



THE PRICE OF A BEATING HEART

ASHLEIGH BONNER

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Description: Will love or survival win in this post-apocalyptic society?

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A STRICT HIERARCHY.

A VOW.

In a society where most are born wrong and suffering is the norm, two people—one born right and the other wrong—fight to stay together as their society pulls them apart.

Every day they ask each other: Love or survival? Because life and death are only a body part away—and love may cost more than they were born with.

The Price
of a
Beating Heart
Ashleigh Bonner

Book 1, The Beating Heart series

Chapter 1

The bell dings, and I become a murderer.

I hold the knife with my thumb and middle finger—and cut the succulent wight, marinated in thrice-boiled synthhony and pureed tomatoes, into small cubes. I place each piece gently in my mouth and chew silently. Slowly. Counting each movement of my jaw.

Twenty-five—that is the correct number of chews for each piece.

The magnificent blend of sweet and sour massages my senses; this wight is the best I have ever tasted, and I wish to always dine in such comfort.

I sit across from my husband, James of the Pillars, in a green floor-length dress with a short train, a light green scarf with black dots, red lipstick—V3454 Scarlet—glossy, black one-inch heels, and matte white pearls. My seat is luxurious, made of real oak and leather, and the air smells of fresh lavender.

Finally, we are here: the finest restaurant of Urban, Ancient Dreams. For five years, we have planned to dine here and, just yesterday, were able.

“Delicious.” I raise an eyebrow at James of the Pillars and then reach across the table to his hand. I drag my finger slowly down the space between his index and ring finger; the healed-over skin of his missing middle finger is soft, smooth, and lighter than its surroundings. He sighs and smiles at me.

Here, our life is perfect. Here.

350 years before, green skin alterations were to die for. You could get them for no cost. Ha, ha. Your favored show, Today in the Past!

I glance around. Some wear gold, pearls, and headwraps, and others are in muted color-shifting tapered pants, layered dresses, and skirts—all with short trains trailing them.

Much of their talk is of James of the Pillars, so excited are they to see him after all these years, but none will be so impolite to approach him while dining.

“More vin de cuivre?” He drinks the last drop of the blood wine, raises my hand to his lips, and kisses the tips of my fingers. A spot of red remains on the middle one.

“Of course, but I will pay.” I suck the red from my finger, and he laughs. With a snap of my fingers, I signal the happy-maker, who rushes to our table.

“Please. A bottle of your grandest vin de cuivre.” I emphasize every “t”—effortlessly.

“That will be three units, marm.” I put my arm out, palm up, and he places The Charge to my elbow and pushes the button. The device reads my barcode, branded into my skin, and then I feel a small pinch. My blood fills the container to the third line.

A beam of green light shoots from The Charge, makes a small green dot on the ceiling, and embarrassment shoots through me. A few patrons giggle. There should be no light. The happy-maker’s genuine smile falls. He gulps and then hurries to get our bottle.

I wait. Irritation and shame courses through me. The invisiband stops my blood from running, but I continue to stare at the soft inner skin of my elbow. My blood is as valuable, as red, as any others. I study my clothing, then the other patrons’. How did the happy-maker guess? What did I do wrong to make him use The Green Charge? I glance at James of the Pillars. His face is sour. Angry. Sad. We are thinking the same thing, he and I: Will anyone else’s blood be suspected of inferiority? Commonness. The inability to pay.

Our moods darken as we watch other patrons. A woman a few tables over purchases imported First Africa Northlake wight—and is not subjected. Neither is the couple behind James of the Pillars, who purchase two tiny pieces of real, organic, thawed lettuce. And the man to my right with a large slab of 20% contaminated cow? Nothing. It is only us, forced into humiliation.

James of the Pillars breathes out an angry breath. “I will get a refund.”

“It is not allowed.” I only want to go home.

“I will force it. This is a most heinous discrimination.”

He strides to The Charge counter. When his voice and pretend low-class accent begins to rise over the din of the restaurant, I grab our jackets and bags and walk as quickly as I can to him. Heavy with pregnancy, my belly balloons five times its original size.

“It is not worth it. You waste your savings,” I whisper.

James of the Pillars' mid-brown neck has gone bright red. He looks around, close to tears. All stare. Politely, if that were possible. "You deserve more, my love."

"Let us go." I pull at his arm, gently.

He gathers our things from me and walks slowly beside me. My back aches.

As we walk out, we pass the main office, and see the happy-maker's termination.

"... Green Charge supposed to be hidden." His manager is not irate, but already forgetting he existed.

The happy-maker grabs nothing and leaves, as is custom. Tomorrow he will receive a new position with far lower pay—in a rural shack of a restaurant—rather than in the fanciest establishment in Urban.

We continue. The building is large, and the exit is far away. After a few minutes, I stop to catch my breath. Antoine of the Glades walks up to us. He has modified his natural light-gray eyes and added gold flecks. Many in Urban do this. If I had not known him before, I would not know he had altered them.

Antoine of the Glades stands in front of my husband, older but younger-looking. Taller. In one hand he has a large, ripe tomato, and in the other a greasy piece of wight. His lips are oily and a tomato seed sits in his neatly trimmed mustache.

He puts the tomato in the crook of his elbow; his barcode glows red against the tomato's smooth skin. They touch palms in greeting, and then he hums a tone I have never heard in his deep, resonant perfect pitch.

Like a gentle breeze, the layered tone cradles my husband and lulls him into bliss. He closes his eyes, and his entire body relaxes. Our belongings fall to the floor. His throat works for a moment, eager to reply with a more exquisite tune—but instead, he clears his throat and opens his eyes.

They speak more—of new ideas and inventions and old, common laws. I add nothing to the conversation though my husband makes every effort to elicit my opinion. When their discussion finishes, Antoine of the Glades leans forward

and scans him from head to toe. “You speak differently and look awful. Ashen. Sickly. You’ve grown thin.”

James of the Pillars pokes the other man’s belly; it jiggles. “And you’ve just grown.”

They laugh.

Antoine of the Glades looks away and then back. “We need you. Our world needs you—fully.”

My husband shakes his head. “Never. Never, but I very much wish it could be so.”

“It must be exhausting, having to travel when called to duty”—an upside-down triangle broken into eight pieces glows on the man’s neck and then fades—“Returning to Urban would be easier, James—”

“I said never.”

The other man sighs and puts his arm out. “A grand evening to you.” They press their palms together and then he glances vaguely—and angrily—in my direction. “Both.”

He walks off, and we continue to the exit. I pull my jacket tighter. This night could not have turned more horrid. When we reach the outdoors, I look up, once again entranced by the magnificence of Urban: Tall buildings in pastel colors, lush grass, trees, small synthanimals, and hover autos. Invisible and silent, the sky looks clear, but citizens move here and there. There is much life and laughter bustling in the late evening of this small city.

And comfort.

And excess.

I bring my gaze down. The happy-maker stands there, unmoving, staring into the dark. James of the Pillars reprimands him, quietly, but I stop him from this.

“How did you know?” This is the only answer I must learn from the happy-maker.

100 years before, The Kuru acid was discovered. Trust us, it was much needed. Do not forget to take yours. Your favored show, Today in the Past!

“Glossy black shoes with a green dress went out of style this morn. Matte black shoes are popular. I am remorseful, miss. The Charge was an outdated version that I grabbed by mistake.”

He no longer calls me “marm” but “miss.” It hurts. I stare at him. He has no jacket, and his complexion has already begun to lose its color. He sags with fatigue. Tear streaks have cleared a path through his heavy makeup: Dark bags hang from his eyes, a bruise sits on his cheek, and a slight green tinge covers his face. He has less than we do.

“Do you have enough for a taxi?”

He shakes his head. “I was to be paid today.”

“Do you live in Valley?”

“No, Abyss.” Oh, poor thing.

James of the Pillars touches my elbow as I reach into my purse. Leans close to my ear. “You do not know what he will buy with it.”

I pull away, and he turns around.

“Here. This should be enough to get you home.” I dig around my access card, pull 1,000 units from my purse, and place them in his hand. Abyss is 60 miles away—too far to walk. “Be safe, my dear.”

He smiles at me, holding the three vials tightly. “Many thanks, miss.”

James of the Pillars walks around us, then pulls out his access card. Under his image is “Legal” and under mine “Illegal.” He swipes the depart side of his card in front of the metal pole in front of us, so we can return home:

Two people, three-hour stay, Urban to Valley, 50 miles. Late departs will not be tolerated.

Our hover auto arrives, scans the card and our faces, and we get in.

I call a taxi for the happy-maker—and then lift my dress. My husband helps me adjust the wooden prosthetic leg that loosens as my belly grows larger. Its withering top will leave a deep, bloody bruise above my pelvis bone.

Chapter 2

My bracelet jangles in the soft wind; the beautifully designed letters glisten sliver in the morn sunlight.

“How many inscriptions have you purchased?” Marguerite, a 7-aged neighbor child, asks in broken words. Broken because her breaths are long gasps. The Dome has delayed our positions start time, so I sit on my porch, and she gently runs her finger along the charms on my bracelet. They fall against one another and then clip into place.

300 years before, the Distribution Wars split all continents into multiple regions. Be kind. Share. Your favored show, Today in the Past!

“How many letters have I on my bracelet?” I hold my arm aloft, letting the charms dangle. She tilts her head. Her hair is lackluster, like mine. Brown curls frame her ears, dry like straw. She counts in a methodical way, by twos (her maternal has taught her well). Though she smells of sewage and rotten lemons at all times, she is of a good intelligence. If she continues this way, she may qualify for courses next year. Maybe.

“My maternal has only one charm. You have eight. That is wight.” She laughs. “Not wight! I meant—” She sucks in a gasp, having expended her excess air and then watches a boy hang laundry on the clothing line in his side yard. I glance at him, see a boy for a moment, and then hear a bell ding in my mind. I watch his numbers pop up along his body. Considerations. Calculations. Criteria. Even without his smell or touch, I make an assessment: 30,000 units. I shake my head to see the boy, not his numbers.

Marguerite still stares at him. She is an odd child with a washed-out complexion and slight wrinkles around the skin of her eyes from a lack of blood. I want to see her rich walnut color bloom, but her paternal has gone ill—so this will not happen.

Around us is sparse grass, tiny homes with bright doors, and small yards. Each home nearly overlaps the next. I think on this until a clatter from the kitchen draws my attention: James of the Pillars. He prepares ClearJuice and, at times, can be clumsy.

Marguerite turns back toward me, and slouches more heavily on her leaning board, which she has propped up like a triangle behind her. I stare at the board for a moment. Small, light to carry, strong. Helpful. Innocent. But Lower Valley 7 is no place for sickness and requiring a leaning board is not a good sign.

I fear for her. With her paternal ill, The Dome has severely cut her family's pay. James of the Pillars has shared what little extra he has, through the Donation Facility, but with us having been successful, I require more blood to support our conceived.

She holds my charms, and I pull my arm away. "What have you heard of your maternal's pay?"

She shrugs. "The Dome has denied her request for a stable rate."

Marguerite absentmindedly rubs the smooth skin where her pinkie once was. At her age, a part of her still wishes it were with her. She keeps rubbing the space, and then says, "If they reduce her pay more, I will submit my forearm as wight." She leans toward me and whispers, "Want to smell? I am O-."

She says my name; sweat gathers at my palms and a panicked flush sweeps through my body. I breathe in deeply and out slowly.

"Do not say my name."

I lean away from her. She stinks, and the universal blood donor type is not quite to my liking. A tolerable option but overrated.

"The Dome will give much to my family."

(Yes, this may be true. Some markets adore sour blood.)

“But it is my maternal’s wish to keep me as whole as possible. I do not understand why.” She prattles on, talking much on each breath. “Did you know that my maternal did not allow me to let until I was aged a month?”

Hmm. I stare off into the distance, thinking.

“You should not be so keen to bid yourself away, little Marguerite, lest someone else become just as keen, and you find yourself parted with only a torso and head to spare.”

We fall into a deep contemplation, until she giggles and hums softly. Her gasps for air fade as I sing the words in my head:

Tiny child, loud mouth, and not a care

Broken toys, scraped knees, scolded when fair

Maternal signs and sends you there

Paternal signs, sends you where

To The Dome, To The Dome, for parts to snare

One of each paired organs to spare

A torso, a head, tiny child, a tiny pear

I laugh. My paternal sang this when I misbehaved and always kissed my forehead before the last word, so I knew he would not half-bid me.

“Do they take these as well?”

I open my eyes, grab her hand a moment before she pokes my left breast, and then nod.

“Everything not life-sustaining is parted and auctioned.”

The wind blows; it smells fresh today. I breathe in deeply, but pull back when she shoves her arm to my nose.

Sewage and—

I tense my stomach against the loud growling, but it rumbles anyway, and I turn away from her. My assessment is wrong: her true scent is hidden.

The bell dings. I—my brain—I recalculate her numbers. Bids for her wight would be astronomical. Her blood is decadent like Narvellan Candies, which are the best in all the world. When I was young, I had a sixth of one.

On smell alone, hundreds of thousands of units; on age, so tender, tens of thousands more; city of origin, thousands less; complexion—

I shake my head. The numbers (always calculating) fade.

She laughs. “I know. Two years before, the wight-harvester told my paternal that I will make very, very sweet wight.” Her tone is boastful.

Clearly, she has forgotten her wistfulness. Though, if she were bid, there would be none left of her to be wistful for.

She sniffs her arm, and her stomach rumbles hard. Louder, even, than mine, though she is unable to smell her blood’s sweetness. She sticks out her tongue; I slap her cheek lightly.

“No. Autodevouring is not allowed.” Perhaps her intellect is not as promising as it seems.

She drops her head. “I am remorseful.”

Just thirty minutes ago, I had given her half a pound of wight from the gray markets of Second Australia and a few small, thrice-boiled green potatoes, but I see it is not enough.

Of course not, she has weeks of hunger.

“Smelling only. Never, ever autodevour. It is illegal. You know this.”

A small clatter comes from the kitchen. She stares at the porch’s wood—spongy, reeking, rotten, and molded, until I tap the underside of her chin.

“Look at me.” She lifts her eyes to mine; I look at her, sternly. “You know the consequences, yes?”

She nods. I get to my feet, and then help her to hers.

“Come inside, my dear, have some ClearJuice.”

The front door creaks. Marguerite, breathing rougher, plops into the table’s chair and folds her leaning board. Dim light comes from the paneling that covers the ceilings, and our house is lightly warm. Two years ago, we saved enough to purchase wind-powered heating coils. They glow and protrude from the walls in hexagonal designs—and are not safe to touch. Soft music, Urban commercials and news play at all times from a large section of each wall of our home. In every home. Good for productivity. And hope.

James of the Pillars sits at the tiny, square makeshift table (a piece of wood atop a barrel) at the far end of the room. His head hangs. The missing patches in his hair are stark against his black curls, which fall out little by little. A needle attached to a tube pulls blood from him and then puts it back without its plasma. The ClearJuice drips into his cup.

When he notices me, he stands from the seat, bringing the machine with him. Once the process begins, it must finish.

“Give her 5 oz. and then help her home, my love.” His voice is weary, and he is impatient. In need of cheering.

I walk to him, kiss his neck, and then sit down.

“I apologize for my rudeness.” He twirls one of my curls tighter, releases it, and then leans down to kiss my lips. He tastes of dirt, vomit—and love.

I rub my nose against his, and then he shuffles over to Marguerite and tickles her cheek. She giggles and then lies her head on the table. The machine beeps a loud, annoying sound, and he pulls the needle out. The invisiband seals his blood in. She takes the ClearJuice, but does not drink immediately.

“Drink now; it will cool soon,” I say to her. ClearJuice is best when fresh from the body.

James of the Pillars comes back to me and caresses my cheek. His hands are cold and the nails of most of his fingers have broken off. Three charms dangle from his wrist. He hands me a tiny container from his back pocket. It is a salve to put on my belly’s bruise. From Urban. Expensive.

He looks at her, and then whispers, “I have taken inventory, my love. We could spare 12 oz. Discuss.”

“How much have we left?” I turn my head to one side, listening intently.

“Enough for two months. I have just received confirmation. My position has allowed me extra hours because of our conceived.” He rubs my stomach with one hand and taps his chest with the other. Though he looks relaxed, pain bubbles through his chest. I earn more blood because of my pregnancy, and so he earns less.

“We cannot afford it, my dear. You receive so little daily. Look at you.”

“Look at her. What if she was your child? Where is your empathy?”

No blood rushes to his neck, now.

I remove his hand from my belly and press his fingertips to my lips.

“It is with you. You give too much. Are you attempting to slowly autodeavour?” I blow on his fingers, hoping my warm breath will relieve an inkling of his suffering.

He pulls them from me. “Send her away, then. Pray to the Inventor she makes it to her home.”

“I will ensure she gets there.” He will no longer look at me. His face has crumpled into an anguished, guilt-ridden grimace. *You deserve more, my love, and I cannot give it to you.* I turn him to me, and he bends. I kiss his quivering chin. “As I do every Thurs she comes.”

“Thank you, my dear.” He says, and then hands me a tiny container from his back pocket. It is a salve to put on my belly’s bruise. From Urban. Expensive.

Then, he leaves, and I leave him to his misery.

This life is what he prefers.

The cup is half-gone. Marguerite’s head is still down but she hums a complicated piece.

I walk toward her, pulling our second chair with me, as quiet as a woman can with one leg and a belly as large as mine, and listen to her. She hums with passion, and her perfect pitch is another sign of her intelligence.

She hums Antoine of the Glades’ sixth sonata in A minor, and seems content alone, which is odd. Few children truly enjoy being alone, and as of her newest brother, K, she has five siblings. I assume with that many children to care for, no one bothered to give him a proper name. I settle the chair across from her, careful not to disturb the rickety seat’s balance.

“Is that your favorite of Antoine of the Glades’?”

“No, it is my least favorite.”

She lifts her head and continues humming, softer than before. I listen with no more commentary. Though she is in my home, this moment is a private one. When she has drained the last remnants of the beverage from the cup, I stare at her throat. The bell dings. Her youthful vocal cords could help her family, immensely, especially when combined with her pitch. Fifty thousand units at least.

I am curious to ask her why she hums her least favorite song with such passion, but I will not until I escort her home. She watches me, watching her. “I will donate them when I am older. I will never sell them. That will cheapen them, don’t you think?”

Her position is understandable, and she is wise to defend it. But her vocal cords will only be used to the benefit of someone else, and she will receive nothing that will benefit her. Still, I nod.

“Yes, Marguerite, they are priceless.”

She smiles. “I am ready to leave now. Thank you.”

She gets up, in slow segments of movement, like a poorly maintained 100-aged-woman and grabs the cup. We do not have enough wight, ClearJuice, medical treatment, or anything else to bring back her youthful vigor. Or to prolong her life.

“Why are you crying?”

“My conceived causes me pain.” It is better to lie, sometimes.

She pushes the chair in. It squeals against the worn, dingy tile, and she hums the squealing tone, by reflex it would seem. Then, she grabs her leaning board (now a sturdy walker), goes to the molder, puts the cup in, and then closes it.

“What would you like, marm?” Her face is serious. Most children secretly wish to become happy-makers.

“A plate, if you would,” I answer in the haughty Urban accent, emphasizing the “t”s.

She presses the button, and the molder grumbles loudly, dings, and then opens. When she turns towards me, I see the plate: it is scuffed and a bulge disrupts its flat bottom. But that does not damper her enthusiasm. I have known her five of her seven years—she wants to attempt a happy-maker move that would greatly impress. I do not stop her, but only observe what she will do. She lifts the plate, looks at it, and then sets it on the table.

“I ought not. If I fumble, you will have nothing to use for your food or beverage.”

“A grand conclusion, Marguerite.”

We step outdoors. The front door creaks closed and locks itself as we walk away from it.

James of the Pillars sits on the ground, pushing dirt into his mouth. While I have four hours of rest, he only has two. He must travel thirty miles to the Donation Facility to be milked of his sperm.

“Goodbye, James of the Pillars.” Marguerite sucks in a breath. “Enjoy the dirt!” She sounds bright, naive, like a 7-aged-child should, but when she looks at me, I see a soul far older than mine. “I like dirt. I think I will join him the next time I visit.”

“He will like that.”

I watch my husband’s teeth grow dirtier and dirtier around his bloody lips, and I regret that our conception was successful. But not for long.

We will have that better life.

I will guarantee it.

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