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Kiss
OF THE
SPINDLE

A STEAMPUNK *Sleeping Beauty*

NANCY CAMPBELL ALLEN

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Doctor Isla Cooper is cursed. Literally. Each night, at the stroke of midnight she falls into a deep sleep from which she cannot be awakened for six hours. To make it worse, the curse has an expiration date—after a year, she will fall asleep forever. And the year is almost up.

In a desperate attempt to find Malette—the witch who cursed her—Isla blackmails her way onto Daniel Pickett’s private airship bound for the Caribbean, only to discover she’s traveling with three illegal shapeshifters and the despicable Nigel Crowe, a government official determined to hunt down and exterminate every shapeshifter in England. Isla and Daniel must work together to keep the identities of the shapeshifters hidden while coming to terms with their own hidden secrets, and their blossoming attraction to each other.

Filled with suspense, intrigue, and plenty of romance, *Kiss of the Spindle* is a steampunk Sleeping Beauty story. It is a race against the clock as Isla and Daniel try to hunt down the elusive Malette before Isla’s death-like sleep becomes permanent.

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Kiss
OF THE
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For Karin, Julie, Craig, and Syd
How wonderful it is when siblings are also the best of friends

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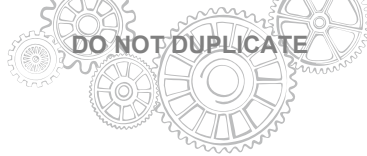


I know you, I walked with you
once upon a dream . . .

—SLEEPING BEAUTY

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Chapter 1

Isla Elizabeth Cooper extended her hand toward the airship ticket agent. “If you don’t have any flights leaving for the Caribbean immediately, return my passport and I’ll find another way.”

The young man, obviously new at the position, scrunched up his eyes. “I doubt you’ll find a flight with another company. Pickett is the only line that circumnavigates consistently, and—”

“Yes, which is why I am here.” Isla drummed her fingers on the tabletop, considering possible options. “Do you have flights leaving for New Orleans?”

“In the colonies?”

“In America. They are a country now. Over a century.”

“Yes, yes. Messy, that one was.” The agent ran his finger down the thick ledger. “New Orleans . . . Orleans . . .” He shook his head. “No, Miss Cooper. None to New Orleans for another six weeks.”

Isla exhaled quietly. “Do you have flights going *anywhere* near Port Lucy in the next few days?”

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His eyes widened. “Port Lucy, miss? Surely you don’t mean to go there!”

Isla held his gaze.

“That is, you’re a gentlewoman, and I hear tales coming out of Port Lucy that would shock and horrify you!”

Isla shifted her weight and nudged her coat open, placing a hand on the ray gun at her hip. “I shall be vigilant.” Aside from that, she’d done her research. There was nothing shocking or horrifying about Port Lucy, not in the last fifteen years. Pickett Airships needed to educate their employees.

“Oh! Oh, well.” He glanced down at her passport, then back up to her face. “You’re a Predatory Shifter Counselor?” He further scrutinized the fine print. “You work for Cooper Counseling and Investigations?” The last came out on a squeak. “Is Dr. Cooper your father? Or husband?”

She sighed, unsurprised by his reaction. “*I am Dr. Cooper.*” Isla saw the boy’s disbelief in his blank stare.

“But . . . Cooper Investigations—they hunt predatory criminals!”

“Yes. We do. I do.” She also offered a valuable service to shifters who needed help adjusting to the life. Her reputation as a therapist and animal empath usually preceded her.

Isla retrieved the satchel by her feet. “I am pressed for time, sir.”

Still gaping, he gave the documents another long look. “What sort of name is ‘Iz-luh?’”

Isla attempted counting to ten, but reached only to five. “It is pronounced ‘Eye-luh.’”

His expression cleared. “Oh, yes, rather like ‘island,’ then.”

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She twitched her fingers toward her palm. “My passport?”

He returned the documentation. “Terribly sorry to have been unable to meet your needs, Miss Cooper—*Dr.* Cooper. We at Pickett Airships pride ourselves on providing the best service available when using flight to reach your destination, and—”

“Thank you.” She turned away before the boy could recite Pickett’s list of finer points. The lobby’s soaring ceilings and gilded girders amplified conversation and made coherent thought a challenge. She pulled her telescriber from her satchel when she spied her friend, Hazel Hughes, on the far side of the crowded lobby near the exits.

Hazel was the sort of woman who turned heads and didn’t realize it. She was the most kindhearted person Isla knew, and had been since childhood. Her natural beauty radiated from within and manifested itself comfortably in her pretty features and curled tresses the color of dark honey.

Pushing her way through the crowd, Isla reached Hazel, and together they exited the building. Isla breathed in the fresh, early autumn air.

“Quite stuffy in there,” Hazel said. “What did you learn? Are there available flights to Port Lucy?”

Isla shook her head. “Not for another two months.”

Hazel winced. “It could work, but you would be pushing it dangerously close.”

Isla stepped aside as a family of seven barreled their way toward the entrance, dragging luggage and looking flushed.

Hazel bit the inside of her cheeks as the door closed behind them. “Probably late for a flight.”

“Which is why I never leave pressing matters to the last

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minute.” Isla looked at Hazel with a mounting sense of panic. “I cannot wait two months.”

Hazel looped an arm through Isla’s. “I agree. While I am relatively certain you have another three months before the spell becomes permanent, suppose I am the least bit off in that prediction? The sooner you reach Malette, the better.”

Isla allowed Hazel to guide her along the path that led to the airfield. “Where are we going?”

“To find Daniel Pickett.” Hazel glanced at her. “I know his sister. Perhaps he can be persuaded to take you along on his personal run to Port Lucy.”

Isla raised a brow. “We don’t know for certain that’s where he’s headed.”

Hazel smiled. “I may have done a discreet bit of eavesdropping in the Pickett offices while you were at the ticket desk. Not only is he headed for the Caribbean, but he has three passengers booked.”

Isla felt faint stirrings of hope. She knew exactly why Mr. Pickett sometimes flew noncommercial flights, and with three passengers booked on board, she might be able to sell herself as an asset to the flight. If not, she wasn’t above stooping to blackmail.

“This way.” Hazel tugged on Isla’s arm and pulled her around the ground crews working on docked airships and impatient passengers waiting to board. They crossed the expansive field to Pickett’s fleet, which occupied as much acreage as the rest of the airship competition combined.

The air was heavy with the scent of airship fuel, and Isla wrinkled her nose. “How do you know he’s already out here?”

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“I might have also looked at today’s schedule while I eavesdropped.” Hazel glanced at her with a shrug.

Isla shook her head, a smile teasing the corner of her lips. Hazel never forgot anything she saw, read, or experienced. Her demeanor was also innocent enough that the unsuspecting would never imagine her capable of subterfuge.

“That one.” Hazel pointed at the sleek dirigible docked at the far end. “The *Briar Rose*.”

Isla frowned. “He uses his personal craft for trips to the Caribbean?”

“It’s been docked for repairs. And from what I gather, Mr. Pickett has been rather in a mood because of it. The employees do not know why, exactly.”

Isla knew why, exactly. Daniel Pickett smuggled predatory shifters from England and helped them begin anew in countries that didn’t call for the registry and possible execution of their kind. If the ship he normally used to conduct his illegal activities was out of commission, he would be forced to use a contingency plan that might not be as effective. Or as safe.

Much of the Caribbean and pockets of America provided a haven for law-abiding shifters who had made enemies on the Predatory Shifter Regulations Committee. Citizens who had status or could bribe the Committee were left alone. Those who did not were harassed until they “voluntarily” added their names to a national registry and paid a “Predatory Shifter Fee.” The fee was extortion, and the Committee denied all charges when questioned. But predatory shifters who wouldn’t—or couldn’t—pay the fee found themselves or

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their families harassed, threatened, or arrested on fabricated charges.

The official reason predatory shifters were prevented from leaving the country was because it didn't reflect well on Queen and Country to have British citizen shifters running amok in the world. The unofficial reason was because the Committee lined their own pockets with extortion money and favors. If all their victims left England, their coffers would diminish.

Isla knew of Mr. Pickett's enterprise because her work made her privy to quiet gossip and rumor. She also knew that the man loomed large in many minds, either as an avenging angel or a law-breaking menace. He had a reputation for being imposing, intimidating, and aloof.

As she and Hazel neared the airship, Isla spotted the man himself loading cargo into the hold with three airfield employees.

She had never been formally introduced to Mr. Pickett, having seen him only from afar or in newspaper photos. He was tall, with a thick head of coffee-brown hair. Most ladies found him more than a little alluring, and as Isla watched him move with fluid grace in a captain's greatcoat that strained against his athletic form, she understood the attraction.

"We can't load this one without a lifter, sir. It's too heavy." An employee pointed to a barrel of Stirling Engine fuel.

Isla held Hazel back when her friend continued to move forward. She wanted a moment to study the enigmatic Mr. Pickett.

"Then you should secure a lift, wouldn't you say? And why do we not have one already here at our disposal?"

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Mr. Pickett eyed the employee until the man squirmed. “You must be new.”

“Yes, sir.”

One of the other attendants pulled on the new man’s arm. “We’ll locate a lifter right away, sir. The airfield is unusually busy tonight, and we weren’t able to find one earlier.”

Mr. Pickett nodded, and the three employees turned and ran.

Isla frowned. Convincing him to allow her passage might be more difficult than she’d hoped. She glanced at Hazel, who watched Mr. Pickett with brows drawn and her lip caught between her teeth. Her concern clearly mirrored Isla’s, and Isla sighed.

She decided to approach him directly and show no fear. As she nudged Hazel forward, however, Mr. Pickett glanced quickly to his left and right, and then grasped the heavy barrel. He hefted it easily onto his shoulder and loaded it into the cargo hold.

Isla’s mouth dropped open, and she heard Hazel’s quiet gasp. Only automatons possessed such strength. Mr. Pickett reappeared and made quick work loading the remaining barrels and steam trunks into the ship.

He brushed his hands together, and when the three employees returned, one of them driving a lifter, he waved a hand at them. “I secured help from a passing ’ton,” he called out. “We won’t be needing it now. I do not expect such problems in the future, however.”

The employee driving the lifter shook his head. “It will not happen again, sir.”

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Mr. Pickett checked his pocket watch as the employees secured the ship for departure.

Isla turned to Hazel. "My window of opportunity is closing, and I fear we have no time for proper introductions. Go, and I'll manage this on my own. I'll scribe you once we're airborne."

Hazel frowned. "You're certain?"

Isla looked at the impatient captain who was making his way around the stern of the ship with ground-eating strides. "Yes. I believe the element of surprise may serve best."

She hugged Hazel and kissed her cheek. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck! The best of luck!" Hazel pressed her lips together, her expressive golden eyes suddenly liquid. "Be safe."

Isla nodded, grasped her portmanteau, and with a pounding heart, raced after Daniel Pickett. "Captain," she called, grateful for the relative seclusion behind the ship.

She reached his side, hating that she was slightly breathless and knowing it wasn't because she was winded from the brief run. Isla Cooper faced down dangerous predators on a regular basis. She would not be intimidated by one bad-tempered man.

He turned and frowned, and her breath caught in her throat. Oh, dear. Evidently the photos she'd seen had come criminally far from doing him justice.

"Yes?" he prompted.

She exhaled. "I need to join you on this voyage. Money is no issue; I am prepared to pay twice the usual fare."

"This is not a commercial flight, miss." He turned away, and she grasped his arm. He looked at her in surprise, which

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turned quickly to incredulity, and then something she decided she'd rather not decipher.

Isla tightened her grip on his bicep, noting the very human feel of the very not-human limb. "I must get to Port Lucy. Immediately."

"There is a commercial flight bound for New Orleans with a connecting ship to Port Lucy in six weeks."

"I do not have six weeks, sir. Furthermore, I am a natural empath and a Doctor of Shifter Therapy and Human Relations."

He stilled. "I do not see the relevance."

"I believe you do."

"What exactly are you implying, Miss . . . ?"

"Dr. Cooper. I am implying that with this particular cargo, you might benefit from my expertise."

He pulled his arm roughly away from her with a scoff. He opened his pocket watch again. "If you'll excuse me, Dr. Cooper, I have an airship to fly."

"Or perhaps Her Majesty's Cyborg Regulations Division would be interested to know that England's most prominent airship mogul is rather more than he appears to be."

He stopped mid-stride, and she swallowed. Her heart thumped, and she wished she were facing a beast with fangs; those she could usually tame.

Mr. Pickett slowly returned. "I do not know what it is you *think* you know, lady, but you can take your threats and—"

"Your arm, likely fusing into your pectoral," Isla said quietly and pointed from his bicep up along his chest. "Most forward, rational thinkers realize such implants have no

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bearing on one's ability to live a healthy life, run an empire. Government agencies, though, are not always known for rational thinking, are they?"

His jaw clenched and nostrils flared. "Turn around and walk away, Dr. Cooper, and I'll do you the favor of forgetting this conversation occurred."

Isla forced her feet to remain firmly planted. "I assure you, I would not pester you were it not of dire importance. I am desperate—enough that I will resort to tactics usually deemed distasteful."

He stared at her and finally shook his head with his lips twisted in what could only loosely be termed a smile. "Pester," he repeated.

Isla was amazed he couldn't hear her heart thumping. "I must reach Port Lucy immediately, Captain, and I will stay away from your affairs. Should the need arise, I would be happy to help manage your 'cargo.' Otherwise, you needn't lay eyes on me for the voyage's entirety."

"What is it that has you so desperate, I wonder?"

Mercy, did those eyes ever smile? "My concern, none of yours."

"Nor is my business any of yours, and yet you've made it such."

"Unusual circumstances," she muttered, feeling a twinge of conscience.

He folded his arms. "One who is desperate can be coerced, used, even."

She felt her temper stir. "Name your price."

"As it happens, I have no need for a shifter empath of any sort."

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“Then I shall owe you a favor. In your line of work, such services may be beneficial.”

He affected surprise. “I own an air fleet. My line of work has no overlap with yours.”

She smiled. “We both know that to be untrue.”

He shook his head and ran a hand through his hair, and she felt the first stirrings of true hope. She may be bound for Port Lucy after all. “I have no spare accommodations other than my first mate’s cabin; he is not accompanying this voyage. It is not as large as the passenger suites.”

“It is of no consequence to me. If necessary, I would travel in the cargo hold.” She fought a shudder.

“What are you running from? Will I find an angry spouse or relative on my heels? An enemy colleague, perhaps?”

“I am running from nothing. I am going *to* something. My actions are my own entirely, and involve nobody else.”

He examined her for another long, inscrutable moment, his eye snagging on her hip. “You’re holstered.”

She moved her coat aside. “A Crowley triple-blast ray gun.”

“You’ll check that and any other weaponry in my quarters, of course. Unless you are also a certified Air Marshall and permitted to carry.”

Count to ten, Isla. “Very well.” She hesitated. She never parted with her weapons; her profession demanded safety. What were her options, though? “I am permitted to carry, however, and accustomed to maintaining the tools of my trade, keeping them close at hand. Perhaps after a short time—”

“You blackmail your way onto a voyage and think to

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remain heavily armed? While occupying the cabin adjacent mine? I am not a fool, Dr. Cooper.” He extended his hand and beckoned with his fingers. “We’ll begin with that one. And once we’re boarded, I’ll search your belongings.”

Isla fought back the anger she knew would not serve her. Forcing her hand to do her bidding, she unsnapped her holster and withdrew her ray gun, her eyes locked with his. She slapped the grip in his outstretched hand, and he wrapped his fingers around it.

“Release it.”

She drew in a breath, two.

“You may threaten me all you like, Doctor, but my patience stretches only so far. Do not tempt me into dispatching you right now and leaving your body for the attendants to find.”

“Threats, Captain?”

He smiled grimly. “Seems to be the order of the day.”

Isla released her grip and felt immediately vulnerable. She rarely fired it outside target practice, but she had walked with a weapon at her hip since her early teens.

“After you, Dr. Cooper.” Mr. Pickett swept an arm toward the ship. “With any luck, this will be an uneventful voyage.”