

# **The Haven**

**Crimson Rose**

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Vagrant Alley as the citizens called it was where most of Pleasantview's growing homeless population lived in ramshackled shelters cobbled together from the refuse of the more fortunate. Policed by themselves, the rules were simple. Treat everyone with the respect all men and women deserved. Do not steal from your fellow transient. Welcome newcomers with open arms and teach them how to make the best out of what little they have. These three simple things have made what is arguably the worst part of the city the safest.

The Haven is the city's answer to its ever-growing homeless population. Shelter. Food Bank. Free clinic. Temporary job agency. It performs all of these functions and more. And it has done so with dignity, respect and open arms of the place its founder Sebastian Finley once called home until a lucky lottery ticket saw him go from penniless to worth more than half a billion dollars. Most people would have taken their winning and ran, but Sebastian, true to himself and the place he came from opened and personally funded The Haven for nearly a decade before donations and grants reached the point of self-sufficiency.

Twice a day more than a dozen employees drove around the city delivering hot meals and offering beds, jobs and free medical attention to the less-fortunate. All were happy to put food in their bellies and many took them up on offers of free medical care but few were willing to take jobs or to bunk with strangers in an economy gripped by a pandemic. Few, but not all.

Melissa Hayes was just twenty years old. Leaving home at eighteen, she blew through her savings traveling the country without a care in the world. Three months later, down to her last fifty dollars she found herself in Pleasantview with barely enough to gas up her car and spend the night in a cheap motel. What she did not realize was the seedy place in the middle of nowhere was commonly used by prostitutes who did not take kindly on her waltzing in as if she owned the place. Several threatening conversations and eight clients later she was one of them. Taken under the wing of Madam Vivienne, she spent the next year selling her body for absurd amounts of money only to barely see enough to keep her fed and housed in one of the motel's dingy rooms. Stuck in a perpetual cycle, she only managed to break away when Madam Vivienne was arrested and finally put in prison where she belonged.

Now living in a hovel constructed of four pallets with cardboard and a mishmash of carpet squares for a floor, walls made from discarded plywood and two by fours and a roof of corrugated fiberglass sheeting, she had one of the larger and well-made places in Vagrant Alley but she longed for something larger and with electricity and running water so when the van pulled up looking for young attractive women to fill several positions she was immediately hesitant and excited.

Pushing her way through the crowd of about fifty mostly older men, she stood next to her best friend in the world – a petite, gorgeous redhead named Phoebe, whom she met during her year whoring for Madam Vivienne. “Did they say what positions need filled?” Melissa asked.

“Not yet but the way that guy keeps eyeing me I think I might be in this time.”

“God, I hope so. Let's hope they pick us both.”

“Both or neither,” Phoebe smiled.

“Both or neither,” Melissa repeated. “And if they don't take us I have a surprise I think you'll like.”

“Oh?”

“You'll see if they don't pick...”

“You two,” a portly, balding man in his forties called out. “No, not you grandma, the brunette and redhead behind you. What are your names, ladies?”

“I-I’m Melissa and this is my best friend Phoebe. And we both go together or we don’t go at all. Speaking of which, what positions need filled exactly?”

“You’re homeless and penniless and an employer is offering a good job and a warm place to stay until you get back on your feet. Does the type of job really matter?”

“As a matter of fact it does,” Phoebe answered. “We were forced into prostitution once and we won’t ever be doing that again.”

“I can assure you the employer is a legitimate businessman whose only passion is helping those less fortunate than himself. If you want steady work and a place to live then hop in. Otherwise I’ll have to move on.”

“Both of us?”

“We’re looking for six and you’re the first two to fit the bill so, yeah, you can both hop in,” the man replied.

Red flags were popping up all over the place, but the prospects of never having to worry where the next meal came from or if someone was going to rob you blind or worse, both young women ignored them and hopped into the long white van. No sooner were they seated then a slim older woman dressed in a navy blue skirt suit approached with bottles of water and pre-made turkey and swiss sandwiches. “It’s not much, but at least it’ll fill your bellies until we’re finished with our rounds,” she said as she offered them to the two new passengers.

“You kidding me?” Melissa said as she took the bottle and plastic wrapped sandwich. “This is the first meal I’ve had this week that I didn’t have to beg or go dumpster diving for. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

“So, um, can you tell us more about this employer and what exactly it is he’ll want us to do?” Phoebe asked.

“His name is Tristin Ortega and for lack of a better description you’ll be his new live-in maids for a period of three years.”

“And after that?”

“After that you’ll have everything you’ll for a fresh start at life. I am not permitted to go into the details of how much you’ll be making or your exact duties but I can say you won’t find a better job anywhere in the city. Especially right now.”

“So, we’ll be cleaning some rich dude’s house? That’s it?” Melissa asked with unmitigated suspicion.

“Like I said, I can’t go into the details of your exact duties as we were not made aware of them. Only that he’s looking for half a dozen pretty young women to be his maids.”

“Why pretty and young?” Phoebe asked, her suspicion also piqued.

“Well, to put it bluntly, and these are his words, not mine: ‘If I’m going to look at people cleaning my house all day then I damn well want them to be young and attractive.’ End quote. Put yourself in his position. If you were going to hire someone to clean your house would you want someone young, fit and attractive such as yourselves, or old and overweight?”

“As long as they did a good job I wouldn’t care what they looked like,” Melissa answered.

“Fair enough, but Mr. Ortega cares very much what his staff looks like so if you find that offensive then you should say so now.”

"I'm not complaining. I'm just curious why he's looking for they type of woman he's looking for is all."

"Um, if you're looking for young and attractive women in desperate need of work you might want to try over on twenty-third," Phoebe said, referring to an area of town known for prostitution."

"Mr. Ortega does not want prostitutes," the man in the passenger seat called back.

"What about former prostitutes?" Melissa asked. "Because we were both forced into that lifestyle and have only recently gotten out of it."

"So you mentioned before. As long as you're no longer selling yourself and are clean you'll have no problem."

"But if you're still selling yourself and clean and just looking to get out then fuck you?" Melissa huffed.

"I'm sorry, but I don't make the rules. The last thing Mr. Ortega wants are a bunch of angry pimps knocking on his door or threatening his life."

"Whatever." Her mood suddenly dour, Melissa scarfed down the rest of her sandwich along with half the bottle of water and then crossed her arms and sulked as the van spent the next two hours driving around looking for more young and attractive homeless women willing to work. Finding no one else, they called it a night and drove back to The Haven. "Um, this isn't some rich dude's house," Melissa pointed out the obvious.

"No, it's not. Before you move into his house Mr. Ortega has asked that we make sure you're clean and not a wanted criminal so we'll spend the next couple of days doing extensive background and medical checks," Livia – the well-dressed woman who had kept them company during the long drive explained. "To minimize your contact with others and the risk of contracting the coronavirus you'll be placed in one of our private rooms for the duration of your stay. Meals will be brought to you and doctors will examine you there as well."

"You have private rooms in a homeless shelter?" Melissa asked, those red flags now flying higher than ever.

"We do. Normally they're reserved for those going through detox and pose a danger to themselves or others but one will serve as your room for the next few days. On the bright side, it'll have its own private bathroom so you won't have to wait to shower or use the toilet."

The van pulled into the parking garage and the driver turned the ignition off. Once everyone was out he set the alarm and they all filed into the basement entrance of The Haven. While the two men walked straight down the long corridor towards the elevators, Livia guided Melissa and Phoebe down another to the right. Using a key, she unlocked the heavy metal doors and ushered them further in.

"Why do I get the feeling we're being led to a prison cell?" Melissa asked as the doors slammed shut behind them with sickening finality.

"The doors are solid metal and locked at all times to prevent break-ins and the mentally unstable from getting out and causing undo harm to themselves and others," Livia explained. "Just so you know, for reasons already stated your room will also remain locked at all times."

"So it is a prison."

"Absolutely not. Unlike a prison you're free to leave whenever you like. Just don't expect our help in the future should you walk away from the opportunity we're offering." Stopping on front of a metal door with the number eleven painted on its thick tempered glass window, Livia used another key and then pulled it open. "After you ladies."

“Actually, if you don’t mind I’d like you to enter first,” Melissa said. Livia gave her a polite smile and then walked deep into the room. Melissa and Phoebe followed leaving the door wide open in case they needed to make a quick escape. Eyes darting around wildly, she took in the generic abstract art hanging on walls painted light grey and cheap yet functional modern furniture.

“This is one of three full suites used for long term care,” Livia explained. “This is the living room and as you can see it’s fully furnished. Down the hall behind me you’ll find the bathroom on the left and the bedroom on the right. Since all meals are provided there’s no need for a kitchen. The phone hanging on the wall to the left of the door may only be used for emergencies. Press one for the front desk, and nine for nine-one-one directly. The rest of the numbers have been disabled. If for some reason the phone isn’t working or you need to leave immediately you may pull the alarm to the right of the door and it will unlock. But since that will trigger the alarm for the entire shelter please only use it as a last resort. Any questions?”

“Um, does the bedroom have one bed or two?” Phoebe asked.

“Just one right now but another will be brought down as soon as I go up and ask maintenance to do so.”

“Are meals served whenever we’re hungry or at set times?” Melissa asked.

“At set times. Breakfast is served from six to eight, lunch from noon to two and dinner from six to eight.”

“You mean we have a limited time to eat?”

“No. Because we’re at nearly full capacity it takes longer to prepare and serve meals. The times mentioned are when you can expect to eat but that’s about as precise as I can give.”

“And if we miss a meal?”

“If it’s not too long past the cutoff call the front desk and if there’s anything remaining it’ll be brought down to you.”

“You said we’d be seeing doctors. When?” Phoebe asked.

“You’ll spend most of tomorrow morning filling out paperwork and once that’s done Doctor Haiden Underwood will see you. And don’t worry, she’s a woman.”

“Good to know. Can we see the rest of the place now?” Melissa asked.

“You may. I’ll leave you to it. Expect a visit from maintenance in the next hour.”

“Thank you,” Phoebe replied. “Um, before you go, seeing as how we’ll be staying here for several days will it be possible to get something else to wear?”

“Of course. Doctor Underwood will take your measurements tomorrow and you’ll have a few new outfits by the end of the day.”

“Thank you. Um, seeing as how it’s late and we’ve slept together many times in the past for warmth do you think we can get that extra bed in the morning?”

“Sure. I’ll have it scheduled for delivery after breakfast. I’ll also have something brought down so you don’t have to wear the same dirty clothes after showering.”

“Thanks,” Melissa said, her initial fears mostly alleviated. After seeing Livia out, she tore her clothes off and ran to the bathroom for her first hot shower in days. She stopped at the doorway and looked back towards the living room. “You want to join me?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Grinning ear to ear, Phoebe joined her best friend for their first shared shower since their days as prostitutes.