Blood Red Roses
By Russell James

The spirits of the dead cry for justice.

In the waning days of the Civil War, orphaned teen Jebediah Abernathy has been indentured to one of the most notorious plantations in Mississippi, Beechwood. Ramses, the sadistic overseer, rules completely, unchecked by owners driven mad by the loss of their only son. Cruelty and torture are commonplace. And slave boys are mysteriously vanishing. But Jebediah is not completely alone. The ghost of his father and an escaped slave sorceress will lead him to the horrific truth about the disappearances—a knowledge that will probably cost him his life.

Bootleg Cove
By Devin Govaere

Who knows the secret of Bootleg Cove?

Young widow Willie Douglas recently moved to remote, isolated Bootleg Cove on the Chesapeake Bay with her four-year-old son. Her plan—to renovate and re-open an abandoned restaurant. Almost as soon as she arrived, a handyman showed up out of the blue, offering to help. Then Amanda and Sam, two apparently orphaned teenagers, came to her door in need of help and a place to stay.

But it's not just the sweltering heat that's wearing on Willie's already fragile emotions. Her mysterious handyman seems to know more than he's willing to say, Amanda and Sam are acting very strangely indeed, and Willie's beginning to realize that all three of her houseguests have more history with Bootleg Cove than she could ever have imagined. Willie is seeing too many things that she either can't explain or refuses to believe. But the most shocking revelation about Bootleg Cove is still to come…

Linden Manor
By Catherine Cavendish

Have you ever been so scared your soul left your body?

All her life, Lesley Carpenter has been haunted by a gruesome nursery rhyme—"The Scottish Bride"—sung to her by her great grandmother. To find out more about its origins, Lesley visits the mysterious Isobel Warrender, the current hereditary owner of Linden Manor, a grand house with centuries of murky history surrounding it.

But her visit transforms into a nightmare when Lesley sees the ghost of the Scottish bride herself, a sight that, according to the rhyme, means certain death. The secrets of the house slowly reveal themselves to Lesley, terrible secrets of murder, evil and a curse that soaks the very earth on which Linden Manor now stands. But Linden Manor has saved its most chilling secret for last.

Castle by the Sea
By JG Faherty

How did they get here? Will they ever get out?

Jason and Erika are having a wonderful time at the Halloween carnival…until their swan boat in the Tunnel of Love capsizes amid heavy waves and blaring, maniacal laughter. When they come to they are no longer in a carnival in Ohio, but standing at the edge of a sea in a raging storm. In the distance, atop a high, barren hill, looms an enormous castle.

Instead of answers, Jason and Erika find only more impossibilities within the stone walls. The lavish rooms are lit only by torches and fireplaces, the decorations and furniture are a century out of date, and the mysterious host claims to not own one of those newfangled telephone inventions. Outside, in the storm and the dense mist, lurk strange, threatening figures. Inside, another couple seeking refuge think it must all be a nightmare. Perhaps it is. Or perhaps it's something much, much worse.

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Dark Inspiration
Sacrifice
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Catherine Cavendish

Saving Grace Devine

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What Waits in the Shadows



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Blood Red Roses

Russell James

Dedication

For Mr. E.A. Poe.
So much of what ails me I lay upon your doorstep.

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Chapter One

When I was but the tender age of fourteen, my father died.

Such a tragedy would be the year's formative event in most people's lives. It was just one of many in mine.

At that time, my familial life had been turned quite convoluted. My mother had run off years ago, so when Jefferson Davis ordered my father conscripted after the Battle of Manassas, I, his only son, was left in the care of Uncle Trent and Aunt Clara in the small Mississippi town of De Kalb.

Uncle Trent was a barrel-chested man, skin bronzed to leather and hair the color of straw from long days in the fields. Aunt Clara was the opposite, a wisp of a woman with long, dark hair that accentuated her perpetually pallid skin. My father thought they could use another hand about their farm. Uncle Trent thought my father's pay would help him make ends meet. A deal was struck, with an agreement in terms though none in motive. The home of my father's sister already brimmed full with three children, two younger and one older than I, but Uncle Trent promised to fashion lodging for me in an old shed. Assured of my welfare, my father marched off to keep us safe from Yankees.

Two years later, in the summer of 1863, a premonition struck my Aunt Clara. In it, my father appeared to her from across a misty bridge, waved and then retreated into the shroud of fog. He spoke not a word, just offering a gesture of farewell. She awoke in a cold sweat, terrified to her marrow, filled with the certainty that he was dead. When she shared her dream with us, Uncle Trent admonished her that my father was a thousand miles away, marching with General Lee, and not to speak of such foolishness within my earshot.

When I first heard Aunt Clara's dream, I was quick to dismiss it. I told myself that Aunt Clara was always aflutter about one imagined item or another. But mostly, I did not want it to be true.

Though my aunt and uncle were never cruel to me, they were family in name only, placeholders for the return of my father and the reopening of our livery down in Pelahatchie. After my father's departure, I had followed the news of the war and plotted positions on a map I nailed over my straw mattress in the shed. I imagined my father in a tent outside certain towns or walking guard beside a specific river. I was always calculating how far that place was from home, and how soon he could be back when the war ended. I lived for his return. If Aunt Clara's dream came true, what future would I have?

Word came across the telegraph that next morning that a great battle had begun in a place called Gettysburg. Aunt Clara nearly fainted when she heard, and took to fanning herself constantly throughout the rest of the day, as if the tiny breeze she made would keep bad tidings at bay.

News never came of the battle's conclusion. They had told us after both battles at Manassas, after Fredericksburg, after Seven Pines. The newspapers always overflowed with tales of the invincible Army of Northern Virginia when the bluecoats turned tail. Hollow trepidation already possessed us, as nearby Vicksburg, our fortress on the Mississippi, had at that time just fallen to Union forces. The paper's deafening silence on Pennsylvania could only mean that General Lee had finally, incomprehensibly failed.

Three days later, it was announced that the casualty list would be posted by the courthouse at noon. Aunt Clara couldn't bring herself to travel into De Kalb to read it. She sent me instead. She could have forced some of my cousins to accompany me, but she kept them in the fields. It was as if, since I was the one who exposed the family to this loss, I should be the one to bear the brunt of it.

The mayor had erected a wooden panel in the shadow of the clock tower for this solitary task: to herald the losses, losses that were often more than loved ones could bear. The posted list would carry the names of the Mississippians killed in action in those Pennsylvania cornfields, mowed down before a ridge that had held enormous value at that moment, and absolutely none just a day later.

As I approached the courthouse, my front of excessive optimism was but a façade for the darkest of dread. A group clustered around the posting, stock-still and staring straight at the list. Doleful sobs and words of consolation drifted away from the crowd.

In those days, I was short, even for my age, and had to work my way through the men and women who surrounded the lists, a human wall of wide skirts and dingy suits. I broke through the front row.

Usually, a single sheet tacked to the boards held a half-dozen names. I caught my breath.

The list stretched pages long. The ink seemed darker than usual, the letters in a bolder, more mournful font. My eyes scrolled down, and I prayed that the last names would leap from *J* to *L* and host no names that even started with the same *K* that started ours. At the first *K*, my pulse beat faster. I checked each one and froze when my last name jumped out before me. My heart stopped when my father's first name followed my last.

I stood there in shock. I stared at the name, as if looking at it longer would make it fade away and return my world to the unbroken eggshell it had been moments ago. Tears welled in my eyes, and a vast, empty expanse formed in my stomach. I could not control myself. I reached up and tore this preacher of death from its pulpit. The page left its corners on the board, layered over the corners of an uncounted number of sheets before it.

Blinded by tears, I turned from the board and vented my rage upon the cheap newsprint, shredding it so that no two letters of my father's name would continue to touch. Despair so rent my body that I fell upon my knees and sobbed into the page's detritus, until the damp scraps stuck to my hands.

The people around me did not admonish me. But nor did they offer compassion. By now all had suffered losses, some today for the second or third time. They looked down on me in morose welcome, acknowledging my delayed entry into the fraternity of the mourning. The Angel of Death, who had passed my family over so often, had finally alighted upon my shoulders.

Behind me, the town clerk, prepared for my reaction through past experience with others, posted a duplicate casualty list on the board.

Chapter Two

That evening we ate dinner in silence, Aunt Clara sadly vindicated that her premonition had proved true, Uncle Trent apparently consumed with concerns. My cousins expressed their subdued condolences, keenly uncomfortable with me now, as if death were as communicable as consumption and my contact could spread this epidemic amongst them all.

Sequestered in my shed that evening, I apprehended that light still burned in the main house, when usually it had been extinguished long before this hour. I crept from my meager lodging and tucked myself under the kitchen window to overhear what kept my guardians up into the night.

"Trent, you can't," Aunt Clara said.

"I damn sure can, and you know I should."

"He's just a boy."

"Who has just turned burden. He's a mouth to feed without a penny to feed him. The Confederacy doesn't pay dead soldiers. It barely pays the living."

"But he's my blood."

"Situation's about to get worse before it gets better. How long before bluecoats march through town with Vicksburg gone? You heard the stories. They don't leave nothing in their wake."

"But to send him to Beechwood—"

"Glory, woman, it's a plantation, not a prison. They'll treat him right."

A plantation? To a small-town boy like myself, plantations were things of legend, places of fabulous wealth, worked by slaves from Africa. Was I to join them in their labor? The night was warm and humid, yet I shivered in my nightshirt. Here was I being spoken of as a mule, to be sent from one field to the next.

"And they'll pay," my uncle added. "They been looking for a hired hand."

"They'll pay him?" my aunt asked.

"No, they'll pay us. Like a finder's fee. Real gold, not Confederate scrip."

My jaw dropped. I was not a mule being led from field to field. I was a mule being sold.

"It's your damn brother got us into this mess," my uncle said. "Marrying that harlot, then getting himself killed, leaving us with her pup."

At this, Aunt Clara commenced with a fresh round of jagged sobs. My uncle plowed on undeterred.

"Tomorrow morning he'll be somewhere else, either at Beechwood or on the streets. Wherever it is, it won't be here. Best we take the option that pays."

I had heard such type of discourse before, and Aunt Clara always finished on the losing end. Uncle Trent's word was the law. On the morrow, I would be gone.

I crawled back to the drafty shack I had called home. I wrapped myself in the frayed quilt that was the sum of my bedsheets. Fear found its way to every nook in my body, and I trembled until my teeth nearly chattered.

At first I thought to run, to set out in the darkness before my uncle's plan could unfold. But where would I run to? I had no family outside the five who were ready to abandon me now. And without a penny to my name, how would I survive?

A line of thunderstorms barreled through within the hour. I sat awake in the corner of my little shack. Wind and rain blew through the gaps in the rough-hewn pine. Peals of thunder rolled in with such force that it shook dirt from the rafters. Lightning flared through the sky and turned the shed's interior from black to blinding white for fractions of a second. Perhaps I imagined it, but in one of those brief illuminations, I swore I could see the spirit of my father by the shed door, in his uniform of new gray wool, a blank stare upon his countenance. I called to him, but the following flash revealed that I was still alone.

By dawn the storms had spent their fury, and the sleepless night had sapped my strength. I faced the rising sun resigned to whatever future awaited me at the unknown plantation of Beechwood.

Chapter Three

In the end, Aunt Clara had but a cameo role in the show surrounding my abandonment. Uncle Trent roused me from the shed an hour before my morning chores were to begin. He did not seem surprised that I was up and wide awake. He issued a curt order to gather up all my belongings and carry them to the front porch. He offered no reason and I asked for none. Whether he knew I had overheard his previous evening's conversation or thought that I had simply surmised my fate, I do not know. But he understood that, like the executioner and the prisoner upon their final meeting, we had no details that need be discussed.

I had little in the way of possessions to show for my fourteen years of life. I stuffed two shirts and a pair of pants in a flour sack. Doing so left the shed nearly bare. The great map of the now-divided United States remained on the wall. It no longer mattered how far Confederate forces were from my hometown. Nothing about the war mattered at all.

The only other item I added to my bag I could never leave behind: my father's own pocket watch, passed down through three fathers, the oldest of whom was said to have fought in the Revolution. The years had worn the engraving to just the faintest etching, but it was silver and the workmanship indicated it had been most expensive in its day. The crystal was cracked and its hands no longer swept its spotted ivory face. But it reminded my father of our lineage, one that had once been well-off enough for such finery. And now it reminded me of him.

As I stood on the front porch awaiting the next turn of my fate, my cousins were reduced to a trio of faces pressed against the panes of the parlor window, looking like they were witnessing an unfolding tragedy of Shakespearean proportions. I thought this excessive, as I was stepping off the front porch, not off a cliff. Only later did I realize they knew more than I about Beechwood.

Aunt Clara made her fleeting appearance through the front door.

Tears rimmed her puffy eyes, and she could not look me in the face. She pressed a cloth bundle into my hands and scurried back inside like a mouse to its den. Up through the thin cloth rose the smell of warm cornbread. My hands, still chilled from the damp night winds, warmed from the toasty handful.

No sooner had my aunt passed back inside than my uncle stepped onto the porch.

"You're heading to the Beechwood plantation," he said. "You'll work for your keep there, rest assured. Do you know of the place?"

I shook my head in an honest confession of my ignorance.

"Well, it's a good family there, the Powells. Lost their son at the Seven Days' battle. Don't act the fool and embarrass us."

As if anything I did could sully the reputation of a man paid to turn out his own orphaned kin.

A buckboard pulled up in front of the house, driven by Nate French, the grizzled owner of the tack shop. I'd assumed someone from Beechwood would come to fetch me, but instead I was simply to be delivered, as any other commodity. My future grew darker by the moment.

The old man sat slumped in the buckboard's seat, his dropsy-swollen frame filling most of it. He pointed a thumb to the rear. I climbed in and sat upon my sack. We headed out, away from town, down the Meridian road.

Preferring the company of horses, Nate rarely spoke with even his customers. So you can imagine my shock when he addressed me midway through our journey.

"Beechwood, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"You ain't scared?"

A chill ran down my spine. Until this moment, I'd been consumed by fear of the unknown, unaware that a specific fear was warranted as well. "Should I be?"

Nate sighed and gave the reins a little snap. "Ramses the overseer there's a legend. The tale is that a slave attacked him, bit part of his face clean off. Ramses took the time to whip the man to death before he'd let the family call him a doctor. He's one mean cuss."

This morsel of news did nothing to calm my nerves. A disfigured, cruel man with a whip was the stuff of nightmares. I tried to convince myself Ramses was but a legend, like the ghost Bloody Mary or the hairy creature from the swamps. Needing no more kindling for the

smoldering fear within me, I spoke no more to Nate, content to hear just the clop of the horse's hooves along the red clay road.

It was near midday when we finally crossed another's path. Up ahead, a Confederate officer on horseback, hat festooned with a white plume, led a group of men marching in a column of two abreast. He called them to halt and then brought his horse forward to us at a canter.

With each yard closer, the officer appeared to devolve. What at a distance appeared a proud, young, erect cavalryman came into focus and transformed into a wizened old man. His faded coat dated from the war with Mexico decades ago. Gray hair hung from beneath his battered hat. The scabbard at his side was brown with rust and empty.

"Good day," he said to Nate. He wore a captain's rank on his faded epaulets. "Have you seen soldiers up near De Kalb?"

"Nope," Nate answered. "You're the first men in gray we've seen all day."

"No, no." The lines on the old man's face went tight with concern. "Have you seen *Union* soldiers?"

"Didn't know we should be looking," Nate said.

"Intelligence reports them moving east to assault Meridian again." He straightened up in the saddle, but instead of looking more imposing, he looked more like a scarecrow. "The Mississippi Home Guard marches to intercept."

He turned and shouted to the column down the road. "Forward…march!"

The column advanced. Nate held our horses in place, and the men passed around us like a stream around a stone. Of the group, scarcely one was of military age. Young boys with scared faces followed graybeard men stooped by the years. Each guardsman had perhaps one bit of a uniform—a hat here, a tunic there—but none wore a complete set. They did not march in step; in fact they did not march at all. Instead they dragged their boots upon the dusty road, more like a shuffle of tired, aching feet. The men did not sing as my father's unit had on parade before departing. Instead, they made what sounded more like a collective sigh.

The last of the soldiers passed by. At the column's end trailed a boy younger than I, a small drum strapped across his chest. He looked with longing, tear-filled eyes at our buckboard. Had I bade him to, I am certain he would have clambered aboard and abandoned his appointment with combat. But Nate slapped the reins, and the horses pulled the wagon away with a jerk.

We turned off the Meridian road and onto a narrower, rutted path through a stand of gnarled oaks. The trees' spreading branches blocked the sunlight that had bathed us throughout the morning, and the air turned decidedly cooler. As the day had grown quite warm and the road rather dusty, that change should have been welcome. But instead of relief, I felt dread.

Farther down the path, the branches of the oaks closed in overhead and created a tunnel. Great sweeps of Spanish moss hung from the branches like gray shrouds. Though the air was still, these ashen curtains moved and rippled without pattern as far into the murky forest as I could see. Nate pulled his shirt collar up closer to his neck and hunched his shoulders.

On the day my father left for the war, I had seen him off at the train station with the rest of his company. He wore the same newly sewn uniform as in my vision the last night at Uncle Trent's. We said our heartfelt farewells, and he boarded the boxcar already filled with conscripted Confederates. The door opening framed him like a Matthew Brady photograph as the stationmaster rolled the door closed. At the clunk and click of the great door clasp, a foreboding permeated every pore of my body. In my soul stirred a sudden certainty, a certainty that would be the last time I'd stand in my father's presence.

That was the first time I'd ever experienced such a harbinger of disaster. The second time was when Beechwood plantation came into view.

I gasped as I beheld the main house. The edifice rose white, tall and wide from a slight rise at the end of the pathway. Six columns worthy of ancient Greece supported a central balcony above the slim front porch. Narrow windows, tall as a man, lined the top and bottom floors. A metal roof coated in bright red paint topped the house.

Such a sight was designed to induce awe, like a great city cathedral, but in me it instilled a dark dread, deeper than the one from my father's departure, which was strange since the mansion appeared so grand.

As we rolled closer, subtle changes made themselves apparent. The Spanish moss had taken a position along the far edge of the gutter and sent its first scouts creeping downward. A sea of glazed cracks marred the paint on the roof, and in several places, small patches had peeled away. Great fissures rent the mortar between the stones of the foundation, and in places dusty white piles lay beneath black gaps. From under eaves and behind shutters, dark green swaths of fungus peeked out to dare the touch of daylight.

Nate pulled the buckboard to a stop before the main entrance, and the very air of the place seemed to close upon me, humid and heavy with a dripping sense of despair. It so weighted me, I could barely raise my head from my chest.

"Out you go," Nate said.

The porch was empty, the main door closed.

"You won't announce my arrival?"

"I'm paid to transport you, not to nursemaid you." Nate shivered and gave the house a sideways glance with the same trepidation I felt. "Out you go. Now!"

I rolled over the side with all the enthusiasm of a man exiting a lifeboat into a sea of sharks. No sooner had my feet alighted on the ground than Nate snapped the reins, and the horses pulled the buckboard away at a gallop.

I scarcely had time to renew my now-recurring sense of abandonment, when the main door to the house opened. A tall man of cocoa complexion wore a black waistcoat over a white shirt and black pants. Two items struck me as different. The first was his bearing, which appeared quite proud, the opposite of the cowed demeanor of the slaves I'd seen in the Jackson streets. The second item was his blue eyes, which would be startling enough in a white man, but were spellbinding in a man of such dark skin.

"Get in here, boy. You should have been here this morning."

Now, hard as it may be to believe, I clutched my meager possessions to my chest and ran inside. Perhaps because of my age or perhaps because of his authoritative tone, it seemed completely natural for this white boy to follow the direction of one the state decreed should be his servant.

I must admit that the plantation home's interior aroused as much awe as some European cathedrals. My more than modest upbringing could never have prepared me for the main house. Floors of mirror-polished mahogany ran to every room. Two chandeliers with two dozen candles each hung from the ceiling in a foyer larger than my uncle's entire house. Twin staircases swept up from each side to a central second floor hallway. Portraits of men and women in Southern finery hung on the walls in golden frames. Curtains of thick, red velvet hung at the windows, pulled to each side with great black sashes.

On a large table beneath the apex of the two stairways sat a great clockwork under a glass dome. A conventional face rose high in the center, and just under that four gold balls and paddles whirled like a horizontal windmill in a stiff breeze. At the base, two rings of small

carved figures advanced in lockstep every second. The right and left rings rotated in opposite directions, so that with each tick, a different pair would meet where the rings touched, and the preceding pair would split away to meet again on the next full rotation.

I stopped to admire this marvel. My father's pocket watch sat embarrassed in my flour sack. A yank to my collar propelled me away.

"Don't you stop here in the main hall with your ragged clothes and filthy shoes," the man I would later learn was named Washington said. "Get a move on."

We passed down the hall and out the rear door, where the sunlight struck me nearly blind. While the front of the house was darkened by the spreading oaks and drooping moss, the rear of the house opened to acres of cotton fields that seemed to stretch on forever. The merciless sun blazed down on the browning rows speckled with tufts of white. Bent low between them bobbed the heads of slaves gathering the snowy harvest.

One silhouette rose above the scene: the darkened figure of a man on horseback midfield, high and haughty in the saddle, head shaded with a wide-brimmed hat. I could just make out the coiled bullwhip hung at his saddle's side. As his head turned to survey the slaves, I could swear that there was a flash from the middle of his shadowed face, but I assigned it as a trick upon my eyes.

Mouthwatering scents quickly drew my attention from the cotton fields. A narrow covered walk tethered a detached brick cook kitchen to the main house. A warm, spiced whiff of peach pie and the duskier aroma of rich, smoked meat invaded my senses. My cornbread breakfast had run its brief course, and hunger responded with full force.

Washington must have seen the longing look on my face as we passed the kitchen's puffing chimney. "Boy, ain't none of that finery in there for you. Work this side of the Beechwood property line and you white on the outside only."

We turned left around the perimeter of a fenced fruit and vegetable garden. We stopped in front of the stables.

"You're in here, boy."

I'd left a shack at my uncle's farm, that was true, but at least I hadn't roomed with the livestock.

"The stables?"

"Your uncle said you were an experienced stable hand. Aren't you?"

I'd spent some time in my father's Pelahatchie livery, but mostly mucking out stalls and doing a pretty poor of job of it at that. If stable experience was supposed to have paid my ticket to Beechwood, it wasn't going to cover the fare.

But before I could admit my shortcomings, the specter of such an admission's response coalesced in my mind. Tossed out of Beechwood, I'd have no place to go. And surely if I could muck stalls for my father, I could muck stalls for whoever ran the stable here.

"Of course I'm experienced," I lied. "I've years of it."

Washington gave me a look like he was on the fence about believing me. Then he surrendered to convenience. "Then get in there."

I walked in though the open door. My eyes took a moment to adjust to the darkness. Along the left wall stood five stalls. The first stall appeared in good repair and clean. In the next two, the doors sagged open against their frames, as if exhausted from the effort of remaining horizontal. Over the last two hung the heads of two bedraggled-looking brown horses.

"You sleep up there," Washington said, pointing to a ladder that ran up to a loft. A thicket of spider webs covered the loft opening. "Your meals will be at the back of the cookhouse when the bell rings. Don't ask me why you get such treatment."

At the time his sentiment perplexed me. Only later did I learn that the cooks only cooked for the Powells, and that slaves prepared their own rations of corn meal and pork whatever way they could.

"Now, boy, you listen," Washington said. "No matter what you heard about this family, you forget about it all."

That would be easy since I had nothing to forget.

"Master Powell is to be treated with respect. And don't you contradict him or you'll see the lash across that white skin as fast as a black man would. And Missus Powell is never to be bothered. Ever. Especially in the garden. You won't never see their daughter Lucinda down here in the stables. You will see Ramses. Each morning he'll call for his horse Victor, and you'd better have that horse ready when he calls, or the lash will come your way again. You understand, boy?"

I certainly didn't, but nodded anyway. Washington grabbed my bag, threw it up into the loft, shot me a look of contempt, and left me alone in the stable.

I quickly lamented every discordant thought I'd ever had about living with my uncle.

Chapter Four

I started my duties with an inspection of the two sorry nags in the stalls. My father had taught me a bit about appraising an equine, but even without that minor education, I could have diagnosed how ill-fit these horses were for service. Bones protruded from the tight skin on their sides like the ribs of a shipwreck. Their unbrushed coats hosted random clumps in some places, while other spots were but bare patches. Both horses hung their heads and eyed the ground with vacant stares, unaware or uncaring that I was there. I could almost sense that they knew their time of utility on the plantation was at an end, and the earth they stared down upon would soon cover their carcasses. I assumed that nothing but neglect kept them from being auctioned off by the pound for horsemeat.

Two of the three vacant stalls were piled two feet high with waste and moldering straw. They'd be a solid morning's work, if I could chip away at the compacted debris at all.

The third stall was immaculate, the door on solid hinges, the floor carpeted with fresh straw. Whatever horse was out at work on the plantation was far better taken care of than the two that had stayed behind. I surmised that would be the overseer's horse, Victor.

To the right stood the tack room. Inside hung bridles and reins so cracked and desiccated that I was certain they would part upon first use. Dust and straw coated several saddles piled on a sawhorse.

Under a short roof behind the stable sat what had once passed as a stylish carriage. Gaping holes rent the canvas top. Great tears split the black leather seat cushions. The top third of one of the enormous spoked wheels was missing, as if a giant had bent down and taken a bite of it, and just left the stubs of the shattered spokes.

No doubt there had once been a greatness about these stables, as there had once been majesty in the tree-lined road that led up to

Beechwood's impressive portico. But all the buildings had entered a slow decline. There had been an age when a team of sleek horses filled these stalls, and a band of groomsmen kept them shod and fed. Now the sum had been reduced to two withered beasts and an ill-trained boy to care for them.

A bell rang out across the fields, the call to end the working day. But I remembered it as well to be the crier of my supper's arrival, according to Washington. I deserted the wreckage of the carriage and dashed through the stable to satiate my overwhelming hunger.

I didn't make it over the threshold. Just as I reached it, a horse blocked my way, a great black beast eighteen hands high if he was an inch, glossy as obsidian and speckled with sweat from his ride in from the fields.

The overseer, Ramses, sat in the saddle. His broad chest was thick as an oak's trunk and his hands that held the reins were as gnarled as that same tree's roots. Graying stubble stippled cheeks that were creased and tanned from years in the sun. The sheen of a day's sweat gave him a greasy glow. I absorbed all of this in an instant, for his most compelling feature held me transfixed.

An artificial nose dominated his face. A tarnished silver tent opened above his upper lip and tapered up to a spot between his eyes. One narrow, brown leather strap ran from the right lower tip across his cheekbone and around to meet the nose's other side. A second, similar strap attached to the apex above his eyes and ran up to bisect his forehead. It disappeared under his salt-stained slouch hat, and I assumed met the other strap at the back of his head.

Ramses spit a stream of tobacco juice at my feet, aimed well enough to splatter dirt upon my shoes. His eyes were solid black, pupils and irises one, as if melted together by the seething hatred I sensed boiled behind them.

My experiences with people were limited, having been born and raised in a rural environment. This was the first man I'd ever met who exuded evil. Malevolence seemed to radiate from him like heat from a glowing stove. He leaned down across his saddle and brought his face close to mine. He smelled of sweat and earth, and his nosepiece had the stink of sour coins in a banker's till.

"So you're the new boy, eh? Jebediah?"

Earlier, Washington had left me intimidated; the house and the stable had put me ill at ease. But now in the malodorous face of the overseer, I felt a terror so deep it wrapped around my spine and froze me so that I could not answer.

He took my silence in stride, as one used to such scared subservience.

"Simple rules, boy. Be in the stable after dark, and stay there. Never leave the property. And leave all them gyps to themselves. They don't need no white-trash boy stirring things up. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir," I managed. I now had been given two sets of rules to follow and hadn't even heard from the plantation's owner yet.

"And you'd damn well better take care of Victor here like he was your own son."

Ramses gave the horse's neck a slap. Victor snorted and stared down at me with haughty contempt.

Ramses swung out of the saddle. He pulled his coiled whip from the saddle's side and a musket from a holster up front. Six deep notches scored the musket's wooden stock.

"He gets the best feed and needs to be readied by dawn," Ramses said.

He stroked the horse's neck. The horse swung his head around and gave Ramses's shoulder an affectionate brush. Victor's gaze then returned to me, any trace of warmth gone. Ramses swung his musket up across his shoulder and departed. As he walked, his right leg dragged just a bit, his boot twisted at an uncomfortable-looking angle. It was the first time I'd ever seen someone who was born with a clubfoot.

Victor looked up and away, as a king would, awaiting his attendants' removal of his crown and mantle. I unstrapped his saddle and, with great effort given the horse's prodigious height, managed to slide it off his back. Victor instantly shook his saddle blanket to the ground and clomped off to the clean first stall.

I dropped the saddle onto an open sawhorse in the tack room. When I returned, Victor stood in his stall, facing me over the door he'd evidently closed behind him.

"Good boy," I said. Perhaps I'd read too much into the horse's demeanor. Victor was going to do half the work of caring for him.

I stood at the gate and relieved him of his bridle. As I turned, Victor's head shot forward, fast a striking snake. He bit my shoulder. Not a playful nip, but a strong, solid bite that made my flesh crunch.

I screamed and jumped away. I slid back my shirt and exposed a red, bleeding crescent. Victor let loose a satisfied whinny that I swore was a laugh. He turned to the rear of his stall, as if he'd accomplished all he had to do today and could now retire.

The overseer, the slaves, even the animals at Beechwood treated me with contempt. At that moment I feared Beechwood would be the foulest experience of my life.

I had no idea that so much worse could be possible.

Chapter Five

According to the previous toll of the bell, I was due for supper. According to my stomach, I was long overdue. In all truth, had my stomach somehow been sated, my growing melancholy would have convinced me to avoid another opportunity for humiliation.

I pressed some straw across the oozing cut upon my shoulder and headed back to the cookhouse. The closer I got to the kitchen, the less I entertained the idea of skipping my meal. A mélange of mouthwatering scents filled the air, and like a lion, my gut growled in anticipation of the biscuits and beef the aromas promised. I knocked on the open kitchen door.

Several slave women bustled around the dark, oppressively hot kitchen. One looked up at me.

"What you want?"

"I'm new. I was told to fetch my supper here."

"Washington done thinks he run the house lately. Uppity gyp. You dat new boy?"

"Jebediah Kingston."

She shook her head. A bead of sweat flew from her broad nose.

"Don't understand why white trash can't cook they own food. Ain't no better than the rest of us."

While the phrase would follow me the rest of my life, Beechwood was the first place I'd been called "white trash." Later it was explained to me that slaves held the lowest class of white society in complete contempt. While the slaves were born into society's bottom rung, with no hope of advancement, through no fault of their own, a white person alongside them had sunk to such depths by his own volition.

The woman disappeared into the dark. When she reemerged, she handed me a wooden bowl. I looked in with profound disappointment to see it filled with cornmeal mush. A chunk of dried pork sat on the

center.

The slave noticed my dissatisfaction and laughed.

"You didn't think you getting no food from the big house, did you? Boy, why you giving yourself airs?"

Laughter from the others rolled out of the gloom. I slunk away from the door and slid to the ground beneath one of the kitchen windows. My spoon was little more than a wooden paddle, but I raised the bowl to my lips and gratefully shoveled the soupy mush into my mouth. I'd certainly eaten worse, and the smoked pork had none of the gamey, half-rancid flavor that the meat on my uncle's farm always had.

"Another one gone missing," I heard one of the slaves in the kitchen say. "Don't know his name."

"Name of Percy," another said. "Mother don't know nothing, jus' that she woke up and he done gone."

"What you think happened?" a third woman asked.

"What you mean? Ramses done killed him, that's what happened. Boys done vanished since he come here, right? Bastard got the bloodlust; I know the look. Watched him tie Wilma to a pole in the sun and leave her there three day. Done it with a smile on his face. You don't think he smile wider to kill one?"

"I seen him shoot a runaway before. Use that long rifle. Man made a break for it when he knew he was goin' under the lash. Cool as evening, Ramses drew that rifle and took a bead on the man. He let him get all the way to the tree line, let him be one step away from a place to hide. Then Ramses done pulled that trigger. Slave's fool head exploded like an overripe melon. Ramses just grinned and lowered that rifle like he'd shot nothing more than a rabbit. Carved a notch in that gun stock of his right then and there."

The hairs on the back of my neck went stiff. Clear as day, I could imagine Ramses in that dreadful scene: cold, efficient, cruel.

"See," the first slave said. "He the kind of man who needs to kill, finds an excuse. Probably didn't kill in a while before he got here, and had to satisfy that bloodlust."

"He gonna get caught. You just can't go killin' slaves. The sheriff'll come."

That was true. There were laws on the books that protected slaves from murder. A slow, starving death was permitted, but blatant executions might be enough to get an insurrection going. Slaves outnumbered whites in this county. No one wanted an insurrection.

"Ain't nobody keepin' track of us," the first slave said. "The sheriff

don't care."

That was probably also true. The sheriff would investigate large, consistent purchases of slaves, if he investigated anything at all. There were only records of slaves born on the plantations if the owners took the trouble to keep them. Slaves being taxable property, the Powells might not be so precise. It was possible no one would ever know if those boys went missing.

I scraped all I could from my dinner bowl, then ran my finger around it and licked off every drop. I stood by the kitchen door to return the bowl and was roundly ignored. I left it on the ground and returned to the stable.

The sun hung low in the sky, low enough to drown the interior of the stable in shadows. At the far end, the silhouettes of the two worn-out nags stared out of their stall doors, inky shapes against the dusky stalls. Victor brooded in the closest stall, invisible, a black horse camouflaged by darkness. But I knew him to be there. I could feel him staring at me, a spider to a fly. I entered the stable and shuffled along the wall farthest from Victor's stall.

The day had wearied me, especially as it followed a night plagued with poor sleep and the appearance of the spirit of my father. As no one would be seeking me out the rest of the waning day, the loft accommodations, so initially uninviting, now called like a Siren. I began to ascend the ladder.

Behind me, from Victor's stall, came a sound I can only describe as a hiss. My blood chilled in my veins. My hands locked on the ladder rungs. I spun my head about toward the animal.

From the darkness glowed two eyes, white as bone, suspended in the impenetrable shadow as if floating. The horse exhaled another slithering hiss, followed by a huff and a flash of those teeth that had just tried for a hunk of my flesh.

I bolted into the loft, scampering up the ladder rungs like a monkey up a palm tree. I crossed into the loft and smacked into an absolute net of spiderwebs. It coated my neck and face like a sticky lace veil. It threatened to clamp shut my eyes and seal my mouth. I clawed and swiped at the cloying mass.

When I finally cleaned my face, I sat heavily upon the old, dry boards, my heart pounding so hard I could feel its throbbing in my extremities.

As I calmed myself, I took stock of my new sleeping chamber as best I could in the growing darkness. There was space to sleep, for a boy my size at least. I lay down and slowly stretched my feet onto the

abyss at the loft's dark end, anticipating that they would touch something unknown, or worse, that something unknown would reach out and touch them. At full stretch, I felt nothing.

I pulled my sack across the floor and made it my pillow. It was just this morning I'd filled it at my uncle's house, an event that seemed impossibly long ago, on some other planet.

Outside, night had fully fallen. Many days at my uncle's farm, I'd prayed for deliverance from that purgatory. My prayers had been answered with admission to hell.

Chapter Six

To my astonishment, Victor transformed into the model equine the next morning.

I'd risen with the false dawn, cognizant of Washington's warning and aware that Ramses wouldn't miss a minute of daylight working the slaves in the fields. I opened Victor's stall door, Visions of the great black beast charging forward and trampling me filled my head. I gripped his limp, unbuckled bridle in my quaking hands.

But Victor stepped forward, slow, majestic, calm. He wheezed a reassuring chuff and dipped his massive head to present it for the bridle. I slipped it on as smoothly as Cinderella's glass slipper and buckled it tight. The saddle and the blanket went on as easily as saddling a fence rail. The steed didn't so much as flinch.

I thought that perhaps I'd misjudged the horse; perhaps I'd stunk so of fear in my new surroundings that he'd reacted with alarm. Perhaps Victor had to display some sort of dominance, establish the hierarchy in the stable. Whatever the reason, I was much cheered at his changed disposition, and further buoyed by the rosy glow of the rising sun.

"Victor!" Ramses voice boomed like a cannon from outside the stables.

Victor practically leaped in response and went straight for the open stable door, bowling me aside in the process. He stopped short of his master, and Ramses hung his whip and rifle on the saddle. He mounted the steed. Ramses passed me one glance from beneath the shadow of his hat. The low sunlight illuminated the silver tent in the center of his face.

"Boy, have two mules hitched to the plow on the south forty after dinner, you hear?" he said.

"Yes, sir!" I didn't even know where the mules were.

Then Victor took Ramses out to the fields.

I took my breakfast at the cookhouse in the same manner as my supper, and received the same fare. Washington delivered me a sharp warning that Master Powell would be down to the stables this morning, and that all needed to be in order. Given the total disorder of the place, the news resurrected all the dread the day's promising start had suppressed.

Later, I led the two horses out to the corral at the stable's rear. In full daylight, their sorry state aroused great pity within me. They moved with arthritic gaits, painful to behold.

Off behind a barn, in their own enclosure, I saw the two mules Ramses had demanded. They looked to be in better shape than the horses, more a tribute to their hardier nature than better care, I assumed.

I reentered the stables. I grabbed a rusting pitchfork and set to mucking out the stalls. While painfully aware of my shortcomings without my father's copious equine knowledge, I decided that perhaps I could improve Master Powell's assessment with a clean stable. Whoever had the chore before me had done a poor job, and a solid mass of straw and dried offal caked each corner of the sad horse's stalls.

I was hard at work chiseling one of the lumps when a voice rang out behind me.

"Boy? Stable boy?"

This voice was far weaker than Ramses's, reedier than Washington's. I stepped out of the stall and into the presence of Master Powell.

Given the imposing stature of his heads of household and field, Master Powell's appearance took me quite by surprise. A rotund little man, he was short enough that I could look him straight in the eye. A crescent of unkempt silver hair edged his shining bald head and continued down his cheeks into a set of muttonchops. His skin had a pasty color, the opposite of Ramses's sunbaked brown. Powell wore a full suit despite the heat, with a ruffled shirt, a golden vest and knee britches.

My station in life certainly made me no judge of fashionable trends, but I'd never seen anyone wear so anachronistic a suit before. It reminded me of a painting I'd seen in the courthouse, of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

"Ah, there you are!" Master Powell seemed relieved, though I had the impression that it was not so much because I was in the right place, but because he'd gotten himself to the right place. "Tell me your

name, boy."

"Jebediah, sir."

He nodded in understanding. Looks of surprise and then consternation crossed his face in quick succession. He looked about the walls and roof, more in frantic search than in measured inspection.

"Have the horses ready, boy." Apparently my name was already forgotten. "We may call for them after dinner. We may take the carriage into town and attend the Wilkerson's ball."

Without waiting for a response, he turned and marched out of the stables. His head still flicked to and fro as if seeing much, but taking in nothing.

To make this abominable stable presentable would be a great undertaking, but with time I could make a go of it. But getting the two broken-down nags to drag the collapsing carriage into town would require an Old Testament-level miracle. I quickly envisioned myself at the receiving end of Ramses's whip.

"He won't remember," a woman's voice said from the other door of the stable.

I whirled to see a woman backlit by the daylight, a tangle of long blonde hair illuminated like a halo by the sun's brilliant rays. She looked in her twenties and wore a dark green dress cut more closely than my eyes had even seen before, with a neckline that plunged to reveal a pair of firm, round, alabaster breasts. Her face had the hue of porcelain, her eyes the jade shade of jewels. My jaw dropped at the unexpected sight of her. My heart fluttered as if to take wing.

"He never sleeps anymore," she said. "In the daylight, he is a sleepwalker. Nothing comes of his actions."

Her voice floated through the air like filaments of spun gold, devoid of the coarse accent that affected those in my station of life. Instead she spoke with the long, lilting drawl cultivated for generations for the sole purpose of making men wilt.

"But at night," she continued. She wagged a finger my way. "Then he must be minded."

She proceeded into the stable. There was a slight wobble to her walk, just a hint of the stagger my uncle displayed when he dipped too deeply into his cups. She flicked back her hair and looked me over. Closer now, I noted a slight glaze upon those enchanting eyes.

"So it's true we have a new stable boy?" she said.

Captivated by this apex of pulchritude, I could not summon an answer.

She passed me and grazed my jawline with her fingernail. I swore I felt sparks. The scent of lilacs wafted from her fingertips. Her head lolled a few inches in my direction, and she flashed a sly smile.

"Such a pretty boy. I'm Lucinda. I'll see you again."

She walked out the door, following the same path as her father back to the main house. Her hips swayed in a hypnotic cadence with each step, and I was drawn to watch her walk away like a moth to a flame. In all my short life, I'd never seen such a vision, nor even hazarded that a creature so lovely might grace the face of the earth.

With the possibility of seeing Lucinda again to buoy me, and the master of the estate a harmless loon, I dared think that life at Beechwood might not be as bleak as I had assumed. My naïveté would nearly cost me my life.

Chapter Seven

The dread of delivering the mules for plowing haunted me through the rest of the morning. My encounter with Victor had made me quite wary of the animals here. Worse yet, I had no idea where I was to take the creatures, and I harbored a torturous fear of getting them there late.

So rather than wait until after dinner, I decided to lead them out before, to provide some insurance against my inexperience.

The mules proved more compliant than Victor, and only slightly less so than the poor stabled horses. I did not know where the "south forty" was, but I'd seen the sun rise and knew the orientation of south. I led the mules in that direction along the widest path through the cotton fields.

This was the first time I'd seen a cotton crop up close. The plants grew up waist high to me. The bright green leaves of summer had begun to brown and shrivel. Puffs of white fluff topped spindly, blackened sticks like offerings of the dead to the gods. The rows stretched out for acres to a distant tree line.

I came upon the slave quarters, deserted in the middle of the workday. The rude cabins were constructed of rough-hewn logs. Crumbling mud chinked the gaps. None had windows and, to my shock, some did not have doors, exposing the occupants to the elements year round. Dirt passed as floors and mildewed, mossy shingles provided haphazard roofing. I'd lived in rough surroundings and had deemed the shed at my uncle's farm fit for nothing but beasts. But these cabins brought shame to my heart, both for my poor appreciation of my relative abundance, and for the men of my race who would condemn others to such a meager existence.

I passed a group of slaves working this section of the fields. I was astounded to find that they were women and children. At that young

age, I was still quite naïve and had not been exposed to plantation life. I knew in some way that slaves worked the fields. But in my boy's assumptions, the men did such odious work, while the women and children were home, as the farm children were with me, perhaps engaged in less backbreaking chores. But here they all toiled as men, rags draped over their heads for protection from the raging sun, sweating coursing down their faces. All dragged cloth bags their equal in size, stuffed with harvested cotton. They bent and stooped and picked and plucked with hands made calloused by the rough, sharp edges of the dead cotton leaves.

The slaves paid me no heed as I passed. They watched the cotton and their fingertips. The group sang as they worked, but not the lusty type of tune I heard roll from saloon doors, nor the jaunty cadences sung by new soldiers on the way to war. These slaves intoned a dirge, a deep, mournful song of the slaves of Israel and their quest for freedom.

"Go down, Moses. Way down to Egypt's land. Tell o-old Pha-raoh, to let my people go."

Since the war's end, the plight of these people has been laid bare for all to see. But as a boy, I was told the lie we all let ourselves believe. Slaves were happy in their lot; slaveholders were fair and benevolent. This peculiar institution was for the good of all. Even if it took a war, we had to defend it and thus defend true civilization.

At fourteen, this was my first epiphany. These people did not look happy. These quarters did not look fit. Ramses seemed anything but benevolent, and I'd not seen his worst. Yet.

To my relief, I saw the plow up ahead by the side of the path, set to turn under the harvested cotton plants. All I wanted to do was get back to my humble stable and wash the memories of these slaves' sad existences from my mind.

I brought the mules in place and set their harness to the plow. Across the path and a few yards down, a young female slave sat beside the hard-packed earth. Her shoe was off, and she massaged her ankle. A grimace of great pain twisted her face.

From farther down the path came the ebony stallion Victor, carrying Ramses at full gallop. Ramses pulled up to the woman and stopped. A cloud of dust from the horse's hooves coated her. She averted her eyes.

"What're you doing there?" Ramses commanded.

"My ankle, sir," she said. Her squeaking voice trembled in fear. "I done twisted it, twisted it bad."

I did not doubt her veracity. The pained look upon her face and

her ministrations to her swollen ankle had preceded Ramses's arrival, and she had no reason to act such a scene for my benefit.

"More like malingering," Ramses said, "when there's harvesting to be done."

The young woman began to quake. Ramses pulled his coiled whip from his saddle. From her position, crouched in terror, face downcast, she could not see the smile that creased Ramses's face. But I could.

"Drop your shirt," he ordered.

"No, Master Ramses, please, I didn't do no malingering. My ankle—"

"Damn it, gyp, show your back to the lash or you'll show it your face!"

The woman began to sob and lowered her blouse to her waist. He skin was smooth as melted chocolate. She closed her eyes and mouthed a prayer.

Ramses's whip was a true instrument of terror, tipped at the end with metal sharp as a knife. He let the lash slip from his hand one coil at a time until the tip lay upon the ground. He reared back and cast the whip in the woman's direction. The tip sang as it sailed through the air. With a precision only years of practice could deliver, it tore across the poor woman's shoulder like a butcher's blade and left a trail of blood and open flesh.

The woman bit her lip and fought back a scream.

"Malingering's an expensive hobby," Ramses said. His eyes danced up and down the fresh blood upon her back. "Damn high priced."

With what seemed like little more than a flick and twist of the wrist, he propelled the whip around for another pass. This time it struck the woman's other shoulder and left a perfect *X* of running blood and ravaged flesh across her spine.

The second blow was too much for her to bear in silence. The woman shrieked in pain. The smile faded from Ramses's face, replaced with bright red, unmitigated rage.

"You dare cry out? You gonna complain 'bout this just reward for your laziness? Ungrateful damn bitch! I'll learn you to show silent appreciation."

With that he surrendered all attempts at finesse. He lit into her with the whip hard and fast. Over and over, the tip met its mark with every volley. With each strike, the woman cried out again, and with each cry the fury in Ramses's eyes burned brighter. The whip churned the woman's once supple back into a hash of red and brown.

Unsatisfied with lashing her at a distance, and livid at her refusal to cease her screams, Ramses leaped from his horse with a profusion of profanity. He folded his whip in thirds and, dragging his crippled leg beside him, closed to a foot from the suffering woman. Then he continued to beat her with the whip's looped ends until she finally dropped to the ground, face-first, unconscious.

Ramses towered over her, panting and sweating from the force of his fury and exertion. "See! You can be quiet if'n you just try. Goddamn bitch."

He tipped back his hat and wiped the sweat from his brow with his shirtsleeve, though the splattered blood on his pants did not seem to bother him. He returned the blood-soaked whip to the saddle and swung himself back up on Victor's saddle. The steed whinnied and flicked his head in what looked like approval. The horse trotted in my direction.

Ramses did not look shocked that I was there. My observation of his assault on the poor slave was of no more consequence to him than if he'd been seen by a rabbit or mouse. He might have known I was there all along, and indeed, standing next to two large mules, I would have been quite hard to miss. He stopped right beside me and stared down across his silvery nose. Blood speckled the right side. Anger filled his eyes, though only a fraction of what he'd shown the slave woman. Still more than enough to terrify me, having seen his capability for cruelty.

"Boy, what time I tell you to have those mules out here harnessed?"

"A-after dinner, sir."

"Well, damn it, does this seem like after dinner? Does your stomach feel full?"

I dared not attempt an answer.

"So look what you've done," he continued. "Them mules'll be out here two extra hours in the sun afore they start pulling that plow. What good's that going to do the mule? You're just baking them in this heat."

"I-I'm sorry," I offered.

"Next time you don't do as I say, there *will* be consequences. And nothin' untoward better happen to those mules."

He rode away to the main house and a dinner of his own. He'd nearly beaten a woman to death for nothing, but he was concerned that the mules needed to be kept out of the sun.

I looked over at the wounded woman, facedown in the dirt, glistening blood across her back like a wet, red vest. My first instinct was to rush to her side, to somehow get her to help. But the possible repercussions popped up like weeds, especially those that might come from the tip of Ramses's whip.

I was about to assist her, when three young male slaves came tearing across the cotton fields. One of them shouted and sobbed that he was coming to help her. A husband perhaps.

Now, from the moment I saw the three come running, I told myself that only their arrival kept me from rushing to the beaten slave's aid. But the lie rang hollow. Deep down, I knew the truth: that I was about to head in the opposite direction and protect myself rather than risk anything to save her.

To acknowledge yourself a coward at the age of fourteen fosters a self-loathing I hope none others ever have to experience. Before the week was out, I would pay the penance this sin demanded. And more.

Chapter Eight

That afternoon, I'd filled a wheelbarrow with the detritus from the horse stalls. The garden was the natural place to dump this fertilizer. But the gardens abutted the cookhouse, and dumping a load of manure there would bring the cooks out upon me as sure as kicking a hornets' nest earned sharp stings, and the cooks would have the hornets' ill temper to boot. I lifted the handles of my wheelbarrow and headed for the garden's farther edge, where I was certain to spy a proper location for my delivery.

Being midsummer, the garden held a bountiful yield, with all manner of greens, swaying stalks of corn and ripe tomatoes desperate for plucking. Knowing the allure of such a cornucopia to the starving slaves, the Powells built a great fence to separate these fruits of the earth from those who trod the cotton fields. I followed the fence's perimeter.

At the far edge, a gate in the fence stood open; the lock and chain hung on the fence post. Surely it would be refastened by nightfall, but for now it was my opportunity. I trundled my load through the gate and up a narrow pea gravel path between crop rows. I passed through stalks of corn that towered over my head, laden with deep green ears crowned with golden tassels. I exited the edge of the cornfield and came upon a wondrous sight.

A second trail of pea gravel cut across my path. On the far side were beds of roses, each a rectangle about eight feet by three, each a solid carpet of rich, blooming red. The bushes closest to me were about waist high, and the beds' heights diminished as newer-looking plantings sprouted farther from the path. The roses' sweet aroma tried to subdue the stink of my wheelbarrow's load.

Several beds away, there lay a fresh-turned patch of earth, brown and rich, a perfect rectangle, ready to host a new planting of roses. If ever a place begged for a delivery of manure, this was it. The broken

soil saved half the effort of turning the manure under.

I made my way between the rose beds and heaved my load upon the bare earth. I turned to work it in with my shovel and stopped short at the unexpected sight of a woman.

She stood shrouded in the clothes of high mourning. Black lace and dusky crinoline left nothing of her exposed to the sunlight. Despite the heat, velvet gloves covered her hands.

"That can't be so," she said, though she had no companion for her conversation. "No; the ball will go on this year. It wouldn't do to cancel it."

This had to be Master Powell's wife, whom Washington had mentioned. Only in the aftermath would I learn her name was Beulah.

There was no lack of women in mourning throughout the state. Grim weekly losses were posted on the steps of every courthouse, not just the one in De Kalb. But Miss Beulah's son Junius had died over a year ago. Her proper period of high mourning had passed. The combination of her dark mode of dress and her conversation with herself gave me pause.

"Well, the war is the war," she said. "But it's far from here, and our generals will never let it get this far south. We must uphold our traditions. It's what you're fighting for, isn't it?"

I wondered how she could not know that the war was about to come to her front doorstep, at least according to the aged Confederate captain. Surely she would at least know Vicksburg fell.

At this point, she noticed me standing on the other side of the planting. She looked at me through the lace veil across her face. She betrayed no shame or embarrassment at being overhead speaking to herself. Even through the lacework cover, her eyes looked tired.

"There, boy, who are you?"

"Jebediah, ma'am. I work the stables." I felt great discomfort in her presence: not the fear for my safety that I felt with Ramses, just an unease around someone unbalanced.

"Stables? Why, where is Marcus?"

"I wouldn't know, ma'am." I wondered how many years gone this Marcus was.

"Where's your family?" she said.

"I'm orphaned." I was shocked at my acknowledgement. It was the first time I'd recognized my new status. "My father died at Gettysburg."

A strange look that combined sympathy and elation crossed her face. She rounded the bushes and grasped my hands in her soft, velvet

gloves.

"Then you understand! My Junius made his ultimate sacrifice saving Richmond in the Seven Days' Battle. We both share the sweet agony of loss."

I restrained myself from contradicting her. There was nothing sweet about my loss, the cursed circumstance that led me to her stable and a life one step away from involuntary servitude.

She looked past me to the tilled patch of ground. "Master Powell has had them start another bed. Junius will be so happy."

"He liked roses, ma'am?"

"He is the roses, dear child. Can't you feel him here with us?"

Again, I kept my answer to myself, but she continued on without it.

"The mortal coil he shed lies here beneath us, buried amidst the roses. The more roses we plant, the stronger his presence here."

Concern flashed across her face. She looked to the side at nothing.

"Now, Junius, he'll understand. His papa was lost in the war. I can tell him about you." She looked back at me. "You understand how it works, don't you?"

I dared not dash the sense of happy anticipation she exuded. Though she made no sense at all, I nodded.

"It was the spell on the roses that did it. Well, Master Powell calls it a spell; I call it a blessing. Old Eleeza cast it so that the life within the roses could give Junius life in the beyond."

Grief had surely taken this woman's mind. I backed away a few inches. Her grip on my fingers tightened.

"Why, with enough roses," she said, "he shall live forever."

She dropped my hands and looked off at her empty side again. "Yes, yes, I know."

Then, as if I didn't exist, she shuffled off into the garden of roses, enmeshed in a deep one-way conversation with the humid air.

I turned back to my task and worked the manure into the fresh-turned earth. At my fledgling age, understanding much of what transpired between adults eluded me, but I understood her madness, perhaps because I understood her feeling of loss. Her firstborn son, the heir to the plantation, had been killed in combat. Only a fellow sufferer knew how unreal the loss felt, for at first it was just a name on a page on the courthouse lawn, a name that could as easily be wrong as right, with all the confusion in war. There was no evidence to back up the preposterous claim that her son or my father, who had been so full of

life, so much more real than reality, could actually cease to exist.

But while my loss was still in limbo, unconfirmed by physical proof, hers was not. Her son's corpse did come home. No doubt a horrid, damaged, putrefying, unrecognizable lump of cold flesh by the time it made the long trip south from Richmond, perhaps missing limbs where flying lead had found its mark. How could a mother reconcile what lay before her in a rude pine box with the strapping son she had sent off to fight a glorious war?

So she retreated into the comfort of superstition and spirits. And now she walked the roses, dressed in eternal mourning, and conversed with the dead son of her imagination. And so she held on to the edge of reality instead of falling fully into insanity's abyss.

I turned more earth with my dull spade and remembered the vision of my father the last night at my uncle's farm. I shuddered and sent up a prayer to the Lord, a prayer that Beulah Powell wasn't a portrait of my future.

Chapter Nine

My situation at Beechwood was tantamount to invisibility. Unless addressed by someone else, my presence passed unheeded. The stables were between the plantation house and the slave quarters, and it appeared the inhabitants of each area treated it as the domain of the other, a place to avoid, like the stretch of battlefield between Yankee and Southern lines. Even when I left the stable area, there was no acknowledgment of my existence unless my crossing interrupted someone's work. So the list of people who ignored me, which had started with my mother, grew much longer at Beechwood.

That afternoon, I discovered a bright side to this social shunning. At the edge of a patch of trees south of the stables, I loaded up a pull cart with hay for the horses. In the shade of the oaks, two teenage male slaves rested low to the ground. A few extra tools lay between them. They had apparently been sent on an errand to fetch them, and decided to extend the time allotted. My presence did not interrupt their conversation one syllable.

"He ain't coming back. Percy's just gone."

"Maybe he run off."

"I know Percy. Ain't got nothin' to run off with. Besides, why the Massuh didn't send the dogs out to find him if he run off? Because he ain't run off."

"They sent the dogs out after Old Eleeza when she run off, and they come back with nothin'. Maybe the dogs ain't no good no more."

"The dogs is good. He got Percy and took him off. I'm telling you, I saw it myself. Old Ramses came up in the night and ordered him to the big house. Then he gone."

"Who you tell?"

"I ain't tellin' no one but you. I don't want to be next."

"What'd he do to cross Ramses?"

"That's it—ain't done nothin'. Like Joshua done nothin'. Like Terrence done nothin'. Every disappeared one done nothin' but come of age."

I lay this conversation side by side with the snippet I'd overheard through the cookhouse window. Slaves were disappearing from the plantation. After witnessing the innocent woman's horrific beating, I knew Ramses certainly was capable of such a crime. From my experience, even his horse seemed capable of such a crime. A man who'd had his nose bitten off by a slave would certainly have a debt to settle there, a debt he might extend past the individual and on to the whole race.

As I walked the cart of hay back, I mulled whether Ramses satiated his bloodlust with the Powell family's consent. I perceived not. Mr. and Mrs. Powell didn't seem aware of what transpired around them. Ramses could do as he pleased, and they would never know. From the look of things in the fields, the real power in the plantation rested in his hands.

When Ramses returned Victor to the stable that night, thoughts such as these were still foremost in my mind. I shuddered as his dark figure approached from the shadows of the spreading oaks, imagining how Percy and his other victims had seen this same scene during their last hour on earth. The closer he came, the more frightened I grew. As he entered the stable, I was near frozen in place with sweat dripping from my temples.

He brought Victor up just short of me. I raised my eyes to the overseer and had to bite my lower lip to keep from screaming. Ramses cast a steely gaze down upon me. From my vantage, I could just make out the jagged stump of a nose under the silver tent on his face. His black eyes smoldered with contempt.

"What the hell is wrong with you, boy?"

"N-nothing."

"Then take the damn horse!"

I shook myself from my paralysis and grabbed Victor's reins. Ramses dismounted. Victor threatened me with a rumbled chuff.

"A day in the fields with the goddamn gyps, and then I have to trust Victor to an imbecile. You treat this horse like he was your mama, or you'll see the tail of my whip, you hear?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"Wait, you ain't got no mama, right? Nor papa?"

"No, sir."

Ramses broke into a smile that made my skin crawl. “Ain’t no one ’round to miss you at all.”

From another, such a comment would have been mere insult. But as he sauntered out of the stable, I was left quivering in my shoes, knowing that he’d just realized I could join his list of victims. Even the slaves wouldn’t ask what happened to me if I vanished.

Victor brought me back to the world with a vicious strike of his enormous head. I dropped the reins and he strode into his stall, no doubt knowing how much more difficult removing his saddle would be in those confines. And indeed I struggled with the task amidst a series of violent kicks and surprise nips. I realized that Victor behaved so well in the morning, not out of any respect for me, but out of fear of Ramses’s wrath if he wasn’t ready on time.

It took quite a while for sleep to overcome me that night. I stared for hours at the stable’s closed door, certain it would creak open and that Ramses would return. Bloody whip in hand, he’d drag me from my perch and take me to the dark place where he’d dispatched the other innocent boys. Had I any sense that I could survive outside the Beechwood gates, without food or money and trapped between the clashing armies, I might have run off just then.

In the wee hours, exhaustion finally won out over fear, but my sleep would not last long.

Chapter Ten

I awoke in a cold sweat in the stable loft. Despite the thick, warm night air, I trembled with a chill. I sensed a presence in the stable and thought that an intruder had entered and made some noise to awaken me. Ramses had come after all.

I realized Ramses would have no need to employ stealth. It had to be a thief. The only thing of value to steal was Victor or perhaps Ramses's saddle. Neither was a loss I wanted to answer for.

A glow emanated from the stable floor: not the flickering yellow of fire, but something softer, fainter, sulfurous. I crawled to the edge of the loft and peered over. My heart stopped.

My father's spirit stood in the center of the stable. He still wore the crisp, new uniform he'd worn off to war. His body had a strange, luminous quality, as if tiny candles burned within him, and his flesh and clothing let the light filter through. He stared up at me in the loft, as if he had been waiting for me to show my face and look down. His eyes held the most profound sadness.

"Papa? Papa!"

He did not answer, did not show any sign of recognition. He turned, walked toward the closed stable door, and then passed through it.

The sight of his specter engendered no fear, though one might assume it would. Instead, all I felt was a deep longing to stay in his presence. I scrambled down the ladder and burst out the door after him. He was already a ways down the path from the stable, farther than his spirit could have walked in those seconds. I ran after him.

Fast as I ran, I gained no ground. He walked at the edge of the cotton field, and as I closed on him, he was suddenly a hundred yards deeper in the plantings. I closed again, and then he was off to the right, near the field's edge. He never looked back, never checked on my

progress. He entered a trail into the woods.

"Papa!"

I rushed after him blindly into the woods, hands ahead of me fending off branches and low-hanging moss. My pulse raced.

I caught sight of his opalescent figure ahead, beside an ancient oak. Lightning had struck the tree and split it near in two. As I closed on the oak, he stepped around to the other side. I rounded the trunk and jerked to a halt. He was gone, but I'd discovered something else.

A low fire burned in a small clearing. An old slave woman sat beside it on the stump of a long-dead oak. In the darkness behind her rose the barest outline of a haphazard shack fabricated of cast-off wood.

She looked up at me from the flames with surprise. Her face was long and deeply lined, her nose narrower and longer than most Negroes'. The sharpened white bones that pierced her earlobes flashed in the firelight. Strange symbols covered the red sash about her forehead. She rose with the slow deliberation of the old and pained.

"Who are you? How did you find this place?"

Normally, I would have balked at telling the truthful answer. But her dress and demeanor led me to trust that she would believe me. "I followed my father's spirit."

Understanding dawned upon her weathered face. "Yes. He could see what lies hidden from the rest."

While her camp was in the woods, her shack and fire were hardly concealed. "Hidden?"

"Within the circle."

She pointed to the ground behind me. A trail of rough salt crossed the path. It continued in a circle around the clearing, interrupted at four equidistant points by piles of bleached human bones, one with a skull atop it.

"With the spells of my Cherokee mother, I've blinded the living from all within the circle. Her bones stand guard for me."

My skin crawled as I realized that the skull whose dark sockets stared at me from the right was the crazy old woman's mother. A Cherokee mother explained this woman's combination of Indian and Negro features. It also explained her more educated speech, as I'd been told that the Civilized Tribe had even a written language and mastery of English. But in Mississippi, half-black still meant all slave if that person fell into the wrong hands, as she certainly had.

"The slave hunters passed me by," she said. "Their hounds never

caught my scent."

"Wait, are you Eleeza?"

"You've come from Beechwood? But from the look of you, you are no Powell."

"I work in the stables, nearly a slave for the Powells."

She cast me a scornful look. She slid up the sleeve of her blouse. Her ropy arm carried the scars of multiple lashings. "When you can show skin like this, tell me of your life as a slave."

I grew red-faced with shame. Poor though my position was, it did not compare with the lives of those enslaved.

"You cast a spell on the roses there," I said, to change the subject.

"Yes. Missus Powell had brought me into the main house to work. My age made me unfit for the fields, and she saw I had more education than the rest. For slaves, she treated us better than most.

"When news came of her son's death, she was inconsolable. She never left the house, barely left her room. In a moment of weakness, as a mother, I felt compassion for her. With my mother's magic, I made her favorite place, the rose garden, a weak spot in the veil between this world and the next. She could feel closer to her son's spirit there."

"Why did you run away if life in the main house wasn't bad?"

"After I enchanted the roses, it got bad. Master Powell flew into a rage when she told him what I'd done. Said he'd 'brook no witchcraft', as he called it. He had me shackled and arranged to send me to New Orleans to be sold, as a symbol to the rest of the slaves of what following witchcraft would bring them all."

"How did you escape?"

She laughed. Her few remaining teeth were like kernels of blackened corn. "A hex bag is stronger than iron bindings, and let me slip from the Powells' chains in the night."

"Head north," I said. "The Union soldiers are close. Lincoln has freed all slaves."

"I am too old for such a journey. My Cherokee half is part of this land. And my African half still has family in Beechwood."

"They come see you here?"

"No one sees me here. The risk is too great. They would talk about it, especially my grandson, or someone would follow them out here. My grandson's father has promised to look out for him. It just feels better to be close to them."

Just like it felt better to have my father's pocket watch in my bag.

"Ramses is a twisted man," she said. "He'd not be above torturing

one of them if he thought they could give up an escaped slave."

"I fear he's worse than that. Slaves have been disappearing, disappearing after he takes them from their quarters at night."

"Are they sold?"

"No one knows. They just vanish."

"If they were sold," she said, "Master Powell would advertise it, strike some fear into the rest."

"There is fear enough from not knowing. There is no mention of the boys again. I would not put it past Ramses to kill them just for sport."

"This is a bad sign. Perhaps the spirit of your father brought you here to tell me about this." She looked across her shoulder at the eastern sky. "You must go back while you still have darkness to hide you."

She was right. I had no idea what time I had woken up, or how long I'd been awake. Being seen by the slaves around their homes might be as bad as being seen by the Powells around theirs. In addition, slave hunters regularly patrolled the woods. How would I explain my presence? The rest of the world wouldn't duplicate Eleeza's blind acceptance of the tale of my father's ghost.

Eleeza turned and disappeared into the shadows of her shack. The fire instantly shrank to embers, as if turned down like the wick of a lantern. There would be no answers for the many questions I still entertained. I backed away from her camp, careful to step over and not through the circle of salt in the sand.

Chapter Eleven

My trek back through the woods was much more deliberate then my headlong flight in. During my advance, the force of my father had drawn me forward, but on this return trip, fear of discovery shoved me from behind. Each snap of a branch or rustle of a leaf conjured visions of slave hunters prowling the woods or runaways ready to kill to stay secreted.

At the forest's edge, I found myself at a different spot from where I'd entered. I was beside the slave quarters, not in the midst of the cotton fields. The most direct route to the stable was though the warren of log cabins. Exhaustion and fear overrode what little caution youth kindled, and I made a dash for the lee of the nearest cabin.

No sooner had I ducked into the shadow than I heard the door of that cabin burst open. Lantern light lit the window frame above my head. My heart slammed to a gallop and I tried to make myself small. I closed my eyes, as if not seeing meant I could not be seen.

"William!" growled Ramses. "Get the hell up, boy."

The whimpering sobs of a woman responded. "Master Powell done promised William would be treated different."

"You see Master Powell in the doorway or you see me?" Ramses said.

"Leave him be, please," she begged. "Take me instead."

Ramses laughed. "Woman, you ain't got what this boy's gonna deliver. Not by a furlong." The tip of his whip snapped against the wall by my head so loudly that I flinched at the impact. "Let loose that boy before I split you to the bone."

The woman cried.

"It's gonna be fine, Mama," a teenage boy's voice said. The reassuring words crackled with fear. "I'll be back right quick. Right, Massuh Ramses?"

The whip cracked again.

"Just get out," Ramses said. "I ain't sayin' it again."

Something scuffed and shuffled inside the cabin.

"Breathe a word of this, woman," Ramses said, "and you'll be on the block in New Orleans to the lowest bidder."

The door creaked open and slammed shut. I crawled around in the dirt to the front of the cabin. Ramses stood at the boy's back, lashing his victim's hands together. His metal nose glowed in the low moonlight, and without his hat, the leather straps around his head looked like bindings that kept him from exploding from rage. The boy looked to be about my age, perhaps a shade older, but the poor condition of the slaves made it hard to judge. Ramses frog-marched him up the path toward the main house, a strange dance of shoving the boy and dragging his club foot that made them look like the shadow of some wounded, four legged animal.

From within the cabin came the muffled wail of the bereaved mother, no doubt screamed full force into her bedding. Her sorrow cut me to the bone. As soon as Ramses was a safe distance up the path, I scrambled across the road and between the other cabins. I ran straight for the stable.

My quicker speed and more direct route allowed me to beat Ramses back to the big house. From the inside of the stable, I watched him shove the boy to the rear of the main house. He pulled open the door to a buried root cellar between the main house and the cookhouse. He shoved the boy in. He followed him down and pulled the door shut behind him.

With the earth to hide his cries, there was no telling what tortures the boy might be enduring, but my imagination certainly attempted to fill in the gaps.

It dawned upon me that this was my second failure to take action as a man. First I'd let a woman be beaten, then left her in agony to save myself. Now I had witnessed a kidnapping and the possible prelude to murder, and hidden myself in the shadows in response. I was no match for Ramses, but between the other boy and I, we might have had a chance. I feared this cowardice in the face of evil could be my lot in life.

In the main house, a light came on in one of the ground floor rooms. I made out a shadowy mass of long hair moving beyond the thin curtains and recognized Lucinda. A piano started to play.

The Powells were so unaware of what evil unfolded in the earth beneath the plantation that Lucinda could play sweet music while a

boy met some grisly fate.

But still, the burden of taking action was more than I thought I could bear. I crawled up into my loft, thankful that I had made it back undetected and terrified for the boy now trapped underground. I can say for certain that I slept not a wink that night, consumed with thoughts of the witch in the woods and the doomed boy beneath the root cellar doors.

Chapter Twelve

The break of dawn came and I rejoiced. The sun burned away the shadows of the night, and I rushed to begin my day, to busy myself with chores and to purge my mind of the previous night's horrors.

But Victor was my first chore. The horse eyed me from the moment my feet touched the stable floor with a look far too knowing for such an animal. He could not be aware of what I'd seen, yet he seemingly smiled at me, the same look one friend would give another who now shared a great, dark secret, a welcome to a twisted fraternity. We both knew the full depths of Ramses's depravity.

As with the previous morning, he allowed himself to be saddled and prepared, lest his master be kept waiting. When I finished and lashed his reins to a post, he looked down at me and snorted, as if to say, "Good day, brother."

Ramses arrived, musket upon one shoulder, club foot scraping a deeper gouge in the earth today. Was he tired from his torturous exertions the night before? Had William given him a good fight before dying? I certainly prayed so.

With each step closer he took, a great new anxiety welled up within me. Perhaps he'd seen me last night, but with his hands full of kidnapped slave, he'd said nothing. Now, alone, he'd whip me into a permanent silence. I stood frozen in fear by Victor's side. The overseer entered the stable, his weathered face contorted into a snarl. He tapped his coiled whip against his thigh. Two black eyes bored into me like sharpened awls.

"You gonna bring me my horse, boy, or do I need to whip you into action this morning?"

I jumped and unlashed Victor's reins. I led the horse to Ramses's side. He slipped the musket into its custom holster and held the whip

in one hand. He mounted the horse, and as soon as he was seated, brought the whip's hard handle down across my face. The force spun my head to the side and opened a red-hot gash in my cheek. I shrank away.

"Boy, yesterday I gave you grace for your slowness, but you keep movin' like molasses, you'll see more than this whip's handle. Get me?"

I clutched the searing side of my face. Warm blood seeped through my fingers. The pain brought tears to my eyes. I remembered what happened to those who cried out in pain. I nodded without looking up.

"Might as well have a damn gyp in here." He sighed. He spun Victor on his hind legs and left the stable at a canter.

I fingered the wound upon my face. While it bled, it was not deep, little more than a scratch. But the impact would leave a bruise, and I could already sense the swelling. Eleeza would be satisfied. I had finally tasted the whip.

At the bell's toll, I made my way to breakfast, starved from my long night's actions. Whether William's mother followed Ramses's order of silence or not, word of her son's kidnapping somehow spread. The cookhouse was rife with rumors as I picked up my morning porridge.

William's disappearance was big news. But another development was bigger still. His mother was dead, found hanged from a rafter in her cabin.

I nearly dropped my bowl as I overheard that news. She'd most certainly been alive when I'd departed, and Ramses would not have dragged his crippled foot all the way back there to kill a woman he'd certainly terrified into silence. She could have only died at her own hand. And who could blame her?

However, the rumor mill ground out the rest of the story with a most strange twist. Ramses wasn't mentioned as William's kidnapper. The consensus was that the boy had absconded, that his escaped grandmother had come back to show him the way to freedom through the Underground Railroad after his mother's suicide. The women took this as proof that Eleeza was alive and free.

No bit of news could have distressed me more. As if this wicked tale did not have enough twists and turns, now Ramses's latest victim was the grandson of the witch in the woods.

I returned to care for the pathetic horses. After they were fed, watered and brushed, I turned my energy to the two vacant stalls and the marbleized masses within each. With pitchfork and shovel, I hacked at the floor of a stall until I hit bare earth. Shovelful by

shovelful I excavated as if uncovering an Egyptian ruin. So hard was the detritus I did not even take it to the garden as fertilizer, and just dumped it far beyond the stable.

As I worked closer to the center, my shovel struck something with a sharper, hollow sound to it. With great effort I worked the spade underneath it. Despite my exertions, it would not dislodge. I slipped a small log under the shovel's handle and pressed my weight against it like a lever. The mass stirred a bit, and I bounced upon it once, twice and then a third time.

At this last attempt, the item broke free. The shovel collapsed to the ground and I with it. The excavated item flew into the air and landed inches in front of my eyes.

A horse's skull stared me in the face, eye sockets blackened with stinking mold, insects crawling upon patches of desiccated remains. I screamed and threw the skull across the stall. I scrambled away and pulled myself to my feet. Inside the stall, a gouge in the detritus yawned where the missing head had lain. The tips of white bones poked from the edges.

A horse had died here and reposed unburied until right now. How long ago had that been? How much straw had been shoveled upon the rotting carcass? What beasts had skulked into the stable in the night to feast upon its remains? The concept made my skin crawl.

I looked away only to see the adjacent stall, with its duplicate mound of undetermined origin. My stomach churned at the realization that another corpse no doubt lay there, awaiting my exhumation.

Outside the sad nags whinnied. No wonder their spirits were as broken as their bodies. To stand and eat and sleep alongside the carcasses of their fellows would be too much to bear. In defense of their sensibilities, though I may have given them too much credit, as I continued my work through the day, I took the wheelbarrows full of corpse out the opposite door and dumped them out of the horses' sight.

My mind was never far from thoughts of the previous night, and this revelation brought one question back again. What did Ramses do with the bodies of those he killed? I imagined the root cellar as a crypt filled with his victims' corpses, bodies stacked for display or perhaps stood up against the walls. I could barely stand the gruesome idea of it, the rank stench the cellar had to exude.

After dinner, these morbid thoughts compelled me to inspect the root cellar entrance, though the voice of self-preservation spoke to the contrary.

A thick chain and a padlock secured the doors. I was relieved to

make that my excuse for ending my investigation and returning to the stable. I did not even sniff the air around the door, nor listen for the cries of anyone trapped within.

Chapter Thirteen

The afternoon brought the stables a visitor, one only the thoughts of recent horrific events had kept from my mind.

As I shoveled the last of the first stall's equine graveyard away, Miss Lucinda floated into the stables. She stepped upon tiptoes, as if she danced to some music none but she could perceive. Mud splattered the bottom hem of her pale yellow dress. Her blonde curls were askew and one long strand hung down across her right eye. She looked upon common objects with wonder, traced the outline of a hinge with her fingertip.

She was a beauty; none could deny that. But this unkempt look of freedom made her doubly attractive, seductive in a way that I was only on the edge of understanding at that age. My pulse throbbed in my ears. The shovel slipped in my sweating palms.

She looked across the stalls and noticed me for the first time, though I had been standing in plain sight. She smiled and waltzed over to my side. She smelled of the roses in the garden. She reached out and gave my neck the faintest caress with her fingertip. My knees grew weak.

"Stable boy, dear stable boy." I didn't care that she knew not my name. "Hard at work among the dung and straw. Do you enjoy your work here?"

I could scarcely speak in her presence, and her touch had nearly made me pass out. I mouthed some silent syllable and she continued.

"We all have work we must do, though we may detest it, don't we?" Her hand swept across the floor as if gesturing to a carpet of gold. She looked up at me with glassy eyes. "You must take things out, I must take things in, but it's all the same, isn't it? We all work for the common good, for what is best for the family. Isn't that so?"

I could scarcely manage a nod.

She twirled around the stable floor, teetered at the end of her spin and caromed off the far wall. I rushed to help her, but she righted herself and held me at bay with an upturned palm.

"Now I have my helper," she said. She patted a pocket in her skirt, and two tiny bottles clinked together. "But you, poor boy, have to manage all on your own."

She stepped forward and held my head in her soft, white hands. A second curl had joined the first across her right eye. She appraised my checks and hair. Below my belt, I grew hot and hard, a shocking new sensation.

"But soon you'll be beyond all this. The last was not enough, though I did my dirty part as I should. It's about the purity, about milk untainted by dirt, about magnolia blossoms in their first perfect bloom. You understand, don't you, stable boy?"

I did not, but her touch rendered the world immaterial. She reached down and ran her hand between my legs. I quivered and caught my breath.

"Ah, you'll be ready," she said.

She drifted away from me, like a ship sailing off to sea. She passed from the shadowed stable into the daylight, flapped her arms like some great butterfly, and tiptoed in the direction of the rose garden.

I leaned against the shovel to relieve the throbbing, swollen pain between my legs. I watched her disappear from view, drinking in every second like she was water in the desert.

She made no sense. No matter what she stirred in me, she made no sense. Nor did her father, nor her mother. Perhaps the loss of Junius had driven them all to lunacy; perhaps the fundamental evil of the servitude they forced on others had done it. Whatever the cause, they would be no help in stopping Ramses's wicked ways. I shuddered to think that the task might fall upon my shoulders alone.

Chapter Fourteen

That night I slept uneasy, so surrounded by the awful news of the evil, afraid of what Ramses might do to me if he became aware I knew his guilt in the disappearances.

In a dream that night, I stood in the cotton fields. Mist shrouded the edges, so it appeared that the skeletal plants stretched on forever. Malevolence seemed to seep up out of the ground, to threaten to climb up, wrap around me and pull me down in an embrace of permanent damnation. My skin crawled with the need to get out of that place.

There was no clear direction back to the stables, but anywhere had to be better than here. I ran up one row.

Beulah Powell appeared out of the mist, still clothed for mourning, her lace veil draped across her face. I jerked to a stop.

"Junius is here," she said. "In the earth, in the air, all around us. My son isn't dead; he'll live forever."

Her voice was high and sounded far away. It made the hairs on my arms stand erect. I turned to run the other way and leave this grief-crazed woman to herself.

Master Powell blocked my way. His gray hair stood even more wildly askew. Each of his eyes looked in an opposite direction, though he faced me head-on.

"Boy, fetch the carriage. We must take Junius to the ball. We can't be late."

I jumped the cotton plants beside me and broke out in a run through the rows of plants. The rough bushes tore at my thin pants and scratched my legs.

A young slave woman appeared out of nowhere to block my way, quite lovely to look at, but her head lay at such an angle that it rested upon her shoulder. A red ring of raised skin encircled her neck. She stared at me through vacant, clouded eyes.

"William?" she said. It was the same voice I'd heard in the cabin from which Ramses had taken his last victim. "Where are you, William? I've come for you."

From behind me sounded Victor's unmistakable whinny: part laughter, part threat, all terrifying. I spun in time to see a dark shape in the mist, a thick-set rider in a slouch hat upon a great shadow horse. Hooves thundered and a whip cracked.

"William?" the mother called again, louder. "Where's my boy?"

Ramses and Victor's dark hulk circled us at a gallop, just barely obscured by the mist, cutting off any avenue of escape.

"William," she called again. "Come to me, boy."

Somehow, in my subconscious, I thought that if she remained quiet, the mist would hide us from Ramses, as it partially hid him from us. Her calling out was just a beacon for him to follow.

"You must be quiet," I whispered. "He'll find us both!"

The look on her face didn't change, still impassive and far off in another world. "William!" she shrieked.

Ramses's gravelly laughter filled the air. Victor whinnied. The horse turned and charged the two of us. As it broke through the mist, I had my first full view of the apparition.

Victor's bulging eyes burned red as hot coals. Ramses sat high in the saddle, his face a chilling, twisted snarl. In the darkness, his eyes matched the fire in his horse's. So bright did they burn that the sides of his metal nose glowed crimson. The brim of his hat cast the rest of his face in shadow.

Ramses drew his whip and reared back to strike me. I ducked and covered my head with my arms.

The whip never struck. The pounding of the horse's hooves stopped. Everything vanished.

"Tell Eleeza. Now!" my father's voice boomed in the darkness.

Chapter Fifteen

I sat straight up in the loft, wide awake. I could practically hear the thunder of my heart in my chest. My hands shook with fear.

The memory of my father's command still echoed in my head. Unlike a dream, the memory did not fade with my return to consciousness, and the imperative he gave me seemed no less commanding than it had been in the nightmare. This was a message from the spirit of my father.

Eleeza sent an unnatural fear through me. Her shack was far off, through woods filled with wild animals and dangerous men. I could justly say that none of this really was my concern. All those reasons to stay tucked in the stable made sense.

Until I remembered the slave whipped nearly to death at Ramses's hand, the woman whom I would have left to die in my selfishness. And there was the boy I'd let be kidnapped without even a protest. Under the weight of all my failures, only one course of action made any sense at all.

I climbed down from the loft. I'd had quite a dance getting Victor unsaddled tonight, and had the bruised leg to prove it. As I passed his stall, he whinnied loudly enough to wake the Powells in the main house. He rammed himself against the stall door with a crash. All the stalls shook. Dust snowed down from the loft above. But the latch and hinges held.

I hurried out into the night. I was certain that with such a strong declaration in my dream, my father's spirit would again guide me to Eleeza's hidden camp. But the dark night remained still. His luminous ghost did not appear, to my great disappointment.

As best I could, I retraced the path he'd shown me the night before, crossing the cotton fields that had so recently haunted my dream, tramping through the moss-draped woods that began on the

plantation's edge. Just as I became certain I was lost, I arrived at the last place my father's spirit stood, beneath the old lightning-shattered oak.

But when I turned to the left, Eleeza's camp wasn't there. No shack, no fire, not even the clearing I'd stood in. My first fear was that my earlier discovery had driven her to move to a new, unknown location.

Then I remembered the circle of salt and her enchantment of invisibility. Without my father's spirit here to part that curtain, perhaps her camp was still here, but hidden.

I took slow, deliberate steps in what I surmised to be the shack's direction. With my ninth step forward, the encampment shimmered into view. A fire blazed before Eleeza's shanty. Eleeza stood sprinkling something into an iron pot suspended above the flames. She looked upon me with surprise.

"What are you doing back here?"

I couldn't just blurt out the horrible news of her familial deaths, and opted for a partial truth. "I had a dream in which my father told me to return."

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know." I paused and grasped at a straw for conversation that might enhance her mood to soften the later blow. "You should know the roses you enchanted have given Mrs. Powell great solace. She walks among them every day. She buried Junius among them."

"No; that can't be." The old woman looked terrified. "There was no body returned."

"It came home later, after you escaped."

Eleeza stepped away from the fire and paced in a tight circle. She rubbed her hands against her temples, eyes clamped shut.

"This is a bad thing. I had to cast a strong spell on the roses because the body was lost, the soul tied to the flesh somewhere far away. If the roses touch the elements of the departed…do you know what that would awaken?"

This revelation that I had hoped would ease her mind before the bad news' arrival had the opposite effect. She was off on some superstitious tangent. I needed to get to the point.

The old woman wrung her gnarled hands together and paced faster.

"Eleeza, there is something else of greater consequence I am afraid I must share."

I paused, but had to do my duty.

"I have bad news about your daughter and her son, William."

Eleeza stopped, then stepped to within a foot of me. Her face fell into shadow; her voice turned hard as ironwood. "What happened to them?"

"I fear that William has become Ramses's latest victim. As I left you last night, I witnessed it myself. Then, such was her grief, his mother took her own life."

The old woman's frail body began to shake with rage. Her fists balled up, and the muscles in her arms tensed like knotted rope.

"They'll pay for this," she said. "After I cast the spell of the roses for them, they threatened to sell me, and now they kill my family."

"It's not the Powells," I said. "Just Ramses. Whatever Mr. Powell did to you—"

"Work with the Devil and you earn the Devil's due," she said. "No slaveholding family deserves a lick of compassion. I learned that lesson once already."

She went into her shack and reappeared in a flash. She handed me a tiny burlap sack, tied closed with a black string. It smelled of swampy decomposition. She pressed it into my palm.

"This isn't your doing, boy," she said. "This hex bag will keep you from reaping what they have sown."

Something oily oozed from the little bag onto my palm. I resisted the urge to drop the ridiculous, disgusting offering, but instead shoved it in my pocket. I wiped my palm on my shirt.

"My mother taught me her magic, and to use only for good," Eleeza said. "Never for evil, never for revenge. What have been my rewards? Slavery, loneliness, my daughter raped and impregnated, and now even that sliver of family taken from me."

Hatred blazed in her eyes. She threw a log hard upon the fire. An explosion of burning cinders flew up in the air.

I thought of Lucinda's alluring beauty, her innocence in all this.

"I swear to you," I said. "The daughter certainly isn't involved."

Eleeza pulled some herbs from her pocket and threw them into the fire. It fulminated in blue flame and sent up a white cloud like a mushroom.

"Silence!" Her face was now a mask of twisted rage. "I've offered you protection from what I'm about to unleash. Save yourself before I revoke it."

I weighed her words and the fury she displayed, and judged that

I'd not convince her she was wrong. I backed out of the salt circle, and the scene transformed back to a dark, quiet place in the woods. Even the smoky scent of the fire disappeared.

The horrible harbinger feeling dropped upon me again, the one that had foretold my father's death, the one that had predicted Beechwood would be hell. This time, it felt more foreboding and terrifying than both of those combined.

Chapter Sixteen

I left the woods and cut back across the plantation to the stable. I turned a plan over and around in my mind. I could not stop whatever Eleeza was about to do. I tried to convince myself that she was a crazy old woman in the woods, that she could no more make magic than I could turn manure into silver. The supposedly bewitched roses were just a convenient fantasy for Mrs. Powell, a crutch to support the weight of her grief.

But there were ways she could take revenge that required no supernatural skills, like setting the plantation alight or returning to rouse other slaves to rebellion.

A bit of me did fear that she could tap some unearthly power. I could not deny that Eleeza could hide her camp from my sight, that she appeared to have some command of the campfire's flames. There was indeed some magic she could summon, and it was best that I think the worst of her abilities.

Ramses should get what he deserved. An eye for an eye, as the Good Book said. But the Powells had no hand in his depraved behavior. The parents were mad, and a woman of Lucinda's beauty couldn't even imagine such horrible acts as Ramses had committed. It was up to me to warn them. They could offer Ramses up, take him to the woods and leave him there for Eleeza to exact revenge for her family and the other victims. At a minimum, the Powells could flee, leave the plantation for a few days, and let Eleeza hunt Ramses down.

I could not barge into the main house at this hour of the night and wake the family. The house servants would throw me out. I resolved to wait until morning, to let Ramses collect Victor and head out to the fields, and then to warn the Powells, especially Lucinda, of the danger they faced.

As I approached the stable, I was quite lost in these thoughts,

including visions of Lucinda's warm embrace for the hero who saved her from whatever grisly fate Ramses would endure. Perhaps her other favors would follow…

I crossed the dark stable threshold.

"There you are!" Ramses said.

I stopped cold. Sweat popped from by brow. Even in the stable's darkness, I could see the faint, reflective glow of Ramses's metal nose.

"Told you the rules 'bout being out at night, 'bout consorting with the gyps." He stepped forward from the shadows. He held his whip at the ready. "Should of paid me mind. Makes this whole thing a mite easier."

Sheer terror either freezes one on the spot or sends the burst of energy to flee. This time it gave me the latter. I turned and ran to the dark main house, the only hope I had for salvation from this killer madman.

Ramses's whip flew out from the stable like the arm of a giant squid. It wrapped around my ankle, and the metal tip stung my calf. Ramses yanked it, and I dropped to the ground face-first. He reeled me in across the rough path like a hooked fish. I scrambled in vain to seize something to arrest my retrieval. He dropped, knee first, upon my back. My lungs collapsed at his weight. He lashed my hands together behind me. From the stable came Victor's haughty whinny.

"Gyps can't outrun the whip," he said. "Ain't no way you can."

He yanked me to my feet. His sweat smelled of whiskey.

"Please, sir," I begged as I gasped for breath. "Let me be. I won't tell the Powells. I won't tell a soul."

He shoved me forward. "Boy, you don't even know what you don't know."

And just as he'd pushed William the night before, so he thrust me ahead of him, one foot-dragging step behind me with each prod. We passed the silent cookhouse and approached the door to the root cellar. The chain and lock hung open.

"Look, I'll run off," I volunteered. "Cross the Union lines and head north to Tennessee, or Kentucky, or even Canada. No one will ever know anything about what you've done."

Ramses pulled open the root cellar door. The damp, moldy smell of earth rose up from the inky depths. He stood me on the top step inside. Visions of a pile of Ramses's victims flashed into my head. Their rictus-frozen mouths no doubt awaited me below.

"Ain't no one gonna know this way neither," he said

He shoved me forward. I stumbled down a short flight of steps and fell, back first, upon the bare earth. Ramses stood in silhouette above me, framed by the open doorway.

"For what it's worth, boy, this ain't right. Gyps is one thing, half-breeds another. But white ain't right. Times is desperate though. Still, I ain't doin' the final delivery this time."

He kicked shut the door and plunged the cellar into total darkness. The chain clattered through the handles on the other side, and the lock clicked shut. I felt buried alive.

What Ramses had said made no sense, nor did leaving me down here by myself. Whatever despicable deed he had planned, why not finish it now?

But, as he said, I didn't even know what I didn't know.

Chapter Seventeen

No bodies surrounded me. My terror that the dead boys lay in wait for me down here proved unfounded.

A dim light appeared to my right. The root cellar wasn't just a sunken room. A corridor stretched off into the direction of the main house, with a low light at the far end. Before I could even think what that might mean, the sweet, echoing notes of piano music floated down the long passage. I remembered Lucinda's playing the other night. If she was at the end of this passageway, perhaps I had hope of escape after all.

I rose and staggered down the tunnel, hunched to protect my head, shoulders scraping the bare earthen walls. The rope bit into my wrists. The light grew brighter, the music louder. At the passage's end, I climbed a set of steps through an open trap door. I stepped into the parlor of the main house.

I squinted against the brighter light and looked about the room. To the left stood an armless leather lounge chair. To the right, Lucinda sat at a cream-colored piano trimmed in gold. Her hair was brushed back into a ponytail. She wore a red dress cut in the same style as the other day's green one, although this dress was slit up the side to reveal her leg to just above her knee. She turned to me and smiled a crooked, lazy smile.

She rose and approached. Tiny bottles clinked in her pocket. When she reached me, she wrapped her arms around my shoulders and clasped her hands behind my neck. My manly region caught fire like dried tinder.

One hand still cradling the back of my head, she reached down and drew a small medicine bottle from her pocket. She pulled the cork with her teeth, spit it aside and laughed.

"This will help you relax. It always helps me through." She pinched

the back of my neck and my mouth opened. She poured the contents of the bottle inside me. It tasted of alcohol and something else, something sharper and stronger. I swallowed. It burned all the way down my throat and hit my stomach like a cannon shot.

A few drops remained in the bottle's bottom.

"This can't be wasted," she said. "It's such good medicine." She tapped them onto the tip of her outstretched, pink, full tongue. She ran the tip around her lips and sighed. "Oh, I need some of that back from you."

She grabbed my head with both hands and gave me a violent, passionate kiss. My mind swam, and then she thrust her tongue inside my mouth as if in search of any unswallowed drop of the drug she'd given me. When our lips parted, the combination of her passion and the opiate she'd given me brought forth a euphoria I'd never experienced before, and would never again. My knees grew weak.

"Lucinda…" Her name fell from my lips like a prayer.

The drug opened up my perception. This wasn't what I'd feared at all. Whatever Ramses had done to the other boys, he hadn't done it to me. My kidnapping hadn't led to murder; it led to love. Lucinda must have bade him capture me for her, knowing her father would never approve of her being with an orphaned stable boy. What other way could we be together?

She untied my hands and backed me up to the lounge chair. She pushed me down upon the supple leather, and I lolled back, arms out to my sides. A great tent rose between my legs. She pulled a second bottle from her pocket and drank down the contents. She threw the empty bottle at the fireplace and missed.

"That should be enough," she said.

She pulled open my trousers, and released from its restraints, my manhood rose to stark attention. She shed her dress and it slipped down to her ankles. All she wore was a black corset that raised and displayed her full, supple breasts. The dark color accentuated the milky perfection of her skin. The sweeping curves of her legs arced up to end at the downy beauty below her waist. I'd never dreamed such splendor existed.

She reached down and caressed me. My entire body shuddered in response. I couldn't help but moan with pleasure, too addled to be embarrassed by my reaction.

"I need to make you a man," she said. Her words were slower and slurred. "Only a man will do. Are you ready?"

I'd have happily let her push me from a cliff if she'd asked. I slid up on the bed to make room for her.

She climbed up and straddled me. She stroked me several times and then tucked me inside of her. She lowered herself upon me. Her wet, tight womanhood made every inch of me tingle. She rocked back and forth, and I roiled with rounds of ecstasy. With each stroke, her swollen breasts passed before my face; the lace of her corset tickled my nose. By the third twitch of her waist I lost control of myself. I closed my eyes and grabbed her. My back arched and I exploded inside her. The world in my head went white, and joy as I'd never experienced rippled through every muscle in my body. No experience that ever followed would match this one's intensity.

"Lucinda," I whispered. I smiled such that I feared my face would split. "My love."

I opened my eyes. She did not share my delight. She had instead the look of one who'd just finished a task, and an unpleasant one, like downing a dose of castor oil.

"Lucinda?"

She raised herself off me. My spent, flaccid manhood flopped down between my legs. All the bliss driven by love—and its artificial, opiate cousin I'd ingested—drained away. Lucinda stood and took two quick steps from the bed, as if repelled. She pulled a cloth from beneath her corset and wiped between her legs with the sharp downward strokes reserved for scraping mud from fine boots.

The door to the room burst open. Washington and another big house slave rushed in to the side of the bed. Washington's ice-blue eyes looked cold as winter.

The scant remainder of my postcoital daze burned away, replaced with panic. I realized there were darker designs to my abduction than I'd imagined, and love had nothing to do with them.

Chapter Eighteen

I raised my pants just in time for the two men to grab my arms and yank me off the chair. I struggled against their iron grips, but my encounter with Lucinda had left me physically drained.

Master Powell entered. His gaze bounced around from one corner of the room to another, and his steps had a jitter to them. Lucinda looked up at him, unconcerned about her partial state of dress. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Father, the laudanum's not enough. I can't do this anymore. Don't make me do this anymore."

"It's finished now," he said in his tweedy little voice. "The last payment. It's all for the family, you know. Your brother will thank you."

I was completely confused now. From the moment Ramses seized me, every time I thought I understood my situation, the whole thing turned upside down.

"Master Powell?" I said.

Washington pulled a strip of cloth from his pocket. He bound my mouth shut.

"You got nothing to say, nothing you need to know," Washington said. "No more than the others did. Told you from the first day you wasn't nothing special."

Lucinda wrapped her dress around below her waist and slumped into the seat at the piano. She dropped her head on the keys, and they sounded a deep, dissonant chord. Her back heaved as she sobbed.

The two servants dragged me away and out the back door. So large were they both that my feet scarcely grazed the ground the whole time. The full moon had risen, and the area had a washed-out, ethereal luminosity about it. Off in the distance, to the house's front, a brief crackle of musketry rose from nervous Confederate pickets,

miles away.

Master Powell followed a few steps behind us. All of us stopped at the sight of Ramses astride Victor by the cookhouse. Two saddlebags and a bedroll rested on Victor's haunches behind the saddle.

"Where might you be going?" Master Powell demanded, though his squeaky voice lacked all pretense of authority.

"The hell out of here," Ramses said. "Ain't doin' any of this no more. Should a known not to work a plantation what had a witch. Should a had her sold the minute I hired on, before she fouled my situation like it is. Killin' lazy gyps is part of the institution, but this…" He pointed out to the rose garden. "This here's murder, and more of the Devil than I want."

Ramses's statements seemed to ground Master Powell a bit more in reality.

"You're under contract, Mr. Ramses. I kept you off the front lines with the Home Guard. Pass through that gate, and they make you Yankee cannon fodder."

"A chance I'll take." He swung Victor's head around, and the horse clopped off to the main entrance.

"No matter," Master Powell squeaked after him. "Junius will be back soon enough to run things."

Washington and the other slave went back to business. Through the glowing, silent garden we marched, past the rows of vegetables. We came upon the rose beds.

Two torches burned and flickered in the center. The fresh-turned plot where I'd dumped the manure now hosted a dozen new bushes. A new, second plot lay beside it. The earth rose to a long dome in the pile's center. Beside that, a third plot was excavated, this one not yet disguised as a place for planting. Rectangular and deep, with its missing earth piled around it, it could be mistaken for nothing but the grave it was.

Atop the opening rested an old wooden door mounted on four legs, the legs at the bottom a half-foot shorter than the ones at the top, so that the door angled down. A series of herringbone gouges on its face pointed down and in, to a central cut that terminated at the lower center of the door. A bucket hung beneath it. Leather straps were bolted to the door in such positions to hold a prone man's arms, legs and chest.

I apprehended that this device of torture was my destination. I struggled anew, some strength regained as anxiety wore the drug's

effects further away. But Washington wrapped an arm about my windpipe and squeezed. I went lightheaded, the strength drained from my limbs and I passed out.

Chapter Nineteen

When next aware, I lay strapped to the contraption and moments closer to what I knew would be my death.

Beulah Powell stood at the foot of my future grave, the two house slaves at either side. The veil of her mourning dress was pulled back, and her face had an almost cheerful look of expectation. Beside me stood Master Powell. He held an awl in his hand. The maniacal grin on his face sent a fresh bolt of fear through my body.

"Ah, awake. My Beulah wished to rush, but I thought you deserved to know the result of your sacrifice. The others did not, but you get the respect due your race."

I tugged at the thick straps at my wrists and feet. They didn't budge. Master Powell carried on, eyes looking glazed and crazy in the torchlight.

"As soon as we buried Junius beneath the bewitched roses, he came to my Beulah from the other side. He explained how the blood of men fed to the roses would keep him alive on our spectral plane."

Mrs. Powell bounced upon her toes as she relived the thrill of that moment.

"And of course, the polluted blood of the tribe of Ham wouldn't do. Slave blood to feed the master's son? Perish the thought. So I had Ramses bring me the slaves I'd fathered, so at least half the blood we poured upon the ground would be as pure as that which had run through my son's veins."

The more Master Powell spoke, the deeper my despair became. It is frightening to listen to a madman, but twice as terrifying when the madman can make rational to himself actions beyond all reason. That kind of lunatic is beyond convincing to change their path. Grief had driven the entire family to believe in the fantasy Eleeza's story had sparked in Beulah Powell. They had gone so far as to perform human

sacrifice in response to her hallucinations.

"And we've fed our son well," Master Powell said. He swept a hand across the multiple plots of roses in the garden. "But now the Union Army advances toward Meridian. They've burned every plantation north of Jackson. We must bring back Junius for good before the roses are put to the torch, and we lose him forever. He's told us your pure, white blood will do just that."

I screamed into my gag and shook my head in a violent no as I pulled at my bindings. Master Powell did not react, too lost in his own vision of a beautiful Beechwood family reunion.

"Of course, as it had to be the blood of men, Lucinda had her role to play with each, to usher them into manhood before their sacrifice." He shot his wife a sideways glance. "Given her mother's list of infidelities with the slaves, I was certain the girl would enjoy it, no matter her pretense otherwise."

Through my gag, I cursed him for what he had done to his daughter to fulfill his insane quest. He rolled the awl against his fingers.

"No need to fear. This is razor-sharp. I'll just cut you here and here—" he tapped the cold metal blade to a few spots on my body, "—and your heart will do all the work, pumping blood out through your veins, onto the table and into the bucket. With so many to practice on before you, I've become quite good. You'll drain away and fall asleep."

Master Powell rent great holes my shirt and pants. With one hand he held me in place, and with the other plunged the awl into my flesh. It felt like a white-hot poker impaled me. I screamed into my gag. Then he wiggled the awl to widen the wound and get the blood to flow. Over and over he pierced my flesh. When he stopped, I could feel the warm blood flowing from my wounds. Then arrived the most sickening sound of all: the drip of the first drop of my blood into the metal bucket.

As the source of my life drained away, I soon felt weak. Master Powell ministered to the wounds, clearing clots as they occurred to keep the blood flowing. Despite the thick heat of the night, a chill consumed me from the inside out. The edges of my vision grew dark.

Death was now a certainty. In consolation, I would soon see my father and be reunited with the only person on this earth who'd ever truly loved me.

Beulah had been alight and dancing with expectation since my first incision, a bizarre sight in her mourning attire. She could stand waiting no more, and grabbed the bucket from the table's end.

"Beulah!" Master Powell said.

But she whirled and poured my fresh blood at the base of the roses behind her. Like a praying supplicant, she dropped to her knees as she tossed the bucket away. My fresher blood dripped down from the door's edge to water my own future grave.

"Junius?" she cried out. "Where are you, Junius?"

In my dazed mind, her voice seemed an echo of William's mother's cries in my dream.

A tiny, shrill chorus of squeaks filled the air. A handful of field mice scattered from the plot of roses and raced off in all directions. The bushes rustled, like a breeze passed through them, though the night air hung perfectly still.

Beulah leaped to her feet. "Junius! I'm here!"

This time the roses shook, from the tips of the branches deep down to the roots. The two house servants stepped back, eyes wide in fear. Master Powell stepped up beside his wife, jaw hanging open.

Between the bushes, a hand shot straight up through the soil, pallid and thin. The cuff of a Confederate officer's jacket just cleared the dirt.

It was not until this stunning moment that I truly believed the veracity of Eleeza's claims of supernatural power. There was no denying that I was observing the resurrection of a dead body. My half-conscious state no doubt kept my mind from reeling off into oblivion at the epiphany. From Eleeza's reaction when she had heard Junius was buried amidst the roses, I gathered that whatever unholy entity had pierced the membrane between the two worlds was not fully Junius.

Without the master's attentions, my clotted blood closed my wounds. But my blood loss was such that I was too weak to do anything but watch, and too confused to disbelieve what was about to unfold.

"Murderous bastards!" screamed the voice of Eleeza.

From the opposite side of the garden, she rose to hover a dozen feet off the ground. Her eyes burned with fury. The two house slaves went down on their knees. The Powells looked up with the barest of comprehension.

"You dared kill my family?" Eleeza said. She stared straight at Master Powell. "After you stained my daughter's offspring with your putrid blood?"

A second hand burst from the ground beside the first. Palms down on the earth, they pulled Junius free from the soil to the waist. Dirt matted his dark hair and worms crawled through it. His wan skin

clung tight to his skull. His eyes were but black holes.

This grotesque resurrection turned my stomach and sent through me a new wave of fear. Whatever the Powells had returned to this earth, it was not their son. It was not even human.

But while this creature from hell repelled me, the Powells stood enthralled, Beulah Powell especially. She looked into the deformed face of her son's cadaver as if upon a work of Florentine art. The dour expression of loss I'd always seen her wear was positively transfigured into a glowing, trance-like look of delight. It was as if she were reliving the first moments after her son's birth, not the reanimation of his rotting flesh.

"You want to raise the dead?" Eleeza said. "Then here you go!"

Eleeza spread wide her arms, fingers outstretched. A stream of blue fire flew from each fingertip, and each hit a different block of planted roses. The roses burst into flame as one and vanished in an instant incineration. She closed her hands and snuffed out the streams.

The earth of all ten sections twisted and surged. The corpses of the sacrificed boys surfaced. They were in all levels of decomposition, from William's lifelike appearance to the oldest victim, now more bone than boy. Each clawed its way upward, limbs writhing, jaws clacking open and closed, stretching from their enforced slumber.

The Powells screamed. The house slaves bolted in opposite directions down the garden path. The outermost two of the risen dead ran in pursuit. They moved with a loping gait like an antelope from the Great Plains. In three strides, they caught Washington and the other slave, leaped upon them and brought their victims to the ground. The dead each balled a fist and punched through the backs of the living. When they extracted their hands, each clutched a beating heart.

The other walking dead advanced on the trembling Powells, one slow step at a time, apparently happy to postpone the slaveholders' executions if it meant the murderous owners lived those extra moments in sheer terror.

Behind the Powells, Junius snapped to full standing height, wearing the dirt-stained dress uniform his mother had buried him in. He drew his sword from the scabbard at his side and stepped between his parents and the resurrected. The attackers paused.

Hoofs pounded down the path from the main house. Ramses and Victor charged into the rose garden.

"Knew I heard the voice of a damn gyp witch!" Ramses shouted.

Ramses let his whip fly, and it wrapped around the neck bones of one of the more skeletal corpses. Victor reared up on his hind legs and whinnied. Ramses snapped his wrist and decapitated the creature. The skull bounced to the ground. The rest of the skeleton collapsed into a pile of bones.

"You!" Eleeza yelled from her position above the fray. She let loose another bolt of blue fire at Ramses.

Victor was still up on two legs, and the blast hit him square between his ribs. The heat boiled the horse's internal organs in an instant, and the creature's rib cage exploded. The animal dropped on its side with Ramses's good leg pinned beneath it.

"For my daughter and grandson," Eleeza commanded the corpses, "and to avenge yourselves, kill them all!"

The risen dead rushed Junius and the living. With one slash of his sword, Junius severed the head of the first assailant, but the next several overwhelmed him. Two gave chase to the finally fleeing Powells.

One corpse rushed the trapped Ramses. The overseer drew his musket from its holster with one hand and pointed it at the creature. When the barrel was point blank at the corpse's head, he pulled the trigger. The creature's skull exploded and it dropped in its tracks.

Another corpse caught Beulah Powell from behind. It leaped upon her back, reached down and twisted her head completely around with a bone-crunching snap. She dropped to the ground in a billow of black cloth and lay still.

At the sight of Beulah's demise, Master Powell stumbled. William's corpse fell upon him and pinned him on his back. William reached down and tore his former master's jaw from his skull. Powell's tongue wagged in the open space in a gagging, stifled scream. William plunged his hand into Powell's chest, ripped out his beating heart and shoved it down Powell's throat.

A third corpse made a beeline for the trapped overseer. Ramses tossed aside his empty musket and pulled a Colt revolver from his saddlebag. He fired three wild shots at the charging corpse. The third hit its mark. The corpse's head spun from the impact before it dropped to the ground.

Eleeza watched with glee, enthralled at the Powells' demise. Ramses swung right and took careful aim at the hovering witch. He fired.

The bullet hit her chest in a splatter of blood. She staggered in midair and turned, enraged, to face Ramses. She let fly another, enormous bolt of blue flame. The bolt struck Ramses and Victor dead

on. They exploded in flames and sprinkled to earth as a cloud of soot.

The corpses that had swarmed Junius each had hold of one of his extremities. They pulled in unison. With four crunching pops, they dismembered the dead soldier. His head and body hit the ground, his mouth shouting silent curses and commands. William walked over and stomped Junius's windpipe. Junius fell still.

William spied at me on the execution table. He snarled and charged. Eleeza had ordered "Kill them all." I knew no white man was destined to leave this place alive.

At the table's edge, William stopped. His face turned calm. He reached down and unbuckled the straps that bound me. I was too drained to move.

Eleeza drifted back to the ground, clutching the wound in her chest. She landed on the path before of me and went down on one knee.

"Why did he spare me?" I asked her.

She looked up at me, her face finally calm. She took a deep, difficult breath. "The hex bag I gave you, your protection from dark magic."

The oily little sack she'd given me still rested in my pocket.

The walking dead stood around us. Immobile.

"How long will they last?" I asked.

"Only as long as I do. All spells die with she who cast them."

Eleeza sagged to the ground. She spit up a splatter of bright red blood.

"Leave this place, boy. Take nothing with you. Cleanse this from your memories."

Eleeza dropped across the path. She exhaled one last, gravelly time. At that breath's end, the remaining corpses dissembled and collapsed where they stood.

I lay upon the table and prayed for my strength to return. Eleeza had given me good advice. I already knew I would not take it.

Chapter Twenty

The end of the bloodletting gave my strength the opportunity to recover. My head soon cleared, and I rolled myself off the table that was to have been the instrument of both my death and Junius's permanent return to life. The air stank of Ramses's charred flesh and the rotting bodies of the long dead. All about me lay the victims of the Powells' insanity. I could not stand to be in their presence any longer.

I passed the charred mass of ash that had been the overseer and his satanic steed. The saddle and saddlebags and the horse's hooves were all that still had form. Ramses's metal nose protruded from the flaky pile that remained of his head. At the end of the strip of ash that had been Ramses's arm lay the blackened pistol that claimed Eleeza's life. I scooped it off the ground on my way to the gate.

I staggered down the path between the crops, back to the main house. The eastern sky shifted from black to dark blue, and I realized how long the night had been. This day was about to dawn on a very different Beechwood.

I exited the garden. One of the plump cooks stood at the cookhouse door, no doubt roused by the commotion amongst the roses. She placed her hands upon her ample hips in preparation to give me a solid dressing-down for being out in the garden at night. As she got a better view of me, an expression of shock swept her face. Indeed, I must have been frightful: skin pale and punctured, clothes shredded, bloody trails dried on my arms and legs, unsteady upon my feet. I held Ramses's heavy revolver low and loose against my thigh. It was a surprise that she did not run screaming.

"What you done, boy? Who shoot that gun?"

There was more explanation here than I had the strength to give, and more than she had the open-mindedness to understand. "They're all dead," I answered.

"Who?"

"Ramses. The Powells. Washington. All dead."

"You kill them all?"

I leaned against the fence rail for support. "Just go. Everyone. You are free."

She backed away from me slowly, the way one would from a rabid dog. Then she twirled and sprinted away toward the slave cabins, rolls of fat undulating under her blousy dress with each stride.

The sun crested the horizon, a red fireball to finally dispel the hellish night that had preceded it. I tucked the pistol into my waistband and staggered into the cookhouse. A box of matches on the counter caught my eye, and I put them in what remained of one pocket. I felt the hex bag still in there. *The magic dies with the one who cast it*, she had said. I tossed it into the empty fireplace.

A smoked ham hung from a hook. Fruit lay in a bowl on the counter. I grabbed a knife and set upon the ham like a wild beast, chopping hunks from it that I greedily wolfed down. When the dried, salted meat threatened to lodge in my throat, I took peaches from the bowl and let their sweet juices revive me with each swallow.

Perhaps it was just the effect of decent food on my mind rather than my body, but new energy coursed through my veins. I left the cookhouse to fulfill the rest of my plan.

Outside stood almost a dozen slaves, all looking pensive and bewildered in the low morning light, all staring at me.

"Dat's the one," a slave whispered. "He done killed 'em all."

I stepped forward. They all stepped back. They didn't know the truth, but they knew as much as they needed. Cannons crumped in the distance as soldiers began a dawn assault to the northwest. I was running out of time.

"Get out of here!" I yelled. "Take your freedom before I water this ground with more blood!"

The little crowd scattered. I headed to the stable.

The Beechwood ground had indeed been watered with blood. Not just mine in the grave that I avoided, and not just the blood that fed whatever demon arose in the corpse of Junius Powell. The blood of generations had fed this ground, generations held in bondage and treated worse than domesticated beasts. And ground saturated in sin yielded cotton crops tainted by evil, and people twisted to live for revenge or to delight in the extraction of pain. The malevolence spread its vile influence far enough to touch my uncle and have him sell family

into servitude. No rain would ever wash the spiritual stain from this earth. Only one thing could.

At the stable, I passed the open door of Victor's stall. Ramses had to have saddled his horse himself. As I thought about it now, he'd been doing that before I got here—mucking out his horse's stall as well, as it was the only clean one. Only a damaged soul could see value in a black horse and be blind to it in a black man.

I led the two tired horses out of their stalls and put them in harness. While I might have imagined it, both horses appeared to adopt a look of dismay.

"One more task, boys," I said. I stroked their necks. "You don't want to stay here."

I found the low cart I'd used to move hay. I pulled it forward and harnessed the horses to it. It would not carry much, but it would carry enough. Enough for one.

I scrambled up to the loft and pulled my meager sack down with me to the stable floor. This last set of shirt and pants would do me well when I had time to change later, but the most important item was in the bag's bottom. I pulled out my father's pocket watch, though I suppose it was no longer his possession, as it had officially been mine for the last year. I gave the stem a spin. For the first time, the watch began to tick.

I tossed the bag in the cart and led the horses clear of the barn. I returned, knelt by a stall door and struck a match. The straw lit on contact. Fire raced up the dry stable wall like a mouse for the rafters. As I walked out the stable door, I dropped a thick trail of straw from the stable to the garden's edge, like Hansel's breadcrumb trail, so the flames could devour the evidence of the night's satanic deeds.

In the distance, a fusillade of cannon fire rippled like low thunder. The initial rounds had found their range, and the full battery had joined the day's battle.

I led the horses and their tiny burden away from the stable. Their first, hesitant steps spoke of their trepidation at the task; their low-slung heads faced the ground in bleak despair. But several yards in, their gait gained confidence, as if memories of a useful existence returned to them, a reminiscence of pride in completing productive tasks. With a shake, they raised their heads to the risen sun and snorted with a self-assurance long forgotten.

We passed the cookhouse and the garden entrance. A swarm of dozens of slaves milled about, stripping anything edible to feed their families. They saw me and froze in position, certain that the wrath of

the wronged white man was about to descend upon them. I looked away and continued on. The slaves went back to their task. Several laughed with relief.

I stopped the horse at the rear portico of the main house. One more duty to complete.

Cannon fire thumped again, closer to the property. The faint clatter of small arms joined the distant symphony of combat. The Home Guard was no doubt falling back, probably running in retreat. The end of so much was almost here.

I entered the main house and went straight for the parlor where Lucinda had taken me. I opened the door and cringed with the memory. What I'd thought was a wonderful moment of magic, I now saw as the shameful, embarrassing act it truly was.

The advancing Yankee soldiers allowed no moments to dwell on such things, at least not now. The room was empty. I had little time to find what I searched for—to find Lucinda.

She hadn't left the main house after Washington abducted me, hadn't been to the grand ceremony of the cadaver's resuscitation. Given the frame of mind she had been in as they dragged me out the door, she'd have to be here somewhere, somewhere she felt safer.

As I searched through the lower floor, the elegant trappings that had impressed me so just days ago upon my arrival had no such effect now. The morning sun showed the contents in their true state of decay, with chips peeling from paintings and furniture threadbare and drooping. The amazing timepiece on the table had stopped. When still, it was easy to see the rust and tarnish that spotted the components. The banister creaked as I grabbed it to assist my climb up the main stairs.

I found Lucinda in the third room I inspected. The decor was all in white lace, with pink-striped wallpaper and floor-length brocade draperies. Tinted woodcuts of ponies hung on the walls. A room more in style for a girl than a young woman.

Lucinda lay on the floor. The seductive finery of last night's tryst was gone, replaced with a simple, homespun skirt and blouse, like the penitent renouncing silk and satin to atone for sin. Her arms lay out from her sides. A puddle of dried blood spread beneath one slashed wrist.

My heart fell to my knees. I rushed forward and cradled her head to my ear. Shallow, short breaths tickled my earlobe. I shivered with joy. I inspected her wrist. The cut was not deep. The laudanum, thank the Lord, had impaired her slicing skills. I bound the wound with a

handkerchief from the dresser.

I reached under her knees and shoulders and lifted her up. She was lighter than I expected. I staggered down the steps one at a time, careful not to bump her. In her sleep, her face held a dreamy expression of peace and contentment.

We reached the ground floor in time to hear another, sharper, closer volley of musketry. The panicked cries of men's voices followed the firing, muffled by the moss-covered trees between the house and the main road beyond. I took her out the back door, to the horses and the waiting cart. I'd planned on having Lucinda use it for some of her belongings, but the cart would have to instead do duty as an ambulance.

As I moved to lay her down, her eyes fluttered open. She struggled to focus on my face.

"Stable boy?" she said in a soft, dreamy voice. "Stable boy! Are we both in heaven then?"

"Not quite yet," I answered.

I laid her in the cart with my sad little bag as a pillow. Just days ago, my head had lain upon it for the first time. Now it cradled one much more lovely.

I ran back inside the main house. In quick succession, I struck matches and lit drapes, rugs and furniture afire in all corners of the building. I crossed back outside to spy thick black smoke billowing from the direction of the stables. A thinner gray smoke drifted up from the garden's far end. When the flames had finished their work, there'd be no reason for men to return to this land, no way for the evil that possessed it to again work its black magic.

I led the horses around to the front and then down the long driveway to the road. I stopped them at the property's edge.

Gunpowder's acrid aroma had settled along the tree-lined road. Scattered Southern soldiers passed by in an easterly retreat, some barely constrained from a run. Those who still bore arms carried them haphazardly, often gripped by the barrels with butts dragging in the dirt. Smoke and saltpeter blackened their faces. A lieutenant on horseback, hat missing and hair on end, rode through the group at a gallop, heedless of those around him as anything but obstacles. In the woods beyond, muskets fired another volley.

The last flicker of the Confederate flame had met the enemy and been extinguished.

The story of Beechwood would die here. Soldiers would shoulder

the blame for the plantation's destruction. Witnesses to the final supernatural events were all dead, save me. The slaves would scatter for a freedom long overdue.

Prudence dictated I point the horses east and follow the escaping men in gray. The Northern soldiers would end the chase when they outran their supply lines. I'd drop Lucinda in a town to recuperate, and find my own way in the world.

I looked down at Lucinda's face, angelic in its slumber. No doubt it would turn tortured when she awakened. She was damaged. I was damaged. As it took two weak horses to pull the tiny cart, so I hoped the two of us might be strong enough together to surmount the scarring experiences we'd both survived.

I turned the horses west. Toward Union lines. Toward Pelahatchie. Toward home.

In the bag beneath Lucinda's sleeping head, the pocket watch chimed the hour.

Afterword

I write horror. I spin fictional evil from my imagination for your amusement. Ghosts and demons and things that go bump in the night fly from my fingers to give you a chill and a thrill.

But writing this story reminded me that humanity as a whole can deliver more horror than we find entertaining, more than we want to acknowledge we are capable of. Mankind's genocidal streak did not end with slavery's demise in the United States one hundred and fifty years ago. It lives on in recent times in Serbia, in Rwanda. The demonic seed stays dormant, ready to take root anywhere that one man decides that another, by birth, can never be his equal.

With this tale finished, read *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. This public-domain work is available free and is a more chilling description of our now-quiescent darker side than I could ever create. In stark, simple prose, Douglass lays bare a world I am so glad is gone, but whose lessons I hope are never forgotten.

Russell James
February 2014

About the Author

Russell R. James was raised on Long Island, New York and spent too much time watching *Chiller*, *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, and *The Twilight Zone*, despite his parents' warnings. Bookshelves full of Stephen King and Edgar Allan Poe didn't make things better. He graduated from Cornell University and the University of Central Florida.

After a tour flying helicopters with the U.S. Army, he now spins twisted tales best read in daylight. He has written the paranormal thrillers *Dark Inspiration*, *Sacrifice*, *Black Magic* and *Dark Vengeance*. He has two short story collections, *Tales from Beyond* and *Deeper into Darkness*. His next novel, *Dreamwalker,* releases in 2015.

His wife reads what he writes, rolls her eyes, and says "There is something seriously wrong with you."

Visit his website at http://www.russellrjames.com and read some free short stories.

Follow on Twitter @RRJames14, or drop a line complaining about his writing to rrj@russellrjames.com.

Bootleg Cove

Devin Govaere

Chapter One

September 1967

Willie Douglas flicked the wiper control, and the blades stuttered across the dry windshield, smearing the carcasses of at least six dead bugs across the glass. She peered between the bloody streaks, trying to keep her eyes on the edge of the oiled blacktop. The last thing she needed was to plow into one of the enormous pines that sprawled along this so-called road.

"I can't see a blessed thing." She flicked the wiper control again, hoping for the best, but, of course, the best was often hard to come by.

"Ooohh, bug guts. Do it again!"

Willie glanced over at her son and smiled. Kyle stared at the gore with a fascination and enthusiasm only a young boy could possibly muster in the heat of the damp Maryland afternoon. "Give it time. Every bug in Calvert County seems to know we're here." She slapped at her arm as another mosquito bit into her skin then she squinted, trying to focus on the areas between the smeared guts. "Damn. I shouldn't have done that. I've made it worse."

"I can clean it," Kyle said. "You can put me on the roof like last time."

"I think we're almost there, baby. We've got to find it soon. I think we're running out of road."

Kyle's face swiveled toward her, a worried frown pulling at his mouth. His dark eyes studied her, far too serious for a four-year-old, as his fingers clutched at the teddy bear sitting on his lap. "What happens if we run out of road, Mama? We'll fall in the water?"

"We won't fall in the water, honey." She traced an X over her blouse. "Cross my heart."

Kyle threw himself back and settled into the seat. "Okay."

He lifted his arm and flung it out the window, his hand rising and

falling as though caught in a breeze. Willie would have given anything for a breeze, even an imaginary one.

Rounding yet another bend, the beat-up old Ford rumbled and shook its way between yet another pair of tall pines in the endless wood. Overgrown, gnarly tree limbs slapped the body, and Willie winced with every slow, long screech of a branch along the paint. As the truck continued to clatter and thump along the pitted road, the branches snagged at the mirror and antenna. Willie glanced in the rearview mirror when one branch reached out and threatened to snare the tarp that covered the piles of boxes in the bed. She veered sharply to the right, and the branch cut harmlessly through the air. Kyle rocked in his seat.

As the truck cleared the shadows and lumbered into brain-piercing sunlight, Willie blinked rapidly, trying to adjust to sudden blindness. The scent of stagnant water and mud drifted through her open window along with the hot autumn air. The truck bumped over some debris and rocked when it slammed back down. She heard the squishy sound of tires hitting water and felt a slurping suction beneath the truck as it continued to roll forward.

"Oh shoot."

"Shoot what?" Kyle lifted his small body, trying to see out the glass. His little head swung back and forth, refusing to believe what he saw. "Oh no…"

The bay loomed right beyond the bug-infested windshield, a grayish-green vista of still, calm water. It looked both beautiful and terrifying.

She slammed both feet on the brakes to avoid driving right into the water. She braced herself with one hand on the wheel as she catapulted forward, instinctively thrusting out her arm to block her son from slamming into the dashboard. Kyle's little body hit her arm, the breath whooshed out of his lungs, and he bounced back against the seat. His little hands clenched into fists, clutching Teddy's fur in a death grip.

"Sorry about that," she said softly.

"It's okay," Kyle said.

With a silent prayer, Willie eased the gearshift into Reverse. At first, the wheels spun uselessly, and she cursed under her breath. Holding her breath, she rocked forward then tried again. This time the truck obeyed and began to move backward. She backed up a few feet until she felt the solid ground beneath all four tires. She turned the key in the ignition, and the truck sputtered and clanked then fell into a

fitful sleep. She released the breath she'd been holding. "That was close."

Kyle let out an exaggerated breath, the sound of a boy who had survived the worst moment of his life, but she turned in time to see him roll his eyes. "Nice driving, Mama."

She ruffled his dark hair. "At least we didn't fall in the water."

Teddy momentarily forgotten, Kyle gripped the edge of the dashboard and pulled himself forward. He stood up and pressed his nose against the windshield. "That's a lot of water."

"It sure is," Willie said. "I wonder where—"

She glanced out her window and saw it. Nestled at the edge of a forest of giant pines, the two-story structure leaned precariously at the edge of a sandy stretch that fell away into murky water. A narrow parking lot enclosed it on two sides, but scraggly patches of dried grass had begun to poke through the gravel and broken asphalt, giving it a somber, neglected appearance. The property had seen better days, but Willie couldn't have begun to guess when those days had been.

She'd been told the building had been built in the early days of Prohibition and used as a way station for moonshiners who wanted to sell their product in the big cities like Washington, DC, and Baltimore and as a speakeasy for those Maryland citizens who refused to give up their booze. It certainly looked old enough. It hadn't been occupied for almost a decade, though the agent had told her the site had a fully working kitchen and the last tenants had run a profitable bar and grill. After driving through Calvert County for almost an hour, Willie couldn't imagine where those patrons might have come from. She'd seen four vehicles along the highway and no sign of life since they'd turned onto this side road.

The roof sagged across the wide porch and several of the shutters had fallen to the wooden planks. The blue paint had become splotchy in some places and had peeled away in others to reveal remnants of old pink paint. On the plus side, none of the windows were broken, and other than a few holes, the clapboard siding looked to be in relatively good shape.

Willie ran damp palms across her denim shorts then turned to her son with a smile. "Well, what do you think? Do you like it?"

Kyle tilted his head, took a deep breath and made a tiny noise, "Hmm." He continued to stare out the windows, his gaze moving from the gray-green expanse of the bay to the dirty, sad-looking building that could tumble into the sand at any moment. "I don't know." He turned to her, studying her face, and she waited. "Do you like it?"

She couldn't lie to him. He'd know. She glanced toward the water then let her gaze drift across the dilapidated structure again, wanting to say yes, needing to say yes. Instead, she smiled and shrugged. "I don't know."

"It has my favorite color," Kyle said.

Willie nodded as her gaze roamed over the chipped and peeling dark-blue paint. "It's a very pretty color."

Kyle laughed. "And it has your favorite color too!"

"Yes, it does." The pink splotches beneath the chips were more abundant on the lower level of the house and matched the color of her pink, short-sleeved, button-down blouse. "So which color should we choose?"

Kyle swiveled toward her with a bright smile, the kind of smile that turned the crappiest day into the most wondrous. "Can we have both?"

"I don't know why not. It's all ours. We can do what we want."

Kyle put his knee on the seat and climbed toward her. The warmth of his little body wrapped around hers as he pushed closer, his arms going around her neck. He pressed soft lips to both her cheeks then pulled back. He gave her another one of those beautiful smiles. "I think we could learn to like it, don't you?"

She blinked back tears then brushed the dark, sweaty curls off his brow. "Yes, honey. I think we can learn to like it."

While Kyle and Teddy investigated the area outside their new home, Willie parked the truck in the gravel lot as close to the front door as possible and carried all the boxes into the building. Her tennis shoes crunched on discarded shells of some kind of sea animal, and she hoped they were leftover bits of ten-year-old dinners and not the dead remains of current occupants. She stacked the boxes in the forlorn dining area amid the lonely tables and chairs scattered across the wide, dusty planks. Some of the tables still held crusty old condiment bottles and salt and pepper shakers, as well as rusty silverware. It made Willie sad to see them, so when she'd finished unloading the truck, she quickly boxed up all the remnants of the restaurant's former glory and threw the memories into the dumpster.

The agent had come by the day before. He'd tested the lighting and the phone, as well as plugged in the appliances, but, as yet, the refrigerator hadn't cooled and the walk-in freezer wouldn't have chilled a glass of lemonade, let alone make ice cubes. She put their few

groceries away just the same. At least the food would be safe from the bugs.

Now Kyle had begun to sort through one of his boxes, and Willie fell with blessed relief into one of the curved captain's chairs to rest her aching back. She put her feet up on another and stared at the chaos surrounding them. And this was nothing. The movers would be arriving in a few days with the household things from their old rooms in her mother-in-law's house in Pittsburgh.

Clean paths wove like an invisible maze throughout the room from shoving the larger, heavier boxes toward the far wall where a door opened to a stairway leading to the apartment above. Apparently the upper floor had held both owner and rented rooms for years, but several tenants ago, the occupants had transitioned the space into a private apartment. So near and yet so far, and far too many stairs for her current state. She'd have to at least carry up the bathroom things and the bedding before night fell, but right now she didn't have the strength or energy to carry another thing.

Sweat poured down her face, and she took a huge gulp from the glass of lukewarm water on the table. She watched as Kyle propped his stuffed bear against the side of a box and pulled something out from inside. He stood quietly for a moment then settled down on the floor with his back to her. He'd gotten too quiet.

"Honey, would you like to take a cool bath?" Willie laughed. "We don't have hot water yet, but I bet there's plenty of cold. The agent said we had a great well."

Kyle shook his head and continued to stare at his lap.

"Are you ready for some dinner? I could make us some sandwiches."

"Not right now."

She caught a glimpse of the wooden frame as his tiny fingers caressed it. Her hand trembled as she reached for her water.

"I don't remember Daddy."

His quiet voice stopped her cold. "I know that, honey, and I'm sorry. You were just a baby when he left us."

"It's not your fault," he said lightly, though she didn't know if he meant because Bobby had died or because he'd left them. He was quiet for another minute, and then he swiveled toward her, wearing his serious face. "Are we sure Daddy's in heaven?"

She gulped, blinking back the sudden tears. “Of course we’re sure,” she said quietly.

She saw Bobby’s picture in Kyle’s lap. Her smiling, handsome, full-of-life, happy-go-lucky dead husband stared at her from across the room and across the chasms of life and death. Kyle’s jaw clenched for a moment, and his dark eyes bore into hers with an intensity that had no place in a beautiful hot afternoon where dust motes swam through the heavy air, twinkling in the sunshine like fat fireflies. “But how do you know, Mama?”

She stood, fast or slowly she wasn’t sure, and walked on quivering legs toward her serious little boy. He was the opposite of Bobby. He was all hers, wrapped in quiet and solitude, holding secrets deep inside, secrets that he didn’t even know he had yet. Kyle was a happy boy, and smiled and laughed often, but his mind worked too hard to understand the world around him, and the thoughts tripped him up and often stole pieces of his childhood. How she sometimes wished Kyle had managed to get even a third of Bobby’s carefree spirit.

She sat in front of him and leaned back on her heels. She pulled Teddy into her lap.

“If Teddy died, do you think he’d go to heaven?”

Kyle pursed his lips. “Teddy isn’t real.”

Willie cupped his face. “You’re right, but let’s pretend he is, okay?”

“Okay.” Kyle reached out and jiggled Ted’s paw, as though trying to make him laugh.

“So tell me about Ted.”

Kyle tilted his face. “He’s my best friend. He’s nice and sweet and kind. He makes me laugh. He helps me when I’m sad. He loves me, and I love him. You love him too, don’t you, Mama?”

“Yes, I do. Ted is a fabulous bear. So, do you think Ted would go to heaven?”

Kyle nodded.

“Honey, your daddy was exactly like Ted. If anyone would get into heaven, it would be your daddy.”

“Oh.” Kyle held out his arms, and Willie put Ted into them. He rested his chin on the bear’s head for a moment then looked up with solemn eyes, peeking through the dark curls on his forehead. “Do you think it hurt when Daddy died?”

Willie forced herself to hold his gaze. “Yes, honey, I think so. But I think it only hurt for a minute.”

“That’s good,” Kyle said softly. He let his gaze drift around the

room, following the dancing dust motes. “Do you think I’ll have to go to Vietnam?”

“No, Kyle,” she said firmly. “You will never have to go to Vietnam.”

“Good,” Kyle said. “I want to stay here with you.” He jumped to his feet and slung Ted under his arm. “Can I have a sandwich now?”

“Ham or turkey?”

Kyle gave her a little smirk. “I’m really hungry. Can I have both?”

“Absolutely.”

Kyle ran toward the kitchen, and Willie glanced at the photo through hot, blinding tears. Bobby’s image shimmered in her watery vision. His twinkling eyes, his boyish hair, his smile as bright as the summer sun.

“I’m so lonely, Bobby.”

She stood and put the photo back into the box. When she turned, she stopped dead. A path of footprints, large booted footprints, wove across the dusty floor from one of the French doors to where she and Kyle had been sitting. Her heart stuttered as a spark of apprehension shot through her. Her gaze darted around the room as she tried to remember whether she’d locked every door when they’d finished unpacking.

“Yes,” she murmured, “I know I did.” She took a deep breath and released it slowly. “Didn’t I?”

She grabbed a cloth from the box, got down on her hands and knees, and rubbed the planks with a vengeance, following the trail until the prints had vanished and the dusty floor had another clean path. Then she noticed something else. She sniffed. An odd scent hung in the air, not a bad scent, but one that seemed to have no place in her new home. It was the scent of a man’s aftershave, musky and spicy, and it smelled oh-so good. She closed her eyes for a moment, inhaling again and losing herself in memories of before.

Kyle poked his head through the swinging door. “Mama! Are you coming?”

She tossed the rag on the table, swiped her hands together and jumped to her feet. “On my way,” she said, giving him a bright smile she didn’t quite feel inside.

She awoke to the sound of a mosquito buzzing near her ear. With as much energy as she could muster, she flapped her hand until the droning insect flitted off across the room. She opened one eye and

looked across at Kyle. He lay on top of his sleeping bag, his limbs spread wide and his dark hair matted on his head. His pajamas were plastered to his sweaty skin, and he still wore his dirty socks. A big mosquito bite swelled on his cheek. She'd have to unearth the medicine and find the calamine lotion before he picked it to death.

She rolled to her back and stared at the ceiling. A fan hung in the center of the room, but she'd already tested it, and it didn't work. She thought they'd be much better off if it could be fixed. Several other fans hung throughout the building, but none of them worked. Obviously, a circuit needed repair. She'd have to start making a list. She also had to replace the screens if her noisy, buzzing houseguest was any indication.

She heaved herself into a sitting position and tossed masses of dark hair away from her face. She twisted it into a loose bun and wiped the sweat from her neck. She'd known it would be hot on this shore, but if she'd had any idea how hot, she would have packed a few small fans in the Ford. She grabbed yesterday's clothes from the floor and headed off to the bathroom.

She'd managed to peel off her nightgown and wiggle into her shorts when the walls around her began to shake. She grabbed on to the edge of the sink as the hazy glass of the mirror above it began to pulse with the vibrations. She glanced out the cloudy window over the tub in time to see the yellow cab of a moving van seemingly explode from the forest. A squeal of brakes pierced her eardrums, and then she saw a huge cloud of smoke billow from the stack. The stench of burning tires and diesel fuel puffed in through the open window, followed by the sounds of doors slamming and the muffled cursing of two male voices. She fumbled into her bra and grabbed her blouse. Plunging her arms through the holes, she left the bathroom and had started to button the blouse when Kyle came careening out of the bedroom, dragging Ted on the ground.

"The truck's here!"

"Yes, it is. Let's go…" She glanced down at her shirt. She had an extra buttonhole at the bottom. "Damn it." She unbuttoned it quickly and followed Kyle down the stairs. "Be careful, buddy. You'll slip in those socks."

She had barely finished rebuttoning when a huge fist hammered on one set of the French doors, rattling the glass in the wooden frames. Two huge dark shadows wavered behind the dingy curtains. Kyle slid across the room like a skater and caught himself against the opposite wall, leaving a perfectly clean trail in his wake. He fumbled with several

locks, calling, “Just a minute!” As he unlocked the last one, he gave a yank and nothing happened. “It’s stuck.”

Willie reached the door. “Nope, just a little safety precaution to keep you inside.” She tweaked the end of his nose and pulled down on the latch at the top of the left door then the right. She yanked on both doors, and they opened to reveal two very large, intimidating men.

She shouldn’t have been surprised. They were moving men, after all, lifting and moving large, heavy objects five days a week, sometimes more. But she hadn’t met these men before. She’d packed up and gotten on the road, leaving her mother-in-law to deal with the movers. Alice Douglas was happy to do so, just to get Willie out of her life.

The men stared down at her, and Willie had never felt so small in her life. She was a thirty-one-year-old widow who stood at five foot three, and she suddenly felt like Kyle’s little sister.

“Good morning,” she squeaked.

“Morning…” the largest man dipped his bald head and glanced at the clipboard in his hand, “…Douglas residence?”

“Yes, it is.”

“That’s us!” Kyle chirped.

He took a step back, gazed around the porch, and grimaced as though wondering how anyone would choose this as their residence. “Glad we finally found you.”

“Did you have trouble?” Willie asked. “You got here sooner than I expected.” She tucked her hair behind her ears.

He slapped at a bug on the side of his face. “Easy trip until we hit this stretch of Maryland. The people aren’t all that cooperative with strangers, are they? Kinda grouchy, to be honest. We ran into a few shotguns a couple roads down.”

“I plan to get a sign once I’m up and running.”

He gave her a look that said signage might be the least of her concerns. “We found you, so no worries. But, if you’re getting signs, you could use a sign on that road.” He hooked a thumb toward the forest. “We almost took a swim, truck and all.”

“Us too!” Kyle said.

The other man gave a harsh laugh. Willie couldn’t see his eyes. They were lost behind the lenses of his sunglasses.

Baldy glanced left then right then gave her a long look. “Kind of isolated out here, though. You sure you want us to unload?”

“I don’t really have a choice,” Willie said with a laugh. “I own the place now.”

"Well, good for you." He heaved a sigh. "I guess."

Kyle swayed left then right then finally just dipped down and peeked between the man's legs. "Mama, I want to see the truck." His head fell back as he gazed up at her hopefully.

"I wouldn't mind seeing it."

"Ma'am?" Baldy asked.

"The truck. Is it okay to take a peek?"

"Sure." Baldy put the clipboard under his arm. "Let's get started." He spun around and headed toward the back of the truck.

Sunglasses followed, and Kyle ran behind. Willie started to follow, smoothing her hands over her blouse. She encountered an empty buttonhole and lifted her shirttail. She rolled her eyes, followed the sound of her son's laughter and decided she had more important things to worry about than whether she'd dressed properly.

"That dresser goes in my bedroom, the room at the top with three windows," Willie called up the stairs.

"Gotcha!" Chuck, aka Baldy, yelled back.

She took a few steps backward and whirled around. She ran smack into an immovable wall of hard muscle. She uttered some kind of cry that sounded bone chilling to her ears and stumbled, and two hands came up and gripped her upper arms at the same time her fingers latched on to a hunk of white cotton.

Skip's, aka Sunglasses's, voice drifted down the stairs. "Everything okay down there?"

Willie lifted her face up, up and up, and stared into the most beautiful face she'd ever seen on a man. The sunlight behind him outlined him in gold, and his black hair shone around his head like a dark halo. He looked like an angel dropped on Earth. His deep-blue eyes twinkled in some kind of secret merriment. She guessed he might be a few years older than she was, but there were some lines etched on his face, so it might have been more than a few years. He had a slight scar running down his cheek, just a white line on his darker skin.

"Ma'am?" She heard the *clomp-clomp* of Skip's boots as he started down the stairs. "Are you—"

"Yes, I'm fine!" Willie called over her shoulder. She shook her head, trying to focus, trying to remember what it was she was even doing. "Just saw a spider."

"Okay," Skip said.

The stranger smiled, his teeth blindingly white in his tanned face. "That's the best you can come up with?"

Willie shrugged. "Works every time."

Skip's voice came out of the stairwell. "Hold on, Chuck. Don't try to do that on your—" Something crashed onto the floor above, and broken glass skittered across the wood. Skip ran up the stairs again, his boots pounding against the risers. Chuck let loose with a string of curses she was sure Kyle had never heard before.

"It's okay." Kyle's voice sounded faint, as though his head was buried in his toy box. "Mama hated that lamp anyway."

Willie realized she still had a death grip on the man's shirt. She ran her palms over the wrinkles, aware of every muscle that moved and flexed beneath the shirt. She hadn't touched a man in a very long time and barely remembered how different they felt. She leaned back to look at his face, and he finally released her. He took a step back.

"I guess you're the new owner?"

She nodded and held out her hand. "Willie Douglas."

He enveloped her hand in his big paw. "I'm Harry Warner. How are you enjoying the Crab Pot?"

"The what?" Willie frowned, and her brow furrowed. "I talked with Mr. Benson numerous times during negotiations, but I don't remember buying any crab pots."

He threw back his head and laughed. "No, ma'am. It's this place." He held out his arms. "Your new restaurant. The Davises, the people who built this place, called it the Crab Pot. People around here have called it that for fifty years, whether the name changes or not."

"Ooohh." She glanced around and swept out her foot to kick a piece of shell. "That certainly explains all the little carcasses."

"Yes, ma'am, but it fits the history too. Back in Prohibition, the moonshiners around here used to put the booze out in the bay in marked crab pots. Red flag for whiskey, white flag for gin, yellow for rum and a blue flag for plain old crabs. They didn't use the blue one very often."

"Sounds colorful," she said, "but I think I'll be changing the name."

"That's fine too."

Before she realized what she was doing, she leaned toward him and sniffed. He smelled heavenly and familiar. She had no idea why, but she liked him immediately.

"So what can I do for you, Mr. Warner?"

He smiled. "It's not what you can do for me, ma'am. It's what I can

do for you." He started to pace around the room, knocking on pieces of wallboard, glancing up at the ceiling fans, shaking light sconces, running his hand across the thick planks of the bar. She noticed he had a slight limp as she watched the movements of his tall, seemingly perfect body outlined in a tight white T-shirt and a pair of Levi's. He had a cap of some sort crammed in his back pocket. When she caught herself staring too long at his backside, she reluctantly dragged her gaze upward. He didn't have a drop of sweat on his body, but his skin held a golden glow. She gulped and inhaled deeply. She wanted to trail around the room after him, following that delicious scent. Instead, she rooted herself to the floor.

"And what might that be?" Willie asked.

"The place has good bones, but she's been neglected for quite a while."

"I know the feeling," Willie murmured.

Harry turned suddenly and thrust his hands in his pockets. He tilted his head in a way that reminded her of Bobby. She felt a pang in her chest, but she put it from her mind. "Got a list of repairs yet? Things you need done?"

Willie slid her hand into her blouse pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. "I started one this morning, but I haven't gotten very far."

Harry unfolded it and gave her a cute smile. "I'll say. I'm getting off easy if you only need two things done." He reached out and caught a drop of sweat that slid down her cheek with the tip of his finger, as innocently as a child would have. "We'll have to order the screen mesh, but I'd say we can make the fans a priority, and I can rehang those shutters today."

"So you're a handyman?"

Harry glanced down at the paper, and a brief flash of color appeared in his cheeks. His jaw clenched for a brief moment then he looked up and smiled. "Wasn't always, but I am now." He put the paper in his pocket. "I think I can handle just about anything you need done. Got my truck outside."

She glanced toward the French doors. "You didn't drive into the bay, did you?"

A smile hovered at the corner of his mouth. "No, ma'am. Only outsiders drive into the bay. Never happens with locals because they know to turn left when they hit the last tree."

"That would have been good to know," Willie said. "Whoever

designed that road needs to find a new job."

"It served its purpose back in the day," Harry said. "Franklin Davis called it his early warning system. He didn't want anyone down this road who didn't have business down this road."

Willie sighed. "I'm wondering how many people actually come down this road. I may have bought myself an oversized kitchen and dining room."

"Don't worry about that." Harry reached behind him and pulled the cap out of his back pocket. She saw now it was a Baltimore Orioles baseball cap. After settling it on his head, he said, "Once folks hear you're open for business, you'll have cars parked on the beach. The Crab Pot is always the talk of the town, and it's always busy. When they serve crabs, that is. Some people think change is good." He gave her smile. "Let me tell you, change isn't good when it comes to crabs." He winked.

They walked down the small, carpeted hallway into a foyer where the waiting benches and reservations booth stood. A sign proclaiming the weekly dinner specials still hung on one wall. Crab. No surprise there. She'd propped open the door leading to the parking lot, hoping for a bit of breeze, and now she saw Harry's truck sitting next to hers. It looked like an older model, but Harry kept it in near-pristine condition. The bed held toolboxes, hunks of metal and pieces of lumber. He looked like he'd prepared for almost any disaster. His boots crunched as he started across the gravel. Willie followed him out to the porch.

"If it was so popular, why was it abandoned for so long?"

Harry paused, glancing up at the puffy clouds dotting the sky. "Things change."

"That's certainly true," she murmured.

He turned. "You a good cook?"

She drew back, surprised by his question, though she wasn't sure why. It was certainly logical, but no one had asked her that during purchase negotiations. She nodded. "Yes, that's what people have always said. It's why I thought this might be a good choice for me."

"Then don't worry about business. You'll have plenty. Getting customers was never a problem here, but sometimes life gets in the way. Lots of people have bought this place over the years, and lots of people looked at it over the years, but it takes a special person to love a place like this."

She laughed. "Special like in criminal? Do I need to take

bootlegging classes?"

Harry laughed too. "No, bootlegging is more of a family business. Got to be born into it." He stared at her for a moment, seemingly full of fun and laughter, and then the smile faded from his face. He took a few steps toward her. "You've noticed how isolated it is, how lonely it might get out here?"

She stared at the pines for a moment. That thought had certainly crossed her mind, and it was one of the reasons she'd chosen this location. In the last few months, she'd been so coddled, so protected by everyone around her she'd relished the idea of solitude. Here on this isolated stretch of beach with the forest at her back and water on all sides, her associations would be impersonal, business related. People would judge her on one thing, and one thing only—her business. She wouldn't have to worry about disappointing anyone if her smile faltered or her energy waned. Watching Bobby's family's concern for her deepen by the day had made her so guilty she'd felt drained every day and had fallen into her bed exhausted every night. Here, she had only to please herself and Kyle. She hoped to find a new Willie, someone who wasn't lost in sorrow or anger or buried in the past, someone who didn't disappoint others with her failure to bounce back.

She pursed her lips and nodded. "Yes, I've noticed, but I'm on a first-name basis with loneliness, and I think the isolation will be good for me."

"Then it probably will be." Harry adjusted the back of his cap. "Let me get started on those fans. And, ma'am—"

"Please don't call me ma'am. I'm not ready for that. Call me Willie."

"Okay, Willie." He winked at her. "Welcome to Bootleg Cove."

Chapter Two

With the exception of the hideous art-deco lamp her mother-in-law had given her as a parting gift, Skip and Chuck managed to get everything inside and set up in one piece. Her building was now a home. She wound the electrical cord around the remains of the ceramic French whore and tossed her into the dumpster on top of the broken pieces of the base. She watched the big yellow truck back into the woods and out of her life. Kyle waved frantically when Skip gave one more mighty blast of the air horn.

Kyle bounced on his toes and swiveled in her direction, Ted swinging at his side. “I’m going to be a truck driver when I grow up.”

She dropped the dumpster lid, and it slammed against its mooring with a loud bang. She dusted off her hands then ruffled his sweaty hair. “In case you hadn’t noticed, big guy, we own a restaurant now. So you’re going to be a restaurateur.”

Kyle made a face. “A what?”

“A guy who owns a restaurant.”

His little face fell into instant depression. “Oh… That doesn’t sound too exciting.” His forehead furrowed, and then a bright smile lit his face. “Can we get a horn?”

“Sure. I’ll put it on the list.”

“Good. I’m gonna go look at the water. Is that okay?”

“Looking is fine. Touching is not. Deal?” Kyle’s head nodded vigorously, and he whirled around and sprinted across the gravel. “That’s hands *and* feet, Kyle. I mean it!”

Willie sighed and let her gaze drift toward the shadowy depths of her own personal forest. The sun seemed to set fast here in her little corner of the world. A bit of shimmery light twinkled between the leafy boughs in the woods, but here, on her little spit of land, darkness hovered, ready to pounce. She could almost feel tendrils of dusky

shadows skimming toward her on sneaky feet. Already the darkness had claimed most of the water. Deep shadows had settled over the bay like a dirty, gloomy carpet. She'd been so tired the night before she hadn't noticed how dark everything got. No streetlights. No headlights bouncing off the asphalt. No lights from neighborhood houses. Just a vast expanse of almost-dark sky, deep-green water and the hint of a crescent moon.

She glanced at her watch. Only 6:30. It felt like midnight. She stood for a moment in her new parking lot, listening to the sounds of insects singing night songs in the trees, the mournful call of a loon out in the marshes and the quiet lap of the bay's waters against the shore. She pulled a small notebook and pencil out of her pocket and began to stroll around the perimeter of the building, studying the structure and writing down any project that crossed her mind. She definitely needed to decide on what color to paint it. She didn't really like the original pink or the decades-old blue. She thought a nice forest green with white trim would be nice, but she'd ask Harry and get his opinion too.

She passed the French doors. The framework would need paint, but all the glass was intact, a definite plus. When she reached the old concrete patio at the back of the building, she realized she'd need to do a bit of patching there, but thought how nice it would be to sit on the patio overlooking the bay in the evening. Her guests might enjoy having a cocktail while watching the dark shadows of the water and listening to the lull of the waves lapping at the sand.

She winced as a mosquito took a bite out of her arm, and then she squashed him flat.

She wrote "insect repellents" on her list. Then, after she'd killed two more bloodsuckers, she wrote, "Consider screening in back patio". Whether she did that or not, she'd need some seating. Surely someone had thought to buy patio furniture in the last forty or fifty years.

She headed toward the small shed located down the beach. She'd been told by Mr. Benson that anything she could see while standing on the patio was her property. She'd tested it out and discovered she had quite a large private beach in both directions, the foundation of a fallen-down house to the north—she planned to tear that down completely—and, to the south, a small dock and two small outbuildings, a maintenance shed and a crabbing station.

She shoved her pad and pencil back in her pocket and walked toward the maintenance shed, her sandals squishing through the damp sand, still hot from the sun. She'd have to consider buying a new vacuum cleaner too. Her dreams of living on a beach had never been

overly detailed, and obviously not very practical. She'd thought nothing of the day-to-day chore of keeping the beach from overrunning the building.

The door to the maintenance shed held a padlock, a very firm padlock. She gripped the sill and stood on tiptoes, pressing her face as close to the glass as she dared, and peered through the dirty window. She saw stacks of lawn chairs, several hammocks, a glider and a rather nice-sized picnic table. With a bit of paint, everything could be serviceable, which was good because her budget didn't include buying everything new.

She stepped back and wiped some dirt from her hands. She had a rather sizeable collection of keys to go with the building, but none she recalled would be quite right for a padlock. "I'll just have Harry break that lock," she murmured. "It's my place, after all."

Skittering sensations tickled down her arms. She shivered and rubbed her skin with a bigger shudder, thinking of spiderwebs and the things that lived in them. She glanced around and, sure enough, a huge web clung to the overhang of the shed door. She pulled out her pad. "Have Harry check for spiders".

She moved on to the crab shack, an open-air structure that included several workstations, metal bins and a large tank of some kind. Larger than a refrigerator, it reminded her of the beer case behind the bar. It too had a lock, but this one was a bolt that shot through a hasp. She checked quickly for spiders then undid the bolt and manhandled the lid up. The odor that came from inside was foul and took her breath away, a combination of old fish and some underlying stench of decay and neglect. The tank was filled with mold and several inches of stagnant water. She reeled back, and the lid slammed shut with a bang.

"Have Harry get rid of the tank".

She assumed it was a holding tank for freshly caught crabs and fish. Considering she was opening a restaurant on Chesapeake Bay and people would expect her specials to include crab and anything else that swam in these waters, she wrote, "Buy new tank". She'd find the money somewhere, after she found some local fisherman to supply her with the catch of the day.

She was putting her pad away when she heard a voice.

"Hi there!"

She whirled around as a spear of panic sliced through her. It was a deep voice, a man's voice, almost booming in the quiet of the evening, but not Harry's. Who the hell was talking to her son? She raced across

the sand and over the pitted concrete of the patio. Though sprinting at full speed, she felt as though the fifteen-second run had taken hours. Breathing hard, heart pounding, she came to a screeching halt when she saw the giant of a man bending down to talk to her son.

"Kyle!"

Kyle turned to her with a bright smile and waved to her. "Mama, come here! This is Sam."

Her legs felt like lead as she walked toward them, trying to look composed, in control, not scared out of her mind and shaking like the last, clinging leaf of autumn. This man could snap her child in two with his bare hands and do the same to her a moment later. He must have been over six feet tall and had the bulk to match the height. A red cotton shirt, none too clean, stretched over a wide barrel chest. The long sleeves were rolled above his elbows to show steel-muscled arms. He wore a pair of grungy overalls. One strap hung against his hip as though he'd simply forgotten he should use two. His boots, huge and battered, looked as though they'd tromped through every foot of marsh from here to Baltimore. His blond hair was cut short on the sides but long on top. Curling strands tumbled over his forehead and into his eyes. And when he raised his head…

She froze, shocked by the sight of him. He had such a beautiful face for such a monstrous man. Like Harry, he looked like a fallen angel—one dark, one light—dropped into this dark corner of Maryland by accident, unable to find his way home. The only imperfections were two twisting scars across his neck. His eyes, the bright blue of a robin's egg, twinkled when he smiled at her, and they held such childlike innocence a sob caught in her throat.

"Hi," he said quietly. He rubbed at the dimple in his chin.

"Hello."

She took a cautious step toward him, not quite trusting the beauty, not quite sure that his innocence was all it seemed. And yet it had to be. Those blue eyes held the same glint she saw in Kyle's, the thrill of living a child's life, something no adult on Earth could find again once the reality of life crashed down in adulthood. This man, trapped in the body of an adult, held the soul of a child. With his lineless face, bright eyes and goofy smile, he seemed ageless, but she thought he might be in his late teens or early twenties.

She glanced around. He hadn't come down the road through the forest because she'd been in view of the road. There was no boat pulled up to the shoreline. She knew she was crazy for even talking to the man. She should have been gathering her son and barricading them

both behind the doors of their new home. But what choice did she have? He could probably break down any door she put between them with one crash of those huge hands. She had no doubt those hands would create huge fists. She glanced once again at the dark waters, though she had no idea why.

"How did you get here, Sam?"

His massive shoulders lifted then fell as a big sigh heaved his mighty chest. "Don't know. Guess I'm lost." He gave her another goofy, somewhat-shy smile.

Willie glanced to Kyle, her brow furrowed. "Honey, did you see where Sam came from? We need to get him home."

Kyle shook his head. "I was staring in the water, looking for fishes, not touching, just looking, and I heard something. I turned around, and there he was." He leaned against the giant and slipped his small hand into the man's large paw. "Can we keep him?"

Willie rubbed her eyes with her fingertips. "No, honey, he's not a pet. We can't just keep him."

"Sure you can," Sam said brightly. "I don't mind. I got nowhere else to be, least I don't think so." He shrugged again and glanced toward the building. "I like the way your house is changing colors."

"Me too!" Kyle said.

"You have samwiches in there?" Sam asked.

"Ham and turkey," Kyle said.

"Can we have both? Together?" Sam asked. He turned a hopeful gaze in Willie's direction.

"Sure," she said softly.

Kyle tugged on Sam's hand and led him toward the building. Willie stood stock-still and watched them walk away, a big Frankenstein monster with a smiling child. This couldn't possibly end well. It never ended well, no matter how many movies she saw. She followed behind, wondering when she had lost her mind.

"You can spend the night," Kyle said. "We have enough rooms."

"I know." Sam turned his face to look at Kyle, those curling strands of hair bouncing on his forehead as his head bobbed up and down. "Lots of rooms. Like a hotel, right?" He stopped, his boots crunching on the gravel. "Is that the right word?"

"Rest…rest…something," Kyle said.

"Sure, where you rest," Sam said. "I remember now." He gave a happy sigh and started walking again. "I really like the colors." He took a big breath. "And the air smells good. Real good."

Willie picked up the phone for the third time and then slipped it back in the cradle. Who should she call? What would she even say?

She leaned back against the counter and sipped on her instant coffee, grimacing at the bitter taste. She really needed to buy a coffeepot. She needed to buy a lot of things. A working mind was at the top of her list.

She watched quietly as Kyle and Sam devoured their sandwiches and chips. Sam was on his fourth. He apparently hadn't eaten in quite a while. He couldn't remember when his last meal had been and had gotten a bit sad when he couldn't recall whether it had been chicken or meatloaf. He thought it had been chicken, homemade fried chicken.

"Did your mother make it?" Willie asked, hoping for any clue as to where this big man-child had come from.

"Nope, she's dead."

"I'm sorry," Willie said, wondering who might be in charge of this man if there was no mother.

"It's okay. She left when I was a little kid. Got sick or somethin'. Don't really 'member."

"Aren't you a little kid now?" Kyle asked, his head tilting as he studied the big guy. "I know you look big, but some kids *are* big."

"Not this big!" Sam said with a big laugh. "I'm…don't rightly know. I've had some birthdays. I 'member the cake, but I can't 'member how many. Good cake though." He shoved a pickle in his mouth and chewed. When he swallowed, he snapped his fingers. "Hey, I know! I think it was crab. Yeah, it was crab."

"What a surprise," Willie murmured.

"I don't like crab," Sam said.

She'd turned on every light in the place, and still the darkness crept from every corner, moving closer and closer and hovering around the pools of light. The darkness beyond the windows pressed on the glass, looking for a way in, sneaking bastard. If she stared hard enough, she could almost see the panes bowing with the weight of the hungry shadows.

That loon out on the bay was close to driving her insane. The melancholy sound made her head hurt and her eyes fill with tears, and she had no idea why. The call had sounded prettier outside. Hearing it inside just made her feel lonely.

When the boys finished eating—she just couldn't bring herself to

think of Sam as a man—Kyle took his new friend upstairs to look through his toy box. Once again, the thought of her own mental health hovered at the edge of Willie's mind. She needed to get Sam out of the house. If nothing else, she needed to call the sheriff's office to get some information about him and find out if anyone had reported him missing. Given his size and mental capacities, surely he would be known throughout the county.

Mind made up, she finished cleaning up the small family table in the big industrial kitchen. She was reaching for the phone when she heard a soft tap on the back door. Her heart leapt because her first thought was that someone had come looking for Sam. She hurried to the door, pulled it open, and light spilled out onto the back stoop.

Her eyes ticked left then right. She peered out into the darkness.

"Now you're hearing things. Wonderful, Willie, just go ahead and lose your damn mind."

She closed the door and reached for the phone again. She had dialed three numbers when she heard another knock. She held her breath and waited. Nothing. She dialed a fourth number, and this time when a knock sounded, it was a bit stronger.

"Oh for crying out loud…"

Willie slammed the phone down and yanked open the door. "This better not be a—"

Standing in the puddle of light was a young girl—small, fragile looking, probably about fourteen or so. She looked malnourished, almost to the point of emaciation because her arms were so thin Willie could see her bone structure. The girl's blonde hair, cut in a short bob and clinging to her head like a helmet, framed a heart-shaped face with a pointy little chin. She wore a cheap cotton dress that hung loosely on her skinny frame down to her knobby knees and appeared to have lost two buttons somewhere along the way. The fabric gaped, showing a dirty slip. Her pale, sticklike legs ended in a pair of ugly black shoes which had left a trail of mud on the stoop in her wake. Her quiet voice had no momentum. It barely reached Willie's ears.

"Hello, ma'am. Sorry to bother you."

"It's no bother." It was then that Willie noticed the girl was soaking wet. Willie leaned out the door, wondering when it had begun to rain, but the stoop was dry, except for the trail of mud, and when she put her hand out she felt nothing. "Honey, do you need help? Did you fall out of your boat?"

"No…no, I don't think so. My name is Amanda." The girl reached up and swept the wet fringe from her forehead, revealing blue eyes as

bright as a robin's egg. Familiar blue eyes. They stared at Willie, filled with hope. "I'm looking for someone."

"Of course you are. You're here for Sam." Willie stepped aside. "Thank God. I was beginning to worry. Please come in."

The girl wiped the mud off her shoes as best she could and stepped gingerly inside. She looked around the kitchen with wide eyes, taking in the big, clunky dishwasher—thankfully in working order—the stainless-steel sink, the industrial stove with its cavernous oven and the huge flat-top grill. Willie put a towel around the girl's shoulders and put another one in her hand.

The girl mopped at her face slowly. "Wow. Everything is…changed."

"Changed? In what way?"

"I don't really remember. Just changed. Things just change sometimes." Her little body shivered as if to shake off dark thoughts. Her gaze came back to Willie's in fits and starts, never lighting on anything for more than a split second. "Is my brother okay?"

"He's fine," Willie said with a smile. "You two look very much alike."

"People always say that. I hope he wasn't any trouble."

"Sam's a very sweet boy, very chatty." She laughed, suddenly nervous in the presence of a teenage girl, though she had no idea why. "I was wondering though… How old is your brother?"

"As you've probably figured out, not as old as he looks." Amanda closed her eyes for a few seconds, and when she opened them, she nodded. "I guess he's around seventeen. He's a year older than me, and I'm pretty sure I'm sixteen…pretty sure."

How could the girl not know how old she was?

"So you're sure he's okay?" Her eyes were so serious it hurt Willie to look at them.

"A bit confused, I think, but truly, he's fine. A very happy guy."

"I'm glad," Amanda said quietly. "He used to be so happy…until…" Her brows pulled downward, and she blinked a few times in quick succession. Willie saw some water droplets fall from her hair to trail down her cheeks like tears.

"Until when, honey?"

She gave a weak smile. "Not sure." She shivered again and rubbed a shoulder through the towel. "But I like the room. It's very…bright." She blinked several times.

Willie looked around the kitchen at the pooling shadows, the dark

corners, the gloomy recesses beneath the shelving. Not exactly bright. In fact, puddles of darkness seemed to gather like conspiracies, growing with each tick of the clock. Willie was beginning to regret the broken lamp. She thought she might need quite a few more to feel comfortable.

"Are you hungry, honey? You look…hungry."

She actually looked half-dead, but Willie decided it best not to mention that.

"No, ma'am. I'm not hungry much. Not anymore."

"Well, we can at least get you out of those wet clothes. I have some things upstairs you can wear. Then we'll call your father and—"

"No!"

Willie took an involuntary step back, and Amanda clapped her hands over her mouth. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"It's okay." Willie held up her hand, not sure why, but she didn't want to spook the girl. She took a few steps toward her. "Won't he want to know Sam is safe?"

"No." Amanda shook her head furiously. "No no no."

The sound of clomping boots pounding down the staircase echoed through the room like a herd of buffalo stampeding across the prairie. The walls practically vibrated. The swinging door burst open, and Sam barreled into the room. He stopped suddenly like a raging bull searching for a target and locked on the young girl.

"Mandy! Mandy!"

Amanda rushed toward him, her arms stretched out wide, and Sam lifted the fragile little creature into his big, strong arms and swung her around in a circle, laughing hysterically. But big, fat tears streamed down his cheeks, falling into his laughing mouth and dropping off his dimpled chin. Amanda tucked her face into her brother's neck and sobbed like a baby while Sam smoothed his giant paw over her damp hair.

"Hush, little sis. Hush now. Sam's got you. Everythin's gonna be just right. We're safe here. Hush now."

Willie felt tears gathering in her eyes. She wiped them with a dish towel as Kyle came through the swinging door. He walked to Willie and tucked his hand into hers. He stared up at her with a gentle smile. "Is that Amanda?"

"Yes. Apparently she's Sam's sister."

"I know. They've been looking for each other."

"I guess they have." She listened to the sounds of Amanda's sobs

and Sam's quiet crooning. The solemn, sad cry of the loon hadn't broken her heart as badly as the love she saw between these siblings. The crack in her heart, not remotely healed from her recent trauma, cracked some more, splitting deeper and wider with each second she watched them.

"I was so lost," Amanda said with a sniffle.

"Me too!" Sam said. "Not no more though, huh?" He gave his sister a squeeze and a big buss on the cheek.

Amanda returned his squeeze, her arms twisting around his neck like vines. "No more. I'll never lose you again, Sam. I promise."

"I know, Mandy, my Mandy." Sam's big face swung toward Willie. "Got any more samwiches? I could eat. No crab though. I don't think I like crab. Samwiches would be good."

Lightning sizzled across the dark sky, arcing and flashing from one gloomy cloud to the next like a child playing hopscotch. From where she lay on her damp sheets, Willie had a good view of those clouds racing past her window, as well as the dancing spears of scary light. Heavy drops of rain beat against the glass and pounded against the roof like a demented drummer, and the rumble of thunder shook the windowpanes, a rattling echo of the night's fury.

With two strangers in the building—young though they were—Willie had erred on the side of caution, insisting Kyle sleep in her room. Every now and then he twisted beside her, his little body jolting in response to the sounds. Somehow he'd stayed asleep throughout the night, though Willie had no idea how. Though the wind was blowing—she knew because she'd watched the clouds—the storm had been hovering over the bay for hours now. How could a storm just *sit* over a place on a windy night?

Despite the whirling *tick-tick-tick* of the overhead fan, the tiny breeze did little to stir the moist, sluggish air, and Willie lay as straight as she could on her back, trying desperately to cool down. Her hair was plastered to her head, and her thin nightdress was completely soaked in perspiration. She wanted desperately to open the window again. She had opened it earlier, when the rain had tapered to a mild pitter-patter. She'd stood at the window, enjoying the slight reprieve, and listened to the soft splatters against the windowsill, staring out at the expanse of black water. She watched whitecaps surging toward the shore with each lightning strike, the water swelling onto the sandy stretch then rolling back out to the depths with a chaotic, almost-hypnotizing

rhythm.

She'd stood at the window for a long time, lost in the sounds of the storm and the surf, staring at a landscape that both changed and remained the same. At one point, though, the wind had kicked up even stronger, and a sheet of rain had come pouring through. She'd barely gotten the window closed before the rain flooded the entire floor, and she'd been forced to change her nightgown.

She glanced at the clock on her bedside table—4:30 a.m. Her eyes felt like dry beans rolled in sand. They were the only dry things on her body.

Kyle gave a little snort and rolled, his arm coming across her as he snuggled closer, a warm, damp Ted trapped between them. Though Kyle's heat enveloped her like a soggy blanket, she turned and welcomed him into the curve of her body. At least one of them was able to sleep.

She must have dozed off at some point because the soft sound jolted her awake with a start. She lay quietly, her eyes ticking back and forth, searching for the source of the noise. It hadn't been much, simply a creak in the hardwood, as though someone had stepped near the foot of her bed. She waited quietly for the next lightning flash, and when it came, accompanied by a huge roll of thunder that shook her entire bed, she bolted upright, her heart hammering against her ribs like a battering ram. A shimmering white shape came into view, hovering at the foot of her bed.

She squeaked and clasped her hand over her chest as the shape came into focus. "Jesus, Amanda, you gave me a heart attack."

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

I thought I locked the bedroom door. I'll have Harry fix that tomorrow.

Willie swung her legs over the edge of the bed. She straightened instantly as a sudden cool breeze wafted across her body. It brought with it a tunnel of fresh, circulating air, as though she'd been transported to a room with air-conditioning. It felt like heaven. The sweat lifted from her skin, and she inhaled deeply, her lungs filling with the clean, dry air, and her flesh reveling in the cool, vapor-free draft. For a long, blissful moment she simply allowed her body to enjoy the coolness. She'd almost forgotten about Amanda.

She stood up, feeling a bit dizzy. *Too much oxygen. Not used to it around here.* She took a step toward the girl, shivering now in the cool air. She grabbed her robe from the foot of the bed and shrugged into it.

"What's wrong?"

She struggled to meet Amanda's gaze in the gloom. They were nearly the same size, so they almost stood eye to eye, but Amanda's face remained a blank, dark canvas, almost as if lost in shadow. When the lightning flashed to reveal the girl, Willie lurched backward, nearly stumbling over a slipper.

You're not completely awake. You didn't see that. People's faces just don't disappear.

She whirled and fled toward the nightstand. She fumbled for the light switch on the lamp, her fingers trembling as they tried desperately to turn the little knob. Finally, mercifully, the room flooded with light, and though nearly blinded, Willie was grateful. She inhaled, held her breath, and turned.

Amanda stood meekly at the foot of the bed. Her damp blonde hair clung to her head, and her thin, little body, encased in a sweat-soaked nightshirt nearly falling off her shoulders, was shivering as though caught in a deep freeze.

Willie hurried toward her and put her hand on the girl's forehead, expecting a high fever. Instead, her skin was ice-cold, and it was obvious the nightshirt was more than damp. It was soaking wet.

"Honey, why are you so wet? Did you open a window?"

Amanda shook her head, her teeth chattering. There was no reason for the girl being so cold. In fact, it was so damn hot again Willie ripped off her robe and tossed it on the bed. Kyle stirred and lifted his head off the pillow.

"Mama? Is it mornin'?"

"No, honey, it's still night. Go back to sleep."

"Okay." His head flopped back down, and his breathing deepened within seconds.

Willie took Amanda's hand and led her down the hallway, the spill of light from the bedroom following them to the bathroom. Once there, she snapped on the overhead light, and it flickered and stuttered, nearly going out, but finally snapped into a sizzling pattern of dim-bright-dim-bright. Another thing to put on the list for Harry.

Willie ran the hot water in the sink, opening the tap as far as it would go, hoping for hot water, warm water, tepid water—anything but ice water. The water came out lukewarm, and she soaked a washcloth, wrung it out and then ran it over Amanda's cold face and neck.

"Are you sick, honey?"

"No," Amanda said with a sigh. "This always happens at first."

"At first?" Willie brushed a damp lock of hair away from the girl's

forehead and tilted her head, trying to meet the girl's downcast eyes. "What do you mean 'at first'?"

Amanda's forehead scrunched. "I don't…remember, but I'll be better."

"But this has happened before?" Willie ran the washcloth under the tap again and then over Amanda's skinny arms. She was warming up a bit, though she was nowhere near "better".

"Yes," she whispered. "Several times."

Willie had no idea what she was dealing with here, but she hoped it wasn't contagious. Maybe tomorrow, after she called the sheriff, she should call a local doctor and find out if anything was going around. She certainly couldn't afford to get sick with a new business to start, and Kyle was such a tiny thing. Any bug could lay him low. Yes, after she called the sheriff about her two houseguests, she'd—

"It was nice of you to let us stay," Amanda said, her voice getting lost somewhere between their bodies.

Willie gave a tiny laugh. "It didn't seem like I really had a choice."

"There's always a choice," Amanda said.

"It didn't seem so last night." Willie rewet the cloth and ran it across Amanda's arms again. "You were pretty adamant about not calling your father."

"It won't matter." Amanda sighed, staring at the dingy linoleum. "He'll find us. He always does."

Willie dropped the cloth in the sink and cupped the girl's face, lifting it so Amanda was forced to look at her. "Is there something you'd like to tell me, Amanda?"

Amanda stared at her, her robin's-egg blue eyes blinking against the flickering light. Her pale face seemed to glow in the kaleidoscope of dim-bright-dim-bright.

"I feel better now," the girl said.

"I'm glad, but that's not what I meant." She caressed the girl's cheek, warmer now. "Is there something I should know about your father? Something I can help with?"

"He's…" Amanda blinked rapidly several times and then seemed to find her voice because her words came out with force, almost as though they'd come from someone else, "…he's dead."

Willie rubbed her forehead. "But you just said…" *He'll find us.* Obviously the girl wasn't at her best. She'd had a very bad evening, first with losing her brother and then with this… Willie shook her head to clear her thoughts. "Sam told me your mother was dead, but he

never said anything about your father being dead too. Did it happen recently? Have you been living alone?"

Amanda lifted her chin and stared directly into Willie's eyes, those blue eyes almost mesmerizing in the dim-bright-dim-bright. "Yes, we've been living alone. It's been hard with Sam, but we've managed. He gets very lonely, though, and wanders off looking for friends. He seems happy here, and I'm happy when he's happy. Please don't send us away. I'm not sure…" She just ran out of steam. When she sighed, her shoulders slumped beneath the wet shirt. A drop fell from her eye and slid down her cheek. She didn't seem to notice.

Willie wrapped her arms around the girl and tugged her close. Amanda's head dropped onto Willie's shoulder. The girl's body was still cool, far too cool for a hundred-degree night on the Maryland shore, but much warmer than it had been.

"Please don't send us away, Mizz Willie," she murmured. "We like it here with you so much."

Mizz Willie. So old-fashioned.

She ran her hand down Amanda's back, rubbing soothing circles against the girl's shoulder blades, like she did with Kyle when he had a bad dream.

"I'm not sending you away." *At least not tonight.* "Don't worry about that. Do you think you can go back to sleep now?"

Amanda nodded against her shoulder.

"We'll get you a new nightshirt and check on Sam."

"He's fine," Amanda said, drawing away. "He's always fine when I find him. He never remembers."

Willie nodded, though she had no idea why. "I guess that's good, right?"

"I guess it is." Amanda gave her a smile. It was a teeny-tiny smile, but it was a start.

Chapter Three

She pulled the paper from the pocket of her shorts and leaned closer. She didn't have to, they were certainly close enough, but she wanted to smell him. "The list just keeps getting longer and longer."

"Keeps me in a job, right?" Harry said with a smile. He plucked the paper from her fingers. "Spiders. Check. I can do that." For a split second, a frown crossed his mouth, but he glanced up with a smile. "Bathroom light still creating problems, I see…" Willie watched his eyes scan the paper again. "And the bedroom lock… You're sleeping in the room with three views of the bay?"

"Yes, how did you know?" she asked, an uncomfortable chill skittering down her spine.

"Well, for starters," he said with a smirk, "your furniture was in there yesterday when I fixed the fan."

"Oh right…" She felt like an idiot, but she breathed a sigh of relief anyway. For a moment she thought Harry had been spying on her.

"Also, that lock has never worked right. Hasn't for years."

"You seem to know an awful lot about my building, Harry."

"Been around awhile, ma'am."

"Willie," she said sternly.

He nicked the edge of his ball cap with his finger, settling it a bit higher on his forehead, and smiled. "Right, ma'am. I'd forgotten."

Another old-fashioned one.

She'd discovered, though, she kind of liked it. It made her feel both like the lady of the manor and like a good friend. At least she hoped she and Harry would be friends. She liked his company, and he wasn't hard on the eyes. She'd never personally known a better-looking man, not even Bobby.

The sound of tromping boots sounded on the staircase, and they both turned as Amanda's small wraithlike body slid silently through

the doorway, like an apparition. Amanda came to a standstill at the threshold, her mouth dropping open. Kyle plowed into her back.

"Hey, Mandy, what's the holdup?" Sam said from the stairwell.

She squealed like a little girl at Christmas. "Harry!"

Amanda flew across the room, weaving through tables and chairs with a graceful elegance, and launched herself into Harry's arms. It seemed to be the only way she knew how to greet a male. Harry swung her around, her thin, little body flying almost horizontally. Both of them laughed like crazy people, and Sam swooped up Kyle in his arms to get him out of the way and then raced across the room, his body wedging between tables like a player on a football field, bumping them with each stride, the impact sending the furniture skittering across the wood floor.

Harry settled a dizzy Amanda back on her feet, and she wobbled for a minute, a bright smile across her face. His arm went around Sam's back, and he tugged the giant close for a second, gazing up into Sam's big, handsome face. "Sam, my man, how are you?"

"Good, Harry, good." Sam's head bobbed up and down, his smile growing wider with each bob. He planted Kyle on the floor, and Kyle rushed over and hugged Willie's leg, looking up at her.

"I guess they know Harry, huh?"

"Sure looks that way."

"I've been looking all over for you two," Harry said, cupping Amanda's chin. "How did we miss each other?"

"I don't know," Amanda said. "But we've been here for a while. Mizz Willie's taking care of us."

Willie noticed that Amanda's pale face had a bit of color for the first time since she'd arrived. A tiny rose blush stained her cheeks. She looked almost like a real girl and not the washed-out shadow she'd been before. Maybe she'd kicked that bug. Just to verify it, she placed her hand on Amanda's forehead. Neither hot nor cold, definitely an improvement over last night.

"I told you I'd be okay," she said with a smile.

"You did," Willie said with a nod, "but last night that was very hard to believe."

"She's a quick study," Harry said. He jabbed a pretend punch at Sam's stomach, and Sam doubled over with a laughing *whoosh*. It was a game they'd obviously played before. "And my man Sam here always comes through with flying colors, right, buddy?"

"Yep, Harry. Lots of colors."

Willie shook her head, her gaze darting from Harry to Amanda to Sam and back to Harry. “I don’t understand.” She tried to smile, but a twisting, whirling kind of sickness had invaded her stomach, making her feel like puking. It was the same feeling she got when riding the Tilt-A-Whirl at an amusement park.

“The kids and I are old friends,” Harry said.

“I can see that, but—”

“Hey, Mizz Willie, can I have some eggs?” Sam asked. “No crab though. I hate crab.”

Willie kept her gaze locked on Harry. “Sure, Sam. You go on in and find them in the walk-in. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Sam tore off through the swinging door, and Kyle ran behind. Amanda looked at them uncertainly for a moment, and then Harry gestured with his chin toward the door. “Go on, Amanda.”

She backed away, staring at them the whole time, and finally turned and disappeared through the swinging door.

“What’s going on?” Willie asked.

“The kids are on their own.”

“Amanda told me that. How are you involved?”

“I just look in on them from time to time.”

“Meaning?” She folded her arms across her chest.

A nerve ticced in his cheek, but he kept his gaze steady on hers. “Drop off some groceries, make sure they have firewood in the cold, make sure Sam stays put. Obviously he doesn’t always.”

“No, obviously not. Why aren’t they in foster homes? Why isn’t Sam getting the attention he needs? Amanda shouldn’t be forced to accept responsibility for him. He needs supervision, someone who—”

“They do fine.”

“I don’t call it fine. When they showed up here last night, one was starving and one looked like a drowned rat. Amanda was sick last night. I still think I should call a doctor. It could be anything.” Her gaze drifted to the swinging door.

“She’s fine,” Harry said. “It always takes a day or two.”

“What does that even mean? It doesn’t make sense.”

He ran his hands from her shoulders down to her wrists, holding them for a minute before his arms dropped back to his sides. “Trust me. The kids have had some rough luck, but they need to stay together. They just need a bit of help from time to time.”

“Which is why I’m calling the sheriff right after breakfast.” Willie started toward the swinging door, but Harry grabbed her arm. It was

gentle, but she felt the intent behind it. He meant to stop her from calling the sheriff.

"The last thing those kids need to be is separated," he said quietly, but his blue eyes flashed with determination. He meant to convince her with his gaze alone. The hand wrapped around her arm was warm, but the strength was evident even in the gentle hold. "They need our help."

"The sheriff can help them. That's what law enforcement does."

He laughed, but it wasn't a pleasant sound. "Yeah, riiiight. Where do you come from again, ma'am?"

She'd thought she liked that soft Southern drawl of the word *ma'am* on his lips, but she'd been wrong. She hated it. She tugged her arm loose, and he held up his hands and took a step backward.

"Stop calling me ma'am. It's *Willie*."

"Okay…Willie."

"I come from Pittsburgh, and I see no reason why the sheriff here can't help them."

"Aw, Pittsburgh." He tilted his head back and studied the smoke-stained ceiling. "A completely different world, Pittsburgh. Here in Calvert, well…Calvert people do things differently than most everyone else, particularly law enforcement. I learned that the hard way, ma'am, I mean, Willie." He stared down at her, those eyes darker now, full of something she didn't understand. "Please give it a few days. Don't call the sheriff just yet. I'm asking as a…friend."

Willie set her jaw for a moment, prepared to say no, but something, some tiny little voice in the back of her mind, told her to acquiesce. She gave a curt nod. "Okay, Harry, I'll give it two days. But I need you to fix the lock on that bedroom door because I can't take another heart attack in the middle of the night."

"Will do." He tipped his hat. "Thank you…Willie."

The next two days passed in a blur, a whirlwind of activity in which they cleaned, cleaned and cleaned some more. Sam and Kyle began in the dining room, wiping down windows and walls. Sam cleaned from the top to almost the bottom, and Kyle cleaned from the bottom to nowhere near the top. Willie and Amanda set to work on the kitchen, spraying and polishing and scraping at the appliances and racks until they shone. After that, they tossed the linens in the ancient washing machine and loaded all the dishes and glassware in the ancient dishwasher. Both chugged as though on their last legs but

continued to work until Willie had several piles of pristine tablecloths and napkins and everything sparkled on the steel shelving.

Willie had made three calls to the hardware store and two runs into the nearest village and was now on her third run. The village was six miles away, most of it on her old winding road through the woods. After spending two days with Amanda, Willie had felt comfortable leaving Kyle in her charge. Amanda seemed to have quite a bit of experience keeping her eyes on Sam, and though she *had* lost him at least a few times, Willie had made it clear that Kyle was to stay within Amanda's sight at all times. Besides, Harry was right there patching up some holes in the clapboard, so she knew he would be a second set of eyes.

After a sweltering drive through damp woods with only a hint of a hot breeze coming in from the bay, she arrived in the small village and angled her truck into one of the four parking spaces on Main Street. She cut the engine and sat for a few minutes fanning herself with a stack of flyers, peering up and down the street. *Village* was the right word for it. After living in Pittsburgh all her life, Willie had seen her share of small towns, but she'd never seen anything this small. There was one stoplight in the center of Main Street to allow for traffic coming from the beach, but even that seemed unnecessary because there was very little traffic. She'd seen only five cars and two trucks on her three runs to town. Most people in this town seemed to walk from one of the dozen or so residential streets that veered off from the main street, which stretched less than a quarter of a mile before disappearing back into the gloom of the woods.

Besides the hardware store, there was a feed store, a small café, a five-and-dime, a grocery and a gas station. She'd been told she could collect her mail at the feed store on Mondays and Thursdays, when the postmaster for the county stopped by on his rounds. Offering so little, the village was not exactly a place to spend a hot, sunny afternoon shopping, and yet there were three women standing in front of the grocery. All three held shopping bags clutched in their arms, and they seemed rather subdued, talking quietly.

Willie saw each of them in turn glance toward where she sat in the truck, but none of them smiled. She heaved a big sigh then pushed open the truck door and stepped out into the blistering sun. Storm or glaring, hot sunshine. This area seemed to have only two moods. She was starting to feel the same.

She shouldered her purse then nodded to the women, and they all nodded back reluctantly. They watched as she stepped into the small

café, and mercifully the door shut behind her, blocking the heat of their stares. The wonderful sensation of cool air enveloped her. She slid onto a stool at the counter. The waitress, a woman with graying brown hair and deep-brown eyes, came toward her slowly, eyeing her, from her sweaty hair to her damp blouse.

"Hot one out there."

"Yes, it is." Willie grabbed a napkin from the dispenser and wiped the sweat from the back of her neck. "This air-conditioning feels wonderful."

"Had it installed last summer. I'm gettin' too old for this heat. What can I get you, hon?"

"Iced tea?"

"That your truck?" The woman nodded toward the window. "I've seen it a couple times now."

"Yes. I've been picking up some things from the hardware store."

"Uh-huh." The waitress—her name tag said *Betty*—filled a glass with ice and grabbed a pitcher of tea from the refrigerator. She poured some tea into the glass, plopped a straw into it and slid it across the counter.

"Thank you."

The woman nodded, and Willie waited for more questions. None came. Betty turned and began to cook something on the grill. Willie heard the sizzle as butter hit the hot surface. She twisted on her stool, sipping at the cool liquid, her gaze flickering between Betty and the three women on the sidewalk. They all stared through the window, making no move at all to hide their interest. Willie stared back, making no move to hide her disdain for their interest. Not exactly the best way to begin life in Maryland, but they'd started it. She listened to the spit and crackle of the fryer and enjoyed all the delicious scents flooding the café.

She thought vaguely about asking Betty if she knew anything about Sam and Amanda. It seemed she ought to look into where the kids had come from. Maybe they even lived in this village. She'd promised Harry a couple of days, though she had no idea why, and those days had now passed. She enjoyed the kids' company, but surely someone was worried and missing them somewhere. It wouldn't hurt to investigate a bit. The time on her promise had expired.

"Is the sheriff's office around here?" she asked the woman's back.

"Nope. You gotta go north to the city for that."

The city… On the way south, she'd passed a larger town about ten

miles north of here.

"Prince Frederick?"

"That's the one." Betty turned toward her. "Hungry, hon?"

Willie whirled around on her stool. "Um…I don't really know. I've been so busy I've barely thought of food."

"I can see that." Betty eyed her again. "You look like you could use some meat on your bones. You're a skinny little thing. Scrawny even."

Thank you so much.

Betty turned away for a few minutes then set a plate in front of her. It held a grilled-cheese sandwich and a massive order of French fries. The food looked heavenly and smelled even better.

"I think you should eat something."

"You're right," Willie murmured. "I should." She glanced up with a smile. "And it's my favorite lunch."

Betty grunted. Willie guessed it was her form of a chuckle. "It's everyone's favorite lunch. Mine included." The woman lifted her eyes to the window and sent out a murderous glare. Willie turned a bit in her seat, in time to see the women on the sidewalk scatter like hens in three directions.

"Nosy biddies. Nothing to do but stare at people all day."

Willie shrugged then picked up her grilled cheese. "I guess new people are always the talk of the town."

She took a huge bite, letting the taste of the gooey cheese settle on her tongue. She couldn't really remember the last time she'd had something other than a cold sandwich or toast. Weeks maybe, with the planning and the packing and the moving. Maybe even months, considering… She decided it didn't matter and popped a fry into her mouth. The salty taste was almost nirvana. Betty slid a bottle toward her.

"Gotta have ketchup, right?"

Willie nodded, unable to answer with a mouthful of food. She tipped the bottle and dropped a big, round dollop onto her plate. Betty disappeared into the back room, and Willie ate in cool silence for a few minutes. When Betty materialized suddenly in front of her, Willie jumped.

"You're at the Crab Pot. On Bootleg Cove." It wasn't a question.

"Yes, how did you know?" Betty simply stared at her. Willie smiled. She dredged another fry through the ketchup. "Willie Douglas." She wiped her fingers on a napkin and held out her hand.

Betty gripped her hand in a cool, firm handshake. "Betty Latham."

"So I guess you don't get many new people around here, huh?"

"Not this time of year. We get some summer people, rich folks from DC coming down to their little cottages. Ha! Their little cottages are bigger than most of the houses of us regular people. Definitely bigger than mine." Betty swiped at the already clean counter with a dishrag. "Mostly it's just the fisherfolk and a few of us stuck here in the village."

"You have a nice business here." The little café was clean and very homey with its chrome-and-leather seating and tidy counter. Willie took the last bite of her sandwich. Why had she not been eating? She couldn't even remember.

"It's enough to make a living. Luckily, my husband had some life insurance when he passed."

"I'm sorry for your loss." Willie glanced down and began to shred the napkin in her hands. "My husband has passed too."

"Thought as much," Betty said sadly. "Otherwise, he'd be the one drivin' for materials."

"He died in Vietnam," Willie said.

"Lots of the menfolk have."

Willie blinked back sudden tears, hot and intrusive during such a nice, tasty lunch. She pushed her plate away. Looking at the last few fries made her nauseated. Now she remembered why she never ate.

"He didn't have to die." She clenched her jaw, trying desperately to hold back that horrible anger that spiraled through her and sometimes worried those around her. They feared the anger more than the sadness. "He was studying to be a doctor. We had planned such a wonderful life. We were living with his parents, but saving for a house. We had one all picked out in Squirrel Hill, and everything was going to be so perfect. I could *feel* it. But then he came home one day and said he'd volunteered in the army as a medic. That's the way Bobby is…*was*. Always wanting to help, always such a good friend, neighbor, husband…"

"A good man."

"*Too* good." She blinked back terrible, hot tears. "So good I lost him."

"And you're angry with him."

Willie nodded. "Very."

"So you came to Maryland."

"Yes," Willie said then pressed her lips together. "I needed a change." She nodded again. "Change is good."

"Sometimes." Betty was quiet for a minute. "So, you're planning to

stay."

"I am."

Betty slung her dish towel over her shoulder. "Place needs a lot of work." Her eyes narrowed, and she ran a finger over her thin lips. "Who ya got helpin' you out there?"

"Harry Warner. Do you know him?"

"Yeah…I know him." Betty pursed her lips and took away the plate. She slid it under the counter, and Willie heard the rattle of dishes. "You should get on home."

Willie glanced at her watch. "I plan to once I pick up some supplies."

Betty put a hand on top of Willie's and squeezed. "No, hon, I mean back where you came from. Back to family. Back to that Squirrel Hill. Back to life."

"But I can't… I mean, I just bought a restaurant." Willie's forehead scrunched. "I don't understand."

"And I can't explain. Not today. Maybe not ever." She squeezed Willie's hand again. "But I used to live in that falling-down gem you now call a home, and the one thing I do know is that you need to get on back where you came from. It'll be easier on everyone."

Driving home with a truck bed full of concrete mix and paint—dark green and white, just as she'd wanted—Willie thought back to Betty. She'd liked the woman, but obviously some sort of bad blood existed between the café owner and Harry. Maybe Harry hadn't done a good job on some work. Maybe Harry and Betty's husband hadn't liked one another. Whatever it was, Betty wanted her gone and didn't like Harry. She ran a hand through damp hair. Too bad she couldn't give Betty what she wanted. She had a restaurant to open.

While in the village, she had hung flyers on the bulletin boards in the café, the hardware store and the grocery, advertising for waitresses and kitchen help. If she was lucky, she might find someone who could also bartend. If not, she'd consider another hire later. She could make drinks on the fly. Her mother-in-law had proved to be an excellent training ground. She wasn't sure how many people lived in the village, but surely someone would want to work at something other than fishing or crabbing or spying on people in cafés.

Taking advantage of her time in the village, she'd grabbed some pantry staples, meat and lots of fresh green vegetables at the grocery,

planning to make some real home-cooked meals. Though she'd felt a bit squeamish at the end of her meal, that grilled cheese had gone a long way to making her feel alive again.

When she arrived back at Bootleg Cove, Amanda, Sam and Kyle were washing off patio furniture, and Harry was finishing up the last of the patches on the clapboard. The kids waved and went back to their task. She was glad to see Kyle seemed perfectly content with his new friends. Harry met her in the parking lot and began unloading her purchases.

"I ran into someone you know in the village," Willie said.

Harry froze as he leaned into the truck. She stared at the back of his cap-covered head. "Really? Who'd you see?"

"Betty Latham. She owns the café."

"Sure." He straightened up but didn't turn toward her. "I know Betty. Nice lady."

"Really? Did you get along? She didn't seem too happy when she heard your name."

Harry rubbed the back of his sunburned neck then turned toward her. "No, I imagine not. Bad memories, I guess. I knew them when they owned the Crab Pot. Haven't seen her in years."

"I'm not sure how you could avoid her, since there's not another town around for miles."

"I mostly work north of here."

Willie stepped around him and grabbed two buckets of paint. "So why doesn't she like you?" When she turned, she squinted against the sun and shook her head to get the hair out of her eyes. Harry was staring down at her, his blue eyes filled with more seriousness than she cared to see on such a bright day.

"I was here the day her husband had the heart attack and died."

Her jaw simply fell. It wasn't quite what she'd expected to hear. "Oh well…I guess I can understand that."

"She left the Pot after that. Just packed up her personal stuff and walked away. They hadn't been opened more than four or five months. Betty opened the café about six months later. This place has been empty for the last nine years or so. I assume any money you paid went to her."

"I suppose so." Willie began walking toward the porch. "She told me to leave. Go home." She swung around, the paint cans banging painfully against her legs, but she ignored that. "Why would she tell me that?"

Harry hefted a bag of concrete mix onto his shoulder. “No idea, really, except some of the folks around here think Bootleg is cursed. Prohibition was a pretty violent time, and this area has lots of bad blood, bad history.”

“But things have changed,” Willie said. “Why can’t people just move on?”

Harry cast a glance toward the kids, who were squirting one another with the hose, then back to her. “I don’t know, Willie. I think that’s a question for a smarter man than me.”

Later that afternoon, the roll of thunder heralded another storm. They stowed the paint and concrete mix in the maintenance shed since projects would need to be put off for another day. Willie decided to cook some pork chops and invited Harry to stay for dinner. She hadn’t paid him a dime yet. In fact, he’d said money was unimportant and he’d tally things up later, as long as she paid for supplies. She felt, though, she owed him something. She had a big pot of potatoes boiling. She’d already created a large green salad with carrot and cabbage strips and had begun to fry the pork chops. They hissed and spit, sending out a delicious aroma as they browned to a golden crisp.

She turned on the old radio on the counter. She’d discovered she got limited reception out here in the sticks—especially during these storms—but tonight, though a bit staticky, the songs were coming through just fine. She danced around, shaking her hips and singing while she flitted between checking the potatoes and turning the chops, because she knew the song and loved it. Del Shannon’s “Runaway”. She and Bobby had raised some eyebrows when they’d danced to it at their wedding. Every now and then, Kyle would stop coloring at the table and joined in on a few of the lyrics, his little voice soft but melting her heart each time.

Harry was drinking a cup of instant coffee—he didn’t seem to mind the instant—sitting at the table beside Kyle, giving him color suggestions. Kyle tended to think abstractly, so many of his pages were filled with colors that would never exist in nature. Willie thought it was endearing, and Harry seemed to think so too.

“When was the last time you saw a purple-and-pink duck?” Harry teased with a smile.

“I never did,” Kyle said seriously.

“Then how do you know one exists?”

"Ted saw it yesterday."

"And where was this duck?" Harry asked.

"On the water…" Kyle looked up shyly, "…near the giant blue crab. He saw that too, didn't you, Ted?" He reached out and shook the bear. Ted nodded.

"I know blue crabs," Sam said. "Just regular sized, not giant. I don't like to eat them though. Don't like crabs. They stink."

He hovered near the stove, watching the water boiling, his body swaying to the music. Each time Willie poked a fork into a potato, he held his breath, and then his shoulders would slump when she shook her head.

"Not quite yet."

"Okay, but looks good, Mizz Willie. Smells even better."

"It does, doesn't it?" She gave the young man a smile and nodded toward his sister. "Why don't you help Amanda set the table? You can do the silverware."

He nodded eagerly and set to work. Most of the place settings got two spoons or two forks, but he set everything down neatly.

She was lifting the pork chops out of the pan when a cold draft whirled through the open doorway. She shivered, wondering where a cold draft had come from. The temperature gauge had read ninety-seven degrees at 4:30, and it was only 5:00 now. Torrents of rain began to pound the stoop, and as she glanced toward the *rat-tat-tat* sound, a dark shadow passed through the meager light that shone through the gray clouds. She dropped the chop back in the pan, and a gob of grease splattered onto her hand. She yipped as she ran to the sink and ran cold water over the burn, keeping her eyes on the open doorway.

Kyle glanced up, his crayon poised in midair. "What happened, Mama?"

"Did anyone see that?" She took her eyes off the door for a second.

Amanda's brow furrowed. "See what?"

"It was a shadow…but it moved like a man." She grabbed a clean dish towel and wrapped it around the burn on her hand, then moved across the worn linoleum.

"Harry…" Amanda's voice was soft, but beneath that one word, Willie heard such fear she stopped in her tracks.

"What's wrong?" She glanced between Amanda and Harry.

Harry rose and gestured for her to move backward. Instead, Willie rushed to the table, grabbed Kyle and pulled him behind her. Amanda lunged forward and grabbed Sam's arm, trying to pull him back with

her.

He held up several knives. “I’m not done.”

“Forget that,” Amanda whispered furiously. “Come.”

“Bossy pants.” Sam stuck out his tongue but did as his sister ordered.

“It-it’s h-him.” Amanda’s voice quavered.

“We don’t know that,” Harry said.

“It’s *always* him,” Amanda insisted. “And I can feel it. Can’t you?”

Harry nodded then held his fingers to his lips in a *shush* gesture. He took several more steps toward the door. “Franklin Davis!”

A dark pool of shadow—darker than any shadow Willie had ever seen, an oily miasma of black—slithered over the wet stoop and began to rise, inch by inch, higher and higher, until the shadow nearly filled the frame. Raindrops poured over the shadow in rivulets, sluicing over the contours of a face, a shoulder, an arm, a leg, outlining a human shape. Willie held her breath and watched as the shadow began to shift and twist, becoming lighter with each contortion until the figure of a large man stood in her doorway, drenched from head to toe. His dark-blue shirt was splattered with mud and black stains. He shook his head, spraying water everywhere, but also clearing the wet blond hair from his face to reveal another pair of robin’s-egg blue eyes.

The missing father. The dead father.

He can’t be dead. He’s standing right there.

Willie cast a quick glance at Amanda. The girl’s face had paled, all the color from the previous days just gone in an instant. All the happiness she’d captured during her time at Bootleg vanished in the blink of an eye. Tears shimmered in the corners of her wide eyes, and when she blinked, they fell in heavy drops. Her hand clasped Sam’s in a death grip, the knuckles white.

“Is that Daddy?” Sam asked, his voice hushed.

“Don’t look at him, Sam,” Amanda said.

He never asked why. He simply closed his eyes, squeezing his lids tight. Amanda kept her stare locked on the man as he began to move across the threshold. The dark stains on his shirt began to weep, dropping red stains on the floor that looked like puddles of blood. It couldn’t be blood, though, because that much blood loss would have brought him to his knees. Yet he kept walking until he was several feet into the kitchen, dangerous, scary, deadly. That stain had to be rust or paint or something else, but she wished it were blood. She wished it were blood with all her heart because she wanted this man dead, really

dead. Out of her life. Away from the children—*her* children. She would never give them back to a man like this.

Willie scurried back, nearly stumbling over Kyle. Harry, however, took several steps forward.

Please, Harry, make him go away.

"You're not welcome here, Davis."

"Why the hell not? It's my place, after all."

"Not anymore. It's her place now."

He gestured toward Willie, and the big blond man laughed. The laugh made Willie sick in the pit of her stomach. She dry heaved and nearly retched on the floor. Amanda slipped a cold hand into hers, and Willie gripped tight. Sam made a scary noise in his throat, and Kyle pressed against the backs of her legs, his hot little body taut and stiff as an iron rod.

"That's really funny, Warner. I'd say over my dead body, but we both know that ain't gonna happen."

The stranger—no, not a stranger—Franklin Davis, the father, turned his gaze toward Willie, and his glare blasted the length of her body with a horrifying heat. Behind her, Kyle stifled a cry. Her hair lifted in a feathery plume from the back of her neck, and her flesh began to sizzle like the grease had on her hand. Her stomach twisted and heaved again, and her head nearly exploded as her body screeched in agony. She clenched her jaw, trying to keep her scream inside. She had sucked in a deep breath, prepared to cry her pain to the heavens, when Davis's gaze shifted back to Harry.

Mercifully, the heat vanished as quickly as it had come, and she nearly fell to the floor with relief. She grabbed the edge of the table to keep herself upright and retched onto her clean kitchen floor. Her body trembled violently, and Amanda slipped an arm around her waist to help support her.

"We've been through this too many times to count," Davis said. "Gets tiring, doesn't it?"

"It does," Harry said. "Let's make it easy this time. Just leave."

"No can do." The man sauntered across the kitchen and lifted a seared pork chop from the pan, unmindful of the heat and grease. He took a big bite then tossed it back in the pan. Grease splattered over the stove and the floor as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Not too bad. Needs more salt though. People sure do skimp on the salt. Ruins a meal."

He leaned back against the stove.

"Nothing's changed. It never will. If you think I'm turning over my place to that bitch, you're more stupid than you used to be." He gave Harry a terrible smile. "And, if I recall, you were pretty damn stupid, *Fed*."

"Oh God, Harry, what is he talking about?" Willie said. "Please make him go away."

She was still trying to figure out how she had hallucinated a large shadow where a man had stood. It must have been an illusion from the rain, some trick of the light, some trick of this damn building in the middle of nowhere. It was clear, though, despite how much she hoped and wished, this man was no hallucination. All she had to do was look at Amanda's terrified face and Harry's determined stance to know he was as real as they came.

Franklin Davis. Why did that name sound so familiar?

"I want her gone. Today's better than tomorrow, and yesterday's better than today," the man said. "Make it happen, Fed. And I want those kids. They're mine, and I'm getting them back."

"You don't deserve them," Harry said. "You never did, and that is one thing that will never change."

The man shook his head sadly. "You know I can take them…" he snapped his fingers, "…just like that."

Willie straightened. "No."

That horrible anger swelled through her, bursting and fizzing through every cell of her body like the lightning flashes she saw beyond the door. Willie welcomed that anger and let it just surge through her body like the angry water of the bay as it churned onto the beach, boiling and raging, scouring both the good and the bad. She no longer cared about what had happened, about how life hadn't been fair, about how sad and miserable and lonely she was. She just wanted people to stop telling her how to live her own damn life. These were *her* children now. She was keeping them.

"Excuse me, missy?" Franklin Davis turned his steely blue gaze on her and lowered his head like an angry bull, peering at her from beneath a shock of dirty-blond hair.

"Willie, stop," Harry murmured. "Let me handle this."

"No, Harry, this is *my* place. *My* fight." She took in a shaky breath and tamped down the urge to run. She turned the full force of her attention back to Davis, narrowing her eyes as she took a step closer. "I said no. You are not taking these children. They will be staying, and you will be leaving."

Davis drew back, his eyes flashing with silver light. He stared at her for a long, heart-stopping moment, and then the bulbs in the chandelier above the table exploded in a series of blinding flashes.

Pop, pop-pop, pop-pop, pop.

Shards of glass rained down, skittering on the linoleum and across the oak table and showering them in sparkling fragments. Willie twisted and covered Kyle with her body. Harry lunged toward her, his boots crunching on bits of glass, and shoved them out of the line of fire, and Sam leaned to shield Amanda with his big body when she screamed. When the shower of glass ended, they all tentatively lifted their faces and stared at the man across the room.

"Big mistake there, missy. I don't like people telling me what to do."

"Neither do I," Willie said through clenched teeth. She pressed the dish towel to Amanda's arm where she'd been hit by flying glass.

"You're an uppity little thing, ain't you? Time to cut your losses because this ain't your fight." He shrugged. "You can keep trying if you want. Hell, it's America, after all, but you'll never win. Make it easy. Go pack your things and get back to your big city. You're not wanted here."

"Yes she is!" Amanda cried. "I want her."

"Yeah!" Sam said. "I want her too."

"Leave my mama alone," Kyle cried.

"Stay out of this, whelps," Davis snarled. "You'll pay for that sass, Amanda. You know better." He started to yank the belt from his pants.

"Stop that," Willie said. "This is *my* place and *my* home, and these are *my* children."

He paused, and his bright silvery-blue gaze traveled from Sam to Amanda to Kyle, who was peeking around her leg. She blindly reached behind to touch his face and push him back to safety.

"I ain't interested in the little runt, so don't worry your pretty head. I'm just interested in what belongs to me." He tugged on his belt again.

"You can't *own* a child," she snarled, clenching her fists. "They're yours to protect, to love, to cherish. Harry was right. You don't deserve them. And I said I'm keeping them, so get out of my house!"

Davis narrowed his eyes, and his chest began to heave like a bellows. He took one step forward, his big boots leaving hideous red prints on the floor, and then he took another.

"I mean it," Willie said softly. "Go to hell and leave us alone."

Davis froze and began to shudder, his body vibrating as though an

electric current were running through him. For one horrifying moment she wondered if lightning had sparked through the door, but when she looked toward the door she saw that the rain had stopped. The only sounds in the room were the sounds of the boiling water, the sizzle of the now-burning pork chops, and Amanda's ragged breathing.

"This…th-this can't happen," Davis growled. "This isn't how it is. This isn't how it works."

"Maybe this time things have changed," Harry said.

"No, it's not possible." Davis clutched at his chest, his hand coming away with a red stain that matched the stain on her floor. His image began to stutter like old movie film, fading, shifting from light to shadow to light and back. The puddle of red on the floor began to smoke, twisting into a column of greasy vapor that surrounded Davis in a murky red-mist cloak.

Sam gasped, and the sound of Amanda's breathing vanished as she held her breath.

"Close your eyes, kids," Harry whispered.

Willie didn't know if they obeyed. She couldn't have closed her eyes for anything in the world. She stared as the mist throbbed and shimmered, twisting violently as though caught in a whirlpool or a violent tidal swell. The color grew more vibrant, flashing and pulsing like red neon, and just when she thought she'd have to close her eyes against the brightness, the mist flashed and exploded, drenching them all in a deluge of fat red droplets.

Willie stared at the blotches on her skin, lifting her hands to examine them.

"You made him go away, Mizz Willie," Amanda said, taking her hand and kissing it. "We're safe. How can we thank you?"

Willie shifted her gaze to the girl and saw her pale face freckled with heavy drops running down her face like blood-red tears. She opened her mouth to say something, anything, but before she could think of what to say, the world dimmed, and then it simply went black.

Chapter Four

When she heard the moaning, she thought for a moment it was Kyle dreaming beside her. She reached out, trying to find his warm, little body, but instead her fingers smoothed over the soft sensation of worn cotton. It was then she realized the moaning was coming from her. The back of her head was pounding like the time she'd been clipped with a baseball bat as a child.

The soft patter of raindrops filled her ears, and she smelled the stench of burned meat and the bitter, metallic scent of blood. She remembered—

"Oh God," she moaned. "Kids? Harry?"

Her eyelids fluttered, taking in a flickering shadow above her, and she finally managed to keep her eyes open, though it was hard. Everything seemed so bright. She blinked when she saw Betty's face above her. She seemed to be lying in the woman's lap. She tried to sit up, but Betty put a firm hand on her shoulder, her brown eyes stern, like Willie's own mother's had been when she had been sick as a child and had tried to do too much. Willie loved the sense of warmth and comfort she felt from that gaze alone. She missed her mother. God, she missed so much.

"Make sure you're okay before you move. You walloped your head pretty good. Got a knot the size of a turtle egg. I think you hit the edge of the table."

"I feel kind of queasy."

"That don't surprise me at all." Betty shifted a bit and began to lift Willie inch by inch. The woman was a lot stronger than she looked. "Take it easy. Let me know if you're going to vomit. By the looks of things, you might have already done that once tonight."

"I'm fine…I think." Willie managed to prop herself up on her elbow. "You must be scandalized by this mess." Willie's gaze shifted around

the room, but the fragments of glass and the puddles of blood were gone. The light above the table cast off brilliant light. All that remained were the grease splatters on the floor and a couple of burned pans. "The mess is…"

"It's not so bad," Betty said. "I turned off the stove. You're lucky you didn't burn the place down, but that little bit of grease can be cleaned up in no time. I'll help, if you like."

"Thank you," Willie said, though she wondered how Betty had managed to both clean up and take care of her at the same time. "What are you doing here, Betty?"

"I've been thinking about you all day. I know you're all alone out here, and I wanted to check on you."

"I'm not alone," Willie said with a smile. "I guess I should have told you that at the café." She shifted again, wincing at the pounding in her head, but she managed to sit up, slowly, gingerly. "Where is my family?"

Betty pressed her lips together. She lifted her eyes to peer behind Willie, and then she nodded toward the table. "I suspect about right there."

Willie turned, feeling as though she were riding a fast-spinning carousel. Amanda and Sam both had tearstains on their cheeks, and Harry looked as though he'd been through hell and back. "Oh, I'm so sorry if I scared you. Is everyone okay?" She held out her arms, and Kyle rushed forward, launching himself into her lap. She ignored the slam of pain that was radiating through her neck and shoulders and just hugged him tight. Amanda and Sam rushed to her and fell to their knees beside her.

"We're fine," Amanda said. "At least we are *now*. Thanks to you."

"Are you really keeping us?" Sam asked.

"Yes," Willie said, "I'm really keeping you."

"What about *her*?" Sam whispered, his glance darting toward the older woman. "Is she mad?"

"Of course not." Willie glanced toward Betty. "She's a friend. Why would she be mad?"

Amanda laid a hand on Betty's arm, and the woman shuddered, her eyes never leaving the hands clasped in her lap. "We're sorry about your husband. We never meant that to happen. We just wanted a real family."

Betty gave a curt nod but refused to look at the girl. She shifted and rose to her feet, though a bit unsteadily. She grabbed her

pocketbook from the table, and then her glance darted around the room, touching on everything but the people. Finally, it flitted back to Willie. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Willie stood with Kyle in her arms. She felt a bit woozy, and the pressure on the back of her head felt ready to explode. “Go? Where are we going?”

“I’m taking you to Prince Frederick, to the clinic. We have to check on that head of yours. You don’t look too good, Mizz Douglas.”

“Mama, are you going somewhere?” Kyle asked, his brow scrunched as he stared at the older woman.

Willie brushed the dark hair from his brow. “No, I’m staying right here, where I belong.”

Betty sighed. “You just don’t see, do you?”

“See what?” It must have been the bump on her head. Willie was having a hard time concentrating and understanding anything Betty said.

Betty gestured around the kitchen. “Them…this…everything…”

Willie tried to smile, but it felt wobbly. She shook her head. Her hair spilled around her shoulders, and each touch felt like a hammer strike. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Betty.”

Betty’s gaze skittered toward Harry, touching on him briefly before shifting away again. “Why are you doing this, Harry?”

He spread out his hands and gave her a tiny smile. “For them, Mizz Latham.” Harry glanced at Amanda and Sam. “They need to be safe.”

“You were a good man, Harry. Everyone said so.” She peered at him steadily for the first time. “I understand where your heart is, but this isn’t fair. You got to tell her.”

Willie huffed, ignoring the pain in her head, glancing between the two adults who seemed to be talking in some sort of language she couldn’t begin to comprehend. “What is going on?”

Betty shoved her pocketbook under her arm, her brown eyes flashing. “Tell her, Harry, and then get out. I’m coming back in the morning, and so help me, you better be gone.” She whirled and marched out the door, disappearing into the dark, rainy evening.

“Kids, why don’t you go upstairs for a while?” Harry said.

Amanda took Kyle from Willie’s arms. Sam took one last look toward the stove, his eyes filled with longing, then followed his sister from the room. Harry stared out the door for a few moments before he turned back to Willie. He looked contrite, sad, hurt, angry, confused.

Each emotion passed over his face in the blink of an eye. Finally he looked resigned, and he sighed.

"Sit down. I guess we need to talk."

Spring 1923

Harry Warner held up his coffee cup, and Amanda Davis, the owner's sixteen-year-old daughter, refilled it with fresh, hot brew. Amanda was cute as a button with her blonde bob and bright smile, but every now and then a dark shadow passed over her face. Harry often wondered about that dark shadow, but, so far, he hadn't felt it his business to ask. He'd only been staying at the Crab Pot for two weeks, and he wasn't about to make waves until he'd completed his assignment and gotten back to his wife in Washington.

Damn, he hated this Maryland shore. The people were suspicious, unfriendly, and more often than not would rather spit at him than say hello. Of course, a lot of that probably had to do with how most of them currently made their living. Times were tough. He understood that. But the law was the law.

"How was the crab, Mr. Warner?" Amanda asked as she grabbed his empty plate. "Sam caught them fresh this morning."

"Dinner was wonderful as always, sweetheart. Thanks."

She smiled. "Dessert tonight? I made some apple tarts earlier today."

She glanced around the full dining room. Like him, most of the patrons were having a big crab dinner, but he knew some of them had gone out on the back patio to indulge in martinis and whiskey sours. Franklin Davis ran one hell of a speakeasy.

Her gaze came back to Harry, and then she leaned down and whispered, "I only have one tart left, so if you want one, better get it now."

He winked. "I'll take it."

He could afford an apple tart and a good tip for Amanda as well. His cover was as a real-estate developer looking for the perfect spot to construct a resort hotel on the Chesapeake. He had the cash and wardrobe to back him up, and though Franklin Davis wasn't too happy with the prospect of competition—he rented out three rooms above his restaurant to travelers—he'd still given Harry the best room in the place. It suited Harry just fine because he had a clear view of three angles of the bay. Every night when he came home from cruising the

only lonely road down this stretch of the coast, Harry stood at the windows and watched the activity that took place on the beach and out in the water.

The Prohibition Unit had known for months that Franklin Davis was operating a speakeasy here at the Crab Pot, but Harry's superiors suspected the inn also played a part in supplying liquor to some cities north of here. So they'd allowed the speakeasy to continue unhindered because catching a supplier was far more important than busting one liquor establishment. North of here, agents had captured a few rumrunners as they motored up the bay, planning to drop off their bootleg cargo along the coast at various locations, for other men to deliver to Washington, DC. Though no one would talk, the trail had obviously led back to this area of the Chesapeake, and the unit had determined enough was enough. His superiors felt it a slap in their collective faces to have liquor finding its way into DC on a daily basis.

Harry had been sent to find the source, and he'd discovered it over the last few weeks. Every night, boats cruised up into the bay from the south, gathered bottles and crates from beneath color-coded flags and hightailed it out of there within minutes. He had the method, he had his middleman, and now Harry just needed to find Davis's supplier.

So far he hadn't been able to identify any of the men by sight, except for Franklin Davis and his son, Sam. Sam was a strapping young man, strong and muscular, and his job was to row out and hook the crates to the buoys and put individual bottles in the crab pots. He certainly had the arms for such a hefty task. Harry thought Sam was just a pawn being used by his father, because the boy seemed a bit simple-minded, but Justice could handle the implications of that. His job was to identify and report.

Tonight the moon would be full, and Harry thought he just might have some luck seeing a few more faces. After that, hopefully he could get out of this section of Maryland. It was only April, and already the air was stifling, muggy and hot, and filled with biting insects. Despite a lukewarm shower every morning, he hadn't felt clean in weeks. Washington was bad, but nowhere near as bad as this.

Amanda slid the tart in front of him with a small bowl of whipped cream.

"Looks great, honey. You can bring me the bill. I've got a big day ahead of me, so I gotta get to bed early."

He polished off the tart and coffee in no time and paid his bill, sliding Amanda a rather-generous tip personally so her old man wouldn't see it. The girl looked as though she could use a bit of her

own money, if only to buy a new dress or some new shoes. Those ugly black monstrosities she wore looked like they belonged to someone else, not a cute little blonde who should be wearing fashionable shoes like the girls in Washington. This girl deserved pretty things, and from what he saw, she hadn't had many.

He tipped his hat to several ladies at a nearby table, nodded to Davis manning the bar and headed up the gloomy staircase to his lonely room. He dropped his hat on the dresser, took off his coat and slid into the only chair in the room to begin his vigil.

The next morning found him in the dining room again with a huge plate of scrambled eggs and sausage. The toast was a bit burned, but Amanda was trying to both cook and serve while her father and Sam manned the crab station down the beach. He lingered a bit, having a second cup of coffee and studying the patrons from beneath the brim of his hat. There were two others in the dining room with him, a skinny handyman who did odd jobs around the place several days a week and the sheriff. He'd cruised in earlier that morning, spoken at length with Davis and settled down to a breakfast of his own. The big son of a bitch was currently leaning back in his chair, his feet propped up on another, perusing a paper he appeared to have brought with him because Harry had never seen a paper in the place. No one delivered this far down the coast. Sheriff Tanner had his hat tipped forward, shadowing his ugly face, but Harry could feel the heat of the man's stare.

Harry tipped his hat to the handyman and winked to Amanda on his way out.

"Sheriff Tanner."

The sheriff touched the brim of his hat. "Mr. Warner."

Harry walked through the French door into the grueling heat of the bright, almost-blinding sun. He wasn't looking forward to another long, hot day driving between the Solomons and Chesapeake Beach, walking across dunes and struggling through swampy marsh water. Undercover work wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Harry thought after he brought in Davis and his supplier, he'd ask for a nice, cushy desk job.

Seven hours later, Harry found himself stuck on the deserted highway with a flat tire and no spare. He kicked the useless tire, berating himself for not checking the condition of the car before he left the inn that morning. Someone had obviously stolen his spare and

might have even sabotaged his tire on his last stop up the coast.

He began the long trek back to the Crab Pot, hoping someone might come along to give him a lift to the next village, which held the closest gas station. Surely they had spare tires. It was after dark when he arrived at the long stretch of forested road down to the inn, and he walked it in silence with his coat slung over his shoulder, his shirtsleeves rolled above his elbow and his hat sitting back on his head in an effort to catch any breeze that deigned to come through the heavy brush. He heard the shouts before he saw anything. He slipped his coat back on.

As he broke through the canopy hugging the road, he saw Franklin Davis by the crabbing station, haloed in the light of the lanterns that hung around the shed. He watched as the man's arm rose and fell, again and again, striking something or someone who was huddled in the shadows near the holding tank.

"You no-good, stupid son of a bitch. How did you let that happen?"

"I'm sorry, Daddy. It-it slipped." Sam's voice.

Thwack. Thwack. Thwack.

"I'm sorry, Daddy." The shadow hunched lower. "Please, I'm sorry."

Blood boiling, temples throbbing, Harry stood in the shadows for a minute, assessing the rest of the scene before he made a move. There were four cars in the parking lot and one truck. The truck had a white tarp over it, and Harry knew what lay beneath it. He wondered who was in charge of this operation that they'd cover bootleg booze with a white tarp. One man sat in the driver's seat smoking a cigarette, his head tipped back, seemingly bored.

Looking through the French doors, Harry could see several men moving within the restaurant. No women. Amanda scurried between the two tables, delivering food and drinks. In the light of the full moon, Harry saw a small rowboat bobbing at the edge of the shore, filled with crates. Harry heard the *clink-clank-clink* as bottles rubbed together. A man came out of the shadows that stretched between the building and the crab station. He strolled toward the boat, carrying a crate. Harry heard the clanking of the bottles as the man struggled across the sand. Harry recognized the man. The handyman who ate breakfast with him in the morning.

Davis's arm rose again, and this time Harry saw the belt.

Thwack. Thwack. Thwack.

"We're supposed to deliver twenty-four crates tonight, not twenty-three, you simple-minded idiot." Davis grabbed hold of Sam, hauled

him to his feet and then slammed him against the side of the holding tank. “Get some crabs out of there and take them to your sister. And do it right. Don’t let anything *slip*, Sam, or you’ll find yourself walking on the side of the road, looking for a new home. I should have kicked you out years ago.” He shook the boy’s arm. “Do you hear me, half-wit?”

“Yes, Daddy.” Sam opened the holding tank and stuck his head inside. Harry heard murmuring but couldn’t make out the words. Davis grabbed hold of Sam’s hair, lifted and cracked his head against the side of the tank. Sam burst into tears.

“Shut your stupid mouth,” he snarled.

“Daddy!” Amanda’s voice rose above the sound of the sobs and the clanking of bottles. She stormed across the beach toward them, her fists clenched, her eyes hard stones. “Leave him be.”

Davis turned toward her, cracking the belt between his hands. “Oh, missy, you just created a whole lot of problems for yourself.”

“Run, Mandy!” Sam shouted.

“I’ve had it with you, boy.” He slapped the belt across Sam’s neck and gave a mighty shove. Sam fell backward into the tank, and Davis slammed the lid, sliding the bolt home through the lock.

Amanda stood stock-still, her ugly black shoes buried in the sand. “Let him out of there. He’ll suffocate.”

“Sam was right, little Miss Bossy Pants. You should have run,” Davis said softly, his tone sending a shiver up Harry’s spine. “Now you’ll get yours.”

Amanda spun on her heel and ran, colliding with the skinny handyman and shoving him forward. Amanda went sprawling, rolled over and crawled several feet before she shot to her feet and ran again. The man, however, stumbled and, dropping the crate, pinwheeled his arms. He fell forward as the bottles shattered, hitting each other on their way to the soft sand. The man tumbled into the sand face-first, and Harry heard his scream as his hands hit the broken glass. Harry launched himself from the woods and began to pound across the sand, drawing his gun as he moved. His hat flew off his head.

He leapt over the man on the ground, but before he’d managed to clear him, the man swung a bottle in his direction. The bottle cracked against his knee bone and broke. The man ground it against Harry’s flesh, tearing through his pants, and Harry felt the glass shredding his muscles and tendons and grinding against his bones. It hurt like hell, but he whirled and swung his leg toward the man on the ground, kicking him in the face. The man dropped to the sand. When he twisted

around, Harry saw that Amanda had almost made it to the boat. She needed a few more minutes, and she'd be home free.

"Stop! Federal agent!" He went to his undamaged knee, the other screaming in agony, and stretched out his gun arm, sighting in on Davis. The man paused for a split second, glanced over his shoulder, and then whirled around and hurled himself toward his daughter. Harry fired. Davis stumbled and cursed, but didn't stop. He tackled Amanda, and they fell into the surf with a splash, disappearing into the dark water.

"Damn it!"

Harry lurched to his feet, sped down the beach and raced into the surf, churning now as Davis and the girl struggled beneath it. The moonlight shimmered on the water, highlighting the caps then disappearing into shadows. Harry watched the roiling churn of the water but couldn't shoot without hitting Amanda. He shoved his gun back into the holster and dove beneath the water.

He swam blindly, counting the seconds, wondering how long Amanda could hold her breath. When he finally hit a body, it took him a moment to identify the shape. He grabbed Davis by the hair, and both men came up sputtering. Harry tossed his hair out of his face, one hand still gripping the man's hair and the other clamping Davis around the throat. He dragged the man back to shore. Davis's arm flashed up, and his fist struck Harry across the face, splitting the skin of his cheek. He gritted his teeth, determined the man would not escape. He squeezed the man's throat, his eyes searching frantically for any sign of Amanda, but she never surfaced. He could only hope she'd managed to get away and swim a bit beyond the shoreline.

When Davis began to make choking sounds, Harry released his throat, pulled back his arm and slammed a tight fist into the man's face. Davis flew backward and landed in the surf. Harry pulled out his gun and trained it on Davis's chest as the man struggled to his feet.

"Don't move. Federal agent. You're under arrest for violations of the Volstead Act." He drew in a deep breath against the pain.

His knee gave way beneath him, and he dropped to the sand, gun extended.

Davis laughed, clutching his bleeding shoulder. "Not today I'm not, Fed." He lifted his eyes to peer past Harry's shoulders and took a step forward.

Harry fired three, four, five times in quick succession. Davis froze, staggered backward, a bewildered look on his face, and then he fell into the water. Harry caught a glimpse of white, shimmering fabric floating

in the water.

Amanda.

"Didn't think you'd get here so fast with no tire."

Harry heard the cocking of the gun as he started to turn. He lifted his gun, but realized even then it was too late. He caught a glimpse of Sheriff Tanner's ugly mug just as he pointed his own gun. "I'm your man, Fed. Too bad you're out of bullets."

Harry's last thought was of his wife.

Willie stared at him. Her eyes filled with tears, and they splashed against the hands folded in her lap. She leaned forward and touched the bill of his baseball cap hesitantly. She looked to him for his okay.

"Go ahead. I don't mind."

She lifted the hat, and Harry leaned forward in his seat and dropped his head. The bullet had entered the top of his head. Even now, blood pooled in the hollow, and his dark hair was matted and tangled.

"That's the last I remember of 1923. I pieced things together over the years. Davis had managed to drown Amanda, his own daughter, and poor Sam suffocated to death in that holding tank, probably smelling the stink of old crabs. The sheriff put all four of us in the same grave. I found that out later…on the sixth or seventh incarnation, I think. I was pretty strong by then. I get stronger every time.

"I woke up here on the beach in the year 1928 for the first time. The Crab Pot had new owners. The couple's name was Gunderson, and they'd changed the name to Chicken Delight because they'd opened a chicken-and-waffle restaurant. No liquor for the Gundersons, so, given the location, the restaurant wasn't all that profitable. People around here needed to drink to escape their lives. I watched from a distance as Sam and Amanda tried to ingratiate themselves with the owners, but they were having nothing to do with the kids. Kept running them off, until finally Sam faded away. Amanda lasted a bit longer, but they were both so sad.

"I felt so sorry for them that when we woke up next—1931, I guess it was—I made myself known. That one didn't go well either. We managed to scare the man off within two days. It was just the first of many."

"How many?"

"Dozens. Lots of people in these parts are superstitious. Lots of

outsiders can't handle the isolation of the place. Lots of people just couldn't handle us. The Crab Pot has seen its share of landlords, renters and squatters. Not everyone has called it the Crab Pot. Not everyone sells crabs." He shrugged and gave her a smile. "That's a big mistake in these parts. Gotta have crabs.

"I can sense when there's a new owner, when the kids are stirring, so I've figured out how to arrive first, to help them along a bit."

"I think I sensed you the first night I arrived. I smelled you."

"I know," he said with a smile. "Sam usually arrives before Amanda. Most times it's because someone opened the old holding tank. Did you do that?"

"Yes."

He nodded. "Soon after that, Amanda manages to materialize. Poor girl. She's always half-dead…guess that's not really a good way of putting it. But the stress of trying to find Sam and remembering everything that happened, over and over, takes a toll on her. Sam, he's pretty okay when he arrives because he barely remembers that night."

"And Davis?"

"He only materializes when the kids are making progress. Usually they're run off, or they've run people off, long before he figures it out. I think you vanquished him for good this time. You should be proud of yourself."

"Mizz Willie?"

Willie turned around and saw Amanda peeking through the swinging door. Willie's eyes flooded with tears, and she held out her arms. Amanda ran through the door, followed by Sam and Kyle. The girl fell to the floor and wrapped her arms around Willie's waist, dropping her head in her lap. Kyle crawled into Harry's lap, and Sam dropped to his haunches.

Willie looked at Sam as she caressed Amanda's hair. "I'm so sorry for everything you've been through."

Amanda's voice filtered to her, though it was muffled against the fabric of Willie's shorts. "He told you, didn't he?" When Willie nodded, the girl said, "Can we still stay?"

"Please?" Sam said.

Willie cupped Amanda's cheeks and lifted her tearstained face. "Of course you can stay. I told you that you could, didn't I?"

"Y-yes," Amanda said, sniffling, "but…after what Harry said…"

"It doesn't change a thing. I love you guys."

Harry drew in a deep breath. "We're *ghosts*, Willie. Did you not

understand that?"

Willie opened her arms, and Sam crab-walked the short distance and let her wrap him in the circle of her arms. "I'm not dumb, Harry Warner, just a bit oblivious at times." She gave the kids a smile, and they smiled back. "Go get ready for bed, okay?"

"No dinner?" Sam asked.

"Tomorrow we'll start everything fresh. New day, new beginnings."

The kids clambered to their feet, and Amanda snagged Kyle in her arms. When the swinging door closed behind them, Harry took her hand.

"You're very lonely, aren't you, Willie?"

"At times."

"And very sad."

A smile lifted the corner of her mouth. "At times. Nothing gets past you, does it, Harry?"

"I've missed a few things from time to time."

"But not here, not now, not with me."

"No, not with you." Harry caressed her hand, seemingly studying the contours. "I have a confession to make."

"Another one? The fact that you're a ghost isn't big enough?"

He remained silent for a moment and then his words came out, filling the room with an unspeakable agony. "I spoke with Bobby."

Her heart flipped in her chest, and that pang—the one that was a mixture of excitement and hope, panic and bitterness—ripped through her body. "*My* Bobby?"

"The one and the same." Harry nodded. "Nice man. He misses you and Kyle."

That anger began to bubble beneath the surface, that horrible, overwhelming anger that made her so crazy she'd begun to hate Bobby for what he'd done to her. Everyone had said it wasn't his fault that he'd died, but it was. It *was*.

She wanted her husband. She wanted her old life. She wanted that house in Squirrel Hill. All stolen. All lost because Bobby threw it away by being so damn *good*.

"If that's the case, if he misses us so damn much, why hasn't he come to me? Why are *you* here and not *him*?"

"He can't come, Willie. There are rules."

"Rules against loving your wife? Rules against being a father to your son?"

"No, rules about who gets to come back and who doesn't." Harry

shook his head when she rolled her eyes. “Bobby can’t come back because he doesn’t have any unfinished business.”

“Oh, he has unfinished business all right. He has me, and he has Kyle. We are alone because he left us.”

“But he didn’t want to,” Harry said, his voice full of quiet kindness.

“It was his choice to volunteer. He marched right in there and volunteered. And they shipped him off to save lives, and then he died, Harry. He *died*.”

“And he’s sorry for that every moment. He wanted you to know how sorry he is that he’s not here for you.”

She chewed on her lip, trying to hold the tears at bay. “But isn’t that unfinished business? If he didn’t want to leave us, doesn’t that mean he has things to do, that he could come back?”

“Most of our unfinished business has to do with either control and power, as in Franklin Davis’s case, or the need for love. Sam and Amanda stay behind year after year, watching owner after owner occupy their beloved home and beach, because they are trapped here searching for the love they so desperately want. They deserve love, and they’ve found it with you. Unconditional, freely given love.”

He brushed his hand over her hair, and she leaned into the touch.

“Bobby had more love than any man could hope to get in any one lifetime. He knew you loved him, and he loved you more than you will ever understand. He has no unfinished business because he’s had the one thing humans crave, the one thing that allows them to find the meanings of their lives. He died knowing he was loved because he had you.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat.

“I still miss him.”

“As he does you.”

She tilted her head. “And you, Harry? Why are you here?”

“I think I can move on now. I think I just needed to see the kids safe and happy. I think that was my unfinished business. I tried to save them that night and failed. Helping them find happiness is the least I could do. Now…well, I have a wife waiting for me somewhere.” He paused, leaned forward and took her hand, holding it tight. “As Bobby is waiting for Kyle…whenever you’re ready to let him go.”

Hot tears flooded her eyes, scalding her eyelids before they trickled down her face. “What?” She could barely squeeze the word out through her closed throat. “What are you talking about?” Her hand clenched into a fist, and she yanked it away from him, drawing back in her

chair.

"Bobby told me about the accident in Pittsburgh, Willie, about how Kyle's hand slipped from yours. You ran for him, and the man slammed on the brakes, but he couldn't stop the car in time."

"No…" she shook her head violently, "…that never happened. That was a bad dream. I did grab his hand. I *did*. No one can ever say I was a bad mother. No one!"

"You were a wonderful mother, and Bobby knows that."

"He can't know that." Her hair flew around her face as she shook her head. Tears fell like fat raindrops against her skin and mouth, the taste salty on her lips. "He can't know because he was gone. Gone so many years. I was lonely and frightened and missed him so much. And then…and then *they* came to the door, those horrible, horrible men in uniforms, and I knew. I knew…"

She dropped her head into her hands, sobbing.

"I should have stayed home that next day. I should have said no when Kyle wanted to go to the park." She lifted her face and stared at Harry, his image blurry. "But I wanted a normal day, just one normal day before I had to face reality, and I needed to get away from Bobby's parents and their looks and their trembling mouths and the tears on their faces. They stared at me like it was my fault. How could it be my fault? He was the one who had left us."

"It wasn't your fault."

She sat up, rigid in her chair. "I wasn't paying attention. I remember that I was thinking about Bobby, so angry with him for volunteering, for making me a widow, for being responsible for the looks on his parents' faces. They'd never even liked me, and now they were stuck with me because I had the only thing left of their son."

"Kyle."

She nodded. "We came to the corner, and the park was right there. I was thinking about Bobby, and the next thing I knew Kyle stepped off the curb and was running because he'd seen his friend…" She bit her lip until she tasted blood. Her heart stopped for an excruciating, painful moment.

"It was horrible. I can still see it, every twitch of his body, every breath he pulled in. He looked at me the whole time I held him, his little body shaking, blood pouring across my skin like hot tar. It was my fault…all my fault."

"You were in pain, Willie, so much pain. Distracted by your grief."

"No, distracted by my anger. My son's life slipped through my

fingers that day. I lost my son, my reason for living, the only thing that ever truly belonged to me, because I couldn't let my husband go, my husband who shouldn't have let *me* go."

"So will you do the same? Will you hold Kyle because of your anger?"

"No, I hold him because I love him. I cannot even think of a life without him. And he's mine."

His soft voice almost tore her heart out. "You told Davis he couldn't own children, Willie."

She shook her head. "I don't care what I said to him. I love Kyle, and he's *mine*."

"Is that fair to him? Should Kyle have to stay on this Earth when the Earth has let him go? Shouldn't he be allowed to move on?"

"No." She shot to her feet, trembling. "I don't care! I don't care. Go back to your wife, Harry. Go find her and leave me here with my grief and my kids and my lonely widow's bed. Just get out!"

She whirled around and fled toward the door.

"Willie."

His voice was so soft that she paused with her hand on the door, but she wouldn't turn around. "What?" She heard his footsteps behind her and then felt a warm hand on her shoulder.

"Bobby asked me to do something."

She cast a glance over her shoulder, and Harry turned her around. He bent toward her slowly, giving her plenty of time to stop him, but she froze and waited for the kiss. When his lips touched hers, gently, so soft and timid, she remembered her first kiss with Bobby, so sweet, so perfect. Oh-so bitter tears flooded her eyes again.

Harry pulled away and gave her a smile. And then he was gone.

Chapter Five

Betty Latham pulled into the parking lot and cut the engine. Eight o'clock in the morning, and already she felt as though she were swimming in her own sweat. It had to be close to breaking a hundred. She cast a quick glance toward the kitchen door, which was standing open.

"Letting all the bugs in." She swatted a mosquito that buzzed in through her open window. "That's no way to run a restaurant."

Hopefully, Willie Douglas was up and feeling good this morning because Betty only had so much time to waste. She should have opened the café an hour ago, but she'd hung a sign and said she'd be back by ten. So, possible concussion aside, a trip to the clinic this morning would be a bit of an imposition.

She grabbed her pocketbook, and the car door opened with a squeal. The moist air this time of year, any time of year on this blasted coast, played havoc with metal. She slammed the door closed, expecting Mizz Douglas to come through the kitchen door, but when she didn't, Betty let herself in. Willie's truck was in the parking lot and the kitchen door *was* standing open, after all.

The kitchen was spotless, the grease from the night before cleaned up and the pans from the stove stacked neatly on the counter. The table had been set last night, but now everything seemed to have been put away. Spick-and-span, just the way Betty liked it.

"Mizz Douglas!" She stepped toward the swinging door and paused for a split second before pushing it open.

The dining room was empty, but Willie Douglas had been busy. Everything looked clean and shiny, as though the restaurant was almost ready to open. Betty actually looked forward to that day because she loved crab. She assumed Willie Douglas had enough

brains to sell crab. Who owned a restaurant on the Chesapeake and didn't serve crab? Apparently a few. There'd been a chicken-and-waffles restaurant here back in the day. Chicken and waffles, like they lived in some civilized place instead of a hole-in-the-wall on the Chesapeake.

Betty put her pocketbook down on one of the tables. She listened at the bottom of the stairs, hoping to hear the shower running. Everything was silent as a tomb. She didn't like the feeling trying to take root in her heart.

She started up the stairs, her hand gripping the railing so hard she could barely slide it along the wooden bannister. When she reached the top of the staircase, she turned right and stopped. She figured Mizz Douglas would be in the first room, the one with three views of the bay. It was the best room, the one she'd chosen for herself all those years ago. Of course she'd only lived there for four or five months, but she had so enjoyed the views. Bootleg Cove had the prettiest views in all of Calvert County.

The door was ajar, almost closed, so Betty put her hand on it and gave a little push.

She wasn't really surprised by what she found. Not at all.

Willie Douglas lay on the bed, her body curled around a teddy bear. Beside her was the photo of a handsome young man with dark hair. Willie wore a pretty flowered nightgown, her arms and feet bare like a young girl's. Her long dark hair was brushed and lay over her shoulder. There was a soft smile on her face. Betty opened her mouth to speak, but when she felt the tears spark in her eyes, she snapped her mouth closed.

"Stupid fool. You know she's dead. What were you going to say? Rise and shine?"

She sat gingerly on the side of the bed, trying not to disturb the dead woman. She saw the empty prescription bottle on the nightstand and the half-empty glass of water. Or was it half-full? In this case, it was probably okay to say half-empty without being called pessimistic. There was a dead woman on the bed, after all.

"I should have stayed last night," Betty murmured to herself.

"I shouldn't have left."

Betty glanced toward the open door, not surprised to find Harry leaning against the frame, his hands shoved in his pockets. He was staring at pretty, dead Mizz Douglas.

"You left last night?"

"Yep. Isn't that what you told me to do?"

Betty shook her head. "I never thought you'd actually do it. You're quite the surprise, Harry."

He took a step into the room. "I told her the story, and, before you say it, yes, I know. I'm a heartless bastard."

"You had to tell her."

"Maybe, but I didn't have to read her the riot act and tell her to let the little boy go."

Betty lifted a trembling hand to her lips. "The boy was here? I'd heard…"

"He died a few months before she got here. You couldn't see him?"

"He didn't die here," Betty said with a shake of her head. "We can only see the ones who die here. For a smart guy, Harry, you don't know everything. You know, not everyone can see you, pretty as that face is. We had some guests who could, but most couldn't. The owners though…I think the owners can always see."

"But they don't always accept."

"I wanted to," Betty said, "you know I did, but Tom couldn't take it. Maybe he didn't want to take it, and I couldn't be here without him."

"I shouldn't have just left her. I dropped the bomb, told her to give up the only thing she had and just abandoned her."

"Harry, you have a…"

Harry laughed. "A life?"

Damn. That isn't quite the truth, is it? "Partly…I mean, you have other obligations. You wanted to move on, didn't you?"

"I thought I did. I thought I *could*, but obviously I still have unfinished business." Harry stared down at Willie. "What do we do now?"

"I guess we call the sheriff." When Harry opened his mouth, she held up her hand. "We have a much better sheriff now, Harry. You have to learn to let go." She ran her hand over Willie's hair then turned back to him. "So why do you think you came back?"

"I don't know exactly." He shoved his hands back in his pockets. "All I could think of while I was here was Barbara Ann, but then, when it was time to find her, all I could think of was Amanda and Sam and how they felt like mine. I've known them longer than I ever knew Barbara Ann."

"And Willie? How does she fit in there?"

"I don't know yet. But I was thinking of her too."

"You came back for her, didn't you?"

"Yes, I came back for her, but I expected her to be alive. Sad, but alive. I can't help her if she's dead."

Betty tilted her head as the happy sound of laughter reached her ears. "I'm not so sure about that." She went to the window and peered out into the bright autumn morning.

Amanda was running through the surf, dodging the splashes, her cotton dress clinging to her fragile body. Sam was jumping up and down, his big arms flailing as he scooped water and flung gallons of it in his sister's direction. A small boy was skipping at the edge of the beach, laughing at Sam and Amanda and holding a teddy bear loosely in his fist.

"I can see the boy now." Betty twisted toward the bed to see the same bear still curled in Willie's arms. "How incredibly odd… How is that possible?"

"The power of a mother's love?"

"Oh, don't get sappy, Harry," she snapped. "There has to be a logical explanation."

"Let me know when you think of one," Harry said with a chuckle.

She lifted the center window and pushed her upper body through it, looking for Willie.

"She's sitting in a lawn chair down on the beach." She turned toward Harry. "Go get her, tiger." She winked.

Harry's forehead scrunched. "Do you think I should?"

Betty straightened. "What did I just say, Harry Warner? Are you as dense as my Tom used to be? It took him eleven years to pop the question. The dolt. Such wasted time."

"No, ma'am, I'm not that dense."

"Then get your ass out there and get that girl."

Apparently she didn't need to tell him twice. Harry spun on his heel, took one last glance at the dead woman on the bed and vanished through the door. Betty heard the clomping of his boots on the staircase and figured he'd jumped the last few steps when she heard a *thump*.

Betty poked her head out through the window again. When Willie heard the French door open, she turned in her chair. Her mouth dropped open, and slowly she rose. Harry walked into Betty's view and out onto the beach.

All three kids stopped dead, their fun coming to a halt, and stared.

"Harry!" Amanda shouted.

"Harry, Harry." The little boy raced across the beach and attached

himself to Harry's legs, and Sam came barreling out of the surf, losing the other strap of his overalls.

Willie just stared.

"What are you waiting for, girl?" Betty shouted down at her. "Go say hi."

Willie lifted her face, and a hesitant smile hovered on her lips. She strode toward Harry, looking more vibrant and alive than she had the day in the café or the night before when she'd decided to take her own life. Her dark hair curled around her shoulders, and her long, lean legs in their denim shorts ate up the space between them in a matter of seconds.

"You came back," she said breathlessly.

"I couldn't leave you, Willie. I tried, but I just couldn't."

"I'm so glad." She glanced at him shyly. "Did you want to kiss me again?"

"Yep. And if you let me stay, I'll never leave you. I promise. If you'll have me."

"I'll have you," Willie said, smiling. "We'll all have you." She wrapped her arms around Harry's neck, stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

Betty pulled her head back inside and leaned against the frame for a minute, staring at the pretty woman on the bed. "Oh, Mizz Douglas, you've certainly brought life into this old place." She walked across the room, reached for the old phone on the nightstand and dialed the sheriff.

The sounds of laughter on Bootleg Cove blended with the dust motes drifting in the sunlight and then, slowly, ever so slowly, the sounds vanished, and all that remained was the quiet call of the loon out in the marshes of the bay.

"Constance, this is Betty Latham. I've got a body down here at Bootleg. Yeah, the new woman. Suicide. Sure, I'll stick around."

She put the phone back in the cradle and stared toward the open window, relishing the smell of the salty air. She'd missed this place.

"Tom!" She turned in a circle. "Tom, you can come out now. Those pesky kids are gone."

She sighed when his cool breath brushed the back of her neck and his arms wrapped around her waist.

"Hi, honey." Her husband's husky voice sent shivers down her spine. "I thought we'd never be alone. I've missed you."

She rubbed her cheek against his whiskery one. “I’ve missed you too.”

Tom chuckled. “Peace and quiet at last. Forever?”

“Forever.”

About the Author

Devin Govaere is a freelance editor and writer. She has published over a dozen novels using several pseudonyms. She lives in Dayton, Ohio, and can be contacted at dgovaere@gmail.com.

Linden Manor

Catherine Cavendish

Dedication

To Colin - without whom…

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Run and hide, far and wide,
Run and hide from the Scottish Bride.
Don't turn your head,
Lest it be said,
You saw the lace,
On her blackened face.
Don't you stumble,
Or take a tumble.
Don't catch her eye,
Or you'll surely die.

Chapter One

Have you ever been so scared your soul left your body?

Don't laugh, or mock me. One day it could happen to you, for I am just like you. Or I was, before I laid eyes on *her*. Before I set foot in this cursed place.

Ten years ago, I was plain Lesley Carpenter, mature student of history. College was out for the summer and I had decided on my research project—the real history behind old folk rhymes.

Not for me, the usual nursery rhymes like "Ring a Ring o'Roses". No, they'd been done to death. I picked something different. A grim rhyme my great-grandmother used to sing to me when I was a small child. My mother hated it. Only later did I discover the real reason why.

"You'll give the child nightmares," she would say, but Great-Granny just smiled and chanted it all over again, swinging my hands up in the air as I giggled with glee. I loved Great-Granny Davies. Even in her eighties she knew how to have fun. She'd been a flapper in the twenties and I don't suppose she ever came to terms with being respectable. I remember the heady aroma of pot all over her house when we went to stay once. My mother and Great-Granny had a row about that and I was never allowed there again.

Great-Granny died just weeks after my eleventh birthday. I still miss her, and that damned rhyme that would spring into my mind when I was least expecting it. The tune was infectious. It went round and round in my head. A simple little hummable refrain that I thought every other child knew, until I found out that no one had ever heard of it before. Well, no one I went to school with, anyway. Of course we lived two hundred miles away from our Davies relatives and it turned out to have strictly local connections. That's what got me intrigued. That's why I decided on my research project. And that's what took me to Linden Manor.

Now I have to tell you, so you'll know and keep away from the place, and from me too because, you see, I just don't trust myself anymore.

I had reached a crossroads in my life. My fifteen-year marriage was over, thankfully without too much trauma. We'd married at nineteen when I had become pregnant, as a result of a severe lapse of judgment. The pregnancy had ended in a miscarriage, an infected Fallopian tube and no more babies.

Tom and I bumbled along, more companions than lovers, for the last few years. Then he fell in love with a Swedish physiotherapist who worked at the same hospital where he was an orthopedic consultant.

I cried, then realized I was only weeping because it was expected of me. I didn't actually *feel* any regret. I said nothing and, luckily, Tom was overwhelmed with guilt, especially as I seemed to be so stoic about everything and gave him no trouble. I even started including Ingrid's name on Christmas cards when he moved in with her.

His guilt resulted in a generous divorce settlement and, now that I was independent and financially solvent, I decided I would get that history degree I had always intended for myself. I passed Foundation Year with flying colors and enrolled in the three-year undergraduate program. Two years into that, I needed a research project for my final-year dissertation.

My personal tutor, Dr. Scott Hemingway, was cautious. "You'll have to find a new angle, or different nursery rhymes, or you're in danger of lacking originality. Then there are the perils of plagiarism."

Scott was a much-respected senior lecturer within the university and I valued his opinion, but I was determined to stick with my idea. "That's why I've chosen to concentrate on the rhymes my great-grandmother sang to me. They were all local, from maybe a fifty-mile radius of where she was born. There's 'The Scottish Bride', 'Rats' Tails and Moles' Feet', 'The Giggling Toad'—"

His guffaw of laughter interrupted me. He removed his frameless glasses and wiped them on his tie before replacing them on his nose. "I've never heard of any of those. Where does your family come from anyway?"

I smiled. "They *are* good, aren't they? Great-Granny Davies was born in Winterton St. Clement, around thirty miles from Salisbury. It used to be a really isolated community. In the fourteenth century, they cut themselves off from the rest of the world during an outbreak of

plague, and people used to come and leave food for them outside the village. I think that's when a lot of these rhymes started and that may be why they're unique to that immediate area."

Scott drew a hand through his long hair—a gesture he often repeated. The first time I laid eyes on him I was reminded of someone. Only when I went to visit my mother up in York did I remember whom. I was flicking through some CDs of hers and one cover grabbed my attention. She had been a great fan of the sixties American rock band The Doors and my tutor was a dead ringer for the keyboardist, Ray Manzarek. That's if you could imagine Ray Manzarek with a Lancashire accent.

Scott laid his notebook on his cluttered desk and uncrossed his long legs. "I think you may have something here, Lesley. Try and bring out the link with the village's isolation, and research why they might have picked those particular topics. Rats, moles and toads I can understand, but 'The Scottish Bride'? Is that from the same era?"

"Until I research it, I really don't know, I'm afraid. I'm not even sure how old the other rhymes are and, sadly, my great-grandmother is no longer alive, so I can't even check with her. I did some preliminary research on the Internet and, so far, I haven't even been able to trace any reference to 'The Scottish Bride'. The only thing I have to go on is that I remember Great-Granny talking about an important historic house on the edge of the village, called Linden Manor. I vaguely remember her saying a young Scottish woman was brought there, presumably to marry into the family. I don't even know which century."

"Hmm. Sounds interesting. Yes, go ahead, Lesley, it could be you'll contribute something to our existing knowledge of folklore and social history in the rural community, so I would say it's worth doing. But don't be afraid to rethink your strategy if you find yourself going up blind alleys, and you can always come and talk to me, or email me, with any concerns or if you get into any tangles. I'll only be away from the university for a couple of weeks in August, so feel free."

My half hour was up. I folded over my notepad, thanked him and left.

Then I was on my way home, feeling elated, impatient to make a start and blissfully unaware of the danger I was about to put myself in.

Amazing what you can find out about people if you have ten minutes and an iPad. The current owner of Linden Manor was one Isobel Warrender. I even discovered what she looked like—old, slightly

built, with her white hair styled in an old-fashioned bun. I found no record of her date of birth, but I did learn she had married a Leonard Warrender. Isobel had been a Fitzmichael by birth and had inherited Linden Manor from her mother. She had no children and, since the death of her husband many years earlier, had lived on her own.

I couldn't find any means of contact except the street address, so I sent a businesslike letter, explaining my need to research the background of several locally known nursery rhymes and asking if she would be prepared to help me. I reread the letter and edited until I was happy with it, then mailed it. Three days later a reply arrived.

The envelope was thick, good quality and white. The handwriting was a little florid but the product of a steady hand, and she had obviously used a fountain pen. I unfolded the single sheet, praying she hadn't refused my request.

Dear Mrs. Carpenter,

I was most interested to receive your letter and delighted to read that you are researching our local traditions. I remember your great-grandmother and shall be most pleased to assist you in any way I can…

There followed a telephone number and an invitation to call and arrange an appointment at my earliest convenience.

I punched the air. My project was off to a great start.

That night, I rang my mother, certain she would be equally delighted. "I'm hoping to see her next week, all being well, and I'm ringing her tomorrow to confirm."

To my surprise, silence greeted me at the other end of the phone, followed by a deep sigh.

"Mum? What's wrong? Did you hear what I said?"

"I heard."

"You sound as if I've upset you."

"You have."

"I'm sorry, I really don't understand."

Another deep sigh. "I don't want you to go there. Not to Linden Manor. Not ever, do you understand?"

I could feel anger welling up inside me. "No, I don't. This is for my dissertation, Mum. It's part of my research. I need to talk to this lady about 'The Scottish Bride'. You know, the rhyme Great-Granny used to sing to me when I was a child? The one you hated so much?"

"I remember it all too well, and your great-grandmother was old

enough to know better. That bloody nursery rhyme!"

I couldn't remember the last time I had heard my mother swear and it knocked me off-kilter. I didn't want to run the risk of her putting the phone down on me, so I strained to keep my voice calm. "Mum, please, could you look at this from my angle for a minute? I'm excited to have found someone who might be able to put that rhyme into actual historical context. She seems a very old lady herself and she remembers Great-Granny. What is so wrong with me going to see her?"

I could sense panic in Mum's voice. "Look, Lesley, I don't know everything because neither my mother nor your great-grandmother would tell me. For all I know, perhaps they didn't know everything either. But both of them were adamant that I should never go near Linden Manor and I believe that warning extends to you too and that's the real reason I hated your great-grandmother singing that rhyme to you. Quite apart from the macabre subject, the less any of us heard about matters connected to Linden Manor, the better."

"But they didn't say so. I mean, they didn't actually include me when they said you weren't to go there?"

A pause. Then, a reluctant, "No, but I had the impression that there was something wrong with the place."

"I think you're talking about some superstitious claptrap here, aren't you? Did they believe the place was haunted?"

"Maybe, but I think it was a lot more than that."

"I'm still going to meet her, you know."

"I really wish you wouldn't."

"I have to."

To my horror, my mother burst into tears. Now I was the one to be shocked. I couldn't remember the last time my mother had shed so much as a single tear. Not even at my father's funeral five years earlier. She just wasn't the weepy sort, but now she had given way to full-blown sobbing and I hadn't a clue how to comfort her.

"I'm so sorry, Mum. I had no idea you'd react like this. If I had, I'd never have told you I was going there."

"But you're still going, aren't you?"

I felt wretched, but I needed information only Isobel Warrender could provide and I could hardly ask her to come to me, could I? Or even to meet in the village café. The woman looked a hundred years old and I didn't even know if she could walk unaided!

"I'll be fine, Mum. I'm just going to ask her a few questions about a silly nursery rhyme and see if I can find out who the Scottish bride

really was and why someone should write such a dark poem about her."

"I'll pray for you, Lesley." The phone went dead.

I stared at it, hearing the constant hum of the dial tone, until it cut itself off and told me to replace the handset.

Should I call her back or should I leave her alone to get over it? In the end I decided on the latter. We'd just end up arguing and I was determined to go to Linden Manor, so it could get bitter. We had fallen out once before, years ago, over something trivial, but had both been so entrenched that neither of us spoke to the other for three weeks. Finally, I gave in, apologized, even though I believed I was right, and we had been fine ever since. I couldn't even remember what that dispute had been about, but instinct told me this was far more serious. Once I had been to see Mrs. Warrender and had returned unharmed, I could ring Mum and allay all her fears.

"Oh yes, Mrs. Carpenter, I've been expecting your call." From her aristocratic tone, Isobel Warrender could have been educated at some exclusive girls' school. Her voice conveyed strength and confidence that hardly matched her photograph. She had answered the phone herself too, when I had half expected some butler to do that.

We agreed on a date for my visit, and, three days later, I drove down.

Winterton St. Clement was a couple of hundred miles away, off the beaten track and some distance from the nearest main road. As I approached it, childhood memories came flooding back. The Saxon church, with its square tower, clock and weather vane, backed onto a village green, where animals would have grazed in centuries gone by. Now a solitary woman was walking her retriever.

I had never seen Linden Manor on any of my childhood visits to the area, and now that I was looking for it, I soon saw why. I almost drove past the open wrought iron gates, half-hidden as they were by dense woodland. I braked hard and turned into an overgrown track which took me around a bend and opened up into a wide avenue of overhanging lime trees. The house was concealed from view to all but the most determined visitor.

I drove at five miles an hour, bumping every now and then as my tires hit a pothole. Maintenance did not seem a priority for the manor's owner, or, maybe, if she didn't get out much, no one had told her.

After half a mile, the avenue opened out into a graveled courtyard and I had my first glimpse of Linden Manor. Goose bumps rose on my arms and the hairs of my neck prickled.

The imposing sandstone front was resplendent with carved lions and an inscription centered over the large wooden door—*1574*. I knew from my limited research into the manor that this building was much more recent—1895. As always, though, successive renovations and rebuilds had utilized what they could from the previous houses that had stood on this site—1574 was the estimated date of the first grand house, Raven Hall, built for Lord Jasper Fitzmichael, a gift from a grateful Queen Elizabeth. Although what she was grateful for, history didn't record. It did record, though, that he never lived there.

Linden Manor didn't just stand on its own grounds, it *imposed* on them. You were compelled to look upward. And I did. Four floors upward. I blinked rapidly against the bright sunlight, taking everything in. This was a house built on a grand scale, with turrets, carved effigies of yet more lions and eagles—a house of power that had known wealth and status. Yet I had found little information on it in my Internet searches. Maybe Mrs. Warrender could fill in the gaps for me. After all, she was now the only one rattling around in this monument to Victorian Gothic splendor.

I parked my Fiesta outside the front door and my flat shoes crunched gravel as I walked the few steps to the oversized door. Old, gnarled and probably oak, I guessed it had also belonged to an earlier version of the house, maybe even the Tudor one. I looked for a bell, and my gaze alighted on an old-fashioned iron pull. I tugged at it and heard the clang echo through the hallway inside.

I waited. Then I stepped back to see if anyone was at the window checking me out.

A movement out of the corner of my eye distracted me and I turned my head to get a better look. Nothing. I could have sworn, just for a second, that someone had peered down at me from a window on the second floor. I wondered whether to ring again, but decided to wait a little longer. After all, if Mrs. Warrender was on her own, it might take her some time to get to the door.

The summer sun warmed my bare arms and birds twittered in the lime trees. I pushed a stray lock of hair back over my shoulder and tucked it behind my ear. The courtyard stretched out to the left and right of the manor, with yet more lime trees beyond; a more secluded, private place you couldn't imagine.

So why did I feel so ill at ease? My mind went back to that

fractured conversation with my mother. I had allowed it to get to me, that was all. I didn't believe in superstitions and paranormal nonsense. I was practical. Lesley Carpenter was the most down-to-earth, pragmatic person I knew, and most people agreed with me.

I was poised to ring again when I heard the clanging of bolts being drawn back and a key scraping in the lock. After such a racket, I expected a creaking door, but it opened surprisingly smoothly and quietly.

A white-haired lady I recognized from her photograph stood dwarfed by her own front door. Wrinkles seemed to have birthed more wrinkles and I fully expected to see cards from the Queen adorning her mantelpiece—one for each year past a hundred. Her vivid sapphire eyes appraised me, before her face creased into a smile which exposed teeth too perfect and white to be her own.

She held out her hand and I was amazed at her firm, confident handshake. Isobel Warrender seemed, for all the world, a young woman staring out of a crone's body. She posed an enigma of contrasts and, as I crossed her threshold, that thought disturbed me more than anything I had experienced in a long time.

Chapter Two

"Come in, my dear. Welcome to Linden Manor." My new acquaintance led me through her impressive hallway.

Portraits painted in oils adorned the oak-paneled walls, and all gazed down their aristocratic noses at me. I felt like a servant who had dared to come in through the front door. Didn't I know my place? I should have been downstairs in the bowels of this great house, hands deep in soapy water, scrubbing dishes.

Isobel Warrender's heels clattered across the immaculate black- and white-tiled floor. She moved with an agility far younger than her apparent age, as she swept past the imposing central staircase, into a room at the opposite end from the doorway.

"Let's sit in the drawing room. I always find it so much more cozy than the other rooms downstairs. I suppose it's because it gets the sun more."

I smiled and nodded at her, while I took in the sumptuous surroundings. More portraits showed a variety of fashions from the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One dominated them all, a massive picture that hung over the stone fireplace. A young, pretty girl, dressed in twenties flapper style, smiled across the room, and I noticed the mantelpiece was devoid of any cards from the Queen.

"That picture's caught your eye, I see. Can you see the likeness? I expect not." My hostess smiled and attempted to ape the pose in the portrait. It took a second, but then I saw it, in her eyes and the upturn of her lips.

I pointed at the picture. "That's you."

She giggled and clapped her hands like a child. "Oh, I'm so glad you recognized me. It would have been simply awful if there was nothing of her left!"

Mrs. Warrender indicated a comfortable-looking Victorian chair

positioned to the right of the fireplace. “Now, you sit there. That’s right. And I’ll sit here.” She sat carefully, legs together, in the same pose as Princess Diana in those famous photos at the Taj Mahal. There, any resemblance between the two ended. Where Diana had looked alone and vulnerable, this lady was vibrant and in command.

“I shall ring for some tea. Would you prefer Indian, China or Earl Grey?”

As an inveterate coffee drinker, I hadn’t a clue about tea, but thought it would be rude to request my favorite drink. “I’m happy with whatever you prefer,” I said. Her smile indicated I had given the right answer.

She reached up and pressed a button. Somewhere in the far recesses of the house I heard a bell ring. A couple of minutes later, the door opened and a gray-haired woman of around sixty entered. She was wearing a black dress and a pristine white apron. For a moment, I thought I had stepped onto the set of *Downton Abbey*.

“Ah, there you are, Beryl. We should like to take tea now. Earl Grey. And some of your delicious cake, if you please.”

“Yes, madam.”

Beryl hadn’t so much as glanced in my direction and now she had gone again. I wondered why she hadn’t answered the door to me. Maybe her mistress had known she was hard at work baking her “delicious cake” and shouldn’t be disturbed.

“Now then, Mrs. Carpenter—”

“Please call me Lesley.”

Mrs. Warrender nodded but didn’t reciprocate. I would continue using her formal title.

“It’s that little nursery rhyme, ‘The Scottish Bride’, that’s brought you here today, isn’t it?”

“Yes. My great-grandmother used to sing it to me when I was very small. My mother thought it was far too gruesome for a three-year-old, but Great-Granny had a wicked gleam in her eye.”

Mrs. Warrender laughed, as if remembering something hilarious. “Oh I remember Millie Hart. Of course, that was before she was married. We had such larks together. Goodness me, the scavenger hunts we went on. We always had one on the longest day—the summer solstice. We had to find a silly collection of things and bring them up to the ancient stone circle on the grounds of this house. I always partnered Millie because she was so resourceful. She could charm anyone into giving us anything we wanted. Even the local police

constable lent her his truncheon once. He got into such trouble for it when we lost it!"

"Did he ever get it back?" I asked.

Isobel clasped her hands in her lap. "Oh, I expect so. It would have turned up somewhere, I'm sure." She glanced quickly over to her right. I followed her line of sight which led me to the far end of the room and the portrait of a young and handsome man.

The door opened and Beryl entered with a silver tray.

"Ah, splendid, tea has arrived."

Beryl laid the heavy tray down on an occasional table to her mistress's right.

"Would you like me to pour, madam?"

"No, that's fine, thank you, Beryl. I'll manage from here."

"Will your guest be staying for dinner?"

"Oh, I really don't know. Will you, my dear? I believe we're having roast pork today, apple sauce, stuffing, all the trimmings."

It sounded delicious, but who cooks a roast joint for one person? I hesitated, anxious not to overstay my welcome, but then, she had invited me and it had been an age since I had enjoyed a good roast dinner.

"If you're sure it's not too much trouble, I should be delighted," I said.

"Good. That's settled then. There will be two for dinner, Beryl."

"Very good, madam, I shall see to it."

She left and I'd still not exchanged one glance with her. Did she resent my presence there? Hard to tell, as I had never seen a more bland, expressionless face in my life.

"Beryl is an excellent cook. She's been with me for years and I don't know what I'd do without her."

Mrs. Warrender poured the fragrant tea into the cups using a tea strainer. Evidently tea bags weren't allowed in this house. She handed me a cup.

"Cake?"

I accepted and bit into the lightest Victorian sponge cake I had ever tasted. It practically melted in my mouth.

"Now, before we start, my dear, I must tell you that we have a long tradition here, dating as far back as anyone can remember. We always dress for dinner."

"Oh, I…" I looked down at my black jeans and summer top. Smart enough for daywear, but hardly something I would have worn formally.

"It's quite all right, my dear. Later, Beryl will show you upstairs. You'll find something suitable up there, I have no doubt of it. And I understand vintage is all the rage now."

I smiled and wondered just which vintage her wardrobe was from. For now, though, we had other things to discuss. I took out my notebook and pen from my bag and began, "I understand 'The Scottish Bride' refers to a young woman who was brought here to marry into the family, but I don't know anything else and I wondered if you could fill in any of the gaps. Was there something wrong with her? A mysterious death perhaps?"

Isobel Warrender smiled. "Back in the 1780s, my ancestors lived in the house immediately before this one. The eldest son was a rather beautiful young man called John Fitzmichael. Our family has always been unusual in that the house passes through the female line, and back then, the heiress was John's younger sister, Hermione. She was quite a flighty piece, although, once she grew up, she learned to do the right thing." She paused and stared into space, as if a thought, or some recollection that disturbed her, had flashed through her mind. I didn't feel I knew her well enough to question her about it, so I waited.

Eventually, she shook her head. "No matter. John had returned from doing the Grand Tour. He'd brought all sorts of treasures back from his travels; some of which are still in this house, which is a miracle in itself. But the one treasure he had not been able to bring back was a young Scottish girl he had met called Celia McEwan. Her father was a rich Scottish laird who owned vast amounts of sheep and land in the Highlands. I don't know if you've heard of the Clearances?"

"When the wealthy Scottish landowners forcibly evicted their tenant farmers so they could farm more sheep?"

"In a nutshell, yes. It caused untold misery and hardship and Lord Robert McEwan was one of the most notorious. That man was blackhearted."

A chill breeze swept by me. I looked to see if Mrs. Warrender had felt it too, but her expression remained the same as she continued with her story.

"Lord McEwan had big plans for his daughter. He expected her to make a brilliant marriage with another wealthy Scottish family, but three failed attempts later, she remained unwed. By now, she was twenty-one and people were beginning to wonder what was wrong with her. Doors were starting to close on possible suitors. That's when John Fitzmichael requested her hand and, to his surprise, McEwan readily agreed. Of course, my ancestor lived to regret it, from the moment they

exchanged their vows."

"What did she do?"

Mrs. Warrender seemed about to continue when something distracted her. Again, she looked to her right. This time, I had to ask.

"Is there something about that portrait? You keep staring at it. Who is it?"

I stood and started to make my way toward it. This time, a sudden, violent chill nearly knocked me off my feet with its suddenness and power.

"What the—" I just stopped myself from issuing an expletive, "—I mean, what was that?"

"What, my dear?" She appeared unconcerned, even a little vague.

"The draft. Didn't you feel it? It shot right through me, as if someone had opened a door in a howling gale."

"No, I didn't feel anything. I expect you're just a little tired from your journey." She rang the bell again.

I didn't like to tell her I wasn't in the least tired—especially given the shock I had just experienced. I wanted to find out more about this Celia McEwan, and about the portrait that drew so much of Mrs. Warrender's attention.

The door opened and Beryl entered.

"Beryl, will you take Mrs. Carpenter up to the red bedroom? She's quite tired after her journey and would like a little nap. Then, perhaps, you could draw her a bath and lay something suitable out for her to wear at dinner."

"Yes, madam." Beryl motioned me to follow her—the first time she had acknowledged my presence with a look, let alone a gesture.

I was reluctant to follow, but had no wish to offend. As I did so, I wasn't sure if I imagined the briefest exchange of looks between her and her mistress.

The bedroom lived up to its adjective. The thick velvet drapes, hangings on the four-poster bed and even the carpet were red. Not vivid, more of a subtle deep shade, the fabric interwoven with a leafy design in gold thread.

Beryl said nothing, turned down the eiderdown and made her way over to the massive walnut double wardrobe. She opened it and I saw a long row of dresses, each covered in a clear protective garment bag. She moved hanger after hanger until she came across one that met

with her approval. She extracted it and draped it over her arm, where it was soon accompanied by two more. Once finished, she had no choice but to speak to me.

"I'm sure these will be to your satisfaction, madam. I believe you will find them a good fit."

She left and I stared at the sumptuous gowns, now laid out on the bed for my inspection. A full-length cheval mirror stood next to the dressing table and I held first one dress and then the next up against me.

Out of the three, one captured my imagination. Peacock blue, the top seemed to be some kind of silk chiffon, heavily embroidered in a pattern of linden leaves, with tiny blue-black beads. The main body of the dress was in soft, shimmering blue silk, its drop waist accented by a broad sewn-in belt. The effect was lavish, extravagant, and the dress looked as if it had just been purchased and never worn. I also discovered it could have been made for me, as I slipped it on and paraded in front of the mirror.

Only my feet and hair looked wrong. My smart flat shoes were fine for what I had worn today, but this dress demanded fancy shoes or strappy sandals.

I searched the wardrobe floor and was rewarded with a selection of shoeboxes. Each revealed brand-new, or barely worn, soft-leather shoes, mostly with old-fashioned twenties heels. After examining half a dozen pairs, I came across some that could have been bought to wear just with that dress. They were a midnight-blue, soft fabric, with glittering diamanté buckles. My feet slipped into them like Cinderella trying on the glass slipper.

Back in front of the mirror, I clasped my long, dark hair behind me. If I had hairgrips, I could twist it into a knot at the back.

The dressing table was laid with a glass tray containing an arrangement of pots. As I lifted each lid, they were all empty. Except one. In that, I found hairpins and, after a few failed attempts, my hair decided to do as I wished and remain up. I stepped back and appraised myself full length.

A soft knock sounded at the door. Beryl had come to run my bath. I registered her look of wide-eyed surprise as she saw me already dressed.

"I didn't need a nap, so I thought I would dress now," I said.

Beryl clasped her hands in front of her and her mouth set in a thin, disapproving line.

"Very well, madam."

"Thank you, Beryl."

She left. I had the impression I had broken some rule of hers by not taking my prescribed nap or requiring her to draw my bath. I sighed and put the finishing touches to my appearance. A quick touch-up of makeup from my bag and, with the exception of bare legs (fortunately recently shaved), I looked presentable enough for anyone's dining table.

I looked at my watch. Six thirty. With no idea when dinner was served, and an aroma of roasting pork wafting up from downstairs, I decided to make my way downstairs.

I grabbed my bag and strolled down the dark, carpeted hallway to the wide, sweeping staircase. I touched the banister. Pain shot up my arm, as if the wood were electrified. I cried out. Snatched my hand away.

Isobel appeared at the doorway of the drawing room. One glance at me, and a strange look passed over her face. "Whatever happened?"

"I don't know. I feel as if I've had an electric shock, but I know that's impossible."

"Come down and Beryl will get you a glass of sherry. I'm afraid dinner isn't served until eight o'clock, but you are welcome to rest in the drawing room. I shall be going to my room for an hour or so."

I assumed that meant we would resume our discussion of Celia McEwan over dinner, so I happily accepted her offer, and the tingling, burning sensation in my right arm gradually faded.

Sherry in hand, and left alone, now was my opportunity to examine the portrait that seemed to capture Isobel so much. He would have been handsome in any era, but this man was dressed as a late eighteenth-century nobleman. His dark hair and long sideburns reminded me of the Scottish poet Robert Burns, but this man had an almost hypnotic quality about his clear brown eyes. He was posed with his head facing to his right, a slight smile playing around his lips, and his white cravat was immaculately wrapped and tied around his neck. I looked for an inscription and found it on the gilt frame—*John Fitzmichael 1755-1789.* So this must have been painted toward the end of his life, cut tragically short somehow in his thirty-fourth year.

The late afternoon sun cast bright rays through the tall windows. I moved around the room and gazed out over the courtyard, where my

car windows glinted in the sunlight. I looked beyond, down the avenue of trees.

A shadow darted across from one side to another, so fast I couldn't make it out. A bird perhaps? A crow or raven? Except this shadow didn't fly. It had no wings. I was sure of that. This shadow had run across the avenue. Cold fear gripped my stomach.

I shook my head. It had to be a trick of the light—shadows cast by the light filtering through the branches. I waited for something, anything, so I could make sense of it.

Murmuring, like a gentle breeze through summer leaves, fluffed my hair. A hand touched my shoulder, featherlight and cool. I closed my eyes.

"Run and hide…run and hide…"

I spun around. The room was empty, so who had touched me? Who had spoken?

Something on the floor caught my attention. I bent to pick it up. A tiny fragment of lace. I turned it over in my hand. Where had it come from? I was sure it wasn't there a few minutes earlier. And why was one corner of it scorched? Part of the rhyme came into my head:

Don't turn your head,
Lest it be said,
You saw the lace,
On her blackened face.

I shuddered and dropped the lace. A second later, I couldn't see it anywhere.

Leave that house. Yes, that's what I should have done. But I told myself how ridiculous I was being. If I left now, it would be rude to my hostess, who had done everything to make me welcome. And I could kiss my dissertation goodbye. I could never count on her cooperation if I ran out on her.

No, I was being foolish and my imagination had gone into overdrive. I would stay, enjoy a delicious dinner, change back into my street clothes and leave, armed with the rest of the information I needed about the mysterious and sinister Scottish bride.

I should have trusted my instincts. But I didn't.

Chapter Three

"There you are, my dear. Please, sit."

Isobel Warrender indicated a place set for me at the far end of the polished mahogany dining table. A large crystal chandelier glittered and radiated its light around the gloomy room. Trees grew close to the one tall window, blocking out most of the light, and I wondered why she didn't have them chopped down. It must have cost her a fortune in lighting bills.

I took my place and noted the solid-silver cutlery and the snow-white linen table napkin. A crystal water glass stood empty beside me, but Beryl rectified that almost immediately by filling it with iced water. Then she served a delicious dressed-crab starter.

"I do so love crab at this time of the year, don't you, my dear?" Mrs. Warrender said.

"Yes, I do." I took a mouthful. "This is delicious," I said, hoping to elicit some sort of reaction from Beryl. She merely nodded, without the hint of a smile.

The roast pork was cooked to perfection, with golden, crispy crackling and fluffy roasted potatoes. I wondered whether Linden Manor possessed a vegetable garden; everything tasted so fresh.

After a light dessert of lemon posset, Beryl cleared our plates and we adjourned to the drawing room.

"Now, where were we earlier?" Mrs. Warrender asked.

"You had just started to tell me about the Scottish bride, Celia McEwan."

"Ah yes, *Lady* Celia McEwan to give her the title she was born with. Oh goodness me, yes, she was a Lady in her own right, you see. But she caused a terrible stir when she arrived here. I think poor John Fitzmichael soon began to rue the day he had met her. She was willful, you see. And there were rumors of tainted blood. Oh my—"

A loud scrabbling, scrambling noise startled both of us.

I shot out of my chair. "It's coming from the chimney. It sounds like something's falling in there."

A cloud of soot billowed into the room. Then a *thud*. Both Isobel and I broke into coughing fits. The soot fell everywhere, blackening the carpet. I rushed to open a window, but found it stuck fast. I raced to the door and flung it open, nearly knocking Beryl over.

"I heard something. Was it a bird?" She pushed past me and made straight for the fireplace. Fortunately, the sooty cloud was abating now.

Mrs. Warrender had retreated to the far side of the room, directly under the portrait of the ill-fated John Fitzmichael.

Beryl leaned into the fireplace and picked something large and black out of the soot. She held it up.

"A raven. Neck's broken."

I shuddered. The dead bird's head lolled from side to side as Beryl turned it about.

"I'll get rid of it and clean the mess up, madam, if you and Mrs. Carpenter would like to retire to the library."

Recovered from her coughing fit, Mrs. Warrender nodded. "Good idea, Beryl, we'll go there directly. Come along, my dear. After all that excitement, I think we both need a brandy."

The library looked exactly as I would have imagined it—as a book lover, my idea of heaven. All the walls were lined floor to ceiling with bookshelves, and one of those stepladders that you slide along so you can climb up and investigate the top shelves. The room smelled of leather and a lingering aroma of cigars, smells that took me back to my childhood and my father's after-dinner indulgence, although how long it had been since anyone had smoked one in here, I couldn't begin to imagine. The scent must have seeped into the very fabric of the room. Completing the cozy atmosphere, lamps were lit next to each of two chairs by the fireplace.

This should have been the most welcoming and relaxing of places, but this library set my nerves jangling. Something felt wrong in this room. I had the uncomfortable sensation of being watched—and not by my hostess either.

She had settled herself into a leather wingback armchair, and I lowered myself into its partner, directly opposite her. A decanter of brandy and two crystal glasses stood on a small table by her chair and

Mrs. Warrender poured a generous amount into each glass.

She handed me one and I took a sip. The cognac slipped down like smooth velvet and a mellow warmth enveloped me. *Mustn't feel too relaxed.* I still needed information, and time was getting on; the setting sun was sending orange rays into the room. I glanced at my watch—half past nine and I had a long drive home—so, once again, I reached in my bag for my notebook and pen, ready to take notes.

"What else do you know about Lady Celia?" I asked.

Mrs. Warrender took a sip of her brandy. She pointed to a portrait over the fireplace. "That was painted a few days before she was married."

I stood and moved closer to inspect the painting. A beautiful young woman, with searching brown eyes and a pink-and-white complexion, gazed down at me. Soft ringlets of chestnut hair framed an oval face. In her hands, she clasped a single red rose while, beside her, a large black bird perched on a leather-topped desk.

"That's curious," I said. "Why would she be painted with a raven?"

"Ravens are significant for the women of our family. There have always been ravens here."

"Like the Tower of London? They say if the ravens ever leave there, the Tower and the kingdom will be lost."

"Ravens are special birds and they're highly intelligent. Did you know that if one of them dies, the others will gather around it as if they were attending its funeral? They sense death, you see, and they respect it. Their race memory is long, carried down from generation to generation."

She seemed to have drifted off into some kind of reverie. Her voice had become trancelike. Then, she seemed to snap back to reality and shook herself. "Do you remember the rest of the rhyme? About the lace over her blackened face?"

I nodded. "I've always been intrigued by that."

"The night of their wedding, a terrible fire broke out and nearly destroyed the entire house. John Fitzmichael was badly burned rescuing his bride. He carried her out into the open air, where the villagers were throwing buckets of water at the flames engulfing the building. She was still in her wedding dress, but it was badly scorched. By some miracle, John had smothered the flames before they really took hold and burned her to death. She was unconscious and her husband just managed to lay her down gently on the lawn before he too passed out. Some of the villagers saw her face, behind her singed

veil. They said it was blackened and burned.

"Lady Celia had been a very beautiful woman but she was never seen in public again without a mask or a heavy veil. It was also said that all who saw her on the night of the fire died within weeks; some of fever, others of dysentery, but many believed the real cause was a curse placed on them by the Scottish bride. She didn't want anyone to see her in that terrible state, you see. Especially not the men. Those who had done so couldn't be allowed to live, so one by one they died, until there were only women left on the estate." She paused. "I can see you're skeptical, my dear."

I smiled, fighting to suppress the uneasy feeling in my stomach. "I don't believe in curses, I'm afraid. It's all just superstitious nonsense to me."

Isobel looked thoughtful. "I see, well each to their own beliefs, of course."

I had the distinct impression I had somehow insulted her. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Warrender. I didn't mean to offend you."

She waved her hand. "It is of no consequence."

I broke the uncomfortable pause that followed. "What happened to her husband? Did he survive?"

"Yes, and for the next three years after that. He was scarred, of course, and no longer the handsome man you saw in the portrait in the drawing room. He also lost his sight. Maybe that's why he was allowed to live. I've always thought so, anyway."

"But he died very young, didn't he?"

"Yes, he was just thirty-four when he took a fever and died. Of course, that wasn't here. After the fire, the house was uninhabitable, so he and Celia lived in the lodge while the rebuilding took place. He didn't stay there long though. Poor John ended his days in a lunatic asylum."

"Oh how awful! And he'd saved Lady Celia's life too."

"Yes, and she never forgave him for it. You see, her looks were everything to her. The fire unhinged her too, they said. She was often heard chanting, muttering. Incantations some said. Summoning the devil, others claimed. She was said to have turned the earth around the lodge red with the blood of her victims."

"Victims?"

"Why yes. She was rumored to sacrifice babies."

"Good grief! Was it ever proved?"

"I believe not."

"But surely in those days she would have been burned as a witch?"

"No, not by then. Hanged for murder, maybe. Accused and tried for witchcraft even, if the people hadn't been so terrified of her."

"So when did she die?"

Mrs. Warrender took another sip of her brandy and smiled. "No one knows. There's no record of her death. Certainly she outlived her husband by many years and she never moved back to this house. In keeping with our tradition, it passed to John's sister, Hermione, who provided for her sister-in-law as best she could. But as servants died, Celia would not allow them to be replaced. Eventually she just had one, a distant ancestor of Beryl's in fact.

One winter it gradually dawned on people that they hadn't seen anything of the servant for some weeks. It wasn't unusual not to see Celia. She was a recluse by now, but her servant was often seen in the village, buying foodstuffs and so on. Anyway, a couple of estate workers went to the lodge and found the body of the servant lying on the kitchen floor. She'd been partially eaten by rats. But of Lady Celia there was no sign and she was never seen again."

"Goodness, what a story." I'd been furiously scribbling notes and hoped I would be able to read them later. I glanced at my watch again. Ten o'clock. I really must be making tracks, but I sensed there was still more to this story and I was intrigued.

Mrs. Warrender smiled. "You really need to see the lodge. It's derelict now, but I'm sure you'll find it full of atmosphere."

"I'd love to, but I really must be getting back. It's a long drive and—"

"Nonsense. You'll stay here for the night. Beryl will lay out a nightgown for you and any toiletries you may require. Then, tomorrow morning, you can resume your research. There's no point in leaving with the job half-done, is there?"

I hesitated. On the one hand, there was no faulting her logic. I supposed I could always drive back home and return tomorrow, or I could take my chances on finding a room for the night elsewhere. But the latter option would be churlish and her offer made perfect sense. So why was every instinct telling me to refuse and to get out of there as fast as I could?

Again I pushed my fears away. "Thank you, that would be lovely, and very kind of you to offer." I reached in my bag for my cell phone.

"Oh dear, I'm afraid you won't be able to use that here. It's the

signal, you see." Mrs. Warrender pointed to my phone. "I don't have one of those, so it has never bothered me. You're very welcome to use my—what do you call them these days? Landline? You're welcome to use that if you wish to make a call."

I could see *No Service* on my phone and flicked it off. Whom did I need to call tonight anyway? I lived alone, so no one depended on me to return at a certain time. I could ring my mother tomorrow when I got home. She wasn't expecting a call from me tonight anyway.

"It's not important, but thank you for the offer."

"Well now, I think that's enough for one night. I'm afraid I retire early, but you're welcome to stay down here as long as you wish." She pressed the bell for Beryl, who arrived within seconds.

"Mrs. Carpenter will be staying in the red room this evening. Would you lay out everything she needs?"

Beryl seemed surprised. "The red room, madam?"

"Yes, Beryl." There was a note of annoyance in her employer's voice.

Beryl's face remained impassive, but she shot me a quick glance. "Very good, madam."

A knot of panic suddenly twisted my stomach. Had I done the right thing in accepting Mrs. Warrender's invitation? I told myself not to be so stupid. This house was oppressive and it was starting to get to me. That was all it was.

After my hostess retired, I forced myself to stay alone in the library. I sipped my brandy and flicked through my notes. Fortunately they did seem to make sense, so I would be able to transcribe them when I returned home. The creepy story Mrs. Warrender had told me that evening was perfect for my research. And what was all that about ravens? Fascinating. Tomorrow I would check out the lodge and my work here would be done.

I sat there, musing, while the brandy seeped into my senses and my eyes closed. My earlier unease became smothered by the warm headiness of the drink, and I drifted off to sleep.

I awoke with a start; a misty gray light seeped into the room from an early dawn. I shifted position and my stiffened limbs protested. I stretched them and peered at my watch. Just before four. I stood and

stretched again, then glanced over at the windows. But as I did so, I let out a cry.

A figure stood silhouetted against the pale light. She wore a tattered, white wedding dress. She faced away from me, looking out of the window, but I was sure. She was the woman in the portrait.

I grabbed my bag and raced out of the room, up the stairs to the red room, and shut the door behind me. I leaned against it, panting, trying to rationalize what I had witnessed.

It had to be a trick of the light. Ghosts didn't exist. I had woken up and my mind must have still been trapped in that twilight between sleep and wakefulness. I had read that lots of apparent ghost sightings could be attributed to people in that semiconscious state and, in a house like this, with its shadowy corners and gloomy, old-fashioned décor, was it any surprise that my mind played tricks on me?

Gradually, my heart rate slowed and sleep, once again, beckoned. I undressed and slipped on the powder-blue, silken nightdress that fitted as if it had been made for me. It smelled of the fresh outdoors; a credit to Beryl's housekeeping.

I slipped beneath the coverlet and, in a few minutes, fell asleep again. But not for long.

When I awoke this time, I knew someone else was in the room. A horrible tingling like pins and needles started in my feet and fingers and crawled all over my body. Something landed on the bed. Maybe a pet cat had come to investigate the visitor. Perhaps it had lain under my bed all night and now wanted to be fed.

There was only one way to find out. The heavy velvet curtains were drawn across, blocking out most of the light. I hoisted myself up and peered into the gloom. There was no sign of a cat, or of anything else on my bed. Next to me I stroked smooth, unruffled covers.

I reached over and switched on the bedside lamp. Something caught my eye and I glanced over at the pillow beside me. In the middle of it was an indentation, as if someone had rested their head there.

My mouth dry, I stared at the pillow. Could I have rolled over onto it in my sleep? But if I had, wouldn't there have been more indentations where I had slid across? And, anyway, how could the covers have remained undisturbed if I had sprawled all the way over there?

I sprang out of bed, trembling from head to foot. Outside my room

I heard a door bang. Mrs. Warrender, perhaps. Anxious to flood the room with light, I threw back the curtains on a bright, sunny morning and fought to explain what had just happened. I must be right about the cat. It had curled up on the pillow next to me, leaving no trace of cat hairs, somehow. It must still be in the room because the doors and windows were shut fast, so it had no means of escape.

Under the bed, behind the curtains, I searched everywhere. Panic began to rise again as I completed my search, no wiser than when I'd begun.

I had to get out of there. I would have breakfast, investigate the lodge, take photos, make some notes and go. And I wouldn't return.

Decision made, I threw on my own clothes and laid my borrowed ones on the bed. Then I grabbed my bag and was about to leave, when I heard it.

"Run and hide…run and hide…"

A woman's whisper, I was sure of that. A woman had stood right behind me and then vanished. The same one who had touched my shoulder? But, this time, I had felt icy breath on my neck. I had *heard* that voice. "Who's there? Who are you?"

Outside, a bird gave a raucous caw. I glanced around. Through the window, I saw a raven fly off.

And the sight and sound of it struck terror in my heart.

Chapter Four

"My dear, you seem flustered. Did you have a bad night?"

I must have looked a sight. My heart pounded, I gasped for breath and my stomach was churning.

"I'm sorry…I didn't sleep very well, I'm afraid. Strange bed and all that." I don't know whether she believed me, but it was the best I could come up with under the circumstances.

Mrs. Warrender took my arm. She only reached up to my shoulder and that was in two-inch heels. "Come along and have some breakfast with me. You'll feel much better when you have some strong coffee, bacon and eggs inside you."

At that moment, I couldn't see how I would be able to eat anything, I felt so nauseated. But the thought of strong coffee was welcoming. Then I could escape this house.

Breakfast was laid out, buffet-style, on the sideboard. Delicious bacon, fluffy scrambled eggs, mushrooms, perfectly browned sausages, tomatoes—all waited under silver cloches and were kept hot on table warmers. There was enough to feed a family of six here and I wondered if Beryl prepared this every morning.

"Try a little. I guarantee you'll feel much better."

Today, she was behaving like a benevolent aunt and I knew I must give it a go. Besides, I felt calmer. My rational side had taken charge once again. My mind had played tricks on me, I told myself. This was a spooky house, with a long history, and Celia's story had been a disturbing one. My overactive imagination had plundered the opportunity to go wild. Of course, I could simply ask Mrs. Warrender about the cat, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to do so. What if she didn't have one? What possibility would I be forced to accept then?

We spoke little over breakfast. I managed three cups of coffee, a slice of bacon and a spoonful of scrambled egg, and finished as Mrs.

Warrender placed her knife and fork together on her empty plate.

"I would very much like to see the lodge now, if I may," I said, "Then I'll be getting back."

Isobel Warrender dabbed the corners of her mouth with her napkin and set it to one side. "Of course, my dear. I'll take you to the door and point you in the right direction. I won't come with you, if you don't mind. My legs aren't as young as they used to be."

For all she was playing the little-old-lady card, I knew the woman who linked her hand through my arm could don sensible shoes and go for a good, long country walk whenever she chose. Still, I felt glad she wasn't coming with me. I needed to be alone to absorb whatever atmosphere might linger in that place.

I followed her directions, which took me through overgrown woodland. Unlike the avenue of lime trees that led to the house, this proved to be a rough track where oak and ash rubbed shoulders with beech and other trees I didn't recognize. Sycamore saplings littered the ground and I had to take care not to trip over brambles.

The sun had made a brief appearance but now disappeared behind some ominous gray clouds, and the temperature fell quite dramatically. I was glad I had grabbed my lightweight jacket from the car, but wished I'd brought my trainers. My leather shoes weren't made for negotiating rough ground.

I walked for around twenty minutes, although the obstacles I encountered probably meant I hadn't gone much more than half a mile. The dense foliage cleared a little and ahead of me I saw a ruined building. Roughly the dimensions of an average-sized, small detached house, this must be the lodge. Its roof had long since fallen in and ivy had claimed the walls and molded itself to the shape of the building. Here and there, tantalizing glimpses of a sandstone structure peeked through the greenery. There were two steps up to the front door, which hung off its hinges and had once been painted dark brown. Now, it was sad, cracked and broken.

A few feet from it, I stubbed my toe and nearly overbalanced. Straightening myself, I looked down at the offending obstacle—a large stone, half-concealed by brambles. I tugged at them and they fell away, the dry wood snapping as they did so. In just a few seconds, I had revealed a stone that didn't look as if it had originated there. The base was darker than the rest of it and as I revealed it further, the brambles gave way a few feet farther on to reveal another one.

My curiosity aroused, I cleared farther and found two more, all lying in a haphazard semicircle. Each was a similar size and each had a tidemark a foot or so above the base. I was as sure as I could be that this was the ancient stone circle Mrs. Warrender had mentioned.

Then, an image, like some long-forgotten memory, flashed, unbidden, into my mind. A stone circle, a flat center stone, a frightened young woman and her captors. A feeling of déjà vu hit me with a force so strong my head reeled. I hugged myself and wondered why the air suddenly seemed heavy, the birds no longer sang. Eyes seemed to be everywhere, watching me, although I could see no one.

Shaken, but determined not to be deterred, I stepped around the uncovered stones and continued up to the lodge. The steps were uneven so I trod carefully. Once over the threshold, an old, fusty, damp smell assailed my nostrils. Beneath my feet I crunched years' worth of dry leaves and bracken, and I stared upward at daylight where the roof had been. Most of the upper floor had collapsed, no doubt its wooden timbers eaten through by woodworms and deathwatch beetles.

Old-fashioned flocked wallpaper was peeled from the walls and fluttered in the slight breeze. But what struck me most was the silence in that place Then I realized that, not only was there no birdsong, there was no sign of any animal life.

I picked my way over the littered floor and moved farther into the house. Some of the interior walls still stood and I passed through a doorway into a room I could imagine had once been quite grand. Maybe a drawing room. A fireplace stood at one end, its blackened hearth testament to thousands of fires that had once burned here. This floor was also strewn with assorted debris, although, here, much of it seemed to be old paper and books mulched to papier-mâché. I bent down to pick one up. It fell apart in my hands and dropped to the floor, but I could just make out the faded gold lettering on the leather cover. *The Raven and Other Poems* by Edgar Allan Poe. My mind sped back to the incident in the drawing room yesterday. I remembered how the dead bird's head had lolled from side to side as Beryl had examined it. Then I remembered the raven I had seen take off. Why did I think it was the same bird? I shivered.

Farther inside the room, a walnut table listed drunkenly to one side and a matching chair lay on its back. Above, part of a plaster ceiling remained and, even through the years of neglect, mold and water damage, I could tell it had once been a fine piece of workmanship.

I rummaged in my bag for my cell and switched it on. The battery

showed it was mostly charged and hopefully I wouldn't need flash, so I began snapping. I moved around the ground floor from room to room, clicking my camera, until I stopped dead. From somewhere in the building, I heard a faint tinkling.

Like wind chimes at first, it built up as I moved closer to the source of the sound. More curious than frightened, I kept taking pictures. Soon, I had moved out of the former drawing room, across the hall and into another room whose function was unclear. I couldn't see any furniture in here. Perhaps it had been stolen, or repossessed by the manor, or maybe it was buried under years of rubbish and rubble. But somewhere in here, music was being played.

My clammy fingers left wet patches on the camera phone and fear made my breath short. This room was darker than the rest, more of the ceiling remained and there were no windows at the far end, from where the sound seemed to emanate. My senses screamed at me to get out of there, but something compelled me to investigate. I had to discover what was making that sound.

In the corner, hidden in the shadows, I could just make out something covered in a couple of centuries of debris. Maybe birds were nesting, or a squirrel or some other small animal was wandering across the keys. There had to be a logical explanation.

I crossed over to it. Trembling, my mouth dry, I reached forward and tugged at some branches that came away in my hand.

The music stopped.

I tugged harder and dragged ivy and yet more broken branches off the surface, until enough was revealed. A harpsichord. More efforts showed it had probably once been a very fine one, although the keys were now blackened and cracked, and the wood had rotted. I pressed one of the keys, but produced nothing but a dull *thud*. I tried another and another. Always the same sound. The strings must be long gone.

Then how had I heard the music? Who, or what, had made this ruined instrument work?

I panicked. What was going on here? Maybe I'd made a mistake. Perhaps this wasn't where the sound was coming from. Could there be some other instrument here? One that still worked? I gazed around, desperate to find some sane and rational explanation.

"*Run and hide…run and hide…*"

I screamed and almost dropped my phone. Icy breath coated my neck. I had to run. I had to get back to my car and drive home.

Branches tore at my clothes and tangled my hair as I sped on.

Tears streamed down my face and, as a wave of hysteria hit me, I lost all sense of direction.

Then the rain started. Drizzle at first, then harder, until I was soaked through to the skin. I sobbed, prayed, cried out for help. The trees closed in on me from all sides. The wood seemed alive with little darting things that appeared from around a tree, then disappeared as fast as I could see them. I was going mad. I was certain of it. Either that, or they were really there.

A gray squirrel danced in front of me, stopped, scampered up a tree and, before my eyes, transformed into a hideous black imp with flame-red eyes and a leer that revealed sharp pointed fangs.

"Oh dear, sweet Jesus, help me!"

In an instant, ivy wrapped itself around my arm and tried to drag me into a tree. Somehow I shook it off.

"Run and hide… run and hide…"

The voice was in my head and flooded my senses. Again I cried out, as twigs scraped through my hair and scratched my face. The wood was alive, malevolent. I tripped over a sapling and overbalanced. Anything I grabbed at to hoist myself up writhed away from me, as the trees closed in tighter around me.

Rain dripped off my hair, streamed into my eyes and half blinded me. I brushed it away as the undergrowth reduced me to a stumbling hobble.

I heard a loud sigh and imagined the wind through the trees in hell. As I turned to the source of the sound, the rain stopped.

I spun back and saw the courtyard through the last of the trees. A few seconds later, I could have kissed the gravel that now crunched under my feet. One last backward glance revealed the woodland, just as it had been when I had first ventured into it—green, sweet smelling, peaceful.

Could I have I imagined all that? I looked down at myself, at the filthy, mud-spattered trousers and dirty, scratched arms. I reached up and pulled leaves from my knotted, dripping hair and glanced up at the manor, just in time to see something move out of the corner of my eye. I locked on to it. From an upstairs window, a face stared down at me. She was wearing a white dress and a tattered lace veil framed her shoulders.

I screamed and hit the ground in a dead faint.

When I came to, I was lying on a chaise longue in the drawing room, where someone had laid a blanket over me. As I moved, Mrs. Warrender's concerned face peered down at me.

"Thank goodness. You gave us quite a stir, my dear. Whatever happened?"

What had happened? She'd think I was insane!

"I…got lost in the wood. It began to rain and I must have panicked and couldn't find my way back."

"Gracious, well thankfully you found your way in the end. Now, would you like a nice hot cup of tea? It might revive you a little."

I struggled to sit up, aware of the scratches that stung my arms and neck and all too conscious of the state I was in.

"You're very kind and I'm so sorry to have been such a nuisance. A cup of tea would be lovely and then I must get on my way. I've really outstayed my welcome and you've been so helpful."

"Nonsense, my dear. I wouldn't hear of you driving all that way in your condition. You must stay, have a bath, put on fresh clothes. Yours are ruined, I'm afraid."

"No, I couldn't possibly—"

"Now I won't hear another word about it. Beryl will draw you a bath and I have already asked her to lay some fresh clothes out for you in the red room. Then we'll have some tea."

At the mention of that room, my heart sank. That's where all this nonsense had begun. But I couldn't be rude to such a gracious hostess and she was right, my trousers were torn, as was my top. Both were as filthy as if I had rolled in a mud bath and, worse, they—and probably I—were beginning to smell. I started to put my feet in my shoes, only to discover they were soaking wet and split from their ordeal in the wood.

I didn't have much choice but to accept. I would have to deal with the red room. After all, I told myself, there were no such things as ghosts. I never used to question my belief that all things supernatural could be rationally explained, but the past twenty-four hours or so had left me not even sure who I was anymore.

"Thank you again, Mrs. Warrender. I'll return your clothes once I get back home. After I've laundered them, of course."

"Nonsense, just keep them."

What would Beryl have selected for me today, I wondered. My legs were stiff and I limped up the stairs to the red room. The door was

partially open and I moistened my dry lips before I dared to enter. Inside, all was peaceful, if gloomy. The sun hadn't made a reappearance after the shower.

I jumped when Beryl opened the en-suite door.

"Your bath is ready for you, madam. I have left clean towels in the bathroom."

"Thank you, Beryl. I'm sorry to put you to so much trouble."

"It's my job, madam," she said and left.

I sank into the deep bath, grateful for the soothing water on my injured skin. Beryl had added some fragrant bubble bath and the aroma of jasmine and honeysuckle relaxed my aching limbs. Despite my misgivings about this house, I could have lingered in that bath for much longer than the ten minutes I permitted myself.

Then, with hair newly washed, I emerged, wrapped myself in a towel and padded back into the bedroom.

After the warm, steamy bathroom, the air struck cold in the red room and I hurriedly dressed myself in a pair of smart navy trousers. I had expected them to be too short but they couldn't have belonged to Mrs. Warrender as they were a perfect fit. Unlike my preferred boot cut, these were a straight-leg, classic style, as was the top, which was a simple pale-blue, button shirt with three-quarter sleeves. Beryl had left silk underwear and a pair of smart black court shoes that also fit me perfectly. I wondered who had been their previous owners. Everything I wore seemed brand new—odd, to say the least. But then everything about this place was strange.

I took my hairbrush out of my bag and caught sight of myself for the first time in the dressing-table mirror. The one in the bathroom had been too fogged up.

I had scratches on my forehead, neck and cheeks. Nothing serious or likely to leave a scar, thankfully. Reflected in the mirror, I saw the room behind me.

Then a shadow began to take form. The hairs rose on the back of my neck as human features emerged from its depths. A young woman. White face, hollow, black-rimmed eyes. This was not the woman from the window. She was the one I had seen being dragged to the stones. She floated just inches behind me and stared straight at my reflection in the mirror.

I screamed, again and again, and then I was floating too, looking down at my body, collapsed on the floor. I saw my hair spread all around me and tried to reach myself, but I was tethered there, as if

held by some invisible cord.

I searched the shadows for the apparition that had scared me so much it had driven my soul from my own body, but she'd gone. A second later, I snapped back into myself, and sat up on the floor, my hairbrush beside me, and a headache throbbing at my temples.

No one came to my aid. Maybe they hadn't heard me? Or maybe it hadn't happened at all.

I forced myself to breathe normally until my heart stopped pounding. My head still ached, though, and I knew I had some paracetamol in my bag. I'd take my tablets and get out of there, never to return. My mother was right. This was no place for me.

Downstairs, Mrs. Warrender was ready to pour our tea.

"Now that's better, isn't it?" she said. "And I'm delighted the clothes fit you so well."

From her demeanor, I had no choice but believe I had imagined what had just happened. I was sure my screams would have penetrated downstairs, prompting some reaction, at least. Yet, Mrs. Warrender had clearly not heard anything out of the ordinary.

I accepted a cup of tea. Instead of yesterday's Earl Grey, this looked good and strong. I reached forward and grabbed two sugar cubes. Maybe my blood sugar was low and had caused the hallucinations. Gradually, I let go of at least some of the fear that had twisted itself around my spine. I could explain none of what had happened to me, but at least *this* was normal. Afternoon tea in china cups. Timeless.

I sipped my drink and then broke the silence. "I'm curious about these lovely clothes. Do you mind if I ask where they came from? Are they yours?"

I watched for any reaction, but she gave none. She seemed to accept it as a perfectly normal question.

"They belong to Beryl's niece. She stays from time to time and leaves a few clothes here. I'm quite sure she'll be delighted they have been put to good use."

"In that case, please let me pay for them. I should hate her to be out of pocket at my expense."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I shall see she is recompensed and I won't hear of you paying. I have enjoyed your company. I don't get many guests these days."

There was no point pursuing the matter. I thanked her and moved on. "May I ask you a question? It's about the woods out there." I

nodded toward the window which faced onto the woodland leading to the lodge.

Did she hesitate a little? If so, it was gone in a second before she regained control.

"Certainly, my dear, what is it you wish to know?"

"I just wondered if you, or anyone you know of, ever had a strange experience in there."

She gazed at me steadily. "What kind of strange experience?"

I moistened my lips. This wasn't going to be easy.

"As I was trying to get back here, the rain started and, of course, it's terribly overgrown out there. But, at one point, I felt almost as if…as if the woods were alive."

She laughed. "Well, of course they're alive, dear. They're living, vibrant trees."

She was ridiculing me. Why had I started this conversation? Now I would have to see it through. "What I mean is, I seemed to see things in the trees. Things that couldn't—shouldn't—be there."

That wiped the smile off her face.

"I think you had better tell me exactly what happened to you."

I stared at her; her mouth was set in a firm line. No longer the genial hostess, in her place sat a woman who knew far more than she had told me.

Chapter Five

I saw no point in holding anything back now. If Isobel Warrender wanted to know exactly what had happened—or, at the very least, what I *believed* had happened—then that is precisely what I would tell her.

Through it all, she sat, nodding now and again, her hands clasped in ladylike fashion in her lap. Even when I recounted my weird out-of-body experience, her expression never changed. As I finished, she unclasped her hands.

"My dear, you have a special connection to this house, did you know that?"

I stared at her, dumbfounded. "How could I have a connection to this house? I've never been here before in my life."

"That's true, but your family have. I didn't tell you before, but we are related, you and I. Generations ago, of course, but your great-grandmother was a distant cousin of mine. You see, we are both descended from the Scottish bride."

My face must have registered the shock I felt.

"I'm sorry, dear, but it's true."

"So Celia and John had children?"

"Just one. A son, conceived on the very day they were wed." She smiled. "I suppose they had waited so long and the festivities were due to carry on well into the evening. Who can blame them if they caught a few minutes' happiness out of sight of prying eyes? Their child was brought up by John's sister, Hermione, who had no children of her own. He couldn't inherit of course, being male, and in keeping with the tradition of this house, he moved away once he was grown up. He went on to marry and father three children—two boys and a girl. One of the boys became your distant grandfather. Linden Manor eventually passed on to the only daughter—my distant grandmother. She came back to live at the house when she inherited. Then, many years later,

came my mother and now it is my turn."

"How extraordinary. I never knew any of this."

She gave me a strange look. Almost as if she didn't believe me. "Oh well, I expect as the years went by and successive generations came and went, the memory of the connection faded." She paused and I felt uncomfortable with the searching way she looked at me.

I swallowed. "I found the stone circle." Was it my imagination, or did Mrs. Warrender flinch? "I thought I saw something there." No mistaking the flinch this time!

"What did you see?"

"I'm not sure exactly, but a young woman. Two men were dragging her." The vision swam back into my mind. "They threw her down onto a large stone. And there was a child clinging to her. A little girl, maybe three or four years old, with long, blonde hair. I think she must have been her daughter. It was so vivid I could swear it actually happened there, in front of me."

Mrs. Warrender's expression never wavered. "Did the people you saw look as if they belonged to another time?"

"Yes. I've seen illustrations of what historians believed people may have looked like in Neolithic times and these looked similar. I know this all sounds crazy, but—"

She put up her hand. "No, not crazy at all. I've seen the same vision. Did the young woman speak to you, or make any kind of contact?"

I shook my head. "I only saw the vision for a few seconds, but it scared the life out of me."

Mrs. Warrender smiled. "People have lived on this land for centuries, maybe even millennia. So many lives, too much to simply evaporate. Some things remain, locked in this land forever. One day you will understand, of that I am now certain."

Her words chilled me and I stood up. Isobel Warrender rose too.

"Thank you for your help, Mrs. Warrender. It's been a…revelation."

"I'm sure there is much more I could show you in this house."

Her smile helped reassure me, but not enough to make me want to stay. "That's really kind of you, but I must get back. If I may, I'll just use your bathroom before I go."

"Of course."

She indicated a door off the hallway and I opened it. I locked the door and caught sight of my face in the mirror. How tired I looked. Hard to imagine it had only been twenty-four hours since I arrived.

Still, I would have a lot to tell Scott when I saw him for my next tutorial in a couple of weeks. I fished in my bag for my phone and checked the battery. Just under half-charged, but still no signal.

I flushed the toilet and washed my hands. As I reached for the hand towel, something clammy slid along my arm. I froze. I saw my scratched arm, my hand grasping the towel. There was nothing else there, but behind me, something stirred. I swallowed, counted to three and spun around.

The bathroom had gone. I was outside, in a clearing, amid a forest of tall, unfamiliar trees. The fresh, clean air smelled of new leaves and grass, but how had I got here?

What was that noise? A sort of chanting, but unlike anything I had ever heard in churches or cathedrals. This was a monotone, coming closer and growing louder. I sensed danger, as tangible as a bad smell. I must hide somewhere.

A small circle of standing stones, like some miniature version of those I had seen in Avebury, stood behind me. In the center of them lay a large flat stone. But that hadn't been there before, unless…

Right now, I didn't have time to work it out. The chanting was only yards away.

Taking care not to become entangled in the bracken that littered the ground, I made for some nearby bushes and crept in, pulling fronds of a massive fern around me.

Four men approached the clearing. They held tall, crudely fashioned spears. Two of them dragged a young, naked woman with a tangled mass of dark-brown hair. Clutching her hand, a young girl with long, blonde hair and terror in her eyes cried and screamed as she stumbled. I knew at once who these two were. I had seen them in my earlier vision.

The child's screams became earsplitting as one of the men wrenched her away from her mother and flung her to one side. Another man grabbed her and held her fast.

Three of the men threw the young woman down on the central, flat stone. She struggled as they forced her legs open and bound her ankles and wrists, so that she was spread-eagled and tied to stakes. She screamed out in an unfamiliar, guttural language and the men hesitated and exchanged glances. What had she said to them?

Three of them inched away, but the fourth pushed his comrades

aside, lifted his tunic and forced his way into the struggling woman. In seconds, the man was finished and he stepped back. He grabbed his spear and rammed it between the woman's legs. Her scream shattered the air.

I recoiled in disbelief. I clapped a hand over my mouth to stifle my cries. Surely this was no ritual sacrifice? This woman was being punished. But what crime could be so terrible as to warrant this? Her agonized cries knifed through my soul. She strained at her bonds and the terrified child struggled to free herself from the man who was restraining her.

The woman stopped screaming. She spoke softly to the little girl, who fell silent.

Whatever she had said frightened the man who was holding the child, and he quaked and let go. The girl ran to her mother and stood behind the stone. Both mother and daughter cast defiant looks at their captors.

Flames shot from the woman's eyes, engulfed and incinerated the four men in a second. They didn't even have time to cry out. The woman's eyes dimmed. She seemed beyond pain now. Her last glance found me. Then her eyes closed and I knew she was dead. But she had connected with me. I didn't know how.

As the vision began to dim, a raven flew out from the woods and landed on the now-bare altar stone.

Why hadn't I done something to stop those men? But I knew I couldn't. I had been shown this for a reason. All I had to do was figure out why. Somehow, I had slipped back to some far distant, prehistoric age. What I had seen had already happened and nothing I could have done would have prevented it.

I closed my eyes and the atmosphere changed. No longer did I smell grass and leaves. I opened my eyes and faced the bathroom door. I took a deep breath and unlocked it. The hall was empty, so I grabbed my bag, crossed the passageway and opened the door to the drawing room.

There, at the window, someone was looking out. As I stood, unable to move, she turned and I saw the face of the Scottish bride properly for the first time, blackened and burned. Ghostly white bones penetrated the rotting, charred skin. One eye protruded as if popped out. It gleamed milky white, with no pupil or iris remaining. She wore what must have once been a fine white-lace wedding gown, but now it

was charred, torn and dirty. A ruined veil, raised from her face, cascaded onto her lacerated shoulders.

One side of her face remained virtually intact. Her good eye gazed out at me, watching my reaction. I felt myself slipping away, out of my body again. She raised a slender arm. A smell of burning flesh descended all around me, making me gag.

I felt her touch my hair, although she couldn't have. I screamed again and again. She floated closer. The grotesque half-skeletal face threatened to absorb me into itself. Instinctively, I raised my arms to protect my head and shut my eyes.

"My dear, whatever's the matter?"

The stench vanished and I dared to open my eyes. The frightening apparition had gone.

I still stood at the doorway of the drawing room and Isobel Warrender was touching my arm. I lowered my hands and tried to speak, but no words would come out.

Mrs. Warrender took control and steered me to the chair by the fireplace. "Come along, you sit down here and tell me what happened. I'll pour you a brandy. You look as if you could use it."

She handed me a generous measure of cognac and I took a large, comforting gulp. Mrs. Warrender—I still couldn't call her Isobel—sat opposite me and waited until I had composed myself sufficiently to speak.

As the seconds passed, my instincts of self-preservation took hold. I was a sane, rational person and sane, rational people didn't see prehistoric rituals, people burned alive in demonic fires or ghosts standing at windows. For some reason, I had experienced a series of hallucinations and I needed to get home and see a doctor—the sooner the better.

I drained my glass. "I feel better now, thank you. I'm sorry, but I really must go."

Mrs. Warrender stood and came up to me as I reached for my bag. "My dear, you can't possibly go now."

Something in her voice unnerved me. "Why not?"

She smiled. "Because *she* wants you."

Chapter Six

I stared at her. What new madness was this? “I don’t understand. I have to leave now. I have to get back home, back to my life.”

I hadn’t seen her ring for her, but Beryl opened the door and came into the room.

“Our guest will be staying a little longer, Beryl.”

“No, I *won’t*.”

I made for the door but the servant barred my way.

“I’m sorry, my dear, but *she* doesn’t want it that way.”

“What do you mean, ‘*she*’? Celia?”

Still the smile. “If you like, yes.”

“If I like? I *don’t* like.” I was panicking and that made me angry. I made another move to get to the door, but Beryl restrained me with an iron grip on my forearm.

I tried to shrug her off. “Let me *go*. You can’t keep me here. This is ridiculous!”

“Nevertheless we have to, I’m afraid,” Mrs. Warrender said. “When *she* chooses, we have to obey. It has always been that way for us. And it always will be. In time, you’ll learn to see that.”

“In time? I’m leaving *now*.”

“I’m afraid not.”

I heard a hiss and my horrified gaze took in something slithering toward me, across the carpet. Something I couldn’t make out. An indistinct, snakelike shape that meandered in waves of propulsion. Beryl and her mistress stepped back, as the thing took form. It swirled and shimmered and the serpentine shape unfurled its human arms and legs. I shrieked as I recognized it—her—the young woman from the stones.

Fear flooded every pore of my body. I stood, transfixed. Unable to do more than gasp for breath. I tried to move but my muscles were

frozen.

Her eyes bore into me—diamond hard. Freezing my blood. She penetrated my brain. Touched my soul. Found, in there, an echo of recognition.

Mrs. Warrender spoke in a soft, soothing voice that did nothing to reassure me, and everything to unnerve what little sensibilities remained. “Our line goes back to the dawn of time. We endure and we shall ever endure. You shall be next, my dear. *She* has claimed you and taken you for her own. Be calm and all will be well.”

Calm? How could I be calm? But, somehow I knew I must. I used all my willpower to push away at the mind-numbing fear inside me. Squeezed out the terror. Then I felt a slackening. The spirit entity must be sensing a change. She moved away and morphed back into her serpentine state. Still I concentrated on blocking out anything other than calming thoughts. I saw the ripples disappear back across the carpet until I could see her no more.

In some sort of trance, I allowed Beryl and Mrs. Warrender to lead me up the stairs into the red room, my instinctive fear overtaken by a sense of being at home.

I didn’t protest or struggle as Beryl undressed me and slipped the silky nightgown over my head. She pulled the covers back and I slid into bed, laid my head on the pillow and closed my eyes. Did I believe that, somehow, when I awoke I would be back home? I don’t remember feeling anything except extreme, overwhelming exhaustion.

And so I slept, all through the rest of that day and into the next because, when I awoke, dawn was piercing the tiny gaps in the curtains.

With a start, I heard someone moving around in the darkness. I switched on the lamp. Shadows in two far corners of the room moved. Figures were swaying, but I couldn’t make out their features. I should be screaming by now, but something in my mind soothed me, told me everything was as it should be and that these were the handmaidens of the demonic spirit of this place—living, breathing, shifting about in their half life between this world and the next.

As I slid out of bed, I never took my eyes off the almost-sensuous writhing and swirling of those shadows, so similar to the snakelike manifestation of the woman they served. A full-length silk wrap had been draped over a nearby chair and I slipped it on, tying it firmly around my waist. On bare feet, I crept toward the shadows.

A swirl of darkness reached out to me and an instant of fear stole my breath. It drew me farther in, with a heady scent of lilacs and hyacinth. Shapeless arms caressed my body, stroked my face and ran sultry fingers through my hair. It was both erotic and frightening. But I couldn't break away. I had to go farther.

Around me, the heart of the house pulsed and throbbed. Its lifeblood flowed from the earth, through veins of red and orange. Muted light illuminated the shapeless space around me. I could still smell the lilacs and hyacinth, but another smell lingered beneath. One less familiar and far less pleasant. A smell of ancient, rotted vegetation and something else I dared not imagine.

The shadows drifted away, but I was not alone. The woman stood in front of me—naked as when I had first seen her—but now powerful and in command. She filled my field of vision. I reached out my hands in front of me and saw my veins, clear through the skin. They pulsed with the same heartbeat as that around me. Her heartbeat. I stared in disbelief. Surely I would wake at any second, shake off my dream-filled sleep and go out to my car. Then I would drive home and put all this behind me.

Home… But where was home? It seemed like an unreal, faraway place that no longer mattered. *This* was where I was supposed to be. *Here*, in Linden Manor. It didn't matter what the building looked like, or what it was called. The house was built on *this* land. *Her* land. And her legacy had been passed down from daughter to daughter, cousin to niece, until the present time, when Isobel Warrender had become the natural successor. And, at some stage, I was to follow.

I understood. At least part of it. "Those men feared you, so they had to destroy you, but they failed, didn't they? And you took your revenge."

She said nothing. I probably wouldn't have understood her words if she had, but the blood connection was enough for me to know. The men had been right to fear her. Her powers were not God-given, but had come from the darkest reaches of hell.

She faded from my sight, but she still clung to my soul. She was trying to drag it back with her. That thought was enough. It jolted me back to reality.

I screamed, "*No*!" The pulse of the house skipped a beat. My arms glowed and then became flesh again. I closed my eyes and prayed. When I opened them, I was back in the red room and the Scottish bride was beckoning to me.

Today, her veil partially concealed her ravaged face but her

blackened arm, with its clawed hand, turned my stomach and I tasted bile. I wanted to run, but where would I go? I stood rooted to the spot while she slowly lowered her arm before she, too, faded from sight.

Someone had been in the room and drawn the curtains. Had they noticed me missing? Would they know where I'd been taken? Or maybe I had stayed here all along and just imagined it all. If only that were true.

I glanced at my watch and was amazed to find it was ten o'clock. Hours had passed in a matter of seconds. Or at least it seemed that way to me.

I dressed in yesterday's clothes and rummaged in my bag for my car keys as I hurried down the stairs. I found them just as I made it to the front door.

Mrs. Warrender's voice stopped me. "You are surely not thinking of leaving without saying goodbye?"

I turned to face her and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry if you think that's rude, but I can't run the risk of you doing something else to keep me here. I must go *now*." I reached behind me for the door handle and turned it, surprised to find it wasn't locked.

Mrs. Warrender sighed. "My dear, you're not a prisoner here, you know."

Oh really?

Beryl emerged from the door leading to the kitchen and stood next to her employer.

"Beryl, Mrs. Carpenter is leaving us."

On Beryl's face, a look of surprise appeared and disappeared in a flash.

"Yes, Beryl, we shall be sad to see her go. It has been so nice to have company for a change. It's quite cheered the house up. But if she's determined to leave, there's not much we can do to persuade her otherwise, is there?"

"No, there isn't really," I said. Was she really going to let me go this time?

Mrs. Warrender, with Beryl close behind her, followed me out into the driveway and I forced myself not to race to the car. I pointed the key fob at the Fiesta and was rewarded with the reassuring *clunk* of doors unlocking.

Gravel flew up as I spun the wheel and took off down the drive, my

heart pounding. Only when I signaled to join the main road did I realize I hadn't engaged my seat belt. I pulled over briefly to do so and, before I set off for home, turned on the radio. Steppenwolf's classic, "Born to Be Wild", blared out of the speakers.

Hysterical laughter took me over as I realized I had escaped. I put my foot on the gas and turned the radio up.

Chapter Seven

"That's some story, Lesley."

Scott removed his glasses and polished them on his tie before replacing them. His untidy, overcrowded office seemed more like a cubbyhole than a room. One window overlooked a section of the Quadrangle and I watched a small group of students wander across, eating sausage rolls and pasties out of paper bags. There were always students, even during the vacations, and this was a normal lunchtime, the sort I used to share. Now I wondered if I would ever take normalcy for granted again.

Once I had returned to home and relative sanity, I stopped feeling hysterical and reverted to my usual logical self. Now I sought a rational explanation and needed Scott's help.

"I couldn't tell the truth from fantasy there," I said. "I thought I was going out of my mind. Now, I believe she drugged me. Don't ask my why, but it's the only explanation that makes any sense to me. Living on their own so much, perhaps that's how she and Beryl get their kicks. I wonder how many other unsuspecting visitors there have been."

Scott tapped his pen on his teeth and seemed to be considering me—rather too closely for my liking; it was like being mentally undressed. He put the pen down on his desk. "Let's examine the alternatives here. What you have just described, especially the incidents with the Neolithic woman and the Scottish bride, *could* be the result of a bad trip. LSD, acid, call it what you will. Maybe one of the women put a drop or two on the sugar you had in your tea.

"The second possibility is that you're having some kind of psychological episode, but as I can see no other evidence of that, I'll move on to a third alternative. Have you considered the possibility that what you experienced was real?"

I nearly jumped out of my seat. “How could it be real? How could I have seen those things? It’s impossible and I can’t believe you’re even suggesting it.” But wasn’t that what I had begun to believe myself?

Scott shook his head. “I’m merely suggesting you retain an open mind, Lesley. It seemed real enough to you when it happened.”

“Then maybe I really am having a breakdown and I should go and see someone in Psychology.”

“Maybe. I’ve come up with three possible explanations and I’m sure there are more. We just have to use objective methods, investigate each of them and eliminate one by one until we arrive at the only feasible solution.”

“And what about my dissertation? I need to do more research and write it up. I need to concentrate on that, not some eccentric mad witch and her accomplice.”

Scott gave a light laugh. “Indeed you do. May I say though that I’ve found your experiences fascinating. I can’t imagine how you could *not* want to delve further into them and find out the truth. I couldn’t resist it if it happened to me.”

I softened and smiled at him. After all, he was only trying to help me. “You’re welcome to delve as much as you like. You have all the details. But I’d be wary of Isobel Warrender if I were you.” I shuddered.

He looked thoughtful. “I may just consult a parapsychologist friend of mine about this. Thank you, Lesley, you’ve piqued my interest with this one.”

“Glad to be of service,” I said and gave him a mock salute.

The half hour ended amicably and I trotted out of his office, barreling into a tall, thin man who was about to knock on Scott’s door. He backed away, a shocked expression on his face. I must have really startled him.

“Sorry,” I said and then skipped down the stairs and, feeling hungry, joined the queue at Subway.

Faced with a blank white page on a laptop isn’t a million miles away from being faced with a real blank page. I remember my mother dabbling in short-story writing when I was a child. She had a small Smith Corona portable typewriter and I’d hear the ratchets clicking as she wound the sheet of pristine A4 paper into it, lined it up, manually returned the carriage lever twice, and then sat and stared at it.

Minutes would tick by, while I played with my dolls on the floor,

dressing and undressing them, brushing their hair, styling it with little dolly hair clips and creating imaginary adventures for them.

I must have been a hopeless distraction for her, but she never complained. Some days, the muse would never come and she would unwind the paper, remove it from the typewriter and scrunch it up into a little ball before dropping it into the wastebasket in the living room. Other days, she would be inspired and her fingers would fly over the keys. She was trained as a touch typist and mistakes were rare but, every so often, she would stop clattering, suck in her teeth and reach for the Liquid Paper. Then she'd be off again.

I don't think I ever read one of my mother's stories. She was always shy of letting anyone see them. Then, over the years, her output gradually dried up until it stopped altogether. I asked her one day why that was. She shrugged her shoulders and said, "I'd rather read them than write them these days."

I hadn't thought about that for years, until it suddenly came back to me as I was washing dishes in the sink. I remembered her reaction to the news that I was in touch with the owner of Linden Manor. Had she ever written about the place? She clearly knew more than she was letting on, and now that *I* knew we were distantly related to Mrs. Warrender, I was sure Mum did too.

I had rung her within hours of returning from Winterton St. Clement, but had deliberately avoided any mention of where I had spent the previous three days. It wasn't as if she had been expecting a call from me anyway, so we had a trivial conversation about the latest exploits of her far-from-ideal neighbors, who insisted on mowing their lawn on Sundays and letting their children throw their football into her garden. Now I wondered if I should broach the subject and try and coax her to tell me what she really knew.

Through the window, the sun bathed the garden in golden warmth and I opened the kitchen door. Bees buzzed around the fragrant honeysuckle as I ventured out, down the path and onto the lawn, where I sat on the bench and leaned back.

A blackbird trilled its distinctive song and two Red Admiral butterflies fluttered over the roses. Above, the sky was a clear, rich blue, interspersed with a few vapor trails from aircraft transporting their passengers to far-flung parts of the globe.

It was one of those idyllic, peaceful July afternoons, when any labor should be performed in a slow, steady, almost-reverential manner. It demanded to be indulged and I did so, as I let my eyes close and my mind wander.

I remembered childhood summer holidays, playing with my best friend, Steph, in the fields near where we lived. She and I had ridden our ponies along the lanes and through the pretty Cotswold villages. We'd drooled over Duran Duran and tried to dress up like Madonna and Bananarama. Mum had been so cross when she found her clothes covered in her makeup. She'd scolded us, while trying her best to keep a straight face. We must have looked a sight. Dad took a photograph of us and I wondered what had happened to it.

I remembered our last summer, before Mum had uprooted us all and we had left in such haste I barely had time to say goodbye to Steph and my other schoolfriends. I was eleven years old. Mum and Dad had argued over the move—one of the few times I ever heard raised voices in our house. But Mum had been adamant. Something had triggered it. I struggled to remember.

And then it came to me. A September day. Mum running in from the garden, screaming. Terrified, I had looked out of the kitchen window, in time to see a large black bird taking off from the lawn. A raven.

I opened my eyes. Oh yes, she knew a lot more than she had told me. Should I come clean and tell her where I'd been? If so, how *much* should I tell her? If I even started on the strange phenomena I had experienced, she would worry herself into an untimely grave. No. I had to be sensible about this. If I was to do as Scott implied and dig deeper into what was really going on at Linden Manor, I would have to be circumspect.

That much decided, there was now the small matter of whether I delved over the phone or face-to-face. Over the phone would be easier. I didn't trust myself to be able to conceal the truth from her if she could see my eyes.

The sun warmed my arms and bathed my face while the bird kept up his beautiful song and lulled me to sleep.

I dreamed of a sunny day, in a cool forest of tall green trees. Yet, lurking somewhere was danger. I didn't know what kind, but something threatened my life. I started to run, faster and harder, snapping twigs, scratching my bare legs and feet. My breath came faster and faster and the forest grew darker. Something was following me. I could sense it. Something dark. I mustn't turn around. I daren't look back over my shoulder. Got to keep running. Got to keep running...

"Run and hide…run and hide…"

I awoke with a cry on my lips and a sudden chill. The sun had disappeared behind a gray cloud. Where had that come from? I yawned and looked at my watch, surprised to see I had been asleep for half an hour or so.

I stood and returned to the kitchen. Then I picked up the phone and called my mother.

She seemed surprised to hear from me. "I wasn't expecting you to call today, but it's lovely to hear from you. Is everything all right?"

"Oh yes." I was determined to keep everything cheerful and light. "I just remembered I hadn't told you that I made a quick trip down to Winterton St. Clement the other day."

I heard a sharp intake of breath. "You didn't go to Linden Manor. Please tell me you didn't go there. I hoped you'd listened to me. When you didn't mention it again, I hoped you'd changed your mind." I heard a catch in her voice, all her earlier good humor dissolved.

My resolve wavered and I began to wish I hadn't said anything. "Only briefly," I said, certain now that it had been a good idea not to travel up to York for this discussion.

"I don't think I want to know the answer to my next question, but I have to ask. What happened while you were there?"

"Before I tell you that, Mum, please tell me why you were so upset about the prospect of me going there. What had you been told?"

There was a pause, as if Mum was trying to get up the courage to speak about something that scared her more than anything else in the world. Was I being cruel? I certainly felt so, but I *had* to know what she knew, and I felt that, given what I'd been through, I had the right.

I had to strain to hear her. "Linden Manor isn't like other houses."

"What do you mean?"

"It's said that people have lived on that site since the beginning of mankind itself and the earth is saturated with their blood. All sorts of rituals have taken place down the centuries and any building that is erected there seems to absorb all the dark history of the place."

"The present house is certainly very…atmospheric," I said.

"Oh, it's much more than that, and I suspect you know it by now." Her tone had become barbed. My mother was anything but stupid. She knew I was keeping something from her, just as she had kept so much from me.

"Isobel Warrender probably told you we're distantly related?"

"Yes." No point in denying that.

"No one knows how many generations of our women have been tied to that place. It's been an unbroken, convoluted heritage since before any records were kept. You know she hasn't any direct descendants herself, don't you?"

"I gathered that was the case."

"So I expect you can imagine who's next in line?"

"You."

"Why do you think we moved so far away after your great-grandmother died? I'd have moved farther if I'd had it my way. And, after me, *you* are the next in line."

Of course I am. Didn't I already know that?

I think that was the moment I finally abandoned all hope that Mrs. Warrender had drugged me. From now on, I would have to accept that whatever was happening to me was either real, or I was going insane. I could dismiss a virtual stranger's words as lies, but not my own mother's. Not when she was so upset.

Now when Mum spoke, her voice was louder, more urgent. "You have to tell me, did anything…peculiar happen to you while you were there? Anything you can't explain?"

My heart lurched. Now what was I going to do? Lie and say I was only there an hour and everything was hunky-dory? Or answer truthfully and risk a hysterical woman four hundred miles away?

I wished to God I had never made that call. I swallowed hard. Mustn't panic. Just keep calm and find out first how much she knew or suspected about the manor. "What sort of 'peculiar' did you have in mind?"

A snort of annoyance rewarded my feeble attempt. "Don't be ridiculous, Lesley. You know perfectly well what I mean. Did anything happen that shouldn't have?"

"I did think the whole place was in a time warp. It would need a lot of renovation to bring it up to date. Mrs. Warrender was very welcoming. Her maid was a bit odd—"

"Oh come on now, you're babbling. Do you think I don't know when you're procrastinating? This isn't amusing, you know."

"Well what do you expect? I don't know what you want from me."

"Simple. I want the truth. Now stop shilly-shallying around and *tell* me."

I swallowed again, in vain, as my mouth was dry as parchment. I

wanted to tell her, but I couldn't. Besides, she could do nothing to prevent what would now happen. A strong urge to protect her took hold of me. The last thing I wanted was for my mother to dash down to Linden Manor and offer herself up as some kind of sacrifice in return for her daughter's soul. So, for the second time, I lied to her.

"Okay. A few weird things did happen, but nothing I can't rationally explain."

"Did she tell you our ancestors have lived there for thousands of years?"

"Yes."

My mother heaved a ragged sigh. "Did anything else happen?"

"No." I crossed my fingers behind my back.

"Are you sure?" She didn't believe me, I was sure of it.

"Yes." Pause.

"Very well. I can't force you to tell me, I suppose. I just hope that whatever happened doesn't have any repercussions."

"I'm sure it won't."

She rang off after that, but I knew she would worry. And for what? I hadn't really learned anything I didn't know, or suspect, already. But it *was* different, hearing that from my own mother's lips. Knowing she had kept that from me all these years. The crazy thing was, if only she had told me about the origins of "The Scottish Bride" I might never have gone to Linden Manor. Talk about roads to hell and good intentions!

And I was left certain that there was yet more to come. She had once protested she knew very little, but I was sure she knew much more. More even than she had told me today.

A few days later, Scott asked me to go and see him in his office.

He leaned back in his chair and ran his hands through his hair. "I wanted to talk to you about some information I've unearthed that I thought you might find interesting. It's about your family and that house, Linden Manor. Did you know there was an archaeological dig there, back in 1920?"

"No. Did they find anything?"

"Quite a lot apparently." He opened a dark-blue folder and extracted some papers. He flicked through them and then slid one across to me. It was a printout of an old sepia photograph showing the rear of the house and some earthwork, including a couple of trenches.

"They did a proper job, didn't they?" I said.

Scott was scanning a closely typed sheet. "It says here, they found pottery and glass from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and, when they dug down farther, they found Roman and Samian ware, which is pretty high status, as you know. Still farther down, they found flint arrowheads, bones and various other artifacts associated with the Bronze Age and the Neolithic, so it looks like there's been continuous habitation on this site since around 2900 BC. And there was good reason to believe that people had lived there even earlier than that. Unfortunately, the evidence was too sparse to confirm it. Of course, these days we have much more sophisticated dating methods, so it probably would be interesting to have another go at taking the site back to its earliest times."

A sudden shiver jerked me in my seat.

"Are you okay?"

I shook myself. I had no idea what had caused my reaction. I lied. "I'm fine, thanks."

Scott rummaged through his papers some more. "I think I have a photo of your Mrs. Warrender here." He handed a picture to me. "Of course, she was only a young girl then. Does she look familiar at all?"

A young, pretty girl stared out at me from the sepia photograph. Her long, fair hair was neatly plaited and she wore a light-colored dress.

Making allowances for the passage of time? "Yes, I think so."

"She was Isobel Fitzmichael then. Apparently she was fascinated by the dig, especially when they found the bodies."

My eyes shot open. "Bodies?"

"They found two. One was the well-preserved skeleton of a young woman, probably around seventeen years old. She seems to have been buried spread-eagled, with her arms and legs bound to stakes. After all this time, the wood had rotted away but they found four telltale postholes. Most peculiar. Probably some sort of ritual sacrifice. They reckoned she could have dated from the Neolithic."

A creeping sense of unease set my flesh crawling.

"The other skeleton was also a young woman, much later though. Eighteenth century, by the remnants of clothing they found, and this is the part you'll find most interesting. They refer to the rhyme, 'The Scottish Bride', and say that Lady Celia Fitzmichael's body was never found. She simply vanished from the lodge on the estate, but they concluded that she could well be the one beneath the stone. Her body

had been laid in a shallow grave and a large stone, which had probably once been part of a small circle of standing stones, was laid on top of her."

"I saw those stones when I went to investigate the lodge. I nearly fell over one of them and when I pulled some brambles back, I found some more. What did they do with the bones?"

Scott shook his head. "It doesn't say, but it's usual to try and locate relatives to arrange a proper burial. In this instance, though, the most obvious people would be those living at the manor. I expect your Mrs. Warrender knows."

"I wouldn't be surprised. Is there anything else I should know?"

"No, I don't think so. Would you like the research notes?"

"Thanks, yes, that would be great. It's a little bit of history from the family I didn't know I had."

Scott smiled, closed the folder and handed it to me. "Keep going with the dissertation, Lesley. I'm looking forward to reading the finished product."

I left him and made my way back home on the bus. I had long since given up driving to the university. Parking was impossible unless you got there at dawn. I held the folder on my knee and, as we trundled along the city streets and out into the suburbs, I flicked it open and began to read.

By the time I reached home, I knew I was going to have to call Mrs. Warrender, and I wasn't looking forward to it. But I couldn't just leave things unfinished like this. Besides, a niggling sensation, like a persistent itch, nagged me to pick up the phone.

Considering the way I had left Linden Manor, I was amazed that she seemed pleased to hear from me.

"Ah, Lesley, my dear, how are you? Safe journey back I hope?"

"Yes, thank you. I'm…er…sorry for the way we parted. I was a bit upset." *That* was putting it mildly!

"Think nothing of it, dear, I quite understand. This house can be a little overwhelming at times."

My apology had cost me a chunk of pride. After all, who apologizes to someone who, for all intents and purposes, kidnapped them? But, today, I had an ulterior motive and now I took a deep breath. "I wondered if I could ask you a question."

"Certainly, my dear."

"My lecturer at the university told me there was an archaeological dig at Linden Manor in 1920, when you were just a young girl. I wondered if you remembered anything about it?"

The ensuing pause was far longer than it should have been.

"Mrs. Warrender?"

"Yes, I'm still here, my dear. I'm trying to remember. As you say, I was very young at the time, but I do remember some people digging trenches and so on."

"They found two bodies, didn't they?"

Another pause. "I believe they may have, yes."

"Do you know what happened to them? Were they buried in the local churchyard, or somewhere else?"

"I really can't say, I'm afraid. I don't believe anyone told me and that sort of thing didn't interest me at all."

That struck me as odd. After all, Isobel was mentioned in the report as "a lively girl with a keen interest in all our activities, especially in anything we could tell her about the bodies we found". No, Mrs. Warrender was lying to me. I was sure of it.

"Where are the family buried?"

It was an abrupt, almost-rude question that I should have dressed up, but Mrs. Warrender didn't seem perturbed. "The men are buried in various locations, according to their wishes, and the women in a mausoleum on the grounds here."

"Isn't that a bit odd? I mean a mausoleum is usually in a churchyard, in consecrated ground, and it's usually for the entire family, not just the women."

"I expect there was a reason for it once, but I'm afraid it has been lost in the mists of time. I believe the ground was blessed, and I can only assume that, as the women are the ones who inherit the manor, they are the ones who are buried within its perimeter." Her voice was becoming curt now. Not rude exactly, but I had definitely outstayed my welcome on this phone call.

"I hope that has helped you with your research, Lesley, but I'm afraid I must go now."

"Of course, I quite understand and, yes, you have been most helpful. Thank you."

As I put down the phone, a strange sensation began in the fingers that had held it to my ear. Then my ears, too, began to tingle. Like pins and needles. I rubbed my earlobe, but then I heard hissing, as if steam was being released from a pressure cooker. It grew louder and I

clapped my hands over my ears to drown out the sound.

The noise weighed me down and I sank to my knees, wincing with the pain of the pressure mounting in my head.

Something touched my leg and I cried out. I thought I saw a hand—white, bloodless. In a flash, it was gone, but where it had been, my leg felt ice-cold. Still the hideous hissing persisted. Something brushed my cheek and an appalling stench of rotting meat invaded my nostrils. I gagged and stared around me, but could see nothing. My room was neat, tidy, and I was alone. Except I knew I wasn't.

"Who are you? What do you want from me?"

The words were barely out of my mouth when everything stopped. No hissing, nothing touching me, and the smell had vanished.

I lowered my hands and got to my feet. Everything was back to normal.

Almost.

As I took everything in and found nothing amiss, my eyes were drawn to the phone. I had placed the handset on its base unit.

I stared in disbelief at the impossible scene.

Both the unit and the handset were entombed in ice.

Chapter Eight

Mum looked so small and frail in that hospital bed. Her white hair framed her face, which seemed to have aged ten years in the three months since I had last seen her. Surely she had never had so many wrinkles? The hands that clutched the pristine white sheet seemed clawlike and skeletal, the skin almost transparent and tinged with blue.

I placed my hand over hers. It felt cold to my touch, but when I stroked her forehead, she felt warm beneath my fingertips. Her eyelids fluttered and then opened, and the pain of the brain tumor was etched across her face. I squeezed her hand.

"Lesley. I'm so glad you came."

"How could I not come? I just wish you'd told me about this before. I could have looked after you, stayed with you."

A trace of a smile twitched her lips. "No, I couldn't do that. I know how much this degree means to you. Besides, there was nothing you could have done."

Tears prickled and threatened to spill over. I didn't want her to see me cry, knowing it would only distress her further.

"Lesley, I have something I must tell you. I didn't want to, but I have no choice now. I may only have a few days left."

The doctor had warned me, but, still, hearing it from her like that cut me deep inside. I struggled to contain my emotions.

She gripped my hand with surprising strength for one so ill and frail. "I can sense something around you. Some people call it an aura, but all I know is it is the legacy of that house."

"Linden Manor?"

"Yes. When you went there, you let something in and now it has found a home in you and won't leave."

"I don't understand—"

She gripped tighter and I read fear in her eyes. "You've seen, it haven't you? The raven?"

My mother was dying; there was no point in lying to her anymore. "Yes."

"Something else happened while you were there, didn't it? Something you've not told me about."

I nodded.

Her face crumpled and her hand slackened its bone-crunching grip. She shrank into the pillow and tears trickled down her cheeks.

"Then it's already too late. One day, Rya—the demonic spirit of that land—will take you, and there will be nothing you can do about it. Oh, my poor girl. I've let you down so badly. I should have told you so much sooner and then you might never have set foot there."

"But why? What's the reason for all of this?"

Mum sighed. Her voice had dropped to little more than an urgent whisper and I leaned closer to her as she spoke. "Your Great-Granny Davies told me that many centuries ago a young woman called Rya was brought to the stone circle to be sacrificed. She had been chosen because she possessed special powers. She had the power to curse her enemies and make them fall down dead. The villagers were terrified of her, but the men plotted against her. One day, they caught her, and dragged her to the sacrificial stone, with her little daughter clinging to her. There, they beat her and brutally raped her. She knew she was going to die and cursed them and the land all around. And because it was men who had done this to her, she swore that her vengeance would be carried through her female descendants, beginning with her daughter. The line has continued down through the centuries, to Lady Celia and on until the present day."

"But to what end?"

"That no man shall live on the land she has cursed. They can't live in Linden Manor either, because it is built on that land."

"But Isobel Warrender was married. The Scottish bride was married. John Fitzmichael lived in that house until he was thirty-one years old. Generations of them have married and lived there."

"No, they haven't. Isobel Warrender is the current guardian. It is the guardian's duty to try and provide her own successor, so she takes a husband or lover and doesn't tell him about the curse until after a child is born. Then Rya has no further use for him, so he must go. If he chooses to stay, he will die. Some have tried, of course. Some haven't believed in the curse, but the longer they stayed, the more things

would happen to them. Inexplicable falls, being attacked by something they couldn't see in the woods. The list is endless.

"John Fitzmichael was allowed to live there longer than any man, but I believe that was because he was destined to bring the next guardian there. Celia. Rya needed him, you see.

"Your great-grandmother told me Isobel Warrender couldn't have children and, eventually, her husband was found hanging in the old lodge. His face had been clawed, perhaps by a large bird."

"Oh my God! That's horrible. And she must have been devastated."

"Rya's spirit hardens the hearts of her handmaidens. I traced our family tree back, years ago when you were small. I sent endless letters, spent hours typing them up, but I never wanted you or your father to know what I was doing. All I wanted was to protect us.

"I discovered we had a Scottish connection, the McEwan clan. Then I found out that Celia McEwan was the Scottish bride and although they couldn't have known until it was too late, she was the next in line to inherit Raven Hall. That's what they called it in those days. I expect you can guess why. John Fitzmichael's mother died a month before Celia arrived."

"But…the fire…"

Mum coughed. Talking was becoming a struggle, but I had to know, and she needed to tell me. She took a sip of water from the cup I held for her.

"Celia tried to defy Rya. She was as stubborn as her father and believed she was as powerful as her opponent. She cast spells and summoned her own demons to fight for her soul, but Rya, who cares nothing for bricks and mortar, burned the house down. I believe she always intended that Celia should be rescued, just so she could suffer for the rest of her life, while Rya found a more willing handmaiden in John's sister, Hermione, the next in line."

I saw no point in telling Mum that Celia's body had turned up, under the stone, especially when I saw her shift a little and her face contort in pain. I felt a pang of guilt. Telling me all this had exhausted her.

"No more now," I said. "Shall I call a nurse? Get you some painkillers?"

"Thank you, dear, but I'll just sleep now." More tears appeared at the corners of her eyes and her lips trembled. "I'm so sorry, dear Lesley. I love you so much and I've failed you."

"No, you haven't. Honestly. You were just trying to protect me from

all this."

"But now Rya will have her way. She always does…" Her voice drifted off and she fell asleep.

I stayed with her the rest of that afternoon and, by evening, she had slipped into a coma. Two days later, I lost my Mum and I thought the tears would never stop.

She was cremated, according to her wishes, and her ashes scattered around her favorite oak tree in her garden. I wished I could give her what she most wanted—my freedom from the legacy of Linden Manor. I didn't relish my destiny. Rya had heaped no blessings on her female descendants. We seemed to exist merely to ensure the continuance of her eternal curse. Mum and I had used the word *handmaidens*. It seemed appropriate, for wasn't that all we were?

How was I to escape my apparent destiny? Mum had died, fearful of what would become of me. And now, so was I.

Three weeks later, I was back home and on my first night I went to bed late, around two in the morning. Eventually, exhaustion overtook me and I fell into a fitful sleep, from which I kept waking every half hour or so. Finally, at just after seven, I gave up and got out of bed.

Downstairs, the rooms were dark and the only sounds came from a kitchen faucet, which needed a new washer, and a ticking clock on the wall of the same room.

I threw back the curtains on a gray and dreary morning. In the kitchen, I made a coffee, drank it and went back upstairs.

I ran a hot shower and the bathroom filled with steam, as usual. Emerging ten minutes later, I dried myself and my attention was caught by the partially steamed-up mirror. Written in the condensation were words that chilled my soul:

Run and hide… You can't run and hide.

With a shriek, I dropped my towel and raced out of there, shivering with fear rather than from the sudden chill of the air. I slammed my bedroom door behind me and huddled onto the bed. I heard a *thud*, followed by the unmistakable sound of footsteps creaking the timbers as they edged closer to my room.

I shunted backwards, cowering, the duvet clutched in my hands. Every hair on the back of my neck and my arms stood on end. I hardly dared breathe.

The footsteps stopped. Whoever—whatever—it was had to be

standing right outside. I watched the door handle in disbelief. It began to turn downward.

Behind me was a table lamp. I reached back and wrenched it out of the wall. I waited. The handle still turned. Any second now.

Then it stopped. The handle sprang back to its usual ninety-degree angle. I waited, sure it would restart at any moment, but it didn't.

Five minutes ticked by. Then ten. I was still too scared to move. I strained to hear any sound, but there was none. Should I open the door? But surely whatever was out there was waiting for me to do just that. Still I waited. Five more minutes. I picked up my cell phone from the bedside table. Whom could I call?

Suddenly my cell rang and I dropped the lamp on the bed. I saw Scott's name. "Hello," I said through chattering teeth.

"Lesley? Are you okay? You sound flustered."

For some reason, I couldn't tell him the truth on the phone. "I've just got out of the shower and it's cold in here." I kept my eyes firmly on the unmoving door handle.

"Listen, can you pop in today? Richard Westerman from the School of Psychology's here and we've been discussing your experiences at Linden Manor. He'd very much like to meet you."

At that moment, I very much wanted to meet him too. Maybe he could give me some answers.

"I'd love to. When's a good time?" As I held a real conversation with a real person, I started to shrug off my fears.

"How about two this afternoon? Come to my office."

"I'll see you there." I rang off. Now I only had the little matter of getting out of my bedroom safely.

Surely, whoever it was couldn't still be standing there? They must have crept away without me hearing them. Or maybe they'd never been there in the first place. I hurriedly dragged on knickers, jeans, a bra and sweatshirt, and grabbed my lamp again. It wasn't terribly substantial—a standard bedside lamp with a pine base. But if I wielded sufficient force, I could probably do some damage if I needed to.

I counted to three, grabbed the handle, twisted it and threw the door open.

Relief washed over me when I saw the empty hallway, but that still left the rest of the house.

In the bathroom, the words had gone, but then so had the steam. The mirror was clean and streak-free, as if they had never been there.

The spare bedroom revealed nothing. I crept down the stairs. The

front door was locked and bolted, as usual. The living room was tidy and it was here that I swapped my feeble weapon for the more substantial fire poker. Finally, the kitchen revealed nothing out of the ordinary, and the back door was also locked and bolted from the inside. No windows were open, so either I was going mad, or something unnatural was trying to scare the hell out of me. I needed to get out of there and, within five minutes, I was half running to the bus stop.

I shook the hand of the tall, slim man in his forties.

"Good to meet you, Lesley. Dr. Hemingway has told me about your experiences at Linden Manor. Fascinating."

He looked familiar, but I couldn't place him at first. He had a kind face and I hoped he would be open-minded. It was enough that *I* felt I was going mad. I didn't need anyone to agree with me.

Somehow we all managed to fit into Scott's tiny office and his friend Professor Westerman—Rick—asked a slew of questions. Did I see anything I couldn't explain? That took us off into half an hour's worth of intense discussion and I opened up to him as I never had before. I told him everything, ending with my frightening experience that morning. The more I revealed, the wider Scott's eyes grew.

"You're sure no one could have got into your house?" Rick said.

"Unless they could squeeze through the keyhole or down the chimney, no. I can't explain it."

The professor and my tutor exchanged glances. Then Rick reached under the desk for a black box, which he opened. "I wonder if you'd mind if I conducted a small experiment."

I covered my nervousness with a laugh. "Not at all, as long as it doesn't hurt."

"I can assure you it won't." He removed a rectangular black box that resembled a games console.

"It's a thermal camera. It detects heat. Among its many uses, we use it to examine areas people have reported to be particularly and inexplicably cold, or subject to sudden dramatic temperature drops."

"It doesn't seem cold in here," I said. He didn't respond and neither did Scott. Rick pointed the camera at me, and he and Scott peered down at the screen.

"Do you see it? That shape, right behind her left shoulder."

A sudden chill flashed up my spine and I jumped.

"Incredible!" Rick nearly dropped the camera in his excitement. "It

touched her!"

"What is it?" Fear gripped me now. "What do you see?"

Rick looked up. "I'm trying to record this but something's wrong with the camera. It won't retain the image. I can't show it to you properly, I'm afraid, because it's standing right behind you."

He handed me the camera which I couldn't hold steady. Apart from the reds and oranges of my silhouette, all I could see was a blue blur.

I handed it back, too scared to speak and too terrified to think what this meant.

"It's gone now," Rick said. "But we definitely saw something and we saw it touch you, didn't we?"

Scott nodded. "I'd never have believed it until just then."

I looked from one to the other, bewildered. "But what does this mean? Am I being…I don't know…haunted?"

Rick started to pack his camera away. "I would never use a term like that but, in your case, I could make an exception. The truth is, I've never seen anything quite like that in all the years I have been investigating so-called paranormal phenomena. In almost every case, a rational explanation presents itself, but this time…" He shrugged his shoulders.

"Is it connected to Linden Manor?" I asked, fearful of the answer.

"Too early to tell, but I should like to go there, take this further and see what happens."

My worst nightmares hit me all at once. "I can't go back there. I really can't." I burst into tears.

Rick took my hand. "Lesley, you want this over, don't you? You want to go back to your normal life?"

Through a curtain of tears, I nodded.

"Now, I don't know yet what's going on or why you are having these experiences. I certainly can't explain what we've just seen in the thermal camera. I can tell you, though, that when you came in through the door an icy blast came with you. I had the same feeling last time we met. Do you remember? You were just coming out of this office as I was arriving."

"Oh yes, I nearly knocked you over."

"Well, the chill you brought with you did," he smiled. "I believe something strong and powerful has taken hold of you. It may well be something from your own subconscious, but until we go to the source we'll only have questions, with no answers. Can you go through your life like that?"

Damn him! He was right. However terrifying the prospect, I had to find out. And there was only one way to do that.

I had thought she might refuse, but Mrs. Warrender couldn't have been more accommodating.

"It will be a pleasure to see you again, Lesley, and I'm sure your friends will find the house most interesting."

"I'm sure they will," I said.

The plan was simple. Drive down in Rick's car. Once there, take a walk around the grounds, up to the lodge and the stones, and then to the mausoleum which I'd not yet seen. The professor had his thermal-imaging camera and various other gadgets for measuring and recording sounds, sights and anything else of interest. Once we'd exhausted the exterior, he planned to conduct experiments in each of the rooms.

Much against my better judgment, the day would be rounded off with a night vigil in the red room.

Mrs. Warrender greeted us and I thought she looked more frail than when I had last seen her. Her voice was still as firm, as was her handshake, but her eyes looked weary and she seemed to have lost weight, giving her face a slightly gaunt appearance.

Beryl was still the same, her face betraying no emotion of any kind.

"You'll find the mausoleum about a hundred yards farther on from the lodge," Mrs. Warrender said. "I expect it's very overgrown by now. I haven't been up there in years." She smiled and I could tell both Rick and Scott found her quite charming. But I didn't trust her and wished I hadn't allowed myself to be talked into this. After what Mum had told me, and my earlier experiences, nothing should have induced me to return here. But, here I was, trudging through the wood to the lodge with two senior academics. Then, as the trees cleared, I saw the ruined building and shivered.

"Is that it?" the professor asked.

My voice trembled and was little more than a whisper. "Yes."

"Don't worry, Lesley, we're with you this time. Nothing's going to harm you."

I smiled at him, but his words did little to reassure me.

"These must be the stones then." Rick pointed a small device the size of a TV remote control at each of the four exposed stones.

I inched closer and looked down at the nearest one, while the

Professor stood a few feet away, apparently taking some readings from another stone.

The stone was gray. Lichen grew in small patches all over its weathered surface. A sudden chill blasted through me. The stone shimmered, pulsed, grew transparent. I gazed down at Rya. She seemed to be asleep. Long, dark hair cascaded over her shoulders and the animal skins she wore.

To my horror, a wriggling wormlike creature slithered out from her clasped hands and rose out of the stone. Rya's eyes snapped open. For a second, she locked me in her gaze. I fell back with a cry. My stomach heaved. Sweat broke out all over my body.

"What the hell?" Scott caught me before I hit the ground. "What just happened?"

Rick called over from the stone I had been staring at. "The EMF readings are going haywire. I'm getting all sorts of impossible stuff here."

"What did you see, Lesley?" Scott asked.

I shook my head. "You'll think I'm crazy."

"No we won't. We *know* there's something going on here."

"I think there's a body buried under that stone. From the Neolithic."

Scott sucked in his breath. "They did find a body from that era here, but they removed it and took it to the British Museum."

"Unless there was another one." Rick circled around the stone. "This may not have been the stone they excavated. There could still be something under there."

He was staring at me intently, but I couldn't speak. Or tell him why my face must have blanched. Or why my mouth was slightly open. I hadn't the power to close it. Nor could I tell him about the group of women who had appeared just behind him. There must have been twenty or more, standing in silence, dressed in clothes from every era in recorded history. Rya's handmaidens, the successive guardians of this land.

As I stared, more joined them, materializing from nowhere, as if invisible doors had opened and let them through.

I could feel their collective consciousness probing my mind, pushing their way in. I should have been terrified. I should have been screaming my head off, but a strange calm had descended on me.

Scott tapped me on the shoulder. His voice came at me as if through a dense fog. "Lesley? What is it? Come on now, snap out of it."

Propelled by something I didn't understand, I started walking, not to the lodge but beyond it. Rick and Scott followed. They whispered to each other, or maybe they spoke normally, I couldn't tell—their voices seemed so far away.

The women numbered in the hundreds by now. Some moved ahead of me, and where they led, I followed. Others parted for us to pass through. Yet I knew, as we did so, that I was the only one who could see them. Their faces were devoid of expression, but the bond of kinship was strong.

The women stopped and gradually faded from view, their purpose apparently served in leading me to this special place. But our encounter had taught me many things, only some of which I understood then. The rest would come later. Much later.

The mausoleum was overgrown with centuries of ivy, so it seemed impossible to find a way in.

"We'll need a chain saw to get through that lot." Rick sounded disappointed.

I wasn't. The men had no business being here. This was for women of the blood only. So this was why Mrs. Warrender had been so ready to let us come here. She knew what would happen if I led men up here—and she wanted me to know. It was all part of the legacy for which I was being groomed.

"We need to go back now," I said.

Scott put his hands on my shoulders. "Lesley, are you all right? You don't look at all well. You're so pale."

I managed a smile. "I'm fine. Much better, in fact. Things are clearer now."

Rick switched off the EMF meter and tucked it in his pocket. "I think if Lesley wants to go back to the house, that is what we should do. She's running this show, after all."

Something inside me rebelled against him calling this a "show" and I wanted to tell him so, but I reminded myself that he had been kind enough to take an interest. Of course, he would be rewarded well if the paper he would undoubtedly write on this saw publication.

"Did you get anything?" Scott asked.

"Amazing! I've never seen anything like those readings. I need to conduct more investigations here. Bring a team down."

"*No*!"

"Lesley?"

"I'm sorry, Scott, but I think this was a mistake. Please can we go

back to the house now?" I had to go in there. Someone was calling me.

I knew the two men were concerned about me. I wasn't acting rationally and, as we made our labored way back to the manor, they followed some distance behind. I knew they were talking about me in low whispers so I couldn't hear.

All around, invisible eyes watched me—the women who haunted this land, who had always haunted this land. Each generation would add their own member. I understood that now. I was part of a legacy that stretched back five thousand years to a girl who fell afoul of her kinsmen and took her revenge on all men who dared to sully her land.

Somehow, I also knew that once Rya had connected with me a part of her was embedded in me. That was the cold spot Rick had seen in Scott's office—and the presence in my house—maybe even the words in the steam. All part of an inexorable process toward the inevitable.

Back at the manor, Beryl opened the door and stepped back to let us enter. She said nothing. Immediately, I started up the stairs, followed by my two companions. They were silent, but I could feel their eyes burning into my back.

I went immediately to the red room, where I knew she would be waiting.

Lady Celia stood by the window, staring out. As I entered, she slowly turned.

"It's *freezing* in here." Rick stood to the side of me and pointed his thermal imaging camera over to where the Scottish bride was standing.

"Definite cold spot by the window."

"Draft maybe?" Scott said. "Is there a cracked pane perhaps?"

Rick moved closer to Celia. Then he seemed to pass straight through her.

"Good grief. I feel like I just walked into a block of ice."

I stared at Celia, and she at me. She, who had told me to run and hide. I understood now. I wasn't scared of her anymore. I watched as the scars and ravages faded and she was whole once more. Her eyes held pity in them. Pity for me. She had tried to warn me.

"Too late…"

I sighed. She was right. It was already far too late. The time for running and hiding was over. My fate had been sealed the day Rya had bonded with me.

Celia raised her arm and I raised mine. Across the space between

us, we touched each other's souls. In a series of images, she showed me how she had cast a spell to try and banish Rya back to the hell that had spawned her. In the same way a fleeting dream can seem to last for minutes, I saw Celia scream and cower before the evil spirit she was trying to banish. Her spell had done nothing to exorcise Rya and everything to anger her. Fingers of fire spat from the demon's eyes and her distorted mouth, and flames shot up all around her victim.

The door burst open and John Fitzmichael's face contorted in fear as he saw Rya lash out once more, sending more flames shooting up to the ceiling and him crashing to the floor. Somehow, he reached his wife and dragged her out of there, but I knew the last thing he'd seen on this earth was the fire-spitting, venomous spirit.

As the image faded, loneliness, misery and regret poured into me. That had been the price of her failure that night. And she too was tied to this place, as she searched in vain for a way to end the curse. She had hoped to break the line of succession with me—if only I'd heeded her words.

I realized then that she had not been with the other women up at the stones. Lady Celia inhabited a different space from them. She had been ill-served by history, which had blackened her name and attributed terrible acts of vengeance to her. Did Mrs. Warrender know the truth? I was sure she did. Blaming the curse on the Scottish bride had become an all too convenient way of deflecting attention from the real evil in this place.

Now that I understood her, I doubted I would ever see her again. And I watched as she faded from sight. Would I be able to succeed where she had failed?

Rick was about to leave the room. "I'll go and get the cameras and start setting up for tonight."

"No," I said. The two men turned. "I'm so sorry you've had a wasted journey, but I just can't do this." Tears sprang into my eyes.

"You'll be fine, honestly," Scott said. "We're both here. Nothing's going to harm you."

"It's not me I'm worried about, it's you two. You're not supposed to be here."

But they insisted and the burden of the day's events bore down on me. God forgive me, I gave up, said nothing and sat on the edge of the bed. I watched Rick and Scott set up infrared and ultraviolet devices,

cameras and all manner of gadgets designed to get us through the night with the maximum amount of recorded evidence.

Mrs. Warrender kept her distance. Beryl brought sandwiches and coffee at around six and, after she'd gone, Rick closed the door behind her.

The light grew dim in the room as the sun set and the temperature plummeted.

"I'll draw the curtains," Scott said and I watched him pull the heavy drapes together while Rick switched on a bedside lamp he had placed on the dressing table next to some of his kit.

As we sat and waited, the conversation between the two men was all of university matters. I felt my eyes grow heavy and fought to keep them open.

By ten o'clock, nothing had happened, but I felt trepidation building inside me. I sensed a change in the atmosphere even before the needles on one of Rick's machines hit Critical. A buzzer broke the stillness and I jumped.

"Something's broken the infrared beam," Rick said.

We all looked over to the window, where he had set up his experiment. He shone his torch over there and I gasped. Caught in the beam, Rya's eyes glowed red. Her skin shimmered and she opened her mouth in a snarl, parting blood-red lips over sharp, pointed teeth. The stench of something long dead drenched the room. I gagged. Recoiled. Even though I knew I had nothing to fear.

A strangled cry issued from Rick's mouth. He dropped the torch. It thudded onto the carpet and rolled. Its crazy beam flashed across the floor.

I scrambled off the bed and switched on the main light.

"*Rick*!" Scott shook the bewildered man's shoulders.

The professor whimpered, his eyes wild. "Did you see her? Did you *smell* it?"

He staggered forward and Scott caught him before he fell.

I clapped my hand over my mouth. "Oh my God, look at his hand!"

Across the back of Rick's right hand, black scorch marks appeared. The skin was raw and bleeding. A strong smell of burning permeated the air. Now his left hand began to char.

"We're getting out of here. Right now!" Scott helped his friend, as I grabbed what equipment I could and shoved it into his bag. "Leave that. It's not worth it. We've got to get out of here. *Now*, Lesley."

Beryl was waiting at the foot of the stairs.

Scott pushed past her, half carrying the sobbing professor.

Beryl stopped me with a hand on my arm. “Rya always knows. And she always protects herself.”

“The Scottish bride tried to warn me,” I said. “She told me to run and hide, but now it’s too late.”

And I knew. It might not be today, next week or even next year, but one day I would have to return as the next guardian of the house. If I tried to resist, I would meet a similar fate to Celia’s.

For the first time, I saw Beryl’s face break into a smile.

“Now, at last, you understand.”

Mrs. Warrender joined her from her drawing room. She also smiled and touched my arm. “Goodbye, my dear. I don’t suppose we shall see each other again.”

“No, I don’t suppose we shall. Goodbye, Mrs. Warrender—Isobel.”

Scott’s panicked voice summoned me from outside. “Lesley, come *on*. We have to get Rick to a hospital!”

With a final nod to Beryl and Isobel, I turned and left.

Chapter Nine

I achieved my degree, with Honors, and was pleased with that. I think Scott was more relieved than anything. He seemed to hold himself responsible for what happened that night. “If only I had listened to you. You told us it wasn’t safe for us to stay there.”

“I should have tried harder to convince you both to leave,” I said, “but I didn’t. You know the old saying, ‘With hindsight, we would all be millionaires’, so it really isn’t anyone’s fault.” But however much I tried, he still wouldn’t have it. Soon afterward, he left the university and obtained a similar position up in Scotland.

Poor Rick never returned to the university. A period of long-term sick leave followed, and the last I heard he had emigrated to Australia and secured a position at a New South Wales university. I doubted he would ever go anywhere near parapsychology again.

I decided to go for my master’s and gradually things settled down. I never heard from Isobel and two years later, I embarked on a doctorate. I would live my life as I chose, for as long as I could.

Then one day, I returned home from the library to find an official-looking letter on my doormat. I ripped it open and saw it came from a firm of solicitors, informing me of Isobel’s recent demise. They needed to see me to discuss the terms of her will.

The meeting took place the following week and I sat in a leather armchair while a solicitor younger than myself told me I was now the owner of Linden Manor and sole beneficiary of Mrs. Warrender’s will.

“It appears that you are the nearest living female relative and, by tradition, the natural successor to the house. My congratulations, Mrs. Carpenter.”

I left his office and drove home for the last time. So it had happened. It was my turn.

Since I had left Linden Manor that day, the spiritual bond with the

other women of my family had grown strong and tight. Their words set up a constant hypnotic chant in my head. They told me of my destiny and how I must guard the land, and they reminded me of the evil ways of men—of what was done to Rya, the mother of us all. Sometimes I could almost see them out of the corner of my eye. Other times, I would hear footsteps, feel a touch on my arm, and know they were especially close that day.

The next morning, I packed everything I would need and bid a last farewell to my old life.

Once again, I drove up the linden avenue and parked outside the house. Someone would come for the car in a week or so, for I should never again need it.

A raven startled me as it cawed and took off from a nearby tree. It landed a few feet in front of me and regarded me with its bright eyes, before taking off again and flying high over the house.

The door opened and a smiling Beryl took my suitcase and stepped aside for me to enter. She will serve me well until her time is done; then her niece will assume her role, for that is her legacy. We are women of tradition here at Linden Manor.

"Welcome home, madam," Beryl said. She knew I belonged to this land and would do whatever I must to protect it, for I can do nothing less. This is my cursed destiny. I shall never leave here.

So, dear cousin Juliet, I appreciate your request to carry out the research into your Fitzmichael ancestors, but, now, do you understand why we must never meet?

About the Author

Catherine Cavendish lives with a longsuffering husband and mildly eccentric tortoiseshell cat in North Wales. Her home is in a building dating back to the mid 18th century which is haunted by a friendly ghost, who announces her presence by footsteps, switching lights on and strange phenomena involving the washing machine.

Cat has written a number of published novellas, short stories and novels. *Linden Manor* is her first for Samhain.

When not slaving over a hot computer, she enjoys wandering around Neolithic stone circles and visiting old haunted houses.

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Castle by the Sea

JG Faherty

Dedication

As always, I want to thank my wife, Andrea, and my parents for being my biggest supporters. They have been there through thick and thin.

Special thanks go out to the people who made this book possible: Don D'Auria, who I've looked forward to working with since I got started in this business. The staff at Samhain, including their incredible artists who really do make some magnificent covers, and my writer friends who've helped in one way or another with getting this book completed: Rena Mason, Theresa Fuller, Shaun Jeffrey, and Stephen Owen. Also Tom Monteleone, F. Paul Wilson, and David Morrell for the lessons they taught me, and Mort Castle for a boost of confidence when it was sorely needed.

To Harley, who still continues to be my furry faithful companion, snoring next to my desk since I started writing thirteen years ago.

Finally, many thanks to my friends in the business who help simply by being there when you need some advice or encouragement. And to all the fans of the Carnival of Fear and its many wicked tales – there will be more to come.

The carnival appeared without warning, as it has always done and always will. This time it was the residents of Cannonsville, Oklahoma, who woke up on October 30 to find a Halloween carnival set up just outside town. Signs proclaiming *Carnival of Fear—One Night Only!* covered telephone poles, windshields and fence posts everywhere, as if magic elves had spent the entire night doing PR work.

By noon, there wasn't a man, woman or child in Cannonsville who hadn't made plans to attend the festivities that evening.

After all, how often did a Halloween carnival come to town?

The setting sun was no more than a crescent of fiery orange atop the horizon when a tall, skeletally thin man in a multicolored suit entered the Tunnel of Love through a back door. A black stovepipe hat with a sunflower tucked into the band perched jauntily atop the bald dome of his head. Worm-pale lips stretched from one side of his moon-white face to the other in a hideous smile as he stroked a bony hand across the animal-shaped boats waiting for riders.

He stopped at one, a graceful white swan with two seats. "Perfect," he whispered, and the swan nodded in agreement, its eyes glowing red for just a moment.

The Proprietor's impossible smile grew even wider, the ends of it rising past the bottoms of his ears.

"Ah, what fun Jason and Erika shall have tonight. What fun, what fun indeed."

Flashes of white arced across the night sky, leaving red afterimages in Jason Phillips's vision. In the lightning's wake, thunder crashed with bone-jarring intensity, as if the world were floating inside a celestial kettledrum. Jason gripped Erika's hand and helped her struggle up the steep slope. Each step was an adventure; the freezing,

drenching rain had turned the narrow path into a deadly torrent of mud and water that threatened to wash them away at the first careless moment.

Jason tried to keep his mind on finding the right footholds and handholds in the brief bursts of light provided by the aerial pyrotechnics, but his thoughts kept returning to the reality—*or unreality*, he thought—of their situation. The suddenness of their displacement from the carnival, and the ferocity of the storm they'd found themselves in, had prevented them from discussing what had happened, but he knew they'd have to face the facts sooner or later.

The evening had started so innocently. A romantic night at the carnival—they'd intended to see the sights, go on a few rides, maybe grab a candy apple or a corn dog and then head back to Jason's apartment for a very different—but much more enjoyable!—kind of ride. Erika hadn't stopped smiling and Jason, loath to ruin what was turning out to be an amazing time, had gone on ride after ride with her, each one more exhilarating than the last, despite the hour getting later.

Then they'd decided to try the Tunnel of Love. Ordinarily, Jason would have objected—after all, it cost three bucks a ticket and all you did was float in some smelly water for five minutes. However, he recognized it as a chance to make a romantic gesture, something he probably didn't do enough of. So he'd paid the six dollars and they'd let the rough-looking carny with the ragged scar on his face help them into their swan-shaped boat.

Hidden speakers delivered the soft strains of "Muskrat Love" —the perfect corny love song for a corny ride—as the boat slipped away from the dock, taking its place in line behind the other swans. Jason pictured the other riders, some, like him, demonstrating they did have a romantic soft spot. Others trying to recapture their youth. Teenagers looking to perhaps get a little further than usual, cop a feel of a soft, young breast or experience the thrill of that first kiss.

Smiling to himself, he wished them all good luck and hoped that thirty years from now it would be he and Erika reliving their younger days, clasping wrinkled hands and saying how much they still loved each other.

He put his arm around Erika. She snuggled up against him, and in that moment everything was perfect. The music was no longer trite, the water didn't smell like a mud puddle, and the cheap murals on the walls became as picturesque as a summer garden.

Perfect.

And then the entire world went to hell.

The moment their boat slid into the pitch-black tunnel, the previously calm waters turned rough. Erika had cried out and grabbed on to him as the boat dipped and rose with stomach-churning intensity. Foul water splashed over them, soaking their clothes. Insane laughter burst from the loudspeakers, drowning out the soft melodies with painful intensity. Jason shouted for someone to stop the ride, but the only response was more laughter. The waves grew stronger and stronger until they thought the boat might overturn.

And then it did.

The world tumbled around Jason for an instant before his face hit the water and he went under. He tried to push off from the bottom but his hands and feet touched nothing. Another wave hit, spinning him over and around at the same time until he was so disoriented he couldn't think. Water filled his nose and ran down his throat into his lungs, forcing him into uncontrollable coughs that quickly led to choking when he was unable to find the surface.

There was a moment where he felt pure terror, knowing he was about to drown in a stupid carnival ride.

Then, in the next instant, he found himself kneeling in waist-deep water, Erika on her hands and knees beside him, a horrific storm battering them with rain and wind. Flashes of lightning lit the sky like a giant lamp turning on and off, and he caught sight of land only a few yards away.

"C'mon!" he'd shouted, grabbing Erika's hand. Tumbling and falling in the pounding surf, Jason had led Erika to a beach made mostly of black stones and giant hunks of rock.

That was when they saw the lights at the top of a long hill. Confused and disoriented, Jason had instinctively headed for them.

Erika screamed, pulling Jason's attention back to the here and now. She'd fallen again, her hand slipping from his. He wiped water from his face in a futile attempt to see better; the heavy rain hid everything behind a curtain of gray.

Jason stumbled back down the path until he found Erika clinging to a rock with both hands as a miniature river swirled over her. He said

a silent prayer of thanks that she was still with him. More than once during their climb he'd seen strange shadowy shapes moving through the rain, their forms rendered indistinct by the storm. Each time, the dim figures had faded back into the wall of rain and mist that blanketed the unfamiliar landscape, disappearing before he could get a good look at them. Even when they weren't visible, the feeling of being watched remained.

"Hang on!" Jason reached out, grabbed her wrists and pulled with as much strength as he could muster. He thought for a moment she'd slip away again, but then her grip tightened and she crawled to her knees next to him.

He put his mouth close to her ear. "It's not much farther. C'mon!"

Erika nodded, her blonde hair hanging in sodden tangles. Arms linked, they climbed to their feet and staggered the last hundred paces to the oversized wooden doors of the castle. They'd first spotted the edifice when they were halfway up the steep hill, the lights from its windows a beacon of hope guiding them onward as they'd fought their way through the downpour.

They reached the castle without further incident and stepped into the recessed entrance, stumbling a bit as the ancient stone blocks sheltered them from the violent hammering of the raindrops.

After catching his breath, Jason searched both sides of the door for anything resembling a doorbell or speaker. When he found nothing, he pounded on the door. The dull thump of his fist on the thick wood was instantly lost in the vehemence of the storm. He looked at Erika and shrugged.

"I'm opening it. We can't stay out here."

Erika nodded and he returned his attention to the door. A simple iron handle sat to one side. Jason grabbed it, and then found he had to use both hands to depress the lever. He put his shoulder to the wood and pushed the heavy door open just enough for them to slip through. Once Erika moved past him, he closed the door, cutting off the roar of rain and thunder. In the resulting quiet, Erika's voice sounded unnaturally loud.

"Oh my God."

Jason turned from the door, his heart kicking into overdrive. Erika stood statue still, her eyes wide and unblinking. Water ran from her hair and jacket in streams, creating a puddle around her feet.

He started to ask what was wrong, and then understood what had her frozen in shock.

A room larger than their whole apartment spread out before them in majestic splendor. An enormous fireplace, wide enough for a dozen people to stand shoulder to shoulder, occupied the center of one wall, a roaring blaze offering a welcoming warmth that reached them despite the size of the room. Broad windows covered another wall. Crisscrossed metal bars formed a honeycomb pattern on the beveled glass. Instead of paintings, colorful tapestries hung on the other walls, each woven cloth a magnificent work of art in its own right. The lifelike subject matter on the fabrics ranged from pastoral garden scenes to depictions of fox and boar hunts.

The furniture was just as grand as the room. Oversized leather couches and chairs were set up in groups, creating a central space more opulent than the lobby of the finest five-star European hotel. Oil lamps burned in sconces, their flickering shadows creating the illusion of movement among the room's inanimate objects. At the far end, matching staircases of dark, polished wood curved upwards to the left and right. Between them was an arched hallway that appeared to lead deeper into the castle.

"What is this place?" Erika whispered.

"Maybe it's some kind of inn, or a bed-and-breakfast," Jason said, wringing the water from his hair.

"But where? We were at a *carnival*, Jason. Is this your idea of a joke?"

Jason started to reply, but Erika cut him off, her voice rising into the high-pitched tones of hysteria. "How did we get here?"

"I don't know!" He stopped and took a deep breath. One of them had to stay in control, and it looked like it would have to be him. "Listen to me carefully. I didn't do this. I couldn't have done it if I wanted to. Something took us from the carnival. I don't know where the hell we are, or how to get back."

"You're in the ancestral home of Professor Johann Osvald," a voice said.

Erika gasped and clutched at Jason's arm.

For the first time, Jason realized they weren't alone. A man and woman rose from chairs near the windows. They appeared to be about ten years older than Jason's twenty-five. The man wore a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches, which combined with his gray slacks to give him a somewhat professorial air. The woman had on plain-looking jeans—what Jason's sister liked to call "mom jeans"

—and a navy pea coat over a white button-down blouse.

"I see you got caught in the storm as well." The woman's lips trembled slightly as they formed a tentative smile.

Approaching the couple, Jason noticed their hair and clothes were still damp. Splatters of mud stained their shoes and pants.

"Yeah." Unsure of what to say next, Jason settled for staying silent. The other couple did the same, and for several heartbeats the only sound was the crackling of the fire.

"My name's Charles Burns," the man finally said, holding out a pudgy hand. "This is my fiancée, Lilly Thorn."

"Um, I'm Jason Phillips, and this is Erika Snell." He shook the man's hand and then took a step back. "Where did you say we were?"

Burns shrugged. "The maid told us it was the 'ancestral home' of this Osvald fellow." Before Jason could ask his next question, the older man shook his head. "We don't know anything else. We've only been here a couple of hours. Got caught in the rain and ducked inside before we could get totally soaked. A maid came in, gave us some towels and said to make ourselves comfortable, that the professor would be down later."

"But where is *here*?" asked Erika. "We were in a carnival, and the next thing we knew, everything changed."

"A carnival?" Burns's eyebrows rose. "That's where we were too."

"It wasn't a Halloween carnival, was it?" Jason asked.

"Yes! All the people working there were dressed up as freaks and demons and such. We were having a grand old time until we went into the Tunnel of Love."

Jason's heart did a quick stutter step.

"The Tunnel of Love?"

Burns frowned at them. "Yeah. You too?"

Jason nodded. "It seemed perfectly normal at first. Then the water turned all rough and the boat capsized, and *poof!* We're knee-deep in the ocean in the middle of a storm."

Burns took a deep breath. "Same thing happened to us. Got soaked to the skin before we saw this place. Been waiting for this Osvald fellow to show himself ever since."

"Are you from Cannonsville too?" Jason didn't remember ever seeing them before, but then, the town wasn't as small as it used to be.

"Cannonsville?" Lilly shook her head. "Never heard of it. We're from Otisburg, just outside Buffalo."

"Buffalo, New York? We live in Oklahoma." Something turned over

in Jason's guts as a sudden thought hit him, accompanied by a feeling that things were about to go from bad to worse if his suspicions were correct. "What year was it when you went to the carnival?"

Burns gave him a curious look. "What year? Nineteen eighty-five, of course. What else would it be?"

"Oh shit."

Erika grabbed at his arm. "Jason? They've got to be wrong! They can't—"

"Can't what?" interrupted Lilly.

"Where we came from, it was 2014," Jason said.

"That's not possible." Burns shook his head, his face going pale. "We—"

"I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting," a new voice boomed in the hushed atmosphere of the sitting room.

Jason and the others turned in time to see a tall, dark-haired man with a dour expression descending the stairs, accompanied by a very thin young woman dressed in a conservative gray skirt and jacket. Both of them had the pasty-white complexions of people who rarely spent time in the sun.

"Um, hello," Jason said. "I hope you don't mind that we came in. We were lost, and—"

"No, of course not." The man strode toward them, the woman trailing behind. "Maria informed me we had visitors. But she only mentioned two…" The man, who Jason assumed was Professor Osvald, glanced at his companion.

"I'm sorry, Professor," she said in a timid voice that was a perfect match for the way she held herself, with her eyes cast down and her shoulders hunched up as if she expected to be slapped at any moment. "There were only two before."

"We, uh, just arrived," Jason said, wondering if the professor beat the poor woman or if she was just naturally nervous.

"Well, the more the merrier, no?" Osvald's face showed none of the joviality of his words. He didn't seem angry or upset; rather, he had the appearance of a man who'd simply prefer to be anywhere else. It reminded Jason of the way his own father's face would sag when his mother would say they were going to a musical with her sister and brother-in-law.

It was easy to picture Osvald teaching at a university. He looked the part of a professor—tall and thin, graying at the temples, dressed in plain black pants and white button-down shirt. Close-set green eyes

framed a too-long nose, creating a vaguely unappealing, ratlike profile. His sallow skin spoke of too many hours spent reading rather than enjoying the world.

Maria was an altogether-forgettable presence, with dull-brown hair and plain features that made her almost invisible next to her overbearing companion.

The man nodded at both couples. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Johann Osvald, Professor of Chemistry at Grayswitch College. Welcome to my home. You are free to stay for as long as you like.”

“Thank you. I’m Jason, and this is Erika. We—”

“Yes, yes.” Osvald flipped his hand at them, acknowledging and dismissing their introductions in one imperious swoop. “Well, I suppose I should make up for being remiss in my duties as a host earlier. I was involved in my work and couldn’t be disturbed. Maria, show these people to the guest rooms and find them suitable clothing. And set extra places for dinner.”

He nodded to them again, turned around sharply and strode out of the room.

“Please follow me,” Maria said in her small voice, looking anything but happy at the professor’s commands.

“But we need to speak with the professor right away,” Jason said. “We have to find our way home.”

“And where is home?” Maria asked.

“Oklahoma.”

“New York,” said Burns.

“You have come a long way, then. We do not see many people on holiday this time of year, not here. The storms, you know. Maine is much nicer in the summer.”

“Maine?” Erika looked like she might faint.

“Of course. Where did you think you were? Now, please, come with me. You must get out of those clothes before you take ill. You can speak with the professor at dinner. I am sure he will have all the answers you need.” Maria headed for the stairs, leaving no chance to ask further questions. Burns called out to her, but she simply shook her head and continued walking.

“C’mon,” Jason said, taking Erika’s hand again. “We might as well dry off and have something to eat. Then we can get a ride to the nearest town and catch a plane home.”

“But how can we even be here in the first place? We were in Oklahoma, and Maine is—”

"I don't know, love," Jason interrupted, before fear and confusion got the better of her again. "And right now I'm too cold and wet to try and figure it out. Maybe Professor Osvald can explain." He gave her what he hoped was a confident smile and brushed a wet lock of hair from her forehead. "At least we're safe and we know where we are. We'll worry about the rest later."

Erika returned his smile with a half-hearted one of her own. "Okay. But no one back home is gonna believe this."

"Hell, *I* don't believe it."

As they followed Maria, Charles and Lilly up the stairs, he couldn't stop the nagging voice in his head from speaking the one thing he didn't want to think about.

That's if you ever get home.

Jason's hopes of a hot shower were dashed the moment Maria opened the door to the room they'd been assigned. A bowl of water sat atop a medium-sized dresser, with coarse towels and washcloths folded next to it. On the floor was a metal container with a heavy lid and a long wooden handle. Although he'd never seen anything like it in real life, he recognized it right away from movies and illustrations in history books.

A chamber pot? God, I hope that's just for decoration.

He wondered what kind of place didn't have running water, or at least not in the bedrooms. Was there a communal shower they were supposed to use?

"Dinner is at seven. I will come back for you then. There are dry clothes in the drawers. You should rest now," Maria said, shutting the door on her way out.

Erika hurried past the grandly appointed bed and opened the tall armoire. Inside the top drawer, she found an assortment of pants and rough-knit sweaters. Subsequent drawers held thick woolen socks and old-style nightclothes.

"It's like *Little House on the Prairie*," Erika said, holding up a faded nightgown.

"As long as it's warm," Jason replied. He already had his shirt off and was unzipping his pants. A wooden rack stood next to the small fireplace opposite the bed, and he draped their wet clothes over it after he toweled off and dug through the drawers until he found cotton long johns his size. Although they'd been patched and sewn a dozen times

over, they were dry and warm, and that was all he cared about. He pulled on the underwear, which was a one-piece unit that buttoned up the front from crotch to neck, and then got to work starting the fire, using the kindling already in the hearth and some long-stemmed matches he found on the mantel.

Erika joined him a moment later. She'd already put on the nightgown, which was easily three sizes too large for her, and a pair of heavy socks that came to her knees.

"You look like a dork," Jason said. Erika did an exaggerated modeling twirl, the lace cuffs and hem flapping in her wake.

"Maybe I do, but it's warm and comfy. Want one?"

"No thanks. I'll stick to something a bit more manly." He tugged at the collar of his long johns and did his best he-man pose, flexing his biceps like a pro wrestler.

Laughing, Erika pointed at the mirror in the bureau door. "We've turned into a couple of senior citizens."

Thinking about age brought Jason's mind back to their improbable leap through time and space. Erika's smile faded away as well, and he guessed she was thinking the same thing.

How had they gone from Oklahoma to Maine in the blink of an eye? Possibilities swirled in Jason's head, spinning and twisting like the wind-driven rains of the ferocious gale outside. A wormhole? A military experiment gone wrong? Some kind of anomaly that affected time and space? Anything was possible, but none of the options seemed probable.

On second thought, none of them seem possible, either.

Still, here they were. And not just them. Burns and his fiancée as well. One couple from 1985 and one from 2014.

Are we in their time or are they in ours? Or did we all travel to a third time? He hadn't thought to ask Maria or the professor.

And what did the carnival have to do with it?

That there was a link, he had no doubt. Two couples, both in the Tunnel of Love at a Halloween carnival, both transported hundreds of miles to the same location.

"Jason, how could any of this happen?"

He glanced at Erika. She'd moved over to the windows and stood staring out at the storm, her arms wrapped around her chest like she was still cold. He hurried over to her, pulled her close.

"I don't know," he said, wishing he had a better answer. "But it must have something to do with that carnival. We'll have to talk to

Charles and Lilly. C'mon, why don't we lie down for a bit?" Seeing the bed made him realize how exhausted he was. It had been close to midnight when they'd entered the Tunnel of Love, but according to the clocks in Osvald's house, it was only four; he assumed that meant four in the afternoon because neither Osvald nor Maria looked like they'd been woken up by their unexpected guests.

Whatever had moved them from one side of the country to the other had also displaced them in time by several hours.

I hope that's all it's done. Because if we're not even in our own time…

He tried not to consider what that would mean.

"God, I feel like this is all a bad dream," Erika said.

"Maybe it is," he said, stroking her hair. "Maybe we'll wake up and none of this will have ever happened."

Even as he said the words, though, Jason knew it wasn't a dream. The sensations were too sharp, the details too fine. Dreams always had some aspects that were fuzzy or surreal or out of order; what they were experiencing now was, despite all the unbelievable aspects, too real to be a dream.

They lay down, and moments later Erika fell asleep against his shoulder. Exhausted as he was, however, Jason found he couldn't doze off, thanks to his added worry that they might not even be in their own time anymore. He gently slid his arm from beneath Erika and got out of bed. Standing with his back to the fire to get warm, he stared out at the storm-battered ocean in the distance, and the pine trees closer up, their tops bending back and forth in the gale-force winds. Despite the early afternoon hour, it was nearly dark outside, the downpour obscuring the sun as effectively as nightfall.

After a few minutes, he turned away from the depressing view and went to the dresser, where he'd laid out his wallet and both their cell phones. He hit the Power buttons on both of them, but got only blank screens for his efforts.

"Damn." It really had been too much to hope for. A long shot, one he'd taken only because both phones were fairly new and marketed as water resistant. Dunked in the waters of the Tunnel of Love, submerged in the ocean, drenched by rains—he doubted any of those were in the manufacturer's definition of *resistant*.

Although he knew there was no realistic chance of salvaging the phones, he removed the batteries and laid them electronics-side down on a towel, then turned the phones over as well. They were dripping wet, but he hoped that maybe, just maybe, one of them would dry out

and work by morning, even if it was only long enough to call someone—anyone—back home and let them know where they were.

And then, as he stared at the phones, the solution to their problem came to him, one so obvious he felt like smacking his own forehead for not thinking of it earlier.

There had to be a phone in the castle.

Sure, there was nothing in the bedroom, but there had to be at least one somewhere else. The kitchen or the professor's study. And the professor or Maria—one of them had to have a cell phone.

Maria's probably in the kitchen. I can find her and make a call right now.

Jason took two steps toward the door before he stopped. He couldn't leave Erika alone in a strange place—what if she woke up and he wasn't there? Besides, he had no idea where to look for either the professor or Maria. He didn't even know where the kitchen was. In a house the size of Osvald's, he could wander around for hours.

What's a couple of more hours? We can wait until dinner.

With one enormous load lifted from his shoulders, he returned to the bed and snuggled in next to Erika.

A few seconds later, he was asleep.

It never occurred to him to wonder why neither the professor nor Maria had offered them a phone.

Maria came for them exactly at seven, knocking on the door until a groggy Jason called out for her to come in. She entered with her eyes angled down and away, as if she'd caught them doing something more than sleeping or she wasn't comfortable with unmarried couples sharing a bed.

"Dinner is ready," she said, her voice only a touch louder than a whisper.

At her words, Jason's stomach started growling like a caged tiger. How long had it been since they'd eaten? Six hours? Eight? Did candy apples and cider donuts at the carnival even count? He forced thoughts of food away, however, to focus on more important things.

"We need to let people know where we are. I have to call our families, tell them we're safe. Then they can come get us."

"The professor will know more about that."

"What? I don't understand."

She gave them a sad look. "You will. Now, please, get dressed. The

others are waiting."

Erika, her eyes still murky with sleep, looked at him and shrugged while Maria stepped outside. "Maybe the lines are down from the storm."

"I hadn't thought about that," Jason said, pulling on pants and a sweater over the long johns. Even with the fire going, the room was still chilly enough to raise goose bumps on his arms. Since their shoes were still wet, they settled for two pairs of woolen socks each and then went out into the hall, where Maria stood waiting.

Taking Erika's hand, he told Maria to "lead the way".

The diminutive maid escorted them back downstairs, each step creaking under their weight. At the bottom, she turned in the opposite direction from the sitting area. A short walk down a narrow hallway brought them to a dining room large enough to host a small wedding. Osvald was just taking his place at the head of a long table; Burns and his fiancée were already seated. Even after Jason and Erika chose chairs across from the other couple and said hello, eight empty seats still remained on either side of the table, giving the room a desolate quality.

The intoxicating odors of fresh-cooked meat and thick gravies filled the air, and Jason felt his salivary glands flood his mouth in response.

It wouldn't hurt to get some food in us before we pass out.

Osvald waved to Maria to begin serving, then turned to his guests with a weak smile. "Good evening. I trust you found your rooms to your liking?"

"They were fine," Jason said, accepting a plate piled high with meat and vegetables. "Thank you. But we need to talk to you about going home. How soon can we go into town?"

The professor frowned. "Town? I am afraid it will be a few days before you can get off the island. The ferries cannot run in the storm. Besides, tomorrow is the Sabbath, so the boats would not leave port anyhow."

Osvald's words froze Jason in his seat, his fork halfway to his mouth. Before he could say anything, Erika beat him to his question.

"Did you say island? We're on an island?"

"Of course. What an odd question. White Shad Isle. How could you possibly get here without knowing that?"

"We don't know," Jason said. "We were at a carnival—"

"Carnival?" The professor's frown deepened. "I'm not familiar with the term."

Burns spoke up. “A carnival. You know, rides, games, greasy food, screaming children. Surely you’ve been to a carnival.”

“Ah! A fair!” Osvald smiled and nodded before his face resumed its naturally morose countenance. “But there is no fair on the island. Never has been. And it only comes to the mainland in the summer.”

Ignoring the professor’s odd confusion, Jason tried to bring the conversation back on point. “That’s the problem. The carnival we were at…we were somewhere else. And then we were here. We don’t know how it happened.” Jason eyed their host, knowing how strange the tale sounded. The last thing they needed was for him to brand them as lunatics and kick them out into the storm.

But Osvald accepted the story with no indication of surprise. “Hmm. Most strange. Most strange indeed.” He speared a potato with his fork and chewed, his brows furrowed, as if he was considering the ramifications of their situation. Or the texture of the potato. It was impossible to tell.

“Anyway,” Jason continued when the professor didn’t say anything further, “I noticed there were no phones in the room. Is there one down here or in your office we can use to call home?”

“Us too,” added Burns. “Ours got ruined.”

“Phones?”

“Yes. Don’t you have a telephone?”

The professor’s face lit up for the first time. “Ah, a telephone! Marvelous contraption. Used one myself recently. Spoke to someone in Boston as clearly as if they were in the next room. Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m afraid you will have to wait until you get to the mainland.”

“You mean you don’t have phone service?” Burns asked, an incredulous look on his face.

Osvald shook his head. “Of course not. Much too expensive to run all that cable out here to the island. I believe the closest one is in Portland.”

Burns choked on a sip of water. *“One?”*

Before the professor could answer, Jason asked a question of his own, one that made him shiver just to think it, but he couldn’t put it off any longer.

“Professor, what year is this?”

“Eighteen ninety-six.” Osvald scowled at him, the compacting of his features creating an even more rodent-like appearance than normal. Even his tone of voice grew annoyed. “What year did you expect it to be?”

Erika dropped her fork. The sound of heavy silver striking china made everyone jump. “No! That can’t be true!”

Jason felt numb, even though deep down he’d already understood they were no longer in their own time. Understanding and accepting were two different things, however. He wanted to scream, to cry, to pound his fists on the table, but he couldn’t move. His energy was gone, sapped by Osvald’s words. When he finally found the strength to speak, his voice was as frail as Maria’s.

“Professor, it appears that we’re not only from a different place, but a different time as well.”

“Oh, hmmm, that is a problem.” Osvald sipped his wine, his only reaction to the astounding news another furrowing of his eyebrows and a flick of his hand. Jason was beginning to realize that frowning was the professor’s natural expression. “But no matter. As soon as the storm lets up, we’ll get you on the boat to the mainland, and from there to the college. Something brought you here, so logic tells us there has to be a way to send you back. We’ll search the library there until we find it. In the meantime, keep a stiff upper lip and all that, right? Things could be worse.” He raised his glass to them but kept his gaze cast downward.

Someone sobbed. Jason looked across the table, saw that Burns had his arms around Lilly, who wore a shocked expression. He whispered something in her ear but she just shook her head. Jason imagined he looked much the same. He glanced at Erika, saw her eyes had gone wide and the color had drained from her face as she tried to process the latest impossibility. Reaching under the table, he felt for her hand. She flashed him a grateful smile as she clasped it tightly in hers.

There was an awkward silence, and then Burns spoke up, his voice surprisingly jovial, as if nothing at all were the matter.

“Well, if we have to be stuck in the wrong time, better here than outside in that damn storm, eh? Maybe I should have been a professor.” Waiving a hand to indicate the room, he said, “Look at this place. It’s like some kind of grand European hotel. Think of the parties you could have.”

Osvald’s already somber expression crumbled, as if Burns’s words had stripped away a pliable veneer and exposed the raw emotions hiding beneath it.

“I do not entertain much, sir.” Before anyone could respond, he stood up, threw his napkin onto his plate and stormed from the room.

“What was that all about?” Burns asked, looking around the table.

"You are not to blame for the professor's dark mood, sir." Maria approached the table and began stacking Osvald's dishes. "He's not been the same since…since the accident." She crossed herself and glanced around the room, as if afraid Osvald might return.

"Osvald was in an accident? He looks fine to me."

"Oh no. Not him. It was much worse than that. His wife and children, they were lost to the sea. The three of them were returning to the island, a year ago to this very week, it was. They'd been shopping for the professor's birthday. A bad storm blew in, worse than people had expected. Much like this one. No one knows how they convinced the ferryman to leave port in such weather. He must have been desperate for coin. They almost made it too. The boat turned over just before they reached the dock.

The professor saw it happen from his window. He ran down to the pier and leaped into the waves, diving down over and over, until he could not swim anymore and the gardener had to pull him out before he, too, lost his life. When the storm passed the next day, the townspeople came to help but it was too late. They found pieces of the boat but no bodies."

In the empty space following Maria's story, the only noises in the room were the muffled sound of Lilly sniffing back tears against Burns's shoulder and the clinking of plates and silverware in Maria's hands.

"That's awful," Erika finally said.

Maria sighed. "Yes. He's been a different man ever since that day. Broken. He fired all the staff but me. Now he spends most nights locked upstairs in his study, mourning those he loved." She took a deep breath. "Well, if you're done with your meals, it's best to be off to your rooms. It's not good to be wandering the castle at night."

"Is it dangerous?" Erika asked, pushing her plate away. She hadn't finished her meal, but no longer seemed inclined to eat. Jason felt the same; the confirmation of his fears, combined with Maria's story, had killed his appetite.

The young servant shook her head but Jason had the distinct impression she was lying. "No, but there are…things… that could be frightening." Her already soft voice grew even quieter, forcing her audience to lean forward in order to hear her. "The spirits of the dead, they wander the halls of this place. Sometimes…sometimes they even speak with the professor."

"The spirits of his family?" Lilly asked, wiping tears from her cheeks. Her voice was almost as hushed as Maria's.

"Yes. So if you hear…things…tonight, do not venture out to follow them. Remain in your rooms."

A cold silence followed Maria's words, a silence broken by a loud bray of laughter that made Erika squeeze Jason's hand tighter.

"Ha!" One of Burns's eyebrows went up. "That's a good one. Perfect. Stormy night, desolate castle, ghosts wandering the halls. What's next, rattling chains?"

Maria frowned. "I don't understand."

"Never mind." Burns waved a dismissive hand. "I don't suppose it's possible to get something stronger than wine to drink? I feel the need for large quantities of alcohol."

The maid nodded. "I will bring it to the sitting room," she said, and retreated down the hall, her arms filled with dishes.

"Care to join us?" Burns asked Jason and Erika.

Jason stared at the man. Was he insane? "Are you serious? We're trapped over a hundred years in the past with no idea how to get home, and you're acting like it's a vacation!"

Burns shrugged and tilted back in his chair, forcing Lilly to relinquish her hold on him. "That's because I don't believe any of this is real. I don't know if it's a dream or if I had an accident and I'm in a coma, but none of this…" he waved his arms around, "…is possible. Carnivals don't send people to other places. People can't travel back in time. Therefore, none of this is actually happening. And since it's all in my imagination, I'm going to make the best of it by drinking myself into oblivion. Hopefully, when I wake up all this will be gone. And I won't even have a hangover, because the booze won't be real, either."

"What about me?" Lilly asked. "I'm here too. How can I be having the same dream?"

"You're not," Burns said, with a shrug of his shoulders. "You're just part of my dream. The real you is somewhere else, probably looking at my comatose body and praying I wake up soon."

Lilly didn't respond, just shook her head and put her face in her hands.

Jason stood up. Was Burns too dumb to understand the direness of their situation, or had his brain simply snapped, unable to handle the truth? Either way, he wasn't the kind of person they needed to be around. "C'mon, Erika, let's go back to our room. Tomorrow, when the storm breaks, we're getting the hell out of here."

Burns's words echoed through the cavernous space as Jason led Erika to the stairs. "It's all a dream, I tell you. Nothing to worry about."

As they headed up the stairs, Jason couldn't help but pray that Burns was right and the whole situation was nothing more than a trauma-induced hallucination from falling out of the carnival ride and hitting his head. But in his mind, he feared that was just a pipe dream.

The castle was real, and they were in deep trouble.

The stench of rotting flesh filled the air as Jason ran through a heavy fog along a rocky beach. There were things in the fog, vile, dangerous things. He couldn't see them, but he knew they were there. Glimpses of grotesque faces and twisted bodies taunted him through breaks in the dull-gray mist that blanketed the land and sea to the point where he could barely tell where the water ended and the beach began.

He had no idea how long he'd been running, only that his lungs burned and his legs ached, but he couldn't stop. To stop meant death, death at the hands of the monsters in the supernatural vapors. And if he died, who would save Erika?

Save her from what? He didn't know the answer to that, only knew she was in trouble, that something far worse than the creatures in the fog was after her, a fleshless monster with a face like the moon and a sunflower halo. It wanted her dead, and it was up to Jason to prevent it.

How, though? Lost, no idea of Erika's whereabouts, and uncertain whether or not he could even save her in time, he feared running farther ahead would lead him away from her, but the thought of going back meant suicide, because behind him…

Behind him was hell. Its bright lights were hazy, distant sparks, and the crazed, almost-melodic sounds of tortured souls drifted in and out, warped and tangled by distance and fog.

Ahead, the miasma swirled and eddied, parted once more.

A figure appeared in the murky soup, a tall, thin figure with red coals for eyes.

"It's too late, Jason. You can't escape your fate. You'll be with us forever!"

Jason woke trembling from a nightmare that was already fading from his memory, leaving only poisonous remnants behind. Something about a skeletal face that kept laughing at him, and sea monsters chasing Erika. For a moment, he had no idea where he was, the bed beneath him as alien as the landscape in his dream, and then it all

came rushing back. The carnival. The castle. The bedroom on the second floor.

Stuck in a time that wasn't their own.

A reality worse than any nightmare.

In the darkness, the Victorian chairs and furniture took on phantomlike appearances. Even Erika's sleeping form resembled an ethereal spirit.

Movement near the end of the bed caught his attention and he gasped at the sight of a spectral figure. His heart thumped wildly as Maria's admonition about spirits walking the halls came back to him.

Then a flash of lightning illuminated the room, allowing him to see the apparition's face.

Erika?

He turned his head and realized she wasn't next to him after all, that he'd mistaken her pillow and rumpled sheet for her actual body. He looked back just in time to see her opening the door. Her nude form, pale and gray against the darker black of the room, reminded him of a walking corpse.

"Erika? What's the matter?"

Without saying a word, she stepped into the hallway.

"Hey!" When she still didn't answer, Jason jumped out of bed and hurried after her, catching up to her as she turned in the direction of the stairs. He reached out to grab her arm and then stopped. What if she was sleepwalking? He thought he remembered that there was some kind of rule about not waking sleepwalkers or they could have heart attacks. Still he couldn't let her wander around naked. Unsure of what to do, he stepped in front of her, blocking her way.

"No, I have to go to him," Erika whispered, halfheartedly trying to push him aside. "Let me go."

"Erika, wake up. You're dreaming." Jason put his hands against her shoulders and was glad when she stopped moving rather than trying to force her way past him.

"He's calling me."

"Who's calling you?"

"The children need me. I have to go. We'll be a family again."

A chill ran down Jason's back that had nothing to do with the cold air in the hallway, and the blood in his veins turned to ice. Goose bumps sprouted on his flesh. Children? A family?

Was she somehow channeling Osvald's dead wife? And how could the professor be calling her? There'd been no sounds in the hallway or

the room, except for the monotonous thundering of the storm and the ticking of the old clock on the fireplace mantel.

Wait. No one's calling her. Jason's fear receded as he realized she was only having a dream, just like he'd had his own nightmare. It was no surprise, considering all they'd been through the past few hours. They were on a strange island surrounded by water. He'd dreamed of the ocean and monsters. She was dreaming about dead people in the water. Only she'd taken it a step further by sleepwalking. He silently cursed Maria for telling them tales of hauntings in the castle.

"You can see them tomorrow," he told her, guiding her back into the bedroom before anyone happened by and saw them nude in the hallway. Her flesh was cold and clammy against his palms. "Right now it's sleepy time."

She acquiesced without protest, walking to the bed and sitting down. Jason lit one of the candles on the dresser and then sat next to her, figuring she'd eventually fall back to sleep. For a moment, she just stared into space, unmoving, and then her lips slowly formed into a smile, a smile that never reached her eyes. She ran her hands down her body, caressing her breasts and stomach in slow, languid strokes.

"Oh, darling, I missed you so much. It was so dark down there…"

Jason froze. The erotic quality of her words had him spellbound, torn between waking her up or waiting to see what came next in her dream. Before he could make a decision, Erika's body jerked, like a person who'd dozed in a chair and suddenly come awake.

"Jason?"

"I'm right here," he said, surprised to find himself feeling both jealous and strangely excited by what had almost happened. "You were sleepwalking."

"Really?" In the near dark, only the movement of her blonde hair gave away the shake of her head. "I was having the strangest dream. I was in a cemetery. And…I think I was…dead."

"It's okay, it was just a nightmare."

She reached out and felt for Jason's hand. "It felt…so real. It was awful." Her grip tightened. "You don't think it's an omen or something, do you? We're going to get home, right? Promise me we're going to get home."

"I promise," he said, hoping he wasn't giving her false hope. Who knew if they'd ever get back? Or if they'd even figure out how they got here in the first place. "And we're not going to die. Not for a long time."

But as Erika hugged him, her nipples hard from the chilly air of

the bedroom, her words brought his own nightmare back to him.

We both dreamed about death. Coincidence?

Or omen?

Long after Erika had drifted off, Jason lay awake, wanting to be sure there was no repeat of her sleepwalking. So he was wide awake when she mumbled a few words in her sleep.

"We have no choice. The skeleton man told me we're already dead."

It was several hours before his eyes finally closed.

Jason woke the next day to a morning filled with darkness and gloom, and the sound of his hopes crashing to pieces. Thunder filled the air and the steady hiss of windblown rain told him the storm's fury had not abated overnight. A hundred feet below their window, the violent collision of waves against rocks produced a deep, pulsating thud, felt more than heard, like the almost-subsonic bass tones from a jacked-up stereo system of a teenager's car.

Another day trapped in this castle.

The thought of it filled him with dread. He tried to keep a brave face for Erika, but a similar depression gripped her as soon as she saw the weather, and she seemed immune to his efforts to cheer her up.

"What if we never get home?" Erika asked. Cold, despite the heavy clothes she'd put on, she was bundled under a thick quilt, knees drawn to her chest. Her hair lay in a tangled mess and the tracks of tears stained her cheeks. Earlier, he'd explored some of the rooms that opened into the hall and discovered a bathroom with a primitive toilet and tub, but neither one of them had bothered washing after finding out there was no hot water.

"Don't think like that, sweetheart." Jason sat next to her, trying his best to sound positive. "There has to be a way to get back. We just need to find it. As soon as this weather breaks, we'll search the island for the portal or black hole or whatever it was that brought us here. And if that doesn't work, we'll go to the mainland, use the library at the professor's college, go through every book until we find a solution."

Erika shook her head, a gesture of surrender rather than objection. "And what good will that do? How do you expect to find answers in ancient books when we don't even have that kind of technology in our own time?"

"Maybe it's not technology we need. No machine brought us here. So we have to look at other possibilities."

"But—"

A knock on their door interrupted her. When Jason opened it, a frantic Charles Burns pushed his way into the room, looking even more distressed than Jason felt.

"Have either of you seen Lilly? I woke up this morning and she wasn't in bed. I've been downstairs, and there's no sign of her there, either."

"We haven't left the room yet, but we'll help you look for her." Jason was actually glad for the distraction from their own worries. "Have you asked Maria?"

Burns shook his head. "I haven't been able to find her, either."

"You don't think she'd go outside in this storm, do you?" Erika asked.

"She was upset last night, but I can't imagine she'd do something that foolish."

Jason said nothing. Who knew what the poor woman had been thinking? Maybe her fear had gotten the best of her and venturing out into the rain and wind to search for a way home had seemed like a better option than sitting in a room with a man who didn't even believe you were real.

After donning their shoes, they followed Burns to his room. On the drying rack were Lilly's shoes and jeans. The borrowed clothes she'd worn the night before were in a pile on the floor. Burns pointed to the old-fashioned clothing.

"That's where she left them last night. Where could she have gone, half-dressed?"

"Only one way to find out." They headed downstairs, the steps complaining loudly beneath their feet while the massive edifice moaned around them, as if the constant battering of the storm—a distant but audible howl, no matter where in the castle they went—were inflicting physical punishment on living flesh instead of on stone and wood. Although it was past nine in the morning, it could just as easily have been night, thanks to the impenetrable curtain of thunderheads obscuring the sun. Even with all the lamps in the hallways and rooms lit and most of the fireplaces going, a pall of disconsolate gloom filled the spaces between the walls and created shadowy wraiths that twitched and jerked in time to the flames.

After traversing the long sitting area, they found Maria in the dining room, setting the table for breakfast. Only four places were out, the professor's spot at the head of the table conspicuously empty.

"The professor's still in a mood, and won't be joining you," she said, her voice so low Jason had to strain to hear it over the *shush*ing of the rain and the constant barrage of thunder.

Burns pushed between two chairs and leaned across the wide table. "Maria, have you seen Lilly?"

The maid shook her head, a worried look crossing her face. "No. I hope she's not wandering about the castle. The professor would not like that."

"Could she have gone to the kitchen for something to eat, and perhaps gotten lost, or gone outside?" Jason asked.

Burns turned to him, his arched eyebrows indicating that his fiancée getting lost while looking for a snack was a possibility he hadn't thought of.

"I did not come across any sign that she'd been in the kitchen or pantries, but come. I will show you where they are and you can look for yourselves."

They followed Maria down a short hallway that ran under the stairs and led to a kitchen larger than what you'd find in most houses, but much smaller than Jason had expected, considering the size of the dining room table. On one side, an old-fashioned wood-burning stove with two cast-iron burners sat next to an equally ancient oven. In a recessed section of the same wall, a pot hung suspended over a pile of hot coals. Heat emanated from the cooking area in scalding waves, and Jason wondered how a person could stand close to the appliances long enough to cook without catching fire themselves.

A long table occupied the center of the room, its rough-hewn surface worn smooth from decades of use and disfigured with innumerable scars and dents from the countless meats and vegetables that had been chopped, carved, sliced, and pounded to create thousands of meals over the years.

The remaining walls were lined with sturdy wooden shelves, most of which held cooking utensils, jars of jams, pickled foods, spices, and sacks of rice and flour. No decorations or pictures livened the walls, which were made of wide planks. Eons of grease and smoke had colored them a uniform gray, hiding any traces of paint that might have been there long ago.

Once away from the cooking area, the room took on a definite chill. As they walked through, Erika pulled her sweater tight.

Although the odors of fried meat and oven-baked bread lingered in the air, teasing Jason's stomach, they evoked no sense of hominess in him. Instead, they seemed strangely out of place in the melancholy

room, as if comfort and warmth were unwelcome strangers.

If the kitchen truly is the heart of any home, this home is close to dying. The random thought added to the dismal air of the place, and he forced himself to put it out of his mind.

At the far end of the room were two doors. "Where do those go?" Jason asked, pointing toward them.

"One leads outside; there is a short path to the woodshed. The other leads to the storeroom." Maria shook her head. "But no one in their right mind would go outside in this weather, and the storeroom is no larger than this kitchen. How could a person be lost in there?"

Remembering Erika's sleepwalking episode, Jason looked at Burns. "You check the storeroom, and I'll look outside for any signs she left the castle."

"No." Burns put a hand out to stop him. "I'll go outside. I can't ask you to get soaked. We'll meet back in the dining room. And bring some towels," he added to Maria.

Jason nodded. "Okay." He waited while Burns opened the door, letting in a violent spray of wet, cold rain, and then pushed it closed as Burns disappeared into the ferocious gale.

Maria handed him a small lamp, its flame dancing behind glass panels. "There's no light inside."

"Wait here, I'll be right back," he said to Erika, and then lifted the latch on the aged wooden door. Lamp held high, he stepped into the storeroom.

And found himself in hell.

Jason's first thought was that the lamp had gone out. There'd been a moment of lightheadedness, a feeling like he'd stood up too fast after bending over. Then it was gone, replaced by a different type of disorientation. Total darkness stretched out in all directions. He brought the lamp down to relight it and saw the flame still burned, but the glow it produced only managed to carve an inch or two from the impenetrable black before giving up.

"Erika?" He turned around, expecting to see the doorway behind him, Erika and Maria framed by the light from the kitchen.

There was nothing except more black.

An unpleasant odor filled his nose as he breathed a combination of dead fish and sulfur.

"Erika? Maria?" When no one answered, he called their names

again. And again. Louder each time, his voice echoing in his ears but not in the endless space around him, as though the immense void were lined in cotton. Fear gripped him, his heart beating faster and faster, fueled by the adrenaline pumping through his body. He wanted to run forward but his last shred of self-control asserted itself and, instead, he walked in a slow, deliberate fashion, his free hand waving back and forth to locate any obstacles.

He counted ten steps before he stopped. How could he still be inside the storeroom? He'd only taken one or two steps past the door; by now he should be well into the kitchen again.

Was he? Had something happened, causing the lights to go out? Had Erika and Maria simply left the room to find out why, or to light the lamps again?

No, that doesn't make sense. What could blow out all the lamps and candles in a room at the same time? And why would Erika leave him there in the dark? Even if Charles had returned and gusts from the storm had blown out some of the candles, others would still be lit. And Erika wouldn't have left him alone in the dark.

He took a deep breath, intending to yell for help, and caught a hint of something new in the polluted air. Something familiar, but not the odors of spoiled seafood that he'd been breathing. A different kind of scent…

Popcorn. That's what I smell. Greasy, buttery, fresh popcorn. And sugar, like…cotton candy? Or candy apples? Like at a… fair…?

Behind him, someone laughed.

Jason whirled around, his ineffective lamp thrust forward, thoughts of food forgotten in an instant.

"Who's there?"

More laughter—a low, gleeful chuckle. Although there was nothing inherently dangerous to the sound, it still raised the hairs on Jason's neck. It reminded him of someone about to play a nasty prank on an unsuspecting target.

"I can hear you." Jason was about to add "show yourself", but he realized how stupid that would sound. Obviously, the person taunting him was hiding in the dark on purpose, would make himself known only when he was ready. Showing anger or fear was just adding to the prankster's sadistic enjoyment.

More laughter, this time accompanied by something else. A wet, thumping, swishing sound that made Jason think of someone mopping a floor.

Splash-thump-swish. Splash-thump-swish.

He swung the lamp around. The sounds seemed to be coming from more than one place, as if…

There's more than one thing out there.

Apprehension gripped Jason's stomach in a tight fist. There could be a million explanations for what he was hearing, but he was suddenly positive there were *things* out there in the dark. Things coming toward him.

But from which direction? He wanted to run, but which way? In the Stygian black, he might end up right in their midst.

And what were *they*? The sounds were not loud; in fact, if he'd been breathing heavily or talking he might not have heard them at all. The total darkness made it impossible to tell how far away they were. Six inches? Six miles? Distance would be a big factor in determining size. Was he listening to the footsteps of a giant beast, a dinosaur-sized creature coming at him through some distant swamp, each massive step crushing tall reeds and swamp grass and displacing tons of muck? Or was it simply a handful of frogs hopping across a road a foot away from him?

Road. That made Jason think to bend down and examine the ground he stood on. It should be wood because both the kitchen and pantry had plank floors. He had to bring the lamp almost to his feet before he could see what he stood on. And when he did, it made no sense. Instead of boards, beneath his feet was a rough, hard-packed dirt surface, littered with rocks and stones of all sizes.

Nothing moved in the tiny circle of light, for which he was both grateful and not, because while he had an intense aversion to seeing what was thumping and squishing towards him, *not* seeing it, not knowing what it was, made the terror so much worse.

He stood up, and found to his surprise he could still make out the features of the ground directly in front of him. Moments later, a thin, pale stripe of light appeared well off into the distance and he recognized what was happening.

The sun was rising.

Faster than any dawn he'd ever experienced, the dim stripe expanded, grew upward and to both sides, stretching farther and farther in all directions until the entire sky became visible, and with it the place where he now stood, at the source of the foul, tainted air.

At the edge of an ocean, although not like any ocean he'd ever seen.

The surface was flat as a placid lake, with hardly a ripple in sight. Weak, ineffective waves lapped against coarse sand and an assortment of boulders, rocks and stones that littered the beach, which began not five feet from where Jason stood, sand and packed earth mixing along a jagged line of demarcation. Scattered between the rocks were thousands of shattered shells, broken shards of dull gray that looked capable of slicing an unwary bare foot to the bone. Many of them lay well beyond the current waterline, which Jason took as evidence the ocean did rise and recede at some point during the day or night, despite its present state of dormancy.

After only a few minutes, the sky stopped brightening, creating a monotonous leaden dome that blended into an equally washed-out sea along the distant horizon. The sun refused to make itself known, as if embarrassed by the dismal land below it and deciding to stay hidden behind a blanket of haze.

Jason turned in a slow circle, trying to get his bearings. His first thought, that he was still on the island, disappeared from possibility when he saw how far the shoreline stretched to his left and right. Behind him, the ground rose sharply to some sort of plateau, the edges of which were partly obscured by rolling, tumbling vapors. The hillside itself was nearly barren, playing host to just a few twisted, brown, woody stalks that appeared to be something between a plant and a tree. All of them looked sickly, as if a lack of exposure to sun and nutrients had drained the essence of life from them.

A shimmer of light caught Jason's eye and he looked down again. Glistening streaks of wetness crisscrossed the ground around him, rendered visible by the lightened sky. Each stripe was as wide as his hand. They had the appearance of snail trails, only much larger. The thick, mucous-like substance was already beginning to dry, the mother-of-pearl sheen fading to crusty gray flakes.

Bending down, Jason touched a finger to one of the tracks, and then quickly pulled it away with a yelp as sudden fire burned his skin. He wiped the injured digit against his sweater and then watched in horror as the strands of wool disintegrated, leaving a dime-sized hole in the material and a small blister already forming on his fingertip.

At that moment, his brain made an instant connection.

Those things I heard in the darkness. They made those tracks.

An image of giant slugs humping and sliding their way across the rocky ground, each one coated in poisonous, corrosive slime, filled his head. He imagined them moving past him in the dark, their deadly bodies inches from his feet, as they made their way back to the ocean

before the daylight arrived.

He'd been lucky they'd avoided him. Now he had to get as far away from them as possible, which meant putting distance between himself and the murky waters.

Careful not to touch any of the slime trails, he made his way up the steep grade to the top of the hill, digging his fingers into the crumbling dirt to make it up the last few feet.

Where he found himself at the edge of an enormous graveyard.

Swirls of ground fog floated in random patterns between headstones and crypts and more of the deformed, stunted trees, making the depressing landscape even more dark and oppressive. The wet, earthy scent of rotting leaves and mildew joined the rank stench of the ocean, the same smell he remembered from raking leaves in the fall after a heavy rain. He turned in a slow circle, trying to find the ends of the cemetery, but it had none. As far as he could see, crooked rows of grave markers marched on until they, too, blended with the monochrome gray.

In the endless, bleak landscape, the only color was a single red rose atop a gravestone. The open grave in front of the marker gaped at him like a toothless maw. Mounds of dirt sat to either side, ready to be dropped into the hole, where they would land with muted thumps on top of the waiting casket.

Jason walked toward the grave, filled with a sick desire to read the name carved into the granite. Each step filled him with dread, because he knew deep down he didn't want to see whose grave it was, that no matter what name was engraved in the stone, the knowledge of their death would be a terrible thing. And yet he couldn't help himself, his curiosity overwhelming his instinctive reluctance.

He reached the open pit and stopped, his eyes cast downward, away from the tombstone and its darkly alluring inscription. But it wasn't dread that kept him from looking up. It was the grave.

There's something in the hole. Something alive.

How he knew it, he had no idea. There was no doubt, though. He sensed it down there, lurking in the wet earth of the fresh-dug hole, waiting for some unwary fool to lean over and look down.

I won't look.

Jason took two steps back, torn between returning to the moonlike surface of the beach with its unseen creatures or wandering through the cemetery in the hopes of finding a way out before the thing in the pit decided to come after him.

That was when he heard it—the wet *thump-squish* he'd experienced down on the beach, the noise in the darkness.

Only this time it was coming from the pit.

He turned to run, only to discover the beach and ocean were gone, covered by a wall of fog so thick no details were visible within it. The immense cloud bank towered over the hill he stood on, a massive wall of gray that was visibly advancing toward him at a slow but steady pace. Somewhere deep in the fog a man laughed, the sound of it identical to the sardonic chuckle from the beach. Nothing about it was pleasant. It was the creepy, ecstatic laugh of an insane-asylum inmate as he danced in crooked circles, the manic giggle of a serial killer preparing his latest victim in a stew. And farther in the background, the tinkling notes of a lively musical tune, the melody lost to distance and the muffling effects of the mist. Nevertheless, it was somehow familiar, almost like the happy music of an ice-cream truck in the summer, but not quite the same. Together with the crazed laughter, it created an air of menace that made Jason shiver.

There was no time to ponder where he'd heard the merry tune before, though, as just then the damp squelching of the unseen beast reached him again. Images of the abnormally large slime trails came to him, along with a fear of what would happen if one of those creatures touched him with its caustic mucous.

But where could he go? Trying to navigate the cliff in that fog was suicidal. Staying in the cemetery, not much better.

The first wisps of the encroaching cloud bank touched him with tendrils of icy dampness far more chilling than the ground mists of the cemetery. With them came more of the mad giggling and eerie music.

Was it a calliope? It disappeared again before he could be sure. Not that it mattered. A gut feeling told him that whatever lurked within the fog was deadlier than the unseen creature in the grave.

Turning, Jason picked a direction away from the fog and skirting the sinister black hole in the ground. He was already past the grave when something called his name.

"Jason…"

He looked over his shoulder.

A pseudopod of gray snaked out over the edge of the grave, a rubbery limb glistening with slime. Half-formed digits gripped the soil, dug in. Smoke rose where the acid slime met damp earth.

"Jason…Jason…"

That voice. Coming from the hole…

No. It couldn't be.

"Erika?"

"Jason…I miss you. It's so cold down here… Jason…come join us…Jason…

"…Jason!"

Something touched his arm and he screamed.

"Jason! Are you all right?"

Jason turned around. A rotted, mangled visage stared at him, and he threw his arms up to shield himself from the creature's vile claws as it reached for him.

Then the image faded away and in its place was Erika, her unblemished arm outstretched. Behind her stood Maria, her hands over her mouth.

He was back in the pantry.

Instead of gravestones and fog there were only shelves of dry goods and jarred foods. Instead of wet earth, there were warped floorboards beneath his feet. The only odors in the air were the lingering ghosts of Maria's cooking.

"What… How…?" His words ran out, leaving him standing there with his mouth open.

Erika stepped back, her eyes wide and concerned, and then reached out again, more tentatively this time.

"Jason?" Her hand trembled more than the cold air called for, and it broke a piece of Jason's heart to know her fear was partly his fault. Despite his lingering confusion, he took both her hands in his, pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her. There was the briefest of hesitations on her part, and then she returned the embrace.

"I'm okay, babe," he said, after they released each other. "I… Something happened. I was someplace else."

"I thought you had a seizure. The door shut behind you, so we opened it again and you were just standing there. Not moving. The lamp fell out of your hand. I didn't know what to do. I went to touch you and Maria said not to, that we should let the spell pass. Then you started saying my name and that's when…"

"It's okay." Jason took her hands again. Erika looked ready to cry, and he could only imagine how she must have felt, seeing him like that.

Standing still. But in my head, I was running, climbing.

It didn't make sense. He'd never had an episode or seizure of any kind before.

"How long was I out?"

Erika frowned. "Maybe a minute or two. No more than that."

"Two…?" Jason quickly closed his mouth. *Two minutes?* It had seemed like hours to him!

First, Erika's sleepwalking, and now this. Maybe it's just a reaction to stress. Or to jumping from one time and place to another.

Hell, maybe Burns is right and this is all just a hallucination. I fell out of that boat in the carnival and cracked my head, and everything since then is just my mind playing tricks on me.

Thinking of Burns made him remember why they were in the storeroom in the first place. A quick glance around the room was enough to show Lilly wasn't there; the shelves offered no place for an adult to hide, and there was no exit other than the door they'd entered through.

"Lilly's not here," he said, eager to be out of the room. "Let's check the rest of the house."

"Are you sure?" Erika asked. "Maybe you should lie down."

"No. I feel fine." It was true too. Other than a lingering sense of unease from his weird episode, he felt perfectly normal. "I sure could use a cup of coffee, though." He'd said it more out of habit than anything, but Maria nodded.

"The professor prefers tea, but we do keep some beans for company. I'll go grind them and put on a kettle to boil." She scurried away, leaving Erika and Jason alone outside the storeroom.

"While she's doing that, we can look around downstairs."

"I still think you should rest. You scared the hell out of me, you know." She didn't smile as she said it, which told Jason how worried she'd really been.

He smiled. "I'm good, I swear. C'mon, let's go." He led the way out of the kitchen, eager to put some distance between them and the pantry. He hoped his words comforted her more than they did him.

Because he couldn't shake the feeling his brief trance was a prelude of worse things to come.

Two hours of searching turned up no clues to Lilly's whereabouts, and by the time everyone met up in the great room, where Maria had coffee, tea and toasted bread waiting for them—and towels for Charles

Burns, who'd come back soaked to the skin, with nothing to show for it—Burns's mood had changed from concerned to angry.

"I demand to speak with Professor Osvald," he said, cornering Maria against a table. "Lilly could be outside, freezing to death, or injured somewhere in the castle, while he sits up there locked in his rooms like some kind of hermit."

Maria shrank away from Burns's antagonistic posturing. "I'm sorry, but the professor has said he cannot be disturbed," the diminutive woman said for the fourth or fifth time, as if repeating the statement would convince Burns to stop insisting.

"Then I'll disturb him." Leaving wet tracks in his wake, Burns strode toward the second staircase, the one that led to the opposite side of the house from the guest rooms.

"No!" For the first time since they'd met her, Maria's voice rose to a shout before returning to its usual meek volume. "I…I will speak with him. But it will take a while for him to compose himself. Please, return to your room. I have laid out dry clothes for you."

"He'd better not take too long." Burns turned and stomped up the right-hand staircase. A moment later, the booming of a door being slammed shut echoed through the castle.

Nestled under a rough, scratchy blanket on one of the couches, Erika turned to Jason. "What do you think we should do?"

"There's nothing we can do until the storm breaks. If the professor wants us to help search the rest of the house for Lilly, we'll help. Otherwise, we wait. But I'll tell you this…" Jason put down his coffee and took Erika's hand, "…as soon as that rain stops, we're out of here. First, we'll check the spot where we arrived."

"Check for what?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "But something brought us here. A black hole, a time anomaly… Maybe if we walk around, we'll stumble into it the same way we did before."

Jason shuddered as an unwelcome vision came to him, an image of a rock-strewn beach leading to a stagnant ocean filled with unseen sea creatures.

"What if we don't find anything?"

Grateful to be pulled away from the memories of his daymare, Jason shook his head.

"If there's nothing to lead us back to our own time, we'll catch the first goddamned boat back to the mainland. We can't trust Osvald to help us. He could stay locked in his room for weeks."

Erika nodded. “All right.” She leaned over to hug him, but his stomach erupted in a series of growls, bringing a tiny smile to her lips.

“You’re still hungry.”

He nodded. “Buttered toast and some coffee wasn’t enough to tame this beast, I guess,” he said, patting his stomach. “Let’s see if we can get something else to eat.”

“Can we take it back to our room? Eating all alone in that giant dining room is creepy.”

“Anything for you, love.” Jason took her hand as they walked back to the kitchen. It struck him that he was glad it was Erika he’d gone to the carnival with, rather than taking his nephews or going with friends. As much as he hated to admit it to himself—and would never admit to her—he was already half-convinced there was a very real possibility they’d never return to their own time. Which meant it would be just him and Erika, alone, for the rest of their lives. Stranded in a strange world with no money, no friends or family and none of the comforts of modern living.

If that’s the case, at least with Erika here we’ll still be able to make a life for ourselves, get married, have children.

A picture flashed through his head—he and Erika living in a two-room tenement, him working a laborer’s job and her home with their three screaming kids. No television, no healthy food or clean water, no dentists and no modern medical care. How long would they survive? Into their forties, their fifties, if they were lucky?

Jesus Christ. We better find a way home.

The rest of the day passed slowly. After eating the sweet rolls they’d brought to the room, there was nothing else to do but watch the rain batter the world outside their windows. Twice, Jason went downstairs to look for Maria, but the main rooms were empty each time.

At three o’clock, he knocked on Burns’s door. When there was no answer, he peeked inside and found Burns asleep on top of the covers. Rather than wake him, Jason tossed a blanket over him and returned to the other guest room, where he and Erika napped for a while as well.

By six, Maria hadn’t come by to announce dinner, and Jason’s stomach was loudly demanding sustenance once again.

“Let’s go see what there is to eat,” he said to Erika, after they washed up as best they could with the freezing water in the hall

bathroom.

On their way downstairs, they stopped to check on Burns, but he was still sleeping. Jason poked his shoulder, but the man only snorted and mumbled something in his sleep.

"Poor guy. He's exhausted," Erika said from the doorway.

"And I'm starving. We'll bring him back something."

The downstairs was still deserted. In the kitchen, they found the stove cold and the countertops bare. The storm continued to crash against the back of the house, so unrelenting in its fury that Jason found himself wondering if it would ever abate. The kitchen door rattled and banged as it fought to keep the unwanted gale from bursting inside.

Plank floorboards creaked and moaned while the hungry couple moved about the kitchen, scrounging odds and ends from the shelves and pantry to make a haphazard meal.

"I've got bread, some more of that jam and a block of very hard cheese," Erika said, piling them on a counter.

Jason, who'd had to steel himself to enter the cold storage room again, returned with his arms full. "I can top that. How does smoked ham and sausages sound? No bacon, but it's the next best thing. Plus, I found this." He held up a dusty bottle. "Red wine. At least we can have a drink with dinner."

They cut up the meat and cheese, spread jam on slices of thick, crusty bread and piled the food on three plates to bring upstairs. They found Burns just as out of it as he'd been earlier, so Erika left his plate on the nightstand. Then they returned to their room to eat, with the ever-present rain a constant companion in the background.

Jason tried to ignore it, but the unceasing liquid attack was beginning to get on his nerves. What kind of storm lasted for days without a break? The fact that they had no radio or television to distract them from their predicament made things worse. He'd never realized how much he depended on simple electronics, not only for entertainment purposes, but also to fill the silences in everyday life.

Like the gaps in conversation when two people had nothing to say to each other, but at the same time didn't want to just sit there listening to each other chew.

"I really wish that goddamn rain would stop. Even for a few minutes." He regretted the words immediately; they'd slipped out before he could stop them.

Perhaps recognizing his sour mood, Erika smartly changed the

subject.

"I hope the professor doesn't get mad at us for taking one of his bottles," Erika said, refilling their glasses with the ruby-colored wine. The empty plates were stacked in the hallway. They'd pulled two chairs over near the window, whose wide sill served as a makeshift table, rather than eat on the bed. Outside, the wind continued to roar its way through the trees, and rain splashed against the thick glass in endless waves, obscuring the view of the ocean far below.

"The hell with him. He hasn't exactly been the model host."

"Jason, the man lost his family. How would you feel?"

"I'd feel horrible, but I wouldn't ignore strangers stuck in my house. And I'd certainly be doing something to find someone if they were lost."

Erika put down her wine, her lips curling up in a seductive smile. "Well, I know something we can do." She ran a finger along his leg.

"That's the best offer I've had all day." He led her to the bed and lay down next to her. His initial worry that their dire situation might put a damper on making love was soon dispelled when Erika practically tore his clothes off and attacked him with such passion that he couldn't help responding in a similar manner.

For a short time, he forgot about everything except their bodies meshing together, lips and hands discovering each other in ways that seemed new and intoxicating, and he relished every moment of it.

Afterward, sweaty and spent, they stayed under the thick blankets and finished their wine. Jason tried to keep the after-sex conversation light, but all too soon reality swam back into their thoughts like a shark rising from deep waters, the twin remoras of fear and depression tagging along beneath it, and the spaces between their sentences grew longer and less comfortable.

He was glad when drowsiness finally overtook Erika and she drifted off before the inevitable topic of being trapped forever in the past came up. That was a discussion he didn't want to have until absolutely necessary. He'd thought his worries would keep him awake, but the gentle sound of Erika's snoring, combined with the wine, food and sex, lulled him toward dreamland, and after a few minutes he gave in and lay back on his pillow, closing his eyes and saying a final prayer for a nightmare-free sleep.

Jason was dreaming of drinking a cold beer while watching football

on the big-screen TV in his family room when a horrible scream shattered his slumber. He sat up, tossing the covers to the side, and turned to make sure Erika was still next to him. She was, backed up against the headboard, her eyes wide and the sheets clutched to her chest.

"What was that?" she asked in a shaky voice.

"I don't know." Jason's heart was racing, his body practically trembling from the adrenaline rushing through his system. "But it sounded like—"

Another scream, this one louder and even more horrible, which Jason wouldn't have believed possible. But as the terrified cry faded away, he recognized it as a man's voice.

"It's Charles!" Jason jumped out of bed and grabbed his pants. When Erika joined him, he tried to stop her.

"Wait here. We don't know what's going on out there. It might be dangerous."

She shook her head. "No way. We stay together."

He thought about arguing, but then realized it made more sense not to separate. "Fine. But let me go first."

He opened the door and peered out into the hall while Erika pulled her clothes on. Frigid air raised goose bumps on his arms and chest, and the floor felt like winter ice under his feet. Widely spaced sconces provided just enough light to see by, while at the same time filling the hall with shadowy apparitions that distracted the eye with their dancing movements. The corridor appeared empty in both directions, but Burns's door stood open.

"C'mon," he whispered, motioning to Erika. He took two steps and then recoiled as his bare foot landed in something wet and slimy. Looking down, he saw a series of damp marks on the bare wood, leading to the open door.

"What is it?" Erika asked.

"Someone went into Burns's room and left again. Someone with wet shoes."

"Is he still inside?"

Stepping around the watery tracks, Jason peered into Burns's room. The bed looked slightly disheveled, the result of Burns napping on top of the covers, but nothing seemed out of place. The plate of food they'd left for him sat untouched on the nightstand. A single blanket lay crumpled at the foot of the bed.

"I don't see him, and there's no sign of a struggle. Maybe he went

outside again, and those are his tracks."

"Or maybe they're Lilly's. Maybe she came back and woke him up."

Jason shrugged but didn't say anything. Neither of their suggestions struck him as being right. The shout they'd heard had been one of terror, not joy. Certainly not the type of cry you'd expect from someone if a missing lover returned to them. And if Burns had been alone, why would he cry out at all?

"You are both wrong."

Erika gasped and Jason jumped a little, even as he belatedly recognized Maria's voice. He turned and found the diminutive maid standing behind them.

"We heard a scream," he said, his heart banging like he'd just run a marathon.

"The spirits of the dead roam this house again." Maria's face was as grim as her tone.

Jason frowned. "Don't give me that bullshit. It was Charles who shouted, not some damn ghost. I heard him."

Maria shook her head. "Mister Burns it was, but 'tis him no more. Heed my advice. Lock yourselves in your room tonight if you want to see morning. Open your door for no one, no matter what sounds you hear or who might speak to you." She glanced at the wet footprints, crossed herself and hurried down the stairs.

Jason went to follow, but Erika grabbed his arm with a clammy hand. "No, let's do what she says."

"What? You don't believe those boogeyman tales, do you?"

"I believe this place creeps me out and I don't want to wander around in the dark. I believe there's two people missing now. And I believe something's going on, something that has Maria scared to death. Let's just stay in our room, like she said."

Jason was ready to argue, but the look in her eyes stopped him. The girl he loved was frightened out of her mind, and he was thinking about leaving her to chase after somebody he didn't even know, just to prove there were no ghosts in the castle? Why did he even care about any of that? Erika was the only thing that was important.

So he nodded, took her hand and led the way back to their room. "Okay," he said, as he shut the door. "We are in for the night."

"Thank you."

Once back in bed, and with Jason gently rubbing her neck, Erika drifted off again within a few minutes. For Jason, however, sleep remained elusive. He lay on his back, listening for any sounds coming

from outside their room. The wooden groans and mutterings of the house combined with the sounds of the storm and the ink-black room to create an atmosphere well suited for tales of vengeful spirits and haunted castles. He'd always believed in spirits and ghosts about as much as he believed in Santa or the Easter Bunny, but he couldn't deny something strange was going on. Not in a castle where the maid prowled the corridors like a phantom, the master of the house was half-crazy with grief, and two people had disappeared in little more than twenty-four hours.

Oh, and don't forget traveling more than a hundred years back in time, his subconscious reminded him. *That should certainly make you more open to the fact that there might be supernatural events going on in the castle.*

The storm continued to pound the ancient stone walls, showing no signs of letting up. Eventually, the sounds acted like white noise and lulled him into something approaching sleep. Except, each time he found his way toward slumber, the splintering crack of a breaking branch, loud and sharp as a gun's report, would shatter the quiet, or an extraloud peal of thunder would detonate outside the windows, rousing him to full wakefulness again.

It was right after another explosion of lightning and thunder that Erika began talking in her sleep. Jason immediately sat up, curious—and more than a little nervous, thanks to her last episode—to hear what she was saying.

"Of course, my love. I understand. The children need a mother… Oh yes, Johann, of course I will. I will be there soon."

She's dreaming about the professor again. And imagining herself as his wife. Jason shook her shoulder, afraid her dream might turn into another nightmare. Instead of waking, she rose from the bed and headed for the door, just as she'd done the previous night. He leaned forward and grabbed the hem of her nightgown, but she pulled out of his grasp.

"Erika, stop!" Everything he'd read about sleepwalking said not to disturb the person. But he'd be damned if he'd let her wander around a freezing-cold castle.

Oblivious to his cry, she opened the door and went into the dimly lit hallway.

"Shit!" Pausing just long enough to pull on his jeans, Jason hurried after her. A vile stench filled the corridor, dead, decayed fish and seaweed mixed together. As he ran past Burns's still-open door, movement in the darkness registered in his peripheral vision, but it

was too late to stop or turn.

Something hard struck his head, and his world went black.

A bright light stabbed at Jason's eyes when he tried to open them. Groaning, he covered his face with his arm and tried to see past the glare. Faces hovered in the darkness, illuminated in ghostly fashion by the reflection of the light off his arms and the water.

Water? How… I was in the hallway…

"Jason?" One of the pale faces dipped closer.

Erika! He reached a hand up to her.

"Oh thank God! For a second, I thought you were dead." She threw her arms around his neck and squeezed, cutting off his air but he didn't mind. At least she was awake and not…

"Wait." He pushed himself up to a sitting position. The light moved away, revealing itself as a flashlight held by a man dressed in jeans and a sleeveless T-shirt, which was stretched to its limits over his broad chest and shoulders. A jagged scar down one side of his face twisted his mouth into a permanent scowl.

"I was chasing you down the hall. In the castle. And then something hit my head. Where are we?"

Erika frowned, but before she could answer, a new voice spoke up, this one deep and masculine and filled with a dark humor completely inappropriate to the situation.

"Well, you certainly did hit your head, Mr. Phillips. You've got the lump to prove it. But you were nowhere near either of our two castles. You're in the Tunnel of Love, remember?"

Jason turned and his breath caught in his lungs at the sight of the gaunt, oddly dressed man standing to his right. Easily seven feet tall, he was so thin his fingers looked like skeleton hands and his face like a skull. Moon-white skin added to the corpse-like appearance. His outfit was just as peculiar—an orange topcoat, yellow pants and a red shirt with a green tie. Topping everything was a stovepipe hat perched on a bald head, a bright orange sunflower tucked into the band above the brim.

At any other time, the man would've drawn a smile, or perhaps even laughter.

But something in his eyes froze Jason's guts worse than eating a pound of ice, and made him think of dead bodies hacked to pieces and stored in a refrigerator to be eaten later.

Evil. He's evil and wants to kill us!

The man smiled and winked, and the feeling of impending death disappeared. The impression of evil, however, did not.

"I am terribly sorry," the man said, sounding anything but. "We've never had an accident in the Tunnel of Love before. Years, decades…" Hairless eyebrows furrowed. "You did have your safety belt on, didn't you?"

"Safety…what…I don't understand." Jason rubbed his hand across his head and yelped when it touched the tender lump on the back of his skull.

Tunnel of Love? They were back at the carnival? How had they gotten back?

Or did we ever leave?

Suddenly, it all made sense.

None of it was real. I dreamed the whole thing. The castle, the storm, all of it. How freaking crazy is that?

They'd been in the swan boat. That much he remembered. Something—a wave, a malfunction, a bunch of stupid kids—had tipped them over. He'd fallen into the water and hit his head on the boat. That explained the lingering reek of foul water and why his clothes were soaking wet.

A shiver ran through him.

Soaking wet on a cold October night.

"If you weren't wearing the safety belt, we cannot be held responsible for what happened," the man continued, apparently oblivious to Jason's shaking body.

"That's fine." Jason climbed to his feet, noticing for the first time that he was on the miniature dock where people were supposed to exit the swan boats. "I just want to get home and dry off."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Erika asked. She handed him a threadbare blanket that smelled of mildew and cobwebs. She had one wrapped around her shoulders as well, and he guessed he wasn't the only one who'd fallen in when the boat tipped over.

"Yeah. Let's get out of here. I think we've had enough of this place for one night."

"Wait, please." The skeletal figure, who Jason remembered was the carnival barker—they'd seen him announcing shows in the midway when they first entered the grounds—held up a hand. "It's far too cold for you to walk around soaking wet. You can dry off in my office and I can provide you with fresh clothes. And, of course, I'll refund your

admission price."

Jason's first thought was to reject the man's offer and just leave. After all, the night was ruined, he was freezing, and the whole nightmare—hallucination?—he'd experienced still had him feeling freaked.

"I wouldn't mind getting out of these," Erika said, tugging at her dripping shirt.

You're not the only one who's wet and cold. Feeling guilty about thinking only of himself, he nodded to the barker.

"Okay, we'll take you up on that offer. Thanks."

"And after that, we go to the hospital," Erika added.

"No way! I'm totally fine. My head hardly hurts," he said, hoping the intense throbbing in his skull didn't mean a concussion.

"Wonderful!" The barker clapped his hands, sending sharp spikes of pain through Jason's head. "Right this way." He took off at a brisk pace, exiting the Tunnel of Love through a recessed door, his burly assistant close on his heels. With a shrug, Jason took Erika's hand and they followed the two men.

While they walked, Jason thought about how much fun they'd been having before the accident, how it had been one of the best nights they'd had in a long time, and he found himself wishing they could have finished things on a better note. His weird dream about the castle might not have been real, but it had made one thing clear.

He loved Erika, and he wanted to be with her forever.

The barker's office turned out to be a small trailer with a hitch so it could be mounted to a truck and hauled to the next stop. By the time they reached it, Jason was shivering nonstop under his blanket and already regretting his decision to stay. A sign over the door read *The Proprietor*. The barker pushed it open and then beckoned them to enter.

"Welcome to my humble abode," he said. "Come inside. I will have someone bring you dry clothes."

The interior turned out to be nothing like Jason expected. A desk, a kitchenette area and a closet-sized bathroom took up most of the space. A dark curtain in the back separated what Jason assumed was a sleeping area from the rest of the room. No decorations of any kind broke up the clean lines of the furniture or countertops. Even the desk was devoid of papers, pens or other signs of use.

"Please excuse me." The Proprietor and his scarred assistant stepped outside, shutting the door behind them. A few seconds later, the barker opened the door again. This time, he was alone.

"I've sent Molach to fetch clothes. Once you're changed, you can be on your way, no worse for the wear, I hope."

"Thank you. We really appreciate—"

The door opened again, cutting Erika off in midsentence. The hulking giant stood there, a pile of clothes and several towels in his arms.

"Excellent!" The Proprietor took the bundle and placed it on the desk. "I'm sure you'll find everything you need in there. And I'll leave this for you as well."

With the exaggerated motions of an experienced showman, the Proprietor waved his hand in a figure eight, dipped it into his pocket and withdrew a single red rose, which he placed on the desk next to the clothes.

"A token of apology for the lady. After all, she didn't finish her ride in the Tunnel of Love, and romance should never be interrupted. Your refunds will be waiting for you at the front gate."

Before they could say anything, the Proprietor tipped his top hat and backed out of the trailer.

"That is one very strange dude," Jason said, while pulling off his wet sweatshirt.

"I don't know who's scarier, him or the man with the scar." Erika was already sorting through the pile of clothing and pulling out things that looked to be her size.

Two minutes later, dried off and dressed in T-shirts, sweatshirts and sweatpants with the Carnival of Fear logo printed on them, and with thick socks doing their best to hold back the moisture from their wet shoes, Jason shoved his wallet, keys and ruined phone into his pockets and handed Erika her flower.

"Ready to go home?"

Erika nodded. "Damn straight."

Something in her voice caused Jason to pause as he reached for the doorknob. "What's the matter?"

"I was just thinking. That Proprietor guy didn't even offer us free passes or anything."

"He's giving us our money back. And he gave us clothes."

"That's not very much in the way of compensation, not when it was his ride that malfunctioned. You'd think he'd be bending over

backwards to make sure we don't want to sue, or call the cops."

"Hey…" he put his arms around her and kissed the top of her head, "…we didn't get hurt, and that's all that matters. It's probably all he cares about too. This place will be gone tomorrow. Let's just forget it."

"I guess." She still sounded upset.

"Tell you what. On the way home, we'll stop at the donut shop and I'll get you the biggest mocha frappé thing they have on the menu."

Erika gave him a smile that warmed him better than any blanket could. "Make it a hot chocolate and you've got a deal."

"You got it."

He opened the door and they stepped into a darkness so absolute he couldn't even see his hand when he held it up against his nose. Behind them, the door closed with a heavy *thud*, followed by the *click* of a lock sliding into place. Jason tugged at the knob, but it refused to turn.

"Jason…?" Erika's voice seemed both far away and right next to him, as if they stood in an empty theater where the acoustics were off in some way. Her grip on his hand tightened to the point of almost being painful.

He opened his mouth to reassure her, but his words changed into a whispered curse when a door opened in front of them, revealing a nightmare come to life.

His nightmare.

"No. It's not possible."

"Jason?" Erika turned towards him. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? Everything!" he wanted to shout. Because not fifty feet away from where they stood was the very same castle he'd dreamed about, the one on the island. Professor Osvald's castle. The same gigantic front doors, the same black, moss-encrusted stone walls, the same windows…

This can't be happening!

Erika tugged at his hand and he realized she was waiting for an answer. Except he had none to give. How could he explain a nightmare come to life? That he'd not only seen the castle before, but he'd been trapped inside it, along with—

Something caught his eye. A spot of color against the dark background of the hulking edifice. A yellow square with red letters, just over the doors—*Warlock's Castle. Enter at your own risk!*

What the—? It's only another attraction?

And just like that, other details became apparent. The wide doorway was simply plywood decorated with cheap metal. The stone walls were actually just wood and Styrofoam painted to look like quarried blocks. The windows were painted as well. Rows of lights on the ground created shadows and overworked fog machines added the finishing touches to the faux-gothic exterior.

With the revelation that the castle was simply part of the carnival, Jason finally understood the reason for his nightmare. At some point, while walking through the grounds, he must have caught a glimpse of the Warlock's Castle and the memory of it took shape as Osvald's creepy home in his mind while he was unconscious.

So why couldn't he remember seeing the castle before? It towered above the other attractions, almost as tall as some of the rides, like the Ferris Wheel (*Wheel of Death!*) and the roller coaster (*Hot Rails to Hell!*) whose lights flashed and glowed against the night sky. Surely he'd have noticed it earlier and, having done so, hounded Erika to go inside.

Maybe that bump on my head knocked some memories loose.

More importantly, how had it appeared in front of the Proprietor's trailer when it wasn't there before?

You were upset, freezing and still dizzy from hitting your head. Common sense told him it was very possible he'd simply not noticed where they were.

His gut said just the opposite. He hadn't seen the castle because it hadn't been there.

"Jason, what the hell is going on?" Erika's voice sounded more frustrated and confused than frightened. He understood the feeling completely. It was like someone at the carnival was playing tricks on them.

Could that be it? A practical joke? He pictured carnival workers turning the trailer on a swivel so it faced a different direction. It wasn't far-fetched to imagine they did the same thing to people all the time.

"Somebody's screwing with us," he said to Erika. "That barker."

"But why?"

"Because he's an asshole. It's a carnival prank. We can't leave until we go through there." He pointed at the Warlock's Castle.

"I don't think I want to go in there," Erika said.

Rather than sharing her fear, Jason simply felt annoyed. It was just a carnival attraction. They'd go inside, see some cheap re-creations of witches stirring their kettles or being burned at the stake, and then they'd be done and out, getting jostled by the crowd and shouting to

make themselves heard over the raucous music and the constant cries of the game operators. Any other time, they'd walk away, shaking their heads and joking with each other about how lame the whole thing was and how silly they'd been to be afraid.

Except it wasn't any other night. He was cold, tired, and his head hurt.

"It looks like we don't have a choice," he said. When they got out, he intended to have some serious words with the barker or the manager or whoever was in charge. "C'mon. We'll zip through and then grab that hot chocolate you wanted."

"All right." She didn't sound convinced, but she didn't object when he started walking.

Still holding hands, they stepped onto the gravel path that led to the castle. For a split second, Jason's vision went fuzzy and the carnival seemed to spin around him. Then the fleeting disorientation disappeared. He glanced at Erika, who seemed not to have noticed. She was staring at the castle, looking about as happy as if she'd just lost her wallet.

Good. Jason was glad for her distraction; he didn't want her worrying about him. He was perfectly capable of doing that himself. Concussion, brain bleed, blood clot…it was probably nothing, but he'd heard of people bumping their heads and then dying later on from hemorrhages. Not the way he wanted to go. He made a mental note to watch for any other symptoms or dizzy spells, and promised himself that if he experienced anything he'd have Erika take him to the emergency room.

"Where is everyone?"

Erika's voice brought him out of his reverie. He looked around. "What do you mean?"

"There's nobody here but us." She gestured with her free hand, indicating the hard-packed ground with its scattered clumps of dead grass. Wide swatches of what was ordinarily an empty field surrounded the castle.

"That's not possible." Jason frowned.

"And why is it so quiet?"

Stop asking so many questions and maybe you'll hear something! The mental shout almost made it to Jason's lips but he blocked it, taken aback by his own inexplicable anger. Why was he mad at Erika? He took a deep breath, planning on telling her—*nicely*—that she was letting her imagination get the best of her. After all, just a moment ago

the lights of the rides and the sounds of people had…

He stopped. Because Erika was right. The world around them had gone silent and dark. No rock music blaring from speakers mounted over rides, no screams as people whipped around in circles or got turned upside down on the Alpine Slide or Space Capsule, no whining children begging their parents for dollars. The only lights in the sky were a sprinkling of stars, and the only smells in the air were the earthy scents of dirt and grass scuffed and flattened by thousands of footsteps.

It was just the two of them and the Warlock's Castle.

"Something must have happened," he said, unaware he'd spoken aloud until Erika answered him.

"Like what?"

"I don't know. A power failure?"

She shook her head. "The lights in front of the castle are still on. And we'd hear people. Talking. Shouting."

He nodded. She was right. There'd be people calling out for the lights to get turned on, people screaming for help from the tops of the Ferris wheel or the other rides… Instead, there was just dead silence. Not even crickets or night birds chirping.

"Let's go back," Erika said, and this time Jason felt no embarrassment in agreeing. They turned around.

And found themselves staring at an empty field that stretched on for as far as they could see until it disappeared into the blackness of the night.

From the depths of that darkness, a long, drawn-out howl broke the silence. A heartbeat later, several others answered it.

Hands grabbed Jason's arm and he jumped before he realized it was only Erika.

"Oh God…where's the carnival?"

He could only shake his head while a feeling of déjà vu swept over him—*Erika saying the same thing, only the last time it was while they were fighting their way up a hill on their way to a different castle.*

One that looked exactly the same.

Fragments of his other dream—a dream within a dream within a dream?—came to him. Alone in a cemetery surrounded by unseen creatures. Was that going to happen again as well?

"We need to get away from here." He turned back toward the Warlock's Castle, pulling Erika with him.

"Jason?" A note of hysteria was creeping into her voice. *Just like*

the last time.

"I don't know what's happening," he said, answering her question before she could ask it. "It's this carnival. It's fucked up, and we need to get out. And the only way is through there." He pointed at the castle as they fast-walked down the gravel path.

It only took them a couple of minutes to reach the castle, but in that time they heard several more of the menacing howls behind them. A dank, cold ground mist sprang up out of nowhere, thicker than anything a fog machine might produce, its clammy tendrils seeping through their shoes and socks and leaving a slimy sensation on their skin.

When they got to the doors, Jason reached for the handle and then paused.

"What's the matter?" Erika asked, looking behind them. The fog had nearly reached their waists, and it sounded like the wailing animals were closer.

"The doors." He rapped his fist on one. It delivered the solid *thunk* of thick hardwood. "They're not plywood. And the walls are real stone," he added, running his hands over one.

A low growl, filled with promises of violence and blood, came from not far down the path. Jason glanced over his shoulder and saw the mist swirling in random eddies just beyond the glow from one of the now-muted walkway lights.

No longer caring about the inexplicable change in the construction of the castle, he pushed the door open and pulled Erika inside, then shut it and dropped the metal latch into place.

And was struck with another episode of déjà vu.

Flickering torches set into the walls revealed a foyer that was as familiar to him as his own front porch. In his dream, he'd been in the very same passageway when they entered Osvald's castle.

A heavy body hit the outside of the door hard enough to shake it on its hinges. Erika let out a scream and jumped forward. On the other side of the thick wood, something growled and snorted.

"C'mon. We have to get out of here." He grabbed one of the torches from its metal holder and started through the foyer. With only one tiny latch on the door, whatever was outside might very well break through, and he had no desire to see what it was.

"How do you know where you're going?" Erika asked when Jason

led the way past two alcoves he remembered as being empty and headed straight for the great room.

"I've been here before," he said, ignoring her puzzled response while he guided them through the giant room, his torch thrust forward to ward off the encroaching darkness. Only a few sconces guttered in random locations along the walls, casting just enough light to turn the room from black to gray. Unlike the last time he'd seen it, it was empty of furniture. Cobwebs and dust covered every ledge, nestled in every corner.

When they reached the long staircase that led up to the guest bedrooms, Jason paused. The previously polished steps were now dull and cracked; several were missing and many others showed evidence of advanced wood rot. A quick look showed that the stairs heading to Professor Osvald's quarters were in a similar state of disrepair.

Rather than risk falling through or breaking an ankle, Jason pulled Erika into the short passage that connected the dining room to the kitchen.

"We can hide in the cold pantry," he told her. As they hurried past the counters, he kept an eye out for weapons, but the kitchen was as empty as the previous rooms, with not a knife or pot in sight.

The door to the pantry stood ajar, the opening a black stripe that was in no way reassuring. Jason stopped again, remembering what had happened the last time he walked through that door.

A crash sounded at the far end of the castle, a booming *thud* that echoed from room to room, its promise of violence undiminished. A chorus of growls followed.

Jason pulled the pantry door open and they ran inside.

He turned to shut the door, fighting another bout of dizziness that passed as quickly as it came on.

The door was no longer there.

Inside the Proprietor's trailer, the black curtain at the back rippled and flowed as a skeletal figure emerged. In the darkness, the Proprietor glowed with a sickly phosphorescence. Sallow flesh stretched tight over bones, threatening to split open with every movement. His mouth, distorted into a long muzzle filled with razor-sharp teeth, opened wide, revealing a scaly black tongue forked at the end.

"Enjoy your time at the beach, Mr. Phillips."

It's happening again. He didn't need to turn around and see the stagnant ocean or boulder-strewn beach to know it. Erika's gasp, the smell of salt water and dead fish in the air, the clammy mist weaving around his knees—all of it told him exactly where he was.

More importantly, the slime tracks on the ground in front of him and the dismal gray fogbank already shrouding the light from the rising sun told him *when* he was.

Too close to the time when the creatures came out of their holes.

"We have to get through the cemetery before that fog rolls in!" Jason tugged at Erika's sleeve. She was staring at the sea, her mouth hanging open. He tugged again, harder this time. The glazed look in her eyes faded as she looked at him and focused on his face.

"What…? How… Where are we? What cemetery? Dammit, Jason, tell me what the hell is going on!"

"There's no time." He grabbed her wrist. "I promise I'll explain everything. But not now. Not here. It's too dangerous."

They crossed the beach, broken shells snapping and crunching beneath their feet, and started up the steep hill, Jason helping Erika when her hands or feet slipped. Although there was no way to know for sure—the hill looked the same to the left and right as it did where they were climbing—he was positive they were close to the same spot where he'd ascended before. Old slime trails crisscrossed the rough ground, indicating dozens—or hundreds!—of the mysterious monsters had passed by recently. Despite the trails being dry and faded, he made sure they only stepped on them when absolutely necessary, not wanting to risk having the caustic substance burn through their shoes.

At the top of the hill, he helped her over the edge and urged her forward, despite the fact they were both gasping for air. She stumbled after a few steps, and only Jason's tight grip on her hand kept her from falling. Her eyes were wide as she stared at the endless cemetery stretching out before them, and Jason understood it was shock, not exhaustion, that had caused her to falter. Still, there was no time to waste, not if they wanted to get clear of the cemetery, or at least well away from the advancing fog, before the concealed creatures emerged from their hiding places. Supporting her with one arm, he hurried them across the dead ground and between the headstones and markers.

Until Erika stopped short.

"Erika, don't—" The rest of his words died in his throat when he saw why she'd halted.

Two rows to their left was an open grave with a red rose atop the granite headstone. The same one he'd seen the last time. Only now, with Erika pointing directly at it, he had no choice but to read the inscription he'd averted his eyes from during his first visit to the bizarre necropolis.

Erika Snell
Age 24
Died that others might live

"Jason? That's…that's my name. Why is my name on there?"

Her last few words came out in something close to a scream, and he grabbed her shoulders and pulled her close, figuring it would help calm her. Instead, she grew even more frantic, beating at him with her fists and shouting for him to let go of her. He tightened his hold and she responded by kicking his leg, connecting solidly with his knee. The unexpected pain made him cry out and he let go. The moment his grip loosened, she pulled free and ran away, heading back toward the cliff.

"Erika!" Ignoring the way his knee barked in pain and threatened to give out with each step, he sprinted after her. He caught up before she reached the edge and tackled her between two graves.

"Erika, stop! Calm down!" he shouted when she began to kick and squirm again. After a few seconds, she went limp beneath him. Hoping she wasn't faking, Jason rolled off her. Instead of running, Erika sat up and burst into tears. Jason attempted to put his arms around her again, and this time she returned the embrace. He let her cry into his shoulder, and only pulled back when he heard muffled words instead of just sobbing.

"What is it?" he asked, wiping tears from her cheeks. He'd never seen her freak out so badly.

"That grave. With my name." Erika's words came out in short bursts between sniffles and the hiccup-like sounds she made whenever she was finished crying. "I…I saw it before."

"You saw it? When? Where?" He couldn't believe she'd never mentioned anything about it to him.

"That's just it. I don't know!" She frowned in frustration and pursed her lips. "It's like it was a dream, but I can't remember when I had it, only that I did. I was in a cold, dark room. You were there, sleeping. Everything was…old. Like antiques. Victorian. And I had this dream that someone had died, a whole family, and I was going to be

next. They wanted me to join them."

A shiver ran up Jason's back while Erika described her dream, and the frigid, scaly hands of déjà vu dug their claws into his guts.

A cold room. Antique furniture. Dead people.

She dreamed about Osvald's castle.

Only, how could that be? He thought he'd been the only one to fantasize about the storm-swept castle and its odd inhabitants. Since the moment he'd woken up in the Tunnel of Love, he'd never once heard Erika mention anything about going through a similar occurrence. So why now? Had she experienced something while under the water in the Tunnel of Love? Or had she dreamed about the castle some other time?

What the hell was going on?

"Erika, tell me more about this—"

He never got a chance to finish his question.

Erika screamed and pointed behind him. He turned, a part of him already certain the amoeboid thing from the grave was coming for them. And it was. With dozens of its friends.

The creatures crept out of the fog as silently as ghosts, the damp thumping and squishing of their soft bodies cloaked by the thick mists. Each gelatinous blob was several feet long and had rudimentary arms and legs, useless appendages made of the same amorphous substance as the bodies they protruded from. The loathsome monsters humped along like caterpillars, moving surprisingly fast despite the fact that they looked like elongated jellyfish.

What made the things truly awful, though, was that each one had a head and face with human features, features twisted and mutated by a lack of bone and muscle, yet human nonetheless.

Human features, but the dead, cold eyes of a fish.

Jason opened his mouth to tell Erika to run, but even before he could speak, he realized it was too late. The disgusting creatures had them surrounded, pinned against the cliffs. Their only escape was down, and that would be just a temporary reprieve, because then they'd be blocked by the ocean. The deadly bags of slime would have no problem following them; he'd already seen their tracks all over the hillside, which meant they probably traveled back and forth between the graveyard and beach with regularity.

Jason let out a curse. They had no choice. They couldn't fight their way through the jelly things, not with the acid slime coating their bodies. Their only hope was to get to the beach and pray it led to some

kind of shelter. A cave, a house, anything.

"Down the hill," he said. "And whatever you do, don't let those things touch you."

This time, Erika didn't ask any questions, for which Jason was glad. What could he say? He didn't even understand what was happening himself.

They reached the bottom of the hill in record time, sliding down the last few yards of loose soil like it was the world's largest playground ride. As soon as they reached the rough sand of the beach, Jason turned them to the left for no other reason than it was the direction they'd come from. The tower of soupy mist had already covered the beach and reduced visibility to a few yards, and Jason's stomach churned at the thought that anything could sneak up on them and they'd never see it before it was too late.

"Let's go," he whispered. Erika nodded, her face blotchy from their exertions and covered in sweat. She gripped his hand.

"Don't let go of me."

"I won't."

Together, they ran through the unending gray cloud, dodging rocks that appeared out of the fog without warning. More than once they found their way blocked by boulders and had to swerve to the side, both of them instinctively choosing to wade through the foul-smelling, stagnant water, rather than moving closer to the cliffs and putting themselves within reach of any creatures that might have finished their descent.

Jason's sense of time and distance deserted him almost instantly, thanks to the limited visibility and lack of any landmarks. So it might have been five minutes or ten, a half mile or two miles, when Erika pulled hard on his hand and came to a stop.

"What is it?" he asked, the words tumbling out between long wheezing gasps for air. His lungs felt like someone had poured acid into them, and he assumed that's why she'd wanted to stop.

"I…I heard something." Erika was bent over, her chest heaving, but she managed to point at the unpleasant ocean on their right. "Over there."

"What was it?"

Erika shook her head, unable to get the words out.

Jason took deep breaths, trying to calm the pounding of his own pulse in his ears. "What did—?" He stopped, because as his violent heart rate eased up, he *did* hear something over the sound of his own

breathing. A metallic clacking, but distorted, overlaid with the more familiar sound of splashing water. It reminded Jason of someone washing silverware in the sink.

Click-clack-splash-clack-clack-splash-click-clack—

"You hear it." It wasn't a question. He nodded rather than answering, turning his head to see if he could get a better idea of where the sounds were coming from.

"It's getting louder." More than a hint of fear had crept into Erika's voice, and Jason knew why. Louder meant closer. Or there was more than one thing making the noise. Either way, it meant trouble. Especially since they couldn't see what was approaching. He peered into the fog, trying to catch any signs of movement.

"Jason…" Erika bumped into him as she backed away from the water. At the same time, the intensity of the sounds increased.

Click-clack-splash-clack-clack—

The water. It's coming from the water.

He looked past Erika, across the ten feet of beach separating them from the stagnant ocean. An ocean that was no longer motionless, but boiling. The surface churned and bubbled right at the point where waves should have been lapping gently at the sand. Instead, there was a ragged, foamy line of demarcation between land and sea.

Something rose out of the water. A claw, longer than Jason's hand. Then another. And another. Within a few seconds, there were hundreds—*thousands!*—sticking up, opening and closing in unison.

Clack-clack-clack-clack-clack-clack!

Erika backed away from the sudden invasion and Jason followed, putting a large boulder between them and the impossible life forms emerging from the ocean. Three and four feet long, with multiple antennae and a dozen spiny legs, they were a geneticist's nightmare, a combination of lobster and spider crab and centipede, all claws and jaws, with segmented bodies covered in a spiny shell and giant, multifaceted eyes.

"Run!" The word erupted from Jason's mouth even as Erika was already turning around.

Except there was nowhere to go.

Twenty feet away, a swarm of the jelly-slugs was materializing from the fog, their combined slime trails creating a glittering rainbow sheen across the ground. The saclike creatures humped and slid across the earth and sand and pieces of shell without pause. As they drew closer, their humanoid mouths gaped open, displaying jagged fangs.

In that moment, Jason's mind gave up. Coherent thought disappeared, replaced by a numbing blanket of gray as his brain anesthetized itself. Nothing mattered anymore, nothing registered. His senses all still worked, but the messages they forwarded never reached their destination. It was the acceptance of the end, the realization that not only was he going to die, he was going to die the most horrible death possible. And rather than experience it, his consciousness retreated into a place where there was no pain, and never would be.

It would have been perfect, if something didn't keep echoing inside his head, a single word, repeated over and over.

Son. Son. Son. Son.

"—son! Jason!"

Erika's voice broke through his mental shields, bringing reality crashing down on him at the same time. The monsters were drawing closer, the discordant mix of clicks and clacks and thumps and squelches nearly drowning out Erika's shouting.

"Jason! The rock. It's our only chance!"

He shook his head. The rock? What was—? Then he understood. She wanted them to climb on top of the towering boulder they'd been hiding behind. A rush of adrenaline surged through his veins, renewing his energy and propelling him into action. He gripped the jagged rock with both hands, pulling himself up, ignoring the sharp edges cutting through his flesh. His feet fought for the slightest ledges and crevices. Next to him, Erika scrambled and clawed just as fast. Five feet, ten feet, and then they were at the top, standing on a dome just large enough to hold them safely if they squeezed against each other.

Below them, the jelly-slugs and mutant lobsters engaged in an insane, violent war, claws and mandibles tearing and shredding soft flesh, teeth crushing shells and acids dissolving organic matter. The stench of death and alien fluids rose up in rank waves, accompanied by the squeals and groans of primordial death. Looking down, Jason realized where all the broken shells on the beach had come from. They were the remnants of past battles, a macabre testament to an endless cycle of primitive warfare fought by mindless life forms and fueled by instinctive hatred.

Life forms so intent on killing each other they weren't paying any attention to the two humans atop their perch. For the first time since they'd appeared on the beach, Jason began to feel safe.

Until the earth began to shake.

Erika lunged at him, wrapping her arms around his chest.

"Hang on!" he yelled, praying the rock was too large to topple over. Up and down the beach, rocks and boulders tilted and swayed as the earthquake grew stronger. A distant roaring sound drew his attention to the ocean, just in time to see the waters receding, exposing weird reddish-yellow plants and shells with twisted, irregular shapes.

The roaring grew louder, drowning out the sounds of the animals battling on the beach. Erika shouted something but he couldn't hear it over the deafening thunder filling his ears.

The wave came out of nowhere, a giant wall of gray water thirty feet high and only a few shades darker than the surrounding mists.

The wave hit with the force of a speeding car, slamming Jason so hard it didn't just knock the air from his lungs, it pounded it out, compressing his chest until there was no place for the air inside his body. It wrenched him from Erika's arms, their fingers grasping and reaching as polluted water pulled them from each other.

The last thing he saw was Erika's horrified face surrounded by the ghostly, half-human countenances of the jelly-slugs.

Then bitter fluids filled his mouth and flowed down his throat. The world faded away around him as his oxygen-starved lungs screamed in agony. Once more, his brain threatened to close shop, shut down, erase the pain.

Only this time he refused to let it. Not with Erika so close. He couldn't let her go like that. Couldn't let her get taken from him.

Swim! he shouted at himself, forcing his body to move through the cold waters.

Live!

Li…

Water. Cold. On his face.

Alive?

It didn't seem possible.

Jason opened his eyes. A woman hovered over him, a damp cloth in her hand.

Erika? No.

Maria.

He blinked, but her face remained.

If Maria is here, then…

He was in the castle again, his brain answered. Not the Warlock's Castle. Johann Osvald's castle. On the island. In the past.

Erika. She didn't die. Not here. There were no monsters. They were just part of…what? A nightmare? A hallucination?

Was it all part of the same dream? The face above him grew fuzzy. What was real? Any of it? He didn't know anymore.

Erika. *She* was real. Concentrate on her. She was…

Missing. She'd been drowning. No. Wrong dream. Wrong time.

Sleepwalking! I followed…and something hit my head.

"What happened?" The words came out hoarse but steady. He sat up, ignoring the way the hallway spun around him. Real or not, it was where he was now, and he had to find Erika before something—something else—bad happened to her. In this timeline or any other.

"Where's Erika?"

Maria shook her head. "It's too late, they have her."

"Who's they? Who has her?" He got to his feet, the dizziness fading as a throbbing pain took its place. He reached back and felt a sizable lump already forming behind one ear. He looked at his hand to see if there was any blood, and frowned. His palms were covered in scratches.

From climbing the boulder.

No. That was the dream. The dream within the dream.

He wanted to shake his head, but it hurt too much. Everything was so confused, so mixed up. He wished he could just go back to bed and wake up to a world where everything was normal again and his head didn't ache.

Concussion. He'd hit his head at the carnival and that was causing the hallucinations. Or had he hit his head here and hallucinated the carnival? Did it matter anymore? His head hurt and the world was inside out.

A tear ran down Maria's cheek. "The spirits of the dead. I warned you. Now they've taken your friends and your woman."

"That doesn't make sense. Where are they?" Anger surged through him, driving away the cobwebs in his brain. He clenched his fist, tempted for a moment to strike the diminutive woman.

As if sensing his barely controlled violence, Maria backed away before answering him.

"The professor's room. He's…he's using them to bring back his dead family."

"What?" The maid's words were gibberish, nonsense.

"'Tis true. It's magic, black magic. I told him he should stop with the first two, that he didn't need another. Mister Burns and his

woman, the children. That should have been enough. He didn't need *her*. Besides…I would have…I loved him enough to volunteer. But he didn't want me. He called to your woman in her sleep. You…they didn't need you, just like they don't need me. Not the way I need him."

The maid burst into tears, holding both hands over her face. Jason didn't understand what she was saying, or even if anything he was experiencing was real, but if it was real, then Erika was in trouble. He couldn't take the chance it was just a dream. He wasn't about to let anything happen to her.

Not this time.

He grabbed Maria by the shoulders and shook her. "Show me where they are."

Still crying, Maria nodded. "Perhaps it's best to put an end to this abomination."

She took him down the stairs and then up the second staircase, the one that led to Osvald's quarters. They passed by the second-floor landing and continued up the creaking steps to the third floor, where a single torch guttered, leaving the landing and hallway wrapped in blankets of gloom. It was colder as well, enough so that Jason caught glimpses of his breath.

Random flashes of lightning created a slow-motion strobe effect through the scattered windows. Thunder exploded outside, louder than before, as if the storm were angry at Jason's impending intrusion into the forbidden chambers. The relentless din shook the castle and vibrated the floor, reminding Jason of the earthquake on the beach.

"This way," Maria whispered, despite there being no one else around. She scurried down the hall, glancing behind her to make sure Jason was following. After passing several doors, she paused by one. A fan of flickering yellow light escaped from the space at the bottom.

"In there. 'Tis where he does his dark deeds." She crossed herself and stepped back.

Jason didn't hesitate. He grabbed the handle, flung the door open and charged inside. After only three steps he stopped, stunned and appalled by what he saw.

Two hideous forms, both smaller than adults, stood a few feet away, their backs to him. Wet, rotted rags draped their forms and their equally putrefied flesh showed through in ghastly shades of translucent blue, gray and green. Patches of hair sprouted in clumps from otherwise bald skulls.

"The spirits live," whispered Maria from the doorway.

At her words, the two corpses slowly turned around, and Jason felt a scream rising at the sight of them. He held it back, afraid that if he gave it life it might never stop.

Each creature's face was divided into two parts: the horrible visage of a long-dead child on the left, and healthy, pink, living flesh on the right.

The flesh of Charles Burns and Lilly Thorn.

"Oh my God." Disbelief crumbled away like ash in a breeze. No longer did he doubt Maria's words or refute the possibility of the supernatural. The evidence stood before him and he had to accept it as real, because no sane person could ever imagine anything so horrid, not even in their most fevered nightmares. Somehow Osvald had managed to bring his dead children back from their watery grave and meld their bodies with those of Charles and Lilly, to take the life force of the living and transfer it to the dead.

The Burns-son smiled, exposing a full set of teeth on one side and a rotted, yellowed jawbone on the other. Water dripped from their bodies and Jason realized that one or both of the creatures had been in Burns's room earlier that night, had taken him away in the same manner they'd probably taken Lilly.

The way they'd taken Erika.

He pulled his gaze away from the two impossible beings and looked around the rest of the room.

For the first time, he noticed he was in a library. It was enormous, almost as large as the dining and sitting areas on the first floor combined. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves occupied two entire walls. Thousands, *tens of thousands*, of books lined the shelves. Between them was an oversized fireplace, its flames low and sputtering and offering no heat.

A wide desk squatted like a bloated toad against the fourth wall, its wood chipped and stained, its stout legs doing their best to hold up under the weight of the books and papers piled in precarious fashion atop it.

Scattered along the outside walls were tall stained-glass windows, which were presently enduring an assault by a downpour so furious Jason wondered how it hadn't shattered the glass already.

All of this Jason took in with just a glance before turning his eyes toward the man in the center of the room.

Osvald stood there with a thick, ancient-looking book in one hand, as if lecturing to one of his classes. In his other hand, he held a

wicked-looking knife with a black blade. Intricate patterns decorated the handle. He was facing away from Jason and reciting words in a strange language.

A spell. The same kind of spell that had brought his children back. No doubts accompanied the thought. The idea that magic and spells and time travel were not only possible but real no longer aroused any skepticism in Jason's mind. And because he believed, he knew he had to stop Osvald, put an end to the man's insane experiment, if he and Erika were going to have any chance of getting off the island alive.

"Osvald! Put the book down. This madness ends now."

The professor paused in his incantation and looked back over his shoulder.

"You're right, my friend. It does. But not for the reason you think." His lips pulled up in a maniacal grin so unlike his usual somber expression. Stepping to one side, he exposed a scene straight out of Hell.

The final sacrifice to his dark gods.

Jason looked past the deranged professor and felt his heart stutter. Erika lay naked in the center of a circle drawn in blood, a human pentagram highlighted in crimson. As he fought through the shock of seeing her that way, more details became apparent. Her arms and legs were tied to wooden pegs that had been driven into the floor. Her head was tilted to one side, her hair in tangles across her face, but there was no mistaking her for anyone else. Long, jagged cuts, so fresh they still dripped red rivers onto the floor, ran the length of her limbs.

"Erika!"

Her name exploded from his throat, propelled by horror and anger and emotions he couldn't even name. She didn't respond, but Osvald laughed.

"You're too late, boy."

The idea of it was an ice-cold dagger to Jason's heart, but then he saw her chest rising and falling.

She's alive!

His body reacted instantly. There was no rational thought in his head except an all-consuming desire to save the woman he loved. He lowered his shoulder and charged forward, ready to force his way past the two nightmares and the professor and free Erika. After that, he'd kill anyone who came near her. In his mind, he was ready to do whatever he needed to.

Instead, he found himself bouncing off Osvald's demonic offspring

as if they were made of stone. He landed on his back, gasping for air, unable to fight back when the waterlogged zombies grasped him with iron-strong fingers and hauled him to his feet. Their stench filled the air with the stink of death and rotten fish, and his gasps turned to a violent retching that left him even more helpless.

Maria screamed, drawing Jason's attention. She pointed behind him, and he turned his head, already fearing he knew exactly what he would see.

Three people taken. But only two monsters made.

Which meant it was Erika's turn.

His terror grew even worse when he saw he was right.

The third revenant was taller than the others, but no less grotesque. It shambled forward in awkward, hesitant steps, dripping water, slime and other foul fluids. Like the others, it wore the remnants of the clothes it had perished in. What was left of its hair hung to its shoulders; withered, slate-gray breasts dangled behind disintegrating cloth. Large portions of its face were missing, eaten away by sea creatures and rot. A stubby tongue peered eellike from a gaping hole in one cheek.

The creature opened its mouth and brownish-green seawater dribbled out, adding further insult to the already polluted air.

"Johannnn," it said, its voice choked with phlegm.

"My darling." The professor put down his book and approached the sea-hag, took it into his arms.

Kissed it deeply and passionately.

"Abomination!" Maria turned away. Jason felt his stomach twist as another spasm racked his guts and he doubled over, spitting out the last bits of vomit in his body.

Osvald took his dead wife by the hand and led her to a point directly in front of Erika, so that their feet almost touched.

Knowing what was about to happen, Jason struggled to break free, but his unearthly captors maintained their hold.

"Erika!" he shouted. Her eyes remained closed. "Erika! Wake up! Don't let her touch you."

"It is time," the professor said, ignoring Jason's cries. He raised the ebony blade and strode forward, placing himself between Erika and his corpse bride. Without being told what to do, the dead woman raised her arms, mimicking Erika's forced pose.

Osvald placed the knife against the soft, white flesh of the corpse's arm and drew it downward, parting the skin in a long line. He repeated

the motion with the other arm and both legs. Yellowish-green fluids spilled from the wounds, filling the room with the rancid odors of decayed flesh and sewage.

Instead of showing pain, the creature let out a bubbling sigh of near ecstasy and knelt on the ground. Slowly, carefully, it leaned forward until its arms and legs were pressed against Erika's.

Bits of his wife's flesh hung from his lips and chin as Osvald picked up his book. He flicked them aside and resumed reading.

"Flesh to flesh, blood to blood, life for life, let two become one. Soggoth, Dagon, Hydra, hear my plea. Asmodeus, Astaroth, Mormo, hear my plea."

Osvald raised his knife, the blade still dripping inhuman ichor, and waved it towards the entwined bodies. Erika's eyes opened and a loud moan escaped from lips trapped by the mouth of the dead thing on top of her.

"Erika! No!" At the sound of Jason's voice, her eyes turned toward him, filled with fear and pain.

Osvald lifted the book high and shouted.

"Leviathan, hear my plea!"

Erika screamed and the corpse echoed her, the two voices blending into one.

For a moment, Jason thought tears had blurred his vision. The outlines of the two bodies grew indistinct and then clear again. Osvald let out a triumphant cry.

The corpse rose to its feet and Jason knew he'd failed.

Erika's cuts gaped open but no longer bled. Her chest no longer rose and fell. Her skin, which had held the last of its summer tan only hours before, had paled to grayish-white.

The creature turned around and Jason wished he were the one who'd died.

The left side of its face was still a skull, with only shreds of flesh hanging on the bone. The right side, though, was a perfect duplicate of Erika's beautiful features. Like her face, half the sea-hag's body had acquired Erika's human form.

"My love, you have returned to me." Osvald held his arms out to the loathsome thing.

"As you promised me," it said in a voice still thick with unearthly fluids. She stepped into his embrace and Jason had to look away, unable to bear the sight of the Erika half eagerly meeting the professor's lips and tongue with her own.

"No!"

Maria's sudden shout brought Jason's eyes open. She was running across the room towards Osvald and his terrible creation, a large carving knife in her hand.

"I won't let you take him away from me, you monster!"

Osvald let go of his reanimated wife and caught Maria by the arm before the blade reached its target. The force of her charge pushed them back several yards, their feet sliding as they struggled to keep their balance on the wet floor. Although Osvald was easily stronger than the diminutive woman, Maria's wildly flailing arms and the deadly blade she held made her his equal, at least temporarily. With both of his hands busy keeping the knife at bay, it left her other arm and legs free to attack him. She continued to thrash about, kicking and clawing and screaming like a madwoman, causing him to retreat farther and farther, until he found himself pinned to a wall between two of the ceiling-high windows.

Maria lashed out with a foot, catching the professor in the shin. He shouted in pain and his grip on her knife hand loosened, allowing her the opportunity to bring the blade down in a fast arc. It made a meaty *thump* as it sliced into the side of his neck, right over his collarbone.

Osvald let out a bellow that turned into a bubbling gasp. Bloody froth spilled from his mouth and his eyes bulged from their sockets. He grabbed at the maid but she gave him a hard push, sending him into a nearby window that flew open when the weight of his body hit it. Osvald had time to choke out her name—*"Maria!"*—one time, his hand still reaching for her, and then he was gone, lost in the blackness of the night and storm.

"Professor!" Dropping the knife, she ran to the window, ignoring the heavy rain pouring in.

At the same time, the two zombies let go of Jason and he crossed the room, joining Maria at the window ledge, his hair and shirt instantly soaked as he leaned out and looked down. More than a hundred feet below, the storm-powered waves crashed brutally against the rocky shore, barely visible but loud enough to be heard over the sounds of the rain.

There was no sign of the professor's body.

Remembering the three monsters behind him, Jason turned away from the window and stepped to the side before they could send him on the same path as Osvald. There was no immediate danger, however, as the creatures were still standing in the center of the room, the woman flanked by the two children.

The thing that wore Erika's face stared at him, her single eye alive and filled with sadness rather than evil.

"Jason?" it asked, its voice half Erika's and half something else, something not meant for the human world.

"Erika?" he responded automatically. "Is it really you?"

She shook her head, then nodded. "I… We're both in here. Mary and I. It feels so…strange. She talks to me. She's…nice. She's not angry with you. All she ever wanted was to be with the man she loves."

"'Tis truth," Maria said, her words drenched in sorrow. "The professor tried other spells, ones that would return Mary completely, but nothing worked. Until he found this one. He was going to try it on his daughter first. Josephine. A lovely young girl. He'd steal a girl from town, that was his plan. But the storm came in. And then…then the four of you showed up and changed everything. Soon as I saw you, I knew what would happen. He kept to his plan. The children first. It was always the children first with them."

She paused, shook her head again. Jason wanted to shout at her, "Why didn't you warn us?" but all he could do was listen, caught up in the tale of just how far a man would go for love.

"When…when he saw what happened, what she looked like…*after*, I thought he'd give up. An abomination against God, that's what his spell brought about. I told him so. 'Twas the devil's game he was playing, and nothing good could come of it. But he said 'twas better to have them this way than not at all."

Maria lifted her head and stared hard at Jason. "Them, not her. That's what he said. And I knew he'd made his decision. He would bring them all back, no matter what the cost."

A tiny whimper pulled Jason's attention from Maria to Erika/Mary. A tear ran down the Erika side of the creature's face, but somehow both halves managed to look grief-stricken.

"I'm a monster, aren't I?" Its voice was soft, but Jason still heard it above the roar of the storm.

He wanted to deny it, tell her that she could never be a monster, but he couldn't. Couldn't lie to her, not with her looking at him like that. He'd already lied to her too much, lied about them going home, about being safe in the castle, about not worrying, about taking care of her.

Except he hadn't.

He hadn't kept her safe, not here, not on the beach, not at that damned carnival. He'd failed her.

The woman he loved, the beautiful girl he'd planned on marrying, wasn't even human anymore. She was a monster, there was no denying it. The corpse half of her proved it each time he looked at her, with its rotting skin, bleached bones and missing eye. With its stench that not even the wind gusting in from the broken window could drive away.

She was a monster, and so were the two children standing next to her. The best thing, the most humane thing to do would be to kill them again, for good this time, and then burn down the castle and all the dreadful secrets it contained.

And then what? his inner self asked. *What happens to you?*

He'd be trapped in the past still, only this time completely alone. Not even a picture of Erika to remember her by. Doomed to spend the rest of his life in a place as strange and unfamiliar to him as another planet. Haunted forever by the memories of what he'd lost.

How could he live like that?

He looked at the undead standing there, all of them, a mother and her two children, a couple who'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time, the woman he loved. All of them, in their own ways, dealing with the exact same kind of loss he was feeling.

Lightning flashed outside and thunder shook the walls.

Deep inside him, something moaned and died.

He knew what he had to do.

"Bring his body back," he said to Osvald's children, ignoring the cold, empty feeling in his stomach. Turning to Maria, he pointed at the spellbook on the floor.

"Show me what I need to know."

Erika came to him, took his hand. Her flesh was cold and wet. Soon it wouldn't matter. "Jason, what are you doing?"

"Making sure we'll always be together. *All* of us."

Both sides of her face smiled.

Hundreds of years away, in one of a million possible realities, people screamed at the sight of the swan boat exiting the Tunnel of Love, and the two wet, decomposing corpses it contained. Locked in a permanent embrace, their empty eye sockets stared into the night as the final strains of "Muskrat Love" faded away.

Standing in the shadows, the Proprietor chuckled.

"Such fun. Such fun indeed."

About the Author

JG Faherty is the Bram Stoker Award®-nominated author of five novels, seven novellas, and more than 50 short stories. Several of them involve the Carnival of Fear. He writes adult and YA horror/sci-fi/fantasy, and his works range from quiet, dark suspense to over-the-top comic gruesomeness. He enjoys urban exploring, photography, classic B-movies, good wine, and pumpkin beer. His personal motto is "Photobombing people since 1979!"

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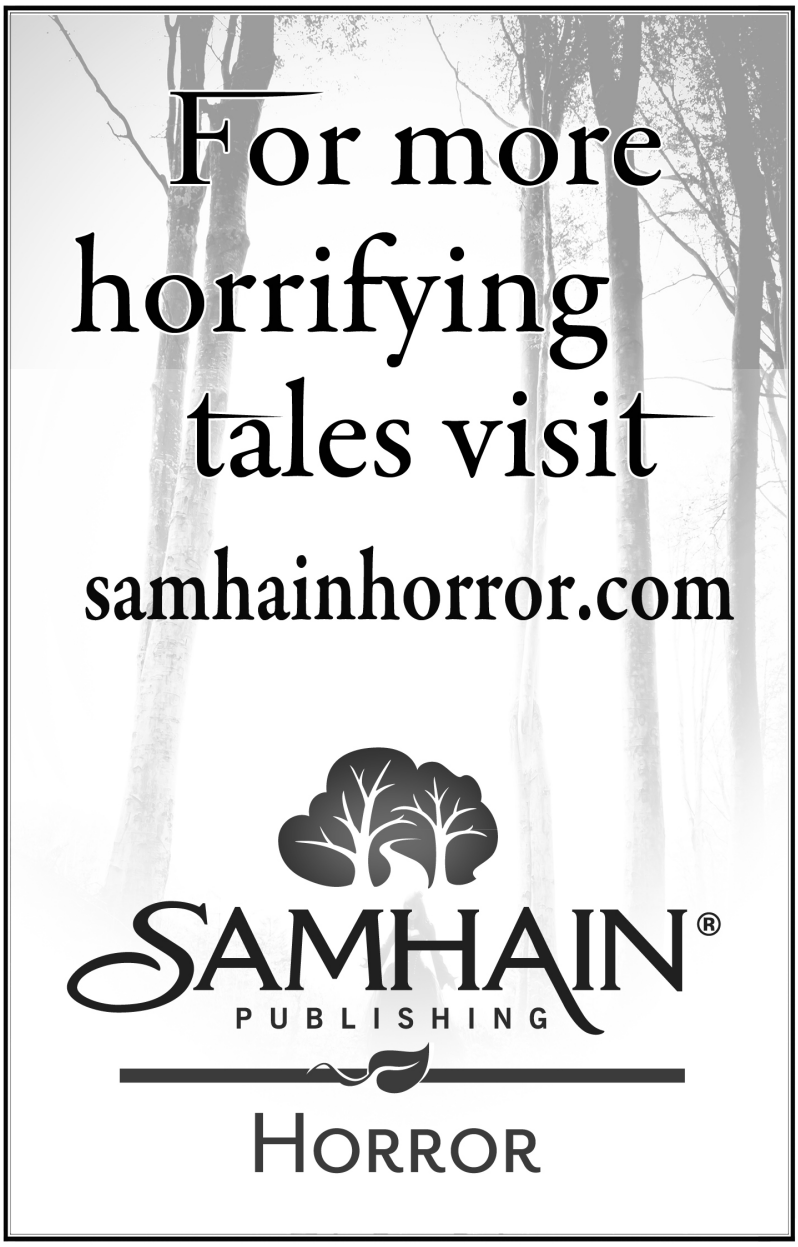


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