

*Excerpt I*

## **H a r r o w i n g R o s e s**

*Barbara Cooper*



The living room was golden. Just as he had imagined. There was a cosy atmosphere, soft carpets and gilded sofas.

The centrepiece was a fireplace, with marble columns. The lamps were jade-coloured and matched nicely to what he presumed were original Chinese vases.

With no windows to be seen, it seemed as though the room was in the centre of the building.

Everything was lit by a soft light. Even the pieces of art hanging on the walls, oil landscapes of foreign countryside scenes, with sheep and streams, had a light upon them.

This seemed to be their domain.

This is where they appeared to be at home.

An exquisite tea set rested on a low table, already prepared, with a wisp of steam coming from the teapot.

They both watched him with attentive eagle eyes.

But this was what he was prepared for.

Dana was standing near the fireplace, her mother seated by the tea.

It was the first time he had met her mother, Sheryl.

She extended her hand, as she got up from the sofa and greeted him nicely. She was polite, in control. From their brief conversation, he

understood that she wanted him here, and probably in fact it had been her idea.

That meant she must believe in his abilities: that was good.

Perhaps her situation was too complex for him to understand, and that's why she felt a pressing need to turn to him for guidance at this moment.

"Thank you very much for coming." Her coral-painted lips were smiling.

Dana's demeanour was a different story. She was just watching, quiet. Her eyes fixed on him.

The blood in her veins was boiling, anger rising.

She didn't know how she felt about having him in the house.



She believed in the cause, as her mother had told her to, but still she didn't need to be happy about it. To have him here, now, in her living room seemed too personal to her. Like he was invading a part of her she didn't want him to see. Opening up to him, in this way!

Sure, Henry is such an odd and interesting character, one she was okay to talk to while on the outside, in the wetlands...but now?

Even though he was attractive and all, she didn't like it.

He sensed her mood.

He mustn't get riled up by her or get into an argument.

He mustn't get pulled into this, even though he just as easily wants to.

He must keep in mind the reason he came here.

He was civilised.

But he couldn't take his eyes off her.

She was beautiful.

Dressed in a red dotted skirt, with a flowing hem ending just above her knees, opaque white stockings and Mary-Jane heels.

Her blouse was cream, with a high neckline ending with a gleaming honey collar, set with rhinestones. Everything was properly buttoned up.

The stones were throwing reflections all around the room and onto her face...fiery silky red hair which was framing it ended in a rich wave just above her shoulders. She had kept it just out of her face, to show off her lovely contours to her best advantage.

She was dressed almost as a schoolgirl, extravagant, but with enough fashion sense to pull it off.

And it suited her very well.

Very different from how he had been used to seeing her in the marshes – yet here she was, in her natural element. Yet underneath still the same girl.

Sheryl had noticed the way he was looking at her right away. She didn't say anything, what she thought about it she kept to herself. Nevertheless, being herself, she was probably already making a note in her head how she could use his apparent infatuation with her daughter to her benefit.

Mother and daughter both had the same eyes – but the mother's eyes were deep icy cold, and they were watching him calmly and calculatingly. Unlike Dana who had fire in her blue eyes, or at least when she was watching him. The cloudy grey always moving, changing from light to darker tones: like in his dreams.

"Of course, thank you for inviting me." He was looking around the room.

The mother, dressed in a soft peach-coloured skirt suit that was also proper and fitting, said, "My daughter told me that you would be able to help with the situation."

He didn't say anything.

He was still suspicious about all their intentions.

The vision of the police searching his rooms came back to his mind at that point.

“Yes.”

“I of course believe in your abilities; you don’t have to doubt that,” she continued.

By hearing that, Henry was surprised.

Where does both their sureness of him come from?

Was it just desperation on their part, resulting in their making themselves believe it, wishful thinking?

“Of course, we – I would need more from you. We would need you to find Debra Lee.”

A pause mid-sentence, for a greater effect.

“Tell us what you know. Or what you are able to share with us.”

Dana smirked a little. She was obviously not so convinced. And something was making her nervous.

He must find out what it was.

Her mother was still leading this, steering the helm.

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