent pillows on velvet chaise lounges, and paintings of exotic Old Earth terrain and new-world Martian landscapes. Rich colors that begged to be touched—a tactile experience for the senses. Customers had certain expectations as to how a Tarot card shop on Night Alley, the most exclusive and decadent street in Nairobi, should appear. If my Russian stranger had been there the night before when business was in full swing, he would have seen my designer silk print dress and makeup just this side of too much, instead of the prim beige knee-length skirt and sky-blue blouse I now wore. I looked overdressed, conservative, and slightly out of style.

Oddly, the idea that he’d caught me this way made me feel vulnerable, like I’d allowed him to see the real me instead of the persona I wore when I cast a reading. That woman didn’t care what her clients thought because she knew they were all in awe of her. In those silk dresses she was untouchable. She held their future in her hands. This stripped-down me was too exposed, too likely to get caught up in things that didn’t concern her. Well, too bad. I wasn’t letting a hot guy and an off-the-chart gut feeling get the best of me. What I wore now was just another disguise. After all, how could I convince the Shared Hope program’s fertility Arbiter I should be allowed to have a baby if I didn’t look like a respectable member of society?

“Have a seat.” I directed him to one of the chaise lounges with an ornate gold-leaf table beside it. A chandelier that appeared to drip with gemstones, but were really artfully colored glass, hung overhead.

“Interesting décor,” he said.

“Would you be as impressed with a rickety table and some collapsible benches?” I asked as I took the chaise across from him.

He laughed. “I suppose not. I understand the need for showmanship. At times, it can be as important as the act itself.”

“Hence the décor.” I gestured around us.

I smiled, so did he, and suddenly the table between us seemed ridiculously small. The feeling in my gut grew, paired now with a growing sense that this man, whoever the hell he was, held some significance for me. It hung in the air.

I took a breath to center myself and refocused on the box in the middle of the table. Whatever designs were once painted on its black lacquered wood surface had long since faded. What it contained was easily the most valuable thing I owned.

I opened the box and removed the Tarot cards. They’d been in my family for generations, dating back to a time before the Earth’s axis shifted thanks to a series of massive global quakes, polar melting, and then the two wars of succession that followed. Family lore claimed they came from the Old World—an all but forgotten place that existed only in history books and on the bottom of the ocean floor.

“Since we’re pressed for time, I’ll do a five-card spread using only the Major Arcana,” I explained. “They are the heart of the Tarot. Each card represents a different state of being. I’m forgoing the Significator since you’re asking about yourself, but I want you to select five cards from the deck which represent what may or may not happen, what will prevent it from happening, why you’re in this situation, what you can do to either encourage or change it, and finally, depending on the steps you take, what will happen.”

As I shuffled, I fell into my usual banter where I reassured the client they were in capable hands. ~~I~~ familiarity made me feel more secure. I could do this. No need to panic because I was looking into the bluest eyes I'd ever seen. Once done shuffling, I fanned out the cards, let him pick his five, the arranged and flipped them over.

I'd been doing this too long to gasp, but that was what I wanted to do. I had a bizarre affinity with this set of cards—more so than anyone in the family according to my dearly departed Granny G. In fact, the cards had bypassed two disgruntled and pissed off generations of Romani to come directly to me, per her wishes. So when I examined the cards, I never lost my smile, even though I'd cast the identical reading for myself only an hour earlier.

I've always believed that things happen for a reason, and when the universe taps you on the shoulder, you pay attention. This was the equivalent of the universe punching me in the face.

He leaned forward. "What does it mean?"

"This is the Emperor, reversed." I pointed to the first card. "You have goals, but waste energy on pointless things that get in the way. You have the will and strength to fight, but aren't using those gifts properly. Next, the Moon. You want to shape events, not be shaped by them. You need to learn to read what's happening around you and act accordingly. However, you also need caution. You have hidden enemies who've yet to reveal themselves. The third card is the Falling Tower. It's the destruction of everything you've built because of your own misunderstanding and lack of judgment. Your bad choices may have put you in a situation where you could lose everything."

The man laughed. It didn't sound forced nor did he look worried, but at the same time, I could tell something was going on in his head. "So far it appears I shouldn't have gotten out of bed this morning."

"It's not all bad," I said consolingly. "Fourth is the Lovers. It could mean attraction or love, but given the other cards, it appears to be a partnership and mutual commitment. This connection will help you overcome your difficulties and further your control of the events. Lastly, the Judgment. It represents the end of an old life, and the beginning of a new one. It's a radical change, but one you will need if you are to overcome your situation."

When I looked up, he was gazing at me with such an intent expression that I worried I'd offended him. Well, I didn't have time to couch the reading in the prettiest of terms; he got what he got. He had to smarten up or he'd lose everything. Sadly, the same applied to me as well. Quickly, I swept the cards back into their box.

"I hope you found it useful."

"Very. I appreciate you making the time to see me."

He was still looking at me. I mean, *really* looking. Looking at me the way a man did when he wondered how a woman looked naked or was considering ways to get her naked. I wondered if he was thinking about the Lovers. Or maybe I was the one thinking that? My throat went dry. I hadn't been studied like that in a long time and it felt better than it should. Even if I didn't have an active Metabolic Factor, I was no slouch. My almost-black hair reached mid-back, my olive skin held tones of Old World ancestry, and I could make my green eyes pop by dressing in shades of blue-green. My figure and height also fit One Gov's genetic specification guidelines, hence putting me in the Goldilocks zone: just right.

No, enough of this. What was I thinking? I had a boyfriend. I had plans for the future. In an hour my whole world could change. And yet...

I stood. He stood with me. Even in my metal-clad high-heeled boots, my eyes were barely level with his shoulder. I felt feminine in ways I hadn't in years. The air felt charged with potential. My g

jerked again, reminding me to act before the moment disappeared. What the hell did it want me to do? Jump him? Rip his clothes off?

He held out his hand. I shook it. It swallowed mine. “Thank you, Felicia. I know how I need to conduct my future affairs now.”

I froze when he said my name. Not that him knowing it was a surprise; it was how he’d said it. I tried to describe it I’d sound crazy. He said it like he knew me. Or, had made it his business to know me. Or, planned on knowing me so well, I would someday learn what his body pressed against mine would actually feel like.

I flushed and released his hand as if it burned. “Feel free to leave your payment on the way out.”

He laughed and a bolt of heat shot through me. “As I said earlier, my people can ensure you make your appointment at the clinic if you’re concerned about time.”

Again, I should have been terrified. If he contacted One Gov, getting arrested would be the least of my problems. Yet I had the oddest feeling that whatever this stranger knew, he’d keep it to himself. Still, I had to make some sort of a token protest, didn’t I? “My private schedule is just that—private. I understand your investigating my flat-file avatar on the CN-net. Many clients do and access is always open. However, any personal information I’ve logged is off-limits. I would appreciate it if you left my shop now.”

He seemed amused instead of angry. “My apologies. I’m glad to have made your acquaintance. Hopefully, we will have other dealings in the future.”

Gut feeling be damned, I sincerely hoped not. However, I must not have managed to school my expression well enough since he added, “Despite what you may believe, the future isn’t decided yet. There are always gray areas left to explore.”

He turned on his heel to leave. Bemused, I followed. Outside, I found two personal bodyguards—a muscle and matching suits. They fell into step behind him as he continued down the sidewalk to the street. I saw four more musclemen at either end of the block, and a helicon hovering overhead in the dull gray sky. Street-side were two flight-limos ready for takeoff, one with its windows down. I could see the pilot in front while in back sat a gorgeous redhead. My mouth fell open. I know it did—just open and flapping in the breeze.

He paused before he climbed inside the first flight-limo. “Ms. Sevigny, you’ll find my payment inside, as well as my halo should you need to get in touch. Your reputation is well deserved. Feel free to use me as a reference.”

With that, he got into the flight-limo. I saw the redhead attempt to climb onto his lap and watched him push her away before the windows rolled up. The security detail ducked into the second flight-limo as the helicon zipped away. In a few seconds, the street was empty.

I ran back inside. On the reception desk was a blue chip wafer used to transfer funds between locked CN-net accounts. It was old tech, the kind used by people who didn’t have direct CN-net mods. People like me. I tapped its face and the readout displayed an obscene amount of money. It was charged seventy gold notes a reading. The readout said ten thousand—very near to the amount that had been in the savings account I’d recently decimated. I almost fainted. Beside the chip was the promised halo. Like the blue chip, it was also old tech. I touched it and watched the name unfurl in bold script.

So I’d been right about the accent. I knew the name. Who didn’t? I’d just never seen his face. He rarely surfaced in public, and when he did, he came and went like smoke.

Alexei Petriv. Crown Prince of the Tsarist Consortium—though “crime lord” and “thug” would also be accurate descriptors. Robin Hood too, in some circles. Thorn in the side of One Gov. Pirate of the tri-system. In my office. Wanting a reading. The need to faint grew stronger. So did the feeling i

my gut.

I had a terrible suspicion I was about to be made an offer I could not refuse.

Chapter Two

I'm not sure how long I stood in the doorway to my shop feeling slightly unhinged while the c-tech bracelet shimmered and vibrated on the reception desk. No doubt it was Roy, checking in. I picked up, tapped the screen, and the holo popped up.

Sure enough, Roy's image appeared. His sandy-blond hair was in desperate need of trimming, as usual. Conventionally cute, his appearance fell within One Gov specs—tallish, broad-shouldered, decent build, nice brown eyes. He always seemed worried and concerned about me, a trait I'd once thought adorable. Lately it made me wonder why he never loosened up. Then again, working undercover for the MPLE (Mars Planetary Law Enforcement), or on the Earth-to-Mars drug trafficking cases he took on, would give anyone reason to worry. Today he looked annoyed, which was also, unfortunately, normal. He hated that a face-chat shim with me meant using an antiquated charm bracelet rather than a direct synapse hookup to the Cerebral Neural net. He claimed I was the only person he knew who wasn't chipped. He was probably right; my family had severe tech phobia. But even if I wanted One Gov sponsored free tech modifications, or t-mods as they were known, it was too late. The first implants had to be done before puberty. And if I was bitter about missing out on the advantages that came with the upgrades...well, there was no point crying over what I couldn't change.

"Hey, babe. Still at the shop at this hour? You're usually finishing up when the rest of the city is just starting. Thought you'd be home by now." He made the last part a question.

"Just leaving. I had a last minute walk-in I couldn't ignore."

He snorted. "Figures. You work too hard." In the background I saw various buildings, but not enough to pinpoint his location. Somewhere in the city center.

"I have to if I want this shop to succeed. You know my family will be the first to say 'I told you so' if there's even a whiff of failure."

He cracked a wide grin. "True. I've experienced the Sevigny clan's displeasure firsthand. Not something I'd care to repeat."

My family loathed Roy. Never mind their inherent suspicion of anything law-enforcement related, they also felt he wasn't good enough for me. Sometimes, I agreed. Other times, being with him felt safer than throwing my heart out there for anyone to stomp on. Mine had already been stomped on once. I didn't need a repeat performance. "I have a couple errands to run, so don't worry if you can't reach me. After that, I'm crashing for the rest of the day. I should be home by noon."

"I hope your idiot business partner hasn't gotten you into something sketchy."

"If Charlie Zero needs me to do something that benefits the shop, I'll do it."

He made a dismissive grunt. "Hey, I'm not shimming to fight. I'm just reminding you about da night. It's your turn to pick the place."

I almost swore out loud. Roy and I had aligned our schedules so we'd have a night off together every two weeks. That was tonight, and I'd completely forgotten. "Already picked," I lied. "Just show up back and be surprised."

"Looking forward to it, babe. Sorry, gotta go. Just got a ping from headquarters. I'll shim when I'

free. Love you.”

“Love you back.” I broke the link without waiting for a reply. Now I had to worry about date night on top of everything else! Fuck. It was almost funny—Alexei Petriv, a complete stranger, knew my plans better than Roy did. It didn’t say much for my current state of affairs.

I slapped the bracelet back on my arm. Immediately, it fluttered. Gods, now what? No face-check for me this time—only a voice and a cloudy screen. Apparently my appointment had just decided to reach out to me. A tingle of fear raced up my spine.

“Have you hailed the Y-Line?” I was asked without preamble.

I swallowed. I couldn’t tell if the voice was male or female. “Yes, I’m leaving now.”

“Location code?”

I scrambled to find the information for the pod I’d booked. “Launchpad 16. Pod 2176.”

I could hear a beep in the background. “Location confirmed. Courtyard Office Center. Mayfair Fertility Clinic. Meeting time, nine hundred hours. Payment transfer received.”

I said nothing. The payment had dissolved my savings. Then I recalled the gold notes from Alexei Petriv. If my gut had feet, it would have kicked me.

“Worried?” the voice asked.

“Of course not. I do stuff like this every day before breakfast.” Well, truthfully, with the shop hours I kept, my breakfast tended to be everyone else’s dinner time, but that was no one’s business but my own.

“I assure you nothing will go wrong.”

“So you’ve said, but none of this guarantees the blacklisted status will be wiped from my fertility record.”

“Now seems a little late for doubt, don’t you think?”

The voice was right, and I wasn’t naïve. I might be scared, but my future with Roy depended on the next few hours. “I know, but I’ve never broken the law before. Well, not like this anyway.”

“Trust me: all will go according to plan.” The voice cut out.

I sighed, letting the air out slowly so I wouldn’t hyperventilate. I had the basics of the plan, but none of its specifics. What I knew included making an appointment at the local One Gov–controlled fertility clinic to speak with an Arbiter—standard practice for anyone with a fertility dispute. However, how I’d alter the record to remove my blacklisted status was beyond me. It was risky, but I wanted to participate in the Shared Hope program, this was my only choice.

When One Gov came to power during the Dark Times, they followed through on their promise of prosperity and equality for all. Unfortunately, some felt their legislation turned humanity into a flock of sheep. Maybe four hundred years ago we’d needed that direction. But now, One Gov took issue with those they felt weren’t well-behaved citizens, and it often meant losing out on things like career choice, housing selection, or calorie-consumption allocation. Or in my case—for reasons I didn’t know—access to the Shared Hope program.

The Shared Hope program meant one child per couple, with One Gov providing subsidies until the child turned eighteen, then guaranteed living space and full citizenship rights until death. And nowadays, death was further away than ever, thanks to the Renew treatments. Unfortunately, long life put a strain on resources. So did the fact that once the last of the ice caps melted and water covered many of the most populated cities on Earth, humanity was left scrambling for what space remained. And based on the history I’d read, that scrambling wasn’t pretty once countries began closing their borders to refugees fleeing the rising waters. My family was damn lucky to end up in Nairobi thanks to my great-grandparents’ foresight and Granny G’s Tarot cards. They moved to high-altitude, cash-

strapped Kenya before the mass exodus happened throughout the world. Many others lost everything including the ability to keep going in the face of such disaster.

The Shared Hope program was the only thing keeping the world in balance. It was open to everyone and ensured valuable genetic material wasn't lost, while keeping population growth in check. If you didn't like it, then you were welcome to try your luck elsewhere in the tri-system. If you were rich enough, moving to Mars was a viable option. And if you were desperate enough, you could try life on Venus. Full colonization of Venus had only begun in the last hundred years, and there were many who felt a trip to hell might be more fun.

It all made perfect rational sense, except why should I be blacklisted without explanation? What happened to One Gov's stance on equality for all? I should be eligible to have a baby just like any other woman. And after today, I would. The Tarot had said as much, and the cards never lied. Alexei Petriv might believe the future still had gray areas, but the feeling in my gut said otherwise. This was my last chance and I had to take it.

Ah, hell. The day I took advice from Russian gangsters was no doubt the day my world ended. Hurriedly I grabbed my belongings, locked the shop, and rushed out to meet my future.

* * *

The Y-Line was Nairobi's answer to mass transit. Unfortunately, "A brilliant design with poor execution" was the most complimentary thing anyone could say. Whatever the case, the grids were always clogged, the pods never arrived on time, and you rarely got exactly what you ordered. I ordered my pod twenty minutes ago and there was still no sign of it.

I waited on the crowded launch platform, tapping an anxious toe and peering up at a gritty looking sky that promised rain. The first wet season of the year loomed around the corner, so we'd be inundated for the next month. Luckily, my shop on Night Alley lay outside the city's flood plain. It was also one of the nicer streets in the city. Though today, the city cleaners had yet to hose away the latest gang signs inked on the cracked gray tile around me. Hopefully my pod would be in better condition. Sometimes pods came filled with garbage, vomit, excrement, or worse. The auto-cleaner handled that, but the system existed in a constant state of breakdown. Even if I got a half-decent pod it might be double-booked—which was how I'd met Roy. It wasn't immediate attraction, but he made me laugh and wore me down until I agreed to see him again. At that point in my life, funny and sweet overrode passionate. I'd already lived through a relationship with all the passion I could handle—the kind where you don't think you can even breathe if he's not with you. So when it ended and I realized I had to keep on breathing regardless, I decided I didn't want more of that in my future.

My toe tapping increased. I couldn't seem to calm myself. Worse, I couldn't pinpoint the reason for my anxiety. Was it the man I'd just left, the situation I was about to hurl myself into, or the man waiting at home? Maybe all three.

I tried analyzing my reaction to Alexei Petriv. It wasn't entirely sexual, more like a feeling that being with him, or at least following where he led, was the right thing to do. Others in my family had similar experiences—moments where we stood at a crossroads and instinct told us which way to choose. We talked about them whenever we got together at family functions, rare events now as we became more scattered throughout the tri-system. We found the instinct varied in strength and regularity, depending on the situation or person. To us, the gut feeling was just another sense letting us see the world a little more clearly when making decisions. You never knew how it would turn out, but it always felt like the most appropriate action at the time. But with Petriv...the feeling had become extreme. Then, the identical card reading...I'd done what I could to appease my gut feeling, y

somehow it felt like I'd made the wrong decision. Maybe I should have confronted him instead letting him walk away. Well, what did it matter now? I'd probably never see him again.

A few more minutes of toe tapping before a swarm of pods arrived at the open-air receiving bay. I always thought the pods looked like gigantic gray sperm, tails cocked in the air to connect with the magnetic slide overhead. The fact that I traveled to and from work each day inside a giant sperm pod while I had no control over my own fertility issues was the sort of irony that could make a girl tear her hair out. Somewhere in the tri-system, I bet a team of design engineers secretly giggled up their sleeves.

I caught my name flashing across the scroll above the door of the last pod, and my c-tex bracelet fluttered. People around me groaned—a tired looking mother with a squalling two-year-old; a businessman who seemed frazzled and out of time; a couple of Net spacers no doubt late for the next space elevator launch, their matching One Gov uniforms giving them away. I sympathized; I'd experienced more than my fair share of late pods.

I skittered across the slippery tiles to the pod and settled into one of the four seats. The door closed with a gentle sucking sound and I turned to set my belongings on the empty seat beside me. Except, it wasn't empty.

I jumped, swore, and barely missed cracking my head on the low ceiling. "What the hell...? I didn't even see you!"

The occupant looked at me. "Perhaps you should pay more attention to your surroundings."

Wonderful. I'd been up to my neck in cocky attitudes for hours. No reason the trend shouldn't continue. "You're my contact?"

"So it would seem."

I regarded my traveling companion while I fought for calm. Male. Or, possibly female. Sometimes they appeared so gender neutral I honestly couldn't tell. Fair-skinned with graying black hair cut in an unflattering bowl shape, weak and unremarkable facial features—odd, given that beauty was so commonplace, preferred, and available at any price. Yet, this face was also forgettable. Combine that bland face with a green-gray pantsuit that could be either business or casual depending on the lighting and you wouldn't be able to describe this person ten minutes after meeting them.

"Ms. Sevigny, I presume? You may call me Mr. Pennyworth."

Well, that settled that. Maybe. "Hopefully it will be nice to have met you, Mr. Pennyworth." *Depending how the day goes*, I added silently.

"I've taken the liberty of putting the pod recording system on an infinity loop so we may discuss our business privately. With you not being directly linked to the CN-net, relaying information isn't as challenging."

I shrugged. "My family doesn't trust t-mods. My great-grandmother called them bad juju. Besides, they're a liability in my line of work. If I can sift all the net-dump into my head with an e-blink, who's going to believe anything I tell them when I do a reading?"

"But you must concede it comes in handy. Otherwise, you wouldn't rely on that antiquated technology." His eyes drifted to the silver charm-tex bracelet clipped around my left wrist. Once, it had been the height of technology. Now, my tech-med struggled to keep it operational.

"I'll give you that one. A girl's got to keep up somehow." I frowned, not sure I could continue making small talk with a thief and con man who held my entire future in his hands. "So when do I get the details on this secret plan that's cost me a small fortune?"

Mr. Pennyworth held up an empty glass cylinder the size of my thumb, secured with a gray screw-on cap, and smiled. His teeth were feral looking, and I revised my earlier opinion—you might forgive

most of Mr. Pennyworth, but you would never forget his teeth.

“Of course,” he said. “Here it is.”

I could only imagine the look on my face. “Must be one hell of a tube.”

“If I thought you were an idiot, I would never have agreed to this shell game. It’s smart-matter in an inert gaseous state. It reacts when exposed to air.”

My eyes widened. “How? I want to fix my blacklisted status, not kill the Arbiter.”

Mr. Pennyworth merely blinked. “This will induce an effect similar to mild intoxication, without impairing mental or physical faculties. Anyone exposed becomes susceptible to suggestion. The effect will last twenty minutes, which should be long enough to convince the Arbiter to modify your status.”

“Can’t you just snipe in and change my status? Isn’t that what you do?”

Again, the long blink. “I do all manner of things. And yes, I could snipe in if I had enough time and you enough gold notes. Unfortunately, that isn’t the case. One Gov’s echo-wall is virtually impenetrable. If I did snipe in, I’d have to nullify their AI queenmind. One wrong move would have a drone army replicating the data and laying so many false trails, we’d both be en route to a Phobos penal cell before I found my way back. This way, the changes will be legitimate in the database, made by the one responsible for them—the Arbiter.”

I had to admit it was elegant, but my gut wasn’t reassuring me of success one way or the other. “We’re breathing the same air. Won’t I be infected too?”

“Yes. It will enable you to make your points all the more convincing. I suspect it will be a veritable Isis Falls of tears and sob stories from all parties by the time we’re done.”

I refused to rise to the sarcastic bait. Isis Falls is the highest and most dramatic waterfall on Venus’s Ishtar Terra. It was even said that its crushing power could produce diamonds. Impressive, but nobody needed that kind of grief.

“What about you? If we all lose our minds, how does that help me?”

Mr. Pennyworth did the blink thing again; the man was a wealth of physical tics. It made me wonder what sort of t-mods he had. No doubt my tech-hating family would lose their minds if they met him—not that they ever would, I reflected.

“I won’t be affected.”

“It’s nice you’re so confident.”

“I am,” he said, and left it at that.

“What if we don’t get a human Arbiter? I requested one, but I’ve put in so many petitions in the past, we may only get AI access. How—?”

“Ms. Sevigny, nothing is foolproof. What we’re doing today is a criminal act. Its very nature lends itself to complications. I can’t provide the guarantees you want. However, I find it disconcerting you’re calling my professionalism into question. I predict a high degree of success, provided you follow my instructions.”

“I know. I just need this to work. If it doesn’t…” My voice trailed. I couldn’t think about failure. “It has to work.”

Sometimes I wondered about the convoluted road that had brought me to this moment. Normal people didn’t consort with criminals. Desperation was the usual mode of transport. And thanks to my family’s seedier connections, Mr. Pennyworth had dropped into my life. I shouldn’t have needed him if things had taken their regular course. If I hadn’t fallen desperately in love five years ago with a man I thought held my future in his hands, I’d never have applied for a reproduction approval permit—the gut feeling again, prodding me to act on impulses I normally wouldn’t consider. Without that push, I wouldn’t have learned about my fertility blacklisted status. I also wouldn’t have lost the man I thought

loved me unconditionally.

“You and the father-elect must be very desperate to have a child.”

I almost laughed, but bitterness and despair wouldn't let me. “The father-elect doesn't know I'm here.”

“Ah, I see. He wants a child and you're afraid he'll leave you if he knows you're blacklisted.”

At that, I did laugh since it was better than crying. Were the problems I thought so secret and painful as common as dirt? “Actually, that's already happened once. I'm just trying to keep history from repeating itself.”

“I'm not sure I understand.”

Gods, did I have to explain everything? “I was with someone before. We were young and in love and I thought he was *the one*. I had this feeling he might propose so I checked on my fertility status just to see what I needed to do to get the fertility inhibitor removed. Kids are important in my family and I wanted to be ready. That's when I found out about my blacklisted status. I told him because I didn't think it would matter. After all, we loved each other. I assumed we'd figure it out together. Instead, he left me. End of story.”

“What happened to him?” came the relentless follow-up question.

“He found someone less complicated than me. They moved overseas, to Bolivia I think. They had a baby. A boy. He's two now.” I surreptitiously swiped at my eyes. Only one tear. That had to be some kind of world record.

A beat of silence, then: “So you're lying to your current partner?”

I glared at Mr. Pennyworth. “Not that it's any of your damn business, but I don't even know if he likes kids. I just feel like I have this sword hanging over my head and I want it gone. I don't want to be that lost, pathetic woman who gets left all over again because she isn't good enough. I want control over my own life. Maybe I don't want a baby right this second, but I want the option there if I choose it. Right now, for reasons I don't understand, I'm blacklisted. So if he brings up the subject, do I say ‘Sorry, I forgot to mention I can't apply for the permit to have the fertility inhibitor removed because some official somewhere decided I'm ineligible to reproduce?’ I already know that won't go over well.”

“So you're doing this for the potential in the relationship.”

“I don't think I need to answer any more questions, unless it's somehow going to help you do a better job,” I said pointedly.

That earned me another long blink. “Forgive me for asking.”

What I refused to say, and he had no right to know, was I also had unresolved parental issues. Everyone thinks they can do a better job than their own parents. Yet what happens when your mother dies, and your father disappears because you look too much like your mother and that resemblance upsets him and makes him insane? How does that twist a person's insides, stirring up a murky soup of resentment but also determination to fix the past?

We fell into an uncomfortable silence and I spent the remainder of the ride watching the cityscape drift by out the tinted window, taking in the lush greenery mixed carefully with urban sprawl. Seeing the city like this, it was easy to appreciate why Nairobi was considered the Star of the East and the gateway to Africa. Thanks to its altitude the city had managed to flourish in spite of itself. Somehow Nairobi had been spared the worst of the chaos and magically come out ahead of the disasters that rocked the rest of the planet.

As if sensing my discomfort, the Y-Line only stalled twice, for a total delay time of ten minutes. Thank the gods for small mercies. The pod docked soon on the other side of the city and v

disembarked onto the gray-tiled receiving platform in Karen. It was noticeably dirtier than the laundromat platform in my division. Ironically, Karen wasn't far from the largest slum in the country, if not the entire continent. Reclamation projects for the Kibera slum came and went every time it was an election year. Local One Gov representatives always promised to clean it up, threw gold notes at the problem, and then gave up when the residents resisted change. We could build a space port on the Moon, put a sunshade around Venus, alter its rotation and give it a moon, anchor two space elevators to the Earth, and even terraform Mars, but we couldn't touch a thousand-year-old slum in the heart of Africa. I wasn't sure if that was something to be proud of or not.

The Mayfair Fertility Clinic lay on the slum's outskirts, not far from the Y-Line platform. Mr. Pennyworth and I waded through people going about their business, drooping a little in the humidity. Well, I drooped. Mr. Pennyworth soldiered on as if the weather was a nonissue. This man was a creepy enigma I didn't want to unravel.

Along the pedestrian walkway the storefronts grew shabbier. Not shabby-chic or whatever trend look the CN-net target ads told us were popular, but downright shabby. People loitered with nothing better to do than stand with their hands in their pockets. Refuse piles grew, their stink perfuming the air. We passed the occasional gang sign, and anyone with business in the area hurried about it at a brisk clip, except Mr. Pennyworth. If he rushed, it was only to keep pace with me.

The clinic stood out from a row of decrepit office buildings. It was oddly cathedral-like, loaded with Gothic spires and stained-glass windows. It might have looked ethereal and beautiful if it wasn't so out of place. Bars on the windows, armed guards, and the electrified barbed wire fence around the perimeter didn't help. Ridiculous One Gov spending at its all-time best—put one of the most significant government facilities near one of the seediest areas of the city, pretty it up, then watch the fireworks. It was a miracle the place still stood.

We approached the first checkpoint at the outer gate of barbed wire and mesh. I felt a trickle of nervous sweat roll down my back. I needn't have worried, as Mr. Pennyworth rested his left hand on the graphic interface and One Gov's citizen chip at the base of his thumb gave up his basic statistics and the nature of the appointment. The interface beeped, and he walked through the gate. I followed, relieved I didn't have to do the same. I wasn't chipped, not physically at any rate. I could blame my family for that mess too. My citizen chip was in my c-tex bracelet. It made life damned inconvenient whenever I ran the c-tex over the reader and the thing refused to scan. I probably wasted more time trying to get my wrist to beep than I did sleeping and eating put together.

We continued along the sidewalk and up the clinic's front steps. The breeze picked up, bringing Kibera's stench with it. I fought not to gag at the odor of raw sewage while my eyes started watering.

"You're doing well, Ms. Sevigny," Mr. Pennyworth murmured. "Only two more checkpoints, then the Arbiter."

I nodded, swiping my eyes. I looked back to those still outside the gate. The crowd appeared to be gathering steam. I could hear singing and saw a few e-thought posters waving. Hardly a surprise. Someone was always protesting in front of these facilities. The Shared Hope program was so significant and vital to the survival of the human race, the only way anyone got real media attention was to protest at a fertility clinic somewhere in the tri-system. Even if it was something trivial like a problem with sanitation pickups or a street name being changed, fertility clinics were always the protesters' target. It didn't make sense, but it got you attention.

"Think they'll close the clinic for the day?" I nodded in the protesters' direction. "I'd prefer you didn't have to do this more than once. My nerves couldn't handle it."

"You also couldn't afford it. I anticipate everything will go according to plan."

I took what reassurance I could from his vague answer and we passed the next two checkpoints with ease. Pennyworth's chip was scanned again, and we waded through a weapons detector that checked for organic compounds and tech assaults. I worried about the smart-matter, but when no alarm sounded I offered up a silent prayer of thanks to any god paying attention.

Finally, we were met by a human who escorted us to the Arbiter's office. Arbiter Black was the name we were given. It meant nothing, merely a pseudonym. I'd been through this process enough to know the drill.

Our guide was a tall young woman, reed-thin with ebony skin and luxurious black hair that bounced around her shoulders. Strong white teeth and blue eyes gave her a startling beauty you didn't often see even in this age of genetic modifications. She seemed wasted in such a worthless One Gov outpost. Mr. Pennyworth watched her ass sway as she walked.

"Third generation MH Factor, Mars model," he commented to me. "Good work, but better exist. The center of gravity is off. It will be corrected in the next batch."

Okay, so there was more to his gaze than I thought. At least it gave me something else to think about besides my own predicament.

We followed Miss Third Generation with Gravitational Problems down the dull gray hall. It was as if only the cathedral shell remained. The rest of the building had been gutted and filled with ugliness. Not even the stained-glass windows brightened the hall.

She led us to an office and told us to wait. It was empty except for a long table, a data portal, and a handful of mismatched chairs. I sat in the first chair, which was hard, lumpy, and the color of faded rust. I turned to Mr. Pennyworth, but he held up a finger and shook his head. No, the gesture said. Not yet.

So I sat in helpless suspension, hands in my lap, not sure what to do and afraid to talk. Mr. Pennyworth did the same, although he looked more at ease.

An immeasurable amount of time later, the door opened. My eyes slid from Mr. Pennyworth to Arbiter Black. Male. Caucasian. Still looked like he had true youth. My spirits drooped. Damn. Why couldn't I have gotten a woman? A man wouldn't feel the same emotional tug of my sob story. I glanced at Mr. Pennyworth and saw the glass cylinder in his left hand. When I looked again, the cylinder had vanished. How long would it take until I felt the smart-matter's effects? How would I behave?

"Sorry to keep you waiting," the Arbiter said as he shook the hand Mr. Pennyworth extended, then reached out to me. I stood to meet him halfway. His voice was pleasant, and he smiled at us. That had to be a good sign. He seemed nice. Maybe this would work. If I spun my story right, with the extra push from the drug...maybe...

I'm not sure what should have happened next. One moment, I reached for Arbiter Black's hand. The next, I felt a sharp twinge in my gut telling me to forget the hand and move away. So I did. And after that...

The wall exploded. Not just the office. The whole building. Through a haze of dust and smoke, I could see clear to the outside.

Arbiter Black was gone.

Well, not gone, given the red smear on the far wall and the scattering of bricks and mortar. Just not among the living anymore.

I backed away, hand shaking, my whole body shaking, in fact, and a scream locked in my throat. I tripped on an overturned chair and came to rest on the edge of the conference table, which had been blown clean across the room. I couldn't hear anything except the ringing in my ears. I covered an

uncovered them with my hands, as if that would help. There were people rushing through the hole in the wall. Some looked like they were screaming, but I couldn't hear them. Then I noticed security outside, subduing the crowd. Oh gods, the crowd...the protesters...It took a moment for my brain to piece it together in a way that made sense. The protesters must have decided to do more than voice their displeasure. They bombed the clinic.

Movement caught my attention. Mr. Pennyworth rose from where he'd crouched on the floor. Aside from a dusting of rubble, he looked unscathed. He hesitated. Looked at me. Looked at the hole. And then he proceeded to make his way toward it. He was *leaving* me?

"Where the hell are you going?" I could barely hear myself though I was probably screaming. I saw his lips move, but couldn't make out the words. "What? I can't hear you!" Dust coated my throat when I breathed, and I fought to keep from coughing.

He took the handful of steps in my direction and stopped so close his lips brushed my left ear. "Our Gov hooahs are on their way, and only one of us needs to take the fall. My advice is to cover your eyes and shut your mouth when they spray the gas."

Then he moved in a burst of speed, using the dust and confusion for cover as he slipped through the hole in the wall. Panicked, I shuffled after him, but my rubbery legs failed and I hit the debris-littered floor. I tried crawling, pulling myself with desperate arms when my legs wouldn't work. Beneath me I felt the ground thundering, and when I reached the shattered office wall, I understood why.

A squad of hooahs charged down the corridor, dressed in full riot gear—face shields, gas masks, and body armor. They looked like shiny black beetles walking on their hind legs, ready to crush anything in their path. But the only thing in their path was me.

When I saw the gas cannon pointed in my direction, I screamed. It fired, I ducked, and it hit the wall over my right shoulder. A cloud of smoke later, I did the only thing I could—took Mr. Pennyworth's advice and prayed to all the gods in the pantheon that I lived long enough to explain everything to Roy so he could arrest that freak's androgynous ass.

I caught a whiff of the sickly sweet gas. Immediately, my body seized. My thoughts just sort of stopped. Panic doubled. Tripled. I wasn't even sure I knew my own name.

"What do we do with this one?" I heard someone say. Couldn't tell if they were male or female, but they must have been leaning right over me if I could hear them. "She's not with the scum outside."

"Filters detected a foreign substance while in the Arbiter's presence. That makes her garbage to go. Let's see how much she likes twenty years in a Soweto East holding pen shoveling out shit pockets."

That was when they did...something. Rolled me over. Pressed the base of my skull. And darkness descended in a smothering wave.

Chapter Three

It's never pleasant to wake up somewhere and not know where you are. It's doubly unpleasant to realize you're exactly where you thought you'd be—jail.

I sat up on a lumpy cot, wincing at the kinks in my neck and back. I tried stretching, but the pinching sensation I felt made it impossible. I'd never been someone who suffered from muscle cramps, so this was a horrible first. At least it seemed like my hearing had returned, so I thanked the gods for that tiny blessing. As I massaged my aches, I studied my cell.

Overhead, dim halogen bulbs struggled to illuminate the gloom. The walls were a dingy gray concrete covered with stains and scuffmarks, the air chill and dank. There were no windows, not even in the solid metal door. Eight cots were attached to the walls. Mine contained a mattress zipped into a white plastic case that crinkled when I moved.

I lay on a bottom cot, close to the door. Across from me, a dented metal bowl jutted from the wall—the toilet. In two of the ceiling's corners hung cameras, meaning should I use the bowl, it would be a fine show for anyone watching. It was also antiquated tech. Cameras were essentially obsolete given how easily images could be manipulated. I shifted uncomfortably, bladder straining, and sighed. Someone would be getting a show today.

I scurried to the bowl on shaky legs. I won't bother describing the treasure I found inside as I made my own deposit. When I reached for the handle with my bare foot—gods, not my hand—horror filled me when the thing wouldn't flush. Shake, rattle the handle...Nothing. I swore and hurried back to my cot, away from the offending bowl.

That's when I felt eyes on me. On the cot above mine was my cellmate.

The woman smirked. "Nice floor act. Can't wait for the encore."

She looked older than me by several years, meaning for some reason she hadn't kept up her basic Renew treatments. Dirty brown hair pulled into a messy topknot, thin to the point of unhealthy, dark skin turned sickly green under the harsh florescent lights—she had a hardness to her face that came from years of anger, drugs, and general neglect. I'd seen that look before—I'm a Tarot card reader. I've witnessed plenty of desperation.

"I'm not here for your entertainment." I hovered in the center of the cell. I didn't want to go back to my cot; it would put me too close to the woman. Then again, I didn't want to spend any more time near the bowl. "You going to keep watching?"

"No point. Show's over." She cackled with laughter. "First time in the pit? You was out so long, thought the guards'd tag you DNR."

"DNR?"

" 'Do Not Resuscitate.' Then again, the dead don't pee." She laughed again before offering an appraising look. "They let you shim anyone yet? If not, better think long and hard, sweetie. Whoever you shim's gonna need magic up his sleeve to get you outta the pit."

I looked at my wrist. No c-tex bracelet. Fear gripped me as the woman's words sank in. I was in a prison the gods only knew where, in a situation I might never escape. My shady, tech-adverse family

could do nothing. Hell, half of them would be arrested themselves if they so much as sent helpful thoughts in my direction. I took a breath. I'd have to shim Roy. He had MPLE contacts he could use. Yet even if he bailed me out, how could I explain the magnitude of what I'd done? I'd been caught in the presence of an Arbiter with a foreign substance. Damn that Mr. Pennyworth. How could I have known others had tried the same gambit before and that sensors existed to scan for it? Never mind that I hadn't even had a chance to do anything—One Gov's justice system would automatically consider me guilty.

"Funny, you being in here," the woman continued, oblivious to my dilemma. "You seem the type who could afford decent t-mods."

That made me pause. "I don't understand."

She made a vague gesture with her thin arm. "Only regulars get the pit. One Gov doesn't have to worry we'll go all chain-breaker with some jumped up MH Factor for strength and smash our way out. They got a special hate on for our particular kinda rat—spooks. Can't read 'em. Can't control 'em. And we all know One Gov loves control."

"Except for spooks," I echoed.

"Grifters outside the CN-net," she clarified.

"I know what they are," I snapped, then crossed to the other side of the cell away from the woman. She was right; I was a spook. Hell, I came from a long line of spooks. The Romani were a rare breed who patently refused to enroll in the free technological modifications and genetic enhancement birthing programs One Gov sponsored. Private sector adjustments were frowned on as well. My family was determined to remain pure human, whatever the hell that meant anymore. Still, that's what made my card reading abilities so unique. No gimmicks or cheats; the talent I had to predict future events was real. My family had always been proud they hadn't gone tech. Now I wondered if we were all suspected criminals on a watch list somewhere.

I looked up at her. "You're a spook too?"

"Only one in the group."

"What group is that?"

"At the clinic. Who you think arranged that mess? Every group needs a mix of tech and spooks depending on the job. Funny you're in here though, given who I seen you with. Always thought he had more finesse."

"Saw me with?"

"When you walked into the clinic, I seen you at the first checkpoint. You and your friend."

That brought me up short. She knew Mr. Pennyworth? That seemed unlikely. Then again, what did I know about the world of organized crime? I knew enough to land my ass in jail and not much else. I wanted to curse my own stupidity. Yet my gut said something was going on and I needed to figure it out in a hurry.

"How exactly do you know my...friend?"

"Nairobi's a small town. Your friend's got lots of aliases. Not sure who he really is, but I know who he's linked with and it goes way up the food chain. That's a chain I'd like a piece of."

I looked at the camera, then back to the woman. She returned the stare, unblinking yet somehow anxious. Her body language spoke nonchalance as she reclined on her cot, but the way her eyes darted to the cameras said something else.

"You're a plant, aren't you?" I guessed. "They want him, I'm the most obvious connection, and you're here to figure out what I know. They're probably feeding you enough information to draw me in and get me to confide in you, thinking I'll be so concerned with protecting my own neck, I'll give

them anything they want.” I looked up at the camera, addressing my comments to the unseen viewers. “Considering how I’ve just been screwed over, I’d like to help, but I have no idea who he is. Until this morning, or yesterday, or whatever day this is, I’d never seen him before. I can’t even tell you the chain of connection between us because I don’t know how anyone got in touch with him either. Further, I’m guessing you’ve seized my client list, my business partner’s name, and are looking up my family members to decide who to arrest next. Have fun with that. It’ll be like beating your head against a brick wall. Now, do I get my shim or not?”

Even though I didn’t have a clue what I was talking about, I sounded incredibly savvy to my own ears—like I breezed through these types of situations every day.

The woman’s head cocked to the side as if listening to something I couldn’t hear. Then she leaped up from her cot, padded barefoot across the cell, and pounded on the door.

“Spook don’t got the goods. Let me out!” she yelled as she pounded.

Nothing happened. She pounded harder, but the door didn’t open. She pounded a good five minutes to no avail. At first I thought it was a show for my benefit, designed to manipulate me. But as I watched, I revised my opinion. Her frustration grew and her pounding became more desperate. She tore out an earpiece and hurled it to the floor.

“Let me out!” she screeched until she was in tears, wild with rage. She whirled on me. “Tell ’em what they want! Tell ’em about the hopped-up t-mod git. I gotta get out! I can’t take more time here! Do it, or...or I’ll hurt you real good!”

She looked like she could too, but what could I offer when I didn’t know anything? She advanced on me, stood my ground and held up a hand as if that might stop her. “If you touch me, any confession I make will be suspect. No one will believe what I say if it’s under duress. Beating me up may make you feel better, but you won’t get out any quicker and you’ll have another charge against you. Besides—if you really were one of the protesters—we were at the clinic for the same reason.”

“What reason’s that?” she asked suspiciously, voice hoarse.

“We’re both women denied a basic right for reasons we don’t understand, and we want that right to stop.” I wasn’t sure on that last part, but it couldn’t hurt to appeal to some sort of sisterhood if it kept her from punching my lights out. Besides, I felt sorry for her. “You picked your way to protest. I picked mine.”

“Give ’em the name,” she said, but sounded less certain. “I got people waiting on me. I can’t spend more time in here again. The hooahs got no problem forgetting you’re here. Don’t care much about basic human rights either. No such thing as that in here.”

“I don’t have anything to tell,” I lied. Maybe I’d feel different if left in the pit a few more days, but right now, all I had were my convictions and I’d stand by them.

The woman went back to her cot. She looked defeated, but I still wondered if it was an act. I sat on one of the vacant cots, tucked my legs against my chest again, and rested my chin on my knees. The woman lay down and sighed, rubbing a hand over her forehead, then her belly. The plastic mattress cover crinkled under her.

“My baby died,” she said softly. “Real good boy. Always did what he was told. Giving everybody kisses. So happy and smiling. Knew he’d grow up to be somebody. Just knew it. Then one day...there was an accident. He died. I held him, bleeding all over me...I wanted to die too.” She stopped and I heard a sniff followed by a rattling cough and the ever-present mattress crinkle. “I applied to have another baby, but they wouldn’t let me. Said I’d used my start-up allocation on my boy. Not enough resources left. Not enough calories. Shared Hope’s only one baby for every two people. Wasn’t allowed to have another. Then, they stopped my Renew treatments ’cuz they said I was becoming

problem. Figured I may as well give 'em what they expected.”

~~Another sniff and cough. No more words came after that. Nothing but the sound of her muffled cries. Maybe she was playing me, but no one could manufacture that kind of grief—the kind that wo~~
cries. Maybe she was playing me, but no one could manufacture that kind of grief—the kind that wo
a person right down to the bone until nothing remained.

“I’m blacklisted,” I said after she’d settled a little. “I’m not allowed to have a baby and I don’t
know why. I’ve appealed a dozen times and haven’t gotten anywhere, so I thought I could get around
the system, but...guess not.”

“Then I’m sorry I tried to make you give up a name.”

“And I’m sorry they tried to use your pain in this way.”

“You’re the Night Alley card reader, ain’t ya? Bet you didn’t see this coming.” She laughed
humorlessly. “My name’s Bahati. Means ‘luck’ in Swahili. Guess I didn’t see it either.”

I thought of my last card reading and the identical reading I’d gotten for Petriv. I shivered. “I think
I did. I just didn’t know it until it was too late.”

“If we ever get out of here, I’ll get you to tell my fortune. Maybe it’ll help me figure what to do
next.”

“It’ll be on the house,” I agreed lavishly. To be honest, I doubted we’d see each other again, but to
say those words and give voice to the implications would be too terrible.

I crept back to my original cot under hers and we each huddled on our mattresses in the chilly cell.
I hated to be so callous, but I didn’t have time to dwell on Bahati’s plight. Her story was sad and
raged at the injustice, but I couldn’t help but circle back to my own problem.

At some point, I fell back asleep. It was a restless sleep, full of awful dreams I couldn’t remember.
I woke up huddled in a fetal position, my arms tucked against my chest for warmth. It took me
moment to realize I was alone. While I slept, Bahati had been removed. I hated to think her story was
a lie used to manipulate me, but I’d probably never know.

I sat up with slow, aching movements. There was no way to know how much time had passed, but
was dizzy, I had to pee again, and my stomach cramped with hunger. Worse, I was so thirsty, my
tongue felt swollen in my mouth. I leaned forward and let my legs dangle over the cot’s edge, in a
hurry to use that disgusting toilet a second time.

Then the cell door opened. My eyes burned at the sudden brightness. I flinched and covered my
face.

“You are free to go,” said a heavily accented male voice I didn’t recognize. “The charges have been
dropped.”

I paused, face still covered, thinking. Charges dropped? But I was guilty! I couldn’t imagine a
court in the tri-system would find me otherwise and yet...Roy must have pulled off a miracle. It was
the only logical explanation. Maybe when he realized I was missing he’d put out feelers and tracked
me down. That didn’t quite make sense, but I didn’t care. I just wanted the hell out in case someone
realized they’d made a clerical error and changed their mind.

I slipped from the cot, one hand shielding my eyes as I hobbled barefoot out the door. It closed
behind me with the click of an electronic lock. We progressed down a long corridor. The harsh
overhead light showed a collection of gray doors, identical to the one I’d just left. I heard faint shouting
from behind each. It made me curious, but now wasn’t the time.

As my eyes adjusted, I glanced up at the One Gov officer, or “hooah,” was the derogatory term.
Young male, dark skinned, dressed in the standard One Gov uniform of gray pants and shirt, insignia
crest featuring a yellow sun and three white dots to represent the tri-system of Mars, Earth, and Venus
over his left breast, a black beret on his head. Around his waist hung a regulation sidearm, a Sudanese

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