Happily Never After

B Alan Bourgeois · Opening excerpt · 1 of 2

The flicker of vintage animation danced across the wall of a dimly lit room somewhere in D.C. It wasn't the White House, but it was close—underground, unofficial, and far more dangerous.

Julian Mercer leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, as The Fairest One twirled through a glade, singing to cartoon birds. "Still feels wrong," he muttered.

Across the room, Dr. Marisa Chen didn't look up from her laptop. "The animations are untouched," she said. "What we're inserting, he won't consciously notice. The subliminals hit the adult brain—especially one ripe with narcissistic delusion and paranoid anxiety."

"That describes him to a tee," Rafael "Rafe" Delgado said from behind a stack of hard drives. A soft-spoken man with a sardonic edge, Rafe had once edited trailers for Everlight Studios. Now, he was splicing psychological weapons into fairy tales.

Julian rubbed the scar near his temple—a faint reminder of Kabul, and why he no longer believed in war the old-fashioned way. Brute force was outdated. Perception was the new battlefield.

"Recap," he said. "Give me our exact method one more time. Humor me."

Reading sample — continued

Marisa swiveled her laptop so both men could see. “We’ve selected four films: The Fairest One, The Puppet’s Truth, The Jungle Throne, and Through the Madness Mirror. Each one will contain carefully placed subliminal messages tailored to trigger emotional instability in a subject predisposed to narcissism, guilt suppression, and fear of betrayal.”

“Jack Winston,” Rafe said dryly. “The king of that trifecta.”

Julian smirked but didn’t argue. President Jack Winston, a blustering, impulsive titan of media manipulation and political brutality, had bulldozed his way to the top of the nation. He ruled with spectacle and spite, branding enemies as traitors and allies as pawns. But beneath the bravado, intelligence reports had long whispered of his declining emotional stability. Insomnia. Paranoia. Obsession with loyalty. A leader teetering on the edge of fantasy.

Their plan wasn’t to kill him. They weren’t assassins.

They were curators of a carefully constructed break.

“Each film,” Marisa continued, “has subliminal frames—some visual, others audio—keyed to his fears. Mirror imagery, villain-face overlays, whispers tied to themes of betrayal, fraud, aging, and death. They won’t register consciously but will cause cumulative psychological erosion.”

“And the kids?” Julian asked.