

# the HARLEQUIN

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## **Bald**

June looked up from wiping the glass countertop and saw someone she thought was a man checking out the testers. But when she looked again she realized it wasn't a man, but a young woman with a bald head, completely smooth, shining in the warm spotlights of the makeup counter. She had no eyebrows or lashes, no hair on her forearms.

June thought cancer, definitely cancer, but the woman looked healthy enough. Her skin was fresh and unblemished, and she had a warm, light energy. She smiled at June, showing big glossy teeth with a playful irregularity to the front incisors. It was charming, the smile, and the way she spoke, softly as though confiding to a friend, leaning over the counter and explaining that she was on a mission for a new eyeliner that did not run so easily. The one she'd been using, a cheap drug store brand, dripped down her face the minute she blinked her eyes.

"Honestly," she said, shaking her head slowly, "it runs in thirty seconds and I look like a mime!"

June tried not to look at the woman's bald head. She willed herself instead to focus on her face, and on the problem she was describing. In order to frame her eyes, the woman penciled a coal color on the edges of her eyelids, just above where her lashes should have been, but weren't. To be effective, she needed to use quite a bit of the stuff. June could imagine exactly what would happen if the liner on the bottom ran, how the woman would appear as though she were crying big black tears.

"I need something with staying power," the woman continued. June tried not to notice the exact angle of the woman's ears, so exposed on the bare skull, or the subtle division in skin where forehead met scalp. She looked instead at the carved nose, the slightly asymmetrical lips, the open inviting eyes. At a beauty school in Newark, she had been trained to recognize skin hues – various combinations of red, blue and yellow – and face shapes, which were classified geometrically. She tried now to think about these things and not about hair. Or lack of hair. The bald woman's complexion had undertones of blue, with small pores that would take foundation well. June studied the face with its big cheek bones and small chin, deciding it was a diamond.

"I'd go with Chanel," June said. "The chocolate liner, not pure black, not with your—" She was about to say hair. "—coloring," she added quickly. She tried to fasten on another part of the woman's appearance, unrelated to the head. The woman had a long neck, a long torso. Strapped around her middle, twice, was a thick belt in fake

rattlesnake. June told herself to look at the snake, not the head. Think about skin, not about hair.

“Really, it doesn’t run at all?” the woman asked. She was smiling, but two little frown lines appeared between her large eyes.

June no longer trusted herself with words, not so soon after the near catastrophe. She thought she might say hair at any second, even out of context. It was silly – the woman obviously knew she had no hair, it wouldn’t be a surprise to her – but June didn’t think she could live with herself if she made any comment, however appropriate, and certainly not if she just –

“Can I see it?” the woman said.

June uncapped the tester pencil and drew a little arc on the back of her hand, softening it immediately with a few swipes from a daub of sponge. She waited, then rubbed the line with her finger before raising her hand to show how it hadn’t smudged. The woman stared, a look on her face as though she’d just witnessed a magic trick. “Is it expensive?”

June frowned. “A little on the pricey side,” she said.

“Crazy expensive?”

June didn’t respond at first. She had forced her attention away from the woman’s bare scalp but now, in an effort not to think about it, she’d become preoccupied with other aspects of her appearance. The woman’s eyeshadow picked up the color of her earrings, big gold badges that sparkled beside her cheeks. Her fingernails were strong and perfectly lacquered, the fingers delicate. She had a kind of luminosity, too, as though whichever way she turned, she was looking into the sumptuous glow of a flattering lamp. What surprised June most was that the woman’s appearance, taken as a whole, was not altogether marred by her baldness. If considered in a particular way, the baldness seemed to amplify her features as water, passing over decorative stones, causes them to shimmer and enlarge.

“Are you going to tell me? Or is it that bad?” the woman asked. She smiled as though there was something funny about June’s hesitation.

“Not at all –” June began, then announced the price. But her voice was nervous, overloud, and the numbers rang in the air as though she were the caller in a game of bingo.

The bald woman lost her smile. “That’s a lot,” she said.

“I know, but go ahead and try it. I’m sounding salesy but the stuff really works.”

June wanted the woman to see that there was something, however small, that would help with her condition. In another city, or on some punk-haired, tattooed skinny kid with dog chains for jewelry, the baldness might have been a deliberate choice, but not with this woman. The lack of brows and lashes left her eyes unprotected and the whites were slightly inflamed. The bald head was not pretty: a

dome of flat surfaces with a pronounced frontal bone and faint blue veins, somewhat raised, running the length of her skull. The skin there was thinner, too, and paler, and wrinkled at the nape. June wondered if she had considered a little cover up for the veins, but did not dare say anything. She, herself, had been scarred from teenage acne, pinprick pits ran the length of both her cheeks, and she diligently hid them with concealing cream every morning. Below the pitted skin was her wide, ringed neck. She had no idea why fat collected as it did there. She'd tried many diets and was currently using a chocolate flavored fiber-rich confection twice a day that promised to stave off hunger. So far it wasn't working.

"You should have the Chanel," June said. "I'm not just saying that. You really –" she was about to say need it.

She remembered now a similar response from long ago, some horrible saleslady at a mall, hovering over a much younger June, who'd sat in the middle of a department store like this, clutching the stool on which she was balanced. The saleslady had held June's chin in her dry hands, studying the acne scars with disapproval, and issuing instructions about a nightly three-step process requiring a large purchase of specialized lotions. "You really need this, honey!" she'd said, while June sank inside, unable to stop the woman from inspecting her face further, then declaring, "You really need to do something!"

And she had done something. She had paid for the products and gone home and stayed there.

June said now, "You should always buy the best. Especially when it's near the eye."

The woman touched the corner of her eye, then smiled. June admired what she had achieved, adding back in makeup and jewelry and clothes what the lack of hair had taken away. The look was impressive, and not only because of the artistry involved but because, as June imagined, there was a recurring despair that needed to be overcome in order to begin in the first place.

"I can't swing it," the woman said. "It's such a lot for a little pencil." June watched the woman select an alternative liner from the array of testers. Now, what felt like an inevitable scenario played out in June's head: the inferior pencil looking perfectly good at first, the color gliding on, but in a few hours the chocolate brown filling the creases of the woman's lower lids and caking at the corner of her eyes. What a disappointment. After staring into the mirror at the bleak eyes, the waxy head, the expanse of forehead unbroken by an arc of eyebrow and making all that effort with pencils and angled brushes, sponges and powders, the woman would end up all smudged and messy.

June grabbed a bag from behind the counter. "Don't make a decision today," she announced brightly. "Give some thought to the liner. Do you have enough of what you're using now to last a little while? Good! Finish that, and then come back and

we'll talk again. Meanwhile, I'll give you some freebies. You won't believe what I've got back here."

The woman looked surprised, then watched as June filled the glossy black bag with samples of moisturizer, toner, exfoliating pearls and day cream. To this, she added tiny phials of perfume, a travel lipstick, a sachet of night cream, and an oval blusher the size of a fifty cent piece.

"You can do a lot with a matte brown powder," June said, still moving. "I've got a sample here and it comes with its own brush –" She rummaged further and found a compact containing a triage of gold tones from Estée Lauder and flashed it at the woman like an ID card. "Nice, huh? And look, some mini Dior..."

These last items weren't strictly speaking free samples. They were testers, designed to be fitted into their respective places on the counter display for anyone to try. You weren't supposed to give testers away, but June felt a strong benevolent urge, as though she were cheering on a marathon runner, that hers was an essential voice calling from the sideline.

It was this thrill which carried June into the next moment, when she lifted from a drawer the expensive eyeliner, cupping it secretly in her palm. Later, she would remember the way she held it, her fingers shaped around its rigid straightness, and how she glanced at the store security camera, wondering if the gaze of the lens was directed at her as she dropped the liner into the bag. It was all done in a single movement, like a gymnast hurling herself up and away from the parallel bars in a brave finish. She shuddered, her smile awkwardly held on her face, then shook the bag, burying the slim decorated box beneath the other products. By the time it registered that she'd stolen the pencil, the bag was already in the bald woman's hands. She was laughing, showing her the slightly crossed front teeth, unaware of what exactly she'd been given.

"Thank you," the woman was saying. "That's really nice of you. And I promise I'll think about that eyeliner."

June thought of the eyeliner at the bottom of the bag, shielded by the wealth of samples. "Me, too," she said. She tried to tell herself it was all right. The security camera, with its dull black glass, was tilted away.

"– I've never seen so many samples!" The woman was peeking into the bag as though into a Christmas stocking. "This is just so nice! Are you sure?"

June stood, frozen in the warmth of the bald woman's gratitude, and said, "Samples, that's all." And then, because it reminded her of why she was behaving so recklessly, she approached the forbidden subject. "You do so well...are really so pretty with...I mean despite the..." She pointed at her own scalp. There was no easy way to say what she wanted to say and could not – no, never – use the "b" word.

"Oh, my hair! My no-hair! Ha!" The woman touched the base of her scalp and laughed lightly as though it wasn't so grave a problem. "It's an auto-immune thing, a kind of allergy, and that's why I haven't dared get the brow tattoos that others

get. I'm worried about the dye.”

June nodded like she understood, though she had not realized people got eyebrow tattoos, nor that it was possible to have an allergic reaction to your own hair.

“Well, never mind about that now,” June said, her voice sounding shriller than usual, with a quality of cheerful hysteria. She stepped back from the counter, crossing her arms behind her and was relieved when the bald woman took this as a signal and said goodbye, thanking her again for the “goody bag”.

June watched as the woman moved off, the bag looped over her elbow, unaware that she was carrying the eyeliner among the samples. She passed through perfumes, moving with no particular hurry toward the front of the store, her scalp reflecting the ceiling lights. She continued her way through the aisles, one after another in a relaxed manner while June, watching, grew increasingly anxious. Every time the woman paused, June wished she'd hurry up and move again. She thought about the eyeliner hidden in the bag and listened to the shallow rhythm of her own breath. She clutched herself with both arms, craning her neck toward the ceiling, then back to the woman, who moved with punishing slowness along the glossy aisles.

She was unmissable. Her height, her exposed head, her gleaming skin, caught the attention of other shoppers. Those picking through arrays of scarves or pantyhose or ties glanced up as the bald woman passed, stopping at once what they were doing, and fastening their attention onto the head as though it were the largest float in a parade. Sometimes they busied themselves again as she passed, then furtively returned their attention once there was no danger of being discovered, their eyes following her from behind. A few moved to make their lines of sight easier.

June felt embarrassed for the woman. More than embarrassed; she was angry. Two teenage girls huddled together at the jewelry counter, exchanging looks of disbelief. One of the girls giggled and June wondered how they could fail to see the courage of the woman, the elegance? How could they laugh at her? She wanted to walk out there – right out onto the floor – and scold them both.

Now the woman stopped, and June felt a thud in her belly as though a rock had landed there. She watched her bend over her handbag, removing a pair of sunglasses with big dark lenses. June felt newly unsettled, realizing that perhaps the woman knew people were staring and that it bothered her enough to want the privacy of dark lenses. For a moment June considered pulling the fire alarm so that the store would be evacuated quickly.

The bald woman still had a hand in her bag and June wondered what next she might take from it – perhaps a pashmina scarf, or a chic little beret. June anticipated a hat, and felt relieved at the idea of seeing the woman under some kind of cover. For now, this had become important to her, that the woman cover her head. She grew frustrated when no hat appeared. No scarf, either. Even worse, she was still a long way from the door. Finally, she began walking again, floating through the aisles and

reaching the exit, her naked head held aloft and tilted back, the sidepieces of the sunglasses slashed across her pale temples. But then, out of the dark recesses of men's coats, arrived a security guard.

He was wearing a dark blue jacket, a navy tie. His shirt was perfectly ironed and his stride, so determined, made him seem even taller than he was. June looked away. She knew what would happen next. She'd seen it a hundred times with those who, deliberately or by sheer oversight, reached the threshold of the store's big glass doors with unpaid goods, and were stopped by this same guard. She couldn't watch as the bald woman was asked to open her bag and produce a receipt, nor what would happen afterwards, when it looked as though she'd deliberately hidden the stolen liner.

June didn't know what to do. She felt exposed, as if it were she, herself, who had been caught with the eyeliner. She willed herself to rush out to the woman and declare with great apologies that she'd made a mistake with the bag. She even imagined doing so, and in her mind's eye could see herself laughing and shaking her head, declaring, *I really need to be more careful!* But she did not move. When it came right down to it, she had no guts.

Instead, she busied herself with a spray she used on the glass countertop half a dozen times a day to keep it unmarked and gleaming. Bending down, she rubbed like mad the clear surface. She closed her eyes and wished that she were anywhere else, or anyone else, and asked herself what it might be like to be a better person. And then, because she could bear it no longer, she gathered up her determination and forced herself to stand, then to push through the little gated door of the counter area and onto the wide shining corridors of the store floor. She felt a little sick inside. She was dizzy. But she opened her mouth to shout out to the security guard.

But he was no longer there. She searched for him and found him some way off, looking at his watch. As for the bald woman, she was at last moving through the exit doors, leaving the store. Nothing had happened. He hadn't even spoken to the bald woman. Or perhaps he had spoken with her, but only to say good afternoon. There had been no harm caused, no threat or accusation. He was waiting for his lunch break. She was on her way home with the bag looped on her elbow.

June stared at the woman, at her insouciance, at her confidence. And she saw something else, too, something she'd failed to notice before. The sunglasses that she'd imagined as a means of camouflage were not on the woman's nose. They were not hiding the bare eyes, nor the brow bone without eyebrow. She hadn't used them to shield herself from scrutiny, as June had imagined. Not at all. They were placed on her forehead, as though to adorn the skull, concealing nothing.

A wash of calm stayed with June. She felt surprisingly unburdened – not only of the fear she'd had over the security guard but about so many other things: her pitted skin, the way her waistband dug into her stomach, her ballooning thighs. And the neck! With its bands of fat that hung on her. She was released – none of this mattered.

She watched through a bank of windows as the woman moved fluidly along the sidewalk and she felt again a well of admiration, even love. She held up her hand, waving. But the woman did not turn. June wanted to see her one more time, see the painted face, the large exposed eyes, the astonishing head, but the woman was gone now, striding away, her white skull bleached in light, radiantly defined while the rest of the world became a dull surround. June had a feeling that she had witnessed something rare, like a solar eclipse. She felt strange, just as one does during the eerie hours of an eclipse, not able to fully understand the momentary passing, nor why it seems so much to matter.

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