

## AN EXCERPT FROM THE DEPTH OF BEAUTY:

The malaise that had dogged Will the night before carried over into Christmas morning. He chalked it up to a change in routine; he wanted to spend time with Tam Shee, but he knew it would be inappropriate to leave, especially since Kit had no idea where he might be going.

He was feeling a touch of self-pity as well, he realized. He wanted to share what had always been a jolly time of year with someone who understood that tradition. Tam Shee had no such reference.

He wanted to take her out to see the lights and decorations of the city, which were particularly festive around Christmas, but he knew it would be difficult if not impossible for her.

He wanted to take Sai-fon up to the mountains so that she could build a snowman. Hell, he would settle for taking her to the ocean where she could collect pretty shells instead of the sow bugs she was forever bringing up for her mother.

Instead he filed those thoughts away, slapped on a smile, and headed downstairs where he knew Kit and Mandy were waiting. His sister, apparently eager to start her own family traditions, had laid out the plan before they'd retired.

"First we'll have a big country breakfast," she said.

"Uh, the staff is off, and since neither of us can cook an egg to save our lives, we'll have to settle for continental," Will argued. "In fact, just coffee's fine for me."

"Oh no, brother dear. Mandy's got it covered. You may not realize it, but she's quite the cook. Half of the goodies coming out of the kitchen in the past few months have been hers."

"Really? She never mentioned it."

Kit gave him a look that said *Did you expect she would?*

Now, as he descended the stairs, he could smell bacon frying and coffee percolating. It was intoxicating. He stuck his head in the kitchen and saw both Mandy and Kit wearing aprons and wielding spoons. Mandy was supervising while Kit poured batter onto a large smoking griddle.

"Is that enough? Is that enough?" For someone as self-confident as his sister, that panicked tone just didn't sound right. By contrast, Mandy's voice was low and calm. She was obviously the one in charge. That didn't seem right either, but he had to admit, the flapjacks and bacon were delicious.

Afterward they retired to the small back parlor, where Kit and Mandy had decorated a small Noble fir. Will had placed his packages there the night before, as had the ladies. He'd never admit it, but he didn't really like opening presents, not for himself, at any rate. He found it embarrassing. Unnecessary, since he could purchase anything he damn well pleased. So instead of anticipation or even a light-hearted sense of fun, he felt only irritation, and a niggling sense of guilt that he should feel that way.

“All right. I’ll play Santa’s helper,” Kit announced, donning a red Santa’s hat. She handed a large box to Mandy, who opened it to reveal a beautiful red wool coat with fox trim and a matching muff. Mandy was struck speechless and could only hug the coat and her guardian.

“Try it on, try it on,” Kit said.

“Can we get on with it?” Will asked, sounding peevisish, which of course, he was.

“Fine, you old mossback. Open your present.” She handed him a small rectangular box. It contained a pince-nez style pair of eyeglasses. Kit laughed with delight. “Now you’ll look like our dear President Roosevelt,” she exclaimed. Will took off his regular spectacles and tried balancing the new pair on his nose. He could tell in an instant he wasn’t going to like them. They seemed on the verge of falling off, and he felt ridiculous. “They’re wonderful. Thanks, sister mine.” He put the glasses back in their box and handed her a present with her name on it.

She opened it quickly. It was a first edition of the original English translation of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*. “A worthy addition to my collection. Thank you, brother dear.”

Mandy walked over and shyly handed Kit her gift. It was also a book, a novel entitled *The Circle*, written by Katherine Thurston. “She’s an Irish writer and is supposed to be very good,” Mandy explained. “It’s about a woman who makes great sacrifices to follow her dream. And the writer has the same first name as you.”

While Kit was saying thanks, Will pulled another small box from under the tree and handed it to Mandy. “Use it in good health,” he said. She sat looking at the box for a moment before carefully opening it. Inside was a nondescript pen set one of his business associates had given him that he’d never opened. It came with different nibs and ink. “You can write in your journal, or even practice calligraphy if you’re so inclined.”

“Such a thoughtful, creative gift,” Kit said drily. “What’s left?”

“Just this,” Mandy said, carrying a medium-size box over to Will.

“You didn’t have to get me anything.”

“I know, but I thought you could use it maybe.”

He unwrapped the box and opened it. Inside was a stereoscope, a wooden viewfinder through which one could see two photographs that replicated what the human eye sees, in three dimensions. Along with the contraption were several dual photographs of places like Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon.

“I thought maybe you could show it to Tam Shee and Sai-fon, since they never go anywhere, and I know you must want to take them places. So now they can at least see what the bigger world is like. I thought—”

Will’s eyes bored into hers, telling her to *stop!* But she didn’t catch his warning in time. Within seconds of speaking, however, she realized the mistake she’d made. She clapped her hand over her mouth, making it even more obvious.

Kit had heard it all. “What are you talking about? Who is this Tam Shee person? Why can’t she go anywhere?”

Mandy kept looking at Will. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know she didn’t—”

“*Enough.*” Will took a deep breath and let the poisonous thoughts roiling within him spill out. “Listen, I appreciate the thought, but you’re really not part of this family, and giving me things isn’t going to make that happen. Has Kit told you we’re looking for your real family? I should be hearing from them any day now. I think it best if you don’t try to insinuate yourself anymore where you don’t belong.”

His speech was met with silence. Kit, he knew, was in shock. Mandy looked at him with those mesmerizing eyes and he wanted to turn away, knowing she knew what was inside him. Her next words proved him right.

“To not be close to the ones you love at special times like this is hard. I know. And I know the steep mountain you have to climb.” She gestured to the stereoscope. “I just thought maybe that would help you along the way.”

She looked around as if she’d lost something. “I ... I think I will take my new coat upstairs and try it on, if you don’t mind.” She picked up the large box and headed out of the parlor. At the doorway she turned around to face them. “Thank you for sharing your family Christmas with me, both of you. I loved it very much. And Mr. Firestone? You needn’t worry. I’ll be ready to go when the time comes.”

Mandy left the room and Will could hear her running down the hall. He wanted to run after her and tell her it was all a mistake, that he didn’t know the prick who had said such vile things. But he couldn’t move. He imagined a pit filled with the sticky residue of shame, sadness, and regret ... and he was sinking in it.

“What in the name of all that’s holy did you just do?” Kit had found her voice. “And on Christmas morning, no less?!”

He turned his gaze toward his sister. “Why, I just taught Mandy one of life’s most important lessons: how incredibly cruel one human being can be to another, with only a voice for a weapon.”