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Enjoy a sneak peek of Phaedra Patrick's RISE
AND SHINE, BENEDICT STONE!

1. White Opal

hope, desire, fidelity

As Benedict Stone huffed his way to work, the sweet smell of the cherry scones in Bake My Day made him forget for a moment that his wife, Estelle, had packed her purple suitcase and moved out of their home.

His mouth watered and he stopped, sniffed and decided he needed something weighty in his stomach to help sugar-coat his sorrows. He curled his fingers into his palms and tried to resist, but it was like an ultrastrong magnet pulled him inside the baker's shop.

"A fella like you needs more than just a slice of toast," a sausage roll bought by a schoolboy said. "You need something sweet, too," a chocolate cookie on display in the glass counter chipped in.

Benedict tried his best to ignore them, but the lure of a succulent bacon sandwich and an oozy jam doughnut were too strong. He bought both and devoured them before he reached the front door of his shop, Stone Jewellery, just a few meters away.

When he unlocked the door, his stomach dropped as he glanced at the "25% off sale" sticker he'd taped into his window three months ago.

He switched on the light and took off his jacket. Gray aluminum and glass cabinets lined the walls of the two-man-deep and two-and-a-half-man-wide space. The walls were all painted dolphin gray, and the floor was gray too. Benedict thought that the color

scheme was calm and elegant, though his assistant, Cecil, claimed it needed more vavoom.

A black door behind the counter led through to Benedict's workshop. The small square room housing his workbench was his sanctuary. When he shut himself away in there, he could block out the outside world and almost convince himself that all was still fine with his wife.

He went inside and straightened up a file on his bench. He liked his tweezers, pliers, snips and soldering iron laid out in lines like a surgeon's instruments. If Cecil moved his mallet by as little as a centimeter, Benedict could tell. Even with few entries in his appointment book, he felt driven to work. He crafted silver bangle after silver bangle, which he stacked like miniature tires on the shelf.

Benedict slumped into his chair and placed his hands on his rounded stomach. He imagined the food dancing in there, laughing at him. "Ha-ha. Benedict Stone is a big guy but he has no self-control."

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Shaking his head with remorse, he picked up a brooch he'd been working on. He switched on his gooseneck lamp and his face reflected in the black shiny metal.

Stone was a good name for him. His hair was short, swept back and graphite gray, the same color as the stubble that peppered his upper lip and chin. Estelle said that he had a kind face, like when kids draw eyes and a smile into uncooked pastry. His hands were so large they looked as if they'd been inflated by a bicycle pump, but his fingers were surprisingly nimble when handling delicate silver findings.

Everything he wore was neutral, from his suit to his socks, except for his size fourteen burgundy loafers. He ordered them custom-made, online, but the company had sent the wrong shade.

"I'm sure you can live with a bit of color in your life for once." Estelle had sighed. "Dark red shoes won't kill you."

But each time Benedict wore them, he felt conspicuous. His width and height attracted attention, and now he sported berry-hued loafers.

As usual, Cecil arrived at the shop ten minutes late. He had a tropical dress sense; he was wearing a powder-blue suit with a peach shirt and an emerald green tie. His white hair was waxed into a small triangle that reminded Benedict of a budgerigar's quiff. Cecil spent a lot of time with his two young nieces, so often spoke as if he was on social media.

Each day, he brought his cat, the fearsome Lord Puss, into work. A white Persian who thought he was superior to humans, Lord Puss sat on a purple velvet cushion on the counter where he greeted customers with narrow lemon eyes and a flex of his claws.

"Aloha," Cecil called through into the workshop.

"Hello. The kettle's boiled," Benedict shouted back, pleased to hear Cecil's voice. He'd spent the weekend alone, mooching around listlessly and wondering what Estelle was doing without him. He watched too many action films and wondered where the heroes got their energy from.

"Coolio." Cecil set his cat basket down and Lord Puss swanked out. The cat blinked around with disdain and settled onto his cushion.

Cecil made two cups of tea, one black for him and one white with three sugars for Benedict. He placed

coasters on the workbench and set the cups down.
‘Ooh, what are you making?’ he asked.

“A silver brooch.” Benedict held it up for Cecil to see.

“*Another* triangular one?”

“Yes.”

“It looks a bit Star Trekky.”

“Great,” Benedict said.

“Yes, if you want to look like Captain Kirk...”

Now that Cecil said this, Benedict thought the piece did look a bit space-age. He placed it at the back of his bench.

“We should make more effort to follow trends,” Cecil said. “What about festival jewelry, or friendship bracelets? How about ear cuffs, or adding gems to your work?”

Benedict stared at him as if he was speaking a foreign language. “This is Noon Sun,” he said. “The villagers like simple, classic things.”

Cecil opened the appointment book and flicked through it. “Well, I can see that you’re not going to be rushed off your feet when I go into hospital for my hernia op. I’ve told Lord Puss that you’re going to look after him.”

“I don’t know how I’ll cope without you,” Benedict admitted. He imagined Stone Jewellery being as still and quiet as his own home and the thought made his jaw ache. He wished that he could chitchat with customers like Cecil could, but words queued up in his head like cars in a motorway traffic jam.

“I don’t like to leave you on your own here, especially with Estelle moving out. How are things between the two of you?”

Benedict's smile slipped. He picked up the triangular silver brooch and gave it a polish on his trouser leg. He would allow only his friend to see his hurt. Even though Cecil was a gossip, cooing and flattering customers, Benedict knew his assistant had integrity and always looked out for him. "All fine, I suppose," he mumbled.

"Benedicto. You don't have to put a shine on things for me. How are things *really*?"

Benedict's shoulders sloped. He wished that his life could be as shiny and simple as his jewelry. "Not good. Estelle's still staying at her friend's apartment while Veronica's working away in America. She's been gone for six weeks now..."

"Couldn't she just check on the apartment each day?" Cecil asked.

Benedict looked down at his big hands. "She wants a proper break, to clear her head. But the longer she's gone, the more it feels that she won't come back. Anyway—" he lifted his voice to try to sound more positive "—I hope she'll be back for our tenth anniversary, in three weeks' time."

"Fingers crossed. Have you got anything spesh planned?"

Benedict opened the drawer in his workbench and took out a long gray box lined with white satin. The necklace inside wasn't yet long enough to reach a quarter of the way around Estelle's collarbone. It was made up of hundreds of interlinked jump rings, each the circumference of a ladybird, in platinum, rose gold, yellow gold and silver. If Benedict didn't think that a ring was good enough, he dropped it into an old teacup on his bench. It was almost full to the brim of the ones he'd rejected.

Cecil nodded. ‘Très elegant. But what else are you planning to do to win her back?’

Benedict frowned. “I’ve bought her flowers, I took her out for coffee... What else can I do but wait for her to make up her mind?”

Cecil moved the lamp out of the way and sat on the workbench. “You’re going to have to make a proper effort to stop her slipping away. In the medieval days you’d get on a fine white charger and joust for her.”

“I can’t ride,” Benedict said as he picked up a link. “I’d squash the horse. I want her to come home, but the thing we want more than anything is the one thing we can’t have...” His throat suddenly felt like there was a pebble stuck in it and he couldn’t swallow it away. “We’ve really tried, but I don’t think it will ever happen for us...”

“Children?” Cecil asked quietly.

Benedict nodded. “We want a family so badly.”

No matter how many times he thought about his and Estelle’s unsuccessful attempts to have a baby, it felt like he’d been shoved off a railway platform onto the track in front of a speeding train. He was forty-three years old now and time was flying by. He longed to feel tiny fingers curled around his own and a small heart beating against his chest. The ache of wanting a child weighed him down like wet cement.

“Estelle says she’s come to terms with being childless. But I haven’t.” He swallowed. Not wanting Cecil to see that his eyes were growing watery, he shifted his seat closer to the bench and stared at the necklace. “I’m happy to adopt, but Estelle doesn’t want to. I hope that staying at Veronica’s gives her time to realize that it’s the best way forward...”

Cecil gave his shoulder a firm pat.

Benedict moved his lamp back into place. "I'm sure everything will work out for us," he said, sitting more upright in his chair. "I just need to bring Estelle home."



That night, finding it difficult to sleep on his own again, Benedict ambled downstairs in the dark. He wore his gray suit jacket over his striped pajamas, and his burgundy loafers with no socks. The only sounds he could hear were the creak of the hallway floorboards, the Noon Sun village clock striking twelve and his own heavy breathing from taking the stairs.

He picked up a torch, tartan picnic rug and a carrier bag full of food and opened his front door. He took three gulps of the chilly October air and padded out to the weeping willow tree in the middle of the lawn. Using his head and shoulders to part its leaves, Benedict clambered into the hollow space. It was once an easy thing to do when he and his brother, Charlie, used the tree as their childhood den. But now squeezing under proved quite a challenge.

He sighed and shone the torch inside the bag. Pulling out a four-pack of chocolate brownies, he pried open the lid. They were perfect chunky brown squares with a dusting of icing sugar on top. He fought the urge not to eat them, but it was as if he was a robot—hand out, pick up a brownie, munch, repeat.

When he was finished, his shoulders sagged with shame and he leaned back against the tree trunk. His parents had planted it when Benedict was eleven years old and his brother Charlie was three.

Their dad, Joseph, traveled overseas to source and buy gemstones, which he sold to museums, shops and

auction houses. When they could, Benedict, Charlie and their mom, Jenny, joined him.

Benedict was attracted to the solidness and definiteness of the neutral gems; the grays, blacks and browns—smoky quartz, brown jasper and onyx. Charlie's hand shot out for the biggest and brightest, the red aventurine, tangerine quartz and golden beryl.

Joseph drilled holes through each of the imperfect stones and Jenny snipped random lengths of silk thread. Benedict tied gems a few inches apart to form sparkling strands, and Charlie stood on Benedict's knee to tie them into the weeping willow.

It was a family tradition that, one day, Benedict hoped to carry on with his own children. But now his future stretched before him, and there was no tinkle of children's laughter in sight. The thought made his heart feel as heavy as a cannonball.

He looked up at the room that Estelle used as her art studio and thought how it would make a perfect nursery. But then his eyes moved across to their own bedroom. He wished she was in bed now, waiting for him, so they could rub their feet together under the covers.

Benedict climbed out from under the tree. He left the rug on the ground and crumpled up the bag. He took out his mobile phone from the pocket of his jacket and his big fingers flexed. They seemed to take on a life of their own and he knew that he shouldn't send a text under the influence of excess calories. But he couldn't stop. He scrolled to his wife's number and tapped out a message.

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I love you. Please come home x

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Inside the house, Benedict trudged upstairs. In Estelle's studio he stared at her canvases, stacked against the wall. She said that her paintings weren't good enough, but they looked wonderful to him. He cleared some clothes and paintbrushes off the bed, kicked off his loafers and lolled sideways until his cheek touched the pillow. Then he lay there, motionless, until his eyes began to flicker and close.

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The loud banging noise startled him out of his sleep. Benedict sat up with a jolt and looked at his mobile phone to see the time. One a.m. Ugh. His tongue felt like it was covered in chocolaty fur. He paused, wondering whether to lie back down or go to his own bed.

But there was the noise again. It was a knock on his front door.

A shot of adrenaline made him stand up. His heart pumped fast and he remembered his text to his wife. "Estelle," he said aloud and his lips flickered into a small smile.

He finger combed his hair and felt his way out of the room. Negotiating the stairs in his bare feet, he yelped as he trod on something sharp, a small stone. He brushed it off his foot with his hand.

The knock came again, louder and more persistent.

The rain hammering against the door sounded like zombies drumming their fingers, trying to get inside. He hoped that Estelle was wearing a coat, or had taken a taxi. She would be soaking wet.

He fumbled for his keys and clumsily unlocked the door. Outside, the security light pinged on, illuminating the raindrops so they looked like a shower

of diamonds. It took a while for Benedict's eyes to adjust, and he rubbed them with his fists.

She stood with her back to him. Her dress was wet and clung to her legs. Droplets hung from the hem.

The skin on Benedict's forearms tingled with anticipation. "Estelle..." he said.

She turned. "I thought you were never going to answer."

Benedict felt recognition glimmer inside him. He took in the shape of her chin, the jump of her nose, the raindrops glittering in her hair. He stared until he felt like he was in a trance.

He knew her face.

But it wasn't his wife.

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