

## Prelude

**Rainair's worst day was not** the one she woke up blind, but the moment she'd realized she had married a monster.

Machines hummed and clicked, their cadence echoing off the walls in time with her heartbeat. Her face felt swollen, and every one of her limbs was numb. The pain that radiated up her spine was like a familiar old friend that frequently called, only its presence was not as comforting.

The sharp scent of alcohol and bleach confirmed she had landed back in the hospital for the fifth time in as many months. Each time earned her more severe injuries. Cliff would kill her eventually. She had to leave him for good, but her every attempt left a wake of destruction.

Good people who had tried to help her had suddenly disappeared or had their lives destroyed beyond repair. Never again, she had promised herself, yet she couldn't do this on her own.

People entered her room. Hard-soled shoes indicated they were not hospital staff. The sickening scent of Axe cologne permeated the air. It reminded her of a crowded room after a rowdy party involving far too much alcohol.

"Rainair Bishop?" a young man asked.

"Yes," she struggled to say. Her throat felt as if she had swallowed glass shards. The raspy sound it emitted rivaled that of a cat stuck in the maw of a hungry coyote.

"I'm officer Hadley, and this is my partner, Officer Adams. We are here to take your report."

Adams hadn't spoken, but her scent was female, and the vinegar-like aroma she emitted betrayed her nervousness. Why would she be nervous?

"Can you tell us what happened?" asked Adams, concern and compassion softening her question. Someone had abused her.

"My husband had me beaten," said Rainair.

The young officer cleared his throat. "Those are harsh accusations, Mrs. Bishop. Are you certain he was involved?"

It was always the same. No one believed her and the reports they filed made her look like a promiscuous chippy who always seemed to be at the wrong place with the wrong crowd. It was getting rather old. "Yes, Mr. Hadley, I'm sure. I recognized his cologne. He was with two other men."

"Do you know who they were?"

"No, but I would recognize their voices. One of them was approximately six-foot-two and rather portly. The other was more athletic and slightly shorter. My husband stood by as they pounded my body like a sack of flour."

"Your husband claims to have been in court that day during the time you called 911."

Of course he did. Cliff always had his script in order before he acted. He was a strategist which made him one of the most influential lawyers in New York. "He was there, with me," Rainair seethed.

"Why would he do this?" asked Adams.

"I tried to leave him. He got angry, just like the last four times he put me in here. I filed the reports."

"We read them," said Hadley. "None of them were conclusive."

"Of course they weren't," she scoffed. It was Cliff's word against hers—a blind woman. "I want to press charges," she said, knowing it would do no good.

"You want to press charges on the founder of the most prestigious law firms in New York, based on the scent of his cologne and a description of two blokes that could be any one of a million people?"

"Yes, I do."

Hadley laughed. "There was nothing on your clothes or person that carried any proof of your allegations, Mrs. Bishop. The scent of cigarette smoke and gin coincide with the story your husband

told. Someone saw you at the Blue Ox, leaving drunk with three men. Someone found you on the street and brought you here.”

“Did you run a blood test on me?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t drink last night!”

“Your blood test proved otherwise.”

Rainair thought about her throat and how it felt raw and sore. A tinge of juniper lingered. Had they forced gin down her throat? She remembered little of that night and wondered now if they had drugged her.

When she detected the scent of Timber Spice Cologne, her heart raced as if adrenaline pumped through her IV.

“Am I interrupting?” said the smooth and confident voice of her husband.

“No, sir. We were just leaving. I think we have what we need.”

“I hope you find the bastards who did this,” said Cliff, his voice thick with honey that reeked of poison.

“Yes, sir. We will.” Officer Hadley and Adams turned and left the room.

Plastic rustled as Cliff laid something down on the table beside her. “I brought you red roses—your favorite.” He leaned down and kissed her swollen cheek.

Then, in a whisper that was barely detectable, he added, “I married you, Rainair, because of your beauty and skill as a lawyer. Your blindness offers another convenience—a dependence of sorts. I have all the perks without the complications—something I don’t have time for. Behave yourself, and I won’t have to hurt you anymore. There is no place you can hide where I can’t find you. The sooner you learn that, the better life will be—for both of us. You are mine, Rainair. You hear me?”

“I’d rather be dead.”

“That’s my girl,” he laughed. “Always the fighter; another thing I love about you.”

His lips crushed down on hers so . It elicited a shot of pain and a whimper.

“Mine!” he repeated.

## Chapter 1

*Seven years later*

**Rai’s knuckles whitened around her iPhone** and that familiar sickness crept from her lower belly up to her chest as if she had swallowed bitter acid. “Tell me.”

“There is no record of your filing,” said Anna. She and Rai had become the best of friends, having both come from abusive relationships.

“How? I filed it in person.”

“Your husband has connections, sweetie.”

“Don’t call him that! I’ve been trying to make him my ex for seven years.”

Anna cleared her throat. “Cliff hosted one of his famous parties last month. Guess who made the invitation list? Judge Hardey and Sheriff John Ramsey. After that, the paper trail for your divorce decree simply disappeared. He’s bad news, Rai, and he’s in bed with all the right people.”

Rai paced back and forth, her white cane tapping out a beat that matched her pounding heart. “I will never be free of him, will I?”

“Hey, we’ll find a way, I promise.”

“Thanks, kiddo. I appreciate your help.” Rai ended the call, then tapped her phone. Oliver, her screen-reading voice, politely announced the time with a polished British accent. “12:43 pm.”

Brian wasn’t coming. She was not surprised. He wanted more than she could give, but long-term relationships were impossible for her, thanks to Cliff.

She had changed her name, her hair color and length, and was careful not to contact her family directly. She missed them, but they understood her reasons and supported her without hesitation. Brian could not do the same.

Despite his persistence, Rai had to be firm. She had hurt him last week after dinner. Brian had left in a huff and hadn’t tried to contact her again. She hated going to these events alone. Being blind was hard enough, negotiating her way through unfamiliar surroundings was downright stressful. The white cane was supposed to tell people she had a vision impairment. More than not, it made her a target. Oblivious travelers crossed in front of her dragging their bags behind them, making the route through the cruise terminal a virtual gauntlet.

Shaking her head, she took a deep breath, grabbed the handle of her wheeled bag and tapped her way toward the boarding line. The marble floor dulled each strike of her ceramic tip. Using the echo of sound, she listened for the density of people and conversation, then moved toward the place where it was most thick.

She grew up in Seattle, and the familiar pier and cruise line terminal should have been a comfort. Today, it was not. “Excuse me,” she said to no one particular. “Is this the boarding line for Taylor’s Emerald Queen?”

Perfect, no answer. No doubt people were staring at her as if she were a private joke.

“May I help you?” asked a warm male British voice.

“Please,” she said. “I’m looking for the boarding line for the Emerald Queen.”

“I can help with that,” he said, a slight smile in his tone. “I’m Z, and you are?” A pleasant scent of bay rum wafted off his body.

“Rai.”

He took her bag and offered his arm. “Do you know which cabin you’re in?” Either the man dressed impeccably well, or his uniform was top notch. The material felt like spun silk and cashmere. She assumed he was an employee—a porter, perhaps?

“5445,” she said, fishing in her brown leather bag for the ticket. Her nerves felt raw, and she thought to forget the cruise altogether and return to the familiarity of her flat in Bremerton. She had committed her attendance, however, and she had to stick with it.

“This ticket is one of two. Are you meeting someone?”

She winced. “No,” was all she could say. It was her fault Brian was a no show. Eager to distract Z’s attention from her embarrassment, she asked, “Do you work for Taylor cruise line?”

“Yes,” he said. “My job is to ensure our passengers are well accommodated.”

“Well, I appreciate your efforts, Z. I would have missed the entire cruise looking for that blasted boarding line.”

He chuckled; a deep throaty sound that made her lower belly tremble. The sensation was a time warp that triggered feelings she had as a teen when her date escorted her to prom.

With graceful ease, Z led her through the terminal, past the security lines, and down a quiet hall that held a faint scent of new paint and polished floors.

“Good morning Mr. ...”

“Just Z,” he interrupted. “Good morning Marda.”

“Yes, sir,” Marda replied with a hint of embarrassment.

That was an odd exchange, thought Rai. “You seem to have respect around here,” she commented. “What position do you hold again?”

“Does it matter?”

She thought about it for a moment. "Well, you seem to know your way around the ship, and other employees know you. I don't think you are a thug attempting to kidnap me and toss me into a van. So, no, I guess it doesn't matter."

That invoked a laugh from him, a roar so deep, it rattled her bones. She was used to having male attention and heard she was a looker more than once. She wouldn't know, seeing she had lost her sight when she was a young teen, before her body bloomed into womanhood. Her blindness added a mystery about her that seemed to intrigue most men until they had their fill of her and moved on to better challenges.

Z guided her up a ramp where the breeze flowing in from the Puget Sound whipped her honey-blonde hair with vigorous gusts. By the time they made it aboard, she was sure she resembled a banshee. Perhaps wearing it down was not the brightest idea, she thought, doing her best to smooth the waist-length locks from her face.

Once on board and out of the wind, he turned her to face him. His warm hand brushed through her wild entanglements with a gentleness of a giant. "Your hair is beautiful," he said, in a volume just above a whisper.

"Thank you," she replied, stepping back from his administrations. "I typically have it braided."

"What a shame." Having sensed her discomfort, he offered his arm once again and led her through a carpeted foyer. Each time someone tried to address him by his formal name, they stopped as if Z had issued a warning.

Rai couldn't help but laugh. "You either have an embarrassing name, or you have something to hide."

"The former," he said, but the shortness in his voice didn't back his statement. No matter, Rai thought. Once he showed her to her room, she doubted she would run into him again. The Emerald Queen was one of Taylor's largest cruise ships—the only one of its size in Washington. Chances of her running into Z again were slim.

After checking her in, he led her to the elevators, pointing out identifiable landmarks that would help her find her way. His understanding and expert orientation techniques impressed her. Most people hadn't a clue how to guide a blind person, let alone how to orient one.

The elevator dinged once, indicating it was going up. Z and Rai stepped inside. Strong cleaning solution affronted her nose as the doors closed. The way the sound echoed, she ascertained that one or more of the walls had a hard surface. She pressed her hand instinctively to the wall to confirm her suspicion. "Glass walls?"

"Impressive," he said. "The buttons are always on the right side of the door. Your room is on the fifth floor." He reached for her hand and moved it over to the third button down on the left. He then shifted her hand to the outside of the button where braille dots indicated the number five. "The braille numbers for each floor are on the outside of the respective button."

The elevator dinged and announced the floor as the doors slid open. "There are three elevators: one aft, one mid, and one forward. We came up the mid elevator which is the easiest to access," Z explained. They turned left and passed five doors on the right and four on the left before stopping. He opened the door with a card key. The lock made a soft moan before clicking open.

Listening to the way sound moved in the cramped quarters, she knew the queen-sized bed was directly in front of her, while a narrow piece of furniture occupied the right wall. A hollow sound on the left indicated an open closet. On the wall adjacent to the door was a low desk or dresser.

Z patted the bed. "Bed." He walked to the right and slapped the narrow piece. "Valet. The closet is on your left, and here," he tapped the table on the near wall, "is your dresser with six drawers. Follow it down to the privy and shower." He tapped the door. "I have set your luggage in front of the closet. Do you need help to unpack?"

Her face burned. "No, thank you." She reached into her bag and pulled out a twenty spot to hand to him. "You have been more than helpful, Z. Thank you. I will put in a good word for you with the boss."

"Know him well, do you?"

"Not at all, actually, but I know folks who do. I'll make sure Mr. Taylor hears about the wonderful service you have provided."

"Thank you, Miss," he said through a smile. "I'll come by once we are underway and orient you to the ship." He took the twenty-dollar bill and closed the door behind him.

Odd man, thought Rai, breathing in his lingering scent.

## Chapter 2

**Damn, she was cute, thought Z**, as he headed toward the lobby. When he saw that lovely bit-of-goods in a blue summer dress talking to a marble pillar in the terminal, his mind got all soft. He rarely reached out to passengers. He did his best to avoid them. This female was an exception. She was easy on the eyes as well. Those pale blue irises and honey-colored hair were stunning. He remembered the feel of those silky strands as they slid between his fingers. The smell of sweet jasmine lingered in his memory.

Females were trouble, he reminded himself. It was best to steer clear of this one. After he oriented her to the ship, he would avoid her, regardless of his attraction. It would be best for both of them.

This cruise included a fraction of the Taylor Cruise Line corporate staff. The awards ceremony was scheduled five nights from now when a handful of people would receive appreciation for their outstanding contribution to the company.

His corporate team occupied deck fifteen, which is where he would spend most of his time. The awards ceremony was the only event he would have to attend. Lower management handled the menial business.

Rai Landon was not part of his corporate team, or she would have a suite on deck fifteen, not five. She was merely a passenger wanting to experience Alaska. Just how much a blind person could enjoy the sights alone was yet to be determined. Damn her friend for bailing on her. Z grinned at the thought of being her guide. Ideas rambled through his mind in creative waves; an unstoppable force that promised a wake of destruction.

Leave her alone, he thought. The last thing he needed was another woman in his life. Memories of his horrid divorce spurred him like a mother scolding an errant child. No more relationships, he'd promised himself. They were poison, guaranteed to kill him with painful slowness. His ex-wife Denise would make sure of it.

**As the passengers loaded with** the grace and speed of meandering cattle, Z watched from the captain's office; a spacious number decked out in teakwood and fancy furniture. Large tinted windows looked down into the foyer, offering a broad view of the reception desk and touring counters.

"Lively crowd," said the voice of his good friend and most trusted captain. Troy Billard had served in the navy with Z's father for many years. The result was a failed marriage and bitter children. He walked with a limp and a gnarled-wood cane, polished to a blinding shine. An amber stone sat atop the staff, embedded into the dense juniper as if the wood had grown around it.

Captain Billard handed Z a cup of coffee. "Nice to have you on board, Gideon."

"Z" he corrected. "And please, remind the staff not to address me by my formal name." He took a sip of the steaming liquid. It went down smooth and offered a sense of comfort. Troy only brewed the best beans. Their rich, nutty aroma filled the room.

Troy refreshed his cup and then leaned on the tinted glass surface of his desk. "Why?" He asked. "On this cruise, I want to remain anonymous."

"Hard to do with half your staff on board, wouldn't you say?"

Z sipped his coffee and then set the mug beside Troy's. "There is a blind passenger on board. Do you know anyone familiar with assisting the visually impaired?"

Troy shook his head, studying Z with speculation. "Not off-hand. I can ask Stan. He has more knowledge on the staff than I do."

Stan, the Human Resources manager had a memory that could put a genius to shame. The man was a virtual vault of information, which made him the perfect choice to manage over five-hundred crew members.

"Thank you," said Z.

Troy's brow arched over a well-practiced smirk. "I'm assuming this passenger is female?"

"Solid assumption."

"Judging by your tense jaw and furrowed brows, she holds an attraction for you."

"Don't be ridiculous, Troy. I'm merely concerned about her being alone on this cruise. Her friend never showed."

"Your mother was blind, right?"

Z turned to face him. Troy was an old friend, but he was about to cross a line—a line not even his siblings dared to breach. Z's mother was the only woman he trusted and still loved, but she and his father died in a plane crash five years ago. Their bodies remain amiss. "She was."

"I'd say that makes you the most qualified. From what I understand, you are not planning to work this week, correct? No pressing engagements, except the awards ceremony, no—"

"Find someone else!"

"Gideon," Troy said with authority, like a father addressing his son. "Not all women are spiteful and cruel. Treat her like a passenger. You don't have to get involved in her life, but it is time for you to move on. Denise has only the power you give her."

"I'll orient Rai to the ship," Z said through clenched teeth. "Nothing more." He set his half-empty cup on the desk and left the office.

## Chapter 3

Soon after the engines roared to life, and the ship pulled away, a knock sounded on Rai's door. She set her braille display aside and scooted off the bed, smoothing any wrinkles from her dress.

The scent of bay rum greeted her as she swung the door open.

Z opened his mouth to speak, but his words came out like a choke.

Rai lifted a brow as if to say, "Excuse me?" Z cleared his throat. "Are you ready?"

Rai reached for the white cane she had set by the door. "Yes, I am." She slipped the card key into her dress pocket earlier so she wouldn't forget it. As a blind person, she had learned to think ahead and plan for quick and thoughtless departures. It was far too easy to forget where she had placed something when she was in a hurry to leave.

Z presented his arm to her as if he had years of practice leading the blind. The way he described the hall and important landmarks were expert and precise. "The elevators to your left will take you to the various floors. The ones on your right are for employees only." He showed her where to find the call buttons. "You are on the fifth floor. The restaurants are on the seventh floor." As he rambled on about the many attractions, spas, theaters, and gambling rooms, Rai felt horribly overwhelmed.

"I don't suppose there is a braille version of this tour?" She asked, trying to pay attention to the many turns and halls they traveled. Finding her way back would be a challenge, but she wasn't about to say anything.

“I can send you an electronic version that summarizes where things are, if that helps?”

“Yes, that would be perfect. Thank you.”

In between pointing out landmarks and corridors, he asked, “So why did your friend not show?”

Rai shrugged. “I suppose he wanted more than I could give.”

She felt him study her, his body shifting slightly as he turned his head toward her. “More than you could give?”

“He wanted a relationship. I wanted more of a … friendship.”

“I see.”

Rai doubted it. Her life was complicated, and she was not about to explain the horrid details to him or anyone else. It was time to change the subject. “You have experience with blind people,” she blurted out.

He stiffened, so she added, “You’re good at this.”

“My mum was blind.”

“Was?”

“She died several years ago.”

He took her up two floors before turning right and leading her down a wide hall to an open foyer. “Okay, the buffet is on your right, and the formal galley is on your left. They serve breakfast in the formal galley, family style, so you will sit with other guests at a round table.”

Now it was her turn to stiffen. She was not a wallflower by any measure, but her years of caution had embedded the need to stay discreet and unnoticed. It was a hard lesson that resulted in repeated pain and suffering if not practiced with graceful efficiency. She had been living in the shadows for so long, she had forgotten who she was. It offered an insight into how an actress must feel after playing the part of a character for years. Her persona, Rainair Bishop died seven years ago after escaping New York. Cliff had done all he could to stop the divorce, and those who championed her simply disappeared. He was mean, dangerous, and possessive.

Z stopped and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Hey, are you okay?”

“Fine, why?”

He scoffed. “Because you look as if the reaper, himself, crossed your path.”

“No, I’m fine, really.”

He didn’t believe her; she could feel it in his silence. “Where would you like me to take you?” His voice sounded clipped, almost angry.

“On deck,” she said. “I want to feel the wind and sun on my face.”

“Come on, then.” He presented his crooked arm and led her outside. “The wind is calmer stern side, and there is a wet bar where you can get a drink.”

“Perfect,” she said.

He got her a glass of iced tea and sat her down in the sun. “All set?”

Rai pulled the iPhone from her pocket and a pair of earbuds. “Yes, you have been very helpful, thank you. I’m just going to relax and read my book for a bit.”

“What are you reading?”

“A Louise Penny murder mystery.”

“I pegged you for more of a romance enthusiast,” he joked.

She laughed. “Not in this life.”

After an uncomfortable span of silence, he said, “Very well, then. I’ll leave you to your leisure. Enjoy the cruise, Rai.”

“Thank you, Z.” She handed him another twenty spot. When he didn’t take it, she waved it as if to gain his attention. “Take it, please.”

“No,” he said. “Your last tip was more than generous.” With that, he turned and walked away. Rai shrugged and slipped the bill back into her pocket.

**Purchase Blind Faith**

