

MARRIAGE MACHINE

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A Steampunk Novella

25,000 words

Note: This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

The Marriage Machine

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ELSPETH SHUTTERHOUSE PEDALED FIERCELY DOWN the rain-slick alley, dodging puddles and potholes in the dark as she searched the lane for landmarks. It was difficult locating an address in the rain, and dangerous to be out in the dark alone. But the alley route was part of the instructions she'd been given an hour ago. *Cycle to 17 Charing Cross, don't let anyone see you and don't stop, eat or sleep until the repair job is finished.*

As she sped through the rain, the silver envelope she'd received earlier that day and stuffed in her chest pocket jabbed the top of her arm. She ignored the stab just as she planned to ignore the social obligation the envelope held.

Black door, brick archway, freight delivery door. She had arrived at her destination.

Elsbeth jumped off her cycle, stashed it behind a stack of crates, locked it to a pipe, and splashed to the door she had been told to use.

She knocked and then chafed her frozen hands together. Her leather jacket and leggings had kept her

warm during the ride through Londo City, but her hands were like icicles.

Light oozed through the crack under the door as someone approached with a lantern. Elspeth swung her heavy backpack off one shoulder and down her arm, just as the door opened. A tiny man with a balding head peered up at her through lenses set in a pair of brass goggles. He reminded her of a lizard she'd seen in her great aunt's ancient and totally forbidden *Encyclopedia Britannica* text, *Volume G-H*, entry *Galapagos Islands*.

The man lifted the lantern to get a better view.

"SteamWizards," Elspeth announced, pulling out her badge to display her credentials. "Citizen Shutterhouse."

"Right this way," the man swung open the door and motioned her in. His leather robe failed to conceal his thickening middle. Economic sanctions would be coming his way if he didn't do something about his physical condition.

Overindulgence today starves the infant on its way.

Elspeth shut off the dogma. She had always scoffed at the indoctrination of her childhood and did her best to live under the radar of the Overseers, but sometimes the slogans seeped into her psyche anyway.

She followed the man down a shadowy hallway, hoping she would be given a glass of ale after her ride, but the man made no such offering and ushered her through a door on the right. He reached for a control on the wall and turned up the gas lamps. Light bathed the huge bay beneath the house, illuminating the lines of a monstrous juggernaut of metalwork and gears, topped off by a fantastic filigree of wrought iron vines surrounding a sculpture of two gilt swans set beak to beak.

Elspeth stopped in her tracks, thunderstruck.

"It's the Marriage Machine!" she gasped.

She rarely ever gasped.

The bald head rotated her way, and the goggles found her face. “Never mind what it is. Can you fix it?”

Of course she could fix it. Elspeth could fix anything. That’s why she had been singled out for the job. She might be young and she might be female, but she had a special knack when it came to mechanical objects. Her father had noticed her aptitude early on and had taught her as much as he could before his untimely death.

She edged closer. “What’s going on with it?” she asked, as she surveyed the complicated mass of wheels and belts.

“We have no idea. It won’t start up. We’ve sent word to the manufacturer, but apparently the owners of the patent are the only ones who know how to fix the machine. They hail from the Outer Islands. It’s a long journey. And with the holiday the cyclones always start, you know. So it’s hard to predict when someone will actually get here. That’s why I called the SteamWizards.”

Elspeth had quit listening to his chatter at the first mention of the term “owners.”

“A Ramsay?” Elspeth stared at the small man. “Is coming here?”

“You know of them?”

She nodded. Of course she knew of them. In a household of mechanics, you either loved or hated the plutocratic Ramsay family. She hated them. To her way of thinking, the Ramsays were responsible for the numbing and dumbing down of the entire female population of Londo City—and had made a profit on it in the bargain.

She studied the machine in which a “lucky” woman exchanged marriage vows with a preselected stranger and was never the same again. The Marriage Machine was usually displayed as a wedding bower, with its inner passage draped in velvet and fringe, its outer workings

concealed with silk ferns and orchids, and its dark influence invisible to all who ventured inside.

Elsbeth had always wondered how the Marriage Machine worked. And now she was about to find out. She could actually discover what made the Marriage Machine tick.

And then she could destroy it.

Talk about perfect timing.

ELSPETH PLACED her backpack on the floor, and the tools clanked as they settled upon the wooden planks of the stage where the machine had been installed. Then she straightened and placed her fists on her hips. "I'll need to see the schematics," she said, sure that the Ramsays guarded the secret of their machine from all but their inner circle, but hoping she might get her hands on a diagram if she bullied her way forward.

"I don't have any," the bald man said. "The machine's been operating for nearly two hundred years. My predecessors didn't keep the documentation."

"Parts list?"

"Nothing." The man shrugged. "It's never had a problem until now. It's got a lifetime guarantee."

"Whose lifetime would that be?" Elspeth walked around the chassis of the machine, sizing it up, looking for leaking valves and broken lines. It took about five minutes to see that a hole had been poked in a slider valve supply line. She could repair such a problem with her eyes closed.

"I have ten weddings lined up for tomorrow and twenty more on Friday. I can't tell you what a travesty this is. It's the holiday season. I could lose my job."

Elsbeth frowned and shook her head. "I don't know, citizen—"

“Davies. It’s Citizen Davies.”

“I don’t see anything wrong right off the bat, Davies,” she lied as she reached for a lever topped with a black onyx ball. “Is this how it’s turned on?”

“Yes.”

Elspeth yanked the brass arm downward. She heard a burst of air, a wheeze, and then nothing.

“See?” Davies motioned toward the machine. “That’s all it does.”

Elspeth crossed her arms over her chest as her future closed around her like a dark tunnel. She had decided long ago that she would rebel against the preordained future if she ever received a silver envelope. Well, she had received the dreaded envelope just that morning. But this Marriage Machine development had increased the implications of her personal rebellion by a hundredfold. She had more than just *her* future in her hands now. She held the future of all the women of Londo City.

If she destroyed the Marriage Machine, her career would be ruined. She would be ostracized from society, and would probably be sentenced to life in the work camps. But the authorities would have to catch her first. And whatever freedom she knew on the run, even if was only a handful of days, would be worth it. This was her seminal moment.

What to do? She didn’t have an explosive. She would have to resort to ruining the inner workings of the machine. But finding the key to complete system breakdown would take some time.

“I need to perform a series of diagnostics.” She reached inside her pack for an apparatus she had made for herself, a portable light she could hold in her hand, with a powerful beam produced by a magnesium ribbon. It was only a prototype, held together with a clumsy set of clamps

and topped by a crude lens, but it was perfect for small dark spaces. That's where she usually worked.

"What is that thing?" Davies asked, peering around her elbow.

"Something I'm developing. I call it a hand-torch." She switched it on. "Now if you don't mind, Citizen Davies, I prefer to work alone."

"Of course." Davies backed away. "Summon me if you need me. I won't be able to sleep anyway. The PneumoSpeak is by the door."

As soon as the man disappeared, Elspeth ducked into the chamber of the Marriage Machine to begin her search for the heart and soul of the beast.

JUST AS ELSPETH found the heart of the Marriage Machine, she heard the block clock toot out twelve blasts muffled by fog. She had labored six hours disassembling countless housings and gears, all arranged in neat rows behind her in the order in which she had unfastened them. By midnight, she was exhausted, and had begun to wonder if sabotage was even possible. But at the last stroke of midnight, the beam of her hand-torch found the innermost secret of the machine, and all fatigue vanished.

"Hello!" Elspeth whispered, awestruck.

Suspended at eye level in a frame of brass was the largest ruby Elspeth had ever seen. In fact it was the *only* ruby she had ever seen. Respectable citizens didn't wear ostentatious jewelry or colored fabric or anything that could be considered superfluous adornment. In these hard times, there were more important things to concern oneself with—such as merely surviving.

She traced the gem with the tip of one finger as she studied the surrounding machine works. The jewel was at

least six inches in diameter and glowed with an otherworldly luminescence. Light must be refracted through the gem's faceted depths, passed through the human body, and was somehow able to affect a person's reproductive system and mental outlook. She felt for the heavy nuts that held the frame in place on the backside of the jewel. She estimated it would take her a good half hour to free the ruby from the intricate frame, and the task would probably ruin her knuckles, too. She reached for a wrench.

It was during the shredding of her knuckles that she came up with an even better plan than destroying the Marriage Machine.

A DOOR SLAMMED and awakened Elspeth. She jerked to a sitting position, banged her head on a pipe and gawked at her surrounds—completely disoriented. She had fallen asleep in the bowels of the Marriage Machine. Elspeth rubbed her skull as she heard Davies talking to someone in the room outside.

"A repair person has been working around the clock," Davies sputtered. "We're doing everything we can."

Elspeth struggled to her feet, ignoring her aching muscles and sore back. She was sure there was a pattern of rivets stamped into her backside. Trying to gather her wits, she pulled out the pocket watch she wore around her neck and squinted at it.

Good Gottfried, it was nine o'clock in the morning. She couldn't remember falling asleep or finishing the job for that matter. But a quick glance around the chamber told her that every gear and every nut and bolt had been returned to its place. No one would ever suspect what she had done during the night. As the two men talked outside

the machine, she replaced the walnut panels and headed for the door of the bower.

Elspeth picked up her backpack just as the door of the Marriage Machine was flung open with a clang.

“And what have we here?” a voice boomed.

Elspeth stared at the man staring back at her. She had never seen such a creature. He had to be over six feet tall. No man in Londo City was over five and a half feet. He wore a long leather traveling coat with rain flaps at the collar that accentuated his massive shoulders. But even more shocking was his hair. It was black. As black as tar. She’d never seen black hair before. Everyone in the LC had the same mousy brown hair—a feature attributed to centuries of inbreeding.

Elspeth threw back her shoulders. “Citizen Shutterhouse, SteamWizards.”

“Sleeping on the job, were you?” the man demanded. His blue eyes raked her up and down.

The man’s ingratitude infuriated her. He had to be one of the Ramsays.

“A woman needs her beauty sleep.” She jumped out of the Marriage Machine and aimed to land on his right foot, but he stepped aside just in time to escape injury. She shot a glance at him, amazed that a large man could possess such quick reflexes.

“She’s all fixed, Citizen Davies,” Elspeth announced, hoping the giant would back off once he knew his family’s precious machine was functioning—at least to the casual observer. But instead of smiling in relief, he glanced at the injured supply line she had fixed, as if doubting her claim.

“That’s wonderful news!” Citizen Davies exclaimed, clapping his hands. “Oh, you’ve made my day. Remarkable work, Shutterhouse. Remarkable!”

“Have you tried it?” the tall man broke off his stare.

“Have you powered it up?”

“Not yet,” Elspeth retorted. “But I’m certain it will work.”

Davies skittered to the start lever and pulled it downward. The Marriage Machine sputtered, shimmied, and then chugged to a start. Davies’ goggles turned her way. He beamed. “Glorious!” he cried. “I am the happiest man on earth.”

“And I’m the thirstiest, Davies,” the tall man retorted. “I’ve been traveling all night. Spare me a whiskey, would you? And Shutterhouse as well.”

“Indeed!” Davies shut off the machine and trotted to the door. “I have a single malt I’ve been saving for a special occasion. I’ll only be a minute.”

“I don’t drink on the job,” Elspeth slung her backpack over her left shoulder. “And I really must be getting back to work.” She turned toward the door.

“Not before you tell me what you’ve been doing here all night.”

Elspeth paused and looked over her shoulder.

“*Citizen*,” he drawled.

His tone and his dark regard made her heart race with alarm. But she’d never let him see it. She planted a fist on her hip. “And why should I tell you? I have no idea who you are.”

“I’m Ramsay.” He inclined his head stiffly. “Captain Mark Ramsay. I assume you are acquainted with the name.”

“Not with yours particularly.”

“With my family’s then.”

“I’m not dead.”

His eyes narrowed. “But you might wind up in that condition, if you don’t tell me what you were doing here all night.”

She frowned. He had some nerve, threatening her. She raised her chin and sent him the most withering glare she could muster. "Is that the thanks I get for fixing your damn machine? Bloody hell!" She stormed toward the door, but he caught her arm, surprising her again with his speed. His large hand easily encircled her bicep.

"A respectable citizen doesn't swear," he warned. "I could report you."

"And I could report you!" she shot back. "For manhandling a female. Let go of me!"

"Not until you tell me what you've been up to." His face loomed inches away from hers. He had amazingly white teeth. She could see his nostrils flare. His nose was large and sharp, and unnervingly provocative when in such close proximity to hers.

"What part of fixing don't you understand?" she retorted, shaken by her reaction to him.

He squeezed her arm. "It couldn't have taken twelve hours to repair what was wrong with that machine."

"And how would you know?"

"Just a lucky guess."

"I was tired. I fixed the Marriage Machine and decided to take a nap while I could."

"You're lying."

"That makes two of us." She struggled to break free. "Now let me go, or I'll call out."

His grip relaxed as his wide mouth curled up at one corner, almost as if he were struggling to hide a smile. The smirk infuriated her even more. She wrenched her arm out of his grasp and brushed all traces of him off her leather sleeve.

His blue eyes flashed down at her. She'd never seen blue eyes before either. Everyone in the city had brown eyes. Fascinated, she stole a second look, unused to color of

any description in her foggy, monochromatic world. She imagined the sky had once been the color of his eyes. But she had only heard about such a sky in the tales of her great aunt.

Then she noticed his eyes darkening to a deeper color, as if the sky were melting into the warmest and most cerulean of oceans. He must have noticed her studying his face.

Elspeth flushed. She was gawking at a Ramsay and daydreaming of a wonderland of color. What in the name of Wanda was the matter with her?

Ramsay gave a short laugh, as if he'd registered her mental lapse. "Since when did the power company start sending girls out to do their work?"

"I'm not a girl."

"Really?" He cocked a brow. "Then what are you, pray tell?"

"An ace mechanic who happens to be a woman."

His cool glance surveyed her figure a second time, but his expression remained impassive, unreadable, as if he took no pleasure from the view.

Elspeth was only too aware that she hadn't been blessed with feminine contours. Her aunt had often chided her to eat more and work less, and maybe then her breasts and hips would have a chance to develop. But she'd never taken the advice. There were too many pet projects to work on at night after her long hours at the power company, and too many diagrams to draw. Moreover, she hadn't cared about the size of her breasts until she'd been sized up by Ramsay just now and been found lacking. If she had possessed ponderous breasts like her cousin Amelie, she would have unfastened her jacket and flaunted her attributes in Mark Ramsay's face. She would bet his nostrils would flare then.

Unfortunately, her breasts were not of the flaunting variety.

“A woman?” He snorted. “You look barely old enough to wear a corset.”

“I’m twenty-five, I’ll have you know. And was top of my class.”

“In what—Advanced Impertinence?”

“I’m not being impertinent!”

“You stare. You don’t mind your tongue.”

“It is my right to speak my mind.” She raked him up and down as thoroughly as he had surveyed her. “Just because you were born into the *esteemed* Ramsay family, and have every luxury at your disposal, doesn’t give you any more rights than me, *citizen*.”

“If you believe that,” he sneered. “Then you are woefully naive.”

Her flush deepened.

Again, their glances locked, and this time his eyes flared with challenge. But before either one of them could say anything more, Citizen Davies whisked through the door with three glasses on a tray.

“*Days of cake and cream should be far and few between*,” he said, smiling. “But I believe this is one of those days. I do believe it is.”

Elsbeth suspected that he had enjoyed more than his share of such days.

Davies picked up a glass of whiskey and held it out to her. “Citizen Shutterhouse?”

“Thank you, but I must be going.” At the door, she turned to look over her shoulder, sure that Captain Ramsay would be watching her departure with a triumphant sneer on his handsome face. Instead, he was sipping his drink and staring at the Marriage Machine, deep in thought.

AFTER PUTTING in a full day at work, Elspeth arrived home just after six that evening. The single gas lamp in the center of the square cast an eerie glow in the fog but failed to reach her aunt's doorstep. Exhausted, Elspeth pushed open the foyer door, pulled off her boots and stowed her backpack in the corner. All she wanted was a bowl of soup and her bed. But just as she reached for the door to the parlor, someone opened it and flooded her with light.

"Happy birthday!" two voices called in unison. Her aunt and cousin clapped and grinned, delighted with themselves for having caught her by surprise.

Elspeth had completely forgotten about her birthday. Technically, it had occurred yesterday, December 18th, but she'd been too busy fixing the Marriage Machine to celebrate.

"We were so worried you'd have to work overtime again," her aunt pulled her toward the settee table where a small white cake sat on a platter. "And that the cake would go bad."

"You could have eaten it without me," Elspeth said.

But she was glad they hadn't. Her mouth watered at the sight of the uncommon treat.

"Never," her aunt retorted. "It's your twenty-fifth birthday, Elspeth. A very special birthday for a woman. We'd never have eaten the cake without you. Now sit down and relax for once."

"Thank you, Aunt Fi." Elspeth had to admit that sitting down felt like the best birthday present of all. "It's been quite a week." She sank down onto the worn cushions of the sofa.

"But you did manage to fix the problem, dear?" her aunt asked, even though she never quite grasped what Elspeth did for a living. Aunt Fi handed her a piece of cake on a chipped plate. "The one you were called specially for?"

"I certainly did." Elspeth answered.

"That's good to hear. But as I have said before, you should speak to your boss. He makes you work too hard."

"It can't be helped, Aunt Fi. It's the nature of my job. Londo City would collapse without the SteamWizards."

"Never mind your dreary old job, El." Amelie sat down with her baby on her knee. Her ponderous breasts had increased geometrically since the birth of her child, and they docked on either side of Benjamin's shoulders like twin dirigibles. "What I am dying to know is if you got one."

"One what?" Elspeth savored a soft bite of cake. Sugar was so scarce, she couldn't remember the last time she'd had anything sweet.

"An envelope. *The* envelope."

Elspeth reached into her blouse, pulled out the now-tattered envelope and tossed it on the table.

"I knew it!" Amelie grinned. "I knew you'd be chosen."

Aunt Fi was more perceptive. She sat down across from

Elspeth, her slice of cake all but forgotten. “But you aren’t pleased, Elspeth. What’s wrong?”

“Everything! I fail to see what’s so wonderful about being forced to marry a complete stranger and never having another independent thought for the rest of my life.”

“It’s not what you think,” Amelie kissed the downy head of her child. “In fact it’s changed my life in ways I never imagined.”

It had changed Amelie all right. Amelie used to write and draw in her spare time. But a few minutes in the Marriage Machine had dried up her cousin’s creative juices. She hadn’t written a line since her marriage.

Nothing could be done about it now, so there was no use mentioning the fact to Amelie. Instead, Elspeth gave her a smile. “It’s fine for women like you, Amelie. You were meant to be a wife and a mother. But we all know that I would be miserable in that kind of life.”

“Maybe you wouldn’t,” her aunt reached over and patted her wrist. “It’s what a woman was born to do, Elspeth—bear children and raise the next generation. It’s important work. And not everyone gets the opportunity. It’s quite an honor, you know. You shouldn’t take it lightly.”

“What’s your date?” Amelie asked.

“I have no idea.” Elspeth put down her plate. She’d lost her appetite for cake and for celebrating. “I haven’t opened it yet.”

“You haven’t opened your envelope?” Amelie swooped down and grabbed it. “I can’t believe you, El, I really can’t.”

Elspeth sighed. “Why would I want to know the date of my last day of freedom?”

“Oh, El! You have to grow up some day.” Amelie shook

her head as she ripped the silver paper and drew out a card. Her face went white. "Oh, my!"

"What?" Aunt Fi blurted, a piece of cake balanced precariously on her fork.

Even Elspeth's curiosity was piqued. She glanced at her cousin.

"You've got a holiday date." Amelie looked back down at the engraved card. "December 25th in fact. C-Day. Oh, my word, Elspeth!" She fluttered a plump hand in front of her face, as if she were overheating with the news.

Elspeth stared at her cousin, completely baffled by Amelie's excitement. She knew all there was to know about pistons and valves, but she was completely ignorant when it came to the social aspects of life. She had no idea why a C-Day wedding was significant. "And that means?"

"Only the loftiest citizens are married on C-Day. The date is in such demand and so auspicious for a good marriage that only the upper crust is married then. Your groom must be an Overseer agent or at least a commissioner." Amelie's eyes gleamed. "You are so lucky! You won't have to work the rest of your life—I'll bet on it!"

Not working sounded like a prison sentence. Elspeth jumped to her feet. "Too bad you're going to lose that wager. I'm not going through with the ceremony."

"What?" her aunt sat back in her chair, appalled.

"I am warning you, Aunt Fi, I'm not going to go through with it."

"But you can't refuse. It's unheard of." Aunt Fi fluttered her hand in front of her face just as her daughter was doing.

"I'm going to be the first woman to say no."

"El!" Amelie gasped. "You can't do such a thing."

"I mean no disrespect to either of you or the lives you

lead. In fact, I will never be able to repay the kindness you showed me by taking me in after Father died.”

“We couldn’t have done any less,” Aunt Fi replied.

“But that machine does something to a woman’s mind.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It allows a woman to conceive.” Amelie hugged her son. “I wouldn’t have Benjamin without the Marriage Machine. And I can’t imagine not having him.”

“Well I can’t imagine marrying a stranger. And I won’t have some man thinking he can tell me how to live my life.”

Amelie paled and looked away.

Elspeth wouldn’t let her turn away as she had done so many times since her marriage. She stepped directly in front of her cousin. “I am referring to your job, Amelie. You loved that job. You loved working at the newspaper. Tell me you didn’t.”

“My child is more important than any job.”

“And who decided that?” Elspeth demanded. She planted her fists on her hips and leaned down to confront Amelie face-to-face. “You or Edward?”

“We both did,” Amelie stammered. “At least, I’m pretty sure we discussed it.” Her voice trailed off.

“Don’t remember?” Elspeth chided.

“Not exactly, but...”

“That’s just my point!” Elspeth crossed her arms over her chest. “The machine does that to a woman. I bet you barely argued your case with Edward—if at all.”

“Elspeth, please,” her aunt put in. “Let her be. It’s for the best having her home with the baby. And it’s your birthday. Let’s just get along for once, shall we?”

Elspeth sighed and plopped back down on the couch.

Aunt Fi patted her hand again. "Please, Elspeth, don't do anything rash. Please think this through, dear."

"I have thought of little else for the past year, Aunt Fi. Believe me."

"What will you do?" Amelie had gone very pale.

Elspeth shrugged. "I'm not sure yet. But there's one thing I know I *won't* be doing and that is showing up at," she grabbed the card and glanced at the silver script. "Boswellian Bower on December 25 at 4 o'clock."

"You'll be ruined," Aunt Fi put in.

"They might even send you away," Amelie added. "What if you had to work in the coal mines in the Norsea Workcamps for the rest of your life? We would never see you again."

"It would be better than spreading my legs for some weasel who thinks he *owns* me for the rest of my life."

"Elspeth, really!"

"Sorry, Aunt Fi. But that's how I see it. Thanks for the cake." Elspeth hurried from the parlor and ran up the narrow stairs to her tiny bedchamber under the roof. She had to get away from people who would never understand her. And that might possibly be the entire population of Londo City.

SOLITUDE WAS NOT to be hers, however. Before Elspeth could strip off her work clothes, she heard a loud banging at the front door and insistent voices down below. Elspeth froze.

"Elspeth?" Her aunt called from the bottom of the stairs. She could hear alarm in her aunt's voice.

Panic streaked through Elspeth. She had planned to run away a few days before the ceremony and lose herself in the Outskirts. But they had come for her sooner than

she had anticipated, and there was no way to escape from her bedroom—certainly not from the tiny first story window behind her. She had no choice but to face whomever it was in the parlor. Swallowing hard, Elspeth trudged down the steps.

Two Enforcers stood in the parlor with lamplight glinting off the metal buttons of their uniforms and the handles of their billy clubs. As she gained the last stair, they turned in her direction.

“Elspeth Shutterhouse?” The taller one barked.

“Yes?”

“You are under arrest.”

“What?” Aunt Fi’s hands flew to her cheeks in shock.

Elspeth couldn’t believe it, either. How could anyone have discovered what she had done in so short a time?

“On what charge?” she demanded.

The officer’s handlebar mustache curled close to his nose as he shot her a look of disdain. “You have been accused of committing a crime.”

“What kind of crime?”

“Theft and transport of unlawful goods.”

“What are you talking about?” Elspeth feigned cool ignorance while she burned like a brand on the inside. There was only one person in the world that could have possibly turned her in to the authorities: that bastard Ramsay.

“Don’t make it worse for yourself, citizen, by feigning ignorance.” The officer looped a restraining cord around her wrists. “You were seen burying stolen property in broad daylight.”

“You must be mistaken,” Aunt Fi cried. “Elspeth would never steal.”

“You can’t take her!” Amelie put in. “It’s her birthday!”

“I suggest you hire an advocate, madame.” The officer

glared at Aunt Fi. “That is, if you haven’t spent your entire fortune on *cake*.” He yanked Elspeth toward the door.

“Elspeth!” Aunt Fi cried. Tears burst from her eyes as she lunged for her niece. But the officers wouldn’t allow the women to hug each other good-bye. Elspeth took a good long look at her family, knowing she might never see them again. Remorse washed over her. She had expected to pay a price for her rash actions, but it had never occurred to her to consider how her decision might devastate her aunt.

That was the worst of it—watching her beloved Aunt Fi fall to the floor in a dead faint, and not being able to help her. While Amelie blubbered and Benjamin wailed, the officers jostled Elspeth out of the house, shoved her into the back of their chugger wagon, and took her to the station a mile away.

ELSPETH SPENT another night huddled on a hard surface, this time on a bench in a detention cell. She was too worried about the future to sleep and jumped to her feet the moment she spotted a warden walking her way down the dark corridor. She had no idea how long she’d been held. Her father’s pocket watch had been taken from her, and there were no windows in the cellblock to allow her to gauge the passage of time.

The warden didn’t even look at her as he turned a key in the lock and pulled at the barred door. It opened with a screech. He motioned for her to exit.

“Where am I going?” she demanded. Her legs were stiff and her head throbbed from lack of sleep, but she ignored the pain.

“To collect your belongings.” He swung the door shut. “And after that, I don’t much care.”

She studied his florid face and bushy sideburns. “I’m getting back my things?”

“You’re being released, citizen. Charges have been dropped.”

“What?”

“I’d quit asking questions if I were you.”

She was being released? Elspeth could hardly believe her luck. Suspicious, she followed the warden to a small chamber where a woman pushed a wire basket toward her. There she found her watch, her tablet, and her mother’s ring. She shoved them back to their rightful places, worried all the while that someone would shout out that there had been a mistake, and that she should be returned to her cell.

Luckily, no such call was made. Minutes later, she burst out of the detention compound and into the bleak morning light. Cold air hit her like a wall. With the cold front had come a strange clarity in the atmosphere. She could see details three blocks ahead of her. And was that the moon in the distance? For a moment, Elspeth paused to gawk at the muddy-looking orb hanging over the rooftops. She had never seen the moon.

But Elspeth couldn’t waste any time staring at the sky. She hugged her arms and hurried toward her aunt’s house, hoping she could get there before she froze to death. The WeatherWizards had predicted snow by the end of the week. But it hadn’t snowed for over a hundred years, so she suspected the promised miracle would not occur this week either.

She prayed the weather would return to its normal foggy blandness. Cold like this would complicate the life of someone who might have to sleep on the streets for a few nights. And that would be her.

She planned to say good-bye to her aunt, pack a bag,

and leave Londo City before the police showed up again, as she knew they would.

A block from Aunt Fi's, she noticed a Flying Horse turn a corner and head her way, its vapor cloud billowing around it in the frigid air. Fearful of who might be in the vehicle, Elspeth increased her pace to just under a run.

The vehicle whisked up beside her. She kept walking and looked straight ahead, even though she had never seen a Flying Horse up close. She could see it was designed to look like a horse from a carousel, fashioned of polished black wood and chrome. She would love to study it more thoroughly—especially the motor, but getting home and away was her priority. One more block and she would be back at Aunt Fi's.

The driver must have read her thoughts, for the vehicle swerved abruptly to hover over the walkway and block her path. She dashed to the left. The vehicle countered the movement, turning with ease on its cushion of air. She cursed at the new technology that allowed such agility. No doubt the agents of the Overseers would be driving such vehicles soon, and there would be no chance of escape for people like her—on land or in the air.

A window opened. "Shutterhouse!" a voice called. "Get in."

Get in? The driver must think she was an idiot. She dashed around the floating car.

"I got you out of jail," the deep voice boomed. "Spare me a moment."

Elspeth recognized that voice. She skidded to a halt and glared over her shoulder. Captain Mark Ramsay had climbed out of his vehicle and was peering through the vapor cloud at her, his blue eyes and black hair unmistakable, even in the fog.

"Get in!" he ordered. "It's freezing out here."

“Not on your life, Ramsay!”

“I can have you re-arrested.”

She shuddered.

“I know about the ruby,” he added. “I had you followed.”

“So you *were* the one who turned me in. I knew it!”

“No, I was the one who got you out. Some loyal citizen turned you in.”

Her heart sank. It didn't matter who had turned her in to the authorities. It only mattered that she had failed. The risk she had taken to disable the Marriage Machine had all been for nothing. No doubt Ramsay *could* have her arrested for the crime. Unlike the rest of the citizens in Londo City, the Ramsays could go where they liked and do what they wished, a privilege they enjoyed for having saved civilization from extinction hundreds of years ago. She was forced to hear Mark Ramsay out or face the consequences.

He raised a black eyebrow and opened the passenger door.

Chin in the air, Elspeth slipped onto the seat of the Flying Horse while Ramsay gently closed the door beside her. She put her elbow on the tufted armrest and tried not to gape at the knobs and gauges that surrounded the steering arc of the Flying Horse. Ramsay settled into the driver's seat and glanced down at her.

“Your jaw has dropped,” he commented with a droll smile.

Elspeth snapped shut her mouth and flushed.

“So you like my new toy?” he queried.

“It's okay. But I don't have all day. This better be quick.”

“I have a job for you.”

It was her turn to stare at him. “A job?”

He nodded as he guided his craft into the street.

“I’m taking you somewhere we can talk in private, and you can freshen up. Don’t panic.”

He drove southward, toward the river, and didn’t say another word. Elspeth couldn’t help but marvel at the smoothness of the ride and Ramsay’s mastery of the vehicle. She felt as if she were zipping along on a cloud—a nice warm cloud with a glove-soft interior.

They whizzed through the streets as the city awakened. Lamps turned on in apartments. A newspaper boy trotted by with his bag. Men hurried to their factory jobs while street vendors opened the shutters of their stalls.

As Elspeth’s frozen extremities warmed, she became more aware of the man who sat beside her—and far too close for her liking. But for a small gear housing, his left thigh would be touching hers. His thigh was long and muscular, his knee twice the size of her own. She shifted her leg to the side to avoid him as much as possible. Then she became aware of his large hands and long fingers, which seemed perfectly suited to work the controls of the craft.

As their bodies heated the air in the Flying Horse, she noticed how wonderful he smelled—as if he had recently bathed but and dusted himself with a refreshing powder laced with lime. He smelled so good that she had a wild compulsion to bury her face in the small of his neck and suck in a deep breath of him. The collar of his shirt, bleached to a blazing white, grazed the sharp line of his prominent jaw. His skin was smooth and tan and shaved to perfection. She almost reached out to touch him, to make sure he was real.

Shaken by her reaction to him, Elspeth glanced at his sharp profile. The first time she’d seen him, she had pegged him as conventionally handsome. But upon closer inspection, she realized that there might be more to Mark

Ramsay than good looks and intoxicating cologne. There was something in his blue eyes—mental agility perhaps. Or cunning. She wasn't sure which.

He must have felt her evaluating him. He shot her a questioning glance that made her flush all over again.

When he quirked his wide mouth like that, and flashed his white teeth at one side, her head flooded with a vision of her pressing kisses on his undeniably masculine lips. She had never seen such perfect teeth. Most people she knew had crooked discolored teeth from the lack of health care and improper diet.

“Yes?” he purred.

“Nothing.”

Elspeth shook herself back to reality. What was she thinking? Mark Ramsay smelled heavenly. She hadn't bathed for three days. He was practically a nobleman in their socialist society. She was an impoverished mechanic. Worse, she was this man's prisoner. The sooner she got away from him, the better.

CAPTAIN RAMSAY TRANSPORTED her to a brick townhouse tucked away on a quiet street that overlooked one of the few greenbelts left in the city. After the Second Reformation undertaken centuries ago, when all buildings containing toxic material and electrical components were razed, only those structures built before 1880 were allowed to remain standing. So now, across from the townhouse was a greenbelt where Scotland Yard, the once revered police unit, had operated. That police force was long gone, leaving the park as its tongue-in-cheek namesake. Scotland Yard ran all the way from this block to the Thames, and only the very rich lived along its border.

Ramsay parked the Flying Horse in a space beneath

the house, and motioned for her to follow him up the stone stairs that led to an interior door.

“I can procure a chaperone if you like,” he said, holding open the door for her. “My neighbor is always keen to make pocket change.”

“I don’t need a chaperone.”

“Do you not?”

“I will never undergo a premarital inspection. So no.”

He nodded, as if he took it for granted that a woman like her would never be selected for marriage. His reaction insulted her, and she was about to retort that she’d received a coveted silver envelope—thank you very much. But good sense muffled the words before she uttered them. Besides, it was considered impolite to discuss a person’s upcoming nuptials with a stranger. Not everyone was “lucky” enough to be selected. A lot of people got passed over.

Elsbeth swept into the townhouse. She expected to enter a lavish interior of velvet drapery and lush woven carpets. Instead the décor was comprised of simple black wood furniture, white upholstery, and gray walls—a plain but not unpleasant arrangement. A single painting hung over the ancient unused fireplace. Elsbeth looked up at the portrait of a man in an old-fashioned suit and was struck by his blazing blue eyes framed by prominent dark brows and black hair. He wore a critical, penetrating expression that bore down upon her.

“My great-grandfather,” Ramsay commented behind her. His cologne settled over her in a seductive cloud. “Alexander Ramsay.”

“I see a resemblance.”

“That’s what they tell me.”

“He looks as if he was a stern man.”

“Times were dire when he sat for that portrait.

Everyone was stern.” He touched her elbow. “Come. Bathe yourself, eat, and then we will talk.”

Elsbeth pulled back. “What’s there to talk about? And why me?”

“I need someone who knows their way around that machine.” His lip curled. “Don’t take it as personal interest in you.”

“I don’t intend to.” She glanced back at the stern visage of Alexander Ramsay.

The sight of Mark’s relative reminded her of her own family. “Is there a way to get a message to my aunt?” she asked. “To let her know that I am all right, and where I’m at?”

“I will take care of it.”

She had to trust him to do as she asked. She was powerless to do anything else. Like he had said, he could have her re-arrested in an instant. She decided not to argue with his agenda either. A bath and a decent meal would restore her. After she’d eaten, she would escape.

ELSPETH FOLLOWED Ramsay up a grand staircase to the first floor. He ushered her into a chilly bedchamber that was larger than her aunt’s entire house. Before she could tell him that she could manage on her own, he started a bath and then fetched a small box from a closet. She watched, curious, as he wound a key in the back and set the box near the tub. It whirred, issuing a wave of hot air.

“Whatever is that?” Elsbeth gasped, ambling closer and holding out her cold hands.

“Something I’ve been working on.” He watched her bask in the glow of the small heater. “It’s damnable cold in these windowless Londo houses.”

“These windowless houses saved us from the radiation cloud.”

But thoughts of the past dissipated as she studied the box he’d produced. Surely, she was looking at the future.

Fascinated, she glanced up at him. “How can it be so small and yet create so much heat?”

“It’s based on the same technology as the Flying Horse.”

“Bacteria biofuel?”

“Yes, but in a more compressed form.” He walked to the tub. “In small cartridges. It costs next to nothing to run.”

Elsbeth stared at the contraption. “You developed this?” she murmured.

“Surprised?”

She was. Mr. Big was becoming an even bigger enigma the more she got to know him. “Have you passed this by the Energy Board?”

“It’s still in the testing stage.” He shut off the water. “Besides, do you really think they’d ever let such a cheap source of heat hit the market?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s my theory,” he handed her a towel, “that the Overseers maintain their hold over Londo City by keeping the citizens cold and hungry. When a man’s hungry, he thinks of nothing but his next meal.”

Elsbeth nearly dropped the towel. “You could be sent to the camps for saying that.”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t thought the very same thing.”

She met his serious gaze. For a long moment, all she could hear was the whir of the little heating unit and the thud of her heart as she stared up into his clear and—what she was beginning to suspect were—highly-intelligent eyes.

For a moment she thought of sharing her disdain of the Overseers and their reactionary ways. She wanted to. But blabbing about her rebellious political views was far too dangerous, especially with a Ramsay.

“Am I not right, Shutterhouse?” he prodded.

He was obviously fishing for information, probably to use against her in the future. That’s what the privileged few did to keep their distance from the rabble of Londo City. They took what they liked, when they liked, and then turned their backs on their inferiors with no repercussions whatsoever, as long as they didn’t violate the Edicts of Conduct set forth by the Overseers. But not many edicts pertained to the protection of the rabble, so in effect, the tiny plutocracy of Londo had free rein.

Elsbeth was sure the Overseers saw the citizens of Londo as an expendable commodity, much like a herd of cattle. Their low opinion of common man infuriated her. Sure, there were many people who plodded through their lives and had no ambition beyond getting to the next day. But there were plenty of young people like herself who yearned for a better life and a say in how the city was run. There had to be a better way for people and more freedom of choice. She wasn’t a cow. She wasn’t part of a herd, and she wasn’t going to be poked and prodded until she did what the Overseers wanted, especially when it came to her future.

There had been a time when the Overseers were needed. They had been angels of mercy, a handful of men who possessed great wisdom and resources. They had saved the human race from extinction after a nuclear accident—the Grave Mistake—had sparked a planetary war. Entire countries had been wiped out in the vicious battles that had followed the accident, and it was surmised that most of the people who survived the initial

bombings died in the endless nuclear winter that followed.

But no one really knew how many humans had survived. No one in the Anglo Territories had heard from the rest of the world in over five hundred years.

After the war and ensuing chaos, a military state was needed and a socialist government required just to survive. As a safeguard against future disasters, the Overseers decreed that anything considered a threat to peace should be demolished. Entire neighborhoods were razed. All manufactured components and technological developments built after the year 1880 were destroyed. The use of electricity was outlawed. Only natural power—steam power—was allowed. Anything else was considered dangerous, with too great a potential for repeating the events that had almost destroyed the earth.

The lesson learned from the Grave Mistake was that human beings could not master the technology they developed. So the Overseers set the clock back to the machinery and mores of the 1880s, and there the Anglo Territories remained.

So far, their plan had worked. In fact, in the last ten years, the birth rate had actually begun to climb. Food was not rationed quite so strictly. The weather was beginning to change. And that's why Elspeth was determined to make a stand. A new day was dawning. It was time someone convinced the Overseers to take a step back.

The trouble was, the Overseers were unapproachable, and for all intents and purposes, invisible. They lived in a well-guarded fortress that had once been known as Buckingham Palace and was now called the Central Compound. They were never seen coming or going. It was impossible to get an audience with an Overseer as well. There were numerous administrative levels to get through

just to lodge a simple complaint or request. No one had ever made it all the way to the top.

Elsbeth frowned.

“What I think of Londo City won’t change the world,” she finally replied. “And might only get me in trouble.”

“Not with me.”

“And why should I trust you?”

“I’m beginning to suspect we might have similar agendas.”

For a moment, she glanced back up to his face. He gazed down at her, his navy eyes dark with smoldering intensity. The way he looked at her made her feel as if his every thought was focused on her reply and that he might actually be interested in her views. In that moment, she felt more power over a man than she had known in all her twenty-five years. But such power was fleeting. If he could turn on his charm like that, he could turn it off just as quickly. His interest in her was probably just an act.

“Sorry, I keep my thoughts to myself,” she quipped, “And I work alone.” She headed for the bath before he could say anything more.

Still, his charm had wormed its way through her defenses, enough to set her heart banging against her ribs. Then and there she made a vow that she would never again let her guard down when in the man’s company.

“SHUTTERHOUSE.”

Elspeth became aware of a presence.

“Elspeth.”

Someone nudged her right shoulder.

She sighed, too groggy to open her eyes and respond to the person summoning her. To avoid further attempts to rouse her, she turned over on her back. A cool rush of air washed over her, startling her.

“Good heavens!” a man exclaimed.

Then it hit her. She felt a chill because she had just rolled out of the huge towel she had been draped in. And she had been stark naked beneath it.

Startled, Elspeth blinked to complete consciousness and was appalled to discover Mark Ramsay staring down at her, his eyes wide. For an instant, they were both immobilized by shock. The next instant, each of them plunged into action.

Elspeth scrambled to a sitting position and struggled to conceal her nakedness with her hands and the strands of her recently shampooed hair.

Ramsay laughed out loud and turned his back.

Elsbeth fumbled for the towel. Her hands shook from being awakened so abruptly. She could feel a blush flooding her face, and wasn't sure what made her more upset—the fact that he'd seen her naked or the fact that he was laughing at her. "You shouldn't sneak up on people like that!" she cried.

"Sneak?" he retorted over his shoulder. "I've been calling for you for five minutes."

"Five minutes?" She yanked the ends of the towel around her torso.

"At least five. I thought you might be dead. I had to come in. For your own good." He turned around to face her. "And you were dead all right. Dead to the world."

Elsbeth glanced around the room. Apparently she had taken a bath, gone to the bed to dress, sat down on the comforter and had fallen asleep still wrapped in the large towel. "It's no wonder. I haven't had a decent night's sleep for days."

"Obviously." He reached out his hand. "But come."

She glanced at his fingers, and before she thought twice, she raised her hand to meet his. His flesh was warm, as if a roaring furnace fired his body. A melting sensation washed over her as he drew her to her feet. Then he lifted her hand closer and frowned.

"Your knuckles," he commented. "What happened?"

"Nuts." She snatched away her hand, appalled yet again that he had noticed her ugly fingers. "In hard to reach places."

"I see." He seemed to find the explanation amusing.

"Comes with the job."

"Ah." His grin widened.

"I fail to see what's so funny."

"Forgive me, Shutterhouse. I am accustomed to the

humor of my men. I read the wrong meaning behind your words.” He bowed his head slightly, more to hide a chuckle than to show remorse. “But you have one more task ahead of you. And then you may sleep as long as you wish.”

“What task is that?”

“I’ll tell you over dinner.”

“Dinner?” Her stomach rumbled in protest. Her knees felt weak. She didn’t think she could wait that long to eat.

“Yes, dinner.” He released her hand and reached for a shirt draped over the end of the bed. “Put this on and come down. The food’s growing cold.”

In a state of shock, Elspeth glanced around the room again, searching for a clock this time.

“Shutterhouse?”

She turned back to look at him again. His blue eyes danced as he gazed down at her. “It’s six o’clock. You slept the entire day.”

ELSPETH SAT down in the chair Ramsay pulled out for her at the dining table. She hadn’t eaten supper with a man since her father died. And she’d never eaten supper while dressed in a man’s shirt. But the unusual external trappings of dinner paled when she looked down at her plate.

“Are those peaches?” she whispered, shooting him a glance.

He nodded. “I brought some supplies with me from the island. I know they’re canned, but I thought you might like them all the same.”

She couldn’t believe her eyes. “There are peaches on the island?”

“Sometimes. If the weather is just right.” He laughed again. He had an easy laugh. When a person didn’t have to

struggle for every penny, for every loaf of bread, life was probably something to laugh about. She looked up at him.

“Go ahead, Shutterhouse. Try one.”

“I’ve never tasted a peach.”

“I guarantee you will like it.” He smiled. Again, his white teeth gleamed, lighting up his face.

Elspeth picked up her fork and sliced through the soft flesh of the peach. She admired the deep orange crescent tinged with crimson as she raised the fruit to her lips. Then she placed the slice on her tongue, closed her eyes, and sat back.

“Well?”

She chewed slowly, savoring every succulent morsel of the delicate fruit.

“Shutterhouse?”

Elspeth raised her hand, silencing him until she swallowed. Then she smiled and opened her eyes as pleasure washed over her. Finally, she sighed and looked at him. He was watching her, his lips slightly parted.

“That must be what an orgasm is like,” she murmured.

He choked and reached for his ale. “Pardon me?”

“An orgasm.”

“What do you know of orgasms?”

She wanted to blurt out “plenty.” But then she would have to tell him where she had learned about orgasms: under *Hormones*, *Female*, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. G-H. If anyone found out she possessed forbidden literature, she would be in even more trouble.

Elspeth shrugged. “I’ve heard about them.”

“Well, there’s no such thing.”

She looked up, not believing his claim.

“Not for respectable citizens.” Ramsay finished his ale in a gulp. “You know that as well as I do.”

Elsbeth recalled one of the verses that had been pounded into her as an adolescent.

Communion between a man and wife has but one purpose: to create life.

"Maybe it's just respectable *men* who don't have orgasms," she mused, cutting into the chicken breast he had arranged on her plate. "And women just pretend not to have them. So no one is the wiser."

"And what do you think an orgasm is?"

"A series of muscle contractions."

"Like a cramp?" He put down his empty glass.

"But one that produces euphoria instead of pain." Elspeth sighed and looked across the room toward the front hall. "I'd like to experience euphoria someday."

She looked back at Ramsay to find him studying the side of her face. As soon as she noticed his stare, he broke it off and grabbed his knife and fork.

"And you consider the act of eating peaches similar to the orgasm?"

"For me it is." She lifted another slice to her lips. "Perhaps for you, a pampered scion of the Ramsay family, peaches have lost their cachet."

"You think I'm pampered?"

"Really, Ramsay." She shook her head as she scooped up a spoonful of the creamiest potatoes she had ever encountered. "You live like a king compared to the rest of us."

His eyebrows rose. "I beg to differ."

"This house, the Flying Horse, this food..."

"All my great-grandfather's. And only when I am in town."

"And at the Outer Islands?"

"There I mostly live out-of-doors." He set his jaw and leveled his sapphire gaze upon her. "Come now, Shutter-

house. Do I look like a man who spends his days lounging about the house, sipping tea?"

She couldn't help but run a glance over his massive shoulders and powerful torso. "Actually no," she replied. "But what *do* you do?"

"I'm a soldier, mostly." His gaze shifted, as if his consciousness had switched to another time and place. "There are a lot of wild things out there—both man and beast, all wanting what we possess here in Londo City. My men and I patrol the border islands, to keep the rest of you citizens safe."

She opened her mouth to protest that she found it hard to believe a Ramsay would put himself in danger for the rest of society. But a second glance at his firm mouth and large hands, and her harsh opinion of his family died on her lips. In fact, for the first time she noticed scars on the backs of his hands and just under his chin. A person didn't get scars like his from teacups and scones.

"I'm the second son," he added. "My family clings to the old ways."

"And that is?"

"The first son inherits. The second son enters the military. In my case a private army."

"Do you have a lot of siblings?"

"Just the one. Thomas." He refilled her glass. "And you?"

"None. My mother died young."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

She glanced at him in surprise. The sincerity in his voice warmed her.

"Don't be," Elspeth replied. "I didn't know my mother. And my father and great aunt more than made up for her loss. I had a wonderful childhood."

He smiled in his engaging way and leaned back. “And I take it, a somewhat unconventional one?”

She nodded. “I was taught as if I was neither girl nor boy. I was allowed to investigate whatever interested me.”

“Even mechanics.”

“Especially mechanics. My father was the best mechanic in Londo City. A genius. He made me what I am today.”

“Well he certainly did *some* job.”

Elspeth shot him a stare. “What do you mean?”

“It’s a compliment, Shutterhouse.” He grinned and leveled his gaze on her. When he directed his attention to her like that, she felt as if she were swimming in warm butter. She tried to adhere to her vow of keeping up her guard but was finding it impossible.

“I have to confess,” he murmured. “I’ve never met anyone quite like you.”

Elspeth gaze locked with his. For a moment she took Ramsay’s words at face value. For a moment, she let herself enjoy the marvelous feeling of talking to Mark Ramsay without the censure of her aunt or cousin to hold her back. She sensed a fellow independent spirit in the man. In fact Ramsay was the first person she’d talked so freely with since her father had died. She couldn’t believe how wrong she had been about the man—and perhaps his entire clan. She hoped what she felt was real, and prayed that he wasn’t deceiving her. The more she got to know the man, the more she ached to lower her guard completely.

But her great aunt—a spinster who had never entered the Marriage Machine—had not raised a fool. Elspeth would think twice—even three times—before trusting a man.

Shaken by her reaction to Mark, Elspeth reached for her ale. She knew it was best if she turned the conversation

to a less personal topic. “So I take it you will eventually tell me why you snatched me off the street?”

“Ah, yes.” He smiled. “I have a proposal for you.”

“And that is?”

“First, let me tell you about my great-grandfather.”

“The one in the painting.”

“Yes. Perhaps the most famous custodian of the Marriage Machine.”

“Oh.” Elspeth couldn’t hide her look of disdain.

“Don’t dismiss it so out of hand, Shutterhouse. It’s the machine that saved mankind from extinction.”

“You don’t think we would have survived?” Elspeth countered. “Without mechanical intervention?”

“That will always be an unknown.” Ramsay sobered. “But it did serve one purpose to be sure.”

“The taming of females?” Elspeth put in, her voice harsh.

“To survive, Shutterhouse.” He held up his hand to cut off her protests. “To survive, the human race had to return to a more conventional way of life. Someone had to work and someone had to raise the children to be decent human beings with strong values. To really take the time. I know it sounds prehistoric, but women and men had to learn to work together for the greater good. And *stick* together.”

“Funny how women were the ones to be altered.”

“Females simply proved to be more sensitive to the machine. I’m sure my ancestors did not plan such an outcome.”

“My cousin has never been the same since she stepped into that machine. Or two of my older friends. They do whatever their husbands ask.”

“But are they unhappy?”

Elspeth thought of Amelie bouncing her son on her knee and laughing.

“Are they, Shutterhouse?”

“No, but as my father used to say, ‘No brains, no headache.’”

“To ensure the survival of the human race, men and women have to marry. That’s a fact, Elspeth. Would you rather be trapped in an unhappy marriage and be miserable for the rest of your life, or have your sharp edges worn off a little so you don’t even know what you were missing?”

“You can ask me a question like that with a straight face?” Indignant, Elspeth jumped to her feet.

He jumped to his. “What other choice is there?”

“Not to be trapped at all!” She threw her napkin on the table.

“You don’t wish to be married? To have children?”

She planted a fist on her hip and threw his words back at him. “Ramsay, do I *look* like a woman who lounges around the house, sipping tea?”

She glared at him, and for a moment she thought he might strike her. But in the next instant he threw back his head and laughed.

“I don’t find it amusing!” she exclaimed.

“I do.” He held his shaking torso as if trying to hold back the laughter rumbling through his muscular frame.

“And if you have brought me here, thinking I’m going to put that ruby back, you are sadly mistaken.” She turned and dashed for the door.

Ramsay’s laughter broke off as he pivoted to stop her. He grabbed her arm and yanked her to a halt. “That is precisely what you are going to do,” he retorted, all humor dropped from his tone. His eyes flashed at her, cool as ice.

“Never!”

“I will return you to jail and make sure you are sentenced to life.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“I would.” He glared down at her, his color high. She could imagine that glare made his men quake in their boots. But she refused to back down.

She glared back at him. “Tell me you would personally choose to marry a woman like that.”

“A woman like what?”

“One whose edges have been smoothed by that machine.”

“How do you know I haven’t?”

“You don’t seem the type.”

His eyes changed, almost imperceptibly. But Elspeth noticed the way his pupils widened, darkening his eyes to navy.

“Listen, Shutterhouse,” he growled. “I don’t care if you plant a bomb in that machine. But not until after my great-grandfather passes away.”

“He’s still alive?” She sensed that she had begun to reach some sense in Ramsay and quit pulling from his grip.

“Yes, but barely. He’s 101 years old. And he’s damnably proud of that machine. For good reason.”

Elspeth was uncharacteristically lost for words.

“He vowed to stay in this realm until he saw one last marriage ceremony. He wants to go to the beyond knowing the Ramsay name will live on through my brother.”

“Your brother Thomas is getting married?”

“On C-Day.”

A chill raced down Elspeth’s spine.

“And as you know, the machine guarantees conception.”

Elspeth thought back to her cousin’s prediction—that she had been chosen to marry someone of the upper echelon of society. What if she were destined to wed a Ramsey? The chill spread through her, doubling her resolve to avoid her date with the Marriage Machine.

“My job is to see the ceremony goes off without a hitch.” Ramsay quirked one of his dry smiles. “Or *with*, as the case may be.”

He released her arm, and she backed away, her thoughts swirling.

“Why can’t you just keep the ruby out of the equation?” she sputtered. “It’s so well concealed within the casing of the machine. No one would ever know it was missing.”

“My great-grandfather might.”

“How?” she shrugged. “He’s 101 years old.”

“And he knows every inch of that machine.” Ramsay sighed. “As a matter of fact, he’s called for an inspection of the Marriage Machine. He’ll be here first thing tomorrow morning to conduct the inspection personally. If he finds one bolt out of place—one loose screw—I don’t know what it will do to him.”

Elspeth stared at Ramsay.

“I love my great-grandfather, Elspeth. And there is nothing on this Earth that I wouldn’t do for him. Nothing.”

“So how do I fit into this grand scheme of yours?”

“You and I are breaking into Boswellian Bower tonight. And you are going to replace the ruby.”

“But it will take hours to get to the heart of the machine.”

“You’ve done it before.” Ramsay pulled out his pocket watch and glanced down at it. “I estimate that you could complete the job in five.”

“You have no idea how complicated that machine is.”

“Perhaps. But you will have me to assist you.”

Elspeth gave him a scathing glance. She could imagine Ramsay with a gun. She could imagine him in a fistfight or brawl. But she could not imagine him with a screwdriver.

"I'm not completely unfamiliar with machines," he added.

She would give him that. He'd built the simple heater. There was hope.

"And if I can't do it?"

"There is no such thing as can't." He shot back.

"What do I get if I actually succeed?"

It was his turn to scald her with a glance. "Isn't your freedom enough?"

"No."

Ramsay tilted his head. "What then?"

"I want safe passage to the Outer Islands."

"You don't know what you're saying."

"I want to leave Londo City. I don't belong here."

"You don't want to go to the Outer Islands." He scowled. "It's no place for a woman."

"You live there."

He crossed his arms. "I'm not a woman. Or at least I wasn't the last time I checked."

"Your family lives there."

"In a compound." He swept the air with an impatient wave of his hand.

"Promise me safe passage, Ramsay."

"Very well!" He sighed. "Replace the ruby without complication, and you shall be transported north." He stuffed his watch into the pocket of his vest. "Now hurry up, Shutterhouse, and dress. We leave in ten minutes."

ELSPETH WAS surprised at how cold it was when she jumped out of the Flying Horse and grabbed the tools Ramsay had procured for the job. It was what she supposed a winter night might have been like in the old days—without the snow. The air was crisp, ice covered the puddles in the alley, and frost crawled up the windows. She could see Ramsay’s breath when he told her to wait while he parked the vehicle around the corner and out of sight.

Wrapped in a long coat that belonged to a member of the Ramsay family, Elspeth waited for him to return. The coat was warm, so she wasn’t cold, but she shuddered all the same. At ten o’clock on a December evening, the alley behind Boswellian Bower was dark and deserted. Even the rats had taken cover on this cold night. Elspeth glanced up at the sky and searched for the moon she had spotted earlier that morning. There it was again, like a big eye, watching her—even clearer this time. She wondered if the WeatherWizards were right—that the fog lying over Londo City would finally lift after its centuries-long stay.

Ramsay trotted up, his winter coat flapping around his

shins, his boats gleaming in the moonlight, and the many buttons of his coat glinting as he ran. His cravat, knotted at the throat, glowed above his vest and lit up his eyes.

“Why must we break into the Bower?” she asked, following him to the back door. “Why not just tell someone that the machine has to be repaired?”

“I can’t take the chance that my great-grandfather might discover his beloved contraption has been tampered with. Davies thinks everything is fine. I want to keep it that way.” He turned at the door and cupped his hands. “Come, Shutterhouse.”

Elspeth glanced at his linked fingers. “What do you have in mind?”

“I’m going to hoist you up to that transom.”

Elspeth glanced up to the arched window at the top of the door.

“I’ll wager the transom is not locked. I’ll lift you, you will open it, crawl through, jump down and then let me in the door.”

“You’ve got to be joking.”

“I am not.” He nodded his head toward his hands. “Come. Step into my hand.”

“You think I can get through that window and jump seven feet to the ground?”

“I’d do it myself if I thought you could lift me.” He cocked one of his expressive black brows.

There was no argument to be made. She could no more lift the giant in front of her than she could fly to the now visible moon. She would do her best to sabotage the machine, but with Ramsay breathing down her neck, she probably wouldn’t have a second chance to disable it. Her best recourse would be to look for an opportunity to escape—but only after she and Ramsay got off the street and out of sight. For now, she had to cooperate.

Elsbeth deposited the satchel of tools on the pavement beside him, slipped out of her coat, and placed it on the bag. Then she lifted her foot. To steady herself, she was forced to plant her hand on Ramsay's shoulder. The man was a rock of muscle. With a grunt, she shifted her weight onto her foot and propelled herself forward as he raised her upward. She braced herself against the wooden door as he straightened his legs and lifted her past the top of the door. When he grabbed her knees and lifted her higher, she wobbled but caught herself by clutching the sill of the transom. Then she pushed the stained glass with her right palm. The transom moved inward.

"Is it unlocked?" His voice was muffled by her clothing.

"Yes."

"Can you get it open?"

As she struggled with the window, she felt him brace her feet on his shoulders. The cold soon took hold of her fingers, making her clumsy. But she managed to crack open the transom far enough to wiggle through. She looked down, worrying about how she was going to get through the window and position herself to jump without falling face first onto the floor below. But as her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness of the corridor, she had an idea.

"Hold my ankles," she instructed.

She felt Ramsay's big hands wrap around her boots.

Elsbeth pushed through the opening and bent at the waist. Then, straining, she reached for the inside handle of the door. As the blood raced to her head, and the transom sill cut into her hip bones, she explored the latch with her nearly numb fingers. Then she found the locking mechanism. She shifted it open.

"Got it?" Ramsay asked.

"Try it."

Still holding one of her feet, Ramsay turned the latch

and pushed the door, just enough to make sure it was unlocked. Then Elspeth wriggled out of the transom, crouched, and slid down Ramsay's back. When her feet hit the ground, he turned and clutched her elbows.

"Good work." He gave her a brief survey. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Just cold."

She broke away to grab the coat and tools, and they slipped into Boswellian Bower.

ELSPETH HAD BEEN to a few weddings. Her acquaintances were slowly turning twenty-five, and the lucky ones received silver envelopes. Although Elspeth didn't consider marriage the right choice for anyone, she attended the nuptials of her friends to show moral support. But those weddings had been conducted in a much more modest bower. From what she could see in the shadows, Boswellian Bower was appointed in understated grandeur.

She followed Ramsay down a corridor comprised of marble floors, embossed wallpaper, and ornate brass lamps. He seemed to know where he was going, and led her into a large room, much like an auditorium, with gilt and plush chairs, and a thick carpet that ran from the entry doors to the stage. Squatting on the platform behind velvet curtains and stage lamps, was the Marriage Machine.

"There she is," Ramsay remarked in a hushed tone beside her. "The Marriage Machine."

Elspeth's heart beat a bit faster. This was the place Fate waited for her. Here would begin the life the Overseers had calculated to suit her and her groom. She frowned and stuffed down her panic. *Not if she could help it.*

"Is there a watchman?" Elspeth asked.

"I am not sure." He motioned her toward the machine. "So try to be as quiet as possible."

"But surely, a watchman will see our light."

"Not if we keep the curtains well drawn." Ramsay strode to the side of the stage and worked the ropes until the curtains swished closed. Elspeth stepped into the now-silent bower and pushed back the curtains that lined the interior, knowing that she must remove the carved walnut panels before she reached any machine parts.

Ramsay lit the lamp they had brought, and set it down in the middle of the bower, just as Elspeth turned for the tools. They straightened at the same time, their noses inches apart. Ramsay gazed down at her, his firm mouth accentuated by the light below. She could see his chest rise and fall with each breath, and wanted to reach out and touch him just below the vee at the top of his vest, to feel what she was sure was the center of the furnace that fired him. He seemed as dazed by the moment as she was. But unlike her, he made a move.

He caught her hands and pressed them between his blazing palms.

"You're frozen," he remarked.

"I'll thaw," she stuttered.

"And much lighter than I imagined."

"My aunt says I'm scrawny."

"Scrawny?" His mouth slanted upward in the sardonic smile that was beginning to have a physical affect on her, especially when he stood so close to her. A flush blossomed deep inside her. "I wouldn't say scrawny. Lithe comes to mind."

"Lithe?" She wondered if she had heard him correctly. She had always thought of herself as skinny. Unfeminine. Boyish, even. The word "lithe" cast her physical being in

an entirely new light. She blushed and hoped he couldn't see her reaction in the darkness.

"Like a mink," he added.

"What's a mink?" She tried to pull away her hands, but he held fast.

"An animal I've seen in the north. They are as slender as you are. With a pelt as soft and sleek as your hair. Quick, smart, and damnably difficult to catch."

His comparison shocked her. No one had ever paid her a higher compliment. She pulled at his grip again.

"Shouldn't we be getting to work, Ramsay?"

He sighed. "You're right." He released her. "Just tell me what to do."

Elspeth would have liked to tell him to lean down and kiss her, to wrap those big warm hands around her and pull her into his fiery chest. But she was positive such a command would backfire, and the only one to suffer would be her.

"Give me uh," she pointed at the satchel. She had to give herself a mental shake, to get her mind back on the job. "Get me a slotted screwdriver." She walked to the nearest panel, knelt on the soft carpet, and held out her hand.

HOURS TICKED BY. As Elspeth worked her way toward the heart of the Marriage Machine, she handed each machine part to Ramsay. He in turn, arranged each piece on a sheet behind him, in the order she gave it to him. They worked swiftly, efficiently, and never spoke a word, until Elspeth arrived at the ornate brass frame that formerly held the ruby.

"What were you going to do with the ruby anyway?" Ramsay asked, breaking the hours of silence.

She shrugged. "I hadn't decided. I just didn't want to store it at my Aunt Fi's house and get her in trouble. So I buried it."

"I see."

"I never could have sold it. A citizen with a stone like that?" she shook her head as she unfastened the large nuts behind the frame. "I would have been sent to the camps for sure."

"So you didn't think further than burying the jewel?" Ramsay asked.

"No. I didn't think anyone would ever find out it had been taken."

"I see." Ramsay sighed and took a gear housing out of her hands. "You should never let your guard down, Elspeth. You should always assume that you are being watched."

"I know that," she replied. "Now."

After a half-hour, she lifted the front of the frame off and set it at her feet.

"Ready?" Ramsay asked behind her.

"If I must." She sighed. "This goes against everything I believe in."

"Do it for my great-grandfather."

"I don't give a fig for your great-grandfather."

"Then do it for me."

She pressed her lips together. There was no denying the regard she felt for Mark Ramsay was growing with every minute she spent in his company. But she could never let him know.

"For you?" she forced a laugh. "That's a real motivator, Ramsay."

He fell silent behind her, and she turned slightly to find his expression had changed from open to closed. Surprise

and guilt washed over her. She had never guessed she possessed the power to hurt a man's feelings.

Without a retort for once, he pivoted and reached into the satchel for a bundle wrapped in wool. Elspeth watched him slip the ruby out of the cloth.

She could not deny the allure of the jewel, no matter how she felt about the Marriage Machine. Even in the low light of the lamp, the ruby glowed as if it had a heartbeat of its own. Ramsay pushed it toward her outstretched hands.

"Careful," he warned. "And no tricks. One slip, and the jewel will shatter."

"I'll be careful." She took the jewel in both of her palms and lifted it toward the frame.

They didn't speak again until the Marriage Machine had been reassembled, cleaned, and polished to perfection.

AS DAWN CREPT over the frozen city, Elspeth and Ramsay whisked back in silence to the Ramsay townhouse. Elspeth kept her eyes on the road and her hands in her lap, and wished she had some of the ice outside to place upon her newly skinned knuckles. They parked under the house again, and Ramsay told her to follow him, but held a finger to his lips.

"My family is here," he warned. "They must have arrived for the wedding while we were gone."

She remained standing by the Flying Horse. "I should go."

"Where will you go?" He mounted the stairs. "You can't go to your aunt's. The police may have questions about the ruby that you would be better off not answering."

"You promised me safe passage to the north."

He rolled his eyes. "Not today."

“When, then?”

“You’ll have to have a pass. I’ll have to get one for you.”

“How long will that take?”

“A day or two.” He put his hand on the latch of the door. “Or you could wait and go back with my family. They would get you through the border without a problem.”

“Would they agree to such a thing?”

“They would do whatever I asked.”

“I see.” She paused, wondering what it would be like to have such power and such loyalty as the Ramsay clan seemed to possess.

“So you must come inside. You have only to wait a few days, whatever you decide to do. And then you shall be a free woman.”

She took a step toward him. “What will I do in the meantime?”

“Whatever you like.” He opened the door to the main level. “What do you normally do in your free time?”

“Work.”

He smiled down at her. “That you shall not do here.”

“It’s all I know.”

“Well, you’re going to have to change your spots, Shutterhouse, at least until after the wedding.”

ELSPETH PADDED after Ramsay as he strode into the house. She assumed he would take her up to the huge bedchamber on the first floor, but he turned left before mounting the grand staircase.

“Drink?” he asked. “I confess I need to transition before I can sleep.”

“Thank you, I would like one. Yes.”

He nodded and ushered her into what had once been the library off the main hall. The books had been confiscated long ago during the cleansing, leaving a bank of polished walnut shelves. Instead of books, the shelves displayed stuffed animals, trophies, and cut and polished stones.

Ramsay headed toward a cabinet at the end of the library as Elspeth wandered to the center of the large and now superfluous room, taking in yet another aspect of the wealth of the Ramsay family. But her survey was cut short by a sharp rap behind her.

She whirled, shocked to see an ancient man in a wheelchair in the doorway. He looked like a skeleton dressed in a

suit. His face was dotted with age spots, his ears were enormous in comparison to his waspish neck. But he still had an amazing head of white hair that floated in the air around his skull. This had to be Mark's beloved great-grandfather. Before Elspeth could utter a greeting, he rapped the floor with his cane and glowered.

"Where the devil have you been?" he shouted. His wrinkled lips showed a surprising number of teeth in such an old human being.

"Out wenching," Mark replied. He strolled up beside Elspeth and offered her a glass of cut crystal. Then he leaned over and patted his great-grandfather on the shoulder. "Nothing to worry about, Gramps. Don't overtax yourself."

"Overtax? Overtax?" the old man's icy eyes blazed. "Your mother has been beside herself wondering where you are. I doubt she slept a wink. And who the devil is this?" He jabbed his cane at Elspeth.

She had to steel herself to keep from stepping backward.

"The wench I was wenching with."

Elspeth blushed scarlet. She was not accustomed to such confrontation or such language, especially with a member of the older generation. The ancient man's blue regard raced over her. He snorted in contempt.

"Don't look like the wenching sort."

"I'm not," Elspeth shot back, insulted by the old man's rude behavior--and the young man's as well. Had they lost their manners? No one had even introduced her.

"I'm Elspeth Shutterhouse, mechanic."

"You don't say," the old man retorted. He cocked one brow and glared at her hands. "And what brings a mechanic to my house at the ungodly hour of six a.m.?"

Elspeth noticed Mark taking a swig of his whisky, as if

playing for time. Of course, he couldn't divulge what they'd been doing for the past ten hours. Maybe he was having trouble coming up with an alibi.

"Actually, your great-grandson came to my assistance."

"Oh?" the blue stare shifted to Ramsay. "In what way?"

"He helped me escape from my indenture. I was apprenticed to a man who was very cruel to me. In fact he used me as a slave. I would never have got away, had it not been for Citizen Ramsay."

"Heroics? Mark?"

Mark nodded and took another drink.

"He found me on the road last night, running for my life. My master actually caught up with me, however, and dragged me back. It took Citizen Ramsay a good deal of time and trouble, but he freed me early this morning. And here I am."

The intense stare landed on her again. "And what does my great-grandson propose to do with you?"

"Shutterhouse would make a good addition to the compound."

"Or anywhere else on the Outer Islands," she put in, certain she would rather be free of the Ramsays if they were all as rude as this.

"She's a hard worker, Gramps. She's careful."

"And how do you know such things?"

"My boss told him." Elspeth clutched her drink, hoping the old man would believe her tall tale. "That's why he wanted me back so badly."

"How old are you, young lady?"

She threw back her shoulders. "Twenty-five. And I have a good fifty-five years of work in me, at least."

"Hmph." The bushy white brows lowered as the older Ramsay inspected her.

“I don’t believe you’re a wench, but I don’t believe your story, either.”

Elspeth paled, fearful that she might be thrown out on the street without a pass to the north.

“That coat you’re wearing.” He pointed the tip of the cane at the long wool garment Elspeth still had on. “People think I’m deaf, blind and doddering in the bargain. But I recognize my granddaughter’s town coat when I see it.”

“It was in the Flying Horse,” Ramsay put in. “Elspeth was cold. Frozen to the bone in fact.”

“A likely tale, boy.”

“I told Shutterhouse she could have safe passage north,” Mark put in. “We could use more citizens like her in the Outer Islands.”

“And how do you expect that to occur?” the old man turned to stare up at his great-grandson. “Does she have papers?”

“No. But surely you can get her through.”

“Why should I?”

“Because I made a promise to her.”

Elspeth was highly conscious that Mark remained standing shoulder to shoulder with her, lending his support in the face of the older Ramsay’s censure. Still, Elspeth found herself holding her breath.

Alexander Ramsay wrapped his gnarled fingers around the handle of his cane and scowled. “I don’t know what you two have been up to. But it’s high time you made your presence known to your mother, boy. Off with you.”

Mark cupped Elspeth’s elbow. “Shutterhouse?” He urged her toward the door.

“Not her,” Ramsay barked. “She stays. Let her finish her drink.”

Elspeth knew she was doomed.

. . .

ELSPETH WATCHED Mark leave the library. She sipped her drink, uncomfortable and worried. She could feel Alexander Ramsay staring at her.

“The truth, young lady.” He squinted one of his eyes as he peered up at her. “I will have it. Now.”

Something told Elspeth she would never leave this library and likely never leave Londo, unless she told the truth to the gentleman in the wheelchair—or at least a teeny, weenie version of the truth. She put her glass on a side table and slipped out of the luxurious wool coat.

“I work for the SteamWizards.” She stepped closer so the old man could see her uniform.

Ramsay shot a glance at the badge above her right breast.

“I’m one of their top mechanics.”

“You don’t say.”

His scrutiny brought back the dogma from her childhood.

Women are wrong if they think they are strong.

Elspeth held herself as straight as possible.

He sat back. “I could tell by your knuckles that you work with your hands.”

She nodded. “I was called to make a repair, and that’s how I met your great-grandson.”

“So your apprenticeship story was claptrap.”

“Yes.”

“Why the lie?”

“Because Mark believes you are too fragile to handle the truth.”

“The devil!” He stamped his cane on the ground. “What truth?”

“He thinks you would not survive the shock should you discover the Marriage Machine needed to be repaired.”

Ramsay’s jaw fell open, but that was the extent of any

physical reaction on his part. He quickly recovered his composure. "Something went wrong with the machine?" he demanded.

"Technically, no." Elspeth took another step closer, warming to the crusty old man as she had warmed to his great-grandson. "It's my opinion that the machine had been tampered with."

"Tampered with?" Ramsay bellowed. "No one would dare!"

"But I fixed it. It was a simple repair. Probably caused during transport."

"I'll have Davies' head!"

"Sir, it was a simple puncture. It could have happened to anyone. Anytime." She crossed her arms. "But the Marriage Machine is as good as new—unfortunately."

"What do you mean by that, young lady?"

"I mean no disrespect, Citizen Ramsay. Your family's invention may have saved the human race—"

"There is no doubt that it did."

"And again, no disrespect." She paused, hoping her words would not over excite the man and cause him to have a heart attack. But she didn't think he was as frail as Mark had led her to believe. She sensed in him an indomitable physical being and an even more indomitable spirit—much like she hoped someone would see in her someday.

She raised her chin. "I believe the Marriage Machine has seen its day."

"What?" he sputtered. "You have no idea what you are talking about." Spittle flew from his wrinkled lips "What's your name again?"

"It's Shutterhouse, sir."

"Shutterhouse, before *my* great-grandfather invented that machine, we were lucky to have a handful of births a

year in Londo City. The damned radiation cloud had made everyone sterile.”

“I am aware of that. But that was long ago. The world is changing.”

“People’s reproductive organs were malfunctioning.”

“I know. My great aunt told me all about it.”

“You stand here today, Shutterhouse, because of the Marriage Machine. Without the machine, your own mother would never have realized the full bloom of womanhood.”

“But as I have said, times are changing.” Elspeth pressed forward, wanting to be heard for once by someone who might be able to make a change—even though her philosophy would not only ostracize her from Londo society but from the Ramsay clan as well. “Women’s bodies are changing, citizen. But no one has the courage to speak up.”

The wrinkles on his brow deepened. “What do you mean, women’s bodies are changing?”

“Young women are reaching menarche on their own, without mechanical assistance. We are overcoming what the Grave Mistake did to us.”

For a moment the old man gawked at her, as if he couldn’t make sense of her words. Then he shook off his shocked expressions.

“You’re speaking nonsense.” Ramsay shook his cane in the air. “Whoever heard of such a thing?”

“My cousin began bleeding at the age of twenty. My best friend at nineteen. And I myself have menstruated since I was twenty-two. But no one will come forward. They are too afraid of being labeled as freaks. They *want* to be selected for the Marriage Machine.”

“And you don’t?” he stared at her.

“No. Not when there are such side effects.”

“Couldn’t be helped.” He cackled to himself. “And who wouldn’t want a woman that’s always happy to see you—is never upset by anything?”

“Weren’t dogs bred for that?” Elspeth retorted, her voice cold. “And look what happened to them.”

Ramsay stared up at her from under his bushy white brows. No dogs had survived the Grave Mistake. They had been eaten to extinction.

“I doubt *your* wife was a drone,” Elspeth remarked. “I bet she wasn’t a little brown mouse from Londo City, dumbed down and silly.”

Ramsay’s watery eyes slanted away. For a moment he gazed at the wall of blank shelves as if looking back to earlier days, to the days the library had been full of books and perhaps a beautiful young woman who had loved him and at the same time challenged him. For a moment, he lapsed deep into thought.

“I’m tired,” he snapped, without looking back at her. His shoulders seemed to have disappeared beneath the shell of his suit. “All this talk is wearisome.”

“I’m sorry, but the truth is hard to take,” she said. “And change is even harder.”

He glanced at her, and their eyes locked. For a moment she thought she had gotten through to him, and that he was going to say something. But then he broke off the stare and rapped his cane on the floor.

“Mark!” he shouted. “Mark!” He scowled at her, as if he’d come to a decision. “I don’t know where you belong, young lady,” he exclaimed. “In a detention center or an insane asylum.”

Elspeth sucked in a breath, damning her faulty judgment in having said too much to the wrong person.

“But I can assure you, Shutterhouse, that you will not leave this house until the Overseers have been notified.”

“Please do not report me,” she begged.

He frowned, pursing his lips over his prominent teeth as he regarded her with his watery but razor sharp regard. “I have no choice. It was high-handed know-it-alls like you who caused all the trouble in the first place. It appears that you have learned nothing from history.”

She had, but not from the history the Overseers had fed them.

Elspeth swallowed and glanced around the room. She was trapped for certain if she didn’t make a move before Mark returned.

She dashed around the old man in his wheelchair.

“Where are you going, young lady?” Ramsay shouted. “Come back here!”

Elspeth sprinted down the hall, ran past the stairs and yanked open the front door of the townhouse. She fled across the street to Scotland Yard and plunged into a grove of yews, just as the first flakes of snow began to fall.

ELSPETH SAT on the hard bench of her cell, a piece of paper in her hand, and her stomach churning with anger. After being pursued through Londo City like a dog, she had been captured two days later and thrown into the detention center near her aunt's house. Wet, cold, and exhausted, she had been dragged into the same cell as before. They hadn't given her dry clothing or shoes and had left her to suffer the cold and to reflect on her transgressions. Hours later, an agent of the Overseers had delivered their decision.

The document in her hand ordered her—on the pain of death—to attend her wedding ceremony. She would be transported there by two guards, who would make sure she did not run away. Her aunt would be allowed to bring her a dress for the occasion, but that is all the contact she would have with her family until after the ceremony. They deemed the marriage punishment enough for her rebellious behavior—and they were right. Tying her to a man was the worst prison sentence she could imagine.

Elsbeth's dinner sat untouched on a tray on the small

table near the wall. She had no appetite—for the food or for the day to come. She would be married at Boswellian Bower tomorrow afternoon at four o'clock.

She sat there—tired, angry and frustrated—and barely took notice when two people approached her cell. If more agents had come to preach to her, she would cover her ears, curl up against the wall, and refuse to recognize their presence.

“Shutterhouse,” a familiar voice called.

Shivering, Elspeth raised her head, shocked to see Mark Ramsay approach the other side of the bars. Words fled. She couldn't even utter a greeting. He was dressed in his usual black traveling coat, unbuttoned now, and displaying black and white eveningwear, set off by a white cravat tied at his throat. His family must be celebrating his brother's wedding by going out for the evening—a rare occasion for anyone these days. He must have come to mock her or upbraid her for disturbing his great-grandfather. Why else the thunder in his expression?

“Why hasn't this woman been given dry clothes?” Ramsay bellowed, glaring down at the guard.

“It was what the warden ordered.”

“Get her clean things at once!” Ramsay pointed at the corridor behind him. “A blanket as well. And make it quick.”

“I can't leave you here alone with her.”

“You've searched me. I pose no threat. I'm only here to speak to her. Now off with you, before I report such inhumane treatment to the detention commissioner.”

The guard scurried away as Elspeth rose, grateful for Mark's intercession but surprised to see him all the same.

“Good Lloyd,” he grasped the bars and stared down at her. “Look what you've got yourself into, Shutterhouse.”

“The worst is yet to come.”

“You should have let me handle it.”

“Why?” she retorted. “You have only one thought, to protect that infernal Marriage Machine.”

“You should never have told my great-grandfather the truth.”

“Someone needed to.” She clutched the bars. “Someone has to speak out. If your great-grandfather is the custodian of that machine, maybe the Overseers will listen to him.”

“It doesn’t necessarily work that way.” Mark wrapped his warm fingers around her cold ones. She tried to snatch her hands away, but he held her fast.

“How does it work then?” she retorted. She had nothing more to lose. She might as well speak her mind. “Who *does* have the ear of the bloody all-powerful Overseers?”

“No one.” His voice held no reproach. Only gentleness. She had to force herself not to break down in tears. “Unfortunately.”

He stared down at her and did not chide her for being a fool, as everyone else had. She paused, suddenly wondering why he had actually visited, if not to berate her.

“Why didn’t you tell me you had received a silver envelope?” he asked.

“You know the rules—no talk of envelopes outside the family.”

“So you follow some rules and not others?”

She glared at him, still trying to get away, but fighting an entirely different battle on an internal level. Though it made no sense, she was glad to see Mark Ramsay. His outrage at her predicament had warmed her on the inside, just as his hands were warming her frozen fingers. His looming bulk was a like a bastion of strength between her

and a world that had spun out of control. But worse, when he touched her and looked down at her with concern darkening his unusual eyes, her heart pattered in erratic leaps of elation.

Her breath caught in her throat. He seemed to notice, and for a moment he stared down at her lips. She thought he was going to kiss her. She ached to be kissed by him. She had never felt such a compulsion in her life. As she stood there, her hands surrounded by his big paws, she realized that she felt closer to Mark Ramsay than she had to anyone in her entire life.

But with the revelation came a bittersweet irony. This was one man she might be able to live with and not chafe at the bindings of matrimony—even without the Marriage Machine. But Mark was not destined to be part of her future.

“I’m told you are to be married tomorrow in fact,” he continued.

“It hasn’t escaped my notice,” she replied. “Or anyone else’s, it seems.”

“A damnable situation.” His voice rumbled with repressed emotion, and she glanced up at him, shocked. His grip tightened.

“Elspeth, it can make little difference if I speak my mind, but I—” He studied her face, and then seemed to think better of what he was about to say. He let his words fall to nothing and sighed.

“Why the sudden holding back?” She studied his face, wondering at his odd behavior. “You’ve been frank with me up until now. What are you hiding?”

“Some things are better left unspoken.” He clamped his jaw tightly. She could see a muscle work on the left side of his face. “Forgive me. I forget myself.”

“Mark,” she jiggled her hands under his, trying to make her point, and trying to rattle him to his senses. “I’m to be married tomorrow. I’ll never be the same. I’ll never desire the things that I want so badly today. I’ll be just a shadow of myself. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

He looked down and shook his head.

“It’s *not* for the best,” she continued earnestly. “Getting married in that machine. Maybe at one time it was. But it’s no longer right or necessary that a woman lose herself for the greater good.” She pressed her face to the bars until her nose nearly touched the cravat at his throat. “Please, Mark, can’t you get me out of here? Just let me run?”

“You can’t live outside society, El.”

“I could!”

“It will be just another prison sentence. It’s not the solution.”

Elsbeth leaned her forehead against the cold bars and fought back tears.

Ramsay’s coat rustled as he stepped closer. “Perhaps it *will* be best if the fire in you is doused, El. You could burn for the rest of your days, if life is not what you want it to be—if you aren’t with the right man.”

“I would rather burn than bow.”

“Don’t say that.” He glanced sharply at her. “Don’t do anything drastic, Elspeth. Don’t make a martyr of yourself.”

“Better a martyr than a matron.”

“You might get part of what you desire in life. But not everything. That’s the way life is.” He squeezed her hands. “Promise me you won’t try to escape. That you won’t do anything rash.”

“Why?” she asked, puzzled by his cryptic words.

A door slammed behind him. She could hear the clump, clump of the guard as he walked toward her cell.

“Listen to me.” Ramsay reached through the bars and cupped her cheek with one of his callused hands. “Don’t fight this, Elspeth. You cannot win like this. Trust me.”

“Trust you?” she repeated, accustomed to using sarcasm when speaking to him. She began to retort that she trusted no one, least of all him. But the words died on her lips. She did trust Mark Ramsay. Deep in her heart, she trusted him implicitly.

His eyes locked with hers, and for a long moment, she experienced a communion with him that she had never shared with another human being. The gaze was much deeper than a kiss and far more intimate.

“Citizen Ramsay,” the guard barked. “Please step aside.”

“Don’t despair,” Mark urged, his voice raspy. His thumb caressed her cheek as he drew his hand away and stepped back. “Don’t fight it.”

“Visitation hours are over,” the guard said, pulling out his key. “You’ve had all the time you’re going to get, citizen.”

“Very well, I’m going,” Ramsay growled. He glanced over the head of the guard. “I shall see you tomorrow, Shutterhouse, at the bower. Try to rest.”

ELSPETH TRIED NOT TO DESPAIR. She did her best to keep her fighting spirit alive. Even so, by two in the afternoon on the day of her wedding, she felt as if she were headed for the guillotine. They had allowed her to keep her pocket watch this time, and she had monitored the minutes as they raced past noon. Soon she could no longer put off the inevitable. She had to get ready for the ceremony. They were coming for her at three.

Although Elspeth didn’t care what she might look like

at the bower, she didn't want to embarrass her aunt and cousin by showing up in her SteamWizards uniform with her hair wrapped in its workaday bun. Her relatives would never hear the end of it.

The guard had given her a basin of cold water and a cloth with which to wash herself, a coarse towel, and a brush for her hair. Aunt Fi had delivered her gown and slippers, but had been prohibited from visiting her. Her aunt had probably never imagined she would spend the wedding day apart from her niece, and was most likely weeping inconsolably. Elspeth felt like weeping too, but she would never let a single teardrop fall. The Overseers would love to see her cry, and she would never give them the pleasure.

Elspeth lathered her grease-stained hands, careful not to brush her tender knuckles. As she scrubbed her nails, she thought of the hours she had worked with Mark Ramsay, and the silent camaraderie they had shared. She thought of him standing beside her while his great-grandfather quizzed them. He had never once betrayed her. She had known plenty of men as colleagues, but she had never allowed a male to get close enough to truly get to know her. Only Mark Ramsay had been privy to her thoughts and schemes. It was such a shame to lose that closeness.

Still, she'd only known him a matter of days. It wasn't as if a huge portion of her life were going to fall away—even though it felt like it today.

She decided to stop tormenting herself with thoughts of Mark Ramsay and concentrate on her toilette. Hiding her nakedness as best she could, Elspeth bathed portions of herself at a time. She wished she had been given a razor to shave her legs and underarms. She didn't know much about what went on after a marriage ceremony, but she

had heard that most women shaved their entire bodies in preparation for the wedding night. Her spouse would be forced to deal with her natural body.

Too bad for him.

The thought that the man might have to suffer a little in return cheered her a bit. But she still felt the looming guillotine blade poised above her maidenhood. She knew most women would laugh at her for feeling such desperation, especially since she was to be married on the holiday and to a man that was probably in a lofty position. Who knows, she could even be marrying Mark Ramsay's brother, Thomas. But that thought plunged her even deeper into despair. How would she ever endure a life married to one brother while she longed for the company of the other? Perhaps the Marriage Machine would wipe her memory clean of her feelings for Mark. She could only hope it would.

The future is for times ahead, not for the present hours' dread.

Elsbeth smiled grimly as she splashed cold water over her face.

Finally, a shred of dogma that proved useful. Or maybe it was the harbinger of her downward spiral. Dogma was starting to make sense.

After she finished washing herself, she dragged on her underclothes and dropped her only good dress over her shoulders. She felt her spirits sink as the black silk settled around her ankles. It was really going to happen. She was going to step inside the Marriage Machine. She was going to become some man's wife.

AT THREE, the guards came for her. They took her elbows and guided her down the dark corridor to the wagon just

outside the back door of the detention center. She tried to get a glimpse of the outdoors, but they forced her head down and shackled her in the windowless cab in back. One of the guards sat across from her, tapping his enforcement stick on his knees and glaring at her, as if he expected her to lunge forward and attack him. He didn't say a single word to her on the ride to Boswellian Bower.

Because she was a criminal, she was ushered into a side door of the building and dragged through the dark to the left wing of the stage. When her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she discovered that she stood with four other young ladies, all dressed in long gowns. One had gloves on. One had pulled her hair back with simple combs. Another wore a small gold bracelet around her wrist. One had even stained her lips and cheeks with cosmetics. Such luxuries were allowed once in a lifetime. Only Elspeth stood unadorned, with her ash-colored hair hanging to her waist.

"Happy C-Day," the gloved young woman whispered to her.

"And to you," Elspeth replied. "What is going on?"

"The last group just finished. We're next."

"Is there any kind of order?"

"There was a number on your card. Didn't you notice?"

Elspeth had only looked at the address and time of day. "I confess I didn't."

"Well, I'm number twenty," the girl said, peering past the curtain into the crowd. "And I'm on pins and needles. Someone said the Ramsay family is here."

"I believe they are." Elspeth strained to look over the other woman's shoulder. The auditorium was dark. All she could see was a room full of white faces in a sea of black staring up at the stage. "I've heard Thomas Ramsay is to be married today."

“One of us may be marrying a Ramsay?” whispered the young lady with the combs. She crowded in to look. Even in the dim light, Elspeth could see her eyes sparkling with eagerness. “Where are they? I’ve never seen any of the Ramsays.”

Elspeth scanned the crowd, and caught sight of a wheelchair rolled against the left wall of the auditorium. Surely the Ramsay family would have the best seats. She surveyed the front row until she spotted ancient Alexander Ramsay. Sitting beside him was a tall black-haired woman with a regal air about her. That had to be Mark’s mother. And there he was, just getting up from his seat in the center of the first row. Mark Ramsay was attired in a crisp black suit with tails and slender trousers. The tight-fitting cut of the jacket accentuated his wide shoulders and slender waist. His great-grandfather was issuing some kind of command—probably to order Mark to make sure all went well behind the scenes.

A chill washed over Elspeth. She had better get behind the scenes herself and quick. Her escape window was narrowing with every passing minute. She swallowed and glanced at the guard. He stood between the Marriage Machine and the far wall. The other guard stood directly behind her, within arm’s reach. To escape, she would either have to run into full view of the crowd or push the guard behind her out of the way. Manhandling the guard seemed an unlikely choice.

Sweat broke out at her hairline as Citizen Davies, the master of ceremonies, padded across to the ladies and softly called out a number. The woman with the bracelet sucked in her breath and flashed a smile at her comrades before she swept out on stage. Applause heralded her appearance as a young man joined her from the other side. Citizen Davies ushered them up the step and through the

door of the machine. Their vows were spoken privately inside the bower as a string quartet played for the crowd and the ruby worked its magic.

Elsbeth's heart pounded so hard, she thought it might burst from her chest. Time was running out. Soon, she would have to make her choice to stay or escape. There really was no choice. Even though Mark Ramsay had told her not to do anything rash, she had to run.

After the couple had spoken their vows, they were taken to the edge of the stage and announced as man and wife. They shared a brief kiss while everyone cheered. Then together, they walked down the steps to the waiting arms of their newly conjoined families. Davies turned to his podium and looked down at his roster. He walked to the gentlemen in the wings and then approached the women. Elspeth could hear the floorboards creak with each step he took.

"Number 16," he called.

"That's me," the woman with the painted lips squealed. She minced into the light, blinking and touching her hair.

Elsbeth moved forward to the edge of the curtain and tried to calculate the steps it would take to dash across the stage and get to the exit sign on the other side. Surely no more guards were stationed where the men stood in the shadows. She gathered up her skirts in her sweating hands.

But then she saw him.

Mark Ramsay walked onto the stage, holding out his hand to the woman with the painted lips. The instant Elspeth spotted him, all thoughts of running vanished from her mind. All she could see was handsome Mark Ramsay's fingers entwining with the young lady in front of him.

Mark Ramsay was getting married? Why hadn't he mentioned it? Elspeth was shattered. Mark Ramsay was

going to marry the painted woman. In a matter of minutes, those red lips were going to press into the wide, masculine mouth she wanted for herself.

It was that moment that Elspeth realized a bone-shattering truth. She had fallen in love with Mark Ramsay.

“No!” Elspeth groaned, waylaid by anguish. The wads of fabric slipped from her hands. She could not believe how her heart was breaking at the prospect of Mark being joined to someone else. How could he have kept his upcoming nuptials a secret like this? He had been scheduled for marriage on the same day as she, and he had never mentioned it. Perhaps that was what he had begun to tell her yesterday at the detention center. Perhaps he had wanted to warn her, but had guessed the news might cause her distress.

“No!” she breathed again, bringing her injured knuckles to her lips. “Mark, no!”

The tears she had vowed not to spill welled in her eyes. Mark’s tall figure, so commanding in his dark suit, wavered before her as he turned for the steps of the Marriage Machine. In moments he would belong to someone else for the rest of his life. She had thought her own marriage would be the worst thing imaginable. But it paled to nothingness in comparison to what she felt about Mark Ramsay’s.

The door closed behind the couple.

“Wait!” Elspeth cried. She dashed headlong onto the stage, her arms wide, her head reeling. “Stop the ceremony! Stop it. You have to stop it!”

“Citizen!” Davies turned toward her, his face contorted with shock.

She grabbed the handle of the Marriage Machine door and rattled it. “Mark!” she cried.

“Contain that woman at once!” a voice yelled from the audience.

“Young lady.” The master of ceremonies grabbed her arm. Wildly, she turned to face him. “Oh, it’s you, Shutterhouse.”

“Stop this ceremony, Davies,” she exclaimed. “You have to stop it.”

The crowd jumped to its feet.

“Come away,” he urged. “Before you cause a scene.”

“No!” Elspeth shrieked. Something had cracked inside her. She had lost control. The sight of Mark Ramsay touching another woman had completely undone her.

She yanked open the door of the Marriage Machine.

“Contain that citizen!” someone shouted. From the sides of the stage, the guards came running, their clubs held high. For a moment, she thought they were going to beat her into submission. They grabbed her and pulled her back from the bower. Men surged onto the stage, jostling her to the side. Women were gasping and chattering as Elspeth was dragged to the wings of the stage where the grooms had awaited their brides. People pressed all around her. She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t think. All she knew was she had to get away.

Then she heard a familiar voice bellow. “Gramps!” Someone rushed by her and vaulted off the stage.

Elspeth wiped her eyes and peered at the crowd as she saw Mark kneel down in front of his great-grandfather. All Elspeth could glimpse through the melee was the old man’s hands hanging over the sides of his chair, as if he had collapsed.

“Someone call a doctor!” a woman shrieked.

Elspeth felt the blood drain from her face.

In that moment, she saw the events of her life turning

back on her in a black wave. Seemingly compatible marriages had never killed anyone. But her refusal to comply with the rules had possibly killed old Alexander Ramsay, and most likely alienated Mark from her forever.

“LET ME GO!” Elspeth commanded, yanking at the hands that held her. “I promise I won’t run. I need to go to the Ramsays.”

“You’re not going anywhere, citizen,” snapped the guard at her right.

She writhed. The guard’s grip burned her wrist. She could see the crowd milling around Alexander Ramsay. She pulled. The guard held fast. She gave a quick yank, but only strained her own joints. Desperate, Elspeth bent down and bit the soft flesh at the guard’s elbow while at the same time she stomped on the top of his foot with the heel of her shoe. With a yelp of pain, he released her. She lunged toward the steps that led to the crowd below.

“Elspeth!” she heard a woman cry from the back of the room. She recognized the voice of her aunt. But she couldn’t take the time to worry about Aunt Fi or her cousin Amelie.

Elspeth pushed through the throng to find Mark patting the face of his great-grandfather, and his mother fanning the old man with her program.

“Grandfather,” the regal woman called. “Can you hear me? Grandfather!”

The old man slumped in his chair, his head lolling to the side, his eyes closed, and his complexion a frightening shade of gray. His respiration was so shallow, Elspeth couldn’t tell if he was even breathing.

“Gramps!” Mark urged, his voice quaking. He smoothed back the older man’s hair at his temple. “Gramps!”

Elspeth’s heart caught in her throat. “Sir!” she cried. “Wake up! Please, I won’t cause any more trouble. I promise.”

Mark glanced back at her, his eyes dark and damning.

“I’m sorry,” Elspeth exclaimed. “I’m truly sorry, Mark.”

Without a word, Mark turned back to his great-grandfather. In that moment, Elspeth’s heart broke all the way in two.

She didn’t care what happened to her now. She didn’t care whom she had to marry. She would do anything to make reparation for what she had just done to Mark and his family.

Elspeth edged closer, near enough to touch the old man’s hand. “I know I’ve been headstrong, sir. I know I’ve wanted to have my way. But I just couldn’t bear to see your great-grandson getting married.” Elspeth didn’t care that everyone heard. She was beyond caring about her reputation. All she could hope was that Alexander Ramsay might hear her and return to consciousness. “I just cracked. I’m so sorry, sir.”

Elspeth felt stares brand her from every corner of the auditorium, but the shameful glances washed over her unheeded. She thought she saw Alexander’s left eyelid flutter.

Elspeth squeezed his gnarled fingers. "If I have to get in that machine of yours, I will. I'll do anything it takes. Just come back to Mark. Please come back."

The eyelid fluttered again.

"Gramps!" Mark exclaimed, patting the old man's cheek. "Gramps!"

Alexander's watery blue eyes opened. He blinked and struggled to find Elspeth's face. She leaned closer.

"Shutterhouse," he wheezed.

"Yes, it's me."

"You damnable interfering chit."

She blanched. "I won't interfere anymore, Mr. Ramsay. The wedding can continue. I promise I'll keep quiet. I swear I won't make any more trouble."

He raised an arthritic hand and wiggled a finger. She bent close to his mouth.

"Love him?" Alexander whispered into her ear.

She rose up and gave a slight nod.

The old man squinted one eye and stared up at her, panting.

Mark took her arm, unaware of what had just been said between the old man and Elspeth. "That's enough, Elspeth. You're disturbing him." He helped his great-grandfather straighten in the chair.

She rose to her feet, encouraged that Alexander had returned to his senses, but struck numb by Mark's cold gruffness. She backed away, which prompted the crowd to step back as well.

"Someone, please get my grandfather a glass of water," Mark called out.

"Make that a sherry," the old man gasped. "My heart is fluttering like a damn girl's."

A young man went running for the drink as Mark and his family restored the old man in his chair. Slowly, the

audience drifted back to their seats as Citizen Davies approached the Mark Ramsay.

“Shall we continue, Citizen Ramsay?” he asked, training his goggles on Mark’s face.

“Yes.” Mark sank into the chair next to his great-grandfather.

“Come, Citizen Shutterhouse,” Davies said, holding out his hand.

Elspeth allowed herself to be led back up the stairs while a million questions swirled in her head. Why had Mark sat down with his family? Wasn’t he next in line to be married? And would he ever look at her again? She stumbled to the side of the stage, worried and perplexed, but knowing she might not get any answers before the afternoon was done—if ever. She had promised to not make any more trouble. And she would keep that promise.

“Thanks so much!” the bride with the painted lips hissed as she walked by. “You’ve completely ruined the mood!”

“Sorry,” Elspeth muttered. “But look at the bright side.”

“What could possibly be bright about any of this? No one has ever had her marriage interrupted. No one!”

“Then you’ll have *some* story to tell your little Ramsay brood, won’t you--about the scandal that happened on your wedding day.” She brushed past the woman. “That is, if you *can* remember.”

“What do you mean—*can*?” The bride planted her hands on her generous hips. “I will never be able to forget this horrible bungle, no matter how hard I try. Never!”

“Sixteen, you’re up again.” Davies put in with a tremulous smile. He motioned for the woman to come back on stage.

She flounced off.

Only the woman with the gloves and Elspeth were left. The other bride stood to the side and stared at her as if she were infected with a contagious disease. Elspeth sighed and stepped backward into the shadows.

She had made a mess of everything, including her fledgling relationship with Mark Ramsay. She had almost killed his beloved great-grandfather. The least she could do was stand quietly by in the gloom and wait her turn. But one thing she couldn't watch was Mark Ramsay being married to another woman. She turned her back and concentrated on straightening her tousled hair. She yanked down her dress where the sash had been pulled crosswise by her struggle with the guard. Then she pinched her cheeks, knowing she probably looked as deathly pale as Alexander Ramsay.

While the quartet launched into a lively minuet, Elspeth felt the strain of the last week descend upon her. She couldn't remember the last time she had eaten. Had it been the peaches and chicken at the Ramsay townhouse? And when had she last slept? At the townhouse as well? Swirls of blackness swam before her eyes as she stood in the wings. Her knees wobbled and her ears began to ring.

A vague shape approached. Citizen Davies? She couldn't tell. Everything wore a fuzzy halo. She heard the number eighteen called. It echoed over and over again, as if she stood at the end of a long tunnel. Voices and music buzzed in her ears, all jumbled together in a nauseating cacophony. A gloved hand propelled her forward. She stumbled onto the stage. There, the bright footlights blinded her, and she tripped on the hem of her dress. She plunged forward, but someone caught her and steered her toward the stairs of the Marriage Machine. And that is all she remembered of her wedding day.

ELSPETH WOKE UP, her head on fire, and glanced around in surprise. She was on the couch in her Aunt Fi's house, with a blanket thrown over her and a pillow under her head. Her aunt sat nearby, calmly sewing a bib for her grandson. For a moment, she wondered if everything she'd just experienced in the last week had been nothing but a bad dream. But as she threw back the blanket, something glinted in the light, and she saw a golden band encircling a finger of her left hand.

It hadn't been a dream. She was a married woman. But if she was married, why was she still at her aunt's house?

"Oh, there you are, dear," her aunt exclaimed, smiling at her. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay." Elspeth struggled to sit up. "What happened?"

"You fainted. Hit your head." Aunt Fi set aside her sewing and stood up. "Really, Elspeth, that was some show you put on. People are still talking about it. I don't think I'll ever hear the end of it."

"I'm sorry, Aunt Fi."

"You were such an outspoken young lady." Her aunt touched her shoulder. "I always worried about you. Thank goodness that's all over now. You'll discover a great sense of peace with the calmness of marriage. I promise you."

"You're right, Aunt Fi. It was stupid. And nothing was gained from it." Elspeth threw her legs over the side of the couch. "Is Citizen Ramsay okay?"

"Do you mean the old man, Alexander?"

"Yes."

"Yes, he revived quite well after the glass of sherry. He seems surprisingly resilient for such an old man."

Relief swept over Elspeth. Then her heart twisted. "And Mark Ramsay? Did he seem happy? To be married, I mean?"

Aunt Fi shrugged. "It was hard to tell. He was quite upset with you. And then you fainted. And really, the ceremony kind of went to pieces after that."

"Great." Elspeth stood up. For a moment her senses reeled. "But I did get married."

"Yes." Aunt Fi took her arm to steady her. "Perhaps you should sit down, Elspeth. You don't look well."

"But I do have a husband. I *am* married."

"Yes."

"Then why am I here?"

Aunt Fi glanced at the door and frowned. "Your husband said he would prefer that you stay with me until you came to your senses."

"Oh." That didn't seem normal to Elspeth, but she was glad for the breach of protocol. The last thing she wanted was to try to be nice to a stranger when all she could think about was Mark and Miss Lipstick together and how depressed that made her.

Depressed? Wait a minute. She should not be sad if she had spent the allotted time in the Marriage Machine. Something was not right.

"Are you *sure* I'm married?"

Aunt Fi nodded. "I saw it with my own eyes, dear."

"Who did I marry? Did you recognize him?"

"He asked that he remain anonymous until you come to your senses."

"I've *come* to my senses." Elspeth said. "I never *lost* my senses. That's what everybody doesn't understand." She ran her fingers through her tangled hair, careful not to touch the bump on her skull, and looked over at her aunt.

"How long have I been sleeping?"

"Since the wedding last night."

"Maybe they're still in town then."

"Who, dear?"

“The Ramsays.” She headed for the stairs. “I have to go, Aunt Fi. Mark Ramsay promised to take me to the Outer Islands. And I’m going to hold him to his word—if they haven’t left already.”

“Do you think that’s wise? You’ve had quite a bump on the head.”

Elspeth nodded. “I have to, Aunt Fi. I can’t be married to someone I don’t love. It will never work. I won’t be happy. And I will make my husband unhappy. I would rather live in the wilderness than face that kind of life. And I intend to go before your calmness of marriage descends upon me.”

“But the Outer Islands, Elspeth?” Her aunt looked at her and sighed. “I will never see you!”

“Oh Aunt Fi.” Elspeth wrapped her arms around her and hugged her tightly. “You will. The world is changing. I’ve ridden in a Flying Horse—did you know that? I bet one day, they’ll be all over the city, and people will be able to travel again.”

“In my time?” Her aunt drew back.

“Without a doubt.” Elspeth kissed her on the cheek. “But for now, I must go.”

“I understand, dear. But do be careful.”

Elspeth nodded and hurried up to her tiny room, packed a bag, and slipped out of the house into a wonderland of snow.

ELSPETH STOPPED in the middle of the square, and slowly turned around, thunderstruck. The ground was covered in white fluff three feet deep. The sky was clear of fog and blue—as blue as—as blue as Mark Ramsay’s eyes. The air smelled fresh and clean and full of promise—almost as if the world had been born anew.

Elspeth gaped at her surroundings and sucked in a deep breath of the cool crisp air. The world was different. But by some quirk of Fate, she was still the same old Elspeth, with the same old fire and determination. She knew nothing inside her had changed. Though the thought puzzled her, she set off at a quick trot, her tools clanking in her backpack and her spirits high.

THE MOMENT ELSPETH caught sight of the townhouse by the greenbelt, her good mood plummeted. It was plain to see she would not have a private audience with Mark. The entire Ramsay family was leaving. Three small steam cars chugged at the side of the road as the family loaded their bags in the back. Alexander sat in his wheelchair at the end of the walkway of the house, waving his cane and obviously fully recovered from his lapse at Boswellian Bower. Mark's mother was opening the door of the car in front, ready for Alexander to be loaded into it. Someone else, probably Thomas, worked at the third vehicle, loading bags and equipment. Mark guided Madame Lipstick toward the second vehicle, holding her on his arm and taking great care that she didn't slip on the icy walk.

Steam puffed into the chilly air, obliterating their faces. Elspeth was glad. She didn't want to discover the truth, that Mark was now happily married and off to start a new life with his pretty bride.

She shouldered her backpack and walked forward. No

time like the present to barge in on their postcard-perfect tableau.

“Excuse me,” Elspeth called. “Mark?”

The new bride turned to look over her shoulder. “Oh, it’s you,” she drawled, staring down her nose at Elspeth. She was dressed in a long wool coat and carried a fur muff, and already sported the aristocratic sneer she had assumed the Ramsays would have possessed but hadn’t after all.

Mark paused and stared down at Elspeth. His eyes were cold, bereft of friendliness. Elspeth couldn’t blame him for looking at her like that, after the trouble she had caused. Someone touched her elbow. Elspeth turned, to see the tip of Alexander’s cane, and was glad for the sudden diversion. Mark didn’t look all that interested in hearing what she had to say.

“Mr. Ramsay,” Elspeth pivoted to survey him. “How are you doing, sir?”

“Well enough, after all the excitement.”

“Please accept my apologies.”

“Hmph.” He rolled his eyes. “People need excitement every now and then. Keeps the blood high.”

She stared at him, not sure she heard him correctly.

“They were talking of taking you away. Execution. The fools! Someone had to do something.”

“You faked that collapse?” she sputtered.

“It was the only thing that came to mind. Not the most elegant idea, but effective.”

“But I thought you were on *their* side.”

“Mark did a thorough job of convincing me otherwise. Kept me up half the night talking about recent developments in the female constitution.”

The regal woman with the raven-colored hair came up behind the old man and grasped the handles of the wheelchair.

“Elspeth, is it?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Eleanor.” She held out her hand.

“Pleased to meet you.” Still trying to digest Alexander’s words, Elspeth shook the gloved hand of Ramsay’s mother and was struck by the serene strength in the woman’s face.

“Mark is busy at the moment, but he will be with you shortly. Why don’t you wait for him in the third car?” She gestured toward the blue car in the back. “It’s terribly cold out here.”

The regal glance swept down her uniform and across her boots, as if seeing for herself that Elspeth really did work for the power company. Elspeth made a mental note to contact her boss. He might expect her to return to work after the holidays, but she had to let him know that she would never return to the SteamWizards.

“Thank you. I will.”

Elspeth scurried to the last car in the line, grateful to be away from staring eyes, while she struggled to compose the opening line she would use, once Mark appeared. She set her bag at her feet and closed the door, grateful even more for the warmth of the steam heater. She ran some phrases through her head. She didn’t want to demand, and yet she didn’t want to beg. She didn’t want to lay blame at his feet for what had occurred at the bower, and yet she didn’t want to take all the responsibility for it either. How would she ever come up with the right words? And what, precisely, did she want to say to the man? That she wished him well with his life? Of course she did.

But not with that woman.

Frustrated and disconsolate, Elspeth glared down at the floor.

Suddenly the door opened on the opposite side of the car, startling her out of her troubled thoughts.

“Shutterhouse?” a familiar voice called.

She glanced up, surprised when Mark bent to get into the car. He sank down into the driver’s seat and put his hand on the gearshift. His cool unfriendliness had transformed into the charming demeanor she knew so well. Her heart did a little flip flop.

“So, you decided to join us?” he asked.

“You promised me safe passage.”

“I did. But I didn’t think you would be up to traveling so soon.”

“I’m up to it.”

“Are you?” He leveled his blue eyes on her, and she looked back at him. His lime-scented cologne billowed out, enveloping her in an intoxicating cloud. Her prepared speech vanished, replaced by an ache deep inside that fanned out in an unbearable wave. “What changed your mind?”

“I never changed my mind about going to the Outer Islands.”

“Oh, that. I see.” A shadow passed through his eyes, making Elspeth suddenly suspect that they were speaking of separate things. He slammed the door. “It’s damnable icy today. We’ll have to watch our speed.”

“Mark, I just want to say something. I need to say something.”

He clenched his jaw and waited, studying her face.

“Mark,” she began and then broke off, suddenly overcome by tears. They ran down her cheeks. “Why didn’t you tell me you were getting married?” Angry with herself for just blurting out her feelings, she brushed away the tears with the sleeve of her jacket, scratching her cheek in the process. “Why did you make me find out like that?”

“I had no choice. At that time I didn’t know if you were going to be my bride or not.”

“What do you mean, *at that time?*”

He shook his head and turned the key to engage the motor. As the car rumbled from merely heating the air to full throttle, he paused and glanced over at her. “Shutterhouse, why didn’t you trust me? I asked you to trust me. Why couldn’t you do that one simple thing?”

“What good would have come from trusting you?”

“It could have made the ceremony a lot more enjoyable. I would have *liked* that.”

“Oh, well.” Elspeth swallowed the hard lump that had lodged in her throat. “I’m sorry I ruined your big day.” She swallowed back a sob.

“Both our days, Elspeth.”

“Sorry, I guess I’m not into the marriage thing as much as you.” She clenched her teeth. “And as for that, why in the hell am I so unhappy? Wasn’t that stupid machine supposed to make me *happy?*”

Mark’s hard expression softened into a smile. But his smile only made her more upset. She crossed her arms and shut her eyes, struggling to control herself and doing a poor job of it.

“Shutterhouse, have you ever heard the expression, there are two ways to skin a cat?”

“Yes,” she retorted, feeling cross and heartbroken at the same time. “And it sounds positively barbaric.”

He pulled into the street, following the two cars ahead of him. Elspeth sat up straight, suddenly at attention.

“Where are we going?” she sputtered.

“To the Outer Islands.”

“Your mother is driving?” Elspeth gasped. “She drives?”

“Of course. You can learn, too. Thomas is a great teacher. He’s a lot more patient than I am.”

Elspeth’s thoughts raced. *Thomas*. She’d forgotten all

about him. She glanced at her left hand, and the golden band winked at her, as if mocking her. So she had married Thomas after all. That was why no one in the Ramsay clan had been all that surprised to see her.

“But shouldn’t you be in that car?” she pointed at the brown vehicle ahead of them, where Madame Lipstick languished. He’d probably kept her up most of the night.

“With Mariam?”

“Yes.”

Mark shrugged. “I’ll get to know Mariam soon enough. We’ve got years to get acquainted. And I wanted an extra car.” He turned the corner, heading toward the boundary of the city. “But back to what I was saying.”

“You mean about cats?”

“Yes. There are two ways to go about things. The hard way and the sensible way.”

He glanced at her. She stared at the side of his handsome face, confounded at where the conversation was headed.

“You aren’t following me.”

“Not really.”

“Okay, then,” he said, obviously enjoying himself. “Do you know the official components of scientific inquiry?”

“Like hypothesis, method and results?”

“Exactly. And part of the scientific method is using something called a control.”

Elsbeth brightened. Mark didn’t seem all that changed by the Marriage Machine, and she didn’t feel any different either. He was married to someone else, but still carrying on a lively conversation with her. Perhaps she could bear such a life. She still wanted to kiss him and to feel his arms around her, but she might be able to live without those things if she tried hard enough. And if Thomas didn’t begrudge her spending time with his brother.

His voice, full of amusement, interrupted her thoughts. “Shutterhouse, are you listening?”

“Yes,” she replied. “A control?”

“A good experiment always has a trial group and a control group. But what if there can only be one group studied at a time because of equipment restrictions?”

She shrugged, still not sure what point he was trying to make.

They headed into a curve, and the car ahead of them fishtailed and nearly skidded off the road. Mark swore and honked. The car tooted back at them.

Mark continued undaunted, as if the incident had never occurred. “What if the first data are gathered, then a single change is made, and the second group of data is gathered. Would it still be a valid experiment?”

“I would assume so.”

“Do you think a scientist could be persuaded to believe the results of such an experiment?”

“Yes, but what are you getting at, Mark?”

“Even the Overseers?”

At her shocked stare, he looked over at her. “Even if it involved the Marriage Machine?”

“The Marriage Machine?” She gaped at him. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that you should have trusted me, Shutterhouse.”

Elsbeth stared at him—at his firm mouth, his sharp nose, and his lively, intelligent eyes—and suddenly the events of the past few days fell into place and made sense.

“You *did* vandalize that machine, just as I first suspected!” she gasped. “You were the one that poked the hole in the supply line.”

“I had it done,” he replied. “So I could come in as a repairman—with no one the wiser.”

“But I beat you to it.”

“And stole the ruby, hoping no one would ever suspect the machine didn’t actually work—at least not in the way it was intended to.”

Elsbeth nodded.

“Great minds think alike.” Mark shifted into a lower gear as the vehicle cleared the final milepost of the city. Elspeth would have liked to look out the window at a landscape she had never seen before, but she was too caught up in what Mark was saying to care where the car went. “That was the exact same thing I intended to do,” he added. “I had begun to suspect the very same thing you did, that the human body had at last overcome the effects of radiation. And what better way to find out than change the machine before my own wedding.”

“Good Gottfried,” Elspeth whispered.

“And that’s where the cat skinning comes in. You can try to make your point by being a martyr and facing the wrath of the Overseers—and perhaps never change a thing. Or you can show the Overseers scientific proof that the machine is no longer needed. If the women from your group and the groups thereafter get pregnant after our holiday ceremony without the benefit of the real ruby in place, the Overseers won’t be able to deny the facts. And then we can show them the truth.”

“The ruby we replaced wasn’t real?” she murmured.

“It was a glass replica. So Gramps would still see a red glow.”

“So the real ruby is where?” she asked.

“Safe and sound in the attic of the townhouse.”

She couldn’t find words to express how brilliant he was.

“Oh, and by the way, Shutterhouse,” Mark reached into the pocket of his coat and pulled out a perfect tangerine. He held it out to her. “Happy C-day. I meant to

give this to you yesterday, but things got a bit out of hand.”

“Thank you.” She gazed at him and then at the precious citrus fruit in her hand. She had nothing to give him in return, not even a lemon. And she wanted to give him so much. If he asked her, she would give him everything, no matter how forbidden.

While Elspeth was still contemplating the future and the part Mark might play in it, she saw the brown car skid off the road and plow into a snow-covered bank. Mark motored to a stop, and they both jumped out and ran forward. The doors of the brown vehicle swung open.

“Are you all right?” Mark called. He dashed to the passenger side of the car, most likely to see to the safety of his wife. Elspeth slipped and slid to the driver’s side, where she assumed she belonged. She wished to show a little respect for the man who had not forced her into the wedding bed.

“Thomas?” she ventured. A booted foot popped out of the car. And then a very tall, broad-shouldered man rose from the seat and scrambled out of the vehicle. Elspeth stared, not believing her eyes. She stood in the snow, the wind blowing her leather jacket around her knees as she glanced from one brother to the other.

Mark and Thomas were identical twins.

“Are you okay?” she stuttered.

“I’m fine, thanks.” He shot a cool smile at her and then glanced over the top of the car. “Darling, are you all right? I should have been more careful.”

Madame Lipstick waved and patted Mark on his shoulder. “Just shaken up a little, dear,” she called back.

Darling? Dear? Thomas was married to Madame Lipstick?

What did it mean? It couldn’t mean...did that mean

that she—Elspeth Shutterhouse—was the wife of Thomas' younger but startlingly similar brother?

Elspeth was more than shaken. She was stunned. She could feel the color draining from her face and her knees giving way in utter shock.

"Ace mechanic going down!" Mark exclaimed, laughing, as he dashed toward her.

WHEN ELSPETH CAME TO, she found she had collapsed in a snow bank and that Mark was kneeling at her side and in the process of picking her up.

"Do you have a habit of this?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Fainting."

"I've never fainted in my life until I met you." She struggled to get up on her own, but he pulled her securely into his arms. He looked down at her, his eyes serious.

"Are you sure you're all right, Shutterhouse?"

"I'm fine!" she shot back. Then she realized she would never be right, and she would never stop fainting and worrying until she knew the truth. She pushed against his chest. "Just tell me one thing, Ramsay. Are we married? I mean, to each other?"

"Technically."

"But you don't want to be?" Her fingers retracted into curls as her heart flopped in her chest.

"I never said that."

"What *did* you say?"

He rose to his feet and set hers upon the ground, but still held her close. "I said I do."

"And what did I say?" she asked, not remembering a single moment of the ceremony.

“Technically nothing. That’s when you fainted.” He began to dust off the snow from the back of her coat.

She loved the way he looked after her—had always looked after her, come to think of it.

“So we never made it official?” she asked, her heart racing.

He straightened and cocked a brow. “In what way?”

“With a kiss.”

“I intended to wait for that, until you were fully conscious. And maybe even willing in the bargain.”

“I’m *more* than willing, Mark.” She placed her hands on the sides of his warm face and drew him down. She had waited for what seemed like forever to feel his firm mouth close upon hers. He kissed her as tenderly and then as fully as she had dreamed a kiss could be, gathering her up in his arms and pressing her into the fire of his chest. His kiss spoke of love and appreciation, but she had to know for certain how he felt. She needed to hear him say it.

“So you *do* want to be married to me?” she murmured against his mouth.

“From the moment I met you.”

“Really?”

“You were unlike any woman I had ever met. Plus, I’d never seen a woman in a uniform before.” He winked at her.

She pulled back and stared at him.

“You are awfully sexy in that mechanic outfit, Shutterhouse.” He kissed her again and looked down at her. His expression grew serious. “But I have to know. Did you want to marry me? All I’ve heard from you is that marriage is the end of the world.”

“I could be persuaded to alter that opinion.”

“Could you, now?” He grinned, no longer taking pains to conceal his joy.

“Yes.” She beamed. Her heart was glowing with so much love for him, she thought it might burn right through her chest. “You’re the one person who might be able to change my mind.”

“Then I’m a lucky fellow.”

“I can’t believe how lucky we *both* were.”

He pulled back a bit. “What do you mean?”

“To have wound up together. What were the odds of that?”

Mark threw back his head and laughed. “It had nothing to do with luck.”

The truth dawned on her. “You switched the cards!” she gasped.

He raised one brow. “Did I?”

“You switched cards with your brother so I would end up with you!”

“I had to, El. I couldn’t have you married off to anyone but me. I love you.”

Her heart swelled in her chest as she realized the risks Mark Ramsay had taken for love. For the love of *her*. Elspeth Shutterhouse.

Behind them a car door slammed.

“What’s the damned hold-up back there?” a crusty voice exclaimed.

“Ignore the old geezer,” Mark growled in her ear. “And just kiss me, Shutterhouse.”

“My thoughts exactly,” she replied.

“Like I said before,” he pulled her even closer. “Great minds think alike.”

THANK YOU!

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