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Natural Beauty

Ling Ling Huang

10 CANELO

CHAPTER ONE

Even the door is beautiful. A single piece of dark heavy wood, like rich chocolate poured under an ancient stone archway carved with wings and scales. My hand rests on the golden doorknob, surprisingly hot to the touch. A twist and a push and I am pulled in by the deep pink carpets and the soft muted clinking of expensive products. Warm candlelight emanates from every surface. A light botanical smell fills the air.

People mill around, tightly wrapped in sumptuous wools and furs. They sniff, drip, and dribble substances onto themselves. Light gray mother-of-pearl inlays stripe the walls. When the light catches, they seem to move like the sudden falling of tears. In fact, the entire place feels unusually alive, as if I have stumbled into the womb of a slumbering giantess.

In the back, a tall man in a sharp black suit stands next to a woman caressing the sleeping sloth curled around her neck. He nods at her a few times before crouching down abruptly to catch a vial tumbling from a toddler's pudgy hand. He straightens and smiles at the child as he places the product out of reach. He moves with authority, towering over everyone. Balletic and rigorous in his economy of movement.

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His dark blond hair is slicked close to his head, and his face has a rubbery quality, like it would hold a pressed handprint. The exception is his cheekbones, which slice the air like fins. I realize he looks familiar, though I can't remember where I've seen him. The wall behind him is light pink, filled with rows and rows of white ceramic jars, like gleaming teeth embedded in a healthy set of gums.

"Darling, you came! Welcome to Holistik."

Saje walks over with quick steps and slips an arm through mine. I worry that she can smell me, the November air not yet cold enough to keep me from sweating on my long walk here. Her smile is warm. "What do you think?"

She's wearing a silky nude jumpsuit, and dark red hair snakes over her shoulder, glinting in the dim lighting. Her irises are brown but have a surprising yellow edge I hadn't noticed last night. She is so tall in her animal-skin stilettos, I have to strain my neck to meet her eye.

"Would you be interested in working here?"

My jaw drops open and my mouth fills with cold air. I hastily shut it, embarrassed, and look at her for a few long seconds to see if there's any chance she's fucking with me. Her expression is unchanged—and looking around at all the products, so many specifically made to keep women from ever aging, I wonder if she's even capable of different expressions.

"Yes," I say, exalting her by craning my neck as high as it will go. She starts to explain the particulars of the job, the pay and benefits included, and I feel a wave of relief so intense, I have to reach out and grab the display table next to me.

"Thank you," I add, surprised to find myself blinking back tears.

Her smile widens, showing teeth. "No thanks necessary. I'm so glad I found you. I knew from the moment we met that you'd be the perfect addition to our little family here. I'll introduce you to Lilith in a moment. She'll be the one to show you around. Why don't you go downstairs? There's an employee closet where you can put your things."

CHAPTER TWO

I take the stairs down and pause. How different from my previous place of employment. Every bit as opulent as the floor above, this private space is enormous and inviting. A few women seem to float together on a cloudlike structure that acts as a sofa. They are homogeneously beautiful, as if airlifted from a movie set about popular high school girls. They are still in character, perhaps, since they don't acknowledge or even notice me. Gigantic shelves loom on the left, crammed with stone jars and crystal vials. A clean, faintly medicinal smell puts me at ease. It is cold down here, refreshingly so, and I love the clinical click of my shoes on the porcelain tiles.

The full kitchen is spotless, as if it has never been used. My view through the clear refrigerator door is blocked by a dense forest of rainbow-colored juices. I ignore my sudden hunger pangs and begin my search for the employee closet.

I pass a door with an electronic lock. A sign over it: *The Zoo*. Down the main hallway, a glass door. Beyond it, people dressed in white lab coats move with urgency. On a table in front of them, something wrinkled and translucent pumps like a beating heart. Jellyfish, I think, though they look like crumpled plastic bags recently fished out of water. In the closet, I leave my bag and hang up my ratty

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old coat. At least the clothes I am wearing underneath are somewhat nicer. Long sleeves, as Saje had requested.

She had stomped in late, looking so filthy rich no one wanted to tell her the restaurant was closed. She was very beautiful, with skin so white it was almost translucent, and her long red hair was tucked into a lavender coat that looked incredibly soft. I could have believed someone was airbrushing her live image.

I had just finished another day of scrubbing endless dishes in piping hot water. It wasn't so bad once I'd gotten used to it. At the end of each night, I would kick off my shoes, eat leftovers from the kitchen, and strip the burned skin from my hands. I felt triumphant when I could get a large piece off all at once, like peeling off an opera glove. Months of lightly flaying myself had made the raw skin baby soft, and I sometimes fantasized about submerging my whole body in the sink, shedding everything.

"May I have one?" She slipped into the seat opposite mine, gesturing at my leftovers, coiling her legs beneath her.

I masked my surprise with politeness. "Sure. They're cold, though."

She picked at the soggy fries, pushing them through a small opening between her two front teeth. I was mesmerized by this action. The gap caused a soft musical whistle when she spoke, as if she had songbirds in her throat. She sighed and the birds took flight. I felt grimy sitting across from her, surely exuding the smell of recycled frying oil from every orifice.

"Man's greatest invention, don't you think? The potato with salt," the woman said, licking a finger.

I said nothing. Carla was glaring at me from behind the counter, prematurely accusing me of stealing a wealthy customer.

"Did you know that they can be toxic? Nothing serious. You won't die from a potato, but it can make you very ill," she said.

I smiled reflexively. Rich people have all the time in the world to pick up random anecdotes for small talk.

She suddenly leaned in, peering at me with an inquisitiveness that made me stop breathing. "Wait a minute. I know you."

I almost looked behind me. "Excuse me?"

"You look very familiar. Have we met?"

I gazed at her once more, carefully, before shaking my head. My hair, greasy from a day next to the fryer, didn't move.

"Have you been in the city a long time? Do you study here?"

Close enough, I thought as I nodded.

"What do you study?"

"I studied piano. At the Conservatory."

There was a look of recognition on her face.

She jabbed a fry at me. "I knew it. You're her! The Rachmaninoff girl!" she said. "Am I right?"

A quick nod.

"You're incredible! I love the piano, and I'm a huge supporter of the arts!"

"That's great," I say.

There's a pause before I realize I should thank her for supporting the vague "arts," which in this instance is me. "Thanks so much."

"What are you doing here? A bit far from the Conservatory, aren't you?" She was leaning in so close, I could feel her hot breath on my face.

"I'm not there anymore."

"Where are you playing next? I would love to see you perform."

I hesitated, still unsure of how to answer these types of questions. It had been almost three years since I had touched a piano. For a second, I imagined shrinking in size and bouncing on her fully cushioned lips instead of answering her.

"I don't really play anymore."

"You don't? Why!"

"It was just time to move on."

"How do you make a living?"

"I work here. Dishwasher." I showed her my hands.

Predictably, she gasped.

"But what a waste of your hands! Your talent!"

I shrugged.

"They must pay a fortune if that's what you're doing to yourself!"

"It's better than nothing. I get a lot of free food."

Before the restaurant job, I consistently found myself choosing between eating enough and putting money away for rent. I never went through with it, but there were too many nights when I waited for my roommates to fall asleep before creeping upstairs to listen to the quiet burbling of their cat's triple-filtered water fountain and to

stand transfixed by the gleam of gold tops on her gourmet cat food.

"Stop by anytime. Ask for me." She was opening her purse and reaching inside. "I go to the Philharmonic every week, and I've never heard a pianist who can do what you do. You deserve better, and we can certainly give you more than free food."

I was startled to see a look of genuine concern in her eyes. The card she slid onto the sticky tabletop was iridescent and embossed with the word *Holistik*. The script was so lavishly curled, the letters looked like they might sneak off the card to ensnare me. She turned it around and tapped on her name a couple of times.

Saje Bernsson.

She rose, encompassing me in her shadow. "My driver is waiting." She placed a cold hand over one of mine, shocking me. "I hope to see you soon." Putting leather gloves on at the door, she looked back at me, remembering something. "Wear long sleeves when you visit."

The wind let in a flurry of freshly fallen leaves, red as her hair. Feathers, too, inexplicably floated out from her open handbag. They swirled in the wind, eventually sticking to the dirty tile.

I find a bathroom across from the employee closet. The floor is spongy, and every step emits a whiff of something sublime. It appears to be a carpet made of woven eucalyptus, matted and pulverized to be plush and springy underfoot. A tub lined with jars of scented salts takes up half the room. I slip into the large celadon half egg, opening the carafes and smelling each one, almost

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compulsively. My bladder is full, but I can't imagine using the toilet, which looks like an art piece. In the mirror, I'm surprised to find that the soft light makes me look well rested. Not quite beautiful, but not completely out of place in this enchanted setting. A creamy soap is dispensed from a sculpture of a bathing woman, and I sink my hands into a dense fluffy towel before hurrying back upstairs.

Saje is waiting for me near the stairs with a strikingly beautiful young woman. A light gray gauze, more mist than coat, is draped over her tight-knit dress and over-the-knee leather boots. She has long glossy hair the color of roasting chestnuts and dark green eyes with all the depth and chill of an overgrown forest. She can't be much older than I am, but on her face, there is more than a hint of superiority. I don't yet know this to be a trait shared by all Holistik girls.

"There you are! This is Lilith. She's our exceptional manager, and she'll tell you everything you need to know."

"Hi," I say, anxious under Lilith's cool gaze.

She dips her chin slightly in my direction as a greeting. "Are you headed back to the Gunks?" she asks Saje, who answers affirmatively before turning back to me.

"I am so happy you're joining us. A quick word before I leave?" Saje asks.

I glance nervously at Lilith. She covers a yawn with a tiny hand before stepping two paces away.

Saje's eyes glow with pleasure as she looks me up and down. "You already fit in so beautifully. As you can see, we favor an international staff."

I look around, but none of the other staff seem particularly international to me. If anything, I seem like a clear

diversity hire. I lower my head in agreement like a good model minority.

"I want to warn you about some of our customers. They may assume you're from the Mainland or another country. It's offensive, especially in this day and age, but it might be best to let them think they're right and to focus on the products you're selling."

I try to smile.

"Exactly like that. And do bring up the formal piano training. Only if you're comfortable, of course. We have a few expensive hand creams that may sell especially well with your endorsement." She reaches over and squeezes my shoulder. "That reminds me." She pops a little glass jar into my palm. "For your poor hands. I'll see you soon! Lilith will take great care of you." She walks away, leaving me alone with Lilith.

I look at the jar, unscrew the heavy lid, and dab a bit on my left hand. A light floral scent rises as the thick cream clings to my skin. Nothing like the watery stuff Ma would rub on my aching hands after long sessions of piano practice. She fortified cheap lotion or Vaseline with a liniment she made using Chinese herbs. Every night after dinner, no matter how exhausted she was, she would soften the calluses on my fingertips so they wouldn't split open. We would watch TV, I would read to her from a book, or she would tell me the things she missed about home. We always drank chrysanthemum tea, steeping the same tired flowers from the day before. The fingers of one hand would always run impatiently while she massaged the other one.

"You're just like me," Ma said. "Every morning in Cultural Revolution, we woke up and officers watch us

carefully make sure we read the Little Red Book. I always keep my fingers moving. So small they can't see. But moving. Hope one day get out, can play piano again."

"She was his mistress," Lilith says coolly.

She had seen my eyes glazing over at the memory of my mother and assumed it was a reaction to the microscopic print on her translucent shawl. I look closer, focusing this time on the delicate name tag. Her eyes blink slowly at me with boredom as if to say, *Yes, I am the child of that famous director. No, I wasn't conceived in something as ordinary as marriage.*

"The lab downstairs will want to get samples from you and take measurements for your uniform. It shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes. Come find me on the floor afterward."

I make my way back downstairs.

People in white lab coats run around, scanning and swabbing me with whirring devices.

"What's all of this for?" I ask the nearest young man.

"We're testing the composition of your body and facial skin to make custom products and supplements for you. They'll be ready at the end of your shift today. One of the many perks of working here."

He grins and continues circling my head with a protracted gray rod. I imagine him bringing it down on me repeatedly.

Next he brings me to a small room by the lab where he tells me my new Holistik uniform will be constructed. Another man sprays me with something before I enter,

and the taste catches in my throat, faintly floral like jasmine tea, but mostly sticky.

"Semochemicals for the worms. You're not afraid of worms, are you?"

In the room, I clear my throat to try and get it to unstick. The man gives me a thumbs-up from a little window. One by one, they start to descend. The room I had thought was empty is filled with thousands of worms, lowering from the ceiling on delicate string. They twist and somersault drunk figure eights. The sound of silk being spun is beautiful, a silvery hum with an indiscernible pitch. My mind can't help but try to transcribe it into music I can play. Suddenly, the little bleached bodies begin to retract, and a voice speaks over an intercom.

"You can come through the door now."

I hesitate and look back. A gentle wind starts blowing in the room and I begin to feel faint. A hand grabs me—the man with the rod earlier has opened the door. His hand is warm and too tight around my wrist, as if I've done something wrong.

"It's all right, you're OK!" He steadies me and I try to blink away the white spots in my eyes. I feel sure that without his support, I would fall.

"What's happening to me?"

"You're OK," he says firmly. "Just a little cross-contamination. Something we use for the worms to make them obedient. For the silk extraction."

I look back through the window at the dangling silkworms. "Are they—"

He waves a hand impatiently. "They're OK. They're paralyzed for a bit while we extract and shape the silk, but they'll continue their life cycle afterward. The alternative