



# The Beast of Blackbirch Manor

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New Concepts Publishing  
Lake Park, GA 31636  
[www.newconceptspublishing.com](http://www.newconceptspublishing.com)

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*For Billy*

## Chapter One

*Southwestern Pennsylvania,  
September 1895*

Victoria's steps faltered as she rounded the bend in the road that would bring her to Blackbirch Manor. Shoving away the remnants of the old horror from her mind, she knew she must not delay any longer. Married to Tadeusz Hermanowski by proxy six weeks ago, she had insisted she needed time to settle her affairs in New York before she could journey to Taylor's Grove, Pennsylvania. However, Tadeusz had grown impatient and her cousin, Paul's, desperate letters convinced her to put aside her misgivings and make haste.

Despite the stifling heat of the day, an icy shiver wound its way around Victoria's heart as she trudged onward up the hill to what had been her childhood home. Nine years ago, she had left under a cloud of suspicion, intending never to return. Now the manor no longer belonged to her family. Tadeusz Hermanowski owned the estate.

Paul had insisted upon the marriage. Officially in mourning for the death of her first husband, Giles Billingsford III, Victoria objected to her cousin's plan. However, Giles had departed this world leaving behind a mountain of debt and Hermanowski had offered to settle all the outstanding accounts--an amazingly munificent offer.

She felt as if she had been purchased.

Still, Paul had given the man glowing praise, informing her that Tadeusz was a wealthy brewer with genteel manners who loved music and horses.

The horrible black crepe stuck to her skin while perspiration trickled down between her breasts as she toiled up the incline. With the long mourning veil, she felt nearly suffocated. The day had started off with a September chill in the air, but the afternoon had grown warmer despite the lack of sunshine. She should have waited in town for the carriage which would have been sent to fetch her, but she had longed for exercise and fresh air after sitting so long in the train.

She came over the rise and saw the lake on her right while above her the sight of the very tops of the great, gray turrets, sent her emotions into a dark tumult. Even now--after all the intervening years--her courage nearly failed her. It took all her willpower not to turn around and run back down the hill.

She stiffened her spine, threw her shoulders back, and stared out at the lake, which the close-set birches left in perpetual gloom. Her mouth grew dry and her heart thundered, but she reasoned with herself. She had to be sensible. She had no money and nowhere else to go.

The rumble of thunder in the distance shook her from her dismal musing. Glancing upward, she noticed the billowing thunderheads blackening the sky in the west. If she did not hurry, she would be at the mercy of the approaching storm. But the

oppressive heat could very well have her falling into a swoon. Stopping to remove the veil, she found she could barely breathe in the saturated, humid air. Drawing out the Marcelaine silk fan from her reticule, she tried to cool the flush on her cheeks but her efforts proved fruitless.

She clenched her teeth. She certainly would not melt and she had dawdled long enough. She buoyed herself onward with the knowledge that she would soon see her cousin again after all these long years away--and she would see Ipsy, as well, the dear cook who had been closer to her than her own tortured mother.

Finally reaching the gate of the manor with its massive columns and intricate ironwork arch, she was appalled by the condition of the once imposing structure. Much of the lacy ironwork had been swallowed up by vines and the gate was unlatched. It swung slowly on rusty hinges, emitting a high squeal that set her nerves on end.

A violent clap of thunder startled her as huge drops of rain splattered around her. Within seconds, she could see nothing but gray water falling all around her. Pelted by the heavy downpour, she hiked up her skirts and ran, blinded by the deluge. Then, above the sound of the storm, she heard the hoof beats of a horse coming up quickly behind her.

"Stop!" The voice of the rider boomed out above the sound of the storm. "Who are you?"

Whirling around, she held her hand above her eyes and saw the horse--a huge, fearsome black creature nearly upon her, but worse was the beast she saw atop the saddle! Though wearing a proper riding outfit, the monster's head was covered with the thick fur of an animal. Terrified by the sight, she screamed and the horse reared up. Trying to escape the deadly flying hooves, she stumbled backward--not realizing that she had reached the front entrance of the mansion. Losing her balance, she fell. Her head hit the granite steps.

She tried to rise but dizziness overtook her. Turning her head ever so slightly so that the world would not spin, she glanced up from her lowly position. She could see the huge belly of the horse and a pair of shiny boots but the pain in her head intensified until the entire world faded away as she collapsed into black oblivion.

\* \* \* \*

Tadeusz Hermanowski stared down at the motionless body of his new wife as she lay unconscious on the settee in the library, her face as pale as fresh cream save for the blood oozing from the wound on her head. At first, he had seen only a black blur against the gray wall of water pouring down from the sky and thought he was about to catch one of the trespassers who had been vandalizing the manor.

He should have known fate was against him--again. He should have known he could not escape his wretched doom--no matter how hard he tried.

He turned away and glared at the flames in the fireplace. Clenching his hand into a fist, he pounded the mantle. How could he have known she would walk up the hill from Taylor's Grove? She should have waited for a carriage to be sent for her use!

He spun around again to study her face. He felt his pulse race as he noticed the delicately arched brows, the wide forehead, and the small, pert nose. Even in repose, she looked like an angel. He put his hands to his temples, closed his eyes, and tried to rub away the ache in his head.

Paul had tricked him! The wretched man had insisted there were no pictures of her. Paul's father and Victoria's father were brothers, so he claimed Victoria bore a strong resemblance to him--and Paul had been an ungainly man with a large bulbous nose and sizeable ears that stuck out like wings from his balding head.

Tadeusz's gut churned. He knew he was damned. When he had been cursed, the witch had pronounced that if he had found no woman to love him by his thirty-third birthday, he would be transformed into a wolf--forever.

In only four days, he would turn thirty-three. He knew without a doubt that this beautiful woman could never love him! He felt the chill of bitter ice encasing his heart.

Opening his eyes, he gazed down at Victoria once more. Her nearly translucent skin lent her an ethereal quality while her flaxen hair reminded him of the purest gold. Her tresses had come undone and trailed across her bosom. His heart gave an ominous thud.

Guilt weighed heavily on his shoulders as he watched the cook press clean cloths to his new wife's wound to staunch the bleeding.

What if she did not come around? Tortured by the thought, he turned, crossed the room, and stood by the window to stare out at the land he had won in a poker game with Paul. He had thought his luck had changed that day. He had truly believed then that he had a chance.

Now he knew he did not.

Exactly one month after he and Victoria were married by proxy, Paul had been found dead--and it seemed the citizens of Taylor's Grove believed Tadeusz to be responsible. Because he was half beast already. A freak. Someone they did not trust.

A chill went through him as he remembered seeing what remained of Paul, but his temper quickly flared again as he thought of the foolish chance Victoria had taken by walking to Blackbirch Manor alone. Unable to suppress his wrath, he let out a vigorous string of curses in Polish. Slamming his fist on the windowsill caused a resounding thud that rattled the glass panes, but it made him feel no better than when he pounded the mantle.

His exquisite wife was lying unconscious on the sofa with a gash on her head--because she had seen a monster.

The smell of the ammonia wafting through the air stung his nostrils as Mrs. Difford, the old cook, continued her efforts to revive Victoria by diligently waving smelling salts beneath her nose. He had already sent William to fetch the doctor. Would the doctor be able to get to the house in this wretched weather? The main road to town undoubtedly looked like a swamp after the cloudburst.

He clenched his jaw tightly and stalked back across the room to see if Mrs. Difford had made any progress.

"There, there my sweet Miss Vicky! Open your eyes, love." The cook patted the pallid cheeks and hands.

"Some whiskey perhaps ..., " he began.

"She's quite insensible. You would drown her." Mrs. Difford spoke softly and pursed her lips when she finished, but she did not look up at him. Whenever she did, he saw the fear in her eyes. Or was it loathing? He was never quite sure.

He paced back and forth, raking his hand through his miserable mane.

"Perhaps, sir, if the settee was closer to the fire ...."

Tadeusz frowned. "Yes, yes. That is a good idea. She is soaked to the skin."

Mrs. Difford dabbed at the moisture on her own face with the corner of her apron. "She is as cold as a winter's day."

Tadeusz felt his heart sink. Was there nothing else they could do? His chest felt weighted with lead. Gently, he pushed the settee right up to the edge of the hearth--closer than was prudent. He placed more logs on the fire, as well, until he thought he would singe the hair off his hands--not that it would matter. It always grew back thicker than ever.

"I see a bit of pink coming to her cheeks, sir." Mrs. Difford sniffed and dashed away a lone tear.

He bent to run his hand along Victoria's cheek. Her skin had the softness of silk and he found that gliding his rough calluses along the smooth surface sent a surge of heat pumping through his veins. He pulled away. Surely, it was only the warmth of the fire that caused such a reaction.

Mrs. Difford renewed her efforts with more enthusiasm. The smell of the ammonia had him stepping back several paces.

Then he heard a soft murmur from the woman's throat and his heart skipped a beat.

"Miss Vicky! That's the spirit, my love! Open those lovely blue eyes of yours," Mrs. Difford encouraged.

Victoria's hand reached out and shoved the smelling salts away. Relief washed through Tadeusz.

\* \* \* \*

Victoria did not want to open her eyes. Her head ached and a strange lethargy seemed to have taken over her limbs. Even the smallest movements felt too great an effort. But she did want to see Ipsy. It had been nine long years since she had seen the dear cook's face.

She could hear the crackling of the fire in the grate though the familiar chill of the old mansion seeped into her. It had always been a gloomy place--dark and forbidding with too few windows. Someone must have carried her inside--which meant she was safe.

She struggled to open her eyes, blinking several times because the room appeared to be spinning. Finally, she tried using only one eye and succeeded in focusing. She saw Ipsy and the glowing halo surrounding her.

Victoria shut her eye. She had been seeing auras now for nearly a year, but she still could not get used to the phenomenon. She tried to talk, but her voice was a mere whisper.

"I-ipsy ... I cannot seem to focus ...."

"You hit your noggin and have a nasty gash. Shouldn't be giving me such an awful fright, Miss Vicky. My nerves aren't what they used to be."

Victoria heard the indulgent note in Ipsy's voice and an ache started in her heart. All the years, all the miles, as well as their sorrowful parting melted away in an instant.

"I am a bit dizzy ...."

“ ’Tis no doubt due to your fall,” Ipsy interrupted.

“Please, help me to get up.” The weakness in her limbs and the ache in her head debilitated her.

“Don’t you get up just yet, Miss Vicky,” Ipsy warned. “The doctor is coming to check out ....”

“There’s no need to bother the doctor.”

“You’ll be needing the doctor this time. That cut bled more than it should have--though you can be sure that as soon as I put one of my poultices on it, it will heal up faster than you can say Jack Rabbit.”

Strangely, Victoria felt herself drifting off. The lure of slumber became increasingly strong. She did not think it was evening as yet though the only light in the library came from the fireplace. She cleared her throat and tried to force herself to stay alert. “Please send for my trunk. I left it in town, but I will need dry clothing.”

“William was going to fetch it when he called for the doctor.”

“If I rest a bit ....” Victoria could barely breathe the words.

“No!” Ipsy sounded stern. “Don’t go back to sleep. Miss Vicky, open those eyes again!”

Victoria’s lids felt heavy and she kept her eyes closed. Besides, the glow around Ipsy’s form troubled her. She had nurtured a hope that coming home would put an end to the strange malady--that perhaps it was only caused by the unhealthy air in the city--or indeed the stress of living there. Of course, she knew of those forward thinking people who preferred to think of her problem as an ability. But Victoria herself had never been quite sure about the phosphorescent clouds she saw surrounding everyone. She doubted she could explain auras to Ipsy. She could barely explain it to herself and few people understood. When she confided in friends they shied away from her afterwards.

“Oh, Ipsy.” She sighed. “Do not worry about me. Truly, I will be fine.” Victoria did not want to cause the dear cook any grief. “Would you please send for Paul?”

The only reply she got was a choked gulp--and that was rather odd. Victoria forced herself to steal another look from one eye at the cook. She felt a cold stab at her heart as she watched Ipsy bite her lip and wring her hands. Victoria’s apprehension mounted. “Whatever is the matter?”

“You must have received my telegram!” Another voice boomed out--one with a thick accent. She had heard that voice before ... before she fell.

Her breath hitched up in her throat. On the verge of panic, she tried to turn so she could see who was speaking, but a shaft of agony spiked through her head with the movement and she clenched her teeth. It took her a moment to recover enough to retort.

“Sir, in addition to the fact that you have not introduced yourself to me, I am very certain that I have not received any telegram from you.”

“I am your husband--Tadeusz Hermanowski.”

*Husband!* Victoria fought to contain the cry welling in her throat. She kept her voice as steady as she could, but she knew it sounded far more shrill than usual.

“Please stand where I can see you.”

“Begging your pardon, sir,” Ipsy broke in. “She has had a bad fall. We should wait until the doctor checks her over. She is probably in shock as it is.”



“She is warm enough by the fire.”

“B-but, sir, we do not know if any bones have been broken.”

“Stop babbling, Mrs. Difford! I have already checked her limbs!” the man insisted with impatience.

Victoria let out a scandalized gasp. Had he touched her after she had fainted?

He stepped into view. The firelight illuminated his tall figure, casting a bright orange glow on one side and the deepest of shadows on the other. She would have screamed but her mouth turned so dry she could not utter a sound. He was the Beast who had come up behind her on that massive horse! He glared at her from the end of the settee like an animal ready to pounce. While he wore a crisp, tailored riding outfit, his face was completely covered with hair. She felt the blood seep away from her face.

“I see panic has taken away your voice, madam.” Was there a note of derision in his tone, or merely resignation? “Did you expect your new husband would be just as handsome as he is rich? I can see I am a disappointment.”

Icy tentacles of horror wrapped around her. Tadeusz Hermanowski looked to be more animal than man. His features--his nose, his eyes, his ears and his mouth--appeared to be human in form as well as pleasing in proportion. But his fur was much like that of a bear--or a wolf.

Victoria blinked, hoping that perhaps the blow to her head was causing her to have a strange dream from which she would awake in but a moment. Her heart seemed frozen in her chest.

The radiant light of the Beast’s aura flowed out just as the light from a candle, but Victoria closed her eyes again. She did not have the strength to deal with it right now. She prayed that she would soon awaken from this terrible nightmare.

“Mrs. Difford, go watch by the door. The doctor should be here soon.” The cultured inflection in the Beast’s voice would have been quite pleasing to listen to if he were not so horrid to look at.

“Yes, sir.” Ipsy gave Victoria’s hand a squeeze before she shuffled off toward the great entrance hall.

Victoria felt a shiver of fear course through her. She was alone with this man-beast! Why had Paul wheedled her into this marriage? She had always assumed Paul had her well-being at heart. How could he betray her? Daring to open her eyes again, she cast another sharp glance at the Beast and watched the colored radiance clinging to his form as he moved. His wide shoulders bespoke barely restrained power. She shuddered.

“You should have sent for the carriage, madam.” His eyes appeared as dull a gray as the stones of the manor’s walls in contrast to the soft shimmering colors that suffused his body.

“I felt the need of exercise and fresh air.” Despite her distress, she noted his hair appeared as black as the coal dug from deep beneath the Pennsylvania hills.

He began pacing restlessly--his dominant presence filling the room with energy. “These are dangerous times.”

Fear knotted inside her, but she did not wish to show it and shot back at him, “The only danger to me was being trampled by your horse!”

“Madam, you should refrain from frightening horses with your ungodly

screeching.” Though his focused gaze bore down upon her, a small measure of the abject terror she felt earlier dissipated. His eyes appeared soulful--quite human, in fact. Conscious of his vitality, she found his nearness set her pulse pounding, which was altogether very disturbing. She saw him staring at her lips. Then his gaze wandered down to her breasts. No doubt, the Beast had lust on his mind.

Worse, she felt herself responding to his blatant appraisal. As her cheeks grew hot, she pressed her lips together. It was absurd. She had no intention of being intimate with such a creature! She had been tricked into marrying him. It was altogether despicable and unfair! Something must be done!

“You do not favor your cousin,” he said as the silence began to lengthen uncomfortably. “You have blond hair, pale blue eyes, and a prominent--though most delicate--chin. You do not resemble Paul in any way. You are quite ... beautiful.”

There was the hint of a catch in his voice ... but not the least indication of flattery. He had made a mere statement of fact.

For her part, Victoria had always found her beauty more of a curse than a gift. Her first husband, Giles Billingsford III, had been so insanely jealous of her that he had made her a virtual prisoner. In truth, she grieved his passing very little. She had been glad to be free of his oppression.

Unfortunately, now she was married to Tadeusz Hermanowski. She shuddered.

“Our fathers were brothers, but I take after my mother.” Her voice wavered at the mention of her mother and the familiar dread tightened in her chest.

“Pity.” He spat out the word.

Confused by his vehemence, she did not know what to say.

He spun around to face the fire. The flames seemed to intensify the gleam that outlined his form. “When I first saw you today, I thought you were either a burglar or an adventuress.”

The chill in her veins vanished as angry heat fired through her. If she had had all her strength, she would have slapped him. “Is that why you felt compelled to test my limbs?” She did not hide the acid in her query.

“There are an abundance of women who would willingly allow me to stroke their limbs. I have no need to do it on the sly.”

She swallowed hard as she glanced at the way his tight riding breeches molded to his muscled thighs. He swung back to face her and she forced herself to look upward, but her gaze faltered. Few men had the sinews of this man-beast. When at last her eyes slid to meet his again, she glimpsed a hint of amusement in the quirk of his generous lips.

“Are you tempted to test my limbs too, madam?”

Her mouth grew as parched as grass in a drought. With difficulty, she cleared her throat. “I should like to speak with my cousin.”

His lips formed a grim line as he glared at her. “I regret to inform you that your cousin Paul is dead.”

Victoria gave a strangled cry as her mind reeled. “No! I cannot believe that! I was not informed of it!” Despite her proximity to the hearth, her entire body became encased in a glacial chill.

A change came over the Beast as if a shadow passed over him, darkening the

emanation shining out from his body. The subtle alteration of shade heightened her distress. She had not seen such an odd shadow on anyone until now. Did it indicate the true nature of the monster that lurked inside the Beast?

“Obviously, you did not receive my telegram. Paul did not die a natural death.”

Shock ripped through her. “Was he murdered?” She could barely fathom what she had heard. Though she lay comfortably on the settee, she felt her entire world crumble.

“He was found on the road to Taylor’s Grove.” He cleared his throat. “Some say he was attacked by animals. I am very sorry for your loss, madam.”

Victoria felt her throat close up. Sorrow pressed down upon her. Paul had been unflinching kind to her--even at the worst of times. Especially after her mother’s death.

“Know that your cousin thought you a worthy prize, madam. When he lost this estate to me in a poker game, he thought to win it back by offering you as his next bid. It is a pity that I am quite good at the game and though your cousin had a fair amount of skill, he made some grave mistakes.” His steely eyes sliced into her, but again that curious shimmer about him subtly changed once more.

She struggled to conquer the well of grief that threatened to undo her. The ice in her veins combined with her swirling emotions caused the ache in her head to become an unbearable misery, but meeting her new husband and learning of Paul’s death had given her a violent fright. She found once again that strange lethargy returning to her, coaxing her to close her eyes and rest.

The hopelessness of her situation had the darkness closing in on her and she found she could not escape the lure of slumber. In fact, she found herself welcoming it, which was most unusual. However, in sleep there lay an emptiness where the pain could not go.

## Chapter Two

*She heard the wail. It sounded more like the cry of a beast than a human. Searching though the long corridor in the basement beneath the manor, she shivered with only her thin nightgown to protect her from the chill. She loathed the basement where the dampness set mold to growing on the walls no matter how often the servants scrubbed it away and she feared the creatures that inhabited the darker corners. But she could not think about that now. Her bare feet made no sound as she hurried softly along the passage.*

*She cursed Paul's stubbornness for refusing to have her mother put away. If he would only listen to reason! She wanted to be free--like other young women her age. She was seventeen! She wanted to go to parties and dances. She wanted to fall in love. But there could be no peace in Blackbirch Manor due to her mother. It was as if the old house had become a prison for them all.*

*Another animalistic howl sent ice tingling along her spine. An echo bounced off the solid stone walls. Stopping for a moment, she listened intently but heard nothing save the creaks and groans of the massive timbers as they bore up under the weight of the old dwelling. Her hands shook as she felt her way along the walls. She paused at the door to each storage room and barely breathed, waiting to hear the rasp of her mother's labored gasps for air.*

*The darkness was complete. She could see nothing, but when she heard the singular creak of the heavy door that led from the basement to the kitchen stairs, she scrambled in that direction. The sound of her mother's laugh, a wild cackle that seemed almost demonic, froze her heart. The hinge of the door that led outside squealed and she felt the draught of the wind rushing into the basement. Her heart quailed, for there could be no telling in which direction her mother would go once she escaped. If she ran all the way down the hill into Taylor's Grove, everyone would learn the truth. That must not happen--no matter how much she resented caring for her mother. She did not want anyone to know of her mother's madness.*

*Stumbling up the steps and out into the chilly night, she saw she had only a pale sliver of moon to guide her. She ran into the kitchen garden, but her mother was not there. From the corner of her eye, she caught a movement at the corner of the house. Taking a deep breath, she sprang in that direction for all she was worth.*

*More hysterical laughter echoed in the icy air as she rounded the corner in chase. An ache in her side slowed her, but she did not stop. Her mother must be headed for the gate! In despair, she wondered why no one else had come to help her. She tried to call for Paul and Ipsy and William--anyone--but though she formed the words with her lips, no sound came out.*

*Off to her right, she heard the crush of leaves in the underbrush and the snap of branches in the woods. Someone--or something--was nearby. Fearfully, she looked this*

*way and that, but all she saw were the swinging their branches of the black birches in the nighttime breeze--shadowing the pallid moon to leave her in darkness so deep that the gloom became as dense as a thick velvet curtain. Again, she heard the sound and the smell of terror filled her nostrils.*

*Without any other warning, she was grabbed from behind. And then she heard the scream, the hideous screams that echoed on and on.*

She woke and realized that the screams had come from her own lips. Her heart thundered as she stared up into the face of the Beast. He loomed over her, his powerful hands pressed against her shoulders, pinning her upon the mattress.

Her body froze in terror. She could not swallow. There did not seem to be a drop of moisture in her mouth. She could not breathe. She lay bound by his strength in the bed that had once belonged to her mother.

Despite the horror still coursing through her, she noticed the glow around him had taken on a muddy quality. Surely, it was an indication of his evil intent, but though he had forced his cruel hands upon her she would not let him see her fear!

"Are you testing my limbs again?" Though her voice was but a whisper, she injected it with as much venom as possible.

His eyes narrowed and she watched his lips thin into a grim line.

"Let her go, Tadeusz." The calm words from a well-known voice came to her from off to her right. Victoria nearly cried with relief. She was safe! "She's awake now and not likely to hurt herself."

The Beast took in a sharp breath before he released her. She saw him glance down at his own hands. Streaks of red blood showed through the parted hair. Had she done that? She clenched her teeth. If she had, he deserved it!

"Best tend to those scratches." Dr. Evans' tone brooked no argument.

The Beast whirled and stamped off to the opposite side of the room. There he stood silhouetted against the weak light filtering in through the leaded windows as he washed his hands in a basin. Though dim, the daylight seemed to cleanse the luminescence about him. She hated this cursed extraordinary sight of hers. What good was it if she did not understand it?

She lifted her hand up and found a bandage covering the wound on the back of her head which still throbbed.

"I used very fine stitches. The scar will be barely noticeable when it is healed."

Carefully--slowly--she cast her glance to the side and saw Dr. Evans. His red hair had grayed slightly at the temples and a few white strands had woven into his small mustache, but despite the passing years, his appearance had changed little. When she was a child, she had never realized how handsome he was. It surprised her to realize it now. Beneath the fine wool of his suit, she could see the muscles of his rugged physique.

She stared at his aura and worried her lip. She did not know how he would react if she told him about the auras she saw. Would he prescribe laudanum for her, just as another doctor in New York City had wanted to do? Dr. Evans had given laudanum to her mother when it became obvious that there was no hope to cure her affliction. But Victoria was not ill--though the ability to see the auras did bother her. At times, when she was surrounded by many people--as she had been in New York--it drained her.

"You will have to forgive Tadeusz," Dr. Evans explained. "You were thrashing about and he thought it would be best to restrain you. However, I think he has learned his lesson. Your fingernails are lovely but powerful weapons."

She closed her eyes and wondered if she still lay in the grip of her own nightmare. Instead of being on the settee in the library, she was now in her mother's bedroom and instead of her black crepe gown, she wore a thin white, muslin nightgown--one that did not belong to her. Her nerves wound into a tight bundle. She did not have any recollection of getting into the nightgown or the bed.

A cold stone settled in her stomach.

She frowned slightly and found it caused her head to hurt more. "But ... what happened ...?"

The doctor scowled at her. "You remember nothing?"

"I ... I know I hit my head and then ... I was on the settee ... then ... then I was told of Paul's death ...."

"I see." He lifted his brows and nodded his head, but she suspected he did not understand at all.

She glanced at the Beast as he dried his hands. He looked decidedly more rumpled than he had while she lay before the fire on the settee. Nevertheless, even from across the room, a sense of power emanated from him, exuding a distinct essence of untamed strength. Surprisingly, a coil of warmth started to wind through her limbs as she studied him, but then she remembered the coarse hands grabbing her in her dream. She had dreamed many times of her mother's final night, but never before had the nightmare ended in the horrible way it had today--with her gripped by powerful arms. Never. In nine years.

"I will have Mrs. Difford prepare some tea." The doctor placed his instruments back in his bag and snapped it shut. "You should remain on a light diet until the pain subsides. You must have bed rest and quiet."

"How long have I slept?"

He pulled out his pocket watch. "It is nearly noon."

"Noon." She bit her lip. "I cannot remember getting into this bed ..."

"You have had a concussion. You went in and out of consciousness."

A spark of panic shot through her. "Did I ... say anything?"

"You muttered some nonsense." The doctor shrugged. "I believe you thought you were a child here once more."

An involuntary shiver shook her.

"Just remember, it may be a few weeks before you can resume your usual activities. You are a lucky woman, Miss Vicky." He stood up.

She fisted her hands. *Lucky? She was married to a hideous creature!* She wanted to have the marriage annulled.

The Beast, with his hands wrapped in clean muslin strips, walked back to the side of the bed. "I have hired a dressmaker who is scheduled to come tomorrow and there will be a small celebration on Saturday."

Victoria pressed her lips together. He spoke as if there was nothing extraordinary about the situation--as if he was an ordinary man, not one covered with fur--as if she had

not been hoodwinked into marrying him--and as if her cousin had not recently died. "I have nothing to celebrate."

The doctor pressed his fingers against her wrist to take her pulse. He cleared his throat as he finished his assessment and addressed the Beast--not her. "A head injury is a serious matter. It would be wise to postpone your plans. I will return tomorrow and check on her progress." Dr. Evans glowered at her. "Stay in bed, Miss Vicky." Then he left the room, closing the door on his way out.

The Beast sat down upon the mattress and shot her a wary glance. "You fight like a wildcat."

"I was ... dreaming ... and ...." She glared at him. "You should not have held me down so forcibly."

She gazed at his lips--human lips--decidedly firm and sensual. His straight teeth dazzled white against the coal black of his hair. She swallowed tightly.

"Who were you fighting in your dream?" His smoky eyes bathed her with a tenderness she did not expect.

She refused to answer and turned her head away from him, but she felt his warmth pulsing through the layers of fabric between them. The contact unsettled her, especially because the firm, persuasive pressure of his touch felt inviting--despite the fact that only a few minutes before she had thought him cruel.

"I only sought to keep you from harming yourself." The radiant luminescence around him no longer seemed muddy, but had a pleasing violet hue.

Guardedly, she glanced at him once more.

"I know you are grieved over your cousin's passing, but a small gathering is in order--and I have few friends." His low voice had a touch of mockery in it.

She frowned. Indeed, who would befriend him? Obviously, her cousin Paul had done so. What had Paul seen in the wretched creature?

The Beast slid his hand upon hers and clasped it. She knew she should pull away but it seemed as if her mind could not command her fingers to do so. Her fingers involuntarily closed around his. For though his appearance was fearsome, there was something almost magnetic in his touch--something incredibly irresistible.

He lifted her hand and brushed his lips across her knuckles. Moist and firm, his mouth lingered for only a moment, but the intensity of his touch slid all the way to her toes. Her breathing suddenly took on an uneven rhythm.

Confused and frightened by her body's reaction, she stared up at him. He was still an animal, she told herself. She could not trust him--and she most certainly could not be married to him. It was ludicrous. However, with him so close, she could not think sensibly. She closed her eyes and forced herself to wrench her hand away. He seemed to have some sort of power over her--and that alarmed her. She had to regain some control!

"And will those who come to this gathering also be congratulating you on your luck in the poker game?" She tried to make her words sting, but a small catch in her voice betrayed her emotions as tears pricked at the backs of her eyes. Horrified, she knew she must not let him see her cry! She must appear strong! Still the tears threatened. She had to get away before they fell. Reaching for the wrap she saw on a chair by the bed, she lifted her head from the pillow. The whole room began to tilt at an odd angle and

dizziness completely enveloped her. She would have fallen to the floor had not the Beast captured her in his arms. Her breath caught in her throat.

There was a sudden change in the radiance surrounding him. The subtle blend of colors now had a slight pink tinge. Intrigued with the phenomenon, she could only stare as his strong hands held her tenderly while he lifted her back onto the mattress. Heat seared through her where his touch lingered. Being held, however briefly, in the Beast's arms disturbed her in ways she could barely comprehend. She closed her eyes.

"You should not have done that." His voice sounded raw and tight as he tucked the quilt around her with care. "Do not move. I will send Mrs. Difford up directly to help you."

He hurried out of the room, leaving the door slightly ajar. Alone, she drew her shaking hand over her forehead and covered her eyes. Why had fate delivered her into this dreadful misfortune?

Snatches of her nightmare flitted through her mind. Not only had her head injury debilitated her, but she feared her return to the manor had had an adverse effect on her psyche. Would she constantly be forced to relive that night of the horror when her mother died?

And what of the new ending of that dream? Could it have been caused by the Beast handling her so roughly? She swallowed hard. Or had she finally remembered more of the missing minutes of that night--the minutes she had always been glad she could not recall?

She twisted the corner of the bed sheet into a knot. At least, with the Beast's focused gaze raking over her, she could shove the horrible nightmare to the back of her mind. When his eyes locked with hers, she could barely breathe--and the feelings he engendered ... well, she had never had feelings like that until now.

She shuddered. It was ridiculous. He was quite covered with hair, as much as any wild creature. Their marriage could not be legal! She would have it annulled and become one of the New Women, the ones who had their own jobs as secretaries and teachers.

She dared to uncover her eyes and discovered that she could focus once more. Slowly, she scanned the room. Nothing had changed in it. During the nine years she was away, the drapes in the room must have been tightly drawn against the daylight for even the wallpaper had not faded. Everything remained as it had been when her mother had occupied it--as it had been the night of her death. The lovely tortoise-shell dresser set lay waiting to be used.

She drew the quilt up to her chin. It seemed all the warmth in the room had vanished with the Beast's departure. His vitality had radiated everywhere, warming her to her toes. But without him a frost spread through her veins.

Then she heard it--a distant whine followed by a faraway howl. Goosebumps rose up on her skin and every nerve in Victoria's body tensed. Did the sound come from an animal--or a ghost? Did her mother's ghost haunt the manor? Petrified by the thought, she held herself so still she barely breathed. Now that she had returned, would her mother's spirit torture her? Would her mother repay the daughter who had drowned her?



## Chapter Three

If it were possible, Victoria would have escaped by running all the way down the hill. However, the room refused to stop spinning and she could not take one step away from the bed--though she did try. The result was that she wound up clinging to the bedpost. All she could think about was what a fool she had been! She had trusted Paul. How could he have lied to her? How could he have been this cruel to her?

Still, she was fully aware that the Beast's generous offer to pay off the debts Giles had incurred had saved her from being reduced to begging in the streets--or worse.

"My stars!" Ipsy exclaimed as she entered the room. She carried in the tea service and promptly helped Victoria back into bed.

Staring at the opalescent glow surrounding the cook, Victoria realized it radiated out further than those she had seen on everyone else. She had so many questions about the strange phenomenon. If she could 'read' auras properly, could she predict an individual's future? Or did the colors merely indicate moods and feelings? Was it possible for her to know someone else's thoughts simply by studying their aura?

She wished she had answers, but even in New York the few friends to whom she had confided withdrew from her afterwards--as if she had some sort of disease. Or as if she had lost her mind. She shivered.

"You've got to stay in bed. You must listen to what the doctor said," Ipsy chastised as she fluffed up the pillows. "My goodness, your hands are like ice."

Victoria swallowed down her fear. "M-mother must not want me to be here. I have disturbed her rest."

"Hush, Miss Vicky. I'm thinking that bump you got on your noggin is causing you to imagine things," Ipsy soothed. "There are no ghosts here, though it is a mite drafty at times and the wind howls around outside something awful in the winter." Ipsy's hands felt as cold as Victoria's own.

Ipsy poured the tea into the dainty china cups that had belonged to Victoria's grandmother. "I know *Pan* Hermanowski intends to have a furnace installed in this drafty old place. It would suit me fine. Got the rheumatism in my knees and my back. Last winter, I could hardly get out of bed some days. William had to put plasters on me day and night."

"Tell me about ... about ... about my husband." Victoria's voice quivered slightly.

Ipsy suddenly seemed to be studying the floor. She cleared her throat before she spoke. "He is a busy man. The brewery takes up much of his time, but he says he has plans to fix up the manor."

"What is he like--personally?"

"Why ... he is not unkind, though he does have his moods now and then. He has allowed William and me to live in the guest cottage, which is much easier on my knees

than climbing up to the third floor.”

“Who is on the third floor then?”

“Why--no one.” Ipsy shrugged. “*Pan* Hermanowski sent them all packing--except for me and William. We have a girl from Taylor’s Grove who comes to help most days. A young man--why I think you’ll remember him, Stan Drummer, works with William in the stable--excepting Sunday, of course.”

“The cobbler’s son?”

“Yes. He likes horses better than shoes, it seems.”

Victoria put her hand on her throat. Oh yes, she remembered Stan very well. Not long before she had left Blackbirch Manor, he had followed her around like a lap dog until one day he accosted her by the gate--kissing her sloppily and putting his hands on her breasts. She had slapped him.

“I-I never liked him--or trusted him.”

“There’s those that are afraid of *Pan* Hermanowski. Stan is not.”

“Oh, I see.” She intended to stay away from the stable. “Ipsy--why would Paul think I could marry a ... a Beast?”

Ipsy’s eyes grew round with fear. “You must never call him that! It makes him very, very angry.”

“He appears little different from an animal.” Victoria pouted.

“*Pan* Hermanowski is wealthy. It does not matter what he looks like. You will never want for anything.”

Victoria could not believe her ears. She trusted Ipsy’s opinion implicitly--but then she had trusted Paul, too. “But he is frightening to look upon!”

“He has been ... considerate.”

“How can you say that? He sent all the other servants away.”

“They were all young and able to get jobs elsewhere. He gave them good references and a bit of money to tide them over. He kept me and William because it’s not likely anyone would want us. Besides, Paul had told him how fond we were of you--and that you were also exceedingly attached to us.” Sadness seeped into the old woman’s face, wiping away the harsh severity from the moment before. “I hope that is still the way you feel.”

Victoria felt her lips tremble, so she merely nodded as her emotions threatened to surface. She told herself that she would not cry and she forced herself to sip some of the tea, but she found her throat seemed to have forgotten how to swallow.

She kept thinking of all that Paul had written to her in his letters. He had reassured her that her mother’s shade did not walk the halls of Blackbirch Manor, but since he had omitted an obvious and important detail when it came to describing Tadeusz Hermanowski, she wondered if Paul had lied about her mother, as well.

She almost choked on the tea.

Officially, Mother’s death had been attributed to an accident, though it was no secret that everyone in Taylor’s Grove suspected otherwise. Everyone knew Victoria had been found sitting on the dock in a trance with the ruffle on the sleeve of her nightgown ripped off, but Victoria could remember none of it. The night had left her with the recurring nightmare that always lurked at the back of her mind--ready to terrorize her any

time she closed her eyes.

Now, the terrifying dream had changed. Her stomach tightened into a painful knot.

Only she and Paul knew that she had found the body one week after that horrible night. The body had floated to the surface of the lake and clutched in her mother's hand was that missing scrap of eyelet lace.

Afterwards, Paul had sent her off to New York to live with an elderly aunt. Aunt Sarah had died shortly after Victoria and Giles were married. And now Paul was gone, too. She did not have a single living relative left.

The teacup in Victoria's hand shook so severely that she set it down before the delicate china could shatter. Staring at the sleeve of the gown she wore, she saw the muslin appeared to be of a coarse quality. The ruffle at the cuff was barely an inch wide. She suspected it had come from a catalog. It was nothing like the one she had worn the night of her mother's drowning.

She reached for the teacup again, endeavoring to hold it steady in her hands.

Ipsy reached out to pat her hand. "You must not dwell on the past, Miss Vicky. It's not good for you. What's done is done."

"Has he heard about ...?" Victoria whispered, aware that Ipsy would be aware of exactly what she meant.

Ipsy took in a ragged breath. "There are those that would think they were doing him a favor by bringing up the past, but it wouldn't matter much. There are other tales now about ... well, I won't be repeating them, for it's a sin."

Victoria knew it would be hopeless to question Ipsy about the rumors. The cook had always been very careful never to spread idle chitchat.

Ipsy left the room. Once more alone, Victoria regretted her hasty departure from Taylor's Grove. If she had lingered in town a little longer perhaps she would have heard the latest gossip. Instead, she had been careful to avoid everyone--though she knew they had noticed her. She had felt their eyes boring into her as she walked along the street.

But then, they all knew where she was headed and who lived there. They all knew she had married a monster.

\* \* \* \*

The hours crept by. Despite her anxiety, Victoria actually dozed off a few times and felt better for it. As evening descended, a young housemaid knocked at the door of the room and carried in a dinner tray. Victoria was immediately disturbed by the dark gray she saw in the girl's aura. A somber pall settled over the room.

Studying the young maid's face, Victoria guessed the girl to be no more than fifteen, a slip of a wraith who nearly swam in the dress and apron. "What's your name?"

"Lily Grady, ma'am."

"Did you grow up in Taylor's Grove?"

"No, ma'am." She set the tray down on the bed. "Will you be needing anything else, ma'am?"

Victoria glanced to the side and saw the trunk in the corner that had come so far with her. The letters Paul had written to her lay at the bottom. She wanted to read them again. Perhaps Paul had hinted at the Beast's condition and she had overlooked the clue.

“My things do need to be put away.”

She watched Lily’s mouth set into a firm, thin line. “Yes, ma’am.” The luminous cloud around her grew even darker and a chill wrapped itself around the room. Still, the young housemaid knelt in front of the trunk. For a fleeting second she ran her hands lovingly over the brass corners as if lost in her own daydream about places she longed to see.

Victoria sighed and thought about New York. She wondered if she would ever visit it again. She lifted the cover on the dish that Lily had brought and discovered she had been graced with cream of chicken soup. Her eyes swam with tears. Ipsy had not forgotten her fondness for the savory delight. Her appetite improved by just breathing in the aroma.

The hinge squealed as Lily opened the trunk. Then came a strangled gasp from the young woman’s lips. “T-there’s naught in here but rocks.”

Victoria tried to keep the reins on her fragile control as she shoved aside the tray, nearly spilling the soup. “No, it cannot be possible! I packed that trunk myself.”

“I’d be saying there’s been a mix up, ma’am.”

Victoria struggled to extricate herself from the covers. She begged Lily for help and the girl steadied her as she walked across the room. Crumbling to the floor in front of the trunk, Victoria stared at it. She wanted to believe it was all another ghastly dream, but then she reached out with her trembling hand to touch the gray stones.

“You see, ma’am, it must be that someone has played a trick on you.”

Victoria paid no attention to the girl’s words. The image of all that she had lost flashed through her mind. “My best gowns, my books, my photos, Paul’s letters ....” She could feel the sob caught at the back of her throat. She pressed her lips together. She would not cry. She reached in and grabbed a heavy rock to pull it out and dump it on the polished floor. “It cannot all be gone! Something must be left!”

“Ma’am! You’re getting yourself into a state!” The girl tried to stay her hands but Victoria pushed her aside. She had to find something--anything!

Lily fled the room, but Victoria took out every rock until her fingers scraped at the bottom.

Numb, spent with her effort and shaking badly, she sat back on her heels. A rising tide of desolation threatened to drown her in sorrow, but she wrestled against it.

The Beast burst into the room. “What have you done?” His voice rumbled low but controlled. Victoria felt the steel in it. She caught the look from his gray eyes as they pierced through her. With the heat of his temper, the cloud of color around him became murky.

She set her jaw, straightened her spine and lifted her chin to give him her coldest glare. “I have been robbed.” Her bravado was only betrayed by a slight tremor in her voice, but surely, he did not know her well and would not detect it.

Behind him, she watched as Ipsy stood wringing her hands. Lily slid through the door, too. Her aura remained dark. Victoria narrowed her eyes and glared at the girl. She did not trust her. She had probably told everyone the new mistress was feeble-minded.

The Beast growled and muttered a string of harsh syllables as he lifted her off the floor in one sweeping motion. Her heart fluttered violently against her ribs. Terrified that

he might drop her, she grabbed the sleeve of his slippery silk jacket and felt the hard muscles beneath the fabric. There did not seem to be an ounce of soft flesh on him. The power in his sinews had an odd effect on her for she found her panic quickly replaced by a nervous excitement that suffused the core of her being with an abnormal heat.

"You will stay here!" He laid her back upon the thick mattress and pinned her down with one hand placed tantalizingly close to her breasts.

Stunned that she had been so tenderly positioned upon the bed despite his anger, she found her mouth as dry as dust. Perhaps it was the warmth she felt flowing from his hand--or simply the location of it. He had but to move his hand a hair's breath and he could be cupping her breast--and the truth was that she hoped for that to happen. Realizing where her thoughts had wandered, her cheeks grew hot.

She wished she could slow the beating of her heart for surely he could feel it galloping beneath her ribs. Licking her lips, she boldly stared up at his dark visage. "Everything I had was in that trunk! I insist that my things be returned."

At her demand, she watched his lips thin into a severe line. Slowly, he removed his hand, almost as if reluctant to shift it away from her. She found herself imagining what it would be like to have his big hands stroke her breasts. Giles' perfunctory explorations of her body had done nothing to arouse her, but she did not doubt that it would be very different to have the Beast touch her intimately. He made her skin tingle.

"No common thief did this." He crossed his arms and turned his back to her. "You should be aware that there are those who believe me to be a fiend and think this world would be a better place without me in it. Many have already tried to frighten me away--and this is the type of work they do. That is why you must never leave the estate unescorted."

She did not know if he was looking at the trunk and the surrounding pile of rocks or staring out into the darkness beyond the window.

"Your necessities can be replaced. I have already purchased many dresses for you." Then he turned toward Ipsy and Lily. "You will clean this quickly," he ordered with cold precision.

The two nodded in unison as he stamped out the room. Ipsy told Lily to fetch William.

Victoria lay her arm across her eyes and hoped that Ipsy would not notice the bright heat suffusing her cheeks. "All of Paul's letters were in that trunk."

Ipsy's deep sigh echoed in the room as she patted Victoria's hand with her own. "Poor man. Near as anyone can figure out, he was killed by a pack of coyotes--or a wolf."

Victoria frowned. "But there are no wolves here. They've been hunted to extinction."

"Perhaps a bear, then." Ipsy shrugged. "He had his gun with him but not one shot was fired."

Victoria shivered and the well of sorrow in her heart widened. "B-but he knew how to shoot."

"He must have panicked."

Victoria's stomach rolled as she thought of the gruesome way Paul had died. How he must have suffered! Grisly images began to crowd her mind, but she forced them

away. She slid her arm away from her face and cast a glance back at the trunk. She could picture in her mind all the things she had so carefully packed. At the bottom had been the stack of Paul's letters, tied with a blue ribbon. She tried to remember her cousin's exact words, but the only thing she could recall was his praise for Tadeusz Hermanowski. He had made him seem like a knight in shining armor.

But Tadeusz is a beast. She shuddered. Not much different than the animals that took Paul's life.

An icy shiver slid up her spine. "There are tales of men turning into wolves ...."

"Do not think such things. That is nonsense." Ipsy lifted the tray with the untouched soup and her expression grew melancholy. "It is a pity you were not here for the funeral. *Pan* Hermanowski had it done proper, great banks of flowers around the coffin--gladiolas and mums--and a service at the church in town. So many people came and no one had a bad word to say about him."

Victoria's throat tightened. Paul had always been so good and kind--but he had pledged her to a beast. "He had a gregarious nature."

Ipsy sighed. "It was a pity no woman could see beyond his appearance. He would have been a devoted husband."

Victoria frowned. Indeed, Paul had never been handsome. In the Beast, he must have seen a creature more unsightly than he was. Perhaps that was how they had become friends?

Ipsy left, but her husband, William, soon appeared to deal with all the rocks. Victoria apologized for her recklessness, but William, now stooped with age, reassured her that it was no more mess than he was used to cleaning up in the stables--in fact, it was a lot less.

Lily returned with another bowl of soup. Victoria forced herself to finish most of it. Later, she luxuriated in a warm bath, but her head still plagued her. It ached so badly she almost considered trying the new headache powder Dr. Evans had given her, but she wanted all her wits about her and there was no telling what might happen if she was under the influence of medication. She feared the auras would grow larger. That possibility troubled her and she gnawed at her lip.

Settling against the pillows, she shuddered as she thought of her new husband and Ipsy's warning to never call him the Beast. Could he have a savage streak in him?

If he did, why would his touch send so much warmth flowing into her? It was something she had not experienced before, something she had not expected, something that had started a terrible yearning in her, a hunger. And that distressed her.

Cautiously, she got out of bed. She refused to be an invalid. Besides, the soup had strengthened her. At least for now she no longer had to worry about whether she would have a roof over her head, and food, which gave her the benefit of diverting her attention to other matters. Whoever had been so depraved as to break into her trunk and steal her precious mementos would regret it. Whoever—or whatever—had murdered her cousin would be punished. Like a fuse sparking along its path, anger sizzled through her veins.

She went to the hidden drawer in the secretary where her mother had kept her most precious jewels. The drawer stuck. She picked up the letter opener and pried at the drawer. Finally, it popped open and she let out a gasp. There were no jewels inside. Who

had taken them? Had Paul put them away for safekeeping? Had he used them for another bet? Had a servant snatched them? The jewels were rightfully hers!

Her uneasiness grew as she thought of another plausible explanation. Had the Beast taken the jewels? Before she closed the small drawer, she noticed a sheaf of papers jammed in the back. She drew them out, and then crossly slammed the secretary closed.

She had thought she could use the money from the sale of the jewels to offer a reward for hunting down the animals that had killed her cousin. But what could she do now? With her head still aching, she set her jaw and did her best to ignore the pain. To her relief, she found she was not as lightheaded as she had been. She walked over to the divan and sat down. Smoothing out the papers she had found, she carefully unfolded them. One glance at the contents sent a keen pain twisting in her heart.

The writing was in her mother's hand, but that was not what shocked Victoria. The delicate sketches her mother had drawn filled her with an awful sense of doom. On each piece of paper, rendered in pastels, her mother had portrayed people she knew. Victoria recognized each face. There was her father, Paul, Ipsy, William, Dr. Evans—and several of the other servants who had worked for the family in the past. Victoria saw her own portrait—tenderly drafted with subtle shading. A halo surrounded each figure—carefully blended and smudged in so that the aura appeared to be translucent or transparent, much like the glow that Victoria saw emanating from everyone around her.

She could barely breathe. Why had she never known that her mother had seen auras? Victoria squeezed her eyes shut. Had she inherited a special gift, or a terrible disease? Had her mother been driven insane due to her ability to see auras? Or were the auras an indication of a terrible madness?

Had she begun the slide into the abyss of insanity?

## Chapter Four

Studying the pictures again, Victoria's mind whirled through a tumult of emotions. Why had her mother never explained what she saw? How could she have kept it a secret—despite her frequent raving? Would it have made any difference to Victoria if she had known? She felt an ache in her throat as tears pricked at the back of her eyes. If only she could turn back the hands of time!

Folding the papers, she intended to return them to the hidden drawer, but then she reconsidered. Obviously, someone else knew of that drawer since the jewels were missing. Victoria felt a stab of fear in her heart. Did anyone else know of her mother's pictures? She tried to calm herself. If anyone else had seen the pictures, they might not have understood the significance of the odd backgrounds. They might have believed the pictures to be simply the wild imaginings of a maniac.

Victoria's breath caught in her throat. Maniac. Lunatic. How long would it be before those around her began to label her with such names?

But was it madness? There were those who believed in the strange phenomenon. She had lied to Giles once in order to attend a meeting of the Theosophical Society and though she had later paid dearly for her escapade, she felt it had been worth it. She had learned that there were others who saw auras—who thought of it as a special gift. Not only that, but some believed they could interpret what they saw. She wished she could have found out more about it—but Giles would never allow her to go to another meeting again and after he died she had more pressing matters.

She put a hand to her head as her injury began to throb painfully. A tide of memories swept over her and the guilt she felt owing to her mother's death threatened to overwhelm her. She fought to shove the old horror away, though she knew she could never be entirely free of it.

She decided to find a better hiding place for the pictures, but in glancing around the room there did not seem to be any secure spot. Tapping the sheaf of papers against the edge of the table, she remembered there was an old trunk in one of the storage rooms in the basement with some of her childhood things. That would be a better location for keeping the papers hidden for now.

The sound of a long, thin cry sent goose bumps rising up on her skin as she remembered the distant whine she had heard earlier. But this did not come from far away.

Again, she heard it—almost a squeal that set her nerves on end—piercing the night. For a moment, she froze. Could that be her mother's ghost?

She fisted her hands and grabbed her wrap. No! Fear was twisting her mind, making her imagine things. She had to think rationally. She would not succumb to madness as her mother had. She would fight it!

A series of slow, sad notes followed and Victoria realized that she had heard an instrument being played. She wanted to laugh at her own foolishness.



The notes sounded as if they came from a violin—and the music seemed to come from the room next to hers, a room that had once belonged to her father. The dressing room of her mother's chamber had a door that led into that room. Curious, and also considerably relieved, she went to the dressing room door. She listened for a minute and recognized the tune—a melody from Chopin. Gently, she tested the door to see if it was locked. It was—but from his side, not hers. Inexplicably, a melancholy ache went through her. She shook off her odd reaction.

Picking up a candle, she went out into the hall. While the Beast was busy entertaining himself, she would find her old trunk in the basement.

The music sounded more muted in the lushly carpeted hallway. Padding quietly along the thick carpet, she soon discovered that not only did she have the misery in her head to contend with, it seemed that the bones in her legs had no more strength than Ipsy's biscuit dough. But she was determined as she made her way toward the stairway, keeping close to the wall for support. The muffled tone of the Beast's music became more distant. Reaching the ornate newel post, she stopped to catch her breath and gazed downward. Though her head did not hurt so badly now, she felt somewhat woozy.

Deciding that it might be best to set the candle down on a nearby table, she carefully folded the drawings and tucked them into her pocket. Then she lifted the hem of her nightclothes, held onto the railing, and proceeded downward. Despite being lightheaded, she managed to arrive safely in the main hall. The hearth there had been banked for the night, but she found another candle above the mantle and lit it from the hot embers.

Reaching the kitchen, she went to the basement door, but she found a padlock on it. When had someone put a lock there? And why? She stood there for a few moments staring in frustration at the door before she turned and headed back toward the stairs. Suddenly the idea of returning to her mother's room filled her head with the memories of the past and worse, that terrifying dream that had wakened her earlier in the day.

The horror of that dream had been so vivid and recalling it now caused a clammy sweat to bead up on her brow. Surely her mind in its confused state had conjured up the new ending to the dream? It could not have happened. She had been alone when she was found on the dock. The bruises she had borne afterwards were surely caused by her mother fighting against her. That is what she had always believed.

By sheer force of will, she straightened her spine. Perhaps she could spend the rest of the night in the library? A book might help alleviate the troubling thoughts in her mind. Besides, she knew she would feel far more comfortable in that room than in the one her mother had used—especially since she knew who was in the room next to her—and who had the key to *that* lock.

She raised the candle high and headed toward the library when she heard the sound of a door opening. Her breath caught when she saw the Beast step into the hallway. He had come out of his study. For a split second, she thought he seemed as surprised to see her there as she was surprised to see him. While he quickly masked the astonishment on his face, the colors in the radiance surrounding him continued to be unsettled—a swirling mass of phosphorescent tones that shimmered like silken veils.

She remained riveted to the spot by the sight. It fascinated her—for she had never come across anyone else with such a dynamic aura. She thought of her mother's drawings and the colors her mother had used around people. Had her mother been confused by the glowing halos? Perhaps she had been frightened—as Victoria had been when she first started seeing them.

Maybe it was not madness but a terrible fear that had driven her mother insane?

As the Beast came toward her, his words were soft, but his tone held the edge of a distinctive threat. Inexplicably, she sensed that he did not mean to harm her—that he was honestly concerned about her.

"You are feeling better?"

She shrugged. "I was going to the library to get some books."

He lifted one eyebrow and frowned at her. She watched the shifting shades about his head coalesce into a gray haze. At once, she felt unsure about his intentions.

She found his nearness filling her with a strange inner excitement that disturbed her far more than his furrowed brow. Her breathing became most uneven when she remembered only two thin layers of fabric covered her nakedness. She turned so that he would not detect the effect he had upon her.

"I cannot sleep." She felt his hand come down upon her shoulder and nearly gasped as the vein in her neck quivered in response to his touch.

"I will get Mrs. Difford to make you a sleeping draught." His thumb massaged the skin along her shoulder. Her heart pounded fiercely in her breast.

"Please do not wake the poor woman. I simply need a book." She held herself rigid, trying to deny the persuasive motion of his thumb on her flesh.

"I will get it for you."

"B-but I am not sure which book will lull me to sleep." She lifted her chin in an attempt at defiance, but she could feel warmth pooling in her most private area. In truth, she found his nearness more thrilling than she could imagine. She knew she should move away from him, but she found herself reluctant to break the contact. "I must search for the proper book on my own—something generally calming and dull."

His hand slipped down to the small of her back. Victoria took in a quick, sharp breath. She felt as if her veins had turned into rivers of fire.

"You are trembling." His other hand removed the candle from her shaking fingers and returned it to the mantle.

"T-the thin m-muslin of my gown . . .," she sputtered and then stopped as he drew her up against him. The heat of his body against hers had every nerve tingling. Fearfully, she gazed up at him and held her breath. The gray in his aura altered—growing into an opalescent haze, and then shifted to a clear red. Her senses spun as her soft curves were pressed against his firm muscles.

"You are not cold," he whispered hotly into her hair.

She closed her eyes and swallowed hard. What was happening to her? This was true madness!

Her mind reeled as the Beast buried his face in her hair. His uneven breath, scorching against her ear, sent a shiver of raw need coursing through her. The ache of desire compelled her to slide her hands along his back. With Giles, she had never been

forward and she had endured his baser moments in silence. There had been no passion for her then. Now she began to understand the throbbing heat of lust—and she could not stop herself from wanting what her body ached to have.

Propelled by a force which she did not have the strength to oppose, her fingers trailed downward to feel the firmness of the muscles underneath the slippery silk fabric of his pants. His buttocks tensed in her hold as she pulled him closer. The hard heat of his male member pressed against the soft folds of her want. She longed to be closer. It was beyond her comprehension—and she should have been frightened, but her desire was stronger than her fear. She clung to him with her limbs trembling. He lifted her chin.

“My Beauty ...,” he muttered before he covered her mouth with his.

His lips, warm and moist against hers sent a surge of blood pounding in her brain. In the dim corridor, completely alone with the Beast, she wanted to know all of him. His tongue thrust against hers, challenging her to respond and she boldly matched his movement with her own. He tasted of hearty wine and the scent of it only made her drunk with desire for more.

She should have been shocked at her own behavior, but her hunger spiraled as the pleasure from his lips radiated all the way down to her toes in a flood of heat.

He drew back. “Enough.” His voice sounded somewhere between a groan and a growl.

Startled, Victoria gave a small cry.

“I—I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I did not mean to ... t-touch you ... so familiarly.” She knew she did not have control of herself—and that alarmed her. The air chilled her as she moved away from him, and she shook badly. She had acted like a wanton fool with a man who was quite terrible to look upon!

He put a hand under her chin again and tilted her face upward. She dared to look up. She could see the speculation in his brooding eyes.

She wanted to deny the shiver of anticipation that wound through her. She fought to remind herself that she must do all she could to get an annulment. Her marriage to the Beast could not be a valid union.

“You must be well for our celebration.” In what seemed one effortless motion, he scooped her up off the floor and into his arms. When she pressed her hand against his chest she felt the thundering of his heart. Had he been affected by their encounter as much as she was?

He carried her to the bed in her mother’s room and laid her gently on the mattress. She held her breath, wondering if he would cup one of her breasts, but instead, he toyed with her long braid. She watched the wry grin twist his mouth.

“Your hair shines like gold in the candlelight.”

She felt the fire in her cheeks.

“Perhaps a golden necklace to match your hair would be a fitting gift?” He trailed a finger along her cheek and down to her neck. There he made a few idle circles that twirled down toward her breast. She did not dare breathe for fear she would melt from the fire his touch kindled inside her.

He withdrew his magical contact from her. Feeling frustrated as well as humiliated, she turned her face away. Indeed, she had acted exactly like an adventuress—

and now he would pay her for her favors.

"I will bring you several books." His voice sounded oddly strained. "I daresay that Cicero's musings will cause your eyelids to droop." With that, he left the room.

She closed her eyes and willed her rapid pulse to slow down. Her own arousal confused her. Until now, she had found the marriage act unpleasant, but the Beast set off a surge of shameless cravings in her such as she had never known. It seemed like a terrible hunger that only he could satisfy and in the most elemental way—and she must not succumb, not if she wanted to divorce him.

The blood surged in her veins thinking about it, which unfortunately intensified the ache in her head. It set to throbbing once more until blessedly that strange lethargy embraced her and she found herself drifting off into her dreams.

\* \* \* \*

Tadeusz went directly to his study and poured vodka into a glass. He rubbed his forehead as if that could erase his troubles. His heart twisted in his chest as he thought of all that had happened in only one day's time. From the terrible moment he had first lifted Victoria's limp body up and carried her into the manor, to his encounter with her in the hall only a few moments ago. He had loved her from the first instant--and he knew she would certainly break his heart.

He told himself it mattered little. Marrying Victoria had been his last hope. Her delay in arriving had driven him to the edge of sanity, though considering her incredible beauty he understood why she had put him off.

He had no time left. In a few days, he would become a wolf—a denizen of the forest, forced to hunt for food and to eat it ... raw. His stomach lurched. All the wealth he had struggled to amass would be useless to him. For years, he had been feared and ridiculed as a beast. Now he would truly become one in every sense of the word.

Still, his brief tryst with Victoria had left heat stirring in his loins and he allowed himself to slip into the memory of examining the smooth, cream-colored flesh of her limbs. Everything about the small, dainty woman intrigued him. When he had stared down into the depths of her eyes he could hardly believe the color, the very same hue as a robin's egg in the springtime. That color darkened when she realized what she had married. But while her features had frozen in panic when she saw him, she did not cower—a fact that had impressed him.

In fact, she appeared to possess an amazing ability to quickly mask her feelings by narrowing her eyes and shooting him a stern look. It struck him as almost ludicrous—this little woman, so delicate, and yet so fierce. She sent his pulse leaping into life.

The sight of her lips—plump and full—waiting to be tasted, drew him to do just that, but savoring her sweet breath had nearly shattered all vestiges of his good sense.

Downing the vodka in one gulp, he hoped it would clear his head and deaden that member which now swelled in his silken pants. Victoria affected him deeply.

In addition to lying about her appearance, Paul had also assured him that she was sweet and meek—a docile sort who would be grateful to him for saving her from ruin. But Tadeusz suspected that though Victoria appeared to be more delicate than a Dresden doll, she had a backbone of steel—and enough passion to turn both of them into a molten mass of need.

That was not part of the plan.

He needed someone to *love* him to rid himself of the curse. Lust was not love. He had already tried that route. Indeed, many women were more than willing to use him—but they were not fools. They would satiate their needs in the dark with him, but that was where the relationship ended. While they appreciated what he could do for them that was all the thanks he got.

He was nothing more than a condemned man.

Would it be quick, he wondered? Or painful and slow? He held his hands steady and stared at the tips of his fingers. Had the nails grown longer? Would they twist into claws at any moment?

Would he remember who he was? Would any of his memories survive the transformation? Or would he be driven by instinct—and not reason? Should he simply end it all now?

He lifted the decanter and splashed more vodka into his glass. Draining the glass again, he found the pulsing in his veins had dwindled. He sat down at his desk. How could his emotions toward Victoria have gotten so out of hand? He had always prided himself on being in control, but this time with this woman he had nearly gone over the edge—in seconds.

Maybe because he had so little time left to enjoy a sweet-scented woman upon soft cotton sheets?

He stared at the glass in his hand and thought of drinking himself into a coma. Gripping the glass, he lifted it high—ready to send it crashing into the fireplace, but he held back. With the muscles twitching in his arm, he set the glass down. Breaking the glass would not solve his problem. Anesthetizing himself completely would not help. He needed his reasoning skills—especially if he must fight a battle against his own personal restraint. Especially because there were still loose ends that needed to be tied up. He wanted his business left in capable hands. He owed that much to his employees.

He massaged his temples and tried to erase the image of Victoria from his mind, but it did not work. He had never expected to come upon her in the hall wearing her nightgown and wrapper. She should not have been out of bed. He should lock her in her room!

He leaned forward to rest his head in his hands and the scent of lilies assailed him.

Startled by the perfume, he put his hands on his desk and stared at them. He had touched her and now he was imbued with her fragrance. He closed his eyes and remembered the petal soft touch of her skin. He had seen the swell of her breasts and her hard nipples beneath the soft fabric of her nightgown. Her hands had sent shafts of fire speeding to his groin. When she leaned into him with her soft flesh molding against his, he very nearly consumed her.

He opened his eyes and reached for the decanter again. He had been too busy channeling all his energies into his business rather than satisfying the flesh. It had been too long since his last rendezvous with a woman. Nevertheless, he recognized something unique in the attraction between Victoria and himself. It was almost magnetic—a force far beyond anything he had previously experienced. He knew it would have been so easy to let himself go—to take advantage of the situation and indulge his lust, but he must not

touch her again. It was too big a risk. He knew she could not love him. It would be impossible for one so perfect to love an unsightly monster. He needed to keep his distance. His soul had been lost a long time ago, but he did not want to spend the last few hours of his life in misery as a simpering, love-struck fool.

He stood up and locked the vodka away in the cabinet. He had told Victoria that he would bring her books to read. He intended to do as he promised, but he would not tarry long in her room. He fisted his hands. He would not touch her.

When he stepped out of the study, he felt a cold chill ice along his spine. The manor lay as still as death and that sent apprehension gnawing at his insides. The absolute hush surrounding him was unnatural. In the short time he had lived there, he had learned that the mansion was never utterly quiet. It creaked and groaned and often the wind made a sound much like a sigh as it whipped around the corners.

Sweat dampened his shirt. His slippered feet made no sound as he walked across the thick carpet in the library to pick out the dullest tomes he could find. That did not prove to be a difficult task for Paul's taste in books leaned heavily toward philosophy—a discipline Tadeusz considered a great waste of time. He thought of himself as a man of action. To contemplate any situation took time—and he did not have that.

He frowned as he lifted another book from the shelf. He had never doubted that he deserved his punishment since his black soul was stained with blood, but he saw in his mind the image of the sweet guile in Victoria's blue eyes. Perhaps the devil wanted her, too. Steeling himself, Tadeusz clenched his teeth. He would not bring another soul down to hell with him.

He had made a promise to Paul that he would protect Victoria—and he was a man who honored his promises. Besides, he owed it to Paul. Victoria would have a steady income from the profits of his brewery for the rest of her life—a life he could not share with her. The abyss of sorrow widened in his hollow chest.

He left the library and headed toward the grand stairway with an armload of books. Melancholy settled on him so deeply that when he heard the first few notes from one of Chopin's gloomy preludes, he thought he had merely imagined it in his mind. Shocked, he stood still and listened. He knew the tune well so when one hesitant note was off, he clenched his jaw until it hurt. The sound came from the drawing room. Since there was no one in the house except for him and Victoria, she had to be out of bed again!

Aggravated, he slammed the books down on a side table and yanked open the door to the drawing room. To his complete astonishment, nobody was there. However, a trail of wet footprints led to the piano. He blinked in disbelief and followed the trail.

The footprints had come from someone very small and dainty—wearing no slippers.

The trail ended at the bench. A large puddle of water lay on the bench and on the floor beneath it. However, there were no footprints leading away from the bench. Confusion warred with alarm within him.

Could Victoria be playing some sort of trick on him? How had she gotten so wet? How had she vanished? Dread set his pulse to racing and he leaped upstairs with the armload of books. Breathing heavily, he reached Victoria's room and rapped lightly on the door. Receiving no answer, he turned the knob quietly. He found her sound asleep.

Her chest rose and fell in the soft rhythm of deep slumber. She wore the simple gown and wrapper she had been wearing when he had put her in the bed. He lightly touched the fabric. It was dry. He wanted to pull back the covers and see if her feet were wet.

But touching her was dangerous. Besides, he should not wake her. His head swirled with doubt. Her hair remained neatly braided and tied with a blue ribbon. With the luster of twenty-four carat gold, each strand reflected the candlelight.

He turned to blow out the candle that she had left burning.

Then he walked out of her room wondering who had been in the drawing room. How had they gotten inside with all the outer doors securely locked?

He pressed his lips together tightly. He intended to find out.

## Chapter Five

Victoria woke as Ipsy pulled back the heavy drapes in the room. Undoubtedly, the sun was shining on the other side of the hill, but the leaded windows in the chamber faced north and only the palest light filtered through, leaving all the corners in bleak shadows.

"I'm sorry, Miss Vicky, but the dressmaker will be here this morning."

Victoria covered her eyes with her hand. "I thought my husband ordered everything from a catalog?"

"Oh no! The dressmaker is a well-known seamstress from Pittsburgh and you will be getting several gowns, especially seeing as you have nothing left. The dressmaker will have two assistants with her, as well." Ipsy's aura, glowing brightly, matched her cheerful mood. "I'll be making scalloped chicken for lunch. Lily will be here to help, of course."

Victoria turned her mouth down in a grimace at the thought of the dour-faced girl with her dark, mysterious aura.

Rising slowly, Victoria discovered she felt physically better than she had the previous day. However, the thought of her lost possessions, her cousin's gruesome death, the celebration, and the awful physical craving she felt toward the Beast soured her mood. She wondered if her own aura would switch into a gloomy shade. But when she glanced toward the mirror at the dressing table, the glow about her appeared to be much the same as usual--except for a tinge of red, the same red she had seen in the Beast's aura.

Her heart twisted. Was it lust then? Or passion? Had she *caught* it from him? Like a disease? She ran her tongue along her lip and remembered the taste of his kiss.

"I made rice pudding seeing as it was always one of your favorites—and today you'll be needing your strength," Ipsy chirped as she set a tray on the bed. "The dressmaker will be expecting you to stand still. Otherwise, you'll be getting poked with pins."

Victoria pressed her hand against her stomach. She did feel a few pangs of hunger. Her cheeks felt hot as she also remembered the very different feelings the Beast had caused in that region of her body last night. She glanced at the table by the bed and saw the stack of books he must have placed there after she had fallen asleep.

Had he touched her while she slumbered? Or kissed her?

The room felt far too hot, but she did not want Ipsy to notice her distress. She picked up a spoon.

"It seems very strange to me that you have been relegated to the guest house. I cannot comprehend why my new husband would insist upon such a move. It is far more efficient, especially in bad weather, to have the servants under the same roof."

Ipsy shrugged. "*Pan* Hermanowski bought us sturdy galoshes and umbrellas so we have no trouble with the weather."

"He seems to have made many changes here." She tried to sound as casual as she



could. "In fact, I found the basement door had a padlock on it."

"Pan Hermanowski had to do that. The basement is well stocked with wines and other liquors. But after someone broke in and stole quite a number of bottles, he put the padlock on the door. He goes down there every morning to check that no one has broken in during the night—and to choose a bottle of wine for the evening's dinner."

"I find it difficult to believe that someone came in and robbed the manor. The people in Taylor's Grove have always been law-abiding citizens."

"Times have changed. You cannot trust anyone anymore. Look at what happened to your cousin."

"But you said he was killed by a wolf or coyotes."

Ipsy cast her glance to the floor. "Yes. That is what the sheriff said."

"Are there different accounts? Who found him?"

"Pan Hermanowski."

A prickle of fear crept along Victoria's shoulder. She swallowed hard and put the spoon into the rice pudding, but her hunger had evaporated.

"When will the dressmaker be here?"

"At ten—Lily should be along so and she can help you get dressed. I laid out your things."

Victoria glanced toward the divan and noticed the simple navy blue housedress and petticoats—all looked ready-made. She sighed. It was better than what she had been wearing. She had borrowed the dreadful black crepe widow's weeds from one of her friends.

"I am feeling much improved today. I am sure I can manage myself. You will need Lily in the kitchen."

"Yes, those young legs of hers are a blessing."

After Ipsy left, Victoria reached over to lift the books off the bedside table. The Beast had picked out three of Paul's favorite volumes--Plato, Cicero, and Aristotle. She randomly opened Aristotle's *On Man and the Universe* and found Paul had underlined a sentence on one page. "People are not all terrified by the same things."

A tremor shook her shoulders and she closed her eyes. Had her mother been terrified when she saw auras? Had *fright* driven her crazy?

Victoria swallowed hard. She would not go insane. After all, she had heard there were others who belonged to the Theosophical Society who also saw auras. While she had not met them, they could not all be deranged. Could they?

She opened her eyes and ran her finger over the underlined words. Then quickly skimming through the pages, she noticed other sentences that Paul had underlined. In a few places, he had scribbled a note or two—or placed a question mark. She closed the book, for now—but she intended to read each volume. While she no longer had Paul or his letters, she did have his books. Maybe she could find some answers in them. Or solace.

A knock sounded at the door. Hastily, Victoria drew the covers around her as an unwanted tingle of excitement flickered through her. Would the Beast be visiting her so early in the day?

"Come in," she called out in a far too breathy voice.

Instead of the Beast, Dr. Evans walked into the room with his medical bag in hand. She felt a moment's disappointment, but she hoped it did not show in her expression. She noticed the glow around him was not quite the same as the one her mother had drawn. It had changed. Could that indicate that the doctor's personality had altered in some way? Or did the change have to do with his future? She wished she knew the answer. "Did you take that headache powder I gave you last night?" he asked.

"No," she admitted.

His mouth thinned into a narrow line. "You should have. It would have helped you to sleep."

"I fell asleep quite easily." How many of her mother's nightmares had been caused by the laudanum, she wondered?

The doctor pulled up a chair and sat down beside the bed. "I see you have eaten."

"Just a little. Ipsy made rice pudding."

"You are fortunate that Tadeusz did not dismiss her and William."

She opened her eyes wide in surprise. "B-but she told me ...."

"Paul and I changed his mind," the doctor interrupted. "Tadeusz wanted to get rid of all the servants, but last winter, Ipsy's rheumatism was so bad, I feared she would become completely incapacitated. We prevailed upon Tadeusz to show some compassion."

"It would have been wicked to toss them out!"

"Tadeusz is rather single minded. However, Ipsy has turned out to be stronger than I had imagined and William is very devoted to her. Nevertheless, I have strongly suggested that Tadeusz put in furnaces in both this manor and the guest cottage." Dr. Evans busied himself by checking her injury and replacing the bandage. He reminded her to continue to rest and eat lightly.

"The dressmaker will be here."

The doctor shook his head. "I discussed that with Tadeusz but he insists that you will not need to be on your feet for any length of time and he has promised me that tomorrow's celebration is to be a simple affair with only a few select friends. I will be there, too. So, if you are feeling unwell, I will see to it that you are permitted to retire." He gave her a sidelong glance as he put away his instruments and closed up his bag.

She had an uneasy feeling as she stared at the dull radiance about him. Aside from being dark, it seemed to have holes in it. What did that mean? That he had left something out? That he was not telling her all she should know? A measure of fear tightened in her chest.

Then she thought about how ridiculous that sounded. What foolishness! Perhaps that was how her mother's madness had started—as a kind of paranoia?

"There is one important thing I thought you should know about Tadeusz," the doctor began.

Her stomach clenched into a cold knot.

"I believe he has a condition called hypertrichosis. I read of a case study concerning another man afflicted with this unusual disfigurement. The man married a beautiful woman, but his offspring all bore the same defect as he did for the rest of their

lives.”

Victoria turned her head away. “I was married for seven years—but I never ....” She swallowed hard. “There were no children. So that is not a concern.” She had learned to live with the disappointment, but it still hurt. She had believed that children would have made her unhappy marriage bearable.

The doctor cleared his throat. “You must be aware that some men are more virile.”

She felt the flush spread across her face. Last night, she had been so affected by the Beast that if he had swept her into his bed, she knew she would have been unable to resist. Was he more potent than other men? Was that what had drawn her to him?

“I do think it would be well if you and Tadeusz continue to sleep in separate rooms, Miss Vicky.” He patted her hand before she left. For some odd reason, she instinctively wanted to pull away from him, but she did not. He quietly left and she stared up at the ceiling for a few minutes. Her attraction for the Beast could not be right and it made no sense, but the power of it took her breath away.

Still, Dr. Evans had brought up a valid point. A child brought into the world with the Beast’s horrible deformity would have to face a terrible legacy.

She frowned and then froze as an idea came to her. Perhaps, she could use that information as grounds for an annulment? Sliding out of bed, she went to the secretary and sat down. With pen and paper, she drafted a letter to a friend in New York. The woman’s husband was a lawyer and she hoped he could help her.

An odd ache settled into her chest as she wrote, but she fought against it, forcing any doubts to the back of her mind. She convinced herself that she was doing the right thing. After all, she had been deceived.

When she finished the letter, she realized the blotter was missing. That annoyed her. How many things were missing from the old manor and who had taken them?

She left the letter on the desk for the ink to dry while she quickly hurried into her clothes. At the dressing table, she brushed her hair and pinned it up loosely. She stared at her own reflection in the mirror, wishing she had answers to her questions.

A sudden, sharp pain went through her head as she focused on the ever-shifting halo of energy about her. She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples, hoping she was not about to suffer a migraine. The searing headaches had plagued her ever since the auras had begun to appear to her. She wondered whether her mother had suffered from migraines. Ice spread through her veins and her stomach felt queasy again. She opened her eyes and pushed herself away from the dressing table. Could the members of the Theosophical Society be wrong? Was it possible that she had inherited her mother’s illness? That it was not a ‘gift’, but a curse?

Her gaze drifted to the top of the secretary where she had placed her mother’s drawings last night just before she fell asleep. Biting her lip, she struggled against a compulsion to look at them again. Were all the auras she saw different from the ones her mother had seen?

Did her mother have a touch of bright red in her aura?

Hastily, she stood up on tiptoe and snatched the papers. Sitting down on the divan, she took the time to study the pictures with the muted daylight coming through the

window. Taking in a ragged breath, she vowed not to allow herself to be affected by what she saw. First, she pulled out the sketch her mother had made of Ipsy. The soft colors blended around Ipsy's face were not the same as the ones that Victoria saw.

Studying the picture, Victoria noted that her mother had drawn in a wide aura—larger than the ones Victoria saw. Thinking back, she remembered that in the beginning she could only detect a narrow glow surrounding other people, but with time the luminescence had taken on progressively greater proportions. She bit her lip in apprehension. Was that a sign of the progression of the illness?

Had her mother drawn more pictures like these?

Victoria recalled that her mother's personal possessions had been hastily put away in a trunk. Was that trunk also in one of the basement storage rooms?

When a light rap came at her door, her heart lurched. In a panic, she folded the sketches and slid them beneath her skirt. The Beast boldly entered the room.

"Y-you should wait until I answer your knock," she stammered. She watched his gaze slide to the edge of the folded papers, which had caused an untidy lump beneath her housedress. She felt the blood drain from her face as she swallowed back her fear, straightened, lifted her chin, and narrowed her eyes. She intended to pierce him with a sharp look, but instead she felt a strange tug inside her at the sight of him while the memory of last night's passionate encounter played in her mind. She fought to ignore the flicker of heat that ignited deep within her.

"I thought you would still be asleep and I hoped not to wake you." He gave an unexpectedly polite nod of his head, but his presence—at once imposing and intense—had her stomach fluttering. She recalled the way she had touched him last night and the fire in his kiss. The manner in which he aroused such strong feelings in her seemed effortless on his part and the power of it had not dimmed with the passing hours. She found her pulse beginning to race again.

She clutched her hands tightly together. She must fight against the feelings his presence engendered. She must seek a dissolution of her marriage.

"You look well," he said. Along with the hint of fatigue in his tone, she noticed the shades in his aura had a dull cast. In addition, he appeared somewhat rumpled, his mane tousled and unkempt. The lines around his mouth had a grim set to them, as if he were in pain.

A twinge of concern weakened her resolve. She wondered what was the matter, but she dared not ask him. She could barely think with him so close. She needed to get him out of the room.

"I do not feel well." She put a hand to her head. "My head injury plagues me. I probably should lie down again before the dressmaker arrives. Please, leave me."

"No." He took in a great breath and let it out slowly. Her nerves tightened as she watched him run his hand through his abundant dark mane. "There is one thing we should discuss ... something about my condition ... which ... might ...."

In obvious discomfort, he whirled around so that he faced the secretary desk on which the letter lay. Victoria smothered a gasp with her hand.

The Beast headed straight for the letter and picked it up.

Victoria jumped up and rushed toward him. "Give that back to me!"

He held it up out of her reach and read it. His mouth twisted downward. "So this is the thanks I get. Annulment? Do you know how much money it took to pay off your dead husband's debts?"

"I was tricked into this marriage!" she spat out. "Paul never said a word about ... about ... y-your disfigurement."

"Yes. I could tell it was quite a surprise to you." With but a few quick motions, he ripped the letter into shreds. "Our marriage was legal. I made sure of that."

"I was the bet in a poker game! I was hood-winked by my own cousin into this marriage. That cannot be legal!"

She watched his lips thin with irritation—lips she knew to be most generous. Her pulse raced as she remembered the warmth of his mouth on hers—and the way her blood turned into a river of molten lava as his tongue probed insistently, teasing her, tempting her until she responded with her own tongue. When she realized where her thoughts had wandered, she swallowed hard.

"Paul was well aware of your dire straits—and if you were tricked, it was for your own good. However, I can tell you that if you leave, Mr. and Mrs. Difford will go, too—without a penny."

Victoria went still. "That is—that is reprehensible! They have been devoted to the family all their lives! To turn them out now would be heartless."

"I do not need them. I would prefer to live in total seclusion—if I do not have you."

He raised one eyebrow and in the uncomfortable silence that lengthened between them she realized his gaze appeared to be focused on her bosom.

Her hand flew to her throat where she discovered she had neglected to fasten all the tiny buttons in her haste to dress. From his vantage point, he could see a great deal of her anatomy.

Her breasts tingled as she hurriedly bent to the task of fitting the tiny pearl buttons into the buttonholes. She hated the way her fingers trembled, causing her to fumble more than once at the simple chore.

"Do you need help, madam?"

She glanced up to see a slow but wicked smile light up his face and her heartbeat thundered. In his aura, she saw clear red. Her throat turned as dry as dust. What a fool she was. The power of his lust flashed in the fiery color.

And what of her own aura? She did not glance toward the mirror, but she had no doubt what she would see if she did. His nearness had her bones turning soft. Endeavoring to maintain an air of calm seemed almost impossible. "I am quite capable of doing this by myself."

"Pity. I am quite skilled at working with small, slippery objects." His mocking tone hinted that he not only referred to little pearl buttons and she felt a throbbing at the apex of her thighs.

With relief, she managed to close up the last button, securing the collar of the dress. She smoothed down the bodice. However, that minor triumph quickly faded.

Tadeusz swept down to pick up the sketches that had tumbled to the floor. Once more she tried to grab the papers from his hands, but he easily deflected her.

“What are these? More letters?”

“No. Please, give them back.”

He unfolded the papers. “Your drawings?”

“N-no. My mother drew them.” She saw the immediate change in his aura as he glared at the sheaf of papers.

His voice hardened into a command. “Tell me about your mother.”

Victoria could not prevent the shudder that ran through her. The heat in her veins cooled as an avalanche of ice swept through her. She closed her eyes as she remembered how her mother had appeared as she was pulled from the lake. She remembered how Paul had pried her mother’s fingers apart to get that scrap of eyelet lace out of her grasp. Where was it now? Had it been burned?

A sensation of sickness swept through her. How could she bear living here and remembering ...?

“Did she play the piano?”

The unexpected question confused her. She felt suddenly disoriented. “Y-yes. She was very talented. She played quite well.” *Before the laudanum, before she lost her mind.* Victoria forced away the horrible memories. Opening her eyes, she sank back down onto the divan. “She had a gift for drawing, too. She drew herself in one of those sketches. All the likenesses are remarkable.” Perhaps he will simply assume the auras are a type of background?

He tossed the sketches into her lap as if the paper had burned him. “I am told she drowned in the lake. There are those who say it was not an accident.”

She pressed her hands against her stomach as it roiled threateningly.

“How old was she when she died?”

“Forty-seven.” Her throat ached. Though she was thankful he did not seem to care about the pictures, she could not bear to relive her mother’s death.

“Was it a mishap or not?”

Victoria blanched. She put a hand to her head as a wave of dizziness overtook her. “It was an unfortunate accident,” she whispered.

He began pacing the room. “Do you believe in ghosts?”

She did not know how to answer. Besides, she had a lump in her throat. It did not matter. The Beast went on without waiting for her to answer.

“I can tell you that I give little credence to those who insist there is a spirit world. I think it is all just nonsense perpetrated by those who wish to take advantage by trying to frighten the impressionable and the weak. I will not stand for it!” he growled.

Quite suddenly, he ended his restless movement. His gray eyes sharpened as they focused on her.

Victoria found she could not bear his scrutiny. She thought he could see right through her. Again, memories of their heated moments swept down upon her. She could do nothing to stop the awful yearnings that he provoked. She slid her gaze to the floor. “I think, since we know so little, we should be open to other explanations.”

He startled her by lifting one of her hands in his. “Your hands are shaking. I see that I have distressed you.” The impact of his gentle grip only fanned the flames of the fire inside her. She stared at her hand, which appeared to be swallowed up completely

within his.

Daring to glance up, she saw his gaze soften. Then she watched in disbelief as he got down on one knee and kissed her hand. His mouth felt hot against her flesh, but when he turned her hand over to taste the inside of her wrist, she could barely breathe. The sensation of his moist tongue lightly teasing against her skin had her pulse racing. She knew she could never stand up, for her knees trembled together beneath the fabric of her housedress.

“Your skin has the luster of pearls, but there is fire beneath—is there not? A fire that could consume you with passion, if you let yourself go.”

Alarmed that he could guess what she felt, she knew she should tug her hand out of his grasp, but she could not do it. Helpless against the onslaught of his seduction she felt at once intoxicated with an obsessive need to be scorched by his lovemaking. She closed her eyes, but that did not help. Listening to the exotic inflections in his slight accent was as heady as the effect of a glass of sherry. She ran her tongue along her lips as she remembered the taste of his kiss last night—wine and warm, potent male with a touch of spice. She wanted another taste.

From the back of her mind a warning alarm jangled. She had to stop this madness. The marriage was absurd—no one would doubt it. She should be able to have it annulled. No one could possibly consider it a disgrace under the circumstances. But she could not stop herself from leaning forward. It seemed as if she was caught in an invisible web and inescapably she was being drawn into the center where she would be completely devoured.

“You are a precious opal—pale and cool but sparking with flames inside.” His breath fanned her face. The gentle touch of his lips brushed her forehead. Then his mouth grazed her earlobe and she felt as if the heat of a lightning bolt had run through her.

Somehow, her lips found their way to his, and the shock of that union had her melting in his arms as a shiver of delight went through her.

His fingers unfastened the tiny pearl buttons of her dress with ease—and then his fingers moved inside to work on the buttons of her corset cover. Her nipples hardened and chafed against the muslin. His lips moved down to the base of her throat where her pulse skidded along at breakneck speed.

Gently, he freed her breasts. How she had longed for him to do so! Circling one breast with his hand, his tongue moved to lavish the bud with a stimulating massage. A jolt went through her as his hot lips suckled the peak until it became hard. A sigh of delight softly escaped her throat as pleasure shifted through her. Heat rippled through her—and she glowed with the radiance of it.

A knock came at the door. He groaned and his exquisite torture ended. The cold air chilled her breasts and she shivered. He began to fasten her buttons once more. She opened her eyes and watched him, but she could not move. She felt as if she had been drugged.

As he slipped the last button into place, he cleared his throat and said, “Enter.”

Lily slipped into the room. At once, Victoria felt the swirl of gloom close in upon her as she viewed the girl’s depressing aura. “Excuse me, ma’am—sir. Begging your pardon.”

The Beast stood up and turned to speak to the young maid. "I assume the dressmaker has arrived."

"Yes, sir. The hall is cluttered with her boxes." Lily's lips were pressed into a thin line of disapproval.

The Beast glowered at the girl for a brief moment, but then flashed her a grin which showed all his perfectly straight, white—and decidedly human—teeth. Victoria's breath caught in her throat. He would be so handsome were it not for his thorough coating of hair. An unexpected surge of pity washed through her.

"By all means then send the dressmaker and all her boxes up here," he commanded. "Y-yes, sir." Lily stuttered. She slipped out of the door, closing it behind her.

The Beast's gaze slid approvingly from the top of Victoria's head to her simple cotton slippers. Every inch of her felt singed by that look. Already flushed from his ravishment, she could feel the dampness between her thighs and the yearning ache inside her screaming for fulfillment.

"You will soon be suitably attired in the finest clothing, madam, though you would be lovelier still if you wore nothing at all."

She caught the spark of lust in his eyes before he bowed pleasantly and left the room.

Sitting stiffly on the divan, she fought to pull her drifting thoughts together, but it seemed an impossible task. She had sensed the barely controlled power in the man from the first. How many women had fallen to his masterful manipulations? He had but to kiss her hand and she had turned into a quivering mass of want. Her cheeks burned with shame. He used her like a toy.

But her body enjoyed every moment of it.

\* \* \* \*

Tadeusz tightened the girth on Smialek as the horse pawed the ground. Tadeusz had no idea where they were going. He only wanted to ride hard and fast. Jump a few fences. Take some wild chances. He needed to conquer the raging desire that threatened his sanity. He must rid himself of the taste of Victoria—the feel of her—the scent of her.

Dammit. He could not seem to resist her. Though he had been angry when he saw the letter she had written, seeing the distress in her eyes as he ripped up that letter had made him feel like a bastard. Indeed, the woman had him in the palm of her hand and he could not keep his hands off her. The thought of gliding his hands along her soft, smooth skin drove him half mad!

He had never known a woman like her. She was warm honey and when she melted into him, quivering with need he wanted to drown in her nectar.

She turned him into a lunatic!

All he wanted to do was bed her—even though she would never love him—even though she would break his heart. Even though she would not save him from his awful fate. She was already trying to find ways to escape!

What puzzled him was how she responded to his kisses with such fervor. From her reactions, her ardor could well match his in intensity.

William broke into his thoughts by shuffling into the stable. Tadeusz gave the old



man a smile. In truth, he would never dismiss William or his wife. Not only had he become fond of the couple, they were the only ones who knew what was about to befall him. Unfortunately, the threat of discharging them might be the only way he could keep Victoria from running off. Aside from the fact that he was already infatuated with his new wife, he intended to do his utmost to maintain his promise to Paul. At the moment, that meant keeping her out of harm's way. Judging from last night's strange scenario in the drawing room, the threats were becoming more personal—and too close for comfort.

Tadeusz reached for his rifle. Since Paul's death the safety of everyone at Blackbirch Manor had become a major concern. If he could, he would watch over them once he became a wolf. He suppressed a shudder.

"William, where would someone enter the manor when the doors are locked?"

The spark of concern flashed in William's rheumy eyes. "Did someone break in again?"

Tadeusz explained the odd situation.

William's face hardened. "Tonight I'll be staying up to catch them that's tried to fool you. No one will be getting by me!"

"I do not think that will be necessary—yet. Please, check the lower windows, and the security of the locks for me today."

"It would be my pleasure, sir."

"Thank you, William."

Tadeusz led Smialek out of the stable and looked at the sky. It was such a bright blue it hurt to stare at it—and it reminded him of Victoria's eyes, just as the sunshine reminded him of her hair, and the fluffy puffs of clouds reminded him of her incredibly lovely skin. An ache twisted in his heart and for a moment he lost all interest in riding. He wanted to go back into the mansion, chase away the dressmaker and her entourage and finish what he had started with Victoria.

His heart thudded dully in his chest. He knew he would be a fool to satisfy his urges by bedding her. He could not make her love him. How many more days did he have? Two?

A cold hard rock settled in his gut. He wondered if she cared for him, just a little, would it help? Could just a small amount of affection for him on her part change his fate—or postpone it?

"You going anyplace in particular?" William called after him.

Tadeusz shrugged. "How good is that jeweler in Taylor's Grove?"

"He made fancy necklaces for Miss Vicky's mother—God rest her soul. She was a right pretty woman but when she wore those jewels around her neck she looked like a queen."

Tadeusz gripped the reins and hoisted himself into the saddle. "Then I guess I'm going to visit the jeweler in Taylor's Grove. I'll be trusting you to keep an eye on things for me William."

"Indeed I will, sir."

With that Tadeusz urged Smialek into a gallop. With a destination in mind, he felt a renewed sense of purpose. He had made a habit of complimenting women by comparing them to fine jewels, gold, and silver. He had done it because most women

seemed quite pleased with such flattery and were happy to grant him favors when he presented them with some trinket. But his gifts were only a means to an end. He had never honestly meant what he said to those other women.

With Victoria, he meant it. Her hair *was* like spun gold. Her skin *glowed* like opals. She could be a fine porcelain doll—except for the lily-scented heat that rose from her skin and removed all of his common sense.

Again, a sharp pain pierced him—for while Victoria was more exquisite than any woman he had ever seen, he was hideous.

I will make it up to her, he told himself. She shall want for nothing.

If she stayed ....

He forced himself to cling to a small glimmer of hope.

## Chapter Six

Victoria could not recall ever spending so much time getting poked, pinned, and measured. The hours marched by tediously except for a delightful luncheon. Her appetite had returned and she enjoyed every morsel of Ipsy's wonderful cooking. At last, the dressmaker and her assistants left with their many boxes. Standing by the window, Victoria watched the carriage depart in a swirl of dust and fallen leaves. In a matter of weeks the dressmaker promised there would be countless gowns delivered—one for every day of the month—more than Victoria had ever possessed in her lifetime.

To tide her over until the new ones were completed the dressmaker had left behind some ready-made dresses. Victoria turned away from the window and went to the bed where she ran her hand over the dark russet moiré. It seemed almost scandalous in its richness. She did not think she had ever seen a fabric as beautiful, but then there was the gray cashmere which felt as soft as a whisper against her skin. Most stunning of all was the elegant evening gown of *ciel* blue damask richly trimmed in lace. The low neck was festooned with tulle as well. The dressmaker must have made up a copy of a Worth gown. Obviously, the Beast had spared no expense.

With all his wealth, he could give her the best things in life, but it was the promise of his kisses that made her weak. He was dreadful to look at, but when he touched her she completely ignored his horrid condition and craved intimacy with him. When he kissed her moist heat gathered between her thighs and her breasts grew heavier. She had thought she would swoon in ecstasy when he suckled her nipples. Heat burned her cheeks at the memory. It was shameful the way she reacted to one so disfigured—so unacceptable to society.

But Paul had counted him as a good friend. Could it be that *she* was shallow and callous? She had made a huge mistake marrying Giles. He had been a handsome man, but he had been deliberately cruel. Maybe she needed to dig deeper—to search for the heart of the Beast.

Anguish gnawed at her and she could feel the sting of tears pricking at the backs of her eyes. So far, the Beast had been a far better husband than Giles had been. He also made her skin hot and her insides a quivering mass of need. She licked her lips and a deluge of want almost drowned her. She paced the room, trying to cool her lust. She kept reminding herself that the Beast was quite ugly.

Where would she be able to show off the many lovely gowns he had purchased for her? If she arrived at a society event with the Beast on her arm, she would shock everyone. Women would swoon and their husbands would aim pistols at him.

She sniffed back a sad ache and found a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. She would certainly make a grand entrance!

Her thoughts darkened as she remembered that she had been nothing more than a bet in a poker game and according to Dr. Evans, if she bore any children, they would

carry the same disfigurement as their father.

Her head swirled with doubts. What if the Beast was a more potent male than Giles had been? What if the Beast could give her the children she had prayed she would someday have? The years of her barrenness had been a misery of empty arms. What if the doctor was wrong and her children looked like her?

And what if they, too, would be destined to see auras?

If she bore a child who looked much like the Beast could she love the baby?

*No!* How could she even think of bringing another monster into the world? She glanced up and caught her image in the dressing mirror. There she saw the aura glowing around her. She closed her eyes. Why was she thinking of children or society? She could very well be going mad. It was possible that soon, like her mother, she would not be able to tell what day it was—and she would not care either.

The burden of her doom weighed on her heart. Perhaps she should tell the Beast. Then he would be the one to choose releasing her from the marriage.

Where would she go afterwards? Who would care for her when insanity took over all her faculties? She felt her throat aching with emotion. Her mother had wanted to kill herself. Maybe she had realized that as the only cure for her misery? Was that what lay ahead in the future for her?

The knock at the door startled her.

“May I come in?” The Beast’s voice rumbled low outside her door.

Simply hearing his voice had her heart hammering foolishly. Forcing herself to swallow, she cleared her throat. “Yes.”

He entered and Victoria covered a gasp of surprise. The massive mop of hair had been shorn away from his face and neck. Now carefully cut and combed, it resembled the style most men seemed to favor—though the skin on his face appeared unusually pale.

“The barber in Taylor’s Grove is an extremely patient man.” A touch of derision marred his tone. “I am like nothing so much as a sheared sheep—except that in my case the hair will grow back far quicker.”

“How can that be?” For the first time, she could see the sharp angles and planes in his features. Without the thick hair, his handsome features were fully evident. Her heart did an odd flip.

“That is the way it is.” It seemed as if he mocked himself. “However, I can appear to be almost human for a few days.”

She sensed his sorrow or perhaps the sulfuric glow in his aura echoed his despair. She went toward him and frowned at the brutal scar that ran along the side of his face. It had not been visible until now with the thick covering of hair removed.

His mouth turned down in a grimace. “Once, I tried to singe the hair off, which is why I have that scar. I tried other foolish measures, too. I tried potions and spells, and even plucking out each hair individually, all to no avail.”

For a moment, she felt a squeezing ache. How she pitied him! What torment he suffered!

As a man he was so vital—so compelling—so devastatingly attractive. She reached up and lightly ran her fingers over his skin where already a thin layer of fine hair had returned to mar the surface. Her fingers quivered at the contact and yearning rippled

through her. How she wished he did not suffer from his dreadful condition.

The room suddenly seemed too hot and she could barely breathe.

He captured her hand and tenderly brushed his lips across her knuckles. Her knees went weak.

“Though the shave will not last, I thought it would be a kindness for our guests. I did not want to frighten anyone at our celebration. I regret that I did not have the presence of mind to submit to the barber before you met me. I am sorry I terrified you—my sweet and precious Beauty.”

Her instinctive reaction to him was so intense it almost pained her. Her attraction to him defied logic. Her mind told her to draw her trembling hand away from his, but her body resisted the command.

Time simply stopped while the only sounds she heard in the room were her wildly pounding heartbeats.

When he began to massage her hand with his thumb, she came to her senses and managed to tug her hand away. She whirled around and went back to the window, afraid of allowing her emotions to overwhelm her. Her thoughts had become so jumbled that all her common sense seemed to have abandoned her. She ought to leave. She should not go through with this farce of a marriage.

And yet ... there was the fact that he was far less cruel than Giles had been. When Giles went into one of his fits of jealous rage, he would lock her in her room and forbid her to go out at all—or even to entertain her friends. His heartlessness had begun only one day after they had been married.

Giles had wanted to control her every move—and for the most part he had succeeded. The memory of it tortured her. She could not bear to go through that again.

“I have brought you gifts.” He was so close she could smell the scent of the fresh mountain air clinging to him along with the comfortable aroma of old leather. She had not heard his approach since he came up so softly behind her—or perhaps it was because she was so lost in her own thoughts.

“You do not need to give me gifts,” she protested, struggling to keep her voice under control. “You have already been *most* generous in providing me with such a large wardrobe.”

“You are my wife. I will enjoy dressing—and undressing you.”

An inferno ignited in her cheeks at his brazen suggestion. She swung around intending to scold him for his brash remark, but then she turned she saw the two velvet-covered boxes.

*Jewels!* Perhaps these were the ones which had belonged to her mother—the ones which should rightfully belong to her. She narrowed her eyes and stared up at him, but the tenderness she caught in his expression disconcerted her.

He lifted the lid of one of the boxes. “These are mere adornments that cannot hold a candle to your beauty, but I should like to see them sparkling against your silken skin.”

Inside the box lay a fine necklace fashioned of gold and opals. It had not belonged to her mother for it was far more exquisite than anything she had ever seen. She could not prevent herself from running her fingers over the fine gold chain. When she touched the largest opal in the center, a small spark shot up her arm.

"I would like you to wear this tomorrow," he asked. "But I would like to see it against your skin now."

She glanced up at him, speechless with emotion. Why did she have to be so weak? So completely under his spell?

"Turn around, my dear, and I will fasten the clasp."

She did as he bid and felt her pulse leap as he drew the extravagant bauble around her neck. The touch of his fingers against her flesh reawakened that appalling longing again. She wanted him—in the most elemental way—in the base act she had previously despised and endured in silence.

He lightly spun her around again so he could see the necklace. She heard him draw in a quick breath as he put his fingers to the base of her throat.

He breathed softly as his head inclined toward her. "Passion and sparkle—a fine combination for a most beautiful woman."

She held her breath. Would he kiss her again? Would he take her into his arms and pull her against his arousal? Her hands reached out.

A loud rap on the door shattered the mood.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but I have found a bit of trouble." It was William's voice calling from the other side of the door.

"I will be with you in a minute, William," the Beast replied.

The spell was broken. She sank down onto the divan. The Beast quickly undid the clasp and returned the necklace to the velvet box. "I have earrings for you, as well, but I will put them away in the safe for now. Tomorrow, you will don them for our celebration."

She merely nodded.

"Will you join me for supper this evening?" he asked.

Again, she gave a meek nod—and hated herself for it. This man—this *Beast* controlled her. In a way that was far cleverer than Giles' vindictive treatment.

Did it matter if the Beast was kinder? She was still his puppet.

A huge, open smile wreathed his face, and despite her resentment it felt as if the warmth of the sun shone on her. Then he left the room and suddenly she was alone again with her memories. She shivered as the gloomy walls of her mother's former room seemed to close in about her.

Rubbing her arms to ward off the aberrant chill, she got up and once more began to pace the floor. If he had left the jewels with her, she could have used them to offer a reward for the capture of whomever—or whatever—had killed Paul.

She wondered about Ipsy's mention of the gossip concerning Paul's death.

Suddenly, she had to know what the townsfolk were whispering. She stopped her restless steps and made up her mind to go to Taylor's Grove—even though the Beast had forbidden her to leave the estate. In fact, she was determined to disobey his edict. She refused to be restricted.

Walking down to Taylor's Grove would take too long. She would be missed, but she knew very well how to handle a horse and buggy. The only person keeping her away from the stable was Stan Drummer and she had seen him walking away from the manor at the same time the dressmaker and her entourage had departed.

In fact, if William was with the Beast, nobody was in the stable.

She could poke around town—stop in the tearoom, or look over everything in the general store. Someone would tell her the rumor or she would hear it whispered behind her back. Either way, she had to know. Hurriedly putting on the new cashmere dress, she escaped from the manor.

\* \* \* \*

Tadeusz bent down and stared at the disturbed earth beneath the drawing room window. The heel of a shoe and half of the imprint of a hand lay in the ground. Anger had him clamping his teeth together so hard it hurt. “How was the lock broken?”

“It wasn’t, sir.” William replied. “It could be that someone slipped in during the daytime when no one was watching and laid low until nightfall.”

“Someone who has not been studying Chopin sufficiently.”

“What, sir?”

“Never mind, we must be more vigilant.”

“I’ll tell the missus.” William gave a long sigh. “Was anything taken, sir?”

“Not that I know of—yet,” Tadeusz admitted. *What little peace of mind I had has been destroyed.* Paul had hinted about some sort of danger. The day he died, Paul had come to talk to him. Pacing back and forth, Paul had raved that he was not going to let it go on any longer. Unfortunately, Paul never told him what ‘it’ was. He had simply begged Tadeusz to protect Victoria—no matter what happened.

He and William had thoroughly searched for clues, but they had found none. William thought he might have a spare lock in one of the boxes on his workbench so that the window could be more thoroughly secured. He had a wonderful collection of odds and ends from all the years he and his wife had lived at the manor. Often, if he did not have exactly what was needed for a repair, he would fashion a new part himself. The old man was worth his weight in gold. In truth, Tadeusz had begun to consider him more of a friend than an employee.

“I can have it fixed up before bedtime, sir.”

“Thank you, William.” Tadeusz watched William walk back toward the stable for a moment before he turned to go back inside the manor. He could never get rid of William, or Ipsy for that matter. He was a fool to use that as leverage to keep Victoria at the manor, but he had to do something. His time was short.

He kept up his hopes by believing that if she could simply care for him, with just the smallest bit of affection, he might be saved from his fate.

He planned to attend to his business correspondence before dinner. He would be handing over the business of the brewery to his two vice-presidents and there were still some financial details to work out. But last night’s staged scene wreaked havoc in his mind and he found it impossible to concentrate.

He had heard the tales of those who believed Victoria had pushed her mother into the lake. Certainly, after last night’s performance, it seemed evident that someone intended to frighten her. Someone wanted to make it seem as though the manor was haunted and had gone to a lot of trouble to make it appear authentic. Fear knotted inside him.

That was when William came hobbling rapidly back toward the manor along the

path from the stable.

“The buggy is gone, sir! And Taffy, the mare!” The old man shouted.

Tadeusz ran up to him. “Stolen?”

“No, sir. I don’t think so. I found this.” William held up a small, black reticule which Tadeusz recognized immediately. “Miss Vicky knows how to hitch up the buggy and how to drive it, sir, but that Taffy ain’t done being harness broke and she’s a mighty willful creature.”

Tadeusz felt as if he had a burning coal in his gut. “I told her not to leave the estate.”

“Women love to go to town, sir.”

Tadeusz muttered a string of Polish curses and saddled up Smialek in record time. The big horse did not need to be urged into a gallop. They rushed out through the gate of the estate, and turned onto the road to Taylor’s Grove. Panic built in Tadeusz’s chest as he and Smialek headed down the hill at breakneck speed.

\* \* \* \*

Ordinarily, even despite the serious nature of her mission, Victoria would have enjoyed being out in the wonderfully crisp autumn air. She would have reveled in driving along the road—especially since she had been denied the pleasure of handling a buggy for so long.

Instead, she soon learned that nine years of being away from the task was a very long time indeed. The mare she had chosen had been complacent enough as she hitched her to the buggy, but before they passed through the gate of the manor and turned onto the road, the crazy horse proved to have a will stronger than a mule.

Victoria’s arms ached from struggling to control the reins so that the horse did not pull the buggy into the ditch. She knew she would never get to town at this rate—and if she did not show up at dinner the Beast would soon come after her. How would she ever hear the talk concerning her cousin’s ghastly death?

But though she was frustrated and tired, she did not give up. At the very least, she refused to allow the stubborn horse to get the better of her. She was in charge and that mule-brained horse was going to learn some respect if nothing else!

Still, her progress with the mare was painfully slow. With perseverance she managed to keep the animal on the road, but the horse never gave up its longing to taste the tall grass in the ditch. As the sun started its descent, Victoria’s heart sank with it. Soon it would be dark. She knew she had to turn around and head back to the manor. She pulled back on the reins to stop the horse—and the mare complied. It felt like a small victory.

On one side of the road, the pasture sloped downward and allowed Victoria a bird’s eyes view of Taylor’s Grove with the river winding through it like a silver ribbon. It was a pretty little town seen from above—like a miniature village display she had seen in a shop window in New York City. Only this was far more beautiful—for it was real. Her heart stirred and she remembered some of the good times from her youth—the happy times when she had traveled down this very road accompanied by her parents and her cousin. The long ago echoes of her mother’s happy laughter fell upon her and she closed her eyes. It hurt to think of how everything had changed so quickly. Her father’s death



had brought on her mother's illness, and all the happiness was lost. Forever.

Her musings were disturbed as she heard what sounded like a low growl. Her pulse jumped. *It is nothing*, she told herself.

Then she heard it again. Closer. A wolf? But there were no wolves here anymore. Perhaps a wild dog? Perhaps a pack of wild dogs? She reached for the whip as her heart raced. Was this how Paul had died? Attacked and ripped to pieces?

In a panic and with her pulse racing, she tried to get the mare to move, but the stubborn animal stood as still as if it was made of bronze—except for the flick of its ears this way and that. Muscles tensed, ready to bolt if danger threatened, it continued to eye that lush grass in the ditch.

A howl echoed along the hills and Victoria's blood turned cold. She froze and stopped struggling with the horse. She held her breath and listened. Even the birds had stopped twittering. Then she saw it, a lone wolf moving stealthily down the hillside to her right.

Gulping back her panic, she flicked the whip on the mare's flank. The mare shied to the left, but did not step ahead. The wolf stopped moving, he crouched, ready to lunge from above.

"You stupid horse!" Victoria yelled. She could feel the icy sweat on her brow. She hit the horse with the whip as hard as she could. Once. Twice.

She stood up and hit the horse a third time so violently the horse screamed, reared up and then took off as if the very devil was after her—which was what Victoria had hoped for, but she was unprepared for the jolt as the buggy lurched forward.

The force knocked her backward and onto the floor of the buggy. The reins slipped from her fingers. She had to use all her strength to hang on as the crazed mare galloped down the sloping hill. The reins trailed along on the ground. She could never grab them. She prayed that the horse would not crash the buggy into the trees, or into another vehicle—or worst of all, go over the side of the hill.

The scenery flew by as the mare raced along and Victoria's head spun. Jostled violently on the hard wooden floor, she gritted her teeth as the vehicle bounced into every rut in the road. She considered jumping out, but the possibility that she would break a bone—or a few of them—kept her where she was. Also, the fact that there was a wolf out there.

How fast could a wolf run? Was he right behind the buggy?

She heard a shout. And another. She struggled to see who was calling out, but with the wild rocking of the buggy, she could barely focus.

The buggy slowed—and then stopped. Weak and dizzy, Victoria clutched at the whip in her hand. Would she be able to scare the wolf away with it if he came at her?

She crawled from beneath the seat. Her stomach heaved and she clamped her hand over her mouth. She would not be sick.

She narrowed her eyes to focus them and saw the Beast sitting astride his great black horse. He held the reins to the buggy in his gloved hands.

"You dropped these?" His contemptuous tone did not surprise her though the rather sulfuric shade of yellow tingeing his aura did. She suspected by the set of his square jaw that a prudent move would be to duck for cover. After all, she had disobeyed

his edict—and her little excursion could have ended very badly. Still, she was truly glad to see him. She glanced around, but did not see the wolf.

Despite the throbbing of her bruises, she pulled herself up onto the seat, straightened out her dress, and dusted herself off. “A wolf appeared on the hillside and the mare bolted in fright.” Actually, the dim-witted mare probably would have been the wolf’s dinner. Victoria gulped. And she would have been the wolf’s dessert. However, she decided not to discuss that.

The Beast’s expression clouded over and a savage glint came into his eyes. Her heart began to race. “There are no wolves here.”

“I saw it.” She glared back at him. “And I heard it, too.”

“I told you not to leave the estate.”

She met his fierce look without flinching and lied. “I needed some new ribbons.”

He swore. At least, she thought he did—she could not tell because the words were in his own harsh language.

A tremor went through her even though she fought to squelch it. Yes, it had been a very close call. Nevertheless, she had her pride. “I am not hurt, and neither is your mare.”

He dismounted and tied the reins of his horse to a sturdy bush. Without any more discussion, he examined the mare and then unhitched her from the buggy. He walked over to the side of the buggy and frowned. Victoria leaned over the side of the buggy and swallowed hard when she saw what had happened to the back wheel. If she had gone on much further, the wheel would undoubtedly have come off.

She felt the blood drain from her face as the Beast lifted his gaze to hers. The sulfuric color of his aura had shifted to a shade of orange. What did the fiery color indicate?

“You will ride on Smialek with me. The mare will follow.” It was an order.

He reached up to take her from the buggy. She winced as his hand pressed against her bruised skin.

“You are hurt!”

“No. It is nothing. Only a bruise.”

His lips pressed into a grim line. He swept her into his arms and carried her to his great black horse. With her heart thundering in her chest, she could not control the trembling of her body. But when the Beast mounted the horse and she leaned back against him a sense of calm came over her. She closed her eyes. She was safe. For now.

They rode slowly back to the manor in silence. Gathered against the Beast’s solid chest, Victoria stole his warmth and melted against him. Soon, she found the hunger she had for him growing within her again. She could not stop the sense of anticipation that crept through every nerve.

He had been angry, but he had treated her very tenderly. An odd twinge of guilt pierced her. Perhaps he loved her. And if she left him, she would break his heart.

As they rounded a curve, they came upon her battered hat lying in the road. The Beast dismounted to pick it up. “I will buy you a new hat. This one I will give to Taffy.”

“Taffy?”

“The mare.”

"Oh. I suppose if I had known the mare's name and used it, she would have been better behaved."

"She gave you a bad time of it?" His mouth quirked up slightly in amusement.

"She did not seem to have an ounce of sense." Victoria sighed.

"Ah well. She is the most stubborn horse I have met—though she is beautiful. William has been trying to break her into the harness. It is surprising you got as far as you did with her."

"Perhaps the hat will improve her disposition." She tried to smile, but her attempt failed as he got back on his horse and drew her gently against him once more.

"I find you far lovelier without the hat." His chin rested on her hair. She felt his great chest expand and heard him breathe in deeply.

She dared to glance up at him and caught the wistful longing in his eyes. She knew in that moment that he had a kind heart and a swell of pity for him welled up within her. She reached up to touch his shaven chin. Then her hand slid behind his neck. The contact sent a familiar shiver of awareness through her. "I am really lucky that you showed up when you did and ... and ... I am sorry." She drew his head toward her, knowing that she should not do it—knowing that it would only make matters worse, but she could not stop herself. Something special wound through her whenever they touched. Besides, she could not deny herself the taste of his kiss—for it seemed as if it held a certain kind of magic that made her forget what he was.

His mouth brushed against hers ever so gently. She ran her tongue along the soft fullness of his lower lip and she felt the deep rumble in his chest. She parted her lips and he took possession, smothering her mouth with a greedy hunger that left her knees weak and her senses reeling. He coaxed and challenged her until she felt as if she were on fire with need. His burgeoning erection pressed against her thigh—and her excitement intensified.

Then from somewhere off to her left, she heard a low growl. She came back to her senses. Pushing against the Beast's chest, she broke the contact between them to get a breath of air so she could speak. "Did you hear that? It's the wolf!"

The horses whinnied.

"I heard nothing."

"You had to hear it! It came from over there!" She pointed at the hillside. The implacable expression on his face told her nothing. She searched his aura and found it muddied again.

"The wolves in this area have all been exterminated." The Beast rained a few more kisses in her hair and sighed as he stopped. He urged the horse into a canter. "Ipsy will be quite curt with us if we are late for dinner."

Every one of her nerves tensed. He had heard that growl. Why did he deny it? Even the horses had heard the sound.

Fear took root, winding through her and twisting her thoughts. Could it be that her mother's madness was affecting her in this unusual way? A cold chill went through her.

Has she seen a wolf, or an illusion?

Or was something else happening?

## Chapter Seven

Despair tore at Tadeusz's heart as he sat across the table from Victoria. She twirled her spoon in the apple tart, apparently wrestling with the utensil in an effort to keep her hand from trembling. She barely said a word. She reminded him of a timid fawn ready to spring away from him. The spark of panic and doubt in her eyes cut him to the core.

Dread lay on his heart for he knew she had every right to mistrust him. He had no control. He could not guarantee her safety at all. He had promised Paul to protect her, but he had almost lost her. True, she had foolishly defied him, but that did not matter.

Cold sweat dampened his shirt. He could count the hours he had left. Each minute of silence that ticked by set his nerves on end. He decided he had nothing to lose and would try to pry the past from her—if only to stop himself from thinking of the passage of time.

"Paul told me very little about Giles. He thought you had been introduced to Giles at a party."

"Y-yes, we did meet at a party. We were married a month later."

He watched as she slid her hands beneath the table. He did not doubt that she had given up trying to stop them from quivering. "So quickly?"

"Giles was madly in love ... and ... terribly jealous, as well." Her voice dropped to a whisper.

"I imagine you had other suitors."

She did not look at him. She ran the tip of her tongue along her lower lip. He remembered the taste he had found there—as sweet as the taste of fresh rain. The fire of passion licked at his loins. He struggled to keep his desire at bay.

"Yes, there were others, but Giles was most handsome and he came from a wealthy family."

That sounded like an attempt to convince herself that Giles had been the right choice—but it did not sound like love. Hunger for her clawed at him and he became rash.

"Was your marriage consummated?"

She gasped at his audacious question. "That is ... that is ... I am shocked that you—"

"You had no children."

She turned her face away from him—almost as if he had slapped her. "That does not mean .... We were intimate, of course. That is a wife's duty ... but not all women ...."

*Wife's duty? Had she never enjoyed the act of love?* He clenched his hands into fists.

"Did he hurt you?"

She flinched as if he had struck her himself. "I ... I was ...."

He caught the look of alarm in her eyes and fury boiled up inside him. *What had Giles done to her?* It was a shame that Giles was already dead, for Tadeusz would have enjoyed pulverizing the fiend.

“Did he never pleasure you?”

She lifted her face and he saw the flush blazing on her cheeks. “That question ... all your questions are ... most inappropriate.” With her head held high, she shot him a stern look as if he were nothing more than an impertinent schoolboy.

“I think not.” He weighed her reaction. She furrowed her brow and he felt a stab of remorse at the sight of the lines marring her forehead. “You are my wife and it is now my responsibility to pleasure you.”

Unexpectedly, she jumped up and dashed for the doorway, but in a few easy strides he caught up with her, lightly hooking his arm around her waist. Aware of her bruises, he wanted to be gentle, but he could not allow her to leave.

She froze as he drew her against him. “We must not ... the doctor told me ....”

“That I have a disease.”

He watched her swallow back a sob as she nodded.

“I do not have a disease.”

“But ....”

“I was cursed by a witch.”

Brittle in his arms, she managed a sarcastic retort. “Witch’s curses exist only in fairy tales.”

He searched her gaze, praying she would not laugh at him. “At the age of twelve, I was allowed to drive the team of horses to make a delivery to one of the local inns back in Poland. Afterwards, I whipped up the horses to see how fast they could go, but rounding one bend I came upon an old woman—the one everyone called the witch. Before I could stop the wagon, one of the horses had trampled upon her. As she lay dying on the ground, she cursed me and within a year of her death, my body became covered with hair.”

As she stared up at him, he read only confusion mingled with distress in her eyes. The misery of his misfortune had been bottled up inside him for so long that opening up and trying to speak of it caused him physical pain. He closed his eyes, fearing what he would see in hers when he finished.

“The townspeople avoided me, treating me like a leper. When I could stand it no longer, I came to America. While there was less suspicion, I found more ridicule. Even after I started up a brewery and became wealthy, I was no more acceptable to society.”

He could not tell her the rest of the curse. The witch had threatened that if he told any woman the reason he needed her love, his transformation into a wolf would be immediate. Emptiness ached inside him.

When her hand touched his cheek, he stiffened.

“I guess there are some things we cannot explain ... or ever completely understand.” Like a fragrant balm upon his stained soul, her words and her touch soothed him. He relaxed and the deep hurt inside him diminished, but he knew the depth of his love for this precious woman would rip him to pieces.

He opened his eyes once more only to have his heart lurch as he watched her

delicate, pink tongue dart out and slide along her ripe lips. His blood ignited. He wanted her, but he knew he must tamp down his own ardor—somehow he had to be strong enough to restrain himself.

“My Beauty, after tonight, you will understand what it is like to be pleased. There will be no duty, only ecstasy.” With that he swept her up in his arms.

\* \* \* \*

Victoria’s pulse raced as the Beast carried her upstairs. His heat seared through her gown. With her arms clinging to the corded muscles of his neck, she breathed in the smell of him—leather, wine, and some deeper primeval scent that seemed to melt her defenses and make her weak with longing. Feeling the strength of him, the sinews in his arms and the solid wall of his chest, had her tingling with anticipation.

But also with fear.

His predominantly red aura was now tinged with pink. Were the two shades the colors of love or lust? Or was what she saw an illusion, created by the madness growing ever more powerful within her?

Did it matter? She knew she should not consent to this reckless folly. She was a fool.

Still, as he laid her lightly upon the bed in her mother’s room, every one of her nerves hummed in eagerness.

“Do not ... do this.” The small catch in her throat sounded neither confident nor firm.

“I promise not to hurt you, only to give you pleasure.” His words had the smoothness of silk. He calmly slipped out of his jacket.

“But ... but this is ... too ...” She swallowed hard. “W-we need to become better acquainted.”

He lifted one dangerous eyebrow and her stomach did a strange little flip.

“My sweet Beauty, I will not penetrate you.”

She felt the blush on her cheeks go to the roots of her hair.

“There will be kisses. You like my kisses.” He had rid himself of tie, cuff links, and collar. “I will kiss you all over.” He sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Everywhere?” She watched him with breathless expectancy.

“Your lips, your ears, your breasts, and more.” He held out his hand to her. “Let me begin by kissing your hand.”

She knew this was the last moment at which she could resist—for if she did not, he would completely have her in his power. She knew all it took was a touch from him to ignite the passion within her. She was nothing more than an instrument to him—like his violin. He would play her and draw out exactly the notes he wanted.

But she could not resist. Her hand trembled as she held it out and reached for him. He grasped her hand and then bent to his task, proceeding to taste her palm and then her wrist. Though this was only the second time he had lavished such attention on her hand, the intensity of her response was immediate. Languid warmth flowed through every vein until she felt as if she had no more strength than a leaf caught in the wind.

His kisses traveled upward. Their mouths met and she quivered at the tenderness she discovered as he slowly, but thoroughly, devoured her. His tongue captured hers and

then went deeper. In a moment she followed his lead, savoring the wet darkness.

Before she realized it, he had unfastened the bodice of her dress and lowered the fabric from her shoulders. She felt the chill but it did not last long as his heated hands caressed her. He soon freed her breasts from her corset cover, as well. Her fingers raked through his hair as he pressed the heat of his lips against first one rosy nipple and then the other until they became hard and sensitive to the slightest touch. Tremors of need sped down to her most private place until she felt the dampness gather at the apex of her thighs where a hot ache swelled.

She wanted more. She moaned as a primitive urge swept through her.

"I will see all of you, my Beauty." The husky tone in his voice seemed heavy with emotion, and Victoria found it thrilled her. She nodded her assent and fumbled in an effort to free herself from the yards of fabric that encumbered her as well as the boned corset. The Beast swiftly came to her aid and extricated her from her cloth prison.

Still, as he slid her pantelettes down, she shivered. She heard him suck in his breath and she glanced up at him. His eyes were wide and smoldering with desire.

Panic gripped her as reason shot through her lust-filled mind. She was naked, completely defenseless—and memories of Giles paralyzed her with fear.

"N—no! I ... I ...." She grabbed a corner of the coverlet and curled up beneath it.

His hands patiently skimmed down the side of her body. The tender warmth of his touch comforted her despite the fabric between them. "I will not hurt you. I want only to give you pleasure. Allow me to bring you to the pinnacle of ecstasy. Let me kiss you once more."

His words soothed her and she could not deny the forces within her that longed for fulfillment. Taking a deep breath, she allowed him to remove the coverlet. She lay back. His hot hands slid down her body, searing a path to the swell of her thighs. He moved her legs gently apart. Slowly, he lavished the sensitive skin along the inside of her thighs, moving upward inch by inch until he reached the nest of curled golden hair guarding the entrance to her sex.

"I will kiss you here."

Shocked, she felt the blaze on her cheeks, but she soon forgot her embarrassment as his tongue lapped against her delicate nub. An explosive force built within her. Her legs quaked as she found herself on fire with desire. Her breath came in harsh pants as he pressed his tongue into that intimate spot. Her body throbbed and pulsed. She could not control the shaking of her limbs.

Was it pleasure or torture? Or sheer agony? She lifted her hips and clutched at the coverlet with both fists. She only knew she wanted more.

Then he shifted his position and lay down beside her, drawing her against his warmth. His hand covered her mound and slowly, gently, his finger entered her. Slick and wet, his finger slid in and out. She cried out as an uncontrollable cataclysm rocked her—and still his finger moved inside her until she shuddered with each successive wave of undulating passion rippling through her. He ended his persecution, gathering her against him until the climax ended, but she could still feel the deep throbbing which pulsed with her heartbeat.

\* \* \* \*

Victoria awoke with a start, to the sounds of the violin playing a sad, poignant melody in the next room. She knew the words to the song and just thinking about them in her mind was enough to make her eyes misty. Once more she felt a wave of pity for the Beast. The sad strains of the melancholy tune must merely be an echo of what was in his heart.

She shoved the tumbled hair back from her face. The only light in the room came from the glowing coals on the hearth. She must have dozed off since the last thing she remembered was nodding off to sleep in the Beast's arms after he had pleased her.

Beneath the heavy coverlet, her body was naked. Heat returned to her cheeks as she thought of what the Beast had done to her. She would never have believed her own body capable of such an explosion of sensations. Unaccountably, she found herself aching for more.

What would it have been like to join fully with him in the marriage act? Was it possible that it would be even more wondrous? More pleasurable? The maelstrom of sensations the Beast had elicited from her left her euphoric. For the first time in her life, she understood lust and she rather liked it. A smile tugged at her lips. She did not think she would mind being pleased again.

With that thought reality crowded into her mind and desire fled. What was the matter with her? She needed to get out of the marriage—not consummate it! Her marriage was ... unnatural.

Troubled, she slipped out of bed and searched for her gown and wrapper. Lighting a candle, she noticed that the clothes the Beast had removed from her body were now neatly draped on the divan. He had been most considerate. A tender spot opened up in her heart.

The more she tried to forget what had happened, the more the memory rose over her and consumed her. He had awakened the passion in her. She had never experienced such a driving need until now and he was responsible. He had seen her. All of her. However, he had not taken off his clothing. She could not help but wonder what lay beneath his neatly tailored attire. She had touched the breadth of his shoulders, the hard planes of his buttocks, and the solid ridges of his chest. Did it matter if it all had a covering of hair?

She rubbed her eyes. *Yes! Yes, it did matter!* He was a freak. While he had been kind and considerate—and most generous—he was totally unacceptable in society. Besides, any children from their union would be cursed with the same disease.

If it was a disease.

Should she believe the doctor? Or the Beast? Surely, there was no such thing as a witch's curse in this enlightened age? And yet certainly Victoria had been cursed, too ... by her mother ... by her unnatural ability to see auras.

Could the Beast be more potent than ordinary men? What if he made it possible for her to bear children?

What if the doctor was wrong?

Her head swam with questions, but her stomach suddenly clamored for attention. She was ravenous! She went to the door of the room and turned the knob. She found it locked! Instant fury bubbled up inside her. How dare he! The Beast intended to make her



a prisoner just as Giles had done. She would not allow him to treat her like this! She had already endured enough of that brand of cruelty from Giles!

With anger fueling her, she strode back and forth in the room. Yes, she had disobeyed the Beast and left the estate. But she knew the danger now and she would not do it again. There was no reason to lock her into her room! The outer doors of the manor were locked. She had heard William assure the Beast of that fact.

The Beast had become a controlling tyrant—just like Giles.

A flash of memory gave her an idea. Once, as a child she had been disobedient—in this very room. She went to the balcony window and discovered she could open it. She stepped out and glanced at the next balcony only two and a half feet away. She had jumped that space easily as a girl, but with no shoes and with less cumbersome clothing. Glancing down, she gauged the distance to the ground. She could not escape that way unless she had a good, sturdy rope—and if she slipped hopping over to the next balcony ...

She swallowed hard and told herself that she was still agile—though she was overburdened by her clothing—and besides there was no sense in making an attempt to escape if the Beast was still in the next room.

The slow strains of the Beast's downhearted melody continued to drift through the air. As she stood there musing over her abominable situation, she heard the music stop.

Stiffening, she wondered if the Beast would return to her room. A swirl of heat wound through her at the thought despite her struggle to deny it. She went back inside, determined to demand that he unlock the door. But the Beast did not come into her room. She pressed her ear to the door and listened. The door of his room opened and closed, though his footfalls made no sound on the thick carpet in the hall.

After a few minutes of silence, she assumed he went downstairs to get a book to read, or perhaps for a drink and something to eat.

Her own stomach grumbled.

She turned around and glared at the balcony. Now she had her chance. Clenching her jaw tightly together, she picked up her dressing table chair and hurried back out to the balcony. Setting the chair next to the railing, she climbed up. The balcony had a thick ledge. It should be easy for her to balance on it wearing her thin slippers. At least, it had been easy when she was a girl. Now, looking down, she felt a cold chill settle in her stomach. She could not miss ....

Swallowing back her fear, she got up onto the ledge and lightly stepped over to the next ledge. It was actually easier than she remembered. Her legs had grown longer.

She wanted to laugh as she jumped down onto the floor of the other balcony, but her confidence was short-lived. Instead of landing on both feet, she crumbled to one side and scraped her elbow against the manor's rough, gray stone wall.

It was a small price to pay for freedom. She rubbed at the sore spot as she got up and then tried the latch on the balcony door. It opened and with her heart pounding, she entered the Beast's lair.

A single candle burned on the table where a violin lay. She slid her finger along one of the strings and heard a high whine. Startled, she drew her finger back, hoping the Beast had not heard the sound. Picking up the candle, she held it high to see the room's

furnishings. This had been her father's room, but every aspect of the room had been changed and as she glanced around, she felt a chill of fear creep up her spine. Heavy drapes now hid the windows so that no glass was visible. There were no mirrors either. The chairs and the bed were draped with animal skins. The floor, too, had animal skin rugs. Above the mantle, the mounted heads of a deer, a bear, and a tiger stared down at her.

And beside the fireplace, the full-sized figure of a wolf glared at her with eyes the same shade of gray as the eyes of the Beast.

A swirl of terror clutched at her heart. She bolted from the room and went out into the hall. She did not see the Beast anywhere about, but she knew he would probably return soon. Dashing across the hall, she slid into the shadows of the servants' stairway. There, she craned her neck and looked down the winding, narrow stairs which also led to the basement. She wondered if there was a locked door at the bottom of this staircase. If there was not, she could gain access to the basement where the old trunk with her mother's things must be stored. Surely, her mother had drawn other pictures—and Victoria needed to study them.

Forgetting about her hunger, she hiked up her nightgown and wrapper. Still holding the candle, she proceeded to descend the twisting staircase. At the last turn, she saw the door—and the heavy padlock.

Obviously, the only way she would get to the basement was either to take an ax to the door, steal the Beast's keys, or to ask him to open the lock for her.

Would he do it? What if he refused to open it? What if he asked her exactly what she wanted in the basement? What would he do if he knew she saw auras? Would he order the doctor to dose her with laudanum?

Treading lightly, she returned to the second floor landing. She did not want to run into the Beast. She did not know how he would react when he realized she had escaped so easily. Perspiration beaded up on her brow. He might make it impossible for her to flee next time.

She pressed her lips tightly together. She would not allow him to make her a prisoner! She would leave Blackbirch Manor forever!

She twisted her hands together as she stood in the shadows. She could not leave yet. Indeed, she had to know if her mother had made other sketches. Why were some of the auras she saw different from the ones her mother drew? Had time changed the auras, or had each individual's personality altered? If seeing auras was a special gift there had to be some meaning to them. If she could learn the key, perhaps she could somehow discern the future.

Or was it all simply madness?

She began to feel lightheaded again and she leaned back against the wall.

If she went back to New York City and got a job, she could support herself and be free. At least that way she would never be caged again! She fumed as she thought of how the Beast had locked her in her room. One minute he delivers her into ecstasy and the next he puts her into a vault. Her fury spiraled.

Yes. She would go back to New York and attend more meetings of the Theosophical Society. Maybe someone could direct her to an expert who knew the

answers to her questions.

She stood there for a few moments wondering how to escape without a dime to her name when her stomach growled more insistently. She had spent too much time during dinner worrying instead of eating. She scurried down the servants' stairway and made her way quietly toward the kitchen. Before she entered, she peeked carefully around a corner to make sure that the Beast was not there.

The glowing hearth welcomed her. Memories of the happy times she had spent in Ipsy's kitchen flooded over her. With a smile on her face she went into the pantry and helped herself to some of Ipsy's gingerbread.

She decided that if she left, she would take Ipsy and William with her. She would have to be patient and wait a while before her escape. She would have to find some way to get enough money together.

Maybe she could sell Ipsy's gingerbread.

She made plans as she sat beside the hearth and savored every last crumb of her spicy treat while wishing Ipsy was there so she could chat with her just as she had done years ago as a child.

Thoughts of Ipsy soon fled as Victoria licked her fingers and remembered the Beast's fingers—and how magical they were. Sighing, she thought of the taste of his kisses, too. Spicier than gingerbread. True, he had locked her in her room, but he had given her such intense pleasure that her breath quickened at the thought of it and the dampness returned between her thighs.

What would it be like to lie with him again? How much more bliss would she discover?

She stood up. No. She must not think about it. She must not allow this farce to go any further. She had been foolish. There could be no future for her here. She had been tricked into the marriage. The Beast was completely unacceptable as a husband.

A twinge of conscience had her wincing. Other than locking her in her room, and denying that he had heard the wolf growl, he had been rather good to her. It was most unfortunate he looked the way he did. She did not doubt that he had suffered heart-wrenching torture because of his appearance.

Dusting the crumbs from her wrapper, she froze for a moment when she thought she heard the notes sounding from the piano in the drawing room. Then her heart nearly stopped as she recognized the tune as one of her mother's favorite Chopin melodies.

The blood drained from her face as she clutched at the table. Had her mother returned to haunt her just as she had feared! Would her mother seek revenge?

The music continued—though it was played haltingly. Her mother had been skillful on the pianoforte.

Victoria's stomach clenched into a cold knot. The sound echoed from the corridor that led to the grand entrance hall. She peered down the hallway and saw some light at the end of it. She would not need her candle. Though there was not a drop of moisture in her mouth, she stiffened her spine and fortified herself with a deep breath. Listening carefully, she went in search of the source of the music.

Quaking all over, she told herself this was an opportunity to apologize to her mother. Maybe she could make her mother understand how sorry she was—how much

she missed her, even after all these years.

And ... perhaps her mother could reveal more about the auras.

When she slipped out of the shadow of the corridor into the grand hall, she nearly rammed into the Beast. She would have let out a scream but he covered her mouth with his hand. Fury blazed in his eyes, but he motioned with his finger at his own lips indicating that she must remain silent. Still frightened, she nodded.

Slowly, he slid his hand away from her mouth. He held up his hand to indicate that she should not move. Then he immediately turned to edge noiselessly toward the drawing room door. Victoria slid along silently behind him. She saw no reason to obey him. It was *her* mother who had come to settle an old score. Every fiber inside her was stretched as taut as the strings on the Beast's violin. She barely breathed.

He did not turn around as she followed in his wake. She wondered why he did not hear her heart thundering above the sound of the music.

Once ... twice ... the wide planks of the floor squeaked beneath the Beast's feet. Victoria pressed her hand over her own mouth to insure her silence. The moment the Beast put his hand on the door of the drawing room, the music ended. Victoria did not breathe at all as he flung open the door. Would her mother fly out in a rage at her?

No. The room lay in complete calm and there did not seem to be anyone in it—human or spirit.

The Beast slid inside. She stood in the doorway, but she did not see anything as the room lay in darkness. The Beast lit a small lamp and continued to step softly, glancing about—behind the drapes—behind the sofa—as if he expected to find something.

She blinked as her eyes adjusted to the dim light. And then she saw the footprints—wet and gleaming on the wooden floor.

She narrowed her eyes and walked slowly along the watery trail that led to the piano bench. A great roaring sounded in her ears, like the rumble of a huge river tumbling over a precipice. The footprints had come from dainty little feet—ones much smaller than her own. Her mother had had tiny feet. The path ended at the bench where a larger puddle of water had formed. The bench itself was wet, but in the center lay a small piece of eyelet lace.

As her trembling fingers reached out to touch the white scrap, she felt as if an icy hand squeezed at her heart.

## Chapter Eight

When Tadeusz came across Victoria in the hall, he had only managed to suppress his anger because he intended to catch the lout who had broken into the manor—again—despite all the precautions he had taken. What did the perpetrator hope to gain? Did he simply mean to torment or did a threat lie behind it all?

He searched around the drawing room but when he did not find a single clue, he turned around and saw Victoria picking up the small bit of lace on the wet piano bench. He could not mistake the terror on her face. Anxiety twisted in his gut as he noticed her pale skin take on a sickly hue.

He swore beneath his breath. How had she escaped from her room? What was she doing here now? Why in heaven's name didn't the woman listen to him?

He saw her shudder and take in a lungful of air—and he forgot about the fact that someone had broken into the house. He swept her into his arms and carried her to the sofa. Her eyes closed as he placed her gently down on the plush cushions.

"She wants to drive me mad," she whispered.

An icy shiver shot up along his spine as he watched her hands clasping that scrap so tightly that her knuckles stood out against her ashen skin. He took her hands in both of his and tried to rub some warmth back into them.

"I-I w-wanted to say I was sorry, but I suppose it would not matter." She ran her tongue along her lips and Tadeusz found himself remembering the taste he had found there. Drawn by the promise of her sweetness, he leaned closer.

A sudden noise diverted his attention. It seemed to come from the glass doors that led to the garden. He jumped up. He must not let the rogue get away!

"She's coming back." Her voice had a note of dull resignation in it.

Tadeusz stopped in his tracks. There was something in Victoria's eyes that chilled his soul.

"She will drag me into the lake with her this time."

Was she completely unhinged? His heart froze.

He had heard all the rumors and dismissed them immediately when he had met her. But now he found himself doubting his original assumption. While he still needed to catch the scalawag who had forced his way in and set up this scene, it now dawned on him that indeed the scenario had been set up specifically for Victoria—to frighten her. Furthermore, it had worked. He wanted to pulverize the person responsible for it.

He forced a calm note into his voice. "There is no ghost in the manor."

She did not pay any attention to what he said. "I ... I ... shoved her into the lake. This ... this bit of lace was found in her hand when she ... when her body ...."

He took it from her and rubbed it between his fingers. "This is not good lace. It is cheap—and a woman of means would never be seen in it." The difference had been explained to him years ago by one of the women he had known. "This is not the same

one.”

“I—I ... it is not white ... but the years ....”

“Someone did this to scare you!” He tucked the small scrap of lace into his pocket. “And I intend to find out who that is!”

Her gaze wandered away from his features, seeming to focus not on him, but around him—a peculiar mannerism of hers which he had noticed before—but now it unnerved him for it appeared to confirm his suspicions that her mental health was in question. Before he turned away, he saw the furrows marring her brow. He reached up to trace the lines. He wanted to erase them.

He had seen her in ecstasy and that memory made him burn with need. Soon, he would no longer be human. What did it matter if she was deranged? His arousal bulged uncomfortably in his pants.

“Go into my study and lock the door. Pour yourself some brandy. It will settle your nerves. I want to catch the rogue who broke in.”

\* \* \* \*

Victoria’s mouth gaped open. Brandy! He must believe she was nothing more than a hysterical female. She clenched her teeth together. What a complete idiot she had been! She should have figured out the scenario herself. She should have *expected* it. Especially from the people in Taylor’s Grove.

She stood up as casually as possible and decided she would hide in the library.

“Do not disobey me.” He glared.

She flinched at the tone of his voice and her breath caught in her throat. What would he do to her now? Slowly, she returned to face him and saw the haze of muddy shades swirling through his aura.

“This is for your own good.” He took her hand and walked to the study with her. When she was inside, she turned the key in the lock. As soon as she did, she heard his footsteps hurry away.

She added another log to the fire and poked idly at the hot coals. Then she searched in the liquor cabinet until she found sherry which was more to her liking than brandy. She sat in the massive chair behind the desk and struggled with her doubts.

Why would anyone in Taylor’s Grove go to the trouble of setting up that scene in the drawing room? Obviously, her cousin must have revealed to someone the detail about the lace found in her mother’s hand. Why would he do that? He had been the one who told her never to tell anyone at all.

The sherry began to warm her and ease some of her tension, but she could not stop thinking that Paul had betrayed her trust. Why would he save her from being accused of murder—and then reveal a crucial clue years later to some stranger?

And now someone was using that information to play with her mind.

She felt tears welling in her eyes.

Paul must have been drinking as he played poker one night and let the truth slip out. But who had he told?

She assumed the Beast and her cousin had been friends. They had played poker. Knowing her cousin, they had probably had a few drinks, as well. Perhaps Paul had revealed the details of her mother’s passing to the Beast?

Perhaps the Beast had set up that little scene to distress her!

But what would he gain by that? Had her cousin told the Beast of her mother's madness? Did the Beast think he could drive her mad? Why would he want to do that? He had already been most generous.

She twirled the glass in her hand and stared into the amber liquor. Other than locking her in her room, the Beast had treated her well. If she had remained in her room, she would not have suffered the terrible emotional upheaval of seeing the scrap of lace she believed to be from her mother's gown.

Victoria felt a headache beginning to pound behind her eyes. She should not have had the sherry. She wanted to crawl into bed, but doubted whether she would be able to close her eyes. She would surely dream of the night of her mother's death if she did.

She got up from the chair, glass in hand, and began to wander about the room. While the furnishings had not changed since her father's time, the contents of the shelves were markedly different. She found ledgers, neatly labeled, lined up on the shelves. Pulling one down she took it back to the desk and studied the columns of figures. The Beast's brewery appeared to be a massive operation and from what she could gather, it was doing remarkable well.

She drained her glass and debated whether another would help her to forget. The whole dreadful scene and her reaction to that scrap of lace chilled her. How could Paul—even drunk—have told anyone about it? She rubbed her forehead and felt the sorrow welling up inside her again. To distract herself, she went to the window where she could see the reflection of her own aura in the dark glass.

A smoldering gray filtered through the luminous cloud around her. Was it the sherry or her depressing thoughts that had caused the change?

She heard the key in the lock and whirled around. The Beast had returned. His aura swirled with muddy shades as he strode into the office.

"I did not find anyone," he grumbled. "Too dark." He carried a huge chunk of Ipsy's gingerbread and offered to share it with her, but she shook her head. He sat down in a chair close to the fireside.

"Why do you do that?"

She blinked, startled by his unexpectedly question. "Do what?"

"Look around me, not at me. Is the sight of me so horrible to you that it turns your stomach?"

Taken aback, she could only stammer as she felt the blood drain from her face. "N-n-no!" She could not tell him that she had been staring at his aura. Doubtless, he probably already thought her half mad after that hysterical scene in the drawing room. "No. I simply—I am shy—very shy."

"That is a lie." He took a huge bite of the gingerbread—and suddenly all Victoria could think of was how he had taken her breast into his mouth in the same way—greedily—as if he wanted to devour her with his full, soft lips. Tugging, nipping, teasing. She felt the flush on her cheeks as she remembered how he had gone lower—to the tender entrance of her sex. A delicious shudder went through her and heat simmered in her veins. She wanted to force her desires away, but she could not. Her nipples hardened and a tingle of need spread through her.

She struggled to keep her mind clear. Had Paul revealed everything about her mother's death to the Beast? Had the Beast told others?

What would happen now? Would she go mad first—or would the sheriff come and arrest her?

Her throat grew tight with emotion, but she would not allow the Beast to see her cry. And still the yearning she had for the pleasure she knew she would find in his arms distracted her.

Fighting to ignore the sensations swirling through her, she blurted out. "You know nothing about me—other than what my cousin must have told you."

"Your cousin told me only what he thought I wanted to hear. You are as strong-willed as Taffy. What do you see around me that is so much more intriguing than my face?"

She licked her lips. Oh how she wanted to taste one of his kisses. Would he taste like gingerbread now? Would he taste the sherry on her tongue?

Angry with herself for her outrageous thoughts, she walked up to him and focused directly on his face. "Did Paul tell you about that scrap of lace? Did he tell you where he found it?"

"I knew nothing about it until you told me."

Could she believe him? She wanted to study his aura and see if that could help her decide the veracity of his words, but she dared not. Casting her glance to the floor, she twisted her hands together. "I don't remember anything much about the night my mother died. Sometimes, I dream of it, but since I have returned here the dreams have ... changed ... and I do not know if my mind is making it up ... or if I am remembering more ...."

She said it softly, but in the stillness her words seemed to echo back to her.

She succeeded in diverting his attention from his original question for in the silence that lingered between them, she could feel the scrutiny of his gaze. Her skin grew warm.

"How did you escape from your room?"

"I jumped from one balcony to the other."

"You could have broken your neck." His words were harsh—as if spoken through clenched teeth. But she would not look at him.

"I am not clumsy."

"I forbid you to do that again."

Her anger ignited and she lifted her head to glare at him. "Then you must not lock me in my room. I am not to be treated like—like an animal in a zoo!"

He blinked and drew back as if she had slapped him. Heaving a deep sigh, he cleared his throat before speaking again.

"Your cousin was murdered. This manor has been broken into—several times. It is not safe here. I locked you in your room in the hope of protecting you. It was not my intent to cage you. Dammit! I love you!"

The note of rough desperation sounding in his voice startled her more than his words—for she had heard those words many times and in her experience, when a man professed his love, it meant that he felt he owned her, body and soul.



She could not prevent herself from shifting her gaze to his aura. There the colors glowed with intensity—gone were the deep shades. They had been replaced with clear, vibrant hues. She closed her eyes. He would notice again that she was not looking at him, but around him.

She focused directly on his face. “I do not care about love! Giles loved me ... and made me a virtual prisoner. I will *not* live like that again for it will surely drive me mad.” What she did not tell him was that perhaps the process had already started.

“I am already crazy ... with desire ... for you.” He reached out and took her hands in his and the magic of his touch wound through her. She felt his magnetic pull, and she could not stop herself from leaning into him. Her soft breasts pressed against the hard planes of his chest. His breath tangled in her hair and the intoxicating musk from the heat of his body sent a fire of longing through her. She knew she should wrench herself away, but she could not wrestle against the power than bonded her to him.

With little effort, he spun her around. His hands slid down to the mound of her sex and he kneaded her silken cunt through the two thin layers of fabric. But she wanted his skin against hers and she lifted up the hem of her gown.

“My sweet Beauty,” he groaned. “You will ruin me.” His hand slid along her bare thighs and she felt her limbs turn to soft dough. The hard ridge of his arousal pressed against her from behind.

She gasped as her body began to rock with the rhythm he had started. He sparked an urgency in her that removed all other thoughts from her mind. She could no more resist him than she could deny herself air.

“I will not lock the door if you lie with me in my bed.”

Perhaps without the sherry, she would have come to her senses at that point. Instead, she nodded, her body already anticipating the mind-boggling explosion of sensations that she knew he could cause to flood through her. Nothing else mattered, not his monstrous visage or the doctor’s warning or even her own belief in ending the marriage. She was utterly in his power.

“I want you, my Beauty. I want all of you. I will not stop this time. I will not deny myself the pleasure.”

She shivered in his arms.

“But I will not hurt you,” he soothed. Turning her around to face him once more, he crushed her against him and kissed every last remnant of caution away until she was overpowered with passion.

## Chapter Nine

Tadeusz knew he was a fool, but he could not stop himself from making love to Victoria anymore than he could stop the leaves from falling. He had never been a saint and what little restraint he possessed had been severely depleted in the act of pleasuring her. Entering his bedroom, he placed her gently down on the bed.

The room lay in deep gloom since the fire in the hearth had burned down to embers. As he turned to add a log to the fire, he suddenly remembered that his birthday was now only one full day away. Within him something stirred—something he could only describe as a darkness, a darkness so black, so vast that he felt his soul groan. He knew he was motivated by selfish greed. He wanted to take what he could while it was still possible. He had coerced his tender wife into his bed for his own gratification.

He picked up a log and placed it on the embers. *What did it matter?* She would never love him, but he should take his right as her husband. After all, he had paid off her debts and he would provide for her future. She owed it to him.

The flames licked up along the sides of the log and he held his hands in front of him to study them. Had the tips of his fingers curled slightly? Did his fingernails look more like claws? He touched his ears and thought the darkness would swallow him up. His ears had changed, becoming slightly pointed and covered with short fur. His ardor evaporated as fear took its place.

“Tadeusz?”

It was as if she called to him from across a great chasm. He shook his head and struggled against his despair.

“Tadeusz? Are you all right?” A note of alarm along with concern sounded in her tone.

“Yes.” He hurriedly added another log to the fire. It was the first time he had heard her use his name. Coming from her lips, the syllables blended together into a melody. Hearing it, he let out a long sigh and decided that it did not matter if she could never love him. He would want her to always remember him kindly. That would be enough. His fate was sealed. Within the span of hours, she would have only memories. He needed to make those memories good ones—not memories of him satisfying his lust by using her—not memories of him behaving as the beast he soon would be.

He turned and watched the flickering flames in the hearth cast dancing shadows about the room. He sat down on the edge of the bed. Victoria lay beneath a soft fur blanket. He slid his coarse palm along her white shoulder. That was a mistake. He felt as if he had stoked the fire in his belly. Her eyes smoldered with a deeper hue than usual and reflected the blaze in the hearth.

“You should sleep.” He could not prevent the rough edge on his words.

“B-but you ....”

“It is late. You had a shock. Your nerves ....”

“But I want you.”

“No.” He spoke through his clenched teeth. “You need your rest. Our guests will be arriving and we will have our celebration tomorrow.”

“I do not care if I get no sleep at all.” She threw off the fur and knelt on the bed, her naked body glowed the firelight. “I am aching for you.”

Her hands reached out and caressed the bulge of his swollen member imprisoned by his clothing. He closed his eyes as a rumble welled up within him.

“Please,” she whispered as her hands tugged his shirt out of his pants. Her hot palms slid beneath the fabric. The moment he felt the contact, he knew that wrestling with his soul had done no good. She instantly melted his meager resistance.

“You ... have no hair ... here.” He heard the surprise in her voice as she explored his chest with her fingers and then moved lower. “You are ... so perfect.”

He bit back a gasp as she unfastened his pants.

“The witch left me half man.” *Soon I will be all beast.* If a cold steel blade sliced through him it would have hurt less. His human life—such as it had been—had come to an end.

Her teasing fingers freed his erection and all of his restraint vanished in an instant. She wanted him. He wanted her. She was willing. He was a man about to have his last feast.

He tore off his shirt and slipped out of his pants. The sweet smile on her face as she lay back and opened up her arms nearly undid him. He knew he could not last long, but he had to make it good for her, too. Far better than it had been before. Enough to last for a lifetime.

“My sweet Beauty.” He trembled as he lay down beside her. She slid one leg over his thigh and pressed her sweet clit against his shaft. The friction sent a blast of fire searing through his veins.

“I want to kiss you—all of you, as you have kissed me.” She ran her tongue along his lower lip while at the same time she skimmed his erection with the folds of her womanhood. Their lovemaking could be over in a matter of seconds if she continued.

He growled low in his chest. “No. I will pleasure you.”

“I am sure there is some way we can pleasure each other.”

That his small, delicate wife—so untutored in the art of love—would make such a bold suggestion shocked him at first, but then he smiled. Her first taste of pleasure had turned on a long-denied hunger, and he would be cruel to starve her further.

“Yes.” He rolled onto his back and explained that he would kiss her tender nub while she kissed his shaft.

She listened intently and then sighed. “It is a pity that I delayed my arrival for so long—but I was afraid ....” Her words drifted off.

Something twisted inside him, perhaps it was his heart whirling in his chest. He could not speak for his throat ached. He had so little time to share with her. Despite his ugliness, maybe she could have come to love him with time.

But it was too late.

With one smooth motion, she slid atop him. Her nimble hands tenderly held his hard rod and planted fervent kisses along its length. The moist, hot lick of her dainty

mouth jolted him with blistering sparks of hot lust. His pulse raced ever faster.

He spread her thighs and tasted her soft flesh which was already dewy and slick. He felt her shudder as he suckled her before driving his tongue against her need. She moaned low in her throat—in but a moment more he would bring her to sweet release.

Then her sweet, quivering lips drew the tip of his manhood into the liquid heat of her mouth—and he nearly went over the edge.

“*Piekna kobieta* have mercy on me!” he pleaded. His heart thundered. She turned around and lay down beside him again. She kissed him on his mouth, but in her eyes he saw a touch of hurt.

“Did you swear at me?”

His heart melted. “No, my precious Beauty. I called you a pretty woman—but I think I should have called you a vixen instead.”

She smiled shyly. “Oh.”

He picked her up and she squealed. “Let us continue your education.” He placed her soft folds directly above his rigid organ. He did not need to tell her what to do. She slid down slowly upon him until his erection was sheathed within her fluid fire. She began an undulating dance, rising up and pressing down. He held her soft buttocks, guiding her movements, watching the pleasure radiating in her expression until the tempo caught him in its grip and he no longer knew who he was or where he was—and he did not care. He only knew he was joined with her in their burning desire and spiraling toward release.

The climax hit her first. She called out his name and he felt the shudder run through her with the power of an earthquake. Within a split second he was shattered by a zenith of his own, one that ripped through him with such power that it seemed more like an explosion.

She sank upon him and he held her as they melted together in bliss.

He longed to stay there, listening to his heart and hers beating together, but before his eyes closed, he thought of one detail. He slipped from the bed.

“Tadeusz?”

Fear and perhaps—he hoped—a touch of disappointment sounded in her voice.

“I will be with you in a moment, my Beauty.” He snatched up his ring of keys and went to the armoire. Unlocking it, he opened the doors and bent down to pull out a drawer at the bottom. He owned two handguns, but Paul had given him a third, a small Derringer. It was loaded and ready. He picked it up.

Locking the armoire, he returned to the bed.

“Paul gave this to me. He said he showed you how to use it. Do you remember?”

She nodded.

Tadeusz recalled how Paul had boasted that she had excellent aim—better than Paul himself. “Keep this with you at all times. I will not lock you in the room, but you must promise to use this gun if you are threatened.” He handed it to her.

She sighed as she accepted it and then slid out of bed to put the gun in the pocket of her wrap. “I pray there will be no need for it.” She clambered back under the fur blanket with him.

Tadeusz drew her up against him and wondered if she would shoot him when he

became a wolf. If she does, I shall be out of my misery, he thought.  
Then he slept.

## Chapter Ten

*She crept through the basement silently cursing her fate. Blackbirch Manor was a prison, not a home--and it was all due to her mother.*

*An animalistic howl echoed in the darkness and she froze. Listening intently, she heard nothing else but the creaks and groans of the old house. She quietly started moving again, though her hands shook as she felt her way along the walls. All was pitch black around her. She paused at the door to each storage room and barely breathed, waiting to hear the rasp of her mother's labored gasps for air.*

*The heavy door that led from the basement to the kitchen stairs suddenly creaked and she scrambled in that direction. The wild cackle of her mother's demonic laugh sent fear tingling along her spine. As she felt the draught of the wind rushing into the basement, she knew she had to hurry. She must not let her mother escape!*

*When she stumbled outside into the chilly night, she raced into the kitchen garden, but her mother was not there. From the corner of her eye, she caught a movement at the corner of the house. Taking a deep breath, she sprang in that direction for all she was worth.*

*More hysterical laughter echoed in the icy air as she rounded the corner in chase. An ache in her side slowed her, but she did not stop. Her mother must be headed for the gate! In despair, she wondered why no one else had come to help her. She tried to call out but though she formed the words with her lips, the words stuck in her throat.*

*Off to her right, she heard the crush of leaves in the underbrush and the snap of branches in the woods. Someone--or something--was nearby. Fearfully, she looked this way and that, but all she saw were the branches of the black birches swinging in the nighttime breeze--shadowing the pale sliver of a moon to leave her in darkness so deep that the gloom became as dense as a thick velvet curtain. The unexpected smell of terror filled her nostrils.*

*Without any other warning, she was grabbed from behind. Before she could scream, her attacker covered her mouth and nose with a cloth imbued with a surprisingly pleasant odor. Still, she fought and clawed but strong, powerful arms held her fast. She needed air! She felt as if she would suffocate with her assailant squeezing her chest until she could barely breathe. The fumes from the cloth made her dizzy and weak. She tried to twist around to see her attacker, but her limbs grew limp. With her last ounce of strength she raked her nails along the hands that held her, earning her a growl from her foe, but he did not let go. She felt herself falling into a faint as she was thrown to the ground like nothing more than a rag doll and crushed against the dirt.*

*But as she lay there helpless, she heard the screams ... the hideous screams that echoed on and on. ...*

Victoria woke but she did not open her eyes. She lay rigid in bed and felt the sweat dripping from her face. Swallowing hard, she tried to catch her breath—tried to

stop the thundering of her heart. The terror of her nightmare clung to her, robbing her of rational thought. She did not even consider where she lay.

Had she been attacked the night of her mother's murder? Who would have done that to her? Or could her mind have twisted the truth and fashioned the scene?

But it had been so vivid—so real.

She shivered. She had felt the hard sinews. She swallowed once more and could almost taste the cloth that had been held against her face. The memory of the cloyingly sweet smell made her stomach uneasy.

She rolled to her side and came up against a solid wall. She reached out and felt the Beast's naked back—hard, but warm. Then she remembered she was naked—and in his bed. The evidence of their passion lay sticky and damp between her legs. The heat of their joining still glowed within her like red-hot embers.

She dared to open her eyes. A few shafts of sunlight slipped through the heavy drapes allowing her a dim view of the dark room. She glanced slowly about her and saw the animal heads over the mantel, the table, the violin—and the Beast beside her in the bed.

With his slow even breathing, he appeared to be sleeping soundly—too deep for dreaming—too deep to wake at any slight noise.

The horrible images of her nightmare faded as she breathed in the scent of him. She slid closer and reveled in the heat of his body. She had tasted him and touched him in ways that must surely be scandalous—and he had done the same to her. Together they had found bliss—for her it had been more pleasure than she had ever dreamed possible.

Was that love? She bit her lip and knew she wanted to lie with him again—despite his horrible disfigurement. The experience had made her feel free—as if she had broken some invisible chains and knew now who she truly was.

She sat up and studied him. Her fingers lightly twirled through his mane. She noticed that the hair on his face had grown another inch—though that hardly seemed possible. It did not look as if he had been shaven at all.

His aura, too, had changed. More white light filtered through it—and that bothered her. Giles' aura had been white shortly before he died.

The golden shafts of sunlight widened. The day would not be held back by the drapes, but attacked at every corner. From the tops of the drapes or along the edges of the curtains it crept through.

Staring at the Beast as the room grew brighter, Victoria saw that his ears had changed, appearing more pointed and hairy than previously—and his nose looked longer, too.

Her mouth turned as dry as sand. Was this what her mother's madness did? How terrible would her hallucinations become? Her pulse began to race.

Still, she wanted to touch him, to slide her hands along the solid ridges of his chest—to feel again the heat of the silken rod he had driven so deeply inside her. She wanted to be filled once more with the same intense ecstasy. She did not regret it—not for a moment. Her only disappointment lay in the knowledge that her introduction to the joys of intimacy had been so long delayed. But that had been Giles' legacy to her. The bitter thought of all the years she had wasted fell upon her.

Her throat grew tight as a tear eked out the corner of her eye. Dashing it away, she caught the glint from a small shaft of sunshine dancing on the ring of keys that the Beast had tossed onto a chair after he had handed her the small Derringer.

Perhaps one of those keys would open the door to the basement and then she could find more of her mother's pictures of people and their auras. Maybe her mother had made notes, too. There had to be something hidden away in her mother's things.

Carefully, she slid out of the bed and hurried into her nightgown and wrapper. She tucked the Derringer into her pocket and silently made her way across the floor to where the keys sat on the chair. With her heart pounding, she picked them up gently and without a sound. Then she hurried out of the room, opening and closing the door with the greatest care to prevent the click of the lock.

Once in the hall, she ran toward the stairway with perspiration beading up on her forehead. She did not have much time. Ipsy would soon arrive in the kitchen to prepare breakfast. She raced through the kitchen and to the basement door. Trying every key, she prayed that one of them would open the lock. None of them did. In frustration she pounded on the door, but she succeeded only in hurting her hand.

She swallowed hard. One of the keys has to fit, she told herself. She tried each key again and realized there was one that slid into the lock, but she could not seem to make it turn. Desperately, she jiggled it and wiggled it and yanked on it and finally, the key turned to the right and the lock clicked open.

The hinge squealed as she pushed at the door. She felt every nerve tense as she stared into the darkness below. The memory of her nightmare and the terror of it coursed through her.

It was only a dream, she reminded herself. Perhaps the horrible phantasm had been initiated by the sherry she had consumed—or by the explosive lovemaking.

Swallowing her fear, she went to the fireplace and lit a candle. Then, she softly padded down the steps as a prickle of fear crept along her shoulders. The dank basement smelled musty, and the cold seeped through her, but she noticed that there had been changes. Along one wall she saw a row of great casks, and new floor-to-ceiling racks had been put in to hold wine bottles. She went on a little further and found small barrels nestled together.

Finally she came to the storage rooms. Each one had a lock on it.

The rings of keys jingled in her trembling hands. She could not remember in which storage room her mother's things had been placed after her death. Sweat beaded up on her brow. What if the Beast woke up and found her gone? She closed her eyes. Think! Which storage room should she try first?

Then she heard a low growl and her blood turned to ice water. It sounded the same as the growl she had heard when she had been on the road to Taylor's Grove. But it was here—in the basement—nearby—with her.

Panicked, she opened her eyes and saw the wolf directly ahead of her. Not ten feet away the massive creature crept forward, snarling threats deep in its throat, exposing teeth that were sharp and pointed. Its eyes, gleaming in the light of the candle, narrowed on her. Victoria froze and saw her entire life pass before her. Was this how it would end?



Then she remembered the Derringer. She slid her shaking hand slowly into her pocket and grasped the handle on the dainty firearm. The wolf was very close to her now. Would one bullet be enough to kill the creature? The large caliber bullet was accurate at close range, but she had only one chance. Maybe a bullet wound would make the fiend angrier, but there was no other help for her. Her hand trembled. She waited as the wolf inched forward. She could not hold the gun steady, but she fired anyway.

The sound of the blast reverberated off the stone walls. The animal gave a horrible howl and Victoria, for the second time in her life, found the world around her turning completely black as she passed out on the hard basement floor.

## Chapter Eleven

Victoria came to with the acrid, stinging odor of ammonia gagging her. She reached out to shove the horrid, blue bottle away.

"My goodness, Miss Vicky, you've given us a dreadful fright again." Ipsy's soothing voice calmed her. "I dare say we should be locking you in your room if you're going to go sleepwalking like that."

Victoria stiffened in shock. She opened her eyes slowly and discovered she was on the sofa in the library. A cheerful blaze crackled in the hearth, but it did not warm her. "I was not sleepwalking."

"Why--*Pan* Hermanowski found you right here walking around in a trance." Ipsy patted her hand. "I told him how you used to do that when you were a child. Remember when I found you in the kitchen eating up all the marzipan?"

"I was in the basement ... and there was a wolf ...."

Ipsy laughed. "My goodness, what a tall tale. You were certainly dreaming."

Bewildered, Victoria's mind whirled in turmoil. "No!" she insisted. "There was a wolf. It was the same one ... as ... never mind. I shot it. Is it dead?" Her pulse began to race at the thought of the horrible creature snarling and coming towards her. She began to tremble again.

"Now, now, dear. Don't be getting hysterical," Ipsy fussed, tucking a blanket around Victoria. "We'll have to call Dr. Evans if you go on like this. If there was a wolf in the basement, I'm sure we would all know about it."

Victoria pushed the blanket off and sat up. "I am not hysterical." Though I could be insane, she thought. What if the wolf was a hallucination?

*But it wasn't! I saw it. I shot it.*

"Where's the gun?" she asked.

"What gun!" Ipsy's brows rose. "Why I don't see any gun here."

"Where is my husband?"

"Why—I'm sure he must have gone with my William to Taylor's Grove to greet the guests. They were to be arriving on the train." Ipsy twisted her hands. "Are you feeling better now?"

Victoria frowned. Studying Ipsy's aura, she could see it had changed to a hazy mustard-colored luminosity and it was tinged with gray. A pain twisted in her heart. Was her dear Ipsy lying to her?

"I am quite all right." *But there was a wolf!*

Ipsy heaved a sigh. Her smile looked forced. "I told *Pan* you'd be right as rain with a whiff of my smelling salts. You best be getting dressed before they arrive. *Pan* said you were to wear the blue gown. Lily is here to help you."

"I will dress myself."

"That dress has a row of tiny buttons at the back."

Victoria pressed her mouth into a thin line. She did not want to pretend nothing happened, but asking Ipsy was pointless.

“Very well. Send her up.” Attempting to hold onto her fragile control, she stood. She tried to suppress a wince when a pain shot through her right knee. Obviously, when she had passed out, that knee had hit the basement floor first. She held her head high and walked stiffly out of the library.

If she had had a bigger weapon with her, she would have gone down to the basement to search. But she had no intention of going back down there unarmed. She did not want to meet up with the wolf again if it was still alive or injured.

Someone, most likely the Beast, had carried her from the basement to the library. So perhaps, Ipsy truly did not know about the wolf. Tadeusz might not have wanted to frighten the old cook. But how had the wolf gotten into the basement? Had someone put it there on purpose? Just as someone had set up the frightening scene in the drawing room?

*Why are they doing this to me?* Tears welled up in her eyes as she ascended the staircase to the second floor. *Because I killed my mother?*

Then she recalled the new endings on her dream. *Maybe ... maybe I did not kill my mother. Maybe someone else did. Maybe someone did grab me and throw me down to the ground. And that person is afraid I will remember.*

Anger shot through her. She had almost been killed by the wolf. If she had not killed the animal, she must have injured it, frightening it enough so that it ran away. Otherwise, it surely would have attacked her.

She shuddered. What about the Beast? He could be the culprit. He could have easily set up the scene in the drawing room and he had acted very strange and denied hearing that growling animal on the road.

When she reached her room, she wanted to lie down. Her head was beginning to ache and her knee felt swollen. She examined it and found it to be badly bruised. She also noticed that she had a few traces of blood on her hand. Had it come from the wolf? Her stomach rolled. Someone must have wiped most of it off. Would Ipsy have done that?

Lily knocked on the door. The young girl with her depressing aura entered the room and did nothing to lessen Victoria’s anxiety. But after the maid drew her bath, she left Victoria alone for some time while she went to press the gown.

The hot bath did help to take away the chill in Victoria’s body and lessened the ache in her knee. However, the bath did not calm her. How could she ever be calm again after nearly being attacked by a wild animal? And worse, listening to Ipsy deny that such an animal existed?

Dressing in the lovely *ciel* blue evening gown banished some of her dark thoughts for never in her life had she worn anything so exquisite. In it, she felt like royalty—or like the famed opera singer Jenny Lind.

Lily dressed her hair by looping her tresses at the back and then extending the loop about the top of her head. It was a fetching style which drew attention to her long neck and her décolleté. She had not suspected that Lily had such a talent for hair dressing. She praised Lily.

The girl blushed. “It is too bad you have no ornaments for your hair,” she

commented.

Suddenly, Victoria wondered if Lily was the one who had stolen her mother's jewels.

"This dress is quite fashionable. I am sure our guests will not notice any lack of ornaments." She thought about the jewels the Beast had bought for her and worried her lip. She hoped he would return soon. She had to know what had happened.

She went to the window and saw a black coupe pull up on the front drive. The coupe stopped and Dr. Evans stepped out. Drat. He was the last person she wanted to see.

Lily was ready to help her into her gloves when Dr. Evans knocked at her bedroom door. Victoria had already told Lily she did not wish to see him. She only wanted to see the Beast and find out what was going on. She asked Lily to tell the doctor that she was feeling quite well. But the doctor was insistent, promising that he would only take a few minutes to examine her head wound.

Agitated, Victoria flounced down on the divan and told Lily to let the doctor into the room. Then Lily left.

Once more, the doctor's aura disturbed Victoria—only this time she had a physical reaction to it. Like some poisonous miasma, it turned her stomach. She wanted to run out of the room, but instead she clamped her jaw together. Was this the madness taking over? Would she soon be as crazy as her mother?

"You look lovely." The doctor smiled. "I am pleased to hear that you are feeling so much better." After opening his black bag, he lifted her hand to feel her pulse. When he counted the beats, he cleared his throat and said, "I see that you are upset."

She drew her lips up into a wide smile—and hoped the doctor did not see the fear in her eyes. "I shall be meeting my husband's friends—and I don't know a single one of them. I do wish to make a good impression."

"From what I understand, they are his business associates and the talk will most likely be dull—talk of profits and the like."

"I am quite interested in my husband's business. I should like to learn all about it."

"A brewery is hardly the place for a woman."

"Women drink, too. I had a glass of sherry last night."

"Sherry is a woman's drink. Ale is not." He checked the wound on her head. She could hardly bear the touch of his fingers. His probing hands strayed from the area of the wound and slid down her neck to rest on her shoulder. She wanted to slap his hand away. He smiled at her, but to her it seemed a smile of triumph.

"No dizziness? No nausea?" he asked.

She shook her head, despite the dreadful churning of her stomach.

"That is good, very good." He stared at her and her alarm increased. "Do you know your resemblance to your mother is striking?"

Victoria stood up and turned away from him. "I barely remember what she looked like anymore." The lie was easy enough.

Dr. Evans came up behind her and put his hand on her waist. She flinched as the contact sent a chill through her soul.

"It is amazing. You are the same height. Your hair is the same shade—your voice,

too, is astonishingly similar. Uncanny. As if she's come back ..."

She fisted her hands. "Don't say that!" Trembling, she moved away from him.

"You are unusually distraught, my dear." His expression darkened, though his voice became as smooth as velvet. "You must lie down for a while. Some laudanum ...."

"No!" The last ounce of her remaining composure snapped. "I am quite all right. Leave me!"

But he did not. Instead, he stood in front of the doorway, effectively blocking her escape. "Yes, you are so much like your mother—you even have the same nervous disposition." His eyes hardened. "When you were young it was not as noticeable. Had I known then ...."

Panic took hold of her as she stared at his aura. It had turned so dark she felt nearly suffocated. As he came toward her, she turned and ran toward the glass door that opened onto the balcony. She thought only of fleeing him—knowing that if he got a hold of her, she could not escape. With her heart racing, she leaped up to the railing and jumped across to the other balcony. Despite her billowing skirts, this time she landed on her feet. She opened the glass door to the Beast's room and then shut it, making sure to throw the bolt to lock the door. She pulled the heavy drapes closed and turned.

"William?" Raw, harsh pain sounded in the Beast's voice.

She gasped. Ipsy had told her that he had gone with William to pick up his guests in town. He was not supposed to be here. Ipsy had lied to her! Why?

"It's me. Victoria." Embers glowed in the fireplace, but the pale light illuminating the room came from the pure white aura surrounding the Beast's head. He sat in a chair at the table with his head resting on his arm. Something was terribly wrong. Ice slid up her spine.

"My Beauty...." He moved slightly. His foot scraped against the chair as if he thought of rising. "Has William returned?"

"I-I do not know."

The door that led to the hall rattled and she felt her heart sink. Dr. Evans would force her to take the laudanum! And she would go mad just like her mother.

"Miss Vicky? Open this door!" The undercurrent of anger in the doctor's voice was unmistakable.

She twisted her hands. "Please, Tadeusz. I do not want to see the doctor. I am ... I am afraid of him." What if the Beast agreed with the doctor? She could not fight against them.

The Beast muttered a long string of violent syllables in his strange mother tongue. Victoria shrank back into the shadows. All the blood pooled in her feet and she thought she might faint.

"Tadeusz?" Dr. Evans knocked on the door.

"Go away, Evans. I can take care of my wife."

"She needs something to calm her nerves ...."

"No!"

"You will regret this!"

"I doubt it."

"You know nothing about women and their nervous ailments."

“Neither do you.”

“Fool!”

“I know your medicines are useless.”

“To hell with you!” Dr. Evans shouted and pounded once against the door. “I will not be attending your celebration.”

“Good.” The Beast groaned.

Victoria became conscious of the fact that she had been holding her breath. She let out a slow, soft sigh and began to breathe once more—not that she felt much safer. Her heart pounded ominously. Though the Beast’s head was turned away from her, beside him on the table lay the small Derringer. Cautiously, she moved toward the weapon.

She reached out for it and found it covered with a sticky, damp substance. Blood! Her stomach gave a sickening lurch. Before she could draw her hand away, the Beast’s fingers seized her. His hand was cold and it, too, was slick with blood.

A scream welled up in her throat, but she fought to hold it back.

“You took my keys.”

“I--I--I wanted--m-my mother’s things.” Darkness crept up her arm from his touch. How could that be when only hours before she had found warmth—and magic in the stroke of his hands? Now, his cold skin—sticky with blood—alarmed her. Icy perspiration beaded her brow.

“You should have asked.”

“T--the wolf ...?” She faltered, barely able to speak as she recalled the horror of facing that snarling animal.

He let out a groan. The deep sound rumbled up from the depths of his chest, not unlike the guttural growl of a creature in pain.

“What? What is the matter?” She could taste the fright in her mouth. What was wrong with him?

“William. Tell him ....” His hand went slack and fell away from hers. His white aura faded.

“Tadeusz! What should I say to him?” Tears pricked at the backs of her eyes. She shook his shoulder. “Tell me!”

Her efforts roused him and once more he grabbed her hand, but this time his fingers dug into her flesh. She felt the blood drain from her face as she noticed that his fingernails looked like the nails on a dog’s paw—like claws.

Had her mother’s madness taken over her mind? Was this a hallucination? She trembled from head to toe.

“Do you love me?” He barked out the question.

“You are hurting me!” Terrified and in pain, she tried to tug her hand out of his grasp. “Let me go!” she cried.

She gave her hand another yank and succeeded in freeing herself. The Beast lifted his head off his arm and turned to stare at her, but his gaze appeared unfocused—like someone who had been caught in a dream and had not left the night terrors behind. She swallowed hard. His eyes looked larger and his ears were more pointed than before. His nose had widened and appeared darker, too.

“William?”

Something clicked in her mind. Perhaps he was as deranged as she thought she was.

“What is happening to you?” She let out a sob.

He closed his eyes and groaned once more, a sound that tore at her heart for she heard the terrible agony in it. “Ah, my Beauty ... it is you,” he whispered. “And you can never love me.” He laid his head down again. “But you will remember me. Please say you will always ....” His words frightened her more than his changed appearance—more than his vanishing white aura.

She dashed her tears away. “I want to help you.”

“You cannot.”

She put her fist to her mouth to stifle another cry. “There must be something ....”

“William will know what to do.”

“Will you be all right if I leave you?”

“Of course. Smile, my Beauty. Show my guests what a lucky man I am.”

“But you are not well.”

“I am indisposed, but with William’s help I shall join you and my guests shortly.”

She hesitated. “We should not have a celebration if you are unwell.”

“It hardly matters how I feel. We will be festive.” The harsh edge in his voice had a mocking tone. “Tomorrow ... might be too late.”

“But ....”

He groaned again. “And take the Derringer.”

She backed away as ice spread through her stomach. Whose blood was on the gun?

“Take it!” It was an order, spoken through clenched teeth.

She swallowed the bile in her throat and reached for the small weapon.

“It is loaded.”

She nearly dropped the weapon in shock. He had reloaded it then. That meant she *had* fired it. Had she fired it at a wolf—or at a delusion? What if she had only injured the wolf and it was now roaming around the estate in pain—ready to attack someone else? Why had it been in the basement in the first place?

But if it was a mirage, if she had imagined it, then she should not be carrying a deadly pistol. She had no time to debate the issue, for as she stood there, the Beast tumbled to the floor, completely senseless. She ran to find help.

## Chapter Twelve

Tadeusz gritted his teeth as William helped him to ease his arm into a sling.

"You should lie down and rest," William suggested.

"Pour me another glass of vodka."

"You've lost a lot of blood."

"The alcohol should make up for it."

"You'll be falling flat on your face."

"I will take the chance that I do not."

William sighed as he tied the end of the sling around Tadeusz's neck. "If you weren't my employer I'd be saying you're a stubborn fool."

Tadeusz shook his head as if that could rid him of the grief and regret. "I would be firing you if you had not become more than a friend."

"As a friend, you're more trouble than you're worth." William poured a full glass of vodka and handed it to Tadeusz.

He downed the drink in one long swallow. Heat seared through him, but while the alcohol numbed him it did not make the pain go away completely. Later, perhaps, he would drink more—if he could.

"Help me finish dressing. I do not want to keep my guests or my beautiful wife waiting."

"You should tell her."

"No!" He clamped his mouth so tightly shut that his jaw hurt. There was nothing left. Nothing except the memory of her, the warmth, the feel, the taste—and the love that pierced him to the core.

Dammit. It hurt worse than his wretched wound.

"Me and the missus will do the best we can to take care of her, but you know we're getting old."

"I am sure she will marry again." If she did, he knew that given the chance he would rip her next husband to pieces.

\* \* \* \*

Victoria sat on the sofa in the drawing room with her hands clasped tightly together in her lap. Her heart had not stopped racing from the moment Tadeusz collapsed.

If Ipsy had not given her a stern reprimand, she would probably still be screaming and crying. The old cook had done her best to tell her in no uncertain terms that she must put on a brave face and entertain Tadeusz's very important guests. But as Victoria listened to one of the women play the piano and sing, she found it a struggle to keep still. She wanted to go upstairs and see Tadeusz. However, from the corner of her eye, she could see Ipsy peering at her from the doorway—so she stiffened her spine and drew her lips into a wider smile.

The conversation she had with Ipsy repeated in her head over and over.



*“Do not worry. My William is as good at mending people as he is at mending horses. Put on a smile and be a gracious hostess.”*

*“But you lied to me, Ipsy. You told me Tadeusz had gone with William to town.”*

*“Pan Hermanowski told me to say that. I dare not disobey my employer.”*

*“But what happened to him?”*

*“Look, the guests are here. We’ll talk later.” Ipsy pushed her out of the kitchen while admonishing her again to smile.*

Victoria’s face hurt from smiling. She had no idea what song the woman at the piano was playing. She tried to focus so she could make a pertinent comment later on, but her mind continued to drift. She decided she must have shot the wolf and it must have bitten Tadeusz when he tried to save her. Unless, in her madness, she had suffered a hallucination and something completely different had occurred.

Maybe there had not been a wolf at all.

Maybe she had shot Tadeusz.

The pit of her stomach churned. Had she seen claws on his hands? Had his nose widened and darkened? Had his ears grown more pointed?

But that could not be possible. She closed her eyes. Yes, she must be losing her mind. She could not have seen what she thought she saw. A man could not change into a wolf. It was absurd.

She remembered the way she had touched him last night. Beneath his clothing, his body had been faultless—entirely human with fine rippling sinews and warm flesh. Oh, the way he had made her feel—so thoroughly loved, every inch of her.

Her throat grew tight as tears misted in her eyes.

*I love him, too. I do not care how he looks.*

A shiver went up her spine as she saw his white aura in her mind. She was quite sure she could not have imagined that. Her pulse raced even faster.

Suddenly, she heard everyone in the room applauding. She opened her eyes and hurriedly clapped her hands together.

“Well done!” Tadeusz’s voice boomed from the doorway. “I hate to put an end to such a fine musical presentation, but dinner is waiting. I am sorry I am joining you so late but that wicked horse of mine threw me.”

Victoria’s heart leaped when she turned to see him. Though his aura had not changed, he stood tall and straight. Relief washed through her. She found herself struggling not to shed the tears that welled in her eyes.

Finely attired, he cut a handsome figure despite the sling cradling one arm. His black tuxedo with a low-cut waistcoat emphasized his broad shoulders. The white shirt front and white bowtie dazzled as brightly as his white teeth against his black mane. His hair had been combed and trimmed so that he appeared not too much different than a man with a full beard.

Still, her heart lodged in her throat as she realized that the white bandage wound around his head effectively hid the top of his ears and his hands were covered by immaculate white gloves.

“Come my dear, dear wife and let us lead our guests into the dining room.” He held out his hand and she stood up. Suddenly lightheaded, she swayed but one of the

other guests caught her elbow and helped her across the room. She heard the whispers, but she forced a smile to her lips even though she wondered if she would feel Tadeusz's claws beneath those white gloves.

Fearing that she would, she avoided his outstretched hand and latched on to the hardened muscles of his arm beneath the fine worsted wool of his tuxedo.

"My Beauty, you are a true vision of loveliness this evening." His words slurred slightly and she could smell the liquor on his breath. Alarm twisted through her. Drunken men were not to be trusted—another lesson she had learned from Giles.

"Thank you." She cast her gaze to the floor. "I pray you are feeling better."

"Much better, thanks to William, but I have a mind to sell Smialek."

"Because he threw you?" Baffled, she was not quite sure she heard him correctly.

"He is an obstinate creature."

"But—but you love that horse."

"He is a devil."

For a fleeting second she saw the pain flickering in his eyes and she knew he had lied to her. But why? Why would he give away that massive animal which he looked upon with such pride?

Tadeusz took his place at the head of the table. She sat to the right of him. Lily promptly began to serve them aided by Stan, who must have been pressed into service for the occasion. However, he knew exactly what to do. Ipsy must have trained him.

Victoria could not help feeling uneasy with Stan there, but she soon realized he only had eyes for Lily. And surprisingly, Lily wore a shy smile on her lips and her cheeks grew rosy whenever Stan's eyes met hers.

In addition, Lily's aura had changed to a clearer, brighter hue. Lily and Stan are in love, Victoria realized. Suddenly, as she focused on their auras, she knew what they were thinking. Stunned, she sat back in her chair as her hands fell into her lap. She completely forgot about the dinner in front of her—completely forgot that she was the hostess. This had never happened to her. Sometimes she sensed things, and sometimes other peoples' emotions were almost palpable to her—but this was different. Her mouth went dry.

A tumble of feelings, desires, and words swam through her mind. Stan and Lily's thoughts rang in her head as clearly as if they had spoken them. They were going to meet up later on. Stan was going to tap on the window at her sister's house three times to let her know he was there. Then Lily would slip out and they would walk down to the river and go a sparking.

Victoria took in a ragged breath. Did this mean that she had finally developed the ability to read auras or did it mean that her madness had increased?

Tadeusz's gloved hand slid down her arm. "My dear, are you feeling well?"

She swallowed hard, but she did not look at him. She stared at the tablecloth.

"Yes, yes. I am ... just a little tired I suppose. Perhaps a cup of tea will help?"

Lily went off to get her the tea. With the young maid's departure from the room, the spell ended.

But another one soon took its place.

The rotund, balding man sitting opposite Victoria gave a long-winded toast. Unfortunately, she had to look at him and appear interested. She could not help but see

his aura—and she did not like his thoughts at all. She liked his paean to her beauty even less. She was thoroughly glad when he had finished.

Afterward, the men dominated the conversation at the table by talking of nothing but horses. The women could not get a word in at all—unless they, too, had something to contribute to the equine discussion.

Victoria concentrated her gaze on her food—not that she ate much of it. She moved it around on her plate. With her stomach clenched in a knot, she could not swallow anything. She kept her eyes averted so that she did not stare at the auras of the guests. She did not doubt they would assume she was either stupid or insensitive. But that was far better than hearing their inner thoughts. It was difficult enough to deal with her own reflections.

Shaken, she prayed that the dinner party would soon end. However, the guests apparently enjoyed the food and wine for they devoured it with gusto. Time dragged on interminably.

She could feel Tadeusz's gaze focused upon her throughout the meal. She did not have to look up to know that he watched her every move. She cast a glance at his plate and knew that he had not touched his food either, but even though she did not look at his aura, she sensed that he feasted upon her, for wherever his gaze wandered her skin flamed. First her lips, then her neck, then her bosom. Shivers of want ran through her and blood surged from her fingertips to her toes. The air between them was charged with excitement.

She wanted to feel his arms around her, but the madness in her kept recalling the claws at the tips of his fingers.

Finally, the dinner ended. The men took their leave and went off to the study while the women returned to the drawing room. Victoria's head began to throb unmercifully and she wanted to lie down, but as hostess she valiantly continued to smile so hard she thought her face would crack.

The other women obviously knew each other quite well. They chatted on about children, illnesses, effective cures for coughs, and finally got onto the topic of pregnancies. The pain in Victoria's head intensified.

At last the men returned. Victoria rose to move to Tadeusz's side. Again, she smelled alcohol heavy on his breath. As she stood beside him, he announced with regret that the party had come to an end.

Victoria held her hands tightly together so they would not tremble. Would she soon have her answers? Her heart felt a stabbing pain. What if the answers were not the ones she expected? If she stared at Tadeusz's aura would she be able to decipher the drunken man's thoughts.

How would she know the truth anyhow? She could very well be thoroughly insane. She shoved the idea away. I will not allow myself to behave as my mother did, she thought. *If what I see is a hallucination, I will ignore it.*

She and Tadeusz stood outside to see all the guests handed into the carriage. Stan and William would drive them to the hotel in town, as no rooms had been set up for them in Blackbirch Manor. None of the company appeared to be put out by such circumstances. All appeared in good spirits though the bald, rotund man who had used

such flowery words to describe Victoria's face and figure made a show of being reluctant to leave. He held onto Victoria's hand and kissed it several times. He avowed that he would be most pleased to come again to Blackbirch Manor simply to gaze upon her beauty and breathe the very same air she breathed.

He lied. The horrible man had far more flagrant ideas in his head. If Tadeusz knew the carnal thoughts of his friend, he would pulverize him.

She wanted to snatch her hand away, but Ipsy's warning that these were important guests rang in her ear and so she suffered the horrible man's touch. It was not until one of the other men made a few snide remarks that her admirer released her. When he finally let go, she had an overwhelming urge to pull off her gloves and wash her hands. Still, she stood politely and waved goodbye to everyone. When the carriage finally rolled away down the drive, she let her smile fade.

Standing by her side Tadeusz grumbled, "If that man had kissed your hand one more time, I swear I would have challenged him to a duel."

She dared to glance up at her husband. She did not need to study his aura for she saw the spark of jealousy in his eyes. She had seen it too many times in Giles' visage, but in Tadeusz that green-eyed streak looked even more fearsome. Almost deadly.

Her breath caught in her throat. Would it be dangerous to talk to him now? But though her head continued to throb, she *had* to know what had happened that morning.

Unexpectedly, Tadeusz gave her a stiff nod. "I will beg your leave, my dear, for I must see to Smialek. I have sealed the deal on his fate—he has been sold to my first vice-president. Do not wait up for me this evening."

Sorrow swirled in his aura—so strong that she felt her throat ache as his surely did. She knew he was going to say goodbye to his horse. She could see what he saw in his mind—images of him and Smialek jumping fences, racing like the wind along pastures—all the good times he had shared with the animal.

She averted her gaze for fear that she would start weeping.

"Please, I want to know of your injuries. I want to know how you were so badly hurt."

"I assure you I am fine. Please, sleep in your own room this evening so that I do not disturb you when I come in. I know you are very weary." He turned and walked away toward the stable.

Devastated by his curt dismissal, she thought of running after him. She had given herself to him completely and together they had shared the most wondrous intimacy. She loved him. She wanted to lie with him again tonight.

She took a deep breath. Her headache had her feeling nauseous. She could wait until tomorrow. Perhaps in the light of a new day, after she had rested, her fears and anxieties would be reduced to nothing. Surely, what her mind imagined today was only the result of not enough sleep and not enough nourishment—as well as too much company. Just as in New York, when she was surrounded by a lot of people, she picked up vibrations from them. On a small scale, she could handle it, but indeed sometimes it got to her and she wound up with a migraine.

Yes, tomorrow things would be clearer.

She went back into the manor. Before going upstairs, she thought she would thank

Ipsy for the delicious meal as well as her advice. However, Ipsy and Lily had already cleaned up the kitchen and left. A shiver of fear slid up her spine. She hoped no one else had crept into the manor.

Trembling, she hurried upstairs to her room. She turned the lock on the bedroom door before she put more wood on the fire and lit several candles. The wind had picked up outside and she could hear it whistling around the stone walls.

It was only then she realized that she would have a very difficult time getting out of her dress without any assistance. She sat on the divan and rested her head in her hands. Should she go out to the stable and ask Tadeusz to unbutton her? Should she wait until he returned? Should she go to the guest cottage and ask Ipsy?

Did she dare venture out at night when there might be an injured wolf prowling around? And if no wolf existed, would she conjure one up in her mind?

She shuddered as she recalled the wolf snarling at her with saliva dripping from its mouth. The terror of that moment had not left her. She could still smell the scent of the animal's damp fur lingering in her nostrils. Slipping her hand into the hidden pocket at the side of her dress, she touched the Derringer and a cold, clammy sweat broke out on her brow.

The flickering light from the fireplace and the candles intensified the misery in her head. Sighing, she set the gun on her night table, blew out the candles and crawled into bed. She hoped she did not ruin the beautiful gown, but she felt so wretched she did not think she had any other options.

She lay awake beneath the warm comforter for quite a while waiting for her headache to subside and listening to the high-pitched shriek of the wind as it rushed around the manor. Later, she realized that she must have fallen asleep for a short time and that was why when she first heard the screams, she thought it was only the wind.

## Chapter Thirteen

Victoria's headache had departed, but her heart thundered as the terrible cries of distress pierced the night air. It took her a moment to realize that she was not in the throes of her usual nightmare.

Her first thought was Ipsy. William had intended to spend the night at the hotel in Taylor's Grove and return to the manor in the morning. What if the wolf had attacked Ipsy?

Victoria slid out of bed and grabbed the Derringer. She snatched the poker from the fireplace, as well. This time in case she missed, she would have another weapon to fight off the beast. Slipping her feet into her slippers. She hurried out into the hall even though the screams had ended.

Panic pulsed through her. She had to save Ipsy. She prayed as she ran down the staircase. Perhaps Tadeusz had heard the screams, too, and gone to help? But he had one arm in a sling. Maybe he would be unable to fight off the wild creature.

Her feet could not go fast enough. She knew the screams had come from the front of the manor so she dashed out the front door into the night. From there, she caught sight of a movement just beyond the old gate.

She refused to give in to her fear. Her side hurt but she kept going. She was certain now that she had seen that wolf in the basement. Perhaps Ipsy did not want to frighten her. The old cook might have thought she was protecting her.

Victoria should have checked out the basement herself. She should have run after Tadeusz and insisted on the truth.

A chill crept up her spine as she ran along the drive between the black birches—for in the darkness it reminded her so much of her dreadful dream and her mother's macabre dance on the night of her death.

However, this was not a dark night. The light from the full moon lit her way. She knew she had seen something. Whether it was a wolf, or a deer, she could not tell, but she had keen eyesight and something had passed through the gate.

At the gate, she stopped. She did not see anything unusual. Shivering in the chill night air, she turned around, intending to go to the guest cottage and see if Ipsy was there—or what was left of her.

Victoria's tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. There was not a drop of moisture in her mouth. Her steps faltered as another scream rent the air. This was not the high-pitched cry of a woman. It echoed deeper, more like a shout—and it came from somewhere close by the lake. All her blood seemed to pool in her feet. She pinched herself—hard. It hurt. This was not a nightmare. This was not some horrible memory from the past. This was now.

Her throat closed up completely, but she continued toward the lake. She stopped when she came to the edge where the gentle waves formed by the wind lapped against the

bank. A still figure, dressed in a white nightgown, floated face downward in the shallower water at the end of the lake. Only the thinnest, gossamer memory of a white aura emanated from the body as any residual energy drained away in the chilly night air.

All the unspeakable memories of the past slammed into her. It was happening—again. Her mother lay there in the lake. She was seeing her mother’s death all over again. She was living it again. The passage of time did not matter. She had killed her mother and her mother’s death would return to haunt her as long as she lived. She could not escape it! She *had* lost her mind!

Panic took over her senses and she screamed. She spun around and ran—wildly—not exactly caring in which direction she was headed. She met up with the impenetrable wall of Tadeusz’s chest by the old dock and dropped the poker with the impact. He did not reach out to her.

She staggered backward and stared at him. His nose had grown even longer, becoming more like a snout. The bandage on his head had fallen away and his ears had grown more pointed. She stared at his hands which had turned into paws.

*I have lost all sense of reality!* She covered her mouth with her hands as the pain twisted inside her. *What am I to do?*

“Victoria ....” Tadeusz’s voice came out as a frightening, guttural rumble. “My precious Beauty, you should not have come.” He did not move toward her. She continued to step slowly away from him, keeping her eyes on him all the time.

She tried to focus on the white aura swirling about him, but seeing the changes in his body frightened her. She could not concentrate and she could hear nothing clear and distinct from his chaotic thoughts.

“You’re the wolf!” She accused. “You told me there was no wolf, but it was you! All the time!” She tried to catch her breath. “You killed Paul! You killed my mother!”

“That poor unfortunate is not your mother, Miss Vicky.” Dr. Evans’ voice sounded behind her and she turned to see him with a gun in his hand. Aiming the gun directly at Tadeusz, the doctor continued. “That’s Lily—and yes, he has killed her. I never suspected he would be so vicious, but the likes of him are not to be trusted. I am certain he killed Paul, as well. I should have suspected. The full moon comes out and changes him.”

Bile rose in Victoria’s throat as she glanced at the body floating in the lake. In the bright light of the moon, she now recognized the thin housemaid’s form. A red stain grew on the white gown, marring its purity.

“Do not believe him,” Tadeusz begged. “He went on a trip to Michigan a few years ago and got a wolf as a pup. He kept it nearby. He used it on Paul and expected me to find it in the basement. I did, after you shot it. I thought it was quite dead, but it still had enough life left in it to rip the flesh on my arm.”

Victoria closed her eyes. Cold steel clamped around her heart. She could not decipher the pale aura surrounding Tadeusz. How could she believe him? “You told me there was no wolf.”

“I did not want to scare you. You know I love you.”

Her throat tightened as she remembered the passion she and Tadeusz had shared. He had given her more than any other man. Had any of it been real? She opened her eyes

and stared at the doctor's aura. It had more holes than ever in it.

"Love?" The doctor laughed. "You cannot love anyone except perhaps another creature like yourself." The doctor's face turned as hard as stone. "It disgusts me to think that you touched her. She is beautiful—though no doubt as high strung as her mother—and there is only one way to handle a woman like that when she refuses you."

"Drug her. Am I right?" Tadeusz asked. "And then, when she still refuses, kill her and blame it on her daughter?"

Victoria gasped. Her legs nearly buckled.

"Her mother was insane!" The doctor ranted. "She claimed to see halos—on everyone."

"Auras," Victoria could barely whisper. "I see them, too."

The doctor sneered. "I knew it. I saw the way you stared around me—not looking at my face. Thinking you knew my thoughts, thinking you knew what I intended to do."

A spasmodic trembling took hold of Victoria. Dr. Evans sounded deranged. He moved closer to Tadeusz with the gun. Narrowing her eyes, she struggled to concentrate on the doctor's aura.

"Stand on that dock you disgusting animal," Dr. Evans shouted at Tadeusz. "I want to be rid of you. Everyone will thank me for this."

Tadeusz held his ground. "Victoria, please listen to me. He blackmailed Paul. He claimed to have evidence that you killed your mother. But he did not have it. Paul was going to stop paying him. That's why he killed him."

"Stop talking. Move! Now, over there!" The doctor motioned with his gun. "Hurry it up."

"Victoria," Tadeusz begged. "He intends to force you to marry him."

"She will be much better off with me than you, you wretched beast!" The malevolent doctor took aim. "I can easily manipulate her."

In a rush, the doctor's thoughts rang clearly in Victoria's mind. He intended to drug her—and to keep her drugged. He would use chloroform if need be, just as he had used it to anesthetize her on the night he killed her mother.

Victoria clenched her hands so tightly her fingernails dug into her palms. Fury bubbled up inside her. Now her dreams made sense! But could she believe that Tadeusz was not a wolf? If only she knew his thoughts. Still, she could not let the doctor kill him.

She pulled the Derringer out of her pocket and stepped closer to the doctor, aiming the small weapon at his heart. "Drop your gun."

The doctor glanced at her and laughed. "You expect me to believe you can shoot that thing."

From the corner of her eyes, she saw Tadeusz struggle to pick up the poker with one deformed hand.

She kept the doctor's eyes on her. "I am an excellent shot. Surely, Paul told you that. I have far better aim than he ever did."

"Then aim your gun at that monster you married." The doctor turned his focus back to Tadeusz.

Tadeusz threw the poker and hit the doctor in the head. But the poker merely caused the wicked man to stumble to the side. The gun went off anyway. The sound of



the blast echoed off the hills. Tadeusz fell backward off the dock and into the lake.

Victoria squeezed the trigger and shot the doctor right in the heart. He stared at her with a surprised look on his face as he fell to his knees and then collapsed face down in the dirt. She forced back the shock that threatened to immobilize her. She had to save Tadeusz!

Dropping her weapon, she ripped furiously at her skirt to yank it off. She dove off the dock into the frigid water. The moon's light could not reach down past the first few feet. Groping around in the dark liquid, her body grew numb with cold. She could not see anything, but she kicked her legs and dove down further. How much longer could she hold her breath?

By pure chance she managed to snatch at a handful of sodden fabric. She reached out and felt Tadeusz's body. With her lungs near to bursting, she struggled to pull him to the surface. The effort took every last ounce of her strength.

The quaking of her body from the chill of the icy water hindered her movements, but she dragged him as far as she could—to where the water came up to her knees. There she stumbled and fell over a submerged rock.

She could not take another step. Tadeusz's body was too heavy for her to move him any further. She could never pull him up onto the bank. She collapsed beside him. She sat on the underwater rock and put his head in her lap. His eyes remained closed.

"Breathe! Do not die!" She could barely get the words out with her teeth chattering so much. As she stroked the mane on her head, her hand became covered with his blood. However, his nose appeared to be smaller—more normal.

"I love you. I love you with all my heart." She tried to shake him, but her arms had become so clumsy she barely had the strength to lift them. "I do not care what you are. To me you have been kind and gentle ... and loving."

She did not get any response from him. She stopped shivering and longed to rest for a while. She laid her head on top of his. "You cannot leave me here alone," she whispered as the tears fell from her eyes. "I will die, Tadeusz. I will die of sorrow."

His faint aura grew smaller. How cruel life could be, she thought as the tears rolled down her cheeks. She had the promise of happiness in her hands and now it had been taken away from her.

But she had been granted a taste of true love. For that she was grateful. She ran her fingers along Tadeusz's jaw line and leaned over to kiss his lips, but they were cold and the chill sent a pain stabbing at her heart.

"I shall always remember our love. Always." She let out a small sob, and then bit her lip. "Thank you," she whispered. Exhausted, she closed her eyes ... for a moment ... she would not leave Tadeusz. But she needed to rest. For now.

## Chapter Fourteen

Someone shook her violently.

"Miss Vicky! Miss Vicky! What has happened?" William lifted her from the water and carried her to the carriage. He wrapped his jacket around her.

"No. I do not want to leave Tadeusz," she protested weakly. She knew she did not have the strength to move on her own.

"I've seen some saved from drowning." William spoke gruffly. Then he left her alone in the carriage.

She could not keep her eyes open as she lay on the soft tufted seat. But before she drifted off, William brought Tadeusz into the carriage, too.

"He spewed up some water but his breathing's weak. We've got to get you both warmed up."

Victoria fought to stay awake despite the lassitude plaguing her. Should she dare to hope?

William carried them into the manor, one by one, and placed them in front of the fire in the kitchen. He tossed on a great many logs, and ran to get blankets.

Victoria lay in front of the roaring blaze and soaked up the heat. The terrible weariness began to leave her.

Suddenly, Tadeusz stirred beside her. His eyes opened and he gave her a wan smile. "My Beauty," he whispered.

"Oh, Tadeusz." She reached out and touched him. "I thought I had lost you."

He closed his eyes again. She edged up alongside him and stroked his head tenderly. As she did so, the thick hair began to fall away in clumps. She blinked in surprise. Beneath the fur, his forehead lay smooth and clean. She touched his ears. Each one felt quite normal. So did his nose. She lifted up one of his hands and found it to be rather ordinary.

"William!" she called out. "Come quickly."

The old man hurried over to them with his arms full of quilts.

"Something ... very strange ... his hair ...," she babbled.

"Well, look at that." William muttered. "I guess the curse is broken."

\* \* \* \*

Victoria sat bundled up in a blanket by the fireplace in Tadeusz's room. Though she wore a dry nightgown, the thought that she had almost lost Tadeusz still chilled her. The doctor's bullet had only grazed his scalp, but it did knock him out and he would have drowned without help.

She nestled against him while he devoured a rather huge chunk of Ipsy's gingerbread. She sipped from the warm mug she held in both of her hands. Ipsy had told her to drink it all up otherwise she would risk getting chilblains.

Miraculously, Ipsy had slept through everything until William woke her up just as

dawn was on the horizon.

"Poor Lily—I guess she never had much of a chance for happiness." Victoria sniffed. "Why did he kill her?"

Tadeusz shrugged. "He bragged about that before you arrived on the scene. He had been giving Lily money to help him carry out his plans. Then Stan started getting sweet on her and she wanted to quit helping the doctor with his devious schemes."

"William and Stan drove back after Stan found a note from Lily at the hotel. If she had not warned Stan ...." Victoria's eyes welled with tears. She could not seem to hold back her emotions.

"It is a terrible shame. Stan loved her. He thought he could make her happy."

Victoria took a deep breath and glanced up at Tadeusz. There were still many things she had to discuss. "You know I see auras all the time. On everyone."

"You will have to explain that to me."

"I do not know much about it myself. I was—I still am afraid that I will go mad—like my mother."

"You are not insane, and if you were crazy, I would love you anyway."

"Yes. Often, I know what you are thinking."

"That is disconcerting." He finished off the gingerbread and pulled her closer.

She studied his aura. He wanted to know if she would have loved him if he was a wolf.

She shuddered. "Not if you snarled at me like the wolf in the basement."

His eyes opened wide in shock. "You really do know what I am thinking."

"Do you mind?"

"I guess I will have to get used to it." He let out a big yawn. "Anyhow, I shall never ever snarl."

She yawned, too. "This chilblain preventative is making me very, very sleepy."

Tadeusz took the mug from her hands and sniffed it. Then he took a sip. "I do not know what else might be in there, but there is a substantial quantity of my expensive brandy."

"Then you can drink it. I have had more than enough."

"No, thank you." Tadeusz set the mug on the hearth. "I do not have much faith in Ipsy's concoctions. I believe we should simply go and get some rest right now."

Victoria smiled as she saw the flash of desire in his eyes. "But I believe you are thinking of a bit of pleasure first."

"No, you are wrong about that." He frowned at her.

Her heart fell. "Oh."

He took her in his arms. "What I was thinking of was a great quantity of pleasure first. I believe happiness is very important in preventing illness."

"I am sure you are right about that." Victoria stroked the smooth skin of his forehead. "And love is a very important part of happiness."

The End