



# PRETTY BABY

by

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New Concepts Publishing

5202 Humphreys Rd.

Lake Park, GA 31636

[www.newconceptspublishing.com](http://www.newconceptspublishing.com)

Pretty baby, pretty baby. Won't you come  
and let me rock you in your cradle of love,  
and we'll cuddle all the while. I will  
be your loving sister, brother, dad and  
mother too. Pretty baby of mine, all mine.

Pretty baby of mine.

## CHAPTER ONE

Running footsteps thundered down the dark alleyway. He was close. Close enough to smell the bastard's sweat mingling with the putrid smells of rotting garbage. He splashed through neon-reflected puddles that resembled pools of blood and felt the hot metal from an exploding gun whizzing past him. But he kept going, knocking over metal trash cans and darting through the dappled shadows of the humid night. All at once he heard the clinking sound of a Cyclone fence and could see the dark silhouette hoisting himself up over the top. A foot. He saw a foot and lunged at it before it disappeared out of sight. His fingers were like cords of steel, digging into a bony ankle while it kicked and struggled.

The kid was sweating, the palms of his hand slick and wet. When he felt himself slipping, a flash of panic rose and clawed at his stomach. Desperate to get away, the frantic Hispanic wheeled around and pointed the gun, his nervous finger on the trigger.

For a split second Lieutenant Shadoe Madison stared down the barrel of imminent death. Just as an explosion of gunfire would have destroyed his face, his partner grabbed him from behind and jerked him out of the line of fire. The two men fell backward, Shadoe's face grazed and bleeding. The hot streak of burning flesh was ignored as he scrambled up, too close to give up now. He tackled the fence again and was climbing up when he felt his partner's hands on him, jerking him backward.

"What the hell are you doing?" Shadoe yelled, trying to push him away.

The two men struggled together, their faces dripping sweat, their chests heaving for breath.

"Let him go, Madison, let the son of a bitch go!"

"No way in hell!" he yelled, still struggling to get free.

"He's gone, man, long gone."

"God ... damn!" Shadoe cursed, whirling on his partner. He scowled at him, blood dripping from his wound, and his eyes flashing. "If you hadn't stopped me, I would've had him!"

"No, you wouldn't you asshole. You would've been dead. Besides, he's faster than you, and he knows these back streets like a native. There's no way in hell we'll get him tonight."

Shadoe buried his face in his hands. "Shit! Shit! Shit!" he shouted, then whirled around and grabbed the fence like a caged animal, peering into the dark shadows beyond. All at once he began

kicking the fence with a ferocity that made the last strands of his badly tousled, blue-black hair pull free of the rubber band that held it at the nape of his neck.

Max Parenti, Shadoe's partner for the night, watched him as he paced with his hands resting on his gun belt. He was like an animal, ready to pounce on anything that moved. He knew the man's nerves were stretched to the limit. He couldn't relax and had a heightened alertness that caused his eyes to dart. His mouth, normally full and relaxed, was almost thinned to a straight line, moving slightly as he ground his teeth. He sweat profusely, and was irritable and angry.

Max knew the signs, and they were all there.

Madison was a good cop, but he was stressed out. Hell, they all came to that point at some time in their careers, but everyone else had the good sense to back away. Not Madison. He made excuses, pushed himself until he was dead on his feet and couldn't think straight. Now he was at the point of making mistakes. Mistakes that could cost him his life. Like tonight.

"Come on, man," Max said, applying a gentle pressure on his shoulder, "let's get back to the precinct."

Shadoe jerked himself away angrily and stalked toward the cruiser. The anger wouldn't go away. It boiled and festered inside him, giving him a mental picture of a brick wall with every street thug, gang member, and psycho in New York lined up against it. He saw himself holding a submachine gun on them, his sturdy body bucking with the blast of each round. His head ached, the rat-a-tat-tat of the gun exploding inside his brain.

He slumped in the car, his eyes darting around at the dark silhouettes that stalked the nighttime streets. He hated everyone of them. When he couldn't hold it in any longer he hung himself out the window and yelled at each and every passing goon. "You dirty rotten bastards, I'll get you, every one of you! If I have to go to prison for the rest of my life, I'll gun you down like the garbage you are!"

"Madison, for God's sake," Max yelled while leaning over and pulling him back into the car. "Would you get hold of yourself? Look at what you're doing. Listen to yourself."

Shadoe jerked himself back in and glared at his partner as if he were the enemy. "You heard what I said," he growled insanely, then lunged toward the window on Max's side and again yelled at every nameless, faceless silhouette on the street. "I'll kill the goddamned motherfuckers ... every one of them!"

The car skidded and Max stretched his neck to see over Shadoe. "Madison, for God's sake get in your freakin' seat. I can't see a goddamned thing!"

Shadoe pulled back and slumped in his seat, lowering his head to try to rub his headache away.

Max watched him, feeling a stab of compassion for his friend and partner, and spoke softly. “Yeah, pal, we’ll get ’em just like you said, but first we need to get back to the station and give the captain our report. Okay?”

Shadoe didn’t reply, just sat in his seat, his intense gaze hot enough to set fire to every filthy creep he saw. He knew he could pick any one at random and find a rap sheet longer than Broadway from end to end.

They finally arrived at the station and Max quickly emerged from the car to try to help Shadoe, but the anger he was feeling was like a shield around him and he wouldn’t let his partner touch him. He staggered into the station like a drunk man, not realizing that Max had hurried into the captain’s office and stayed in there for twenty minutes.

They both stood at the window looking out at Shadoe who was chewing pencil erasers by the dozens. His movements were abrupt and angry. He kicked the office furniture, yelled at anyone who said anything to him, and barked over the telephone when he answered it.

“He can’t go on like this, Captain,” Max said. “He’s coming apart at the seams. I’m afraid he’s gonna kill someone, or get himself killed.”

“I’ll handle it,” the captain said, turning away from the window. “Call him in here.”

Max turned, but stood at the door, hesitating for a moment.

“You did the right thing, Parenti.”

“I hope so,” Max said, then turned to walk out. As he made his way through the crowded desks, he tried to deal with his sudden resemblance to a stoolie. Hell, he argued with himself, why should he feel guilty about trying to help the bum? Sure, he’d squealed, but Madison was coming apart before his very eyes. He had to say something. Besides, it was for the creep’s own good, he told himself. When he arrived at the desk he watched while Shadoe tried to cram a sheet of paper into a typewriter. “Hey, man, you don’t have to do that. I’ll make out the report. That’s my job, remember?”

“Whatever,” Shadoe snarled, yanking the paper out so hard it ripped. The torn paper was just one more thing to grate on his nerves, so with frenzied movements he angrily wadded it up and threw it across the room.

“Better change your attitude. The captain wants to see you.”

“Yeah?” Shadoe snarled, jumping up and looking his partner in the eye. “It couldn’t be that some sneaky cop tipped him off, could it?”

“Shadoe... I was....” Max began.

“Save it!” Shadoe snapped. Giving Max one last piercing look, he turned, roughly kicking his chair, indifferent to its collision with the other furniture. Shoving his partner out of the way, he groggily wove his way through desks until he stood at the captain’s open door, glaring.

“Come in, Madison,” the captain said without looking up. “Close the door.”

Shadoe stepped in, slammed the door behind him.

“So,” the captain began, while putting away the file he was working on and looked up at Shadoe, “how long has it been since you had a woman?”

Shadoe stared at him, his face a scowling pattern of light and shadow. “You brought me in here to ask me about my fuckin’ love life?”

He could see that Shadoe was on the edge, so he tried to keep it light. “Anybody you’re seein’ right now? What about that little senorita ... what was her name?”

“She’s yesterday’s news.”

“Yeah? Too bad. I seem to remember you taking a bite or two out of that little enchilada, right?”

Shadoe eyed him, his irritation growing. “Captain, what the hell is this? You didn’t bring me in here to shoot the fuckin’ breeze. Now, what is it that’s on your mind?”

The captain scooted forward in his chair and leaned over his desk. “Okay, if that’s the way you want it. What the hell happened tonight? Max tells me you showed your butt to the world.”

“Oh, God, here we go again, that same song and dance.”

“Come on, Madison, level with me. You getting stressed out again, or just need a woman in your bed? Which is it?”

“So I got a little angry, so what? The bastard got away, for God’s sake. Wouldn’t you get angry?”

“Madison, getting angry, and going crazy are two different things. Parenti gave me a vivid description of you hanging out of the car window threatening the goddamned population.”

Shadoe’s face took on a look of deadly anger as he urged himself forward and looked the captain in the eye. “All right, so I went a little crazy. I was close, Captain, so fuckin’ close I could smell him. His sweat, his fear, his stinking feet! I had him right here!” Shadoe shouted while holding out the palm of a clawlike hand. “With him that close how could I give up?” His eyes danced as they continued to pierce those of his captain. “You can count on one thing,” Shadoe said, making a dark promise. “I’ll get that little creep, and when I do--” his voice dropped to a soft threat, “--I’ll bring his head to you on a platter!”

The captain’s face paled. “You’re off the case.”

Shadoe jumped up. “What the fuck...?”

“You heard me. As of right now you’re off the case. In fact I want you to take some time off. A couple of weeks ... a month ... however long it takes to get your head on straight.”

He leaned over the captain’s desk. “Hell, Captain, I can’t....”

“You’re driving everyone crazy, Madison. This is the second time you’ve gone nuts while trying to apprehend a felon. Look at your face. Parenti tells me if he hadn’t pulled you away, you’d be dead now.”

“And you’re gonna believe him?” Shadoe yelled. “If he’d just left me alone I...”

“You’d be dead,” the captain finished for him. “I’m telling you right now that if you don’t get out of here and get some rest I’m gonna lock you up where you won’t have anything to do but sleep and jerk off.”

Shadoe began pacing, his agitation chewing at him while he rubbed the back of his neck. “Come on, Captain, you’re getting excited over nothing. I feel fine. I’m jus--”

“Madison, you’re a good cop, one of the best, but no man can work twenty-four hours a day and not have it affect him. Hell, I can’t even send you home and depend on you to stay there. Before I know it you’re back here pushing your nose into things that don’t concern you and I’m tired of it. So ... you can make up your mind right now what it’s gonna be. Fishing on a nice sunny lake, or a criminal record.”

Shadoe shrugged, a frown etching his face. “What the hell will I do? I’ll go crazy.”

“Damn, Madison, do I have to map it out for you? Do what anyone does on a vacation. Fish, hunt, swim. Take a cruise, for God’s sake, or go back to the reservation and check it out.” Lowering his voice, the captain said, “Find a nice little squaw and do what comes naturally, huh? Sound good?”

“This is crazy. I can’t leave now, I’ve got a desk piled....”

Tired of his arguments, the captain rose immediately, flung the door open and put his head through it. “Hey!” he yelled into the bull pit. “Somebody get me a pair of cuffs!” He looked back at Shadoe and saw him arch an eyebrow. “Don’t believe me, huh? Well, watch this.” He lifted his hands and caught the twin circles of clinking metal as they came hurtling out of nowhere, then turned toward Shadoe, the cuffs lifted threateningly. “When I give you an order, I expect it to be carried out ... one way or another.”

Just about that time Shadoe saw several more of his officer buddies enter slowly, Max one of them, and take their place on each side of the captain. It was an intimidating sight, and small barbs of discomfort prickled down his spine.

Shadoe stepped back and smiled vaguely, unsure of the crowd around him. “Hey. guys, you’re not really gonna do this, are you?” When the officers kept coming, he looked at each one, seeing a fierce determination in their stride. “Is this fair?” he yelled, looking from one to the other. “You’re ganging up on me for God’s sake.” All at once Shadoe made a sudden move, hoisting his gun out of its holster. “All right,” he rasped, “get back you creeps or I’ll blow you away. Nobody’s puttin’ me in a fuckin’ jail cell for trying to do my job.”

“Madison, put the damned gun away,” the captain ordered. “You know you’re not going to use it.”

“Yeah?” Shadoe muttered, “Well that’s where you’re wrong, Captain.”

“You’re not a killer, Madison. A little crazy, maybe, but you’re not a killer.”

Shadoe's eyes flickered at the truth in the captain's words, then made a quick move and pressed the barrel to his temple. "So I'm not a killer, huh? How many of you are in the mood to see my brain splattered all over the ceiling?"

"Madison," the captain growled, a hint of exasperation in his voice, "why in hell is it that every time we want you to take some time off we go through this same song and dance? You're not going to shoot yourself, so put the damned gun back in your holster and let's dispense with the dramatics."

Knowing it was no use, Shadoe gave up and strode toward them while plunging the gun back in his holster. He brutally pushed at the hard bodies that resembled a human wall. "Get the hell out of my way," he growled, "I'm not staying somewhere I'm not wanted." Finally getting beyond the circle, he stopped and whirled on the men. "A man tries to do his fuckin' job and what does he get? Heartaches!"

The remark caused a few snickers among the men. Then the captain spoke up. "What the hell is that, your Barney Fife impression?"

"Wisecracks! That's all I hear outta you creeps." He pointed to his captain. "You just remember this. You threw me out, and it'll be a cold day in hell before you see me walkin' back through that door."

"Always with the threats, huh Madison? Hell, all we want is for you to take the time you have coming to you."

"You're kicking me out on my butt, you mean!" he growled while turning and stalking down the hall to the front door. He slammed it open, then passed through it, leaving the captain and his men to stare after him.

"Well," the captain said, then turned and slumped down in his chair with a loud groan, "crisis over. Thanks, guys."

A new recruit looked around, smiling incredulously. "What the hell was that all about?"

"You'll get used to it," the captain said. "It's just that we have to kick Madison out about every six months."

The recruit chuckled. "Why? I mean, what the hell's his problem?"

The Captain angled a look at him while lighting a cigarette. After taking a long, much-needed draw, he squinted his eyes toward the rookie, his next words accompanied by escaping smoke. "Shadoe Madison is one of the best and smartest cops I've ever known," he said. "If you follow his example, you'll make a damn good cop. I'll admit Madison has his moments of madness, but he handles a lot of cases ... you know, undercover shit ... sees a lot. After a time it gets to him. Hell, when you look at bloody photographs day in and day out ... young girls, children--" a flicker of pain shadowed the captain's eyes, "--it ... it's bound to do something to you."

"Yeah," the recruit said softly, feeling stupid. "Yeah, I guess so. Well, I'll ... I'll just get back to work."

There was no response from the captain as the recruit turned and shuffled out. Instead he sat beneath a circle of smoke, quietly thinking about Shadoe, and wondering why they weren't all stark raving mad. But Shadoe's job was harder. He went undercover, so he had to become one of them. Get down on their level and rut like pigs, learn how they live, go with them into their holes and hear them brag about the raping and killing of women and children. If Shadoe went a little crazy once in a while, he could certainly understand why. With the images of death floating around in his mind, he always threatened never to come back, but he always did. And then it would start all over again, the time fast approaching when Shadoe would have to get away from it for a while.

He stared into the gloom of a dusky office, and whispered, "Get it all out of your system you stubborn asshole, then hurry back for more of the same." A deep sigh escaped his throat as he looked thoughtfully at the burning ashes on the tip of his cigarette.

\* \* \* \*

The next day, with nothing more than a large Band-Aid on his cheek, Shadoe fooled around town for a while, then stopped by a travel bureau called Horizons. He sauntered in and flipped through a few brochures. He was looking at one about a castle in Ireland when his eye caught a beautiful crimson color. The little pamphlet was turned askew from the others, and revealed a picturesque little place on the front called Scarlet Bay Inn. He figured it must have been misplaced among all the cruises and faraway places, and picked it up. It was located on the coast of Georgia. Not far away, yet far enough. Inside was a driving map, and a short piece on the legend surrounding the inn. He was intrigued, so he decided to talk to one of the travel agents to learn a little more about it.

As he approached her, he wondered how much of what she would say could be believed. He reasoned that if he was wanting to book a trip to a haunted castle in Ireland she might be inclined to tell him a load of crap about cold breezes and floating apparitions, but what would she say when she discovered he wouldn't be spending any money there?

All right, so he was the same old Shadoe, overly suspicious, but he couldn't help it, he was a cop for God's sake. After spending years on the force, it covered him like moss on a tree. And it wasn't easy to take it off at the drop of a hat. Over the years he had learned that everybody had an angle, and

he would bet a dollar to a donut that the attractive travel agent had one as well. When she learned he wasn't going to spend a dime there, she would probably toss him off like so much garbage.

Gently slapping the stiff paper against his palm thoughtfully, he hesitantly approached her and listened to everything she said.

"Scarlet Bay is a lovely spot," she assured him. "The windswept shores of the private beach are not far from a ridge that rises up stark and steep. The rocky shoreline below is filled with the most unusual-shaped rocks you will ever see. For thousands of years the surf has worn them into the shape of what looks like human bones. There isn't another place on earth that you can find rocks like that. Legend has it that the rocks are the bones of a warrior god that met his death on the shore, and when his blood drained into the ocean, it caused the scarlet sunrise. The giant is said to come to life during a full moon to roam the beach, looking for the one who killed him." She leaned closer, her voice lowering to an ominous tone. "If one night when the moon is full and you hear a strange clatter, look out on the beach. Chances are you'll see the bones walking around."

Shadoe gave a chuckle. "Come on, now. You don't expect me to believe that, surely."

She smiled, expecting his reaction. "I didn't expect you to believe it, but since it's part of the legend I have to include it. You understand."

"So, is that it?"

"Not even close," she said, grinning. "The rocks have marks that have been dug out by the wind and saltwater. One is a perfect horned moon. The geologists call them chanter marks. On a very windy night you can hear a tune being played through those marks. It's very--" She rubbed her arms as if she had a chill, "--eerie."

"What about the sunrises? I see here...."

"Oh yes," she said, excited. "The sunrises are absolutely stunning. The sun flames across the sky in a vivid scarlet color, and actually moves in a ripple as the sun rises. It bathes the water and the beach with a deep crimson beauty that cannot be believed. Words can't describe it, and pictures can't do it justice. The greatest thrill you will ever have is to stand on that beach and let the sun immerse you in that magnificent scarlet beauty."

"So what about the inn? The brochure says it was rebuilt after the Civil War, and at one time it was a favorite place of the stars. What do you know about it?"

"Yes, here too is a lovely old legend. It's been said...."

By the time he had heard everything, Shadoe had to admit that he had underestimated her. Instead of tossing him off, she took time, telling him all about the spooky old legends and making him feel guilty about not spending any money there. Anxious to get started, he thanked her, went home and packed a few belongings, then struck out, heading down I-95 toward a little dot on the map called Scarlet, Georgia.

Home of the notorious Scarlet Bay Inn.

## CHAPTER TWO

The dirty little urchin who hid among the trees had no face. She moved in the shadows just inside the woods, busily raking dirt into a mound and mixing it with water. When the mixture was just right she rolled it, squeezed it, then flattened it and laid it on the ground. She furtively glanced around to make sure no one was watching, then carefully put her hand in her pocket and pulled out a match and a candle. She pressed the candle into the top of the little mud cake, struck the match, and lit it. When she saw the flame leap, she smiled, feeling a thrill rush and swirl inside her.

“I’m eighteen today,” she said excitedly to the small animals that had gathered around her. “I’m grown ... a woman,” she said, feeling a rogue wind blow, causing her to shiver. She cupped her hands around the small flame for warmth. “I wish it could be a real birthday cake, but ... well ... maybe someday.”

She wore nothing to warm herself in the chill morning air but a tattered thin dress and a handcrafted mask that not only hid her face, but also covered her head. Holes for her eyes, nose, and mouth had been crudely cut out, the edges bound by stitches. A rope of glossy red-gold hair rippled down her back and glinted in the thin sunshine.

Just then she heard something and quickly leaned down to blow out the candle. Like a skittering animal, she promptly scooted around and hid herself behind the tree. She crouched perfectly still, watching a car slowly roll up the drive and inch to a stop. Her breath caught in her lungs when she saw a tall, dark man emerge.

\* \* \* \*

Shadoe Madison was a green-eyed savage. A half-breed Indian with dark skin and long hair that flowed down his back like a dark river. He and his Cherokee mother had lived with his father until he died in a plane crash when Shadoe was only three. Not knowing what else to do, she bundled Shadoe up and took him back to the reservation where he lived under Indian rule until he was fifteen. A lot of his mother’s ancestry flowed through his veins, but his father, who had been a Chicagocop, had given him his green eyes and his natural love for law enforcement. His mother called him Shadoe because he had been born in the shadow of the moon, making him the Son of the Moon.

When he became of age he became the tribe’s Shadow Dancer, and it was his duty within the tribe to perform this ritual. He would paint his face, dress himself in warrior dress, and go to the highest place he could find and perform this dance to the haunting tune of Indian chants. It was believed that evil spirits fled while Shadoe’s silhouette gyrated against the silver brightness of the full moon. During the ritual the tribe sat at his feet, swaying and chanting.

When his mother died, the only thing she left him was a jade jewel. It became his most prized possession and he had it implanted on his cheek bone, just beneath his left eye. White man might have

pawned it, or had it made into a ring or a necklace, but according to the beliefs of his tribe, having it implanted into his skin would honor his mother, and her spirit would become part of him, guiding him through life.

Soon after her death he left the reservation, walking down a dusty old road thumbing a ride. He'd been happy as an Indian child, but now he belonged in his father's world, a world he was anxious to explore. City life was new to him, but he managed to fit in. Daily he walked down the city streets with his long hair flying behind him, and the mysterious jade glittering in reflected light. His appearance was that of a young man in keeping with the wild decorations people put on themselves these days, so it was rarely questioned.

Back then he'd been a pretty-boy type and even married once. But the girl was spoiled and rich, and turned out to be the adventurous type. She had chosen him only because he represented a walk on the wild side and knew their relationship would drive her father crazy. She and her father were part of the rich class, and were constantly playing games with people's lives. When Shadoe found out about it, he was tempted to put an old Indian curse on them, but instead quietly disappeared into the dusty Texas wind.

Eventually Shadoe made it to the Police Academy, and knew immediately he had found his element. Now, after looking death square in the face day after day, his handsome features had the troubles of the world tattooed upon them. In his van weren't only his luggage, but a holster and gun that he used every day of his life. He cringed when he thought of all the midnight chases he'd been involved in, and the streaks of fire that had burst forth from his weapon while in gunplay. He hated it, but at the same time he loved it. Someone nearly always died, and someday he knew it would be him.

Being an undercover cop with a big city police department had been his dream since the day he found out he was a half-breed. For years he'd seen only the surface of law enforcement, but weeks stretched out into years and he gradually became introduced to the underbelly. He'd seen good cops go bad, dead bodies riddled with bullets, and dangerous criminals caught only to be freed by some stupid judge, or an ambitious, attention-getting lawyer. He'd had a bellyful, and then some, but he continued living in this dangerous world he'd chosen. Homicide, drugs, prostitution, that was his beat, but at the moment he'd been forced to put it all aside.

Now that he was here, he decided it hadn't been such a bad idea. The ocean was hidden by trees on one side, but on the other, a path led down to the private beach. He lifted his nose smelling the salt air, and could hear the waves crashing on the bones at the bottom of the ridge. He looked down at the picture on the brochure of the early morning sunrise that bathed the water and beach with an astounding crimson glow that gave the place its name. Even the picture was amazing and gave Shadoe a chill when he considered that the sea turned to blood once a day. It almost seemed as if it meant something. Something hellish. Telling himself he was imagining things, he threw the brochure aside and leaned into his trunk, reached past the holster, and picked up his camera.

"Okay, Captain, you win," he muttered to himself while pulling the leather strap down over

his head. "I'll spend a few days here with my trusty camera, go back with a pocketful of snapshots and you'll...." Shadoe's words faded when he turned and caught a look at the looming stature of the inn.

It was beautiful ... distressingly so. The aging façade was the face of a cherished silent film star, a wilting rose, a haunting old song, or a bygone era that could never be recaptured. Shadoe could almost feel the ghostly past being lived around him. Another time... another era. The windows had sea green shutters, and a wide veranda wrapped around the mansion, supported by large columns. The wraparound porch had a line of white rocking chairs that rocked in the wind. It reminded him of the haunted visitors that were said to still inhabit this place. The center of the porch formed a semicircle platform with about seven steps leading down to a circular drive of crushed shells, that when catching the sun, sparkled with a rainbow of different colors.

In the center of the circular drive was a large fountain where the statue of a nude couple stood on a pedestal kissing passionately, water overflowing from a shallow bowl above their heads. On a plaque at the side, he discovered that it was called The Kissing Fountain. It explained that if you threw in a penny you would find your true love. If you looked down into the clear water, you could see the bottom strewn with pennies, no doubt thrown by those who still believed in fairy tales. A wide bench circled it, providing a place to sit and play in the water, or just linger and enjoy the beauty of the couple as they made love against the aging beauty that still existed in the deep South.

He looked up at the dark tower that pierced the roof on one side. He could almost see the woman who was rumored to float along the widow's walk during storms, her eyes glowing like coals of fire, and her nightdress flaring out in the wind. On one hand he thought it was ridiculous, but on the other, the possibility of it made the hair prickle along his neck.

He looked toward the woods, wondering about the hooded creature the agent had told him about. Small in stature, always wearing a dirty, grimy hood. If she did exist, no doubt she was a colorful addition to the inn, bringing in tourists from far and near, all for a few additional bucks. He had to admire the stately magnolias that dotted the grounds, the lush foliage that thrived this late in the year, and a collection of statues placed here and there to lend the landscape appeal. His eyes fell on an angel with a harp, the breeze causing the strings that were actually wind chimes to tinkle sweetly in the moving current. He took a step to get to the path, then abruptly stopped and dug his hand into his pocket. Coming up with a handful of change, he fished out a penny. Looking around to make sure he wasn't being observed, he tossed it into the fountain. He felt an immediate embarrassment. What the hell was wrong with him? he wondered. First a Barney Fife impression, then this. Yeah, he was stressed out all right. Get a grip, Madison, he told himself, then turned toward the looming old mansion.

\* \* \* \*

The urchin at the edge of the wood stared. She'd never seen anything like the man climbing the stairs of the portico. His long hair blew wildly in the roguish wind from off the ocean, his frame was husky and muscled, and the shadow of his beard gave him a strong virile look. His teeth were strikingly white against his swarthy complexion, and he walked tall, with confidence. As soon as he

reached the door, she turned and ran like the wind. She had to get a better look at the dark-skinned god.

A welcoming warmth greeted him. He stood for a moment, looking at the distinct French motif. The foyer floor was a striking white and gold marble, the decorative wood, an ornate white and gold French Provincial. The wide staircase coiled like a snake from the upper landing, the bottom curling to face the doorway where he stood. His eyes were busy admiring the bold red carpeting that covered each step until his attention was snared by two large globes of light. The perimeters of the moon-shaped orbs were wide and impressive and their round poles stood at least seven feet. They spiraled high, giving light to the cavernous room in the absence of the chandelier that was rumored to have fallen long ago from the domed ceiling, sending several partygoers to their deaths. These tall, impressive lights that reminded him of street lamps stood wrapped inside the ornately carved balustrade that swirled into a circle around them at the foot of the stairs.

His eyes moved upward into the ceiling where the light fixture had hung, and saw shadows that seemed to dangle, dancing in the breeze like cobwebs. Strange that it hadn't been replaced, he thought, then brought his eyes down and looked at the white wrought iron that supported the balustrade as it swirled up the steps in a magnificent design. As his eyes shifted around the room, he noticed more of the lacy white, wrought iron in the form of an elevator that stood in the crook of the winding stairs, no doubt used by those who found the steps a problem. There were towering plants with tangled shadows that stretched across the floor, and a few screens of flower-decorated lattice that gave the formal look of the foyer a warmer feel. A vase of fresh flowers was placed on a table with a marble top that matched the foyer floor, and a lemony scent he knew to be the sweet aroma of magnolia blossoms wafted lightly on the air.

The final touch that brings the whole picture together, he thought. Very impressive. As the fragrant breeze blew against him, he knew the scent must be piped in through the ventilator system. Looking around, he saw two French doors leading into a plush dining room, also decorated in red and white, a comfortable library, a study, and what looked like a parlor being used as a gift shop. In spite of the sign outside that swirled the name of the inn in bold script, Shadoe had the distinct feeling he was entering someone's private home. Wondering where everyone was, he set his luggage down and lifted his voice into the emptiness.

"Anyone here?"

Receiving no answer, he walked up to the counter that occupied one side of the foyer wall and slammed his palm down on the silver bell, still getting no response. He turned his head when he heard a scuffling noise from behind a plant at the entrance to a shadowy corridor.

She knew he had seen her and she turned to run, but before she could get away, she heard his barking voice.

“You there!”

She abruptly stopped, but didn't turn because she was frozen with fear.

He walked over to her and turned her around with a tug on her shoulder. He gasped when he saw the mask.

She saw his revulsion and dropped her head. “I'm sorry, sir,” she whispered timidly, “My--s--someone will be with you shortly.” He quickly turned and ran down a long shadowy hallway toward the back of the mansion. Only the hollow sound of her running footsteps could be heard.

As soon as she was out of his sight, she leaned her back against a wall, breathing heavily. It was him, she thought. He had spoken to her, even touched her. And he was handsome ... so handsome! She had never seen anyone like him in person. Pictures in magazines ... sometimes TV ... that was as close as she'd come. But there, standing in front of her he'd been big as life, his beautiful green eyes holding her captive. And he'd had such a masculine smell. She closed her eyes and breathed deep. Just thinking of him was taking her breath away. But then suddenly she remembered the shock in his eyes, and her covered face crumpled in pain. She reached up and tugged at her mask, knowing she could never let him see her face. Thinking of what his reaction might be if he saw her, she emitted a sob and turned quickly and ran away.

\* \* \* \*

Shadoe was still peering down the hall when he heard a voice behind him, and whirled around. “I'm sorry, what was that?”

“I asked if I might help you.”

With an anxious stride, Shadoe hurried to the counter. “That ... that girl....”

“I'm sorry, sir, did she bother you?”

“No, I ... I was just wondering ... the mask....” He indicated to his face with his hand. “I've never seen anything like it, why....”

“Her face was mangled. It happened when she was an infant. An animal crawled into her cradle, and... well, we live so close to the woods.”

“But she looks like something out of the middle ages. There are doctors ... procedures....”

The woman smiled indulgently, but only with her eyes. “Please, sir, may I give you a room?”

His eyes darted around curiously, searching the shadows for the elusive creature, but saw nothing but an empty hallway. Turning back, he mumbled, “Yes, of course.” When he finally faced her, he saw her closely for the first time. The woman’s face was distressingly thin. Her lips were pinched and she had black eyes that were flat, hard and passionless. As if everything inside were dead. He didn’t want to just stand there and stare, so he began to speak. “It’s so late in the year I figured you wouldn’t have many guests, yet the parking area seems to be full. I haven’t come too late, have I?”

“No, we have a couple of vacancies left.”

He furtively watched as the woman attended to her duties with a cold, mechanical rhythm.

“Not everyone wants to swim in the ocean, you see.” Her lips turned upward in a smile, yet her eyes and voice were cold. “Many people come here simply to be near the ocean. To walk, smell the ocean breeze, see the sunrise. Many things.”

“Yes, I suppose,” Shadoe muttered, his curious eyes still on her. She spoke without feeling ... as if everything she said had been said a million times before. He couldn’t help wondering if the woman ever had an emotion that showed through those blank eyes. Her dark hair was pulled back in a neat chignon, and her dress was dark. It reminded Shadoe of a uniform with white cuffs and a collar that fit snug around her neck. Her face was so chiseled, it seemed a real smile would crack it. With an efficient air, she turned the register around to him and handed him a pen with a white plume. Her teeth seemed too big for her face and reminded him of dirty, chipped piano keys.

Ignoring the pen, he asked, “Are you the owner of the inn?”

“I ... well....” she began, rather surprised by the question, then continued. “It was owned by my father, Garret Van Dare, but he’s ... well, he’s ... dead, so I run things. My name is Lucretia Van Dare. If there’s anything you’d like....”

Shadoe frowned, noticing the hesitancy in her words. Maybe his death was recent, he thought, then asked, “Has it been long? Since the death of your father, I mean.”

“About--” her strong, smooth voice seemed to waver, and one nervous hand fluttered upward and smoothed her chignon, “--I think ... fifteen years now.”

“You must have been close.”

“Yes,” she said, trying to stay tolerant of the stranger’s persistence. Then taking a deep breath, she said, “I’m sorry, but....”

“Please forgive me, I didn’t mean to pry,” Shadoe said, looking at her suspiciously. Then he lifted his eyes and looked around. “Actually I’ve been by this old place many times, always meaning to stop in. I’m a photographer for a web-based operation, and would like to take some pictures if that’s okay.” Now, why in hell did I say that? he thought, then noticed her surprise. “You mentioned the woods earlier. I’m looking for streams, rocks, waterfalls. And just about now the leaves will be starting to turn.”

Lucretia’s impatience was growing, her smile becoming strained. “Of course. Just don’t do anything illegal.” She tried to smile, lifting the pen a little higher into his face.

“No, of course not.” Taking the ancient-looking writing instrument in his hands, he examined it curiously. He finally touched the sharply pointed quill to the surface, and nothing, not even the ticking of a tall grandfather’s clock, sounded over the eerie scratching of his signature on the paper. He looked down at the deep crimson ink and knew it must be in keeping with the name of the inn, but had the eerie feeling he was signing his name in someone’s blood.

She replaced the pen in an inkstand and smoothly turned the book around to read the name. “How long will you be with us Mr. Madison?”

“I’m not sure yet. I travel a lot, and the firm is paying for my trip, so I’m not in a hurry.”

She turned, reached for a key, and extended it to him. “I hope room twenty-four will be suitable. Second floor, toward the back.” She paused, her dead eyes raking across his handsome face. “Lots of trees, brooks, and rocks on that side of the inn ... but not one waterfall. Sorry.”

“No problem. Right now I’m a little more interested in the inn itself. What...?”

Anticipating his questions, she said, “The dining room is open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner... eight, twelve, and six... but you are free to order room service any time. All this is written on the menu in your room, and you have cable, maid service. We also have a Hall of History, gift shop....”

“Yes,” he said quickly, interrupting her flow of words, “the history of this place would be interesting. It looks as if it was one of those ... you know ... plantations at one time. Was it....”

“The Hall of History is that way,” she said, pointing down a nearby corridor. “It is....”

“Filled with pictures of dried-up old ancestors, I’ll bet,” he finished while smiling and leaning on the counter as if he were an old friend. “Is it haunted?” he continued, his voice calm, his gaze steady.

“The inn?” she said, his words coming as a shock.

“It’s just that I’ve heard some of these old mansions are haunted.” He shrugged. “You know, with someone’s grandmother, a Civil War hero, maybe a guest who refuses to leave ... that kind of thing.”

“It is not haunted,” she said, uttering each word carefully while clenching her teeth.

“Yeah? So how about the girl? Is she here to give the place color? The story you tell of an animal in her cradle ... oh man, whoever thought that one up is real sharp. And dressing her up in that mask and letting her dart in and out.” His laugh was forced, taunting. “What an idea. How much do you pay her to put on her little act?”

“Julita is my sister,” the woman said, barely able to contain her anger. “She is not here to lend color, this is her home. She spends her days entertaining herself as best she can. You have no reason to wonder about her, she’s nothing ... nobody....”

“Julita, huh? Interesting name for a scarred-up little nobody. Is she violent? Insane, maybe?”

“What are you insinuating, sir? That she’s dangerous? Nothing could be further from the truth. She’s shy, curls up in the rafters to sleep, and because of her disfigurement keeps herself hidden. Once in a while she helps out when we’re short-handed, but as a rule I don’t let her come in contact with the guests.”

“Only when it pays, right?”

She gasped at his boldness.

Shadoe knew he had made her angry and backed off. “Sorry,” he said, grabbing up his key. “They say that curiosity killed the....”

With a tilt of her lips and a narrowing of her eyes, Lucretia gave him a cold smile as she replied, “Yes, they do ... don’t they?”

Feeling a chill creep down his spine, he flippantly threw the key in the air, then caught it in a tight clasp. “Thanks,” he said, turning and grabbing his luggage, then hurrying up the steps. Halfway up he looked back and saw her looking at him with those dead eyes. He could have sworn he saw something there ... something alive ... something evil. Maybe that was why he’d done it. Maybe that was why he’d fired question after question at her until she cracked. To shake her. Maybe the captain was right, maybe he was cracking up. It was clear he’d been in too many interrogation rooms with too many killers with eyes just like hers. Well, he’d have to soft-pedal it from here on. He certainly didn’t want to be thought of as a nuisance and have the witch ordering him off the place.

Not now. Not when he wanted to know more about the Van Dare family ... and this picturesque old inn that was surrounded once a day by blood and bones.

### CHAPTER THREE

With an angry look on her face, Lucretia rushed from behind the counter and strode to the foot of the stairs. She grasped one of the white posts that supported a globe and scowled up into the dim hallway the stranger had disappeared through. Something moved, and she swung her head around and saw Julita's coarse mask, her violet eyes peering through its crude holes. The eyes of the two sisters met and locked.

"What are you doing out of the attic?"

"It's my birthday, I ... Lucretia, why can't I have ... I mean ... a birthday cake...."

"Why would we celebrate your birthday? Look at you," she scoffed. "You in your dingy little hood. Ugly, that's what you are with your hideous scars. I'm the beautiful one, do you understand? My face is smooth. Yours is ugly, mangled."

"I only wanted...."

"I don't care what you wanted. Get out of sight. Go to the kitchen and help out, the guests are beginning to stir. I can't have the sight of you ruining their breakfast." She turned abruptly and strode back to the counter.

Something intense and hot swirled inside Julita. She didn't know where these new feelings were coming from, but they felt like hot barbs pressing against her. She was tired of being pushed around by this tyrant, told what to do, where to go, as if she were still a child. She knew she should let it pass, but the feeling was too big, too powerful, and the words on the edge of her lips caused them to tremble. Her teeth snagged her bottom lip, trying to keep the words inside her, but the pressure continued to build, and before she knew what was happening her small quivering voice spoke, her anger fanning the flames in her eyes. "You can't tell me what to do... not anymore," Julita dared to say to Lucretia. "As ... as of today I ... I'm a woman ... I'm grown. I can do...."

Lucretia whirled around, her narrowed eyes finding Julita, and stabbing her with them. "You little piece of trash!" Lucretia hissed. "Don't you dare talk to me that way. Do as I say, or I'll turn the whip on you. Do you understand?"

Julita hesitated, wanting to say more, but she knew that Lucretia wouldn't hesitate to beat her within an inch of her life if she continued. It wasn't fair, she thought as she pressed her full lips together, then bit them when she felt another retort rolling forward. She swallowed the words and forced herself to quell the sullen anger that spread through her. Watching the witch at the desk, she slowly crept from behind an ornate statue that stood at the entrance to the library and ran toward the kitchen, out of Lucretia's hellish sight.

Lucretia's cold eyes followed the girl as she ran. Julita was just eighteen today, and she could see her body still developing at a rapid pace. She remembered the night she'd found Julita in bed doubled over with stomach cramps. It was only three months before her thirteenth birthday, and the sheet she lay on was covered with blood. She knew immediately what it was.

She'd fought to prevent it, wracking her brain to try and remember the old wives' tales she'd heard all her life. She gave her cold baths, then hot ones to stop the flow. Sometimes it worked, but only for a while. Taking her to a doctor was out of the question. She knew that he would say it was a natural occurrence, and tell her not to worry. Stupid doctor. He wouldn't understand, no one would. She wanted Julita to stay a child. She didn't want to have to deal with menstrual flow, bulging breasts and a body that came alive with young womanhood. Besides, with Julita's mask, she'd have to deal with questions, whispers, and disbelieving stares. She just couldn't handle it.

After that, every day was a new discovery. Swaying hips, curves, long legs. And overnight, it seemed, Julita's breasts developed to such a proportion that they had begun straining against the shapeless, tattered old dresses Lucretia made her wear. She had no choice but to bind Julita up as tight as she dared.

Day after day, she kept up the constant struggle to keep Julita's feminine charms hidden. Even though her stature was petite, her legs had grown long and extremely shapely, and even her hair had a glossy shine that glinted in the sun. It fell down her back, all the way to her rounded hips that swayed when she walked. Despite all her efforts to make her look plain, nature seemed determined to thwart her efforts by giving her a sensuous appeal that, if left unchecked, would draw the attention of every male in the place.

So far she'd managed to keep the girl in her control, but because of scenes just like the one only a moment ago, she lived in fear that one day Julita would rise up and rebel. She'd started Julita young, and along with learning what drugs to use on her, Lucretia had become an expert at mind play. Over the years she'd been able to bend Julita's will to her own, making her believe what she wanted her to believe. But this rebellion was something new, and Lucretia wasn't sure how to deal with it. So far she'd managed to keep her suppressed, but Lucretia knew that somewhere behind the mesmerized state Julita lived in, she was bright, and showed signs of being strong ... strong enough to one day escape Lucretia's control. If that day ever came, Lucretia would be forced to ... no. She wouldn't say it, she wouldn't even think it. It won't happen. It couldn't possibly happen! But if it did ... if the time ever came, could she do it? Could she ever kill her beloved Julita?

\* \* \* \*

The kitchen was overly warm and smelled of biscuits baking, bread toasting, coffee perking, omelets cooking in butter, and bacon sizzling on the grill. Efficient hands moved swiftly, the chef barked out orders while steam gathered, and hot grease splattered wildly. A buzzing sound joined the other noises, and one of the white-clad workers turned to the phone board. He quickly punched the

blinking button that had the room number inscribed on it, then grabbed the receiver off the hanger. "Room Service," he barked into the mouthpiece, then nodded his head. "Right away, sir." After hanging up, he turned and reached for a clean pot and began filling it with coffee. When he had everything positioned on the tray just right, he called Julita over. "Number twenty-four," he ordered, "on the double."

"Me?" she said, her eyes wide. "Where is Myra?"

"She's comin' in late today. You'll have to do a few deliveries until she gets here."

She lifted her violet eyes and gave him a pleading look. "I shouldn't do this," she whispered timidly, cowering slightly at the thought of her older sister. "Lucretia wouldn't like it."

"What the old bat don't know won't hurt her, right? Just knock and leave it outside his door. No big deal. Knock and run. What could be easier?"

"But I can't," she rasped, fear causing her to breathe harder, "she's at the front desk, she'll see me."

"Look over there," he said, indicating toward the rear of the kitchen. "See those back steps there? They lead up to the second floor. You don't even have to go through the foyer. Hell, that's what they're there for. Otherwise we'd be parading through the foyer day and night." He paused, casting her an irritated glance. "Get a move on, huh?"

She wrung her hands while her eyes darted around the room. She was hesitant, trying to make up her mind, but remembered that she did have explicit orders from Lucretia to help in the kitchen. It was still early, she reasoned, a lot of the guests wouldn't even be up yet. She didn't see how it would hurt to just take the tray up the back stairs, place it outside the door and leave. She wouldn't see anyone, so Lucretia would never know. "Well... okay," she finally said, her hands trembling as she took the clinking tray in her hands. She decided that she would just have to be extra careful, knowing how her sister felt about her coming in direct contact with the guests.

After climbing the narrow stairway, she turned down the corridor that would take her to room twenty-four. She was rushing along when she saw a couple at the end of the hall coming toward her. "Oh, no!" she breathed, then frantically turned her head, looking for a place to hide. She saw a room she knew was vacant and quickly set the tray down on a nearby table. Turning quickly she darted across the wide hallway, resembling a floating spirit.

"Willard, look! Did you see that? A ghost! My God, it was a ghost!"

“Kathryn, please, don’t start.”

“I know what I saw! A ghost just flitted across the corridor and disappeared into that room.” She rushed ahead of him and was about to grab the doorknob when the man caught her.

“Don’t go in there! Whatever it was, it’s gone now, and I’m starving for God’s sake. Let’s just hurry and get down to the dining room and eat our breakfast.”

“It went in there,” she whispered, pointing at the closed door. “Do you suppose....”

“Kathryn, please! You can’t go around chasing ghosts.”

“Willard,” she criticized, jerking out of his grasp. “You’re always trying to spoil my fun.”

“Honey, it’d be like trying to corner a puff of smoke. It’s impossible. Now, please, we’re late as it is.”

“All right,” she relented, then turned and looked up and down the corridor, “but isn’t this place delicious? I tell you, Willard, I really love it. You never know....”

Julita listened at the door, waiting for them to pass. Hearing their voices become garbled and far away, she knew they were finally gone and was about to open the door. She gave a start when she heard a voice behind her.

“Well, hello.”

She whirled around, seeing a man leaning leisurely against the bathroom door frame with his arms folded across his chest.

When he saw her mask, he pushed himself forward, a surprised look on his face. “You’re the little ragamuffin!”

She gasped, looking down at his disturbingly well proportioned legs that were exposed from beneath the brief blue silk robe. “I ... I ... uh ... di--I mean ... I...”

He could see her visibly trembling, and spoke softly. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.” Seeing an anxious look in her eyes, he moved slowly, and with an outstretched arm indicated toward

the center of his room. "Come in if you like, I'll..." He didn't know how to finish the sentence, so he just stood there gaping at her, as surprised to see her as she was to see him.

She'd never been this close to a man before, at least not one this handsome. He was awesome with his long dark hair, white teeth, and something green that glittered near his left eye. She could smell him ... even from here. It was a clean smell ... soap.

"It's the second time today, it seems," he said, interrupting her thoughts. "I have to admit though, that you gave me quite a jolt as well." Realizing he was insulting her appearance, he began to stammer. "I mean ... it ... well, it's not everyday a man runs into ... uh...." He looked at her sheepishly, knowing he would get himself in deeper and deeper no matter what he said.

She wasn't listening to him. Instead her large eyes searched his handsome face, noticing that he must have shaved because his beard was gone. His face was rugged, chiseled, revealing a masculine strength that scared her a little. And she was scared ... even though the strength in his face was softened by two dimples that deepened into lines when he smiled.

"I guess it doesn't matter," he said, watching her closely while she cringed against the door, afraid he would touch her. "My name is Shadoe Madison." When she didn't respond an awkward silence stretched between them. Finally he said, "And you are ... Julita ... uh ... Van Dare. Right?"

"Y-you know my name?" she whispered, placing her trembling hands on her mouth.

"I ... well ... your sister ... she ... it's a beautiful name, by the way." Get out of that damned corner, Shadoe thought, but instead he shrugged, and asked, "Why are you here? Did you need something?"

"R-room ... I was...." she answered disjointedly, then pointed down the hall. "Look ... looking for room twenty-four."

"Yes, that's this room."

She frowned. "No ... it's down...."

"Here, I'll show you," he said, passing her very carefully so as not to frighten her, then reached out to open the door. "See?" he said, indicating to the number. "Twenty-four right there on the door." When she didn't say anything, he thought maybe she was illiterate. "You can read," he asked softly, "can't you?"

She looked at him, feeling a twinge of anger overtake her. It was clear that he thought she was stupid. Suddenly her fear turned to the familiar stab of rebellion. "Yes, I can read," she spat, then turned and picked up his tray from the table in the hall, brought it in and set it down loudly on the credenza in the entryway.

"Oh yes, the coffee," he said, smiling.

"I thought...." she began, her voice faltering. Then lifting her trembling chin, she forced herself to try again. "I just ... I thought this room was empty."

"That's probably because I just arrived this morning." He looked at her for a moment, wondering why she was so frightened. "Are you all right?" he asked, reaching out to touch her. She recoiled, but he caught her hand. "You don't have to be frightened."

Seeing her hand in his, her eyes lifted and met his. Their green glow was breathtaking. She didn't know what a swoon felt like, but believed the weak feeling in her knees must be close. He was so big, she thought, and strong. He towered over her. What would it be like to ... she was ashamed of the pictures that were forming in her mind. "I have to go," she whispered, and began backing away, then turned and reached for the doorknob.

"Wait!"

She stopped dead still and turned around slowly. She kept her head lowered, her eyes angling up toward him suspiciously.

He reached over, picked a bill up off the dresser, and extended it toward her. "This is for you."

She stood looking at the bill as if she didn't know what it was. Then she looked up at him as if waiting for his permission to take it. When she saw him nod and smile, she reached out and snatched it out of his hand and quickly turned away. She looked at it, smelled it, then folded it gently.

He watched her curious behavior, then spoke. "It's customary to tip good service. I'm sure you know that."

She turned her head, cutting her eyes back at him suspiciously while pulling at the top of her dress to deposit the bill beneath the tight binding that Lucretia made her wear. To her surprise the binding snapped, and her breasts ballooned before the man's eyes. "Ohhh!" she screamed, holding her breasts as if they were going to fall out.

Shadoe's mouth and eyes widened in shock. "Oh, my God!" he cried, seeing the little girl in the shapeless dresses and dirty feet suddenly turn into a woman ... a full blown woman.

Julita stood in a crouch, folding her arms over her full breasts as if she were standing naked before him. With her eyes wide with fear, she turned and darted for the door.

"Please," Shadoe said, reaching out. "I wish you wouldn't go. Would you like some coffee?" he asked stupidly, looking at her mask and wondering what other things she may be hiding. "Can you drink through that thing?" he asked curiously, then reached out and took the edge. "Here, let's take it...."

"No!" she yelled, then turned, yanked the door open and darted through it.

He rushed to the door and saw the little urchin streak down the hall. "Nice going, Shadoe," he muttered, then slammed the door angrily, the sound echoing through the upstairs corridor. He paced for a while, raking his hands through his hair. A little girl with a flat-chest and dirty feet had suddenly turned into a woman. He understood the mask, but why in God's name was she wearing those dresses? For that matter what was she doing bound up like that? Was it true that she'd been mangled? How badly? he wondered. Maybe she could have something done ... an operation. He pictured her once again standing there with her breasts hanging out, and suddenly felt something hot and damp swirling in his groin. He was ashamed of his feelings, but one thought led to another, and a picture of her long, shapely legs caused a sweat to break out along his neck. Why hadn't he seen it before? Because I'm an idiot, he told himself. Finally he stalked to the dresser and combed his wet head. As he stared at himself in the mirror he couldn't get her out of his mind. He kept seeing the dingy little mask and those incredible violet eyes. Finally he threw down the comb and wandered over to the tray and poured himself some coffee. Whatever was under that mask surely couldn't be so bad. After all, what kind of monster would have eyes like that?

\* \* \* \*

Finding the familiar narrow steps that led to the attic in the tower, Julita bound up them loudly, stumbling in her haste until she reached the door. She burst in, quickly climbed into her bed and crunched up into a fetal position. She was visibly shaking, and pulling down on the mask as if afraid someone was going to tear it off. "I c-can't! I ... I can't! I'm ugly ... ugly!"

She stayed in her room all day, cringing in the corner of her bed. She didn't want to face Lucretia, because Lucretia would know she'd been bad. She didn't know how her sister found out, but she always did. Finally when the sun dipped low in the sky, and shadowy creatures filled up her room, she knew it wouldn't be long.

\* \* \* \*

That night when the last of the guests had retired to their rooms, Lucretia walked silently through the shadowy corridors, her anger seething, and her eyes shooting fire. When she finally came to the attic steps, she paused, looked up, then began to climb the narrow steps to Julita's door.

When Julita saw her, fear jumped inside her, causing her breath to become shallow. She watched Lucretia slowly pull a hypodermic needle from her pocket and hold it up threateningly. "You were in his room," she whispered.

Julita's frightened eyes quickly glanced down at the hypodermic and then back up at Lucretia. "No ... no, please," she whispered as she inched backward, fear etched on her face.

"Admit it," Lucretia said, reaching out and gripping her arm tightly, "you were in there, weren't you?"

"I ... it was a mistake. I th-thought the r-room was empty." She looked up at Lucretia's midnight eyes, and asked softly. "How ... how did you know?"

"Someone saw you," Lucretia hissed through clenched teeth. "And lucky for me she did. The stupid cow thought she was seeing a ghost. You're the reason this inn pays off so well. Did you know that? They see you and can't believe their eyes. I couldn't have planned it better. The legend, the tarnished, but deliciously evil reputation of the inn, and you. My little ghost."

Julita fought Lucretia's bruising grasp, and in the midst of the struggle a bill floated down in front of Lucretia's eyes. She looked at the bill, then up at Julita. "He gave you money?" Her face screwed up. "For what?" She looked down and saw Julita's breasts bouncing. "Where is your binding?"

"I don't ... I don't know," Julita sobbed, trying to pull her arm out of Lucretia's tight grasp.

"Did he remove your binding?" Lucretia yelled. "Who removed your binding?"

"No ... I don't know ... it just came off," Julita whimpered while struggling.

"Did you let him touch you?"

She twisted Julita's arm, and Julita let out a yelp of pain. Lucretia's lips thinned, and her voice became low and threatening. "Answer me, you little tramp! Did he touch you? Remove your mask?"

“Owww, you’re hurting me!” Julita yelled, struggling to free her arm.

Lucretia grabbed the mask and tore it from her face. “Answer me, you little whore. What did he say when he saw your face? Did he see the scars, the ugly, purple scars?”

“No ... I ran ... I came back h-here.”

“You’d better hope you’re telling me the truth, because I’ll find out if you’re not. Never let any man touch you, do you hear me? They’re pigs, Julita, dirty, rotten evil pigs that have only one thing on their minds.”

With a jerk, Lucretia cruelly pulled Julita’s arm forward and pressed the point of the wicked needle against her skin.

Julita flinched at the prick of the needle, then squeezed her eyes shut, refusing to look as the point of the needle became deeply buried in her flesh.

“Now listen to me, you little whore,” Lucretia hissed as the drug from the needle flowed into Julita’s arm. “If anyone wants to remove your mask, you kill them! Do you understand? Stab! Scratch! Bite! Anything to keep your mask from coming off. Is that clear?”

“Yessss,” Julita said breathlessly, then closed her eyes and whispered disjointedly, “Kill ... b-bi-bite. Scr--”

“Yes,” Lucretia answered softly, watching Julita as her lids began to get heavy. She jerked the needle out, knowing Julita was under her power once again and rasped in her ear. “You must never show your face,” she whispered. “If you do those that see you would be repulsed and run away terrorized! I am the only one who can see you,” she said, lifting her hand and stroking her cheeks and her hair.

While Julita’s lids continued to droop, Lucretia reached over to the dresser and picked up a brush. As she pulled the brush through Julita’s hair, Lucretia crooned to her until she once again brought it to a shining red-gold beauty, then put it up in dog ears and carefully tied it with two pink ribbons. “I don’t want you taking your hair down,” Lucretia said to the pink and golden docile child she saw before her.

“But I’m ... I’m too old....” Julita said, looking up at Lucretia through the drug-induced slits in her eyes.

“No!” she snarled. “You’re not too old ... you’ll never be too old.”

While Julita slowly succumbed to the power of the drug, Lucretia removed her dress and what was left of her binding and put on her baby dolls. It had taken a lot of yelling, a lot of beatings, and just the right amounts of drugs and medication to get Julita to this point, but now that she was here, it was worth it.

“Time to sleep now,” Lucretia whispered, then reached out and gently coaxed Julita from her bed and pulled her into her lap. She still marveled at Julita’s soft skin, and a curious kind of love swirled in her chest for the little ragamuffin she’d created. She couldn’t stand the thought of her growing up. She wanted to keep her small, young.

Like she was that night.

She could still see that dark room and Julita in her crib. She could still feel how badly she’d wanted to stroke her, take care of her, play with her, but her papa wouldn’t let her. “Well,” she whispered, an evil smile playing on her lips, “look at me now, Papa.” She gently fingered the pink ribbons in Julita’s hair, the short baby doll pajamas, and cute little dog ears. “She’s mine now, Papa. For fifteen years she’s been mine. I’ve taken care of her, played with her, and you haven’t been able to say one word about it.” Her voice became a low hiss. “You paid for keeping her from me, Papa, just like I said you would. But you didn’t believe me. Now you both depend on me. Yes, Papa, you depend on me. Ugly, hideous, Lucretia.”

Curling up in a fetal position in her sister’s lap, Julita closed her eyes and put her thumb in her mouth.

“Poor thing,” Lucretia crooned, “she’s played until she’s exhausted.”

After rocking her a little while longer, she at last managed to get her in her bed, then lovingly covered her. She laid her mask carefully beside her head so she would find it when she woke up, then reached over for the music box, turned it over, and twisted the key. The tinkling music began to play, and Lucretia was reminded of her father’s love for the beautiful blond pinup of the first world war, Betty Grable. When he bought the box, he’d had the gentle lullaby changed to a more appropriate tune. Lucretia listened as the tiny musical tinkle filled the room, and the strange words filled her head.

Pretty baby, pretty baby. Won’t you come and let me rock you in your cradle of love, and we’ll cuddle all the while. I will be your loving sister, brother, dad and mother too. Pretty baby of mine, all mine. Pretty baby of mine.

Before she left, Lucretia gently pulled the covers up over Julita, and surrounded the sensuous child/woman in soft, plush, colorful toys that she knew should only belong to an infant ... not a girl of eighteen.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Blood dripped from the sky. The friggin' sky actually bled! Shadoe thought as his dark silhouette stood on the beach bathed in a red glow from the crimson ball that shot bloody arrows into the sky. He sensed an eerie hush, and chills ran rampant along his arms. No seagulls, no chirping birds heading south, and no planes with their low, faraway drone. For only a few moments every morning, this portion of the coast was bathed in the most spectacular sight he'd ever seen. What caused it? he wondered. The legend about the warrior bleeding into the ocean was for mindless fools. But he did agree that this magnificent, surreal beauty had to be seen to be believed. What looked like blood instead of water washed upon the shore. He crouched down and ran his fingers through the sand. The grains were fine. If you didn't know it was sand, you'd think it was red sugar. He immersed one hand in the water that washed up, and when he withdrew it, the water left there was actually red. Whether from the sunrise, or not, it looked as if blood covered his hand. Just then, as if to punctuate his fear, he heard a high scream. His head jerked around, and he saw an incredible stand of giant bones, some lying down, some standing, some leaning against the wall of the precipice. He knew then what the sound had been ... the wind whistling through the chanter marks, lifting, then dying in a morbid tune of death. The sound continued, ending only when the sun began rising higher in the sky, causing the scarlet color to slowly pale and give way to a normal sunrise.

The sunrise over, Shadoe finally returned to his own thoughts. For two days he had watched for the little ragamuffin. It seemed to him that she was noticeably missing. He'd walked through the halls, around the grounds, and even considered going into parts of the inn he knew he wasn't allowed. But she was nowhere to be found. If he didn't see her soon ... darting in and out while going from one place to another, his concern would turn to worry. He could only imagine what that witch might do to her.

As he stood looking out at the crashing waves, he felt restless and didn't want to go in just yet. Glancing down at his watch, he knew there was still time before breakfast, so he looked over at the thick grove of trees, wondering if he would find her in there. He hesitated to go too far since the woods were unfamiliar territory to him, but it was the only place he hadn't looked.

With his camera slung over his neck, he started out, climbing the sandy slope until he spotted a narrow path that looked as if it led somewhere. He followed it, hoping at the very least it would lead to a beautiful area worthy of a snapshot, but the dense, overhanging branches and wild shrubbery were anything but photogenic. Thick vines snaked up the trees, then hung threateningly from the branches. He considered turning back, but didn't want to give up that easily, so he kept going, stumbling over rocks and exposed tree roots until he came to a clearing. Pulling back a thick cover of branches, he stopped dead in his tracks when he saw a dilapidated old church complete with a sagging steeple, broken front steps, shattered windows, rotting planks, and peeling paint. He walked forward very slowly, carefully dodging low-hanging tree limbs in his path. The unpainted wood was ashen, and the early morning mist gave the structure a spectral quality. He could hear the chilling call of birds that roosted in the treetops and the lonely, forlorn sound of a band of cicadas that hid in the lush vegetation.

Without thinking, he brought his camera up and began snapping pictures at different angles.

All at once through the camera lens he spotted something moving, a shadow, looking down at him from a high window. He brought the camera down quickly, but by then it had disappeared, if it had been there at all.

“Why didn’t I snap it?” he growled at himself. “Why in hell didn’t I snap it?”

He walked a little closer, hearing the crackle of dry leaves and twigs beneath his feet. When he came to the crude rail that gave weak support to anyone climbing the steps, he ran his hand along it lightly and felt a sharp pain. When he jerked his hand away quickly, he saw a tiny paint shard sticking out of his finger. Dislodging it, he brushed it away, then unthinkingly put the finger in his mouth, sucking the blood.

The mist seemed to thicken. It coiled around the roots of the trees and the base of the church, making it seem as if it were floating. He watched the mist move toward him slowly as if it were alive. Winding around his feet, it slithered up the legs of his trousers like a wet, slimy snake. He looked around, smelling death in the mist. Death, decay, and....

Ashes to ashes and dust to dust.

Why did those words seem emblazoned on his mind? Because there’s something dead inside, he thought, answering his own question. Slowly he began backing up from the church. He wanted to leave, had to leave. Just as he turned, he heard something rustling in the brush and looked toward the sound. He squinted into the foliage and saw a squirrel skittering up a tree. Feeling relieved, he began running toward the path he knew would take him back to the inn.

In his haste Shadoe had missed the crude mask that seemed to blend in with the rustic surroundings ... almost as if it belonged there.

\* \* \* \*

Shadoe slammed into the inn. He didn’t see anyone at the desk but hurried up to it anyway and pressed the silver bell while he leaned over the desk breathing heavily. Just then he heard a shuffling noise and looked toward a door where he saw Lucretia coming in from a back room.

She frowned at his disheveled condition. “Mr. Madison, are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m ... I’m fine. Been running, that’s all.”

“A man like you, I would’ve thought you were in better shape than that.”

“Well, it wasn’t just ... never mind.” He didn’t know how to tell her he’d been spooked, so he said, “I took some pictures today and was wondering where would be the best place to get them developed.”

“Right there in our gift shop,” she said, while mechanically attending to her duties. “Since many of our tourists take pictures, we have a provision for that. It may take a few days, but you can pick them up, or we can have the photos delivered to your room once they arrive. They can be charged to your room, or you can pay for them upon delivery. If you leave before they’re ready, just leave your name and address at the desk and we will have them mailed to your home.”

It sounded like a speech she gave every day of the week. Flat, without inflection, and boring. He was surprised when she looked up at him and asked, “Did you find your waterfall?”

“No....” He was going to say something else, then at the last moment changed his mind. “As a matter of fact I found a church.”

She looked up surprised. “A church?”

“Yes. In a clearing in the woods.”

She smiled indulgently. “You must be mistaken. There’s no church in those woods.”

“I ... no ... it wasn’t a ... well, it wasn’t a church like you might see on a corner in town. It was an old building. You know, broken steps, broken windows, badly in need of paint.”

“But that’s impossible.”

“Is that so?” He stuck his finger out. “What about this?”

She looked down at his finger, then up at him as if he were joking. “Your finger? What about it?”

“It’s bleed--” He looked down at his finger, and could see no puncture, or any blood. “Oh ... it must be the other....” But when he extended the other finger, there was no wound. With brusque movements he brought both hands up and looked at each finger, but the tiny cut wasn’t there. “I tell you there was a church out there, and when I touched the banister, I got a splinter.”

“Mr. Madison, think about what you’re saying. What would a church be doing in the woods?”

Shadoe felt a momentary anger spurred by her mocking words. Then he stopped, displayed one of his best smiles, and leaned against the desk comfortably. “I was hoping you could tell me.”

“I’m afraid not. I’ve never heard of such a church. Are you sure you weren’t ... well ... had you been drinking?”

Shadoe’s face took on a sudden hardness. “At this time of the morning? I don’t think so. Besides, I know what I saw.” He indicated to his camera. “In fact I’ve got pictures of it.”

“Impossible. You must have been hallucinating. I tell you there is no such church.”

“How much time do you spend in those woods?”

Lucretia lowered her eyes, recalling her nightly trips into the woods as a child, and her delight in torturing small animals. “Not since I was a child,” she said curtly. “But there was no church then, and there’s no church now.”

“Then how do you explain what I saw?”

“I don’t care to explain it,” she said, smiling coldly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have duties to attend to.”

Before she got away from him, Shadoe spoke up quickly. “What’s the reason for that elevator? Does anyone use it?”

“My father....” Lucretia purposely stopped her words, and her eyes stabbed his, clearly indicating she’d had enough. “Mr. Madison, since the first day you checked in, you’ve been asking questions that are clearly none of your business.”

“I’ve heard it running late at night.” He looked at her closely, watching her reaction. “You know, when everyone is supposed to be asleep? I’ve heard voices. Crying, scolding ... even threatening. Either that was you and your sister, or this place is haunted.” He looked around. “Where is the little ragamuffin?”

“The what?”

“The ragamuffin. You know, the girl in the mask. I want to see her ... talk to her.”

“How dare you make such a request. My sister is not at your disposal, Mr. Madison. You pay for a room, a bed, and meals, but that is all! My sister is not on that list.” Her hands moved to grasp the edge of the counter as if she were about to jump over it. “By the way I know about the little incident in your room the other day. Let me warn you now, Mr. Madison, you lay one hand on my sister, and I’ll....”

He looked at her, waiting for the rest of the warning. “You’ll what?” When she didn’t answer, he answered for her. “Spit in my face ... throw me out ... kill me? Is that it, Ms. Van Dare? You want to kill me?”

“You are trying my patience, sir.”

Shadoe couldn’t seem to stop. “What’s in the basement? She has to be somewhere. Is she tied up down there?”

When Lucretia heard him refer to the basement, she stiffened. “What a ridiculous thing to say.”

Shadoe saw her reaction. “Maybe I’ll check it out.”

Lucretia’s burning eyes flared at him. “You’ll do no such thing. The basement is off limits to the guests. You have no reason to be down there.”

“Yeah? What’s down there?”

“Filled wine racks mostly. We use it as a storage area for unused furniture, old guest rosters, bro-broken things....” She hesitated when she got a vivid flash of the broken body of her father lying on the ground when she was only fourteen. “Yes ... broken things,” she said softly, her glassy eyes returning to him. “I don’t know why I’m telling you any of this. It’s certainly none of your business.”

“Do you have an attic?”

Her fiery anger exploded and spread through her. “Don’t you dare go near the attic. If I catch you snooping anywhere in this inn, I will have your physically removed. Is that clear, Mr. Madison?”

There it was, Shadoe thought, the stopping point. He knew it would come if he asked too

many questions. Time to shut his mouth and find out anything he wanted to know on his own.

“You don’t have anything to hide, do you?”

As soon as he’d said it, he was sorry. Why couldn’t he stop his mouth? There was no doubt he had fallen into some kind of vipers nest, but had to be sure he wasn’t seeing something that wasn’t there. Had he been an undercover cop too long? Did he see smoke where there was no fire? He knew only one thing, there was no way he could stop now, no way in hell!

He saw Lucretia grab a thick pad, pull a drawer open, and thumb through a file. When she found the one she was looking for, she pulled it open and picked out a fistful of receipts. Without saying anything, one by one she began to itemize them on the bill. Shadoe realized at once what she was doing and closed his hands over hers. She stopped writing and looked up at him.

“I’m sorry. I was out of line. Sometimes my mouth gets in overdrive and I can’t stop it.”

“You’ll be happier at another inn, Mr. Madison, I must insist....”

“Ms. Van Dare,” he said, lowering his voice, “are you willing to take the chance that I won’t ruin the reputation of this inn?” He saw something glitter in her dark eyes, and heard her sharp intake of air. Good, he thought, he got her attention. “A lot of people know about your incredible sunrise, but most come here because of the legend ... the stories they’ve heard. They say several big stars stayed here in their day.” He chuckled. “After all who could stay away from a place that Marilyn Monroe haunts, or see the suite that she occupied?” His sharp eyes pierced hers. “It is all true isn’t it? None of it fake or made-up to attract guests?” He cast her a knowing look before blurting out the next lie. “The truth is, I’m a reporter doing a story on this inn, that’s why I ask so many questions.” My God, he thought, how easily a lie flows from my lips. Can’t I tell the truth... ever? “Now, my pen can either make you or break you. If you send me away, I can’t say that my--” he paused, speaking the next three words clearly and pointedly, “--front page article will be complimentary. In fact it might be downright destructive.”

She hesitated, a look of dread spreading across her face. “It’s all true,” she insisted, defending the inn. “In its day this inn was magnificent!”

“Don’t you understand?” he said, his eyes becoming as hard and passionless as hers. “It doesn’t matter if it’s true or not, I can write anything I want. People will believe me.”

Lucretia struggled. She didn’t know what to do. She couldn’t afford for the inn to get bad publicity. For years the sunrise, the legend, even the stories of their celebrated guests, brought people here. But now the inn was getting a questionable reputation. Too many murders, suicides, accidents. She only did what was necessary to protect the inn. But after a while a pall began to hang over the inn.

Some regular guests didn't come back, others only came to see the inn whose reputation had become as bloody as the sunrise.

Her eyes stole up into the domed ceiling. It was a party. The inn was celebrating a New Year's Eve party. Suddenly, for no reason, the chandelier fell and crushed several people. The blood, the screams, the horror, was awful. At the time she thought it would ruin her, but it hadn't. It had simply been added to the stories that circulated. Back then no one really believed those stories anyway. It was like a scary movie to them. Fabricated for their benefit. But through the years ... funny how things change.

She looked at him closely, wondering if she should even care. Still, this wouldn't be the same as a hysterical guest. This man was a reporter, a professional. He could reach a lot of people with his column. Just to be sure, she snapped, "What paper do you work for?"

Without missing a beat, he answered saying, "The New York Clarion." There was no such paper, but what did she know?

"Well," she began, her anger cowed in the face of possible bankruptcy. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

"A reporter can't reveal his true identity. Whenever someone finds out who I am they start acting funny and I can't get a true picture of the situation. That's why the lies about my being a photographer for a web-based operation. I hope you'll forgive me."

"I suppose I can give you one more chance," she said, her suspicious eyes sliding up to his. "I'll answer your questions on one condition, Mr. Madison."

"Oh?" he said, looking at her with his eyebrows raised inquiringly.

"That you leave my sister out of this, and don't go wandering around the inn unescorted." A few seconds of silence stretched between them. Then her voice dripped with venom as it dropped an octave. "Bad things could happen to you."

Shadoe was silent, wondering what that remark had meant. The sister? Is she homicidal? Crazy? Dangerous? "Agreed," he finally replied, then removed his hands from hers. He breathed a sigh of relief when she hadn't asked for his press ID.

Good thing, he thought. The only thing I have is a badge, a gun ... and apparently a death wish.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Lucretia's scrawny silhouette made a sinister picture as she carefully descended down a set of twisted concrete steps that led deep into the bowels of the mansion. Her leather-soled shoes echoed an ominous scraping sound, and her thin, spidery fingers carefully grasped the creaking banister. She made little progress as she moved, the twisting steps leading her into a deep darkness where she could feel cobwebs tickling her face, but could see nothing. She brushed them away as best she could, but the closer she came to the bottom the more she felt the dampness, and smelled the stench of wet dirt and mold.

The old man looked up, watery blue eyes looking out of a face lined with age, and hate. Once he'd been handsome, his eyes full of purpose and his heart full of plans while looking toward the future. But today his eyes were as dead and cold as the bricks in the basement wall. His once strong young body had become as thin as a scarecrow, and his hair that was once dark and curly was now mostly gray, and looked oddly misshapen, as if he'd taken something sharp and tried to cut it as best he could. He sat day after day in a wheelchair, never seeing the sun, or feeling a gentle breeze. He was dead ... and had been for fifteen years.

His eyes shifted when he heard a shuffling sound, knowing who would be showing up at the door at any minute. If only she'd trip and fall, he thought. If only she'd crack her ugly skull wide open, I'd jump up out of this chair and rejoice. With his loathing eyes fixed on the door, he saw it slowly open and his oldest daughter walk in.

He chilled as her blank, soul-less eyes looked down her ugly nose at him. She looked like a walking corpse. Her face had a cadaver's thinness to it, and her eyes were dark and haunting. Her crisp dress, smooth chignon, and cold, imperial bearing looked misplaced in the midst of the deterioration of the basement. Her dark blue dress with white collar and cuff seemed to be starched stiff, but maybe it was just the stiffness of her spine that made it seem so. Her thick heels were black, and her hose were dark. Lucretia was only thirty-two, but she had the looks and demeanor of an old woman. She reminded him of an old-maid school teacher ... a strict governess ... someone so prim and proper that sex, and men were taboo. The old man knew what a struggle Lucretia had once had with her sexuality, and constantly having the golden loveliness of Julita around day after day hadn't been easy for her. Seeing the ugly truth everyday in the mirror left her only one choice. She naturally put up a defense, conveying a message in her dress and attitude that she didn't need men ... didn't want them.

"What are you looking at you old bastard? Why I go to the trouble to feed you, I'll never know."

"Because you love me, Lucretia," he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "You love your old papa, don't you dear?"

"Don't be sarcastic. I hate your guts, and you know it. If I had any sense I'd bury you in the ground instead of in this basement."

That's your problem, you ugly nitwit. You don't have any sense, and never did, he thought, looking at her through nail-sharp eyes. "What did you bring me tonight, darling?" he questioned, his voice sugary sweet.

"Soup," she hissed, "laced with arsenic."

"What a culinary delight," he answered. Then his sarcastic smile dropped along with his tone of voice. "Death would be preferable to looking at you three times a day. Don't you know you ruin my appetite?"

"Good. Maybe you'll die of starvation, and save me the trouble of killing you."

"If you haven't killed me by now, I doubt you will." His eyes stabbed at her like freezing shards of ice. "What's the matter, you skinny little imp? Afraid I'll come back and haunt you?" His hate overflowed with the sight of her. "Believe me, I would ... legs and all ... and give you a taste of hell you'd never forget."

"I want you to live, you old cripple. I want you to live with the fact that your precious little Julita is mine now! And she has been, ever since that night. And you can't do a fucking thing about it."

"Fine language for...."

"Do you want to know what your precious little daughter has been up to? She was up in a man's room the other day, letting him touch her ... feel her."

"That's a lie, and you know it. She barely knows what a man is, much less how he's built." Several seconds passed while he eyed her hatefully. "But you know, don't you, Lucretia? Do you long for a man's touch? Do you imagine what it would be like? Well dream on, you walking pile of bones, because no man would touch you. You'll probably live to be the world's oldest virgin."

"Who the hell I fuck isn't, and never will be, any business of yours."

"You fuck yourself, Lucretia, because you can't find any man that'll do it for you."

While standing in front of the dumbwaiter, she snatched a knife off of the tray and waved it at him. "One more word, you filthy bastard ... just one ... and I'll slice you up like Sunday's chicken."

“Am I supposed to be afraid? If it weren’t for me and Julita, who would you torture? You’d have to go back out to the woods and hunt down your prey, wouldn’t you?” His eyes narrowed on her, and his voice became ominous. “Or have you graduated to bigger things now? Funny how the guests seem to check in, but don’t check out. Right, you sickening beanpole?”

She cut him with her cold, sharp eyes, then banged the tray down on a mobile table and pushed it across the floor to where he was sitting. “I should have you committed, old man. You’re beginning to hallucinate ... growing cynical ... imagining things.”

“Ever wonder how I know so much?” he said, ignoring her threat. He turned his head around and his eyes slid up to a ventilator system that had a screen dangling from it. “Through there,” he said, then turned his old, scrunched-up eyes back at her.

She looked up at the spidery, web-encrusted square of metal.

“You think the only thing that comes out of there is heat and cold, and that sickening perfume you pour into it? No, my dear. I hear moans, squeaking springs....”

The color drained from Lucretia’s face. “No ... I ... it’s the other rooms you’re hearing, not ... not mine.”

“You think I don’t know your voice? I even hear the tinkle of that little music box I bought for Julita when she was still an infant.” All at once his weathered face took on an injured look, and his jaw worked with anger. “I never thought that song....” A sob caught in his throat as he tried to get the words out. “You’ve even desecrated my memories of....”

“Oh grow up, Papa,” Lucretia snorted. “The woman’s been dead and gone for years. She wasn’t even part of your generation.”

“You dirty, sloppy bitch, I....”

“You’ll what? You can’t do anything, you bastard!” She tapped her bony chest with her finger. “I own you now, and I decide what happens to you.” With that remark she turned to go. As she was walking away, she felt the tray and everything on it crash into her.

She turned, fury engulfing her. “Look what you’ve done! Tomato soup all over me! If you think I’m going back upstairs and get you anything else to eat, you’re crazy! You can starve, old man!”

“So what? You give me just enough food to barely keep me alive. If I had decent meals, I

might gain the strength to fight back. Isn't that it, Lucretia? What are you doing to Julita to keep her under your control, huh? Well, it won't last forever, you filthy bag of bones. Some...."

"How do you know that Julita is still alive? You never see her, hear her. Maybe I've been lying to you. Maybe I got rid of her just like I'll get rid of you someday, old man."

He felt as if she had hit him in the gut. "Oh, God," he sobbed. "You didn't. Tell me you didn't, Lucretia. You wouldn't ... just because she was beautiful, you...."

Lucretia turned and hurried toward the door. "Oh, go to hell!"

"I'm already there!" he yelled, his last words reverberating through the dark passageway as she shuffled toward the stairs.

His anger was still seething as he sat looking at the closed door, hearing the scrape of her footsteps on the concrete. He remembered when he and his wife first married. They were so happy, he didn't think anything could ever ruin it. The both of them were part of the jet set, the beautiful people. They had a fine mansion that sat at the edge of Scarlet Bay, a spot that was populated by rich Southerners and their property was prime. His wife was exquisite, and he was a handsome devil himself. They had money, took trips around the world, ending their jaunt on the Riviera every year.

And then everything went wrong.

When Greta told him she was pregnant, he was overjoyed at first. But it only lasted until he first set eyes on Lucretia. She was dark, and underweight for her age, and as much as he hated to admit it ... ugly. As she grew, her less-than-lovely looks, and less-than-lovely personality didn't improve, so he gave up. What was the use? He couldn't find anything redeemable about her. As all children do, she developed a love for small animals, but in Lucretia's case, it wasn't to pet them and love them, but to torture and kill them. By that time, he knew something was very wrong with her. He had intended to get her help when she grew older, but by then it was too late. Her dementia was in her eyes, her speech, her actions.

It was about then that he began to look at Greta differently. He couldn't help it. She was beginning to look haggard ... old. They made love less and less, Garret making the excuse that their frequent travels and whirlwind lifestyle was tiring him. He knew they were slipping away from each other, but once again she found herself pregnant. The doctor had told her it would be difficult to have another child at her age, and Garret had begged her to abort it, but she refused, saying she would be able to get through it fine.

And then something happened, an accident, and Greta began bleeding. She was in such intense pain. She struggled, cried, pleaded for him to get someone to help, but it was too late, the child

was coming. Ignoring her pleading, he opened her legs and the child literally fell into his hands. He remembered the feeling of joy he experienced when he saw the child for the first time, all pink and golden. She was a beauty. He looked and saw Greta straining forward, her hair stringy, and her body all used up, and felt repulsed. Ignoring her, he cleaned the child and found a nurse for her. Greta died within minutes, her last words berating him for keep her daughter away from her. Feeling alone and lost, his beautiful Julita became all the more important to him and he became overly protective.

Knowing Lucretia's love for small things he was haunted by nightmare images of Lucretia torturing Julita and maybe killing her. It was slowly driving him crazy. He hired and fired nurse after nurse, trying to keep Julita safe. Everyone thought he was being overly cautious, no one but him knowing what Lucretia was capable of. He went through many a sleepless night before he finally realized he couldn't keep up such a pace, so he made a decision. He would send Lucretia away. He knew it was the only way he could protect Julita, and he would have protected her with his life.

And then came the god-awful night before she was to leave. He found Lucretia in Julita's nursery standing over her cradle with blood on her hands. He entered the room in a rage. He ran at Lucretia, and would have killed her but somehow he tripped and fell off the balcony, his back twisting around the limb of a magnolia tree. He found out later that the blood on her hands had gotten there when she reached into crib and scratched insanely at Julita's face as if trying to scrape away the beauty.

Protecting Julita had cost him much more than his life, because that night ... that horrible, fateful night ... both he and Julita began a season in hell. They both fell into the hands of the insane, cackling sister that passed for a human being.

\* \* \* \*

Later on that night, Shadoe tossed and turned. When he got so tired of the bed, he couldn't stay in it another minute, he finally got up and lit a cigarette. He paced, looking out windows, and watching the clock. The damned night would never end, he thought. He looked around for something to read, but there wasn't anything, not even a magazine. He thought of the library and all the books he'd seen on the shelves, but knew it was restricted after certain hours. The door would most likely be closed and locked, but he decided to find out. He slipped into his jeans and a shirt without bothering to button it. He quietly stepped out of his room and walked quietly to the stairway and descended the steps. When he got down to the foyer, his eye caught movement down by the Hall of History. He quickly crossed to the opposite wall, losing himself in a shadow. The room didn't have a door, only an arched entrance, so he knew it wouldn't be closed off. Being careful not to make any noise, he crept quietly down the short corridor, then turned to go inside. As he expected, it was a long room with portraits of grim-looking ancestors hanging on the walls. Each of the portraits had a small light from the ceiling trained on them, and except for the glass cases that had light illuminating them from inside, the rest of the room was draped in shadows. The glass cases were lined against the walls and were filled with memorabilia such as old registries, letters, a chipped china cup with Marilyn Monroe's lip print on it, and silverware that had dated back before the Civil War. Photographs were fanned out, pictures of the Van Dare family, and brochures telling the history of the inn.

He heard something and whirled around. His eyes tried to penetrate the shadows, but he saw nothing. His eyes darted around the room and detected movement from out of the corner of his eye. He quickly turned his head and found the little ragamuffin hiding in a corner beneath one of the glass cases.

She looked up at him, his towering presence breathtaking. Why wasn't she afraid? Why didn't she turn and run? So many new sensations had become a part of her, and now a brazen boldness. Her stare was shameless as she gaped at the glittering jewel below his eye, then slid her eyes along his broad, hairy chest to the tight jeans he wore. She felt a stirring ... a burning sensation coiled forbiddingly in her groin. "You are a flashy beast, aren't you?" she whispered.

"What?" he said, not sure he heard her right. When she didn't respond, he asked again. "What was that you called me?"

A sudden fear filled her up. "I ... I d-don't remember," she said, her tiny voice trembling now. She moved to get up, but his voice stopped her.

"What in hell are you doing in here? It's...." He glanced down at his watch. "It's pastmidnight."

"I don't ... get out much ... mostly at night."

He could see she was so scared she could hardly speak, so he crouched down and crawled under the glass case with her.

When she saw him come near, she began backing away.

"No ... no, please don't go. I'd like to talk to you." He noticed her eyes raking over him, and followed her fingers as they hesitantly reached out and grasped a portion of his hair and looked at it closely. Fingering it as if it were a foreign substance, she then allowed the blue-black thickness to twine between her fingers. He smiled. "It's only hair ... just like yours," he said.

She reached for her own golden strand, then compared themidnightcolor of his with the shimmering red-gold of hers.

While she looked intently the difference in the two colors, he said, "What did you expect to find?"

Not answering, her glowing violet eyes moved upward to his face and across to the jewel that

seemed to match the green fire she saw in his eyes. Like a blind person, her delicate fingers stroked his face, touched the jewel, then came down and lingered on his full lips.

He reached up and took her hands and kissed them.

Her eyes shifted, met his and locked.

“A flashy beast, am I?” he said, smiling. “Is that good?”

Feeling tongue-tied in the presence of such masculine beauty, she dared not speak, letting her eyes speak for her.

“Talk to me, Julita, won’t you?”

“I’ve never seen anyone so....” She hesitated.

“So ... what?” he whispered, urging her on.

“So--” She flushed, becoming red-cheeked, “--so beautiful.”

“Neither have I,” he said, looking into her eyes, then shifting them down to her crude mask.

Her eyes widened, and her hands went up to her mask. “But I ... I’m not....”

“Let me see if you are. Take off the mask.”

“Oh, no!” she rasped, her eyes darting around as if looking for a way of escape.

Before she knew what was happening, Shadoe reached out and snatched it off. She gasped, her hands flew up to grab it, but it was gone. Suddenly she heard Lucretia’s voice inside her head.

If anyone wants to remove your mask, you kill them! Do you understand? Stab! Scratch! Bite!

Shadoe saw her eyes cloud over just before she lunged at him, her hands forming claws, and her teeth bared as if to take a bite out of him. He caught her just before her nails sank into his flesh, beginning a struggle that ended with his hand cradling the back of her head and crushing her lips in a

fiery kiss. After a few seconds, the struggle died away and she began melting in his arms. Finally Shadoe pulled back and opened his eyes. What he saw made him gasp. It looked as if someone had taken a marker and drawn scratches on her face, disfiguring it with blue, purple, and red ink. It could have only been done by a crazy person, Shadoe thought, hesitantly touching the macabre sketch made to look like heinous scars on a beautiful face.

His touch opened her eyes. Suddenly she remembered, and quickly pulled away, slinking back into a shadow. From out of the darkness, Shadoe could see the glow of her innocent violet eyes staring fearfully at him.

Shadoe looked at her, speechless. "My God, why?" he whispered, frowning at her in disbelief.

"Why ... I don't ... understand."

"Why, Julita? Why did you do this to yourself?"

Tears pooled in her eyes. "What ... I don't know what you mean. Do what?"

Shadoe could see the tears gathering, and knew she had no idea what he was talking about. Someone else had done this to Julita ... someone who was completely insane.

She reached up and touched her face lightly. It felt so strange ... to be without her mask. She felt naked without it ... and to have someone see her without it was torture. Especially him, she thought, then peered at him from within her darkness. "I'm sorry ... I know I'm...." Without finishing, she grabbed the mask and started to put it on, but Shadoe caught her arm.

"Don't," he said, then asked, "How old are you, Julita?"

"E-eight--" she swallowed, "--teen," she managed.

"Who told you about your scars?"

"Lucretia ... she told me. The animal ... when I was a baby. He got in my cradle. She explained it all to me."

He reached out and pulled her toward him, and lay her head against his chest. "If I told you that you were beautiful, would you believe me?"

She pulled away and looked up at him. “B-but....”

“I know. Maybe now’s not the time, but someday I’ll show you just how beautiful you are.” He looked down at her. “Would you like that?”

She smiled, her eyes dipped to look at his lips, then nodded. “Will you ... will you do that ... again?”

He smiled a slow, lopsided smile, then cradled her smooth cheek in his hand and covered her lips with his.

After only a few seconds she pulled back, and said, “Teach me ... please?”

“What ... to kiss? Julita, anyone knows how to kiss.”

“Do they know how to make love too?”

The smile dropped from Shadoe’s face, and he gulped. “T-to m-make love?” Now he was the stutterer. “W-well, first....” He looked down at her full lips, and could feel his tongue thrust forward naturally, in anticipation.

“Is it hard to learn?”

“It ... it’s actually not something you learn ... I mean ... not like....” Oh, God, how had he gotten himself into this mess? She was a tempting little thing, but he knew he couldn’t take advantage of her innocence. A few kisses, a little....

“What do we do first?” she asked, jerking him out of his moral dilemma.

“Well ... first, open your mouth,” he whispered, watching while the sexiest lips he’d ever seen opened at his command. “Now,” he continued, “when I....” All at once he felt her jutting breasts push against him as her arms came stealing up around his neck. “Oh God, Julita,” he moaned, “I don’t think you’re going to need much teaching.”

## CHAPTER SIX

Shadoe stood at his door saying good night to Julita. Something was very definitely happening to him, and he seemed powerless to stop it. In the short time he'd come to know her, a curious possessiveness had filled him, and he'd been dreading the moment he would have to leave the inn. Her cloud of red-gold hair, the innocence of her violet eyes, the mask, and the macabre drawings on her face made her a mystery to him. What was her story? What would he find once he had looked under every stone, opened every closet, exposed every shadow? He was afraid to find out. Was Lucretia protecting her? She seemed to become volatile at the mention of Julita's name. Was she an innocent little lunatic who knew nothing about life or love, and sat around drawing lines on her own face? Or maybe she was a slick little con artist who knew exactly what she was doing. But why? To what end? To give the inn a reputation? To sell her body? It was possible, but hard for him to believe. Her innocence was real, the look in her eyes, her jerking words. If she was guilty of anything, it was only of putting on a show for her guests. But what about the rest? Was she also a tempting little piece who pulled the men into her little web of seduction, then stashed the money away for her future? And was he next on her list? If so, she was one fine little actress.

But what if it wasn't any of that? He'd seen the sister ... her cold, dark eyes, her chilling, gravelike manner, her sinister appearance. She was a woman with some deep, well-kept secrets. What if Julita was one of them? Was some kind of obsession at work here? If so, whose obsession was it? Hers ... or Julita's? But what if Julita was trapped, held captive, a victim. He couldn't leave her here ... locked in her own torment. He had to free her ... free the little ragamuffin who looked at him as if he were a god. But what about after that? What would be left? Love? That was ridiculous. She was only eighteen to his thirty-two. And yet he felt something with her he had never felt with any other woman.

Now he kissed the top of her head as he would a child, and she looked up at him. "You go directly to your room, okay? You need to get some sleep. We both do."

"Can't I come in with you?" she pleaded.

Shadoe hesitated. It would be so easy. And God how he wanted her with him. To feel her soft, sweet body writhing beneath him, her long, curvaceous legs wrapped around him. But it wasn't right. If she was an innocent, he couldn't take advantage of that innocence. He gazed down at the ugly marks drawn on her face to look like scars and wanted to take her inside and wash it clean and love her all night long. But he couldn't. "No, Julita," he whispered, every word piercing his heart. "Not now. Another time maybe, but right now I have to think ... figure some things out. Do you understand?"

"Lucretia wouldn't know," she breathed, "I wouldn't tell."

Oh, God, why is this so hard? he asked himself, and looked at her. "I know you wouldn't, but that's not the issue. I have to make sure it's ... make sure of a few things."

She dropped her lashes quickly to hide her hurt.

“Julita, baby, I don’t want to hurt you, but we need to give this a little time. Right now you need to go back to your room and get some sleep. It’ll be dawn soon.”

“If you say so, but when will we see each other again?”

“Whenever I can manage it. Lucretia has given me strict orders to stay away from you, and if she suspects anything she’d kick me out.”

“No!” she hissed. “You can’t leave ... I’d die!” All at once she put her arms around him and began kissing his chest.

Shadoc closed his eyes, feeling his arousal growing by the second. “Julita, please,” he moaned, “I can’t take much more of this.” He clutched her shoulders firmly and pushed her away from him. “Good night,” he rasped, hating the words.

She stared at him, not saying anything, then finally turned away. She walked hesitantly down the corridor, turning once to see him watching her. All at once, as if some ungodly fear had rose up in her, she pulled her mask down over her head and began running, flitting through the shadowy corridor like a ghost.

Shadoc just had time to take his clothes off before stumbling into bed. He immediately fell into an exhausted sleep. He slept like the dead until hours later, deep into the night, he began tossing and turning, hearing a voice from far away.

Shadooooe, cooome to the chuuurch! Danger is neeeear! Coooome to meeee. Pleeease come to me noooow!

Shadoc lunged forward, dripping with sweat, the faraway voice swirling around in his head. He put his palms up to his ears, but it continued reverberating against his skull, forlorn, desolate, and forsaken. His fingers dug into his scalp trying to lock it out, but he could still hear the sobbing, whimpering, distressed words that came at him again and again like arrows piercing his brain.

It was the old church. Someone was in there, he knew it. It was a woman. He had seen her that first day when she gazed down at him from the tower. Elusive, mysterious. And now she was calling out to him.

Slowly the voice became dim, sounding far away in the back of his mind like a sad memory. He tried to go back to sleep, convince himself it was just a bad dream, a nightmare. But he tossed and turned, the seconds turning into minutes, the minutes turning to time wasted as an urgency filled him to get out of bed and retrace his steps. He envisioned every step he'd taken through that dark, dense jungle. The slapping tree limbs, the splashing sound the water made when his feet plunged into the creek. The skittering animals.

It all seemed to be carved into his memory.

He looked at the clock. Almost four. The woods would be dark. It would be suicide to go now, down a dark, reclusive path he had found only once. Lucretia had insisted that the church didn't exist. Right now he was willing to believe that. He was willing to believe that he'd been hallucinating. After all, why shouldn't he? It made no sense that a church would sit alone, hidden in a rustic setting.

"This is insane," he muttered, realizing he was actually considering fighting his way through that thick tangle of brush at this time of the morning. He kept telling himself that it didn't make sense. But then nothing had since he'd been here. And it didn't make sense that he was lying here when something was hellishly wrong in this inn. He knew that whoever was in that church, dead or alive, was connected to this whole thing somehow. He had to find out how.

Without wasting another minute he pushed himself up off the bed, grabbed his trousers and shirt, and pulled them on. Hopping around on one foot, he struggled to put his shoes on with one hand while he grabbed his jacket with the other. Finally, with his shirt hanging open and his shoes untied, he pulled the door open and darted through it.

Small bulbs, flickering through ornate, flowery globes, lit the hallway, creating shadow monsters that looked surprisingly like the ones that had populated his dreams as a kid, but he moved on. His long-legged stride took him to the landing where fear slapped him against a wall with the sudden striking of the old grandfather clock in the foyer. He felt a cold sweat rise along his neck and forehead as he stood there.

He stayed completely still, his breathing heavy, and his throat closing with fear. God, what was wrong with him? In his time he'd seen bullets whiz all around him. Big city neon glittering on cold blades that sliced the air dangerously close to him. He'd chased hard-core criminals down dark winding streets, fought with monstrous convicts who towered over him like giants. Even hung from tall buildings on a string, ran through dark alleyways, and fought to the death with crazed maniacs high on drugs, but he couldn't remember a time he'd ever been this scared.

At last the sound stopped and he pushed himself away from the wall. Poised at the head of the stairs he looked around for a moment, but didn't see or hear anything. When he had walked down only three steps he heard movement. The chill moonlight coming through floor-to-ceiling windows cast a

looming grotesque shadow on the lofty wall of the foyer, yet he couldn't tell what it was. As the shadow moved, he could hear a scraping sound that made the hair on the back of his neck rise. As the shadow became larger and more and more frightening, he managed to make out the skinny shape of Lucretia Van Dare. She must have entered from the dining room, and was now walking across the wide floor, her grotesque shadow stretched out along the floor and up the walls. What in hell is she up to at this time of night? Shadoe wondered, then saw something in her hand. When he looked closer, he found she was carrying a hatchet and had on a butcher's apron that was stained with dark, faded blood, topped with something which was horrifyingly bright and fresh. The silver blade of the ax that glinted in the moonlight was also covered with blood and was dripping.

He stood watching her for a moment as she made her way across the foyer. She seemed tired, and he could hear her wheezing breath as she lumbered along until she came to the door behind the front desk. He heard a lot of thumping, and within only seconds she turned and pushed herself back through it. The butcher's apron and hatchet were gone, and she had a wet rag in her hand that looked stained and dirty. She managed to wipe up the stains from the marble floor, then disappeared into the dining room again. He stared curiously at the door behind the desk. He remembered seeing her go in and out of it many times, never wondering what she might have stored there. Now he knew. A bloody apron, a hatchet ... and death. He waited a few seconds before he stepped out of the shadow, then without a sound he quickly sneaked down the stairs, gingerly stepped toward the front door, then out.

His next thoughts were of Julita. Suddenly the dark picture regarding the little ragamuffin was partially clearing. If his hunch was right, she was apparently the victim of Lucretia's insanity. One would only have to look at Lucretia to know she was jealous of her sister's beauty and wanted to hide it. That must be the reason for the marks on her face, the mask, even the binding and the shapeless dresses. But that wasn't the whole story ... there was more, and he had to find the answers. Even if Lucretia was a tyrant, that wouldn't make Julita obey her without question. She was bright, old enough to make her own decisions. Why didn't she? What was behind it all? Where did it start?

And why did Julita think that she was ugly? All she had to do was look in a mirror to see.... Oh, God, it couldn't be. Was Lucretia dabbling in hypnotism? Mind play? He'd seen it in his work, but it was usually done by professionals ... evil professionals. Those power-hungry individuals who for whatever reason wanted to have someone completely dependent on them, those that wanted to control someone else's mind. It was dangerous to fool around with something like that if you didn't know what you were doing. If Lucretia was into this, she could damage Julita's mind. And it was very possible that one day Julita would turn on her. If that day ever came, she could kill her sister, and her mind would forever be lost.

The more he learned about the Van Dare family, the more he realized that he had fallen into something too horrible for words. He had to get to the bottom of it, no matter what he would find, but for now he had to let it be, and headed down the path toward the woods.

The woods were even darker than he had imagined. He picked up a stick and used it as a machete, knocking back low-hanging branches and shrubs. He splashed through shallow creeks, climbed low hills and slipped down muddy ravines until he finally came to the clearing. Pushing aside

the veil of limbs and vines, he saw the church just as it had been before, except now it seemed to be spotlighted by the moon. It was as if something didn't want him to miss it ... as if he was being coerced ... invited ... even commanded ... to enter. Churches were supposed to be serene, holy, and a picture of safety in a world of turmoil, but the circle of light revealed the church as a crouching, ashen monster ... something nightmares were made of. Gaping windows for eyes, a bell tower with a bell he thought he'd heard echoing in his sleep. Now he knew it must have been the old grandfather clock, because as he looked at the crumbling old tower thrusting itself into an unfriendly night sky, the bell was gone, the steeple empty. It reminded him of a corpse ... a dead thing ... a shell that had given up its spirit.

His feet moved hesitantly toward the old structure while a night bird made a horrible screeching noise from high in a tree, and cicadas chirped from beneath wild bushes and shrubs. Even though his steps were slow and hesitant, the dark night seemed to magnify the crackle of the dry leaves and twigs beneath his feet. When he reached the broken steps, he looked into the blackness beyond the door that hung from its hinges. He couldn't imagine losing himself beyond that blackness and had to take a moment to steel himself against his fear. Just as he started to reach for the banister, he heard a soft breeze whisper his name.

Shadooooooooo, coooooome to meeeeeee.

Shadoe stopped in his tracks, hearing the voice again. Is this a joke? he asked himself as his head whirled around, his green eyes piercing the tangled shadows of the woods. If some creep is playing a dirty joke on me, I'll have them for lunch, he thought, still looking around. His eyes shifted toward the black sky where the moon hung silver and cold. How could sound effects be rigged out here? It's crazy. His eyes slid down, anchoring on the hellish blackness just beyond the door. It had come from there ... inside. Just go along with it for now, he thought. Find out for sure what's happening, and then bust their sorry butts!

While his heart pounded, he climbed up the weak steps and entered, the darkness beyond the doorway swallowing him, little by little. Inside was a small vestibule with two arched openings at opposite ends of the wall with a credenza in the middle. On it sat a candelabra, hymnals, and a large Bible, all of which were tattered and old, cobwebs stretching between them, to the wall, and all the way up to the ceiling. He turned toward one of the doors through which he glimpsed the auditorium, and walked toward it.

The silence was thick, and dust covered everything. The wooden pews were dusty and splintered, and the seats that had once been covered by a deep burgundy material were now ripped, and looked as if they were throwing up cotton. Stained glass windows that were once an artist's dream, now lay in colorful broken shards. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling and danced in a breeze that whispered through the cracks. Shafts of moonlight streaked across the cavernous space, revealing dust motes floating through the air.

Shadoe walked down the aisle, coming closer and closer to a lone pulpit that stood in the center of the platform. He could almost hear the shouts of the dynamic man of God that must have

pounded on it, delivering the gospel. The choir loft extended across the back, each row elevated above the one previous, and ending at a picture of Jesus carrying a lost lamb. All at once high angelic voices floated on the air, mingling with the moaning night wind. The sound was haunting and faint. An organ stood on one side of the platform, and he walked to it. There he saw the once beautiful instrument covered with dust and cobwebs. The ivory keys were cracked and broken, and the metal controls, covered with rust. Even though the keys weren't moving, he thought he could hear it playing faintly. As Shadoe looked around at the tired old church, he tried to keep from shaking with fear.

He had found a church with no people....

A pulpit with no preacher....

A choir with no singers....

And an organ with no master.

And yet he could hear them ... feel their presence.

All at once a whispery voice called, as if from another world. Shadooooooooe, I'm heeeere.

Shadoe whirled toward the voice, but didn't see anyone. "You creeps!" he yelled. "Wait ... just wait 'till I...." He shuddered, his words fading. "Captain?" he called, trying to control his anger. "You guys ... you ... you're playin' some kind of weird joke on me, right?" His eyes raked through the darkness, hearing the thick silence. "Come clean, you hear?" he yelled, feeling himself coming apart. "I'm onto you! You won't get away with it! When I find you...."

All at once Shadoe felt a touch ... light and fleeting. "Oh God!" he yelled, whirling around while madly brushing at the back of his neck. He looked through the shadows for something ... someone, but saw nothing there. He looked up, his eyes piercing the darkness of the domed ceiling, but he could find no explanation for what he felt ... what he heard. He slowly began backing up, stumbling down the steps of the platform. Wasting no time, he turned and began running until he came to the arched entrance and abruptly stopped. He stood there, frozen, feeling an overwhelming presence. Trying to keep from visibly shaking, he slowly turned. What he saw caused him to bellow out a strangled cry and hide his eyes.

Standing in the same spot that he'd just occupied, he saw a woman. Her face was a hideous mask of dark, weathered, skeletal remains, black holes for eyes, and a perfect set of teeth that stretched into a hideous smile. A thatch of blond hair flowed down to the shoulders of her wedding dress. She was a floating, shadowlike apparition, unlike anything he'd ever seen. Her arms were stretched toward him. Please help me, she whispered. She's in danger ... my baby is in danger. Take her away ... far away ... away ... from them. Please believe me. She's in danger! Her life is in danger. Take her away

... far away!

Shadoe clutched his stomach, feeling her pain. "I don't know what you mean," he rasped, his words said with difficulty. "I don't know any baby. Who ... who is ... them?"

Before the echo of his last word had stilled, he was no longer in the church, but in a room, a dark room where a woman lay writhing in a large bed. A tall, lean man with dark, curly hair was crouched at the foot of the bed. All at once he made a sound of surprise, leaned forward, and snatched a baby from between the woman's legs. As her scream died down, he lifted the bloody bundle, slapped it, and the child's healthy wail filled him with joy.

"Help me," she implored, lifting her head slightly and reaching toward him. "Garret ... help ... me." She saw him looking down at her with a loathsome look on his face, and instead of calling for help, he nestled the golden child in the crook of his arm and watched the woman's blood gush out and her head fall aside in death.

When the vision faded, Shadoe reached out and grabbed one of the pews to keep from falling. He had to literally drag himself along, grasping one pew, then another, trying to get out of that cursed church. Away from the woman whose heartache he could feel, but didn't understand. He had to get out or he'd die from the pain. He finally reached the front, clamped his hands on the door frame in desperation, drug himself through, and down the weak steps until he fell on the ground. The freezing mist of early morning slowly slithered over him bringing on a blessed numbness, and the pain subsided. In the next moment, a deathlike sleep seized him and he knew nothing else until he woke the next morning to chirping birds, warm sunshine ... and an empty field.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Garret frowned down at the thin, watery oatmeal and watched the globs of thickness drip from the utensil as he spooned it up, then let it fall sickeningly back into the bowl. His stomach lurched at the thought of eating this mess.

“What’s the matter?” Lucretia snapped, with a scowl.

His eyes shifted toward her. “What could be wrong?” he growled, “I love raw, watery oatmeal. You could have at least passed it over a flame, you bitch!”

“Look,” she yelled, her eyes flashing. “I’m doing the best I can for you, old man. If you don’t want it, then don’t eat it, but you won’t get anything else. It’s oatmeal, or nothing.”

“I have nothing against oatmeal,” he shouted, letting the spoon clatter to the bowl, “but why can’t you do just one thing right? Are you that stupid?”

“I know exactly what I’m doing,” Lucretia said menacingly while cutting her angry eyes toward him.

“Yes, I know you do. A slow death by torture, isn’t that it, Lucretia? You won’t kill me outright, instead you’ll starve me to death.”

“I only wish!” she barked, her abrupt, angry movements straightening the covers on his bed and cleaning up around the damp, musty-smelling room.

Picking up the spoon again, he dipped it into the oatmeal and lifted it to his lips and tasted it. Almost gagging, he dropped the spoon and pushed the bowl away. “Not only is it cold, there’s no flavor. What about a little sugar, milk and butter?”

“You don’t want to die an early death, do you?” came her sarcastic answer. “You know that stuff will kill you!”

“Then let me commit suicide! Hell, you’re killing me day by day anyway, so what does it matter? What have I done to make you hate me so much?”

She whirled on him. “What have you done? You turned Julita against me, that’s what you did! You taught her to hate me as much as you do.”

“I did no such thing. If she hated you, it was because you earned it. You’re a hateful bitch.”

“There, that’s what I mean. The name calling. The foul words you taught her. Then when she used them, you sat back and laughed.”

He looked at her, his mouth trembling on the edge of laughter. “But it was funny. Anytime that kind of language comes out of a child’s mouth, it’s funny.”

“Only to those who are sick!” she snarled.

His eyes narrowed on hers. “Sick? Me? You hold that coveted title, my dear. Never have I seen a sicker bitch than you.”

“If I am, then who made me that way? I tried to help you with the inn after you decided to confine yourself to your room, but everything I did was wrong. I was being run ragged, and decided to save myself a few steps so I installed a buzzer for you.”

“Very astute,” he said, one side of his lips going up in a lopsided smile while he remembered the fated little buzzer.

“Very stupid, you mean. That buzzer made my life miserable. You pressed it, leaned on it until I thought I would go out of my mind. I was even hearing that buzzer in my dreams!”

“Well, you certainly took care of that, didn’t you? I remember the day you burst into my room and yanked it out of the wall. You were so angry you threw it from across the room, over the balcony, and into the yard. Quite a throwing arm.”

“You were lucky I didn’t pick you up and throw you over the balcony.”

“Ha! I believe you already tried that.”

“If only you had died that night,” she said, her misery showing. “You were a miserable tyrant with everyone but Julita. Her, you spoiled rotten.” Lucretia felt hot tears as they invaded her eyes, threatening to spill down her cheeks. “But when she began parroting your nasty words and habits, I knew I had to get her away from you. It was bitch this and bitch that, but that wasn’t all. When her little mouth began to form the words fuck and cunt, I knew what I had to do.” She turned her dark eyes on him accusingly. “But even that took second place to what followed.”

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? You began molesting her, you bastard! And the worst part is, you did it blatantly. In front of me. It was one more way to torment me."

"Oh hell, Lucretia, that was your wild imagination working again. I never once molested Julita."

"I saw you, you selfish brute! With my own eyes! I saw you push your hands up her dress everytime she crawled into your lap."

"She was a baby, she didn't know what was going on."

"That didn't make it right, you sick, sorry bastard!" Lucretia looked at him with disgust. "You were preparing her, weren't you? With your nasty words coming from her lips, and your ugly hands crawling up her dresses, you were preparing her to one day occupy your bed. I've never heard of anything so sick in my life!"

Anger roiled inside him. His mind entertained thoughts of murder as his eyes finally lifted toward Lucretia, giving her a murderous look. She waited, but no words of denial passed the lips that were closed and pressing into a guilty line.

Hating the sight of him, Lucretia whirled away and started for the door. "I'm sick of looking at you, old man." She looked down at his food. "Eat that sorry-tasting oatmeal, or do without!" she yelled.

"Why didn't you bring me some orange juice? There's nothing wrong with orange juice. It'll be good for me."

"Sorry," she said, her lying mouth trying to keep from curling into an evil smile. "Used the last of the orange juice this morning."

"Bitch!" he mumbled. He knew she was lying, but being her prisoner, he could do nothing about it. He found himself praying day after day for the miracle of her death. He knew if he could just get out of this chair ... for an hour ... even a few minutes ... he would wrap his hands around her scrawny neck and kill her. He dreamed about it, fantasized about it. Sometimes the desire was so thick inside him he could taste it on his tongue. And even as hungry as he was, it tasted better than the finest steak in town.

She heard the mumbled word and felt the searing heat of her temper overwhelm her. “You black-hearted, unappreciative bastard. I flirt with death every day on those concrete stairs just to clean this filthy space, and be sure you get a little nourishment.” Continuing toward the door, she stopped short and looked back at him. “Don’t be surprised if one day I decide it just isn’t worth it.” Glancing down at the rejected oatmeal, she smirked and said, “Bon appetit.”

“You’re an ugly woman, Lucretia,” he muttered, “and someday someone’s going to put an end to your reign of terror in this inn. And, God, I hope I’m alive when it happens.”

“I wouldn’t count on it, old man,” she said with a sinister shine to her eyes.

“Lucretia, one last request,” he said with feigned innocence. Then as each word tumbled from his lips, his face contorted into a sinister mask of hate. “Be a sport and trip on the stairs and die!”

Unmoved by his venomous words, she said, “Papa, as I remember you were always partial to soup, weren’t you? Well, for lunch I have a surprise for you. A nice bowl of cold, watery soup. No crackers, though. Bad for you, you know. Too much sodium.”

When she banged out the door, the old man angrily pushed the tray away, letting it clatter to the floor. The watery oatmeal made a mess that looked as if someone had just been sick.

All at once a sudden weakness washed over him, and he clutched at the arms of his chair. He fought it, knowing what had caused it. His outburst at Lucretia. Lately when he overexerted himself, spells of dizziness would hit him. He knew what would come next. If he didn’t get proper nourishment, he would begin blacking out. For short periods at first, then he would become too weak to lift himself into his chair. Before long someone would come down and find nothing but bones in his bed.

Maybe he should look forward to the blessed day when he would be ushered out of this world. He would be free then. Free from Lucretia, from this torture. He didn’t know how much longer he could last. In the last fifteen years the only thing that had kept him alive was a steel determination and what little food he’d been able to salvage from the slop she had brought him. Even though he still had all his hair and teeth, he’d lost so much weight he was little more than a skeleton. His thoughts traveled back to the night of his accident when he heard urgent whispers just outside his door.

“Ms. Van Dare, I’m a surgeon and I know what I’m talking about,” the doctor whispered in the hush of the cavernous old mansion. “If he doesn’t have this operation he’ll never walk again.”

The old man could hear the whispers, but they made no sense, just tiny wisps of words made with moving lips and lashing tongues that haunted his dreams. Even though he was weak and full of

medication, a word every now and then would get through. It was very disjointed, but he seemed to remember hearing something about a twisted spine. He tried, but he couldn't seem to move, or open his eyes. His mouth worked, trying to say something, to call out, but somehow he couldn't get past the darkness that surrounded him.

"He hates knives," Lucretia told the doctor.

"But it'll give him back partial use of his legs. And with therapy, he'll work his way up to a walker, maybe even a cane."

"I'm sorry, but he insists," Lucretia had said. "I tried, but ... well, he's my father. I can't go against him."

"But this is insane. Maybe I could talk to him. He'll listen...."

"No!" Lucretia said too quickly. "No, he's already given me strict instructions, and I won't have him hounded."

"Hounded ... I don't..." The doctor's words faded as the lingering shadows seemed to make her thin face mutate into something hideous. "Well ... I..." He cleared his throat and tried to smile. "As long as you're sure."

"I'm very sure," she said, putting out her thin, spidery hand. "Thankyou, Doctor, we'll call you when we need you."

"Yes," he muttered, realizing he was being dismissed. "Well, I'll--" he hesitated, "--I'll be getting along."

The old man had thought then that nothing worse could happen to him, but now he knew he was wrong. Back then he'd had a nurse to take care of him. The woman had made sure he had good meals and exercise. And even though he was trapped in his wheelchair, he could get around the house with the aid of the elevator and ramps that had been installed. It was during that time that he decided to turn the old mansion into an inn. Even though he didn't need the money, he'd always been an active man, and needed something to fill his time. He'd been advised to hire someone to run it for him, but decided he'd try to run it from his wheelchair before making that decision. It turned out to be just the distraction he needed to take his mind off his disability. He met many fine people who stayed at the inn year after year, had made many friends, and since he was now able to take care of himself, he discharged his nurse.

To the outside world the Van Dare family was a prosperous, well-liked, normal family. But if

one bothered to look just beneath the surface, they would hear the rattle of many skeletons.

\* \* \* \*

Lucretia remembered when her world began to crack. Her father's booming voice had begun cutting into her head like an ice pick. Her days were filled with him barking out orders. She was no longer his daughter, but a servant, and nothing she did was right. She'd even observed, or had she imagined, her father molesting Julita, seeing his hand steal beneath her dress every time the child crawled into his lap. Lucretia would literally leap from wherever she was and snatch Julita away. Lucretia imagined she heard voices in her head, in the shadows, swirling around her everywhere. The voices told her that her father was going to send her away. Immediately her mind went back to the dark night of her father's accident. He had planned to put her away then, but she had beaten him.

And she would again.

She began sneaking around listening in on his phone conversations and heard him make an appointment for a consultation.

Surgery!

It couldn't happen! She couldn't let it happen! She envisioned him walking around on a cane snapping out orders, continuing the tyranny she knew as a child. Sure, he ordered her around now, but at least from the chair he was limited. She could get away from him ... hide. But not if he gained control of his legs. His tyranny would become limitless.

She had to stop it!

That same night she pilfered around in his room while he was sleeping. She found notes, phone numbers, names. First she cancelled his appointment by telling the doctor in a breathy, sobbing voice that her father had taken very ill. She refused the doctor's kind offer to come out and see him, saying that the illness wasn't of the body, but the mind, and that he would be having private sessions with a therapist. She concluded by saying if there was any change, she would call.

The next morning she picked up the phone and called his friends and business associates and told them her father had taken a turn for the worse and couldn't have visitors. When they questioned her as to when they could see him, she cut them off completely by telling them that she had plans to put him in a nursing home where he could get professional care. No, she hadn't made a decision as to which one just yet, but she was looking into it, and would let them know as soon as that decision was made.

Carefully hanging up the phone she breathed a little easier. Now came the big job. Nervously approaching him, she told her father that the doctor had called to cancel the consultation until further notice. The news seemed to hit Garret hard. He slowly slid into a deep depression and Lucretia's furtive act of taking the telephone out of his room went unnoticed. He stayed in his room, having no knowledge of the calls and visitors he had because they were deftly cut off by Lucretia, and eventually, one by one they quit calling, or coming by.

Garret Van Dare had been forgotten.

Barely alive, he would stare out of his window, not eating, not sleeping. The days, seasons, and years passed, and Lucretia was left with running the inn and trying to corral Julita's youthful exuberance at the same time. To save a few steps she had a buzzer installed in his room, but quickly knew it was a mistake. Her father seemed to use the buzzer excessively. Time and again she tried to ignore the constant vibrating noise that grated on her nerves, but finally had to acknowledge it.

They were burdens, both of them. It was bad enough that she had to do everything now, but seeing to Julita's and her father's needs was getting to be more than she could handle. Day after day, serving him, cleaning up his messes. It grated on her nerves until the day came when she finally had all she could stand. The buzzer, loud and insistent, began its screeching sound. She jerked her head around and glared at the white box.

BZZZZZZZ....

bzzzzzzz... ]

bzzzzzzz!

She put her hands up to her ears, but still it came.

BZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ....

bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz....

bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!

Not being able to stand it one more minute, she hurried as fast as she could up to her father's room, grabbed the little box and yanked the wire from out of the wall and threw it across the room and into the yard. With no one's help, she grabbed his wheelchair and managed to hustle him down to the basement.

By this time Lucretia was a full-blown psychotic. With her father out of the way she had only Julita to worry about. She was still only a baby, so it should be easy enough to make her into anything Lucretia wanted her to be. She began to terrorize the child, beat her into submission. But as hard as she disciplined the child, Julita's beautiful face still haunted Lucretia's nightmares.

There was only one way to handle this problem.

She had a library full of books her father had compiled over the years, so she began reading up on certain drugs, mind-bending techniques, and became an expert. Then came the day when she decided to put it into practice. She experimented at first, measuring the amount of drugs she could give Julita. When she finally found the correct dosage, she drained the hypodermic into her arm while telling her the story of how a wild animal had gotten into her cradle and mangled her face.

It was only the beginning.

Lucretia knew Julita was no dummy, and would see nothing on her face to substantiate her words, so she removed all the mirrors from her room. This solved the problem only temporarily. She couldn't keep Julita confined to her room, and she certainly couldn't remove every mirror in the inn, so she spent days pacing, trying to decide what to do.

With nowhere else to turn, she began reading again and found the answer from a renowned doctor of psychiatry, Dr. Kenneth M. Drury. She mumbled, scanning over all the big words and ramblings until it finally told her what she wanted to know. In essence it said that if the subject saw something, even if it wasn't real, then the mind that had been manipulated, would fill in the details.

This was her answer.

On one of the occasions when she'd given Julita a hypodermic, she took a marker and crazily scratched the scars on Julita's face that had healed long ago. Then she sewed her a mask and made her wear it, pounding into her head day after day how horrible her face was, and to show it would drive the guests away. She drummed into young Julita's head that if that happened, then she would be forced to put her in an institution. Convincing her that she needed all the rooms for the guests, she made her a bed in the attic, telling her it would be a good hiding place where no one could find her.

This went on year after year until Julita was convinced she was a monster, and her sister was doing her a favor by not putting her away.

Then Lucretia began to face another problem.

Julita began to grow.

In Lucretia's mind, the answer was simple. She dressed Julita in large, ugly, shapeless dresses that a small child might wear, and later began to bind up her breasts. In Lucretia's mind she was still a baby. It was her practice to croon to her, hold her, feed her, rock her, and tuck her in at night, even though eventually the cute little legs soft with baby fat turned into the curvaceous legs of a teenager and dangled down beside Lucretia's lap. Lucretia couldn't stand to keep the girl prisoner and allowed Julita a certain amount of freedom to roam the mansion and play in the woods, but gave her strict instructions to stay away from the guests.

\* \* \* \*

Lucretia had turned into a loathsome thing that crept around the house talking to herself. Being in the basement, Garret could hear what went on upstairs, and sometimes he'd be awakened by thumps and tormented outcries deep into the night. He would lie in his bed, grasping at his ears, trying to keep out the sound of Julita crying out in pain. It was torture hearing her cries come wafting down through the ventilator. He pounded on his legs, trying to force feeling into them, but it was no use. He cried, cursing his disability, his wheelchair, and his inability to help his daughter.

And then there were the nights he would hear a strangled cry come from outside. He could only guess at what Lucretia was doing. He knew that a woman like Lucretia didn't stop at ravaging little animals anymore. No, her prey was much larger, her victims, anyone who crossed her. And because of him, she had an inn full of people to feed her obsession ... her bloody obsession.

Knowing Lucretia was getting worse, Garret was becoming desperate, so he tried leaving obscure notes on his tray, or making enough noise for someone to hear, but it did no good. When he had been bad, as she used to call it, she would punish him by going out into the woods and killing some small animal and serving it to him on his tray. Then she would stand just outside his door and hear him bellow with horror when he removed the cover and saw the little thing drenched in blood and staring up at him with dead eyes. He would push the tray away with a tormented howl, and the sound of the metal object hitting the floor would mingle with her maniacal laughter. Helpless tears would stream down his haggard face.

"See what you made me do?" she would hiss at him when she returned for the tray. "If not for you, this small animal would still be alive."

He was usually so sickened with shock he couldn't say anything and would turn his wheelchair away from her. If he was lucky she would leave him alone. But if she wasn't through with him, she would jerk him around and make him stare into her crazy eyes that glittered with the darkness of hell.

Lucretia knew she was killing him, and carefully counted the days on her calendar. Each day was crossed off with big red smears of her favorite color ... the color of blood.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Shadoe felt himself enclosed in a comfortable haze of sleep until a cold wind blew over his body, ruffling his hair, and brushing a chilly kiss across his cheek. Shivering, he opened his eyes slowly. Seeing a forest of trees, he lifted his head, small twigs and dry leaves sticking to his face as he looked around.

What the hell? he thought as his clouded vision raked across the area where he'd slept. Suddenly remembering the night before, he froze, his eyes and mind taking on the clarity of a crystal ball. Jumping up, he whirled his body, trying to find the church he'd been in only hours before. The clearing was empty, shafts of early morning sun piercing through the thick foliage of the trees. Where was the church? The church was here. My God, am I going crazy? he asked himself as he quickly leaned his head over and raked his fingers through his hair. When he lowered them, his hands were full of twigs and leaves. He quickly threw them down and began running as fast as he could out of the clearing and down the path to the inn.

When he arrived, he crept around to the back and furtively glimpsed into the screen door of the kitchen. He could feel the blessed warmth, and smell the delicious food that wafted through the open door. The white-clad workers seemed busy and otherwise occupied as he gently opened the screen door, praying that it wouldn't groan with a rusty squeak. Luck seemed to be with him as he sneaked in and rushed soundlessly toward the rear stairs. Taking his time, he carefully crept up each step, trying to make no sound as he climbed.

When he knew he was out of earshot, he began running down the hall until he found his room. He noisily burst through, then slammed it shut. As if he'd traveled a long distance, he leaned against the door, closed his eyes, and took several deep breaths. When his heart had slowed, he began stripping and hurried to the shower. Turning on the water, he stepped in, and with a frenzy began scouring his body. While standing with his face turned upward toward the prickling spray, things seemed to come into focus. He had decided that it was all a dream and he'd been walking in his sleep. It was stress. The captain was right, he needed this rest to clear out his head.

He emerged from the shower feeling better and went to the phone to order some breakfast. Before Room Service answered, he put the phone back down, deciding to go down to the dining room. He hadn't been there since he'd come to the inn and was anxious to start looking around to see what the place had to offer. Looking at his camera, he figured he might as well go ahead and get the few shots he'd taken developed as well. There was some unusual and beautiful sights around here, and he'd taken shots of all of them. The sunrise, the bones on the beach, and even a few shots of the front of the inn and the grounds. It wasn't a lot, but he knew the guys would get a kick out of seeing them, especially the bones and the shot he took of a cute girl adjusting her stockings when she thought no one was looking.

He glanced quickly at his watch, spent a few minutes drying his hair, then chose a black outfit that he was partial to. When he was dressed, he looked at himself in the full-length mirror. He could

almost see his father standing there instead of him. Like Shadoe, he was partial to trousers instead of jeans, and wore western boots instead of Adidas. Even though he was darker in color than his father, he could see a lot of his father in his face, the way he dressed, even in his mannerisms. But Shadoe's real individuality came from his Native American heritage. It showed up in his long dark hair, the jade jewel beneath his eye, and a silver string earring that threaded through his pierced ear and dangled on each side. He flipped it, gave his jacket a slight adjustment, then turned, exiting his room a lot slower than he had entered it.

He stood at the door of the dining room, waiting to be seated, looking over the red and white decor. While standing there, the swinging door to the kitchen opened and his eyes sharpened when he saw Julita pouring coffee. Just then the maitre d' and walked up to him.

"One for breakfast, sir?"

Shadoe was still staring at the kitchen door that swung in and out frequently, giving him rare glimpses of her. "Uh ... yes...." he murmured, "only one."

"Would you come this way, please?"

Still looking toward the door, Shadoe followed the man to a table. As soon as he took his seat, a waitress walked up.

"Ready to order?" she said with a sparkling, early morning smile.

He looked up at her, then glanced again at the swinging door to the kitchen. Just then he saw the masked face look up at him, but all too soon the door swung shut.

She stood waiting for his order, then turned to see what he was looking at.

"Say ... uh ... I'd like to speak to someone in the kitchen."

"You mean the chef?" She pointed at the menu. "If you prefer low-cal, or kosher, we have a section for that on the menu."

"Oh ... no ... it's not that. I'd like to see ... well ... a young lady."

"Oh," she said, looking down at him knowingly. She slid a quick glance at the door, then back at him, and said, "They're all pretty busy, but I guess I can get her for you. Who is it you'd like to talk

to?”

“The little urchin ... you know ... I believe her name is Julita. She’s the girl in the mask. Could you get her for me?”

“Oh....” she began as if sorry to give him bad news. “I’m sorry, sir, but she’s not allowed to mingle with the guests.”

“Why?” Shadow said, surprised. “Has she got a disease or something?”

“Well ... it’s her appearance. She’s ... well ... I’m sorry, sir I can’t talk about it. Mr. Van Dare, the owner....”

Shadoe put his hand up to stop her. “What has a dead man got to do with whether she speaks to me or not?”

“Dead? Mr. Van Dare? No....”

“No?” Shadoe’s interest perked up. “I was told he was dead!”

“Sir, Mr. Van Dare is not dead, he occupies a room right here in the inn.”

It was owned by my father, but he’s ... well, he’s ... dead, so I run things.

“If you’re not ready to order I can come back later.”

He didn’t answer, just lowered his head as if he were looking at the menu, but not reading it. Where would the old man be if he wasn’t dead? Why had she lied? He turned back to the waitress. “Do you know where he is ... the old man, I mean?”

“I don’t know which room he’s in if that’s what you mean. No one is allowed in there. She takes care of him herself.” She saw his disappointment. “I ... I’m sorry I can’t help you, sir.”

Without ordering, Shadoe threw the menu down, then jumped up and rushed away.

“Sir! Do you want....” She looked at his departing figure, then shrugged and cleared the table.

Shadoe ran out of the dining room looking around for some clue as to where to look. Then his eyes anchored on the front desk and the register that lay open. If he could get a look at it, he could make a note of the empty rooms and try those first. As he approached the desk, his eyes darted around, looking for onlookers. Laying his hands on the register, he slowly turned it toward him and ran his finger down the row of room numbers. He could see at a glance that every room was occupied. But if they were, where was the old man?

Just then Lucretia rounded a corner and saw him. “What do you think you’re doing?” she barked.

Startled, he turned and saw her rushing toward him. “I was checking to see if a friend of mine had arrived yet. I’m sorry if I’ve broken some rule.”

“Mr. Madison, you’re already walking on thin ice around here, and I’d advise you to ask the next time you want to know something.”

“Yes, you’re absolutely right. It’s just that since there was no one here....”

“That gives you no right to search through things that are none of your business.”

Treading thin ice was exactly right, Shadoe thought. But something was driving him, and he had to find out where the old man was. “By the way, how long did you say your father had been dead?”

“I’m through answering questions that obviously have nothing to do with the writing of your article, Mr. Madison. You may write about the comfort and quality of this inn, but anything beyond that is off limits to you.”

Ignoring her outburst, he pressed her, his words brittle and short. “Someone said he was occupying a room here. Is that true?”

Lucretia looked at him and pursed her thin lips. “So that’s what you were looking for. Well, for your information, Mr. Madison, his ‘room’ is out on a well shaded hill beneath a huge oak.”

“Oh, and where is that? I was thinking about the history of this old place and found a brochure in the Hall of History. It doesn’t mention where he was buried, in fact it doesn’t even mention the fact of his death.” His steady gaze met hers and held it. “I have to get the facts straight, you see. Authenticity, that’s the secret of a good article ... book ... whatever you’re writing.”

“You are an arrogant bastard, Mr. Madison, and I am a busy woman ... too busy to be involved in one of your so-called interviews.” She spat the last word out as if it were dirt in her mouth.

“I see. Well, thank you anyway. I’ll just interview the little ... uh ... Julita I think was the name you gave me, right? By the way, where will I find her?”

Lucretia’s face darkened, and Shadoe could feel an icy chill coming from her that was almost physical. “I told you once, and I’ll tell you again. Julita is not available to you for anything.”

“Anything?” Shadoe repeated, wondering why that sounded like a loaded word when she said it. Lifting his hands he began counting effortlessly on his fingers. “The father’s not available....” He looked at her and forced a small laugh. “Dead men rarely are ... if they are ... uh ... dead. The daughter’s not available, and your attitude, if you don’t mind my saying so, Ms. Van Dare, is downright hostile. Now, I ask you. How am I to get my story if I can’t talk to anyone?” He took the edge of the register and pushed it, spinning it around on the turntable. “Well,” he said, watching her bewildered eyes follow the spinning register. “I guess I’ll just have to rely on my own resources. Which, by the way, is what I was doing when you came up and caught me.”

Lucretia looked up at him, wanting to wipe that arrogant look off his face.

“Now, Ms. Van Dare, I know you’re busy. It must be rough running an inn that brings in the business that this one does, but if I can’t get my story any other way, then don’t be surprised at what turns up in that article.” His smile became as brittle as hers, and his eyes as chilly. “Just a warning.”

Just then the phone rang, and Lucretia was quickly distracted. Shadoe turned, a satisfied smile played on his lips. He was proud of himself. He knew she wasn’t about to talk, but so far he’d been able to keep her wedged between a rock and a hard place. She couldn’t throw him out because of a possible bad review, but having him there was like having a boil on your backside. Very uncomfortable.

Turning, he decided to order breakfast in his room, so he pushed himself away from the counter and strode toward the stairs. As his foot barely touched the first step of the wide staircase, his eyes just happened to fall on a door nestled beneath the stairway that looked to be hidden by a large stretch of rose-covered lattice. He stopped abruptly and leaned around the towering light fixture at the end of the curling balustrade. The door was so obscure that he had almost missed it, which he figured was the intent of the strategically placed lattice. He glanced back over at the front desk and Lucretia was turned away while talking on the phone. Taking advantage of the situation, Shadoe crept around the side of the stairs and walked over as quietly as he could to the door. What the hell was behind it, he asked himself. It must be the cellar Lucretia had told him about a few days ago. But if it was a part of the inn that was used frequently, why was this lattice hiding it? He knew the answer. She was hiding something down there. But what? His thoughts went back to the night before when he had seen her coming out of the dining room with an ax. My God, could it be a graveyard? Bones scattered everywhere? Shadoe knew his curiosity wouldn’t rest until he knew. He naturally assumed she kept it

locked, but when he reached out for it, to his surprise it turned with ease, swinging inward with hardly a push. All at once a strong desire to see what was down there rose up in him, and he hated to close the door. But it would have to be later when no one was around ... when the shadows of the inn stretched wide and long, hiding him within their darkness. But what about now? How was he going to get out of here? His eyes darted furtively toward the counter and saw Lucretia's head buried in some paperwork. The friggin' witch would be at the counter. She was never around when he needed her, but let him be trapped in a corner, behind a piece of lattice, and she took root like one of her magnolias.

Just then he saw Julita come out of the dining room and approach Lucretia. She moved as if she were frightened, hardly able to speak because of her fear. No wonder she acted the way she did, he thought. She was frightened to death of her sister. Afraid to move, even to speak. No wonder she was afraid of him ... of anyone. Lucretia had practically broken her spirit, making her almost unable to speak. Watching them together, he was getting a clearer picture of the relationship between these two sisters. One cowering and frightened, the other, a bitter, hateful witch that ruled this plush little roost with an iron hand.

The drone of voices began, then became louder. His head jerked when he heard a slap and saw Julita reel. Her mask fell to the floor, and the girl quickly lowered herself and hurriedly put it back on.

"Get up to your room! Now!" Lucretia yelled.

"Please," Julita pleaded.

From what Shadoe could gather from parts of their conversation, the waitress he'd talked to had told Julita he was looking for her. Apparently she was asking for permission to talk to him. But naturally Lucretia refused with a slap and a host of four-letter words he hadn't heard since arresting a john for pimping along the docks.

To hell with the witch, Shadoe thought. If they wanted to see each other, she wasn't going to stop it. And then he reminded himself of what she had said about him walking on thin ice. He could almost hear the cracking of that ice right now. Later that night, Shadoe heard a gentle tapping on his door. When he opened it he saw Julita standing there, her eyes darting around the corridor as if afraid Lucretia would see her. Reaching out, he quickly pulled her in, then stuck his head out and looked around. When he came back in, she grabbed him, burying her face in his chest.

"It's okay," he said, "you're safe. No one saw you."

"I... I w-was afraid you wouldn't be here."

"Come on, let's get this off," he said, and she automatically recoiled at his touch. "What's the

matter?" When she didn't answer, he said, "Julita, I know what's under the mask."

She was still silent.

"Remember the Hall of History?" Still receiving no response, he dropped his hands from the mask. "Okay, you take it off whenever you feel comfortable." His eyes angled toward her, as he continued. "But keep in mind that I can't kiss you through it."

He watched while her hand slowly caught the edge and pulled it over her head.

He smiled. "That's better. Now, come here."

When she walked into his arms and smiled, his heart did a summersault. "Oh, Julita," he whispered, his voice becoming husky, "you're bad for me, you know that? I could get lost in those violet eyes and never be seen again."

"You're teasing me," she whispered timidly.

"I wouldn't do that, he said, reaching down and lifting her chin for a kiss, but she interrupted him.

"No yet. I've got a surprise for you," she said gleefully.

His eyes widened. "You do?" He looked down at a bag she was carrying. "Show me."

She pulled the bag forward, reached inside, and lifted out some lipstick.

Shadoe laughed. "Sorry, but I don't wear lipstick.

"Silly," she said, then began smoothing it on her lips. When her lips were as red as they could get, she looked up at him and pursed her lips. "Do I look better?"

Her lips, full and dewy tempted him with or without lipstick. "You look beautiful," he said tenderly.

Throwing it down, she ran to the bed, crawled in, then turned to him. It was all Shadoe could do to keep standing. "Julita, what the hell are you doing?" he asked, looking at the little eighteen-year-

old nymph offering herself to him.

“Can I stay here tonight?” she whispered. “I don’t take up much room.”

“And what if Lucretia comes looking for you?” Her eyes became temptingly slumberous, her dark, sooty lashes fanning her cheek. “Julita, we’ve talked about this. If I had my way of course you could stay, but we have to be sensible.”

She slowly lifted her lids when he sat down on the side of the bed. She reached out and stroked his chest. “You haven’t kissed me.”

Shadoe’s lips lifted in a lop-sided smile. “No, I haven’t, have I?” He leaned toward her, lifting her innocent face, looking at her lush lips with too much lipstick on them and turned her chin and pecked her on the cheek.

“No,” she said, quickly, then pointed to her bold mouth. “Here,” she whispered. “Kiss me here.”

“But I’ll get lipstick all over me.”

“So what?” she mumbled, grabbing his head and pulling his lips down to hers.

When he pulled back she saw the lipstick all over him and began laughing.

He looked at his reflection in the mirror and saw the bloody smear. “You little monster,” he said, reaching down and smearing her lipstick all over her face.

The two of them laughed and fought playfully, their faces covered with the reddest lipstick money could buy. But as the fight continued, it slowly turned to passion, Shadoe’s mouth making a trail of Kiss’s Red Fatale along her neck, her breasts, and even on her ears.

But as willing as she was, he refused to take her innocence and eventually sent her back to her room. He ended up taking a cold shower, the lipstick reminding him of blood, and the mystery of Scarlet Bay Inn left unsolved. Thinking of where it might lead him, the glowing lipstick seemed to taunt him.

God, he hated the sight of blood ... especially his own!

## CHAPTER NINE

“Where were you last night?” Lucretia growled at Julita, then hit her hard, knocking her down on the floor of her room. “You weren’t in here. I came and found you gone!”

“I...I g-got hungry,” Julita said defensively. “I was d-down in the kitchen looking for something to eat.” Julita was proud of her lie. It came out smoother than she expected. It seemed that knowing Shadoe ... being with him gave her courage. She wanted to be with him forever. But she knew he would eventually leave. Everyone did. But he couldn’t ... not without her. If he left she would die!

“You’ve also slept the morning away,” Lucretia yelled, intruding on her thoughts. “Why? Were you up late, Julita? What kept you up, you little whore?”

Lucretia stepped closer, her eyes dancing with hellish delight at the thought of beating the girl senseless. “You disobeyed me,” she hissed. “You know what happens when you disobey.” She waited for an answer, then with irritation said, “Don’t you Julita?”

Julita nodded, her fear taking hold like it never had before. She knew she had to get out before Lucretia struck again. She watched her closely, and the moment Lucretia reached out with her spidery fingers to grab Julita’s hair, to pull and jerk it as she had many times before, Julita ducked. Then she took a wild chance and quickly skirted around her, and out the door.

Lucretia whirled around, watching Julita’s quick body slam through the door. “Come back here, you little tramp!” she yelled, running to the door, plunging through it and watching her run down the steps and into the corridor.

The breakfast crowd was clearing out of the dining room, so Julita ran in, found a dark corner and crumpled into it, crying. Her face stung where Lucretia had hit her, and she sneaked her mask off and rubbed it. She looked down at the crude thing that hid her face, and hated it. She wanted to keep it off. He didn’t mind seeing her without it.

Remembering last night she felt warm inside. He was so handsome, and his kisses sent her into a world she had only just discovered. He brought feelings out of her that she never knew existed. The warm melting desire she felt deep inside her was something new. She knew that something more lay beyond it ... a culmination of her feelings ... a place where she yearned to be swept into. A place of utter bliss. Oh, God, she wanted to feel it, experience it. But not with just anyone, only with him. She’d never been so close to someone so handsome. She’d never seen anything like him in her life. A lot of people came to the inn but never anyone like him. He was dark and savage looking. Dangerous and exciting. From the first moment she saw him strange things had been happening inside her. And when he touched her, she wanted more. Again the dread of his leaving entered her, and she knew if he did she’d never see him again.

She looked down at her mask. It was wet in front where her tears had saturated it. She turned it over and over in her hand, looking at the crude stitches, the stains, and the places that had almost worn through with use. The ugliness of the mask brought on a sinking feeling inside. Why was he nice to her when he knew her face was a mess? Why would he even look at her? She was ugly. When fresh tears began to course down her cheeks she lifted her hand to brush them away and her hand stilled, groping along her face trying to feel her scars. Why couldn't she feel anything? Lucretia had said that they were deep, ugly, purple scars that would scare the guests if she went without her mask, so she always kept it on when she wasn't in her room.

Recalling Lucretia's slap, she felt a deep resentment boil up inside her. She wondered what would happen if she began to fight back. She was getting bold. Today had been the first time she'd run away. She thought of the times Lucretia had loomed over her, beating her with anything she could get her hands on. A whip, a cane. Julita had wanted to grab it and snap it in two.

But something wouldn't let her.

Something deep inside.

She'd been taught all her life to cower down to Lucretia, but she was slowly becoming tired of the whippings, the drugs, and the insane way Lucretia made her play the game. She could still hear Lucretia crooning to her as if she were a baby. Putting her hair up in dog ears, and making her fall asleep in her arms. Julita was tired of it. She wanted to be a normal eighteen-year-old. She was too old to be sitting in Lucretia's lap and rocked. A deep sense of shame filled her. No one knew about that ... no one but her and Lucretia. She agonized, knowing if something didn't happen there would be nothing in her future but more of the same. Where would it end? How would it end? She couldn't tell anyone. She was too ashamed. And she didn't know how to make it go away.

Make it go away! Oh, God, please make it all go away!

She lowered her head and cried, wishing she could run away ... far away and never see this inn, or Lucretia again. She'd thought of running away many times, but she was afraid. She had never been anywhere but this inn. She had no idea what kind of world was out there ... what existed beyond the looming walls of this plantation. She wouldn't be able to manage on her own, and she had no money. But what if someone took her away ... what if Shadoe took her away? But would he? She had to talk to him, make him see that he was her only chance. She'd go to him again tonight. Maybe he would kiss her again ... touch her. The thought warmed her in her most private place.

Just as she was getting up to leave, she turned and saw a silver tray lying with some other dishes on a busboy's cart. Its shining beauty struck her, and she reached for it. After gently lifting it her hands had begun to shake, and she dropped it with a clatter.

She had seen her face!

Had she imagined the horrible zigzag of purple scars? The hideous puckering? She felt like screaming and turned to run. Through the dining room, through the foyer, and up the stairs. When she got to her room she burst in and ran to her bed. She immediately began looking around for something, then remembered ... she had left her mask in the dining room!

\* \* \* \*

Shadoe had slept late this morning, and was just stepping out of the shower. Wrapped in a towel, he sat down on the edge of the bed and put in a call to his captain. "Hey, Captain, what's happening up there? Can't solve a crime without me, right?"

"In your dreams, cowboy."

"Please, don't use that word."

"Oh, hell, sorry."

Shadoe laughed. "Just teasing. Samuels and Jones giving you a hard time? Tell me all about it. I've got a few minutes."

"The only one around here that gives me a hard time is you. Now that I'm rid of you, I'm living the life."

"Well, don't get too used to it. I'll be back, you know."

"When the hell are you coming back? If something did break loose we'd be short handed."

Shadoe laughed. "When I'm there I drive you crazy, and when I'm not you miss me. What the hell's going on with you, Noah? You sound like a wife."

"Insults, yet. So, where are you?"

"I'm way down in Georgia. Staying at the Scarlet Bay Inn. Nice little place. I was hoping you would see your way clear to letting me stay a little longer than planned. That's why I called."

“Got somethin’ hot goin’ on, huh? Yeah, sure. Nothin’ happenin’ here anyway. At least nothing we can’t handle.”

“Best thing that could’ve happened to me, you throwin’ me out on my butt like you did. You might want to put this place on your list of must sees. The sunrise is fantastic. I’ll bring a few brochures back so you can read ’em. Plus I took a few snapshots.”

“Hey, don’t get too comfortable. We need you back here. Just wanted you to get your head cleared a little.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be showin’ my face around there soon enough.”

“Hey, Madison. You are resting, aren’t you? I mean, you’re not digging up dead bodies, or looking through someone’s closets for a crime to solve, are you?”

“Me? Please! I’m on vacation. Bodies could be falling all around me and I wouldn’t blink an eye.”

“I seem to remember you saying something like that one other time. Remember that? You uncovered a coven of witches on some island. What was the name of it?”

“Captain, it wasn’t an island, it was in upstate New York. Some little place ... I don’t know ... just north of Tarrytown called Sleepy Hollow. Woodstock, Catskills. I visited all those places.”

“Oh, yeah. Headless Horseman territory.”

“Yeah, well, what can I say? Spooky gets to me.”

“Yeah? You solve more crimes away from home than you do here in your own backyard. How about giving us a little help now and then?”

“I would but you kicked me out. See ya.” Shadoe hung up laughing. He could almost see his captain’s face banging down the phone and yelling, “Bastard!”

Rubbing his stomach and frowning, he felt a few hunger pains clawing at his insides, dropped the towel and quickly got dressed. He glanced at himself in the mirror. Turning his head, he flipped his earring, which was his habit, then smoothed his hair. Tugging on his lapels, he shifted his shoulders to adjust his jacket, then left the room, deciding that nothing was going to keep him from getting

something to eat.

Stepping inside the French doors of the dining room, he looked around, finding it curiously empty. Just then the maitre d' walked up, and Shadoe indicated to the empty dining room. "Where is everybody?"

"The dining room is closed, sir. We open again for lunch at eleven o'clock. We remain open until two. Sorry."

Shadoe looked down at his watch. "I thought you stayed open until ten."

"No sir, we are open for breakfast from seven to nine."

"Well, apparently I was misinformed. I thought...."

"No sir, you weren't misinformed. During daylight savings time we keep earlier hours since it gets dark earlier."

"Oh yes. Daylight savings time. Is it that time of year already?" Shadoe smiled, slightly embarrassed. "Well, no problem, I'll come back for lunch."

"You may order room service anytime, sir."

"Yes, I know." Shadoe smiled at the gracious gentleman. "If I get too hungry to wait I'll do that. Thankyou."

The maitre d' stepped away from Shadoe and headed toward the kitchen. Shadoe was just about to turn to leave when something caught his eye. He stared at it intently, but couldn't tell what it was, so he walked over and picked it up. "My God, it's Julita's mask," he mumbled. A sharp stab of fear speared through him. Had something happened to her? He looked down at the mask, knowing how important it was to her. To get it off her was like pulling a stubborn tooth. She would never leave it behind ... not if she could help it. And that's what worried him.

His eyes darted around quickly. Then he stuffed it into his pocket and headed up the stairs. When he reached the second landing, his eyes fell on a set of winding steps that he'd never noticed before. They were draped in shadow and looked very unpretentious, almost as if they were hiding. He'd seen Julita heading toward them any number of times. His eyes trailed up into the darkness, but could see nothing until he walked over and looked up into a tower that the steps led into. Without thinking he began climbing. His shadow climbed with him, step by step, until finally at the top he

found a door. It was set in a portion of recessed wall, and a shadow covered it. The door showed patches of ashen wood under peeling paint.

It has to be the attic, he thought. One of the places Lucretia had warned him to stay away from. He turned the knob, expecting it to be locked, but it gave way easily. He eased into the room and looked around. It was a nursery. Shabby and small, the unusual room was round, fitting into the tower with a high domed ceiling, and high windows. If not a nursery it could have been used as a cell. He looked around, seeing stuffed animals and toys scattered around. A child's vanity table was beside the door, cluttered with a brush, barrettes, ribbons, and a music box. Crayons were scattered, and pictures torn out of coloring books littered the floor. A small bed, something a small child might use, occupied the main part of the room, but pushed back into a shadowy niche was a cradle, old, well used, with a pink blanket in it. Against another wall, beneath a window that looked out on the front lawn, was a baby bed.

Shadoe walked farther into the room, wondering what baby or small child occupied this room. He picked up the music box and twisted the key on the underside and it began playing. Just then a head popped up from the baby bed.

It was Julita! He looked at her as if he'd never seen her before. She was dressed in brief, baby doll pajamas and lifted herself to her knees, holding on to the sides of the bed. She looked like a beautiful woman playing the roll of a baby in some man's lusty fantasy. Her breasts were unbound, and jutting. The baby doll, ruffled and short, slid off her shoulders, exposing almost all of her breasts. Ribbons tied each side of her hair up in dog ears. When he looked at her, he couldn't help becoming aroused.

"Julita," he whispered, then looked around. "Is this your room? Why do you live in a nursery ... with a child's furniture, and...."

"Get out," she said, sobbing. "You can't be in here. She'll find you."

He thought of the mask, and slowly pulled the scrap of material from his pocket and held it out to her. When she reached for it, he held it just beyond her reach.

"You only get it back if you answer some questions."

"What questions? Why ... why are you here? You'll get into trouble ... we both will," she whispered, frightened.

"I found your mask ... I had to return it." His eyes searched her face. "Tell me. Why do you wear it? Is it part of the inn's charm ... it's appeal?"

“I ... I d-don't know what you mean,” she agonized. “Please go now, before she finds you!”

Shadoe gave her a suspicious look. “How do I know you're not just some little seductress who makes money for the inn on the side? You've been very friendly to me. Offering yourself. How many men have you lured into your little web? A sexy woman dressing up like a child ... it's every man's fantasy.”

Julita's face crumpled in tears. “Please ... I don't know what you mean. I dress the way I do ... bind myself up because Lucretia ... my sister ... tells me to.”

His suspicion turned to anger. “I can't believe that. You're a grown woman for God's sake. Why would you let her tell you what to do? You have a mind of your own, so you must be in this together. She gets you men and you....”

“No!” Julita sobbed.

“Why not?” Shadoe yelled. The thought of Julita being a whore tore at his insides. Tears swelled in his eyes, and almost spilled over, threatening to course down his cheeks. “The big hotels do it all over, why not this remote little inn? At least they're honest about it. Their girls are professionals. They don't have some little whore dressing up like a child running around driving the men crazy.”

“I don't know why,” she sobbed. “I ... I've always lived like this. I ... I don't know any other....”

Shadow's eyes scoured the room. “Just look at this place,” he said in amazement. “No one lives like this. It's a nursery ... a child's room.” He looked back at her. “And you're a grown woman.” His eyes narrowed on hers. “Is this your lair? Is this where the dirty deed takes place?” His voice became husky. “It seems I ... as have countless others, I imagine ... have played right into your hands. I mean,” he continued, forcing the words out, the hurt still sharp and strong, “finding you like this.”

“Why won't you believe me?” she sobbed, pleading with him.

He stared at her for a moment. To Shadoe the tears looked real. It confused him. He didn't know what to believe, and he couldn't think because of the heat that was burning inside him. He thought of what he had gone through to keep his hands off her ... to keep her pure and innocent. What a colossal fool he'd been. She was no innocent. To make up for all the cold showers he'd taken because of her, he was tempted to chuck it all and take the little thing right there in her baby bed.

Slowly she crawled out of the bed and came over to him. He looked down at her bouncing

breasts and couldn't think of anything but the aching desire he felt for her. All at once he caught her in his arms and kissed her, his mouth ravishing her face, her neck, then burying his head in the valley between her breasts. He no longer cared what game she was playing. Maybe he was the fly caught in her spiderweb, or maybe she was telling the truth and she truly was a victim in this mad, insane tale she was telling him.

"Don't ... not here," she said, interrupting his thoughts. "I'll come to you tonight," she whispered. "We'll be together then."

"The way I feel...." His breathing was labored. "I'll be too rough. I can't...."

She found his lips again and began kissing him.

He couldn't resist her. She was too much for him, and if he found out she was a whore, then he didn't care. He couldn't care. He wanted her too much to stand on principles. It was just the trickery of the whole thing. The show she'd been putting on. If she'd been making him believe something that wasn't true, that was difficult to forgive. No man liked to be made a fool of.

"I'm sorry you found out about this," she whispered.

"About this? You mean about you?" He hesitated. "Your little game?"

"No, I mean all this," she said, looking around the room. "The way I have to live."

"Come on, Julita, tell me the truth. It'll be all right. I just want to know."

"I told you the truth. Why can't you believe that?"

Taking a deep breath, he turned away from her and reached up and rubbed his eyes. He had no choice but believe her until he had proof she'd been lying. And then she dropped a bombshell.

"I want to go away with you," she said urgently. "Will you take me?"

"What?" he said, whirling around. "Away from the inn?"

"Away from the beatings, the...." She looked around. "This room! I want to live like a normal person."

Whoa, Shadoe thought. This was a whole different ball game.

“I want to wear lipstick,” she said, looking up at him, memories of the other night dancing in their eyes. “Pretty dresses.” She looked down at her feet. “Shoes.”

Things were happening too fast for Shadoe. Sure, he might take home some souvenirs, but a whole girl? He gazed down at her violet eyes and still saw innocence there. Still how could he leave her behind? Especially if everything she said was true. There was no way he could casually get in his car and go, knowing Julita was here, still in her misery ... still a victim. He reached up and raked his fingers through his hair. How would this thing end? Around every corner he found something new. And now even Julita wasn't who she appeared to be ... or was she?

## CHAPTER TEN

Garret's eyes opened slowly when he heard the faint, faraway sound of tinkling music. He glanced up at the ventilation shaft and stared at it for a moment, the tune bringing back the usual memories.

Then the voices began.

He leaned forward to listen. He couldn't understand what was being said, but his eyes quickened with concern when he discovered it was a man's voice. Something wasn't right. Why would a man's voice be coming from the same place where the music box was playing? The only voices he'd heard coming from that room were Lucretia's. He'd heard crying, razor straps cutting into someone's flesh, but never a man's voice.

It wasn't unusual to hear voices, he heard them from time to time. The guests talking, music playing, TVs blaring, or Lucretia during one of her passionate encounters with a vibrator.

But this was different.

He instinctively knew that this man, whoever he was, was trespassing in areas of the inn he wasn't allowed. And if that were true, then he must be looking for something. Evidence? Evidence of what? Garret thought of all the midnight diggings he'd heard just beyond these walls. If she was doing what he thought she was, then there must be any number of missing persons out there. People that had checked into the inn, and then disappeared. With all the legends and mysterious goings on connected with the inn, it had most certainly gained a tarnished reputation, but no one had ever ran an investigation into the strange happenings here. New hope surged within him. At last maybe Lucretia was going to have to pay for her sins. The idea was intriguing enough to keep him listening.

Straining at times, he managed to pick up a word here and there until a thought occurred to him. If he could hear voices through that antiquated old ventilator, there was a chance he could be heard as well. Quickly turning the wheels of his chair, he hurried over to the shaft and stretched upward, lifting his head.

"Hey!" he yelled. "I'm down here ... in the basement. Can you hear me?" He paused, and heard the voices become abruptly silent.

Shadoe's head jerked toward the ceiling. "What was that?" Then he looked at Julita. "Did you hear something?"

"No," she said timidly.

“Hello!” Shadoe yelled, his eyes elevated upward. “Hello!”

Garret’s old eyes sparked with new life when he heard the faraway voice. “Can you hear me?” he yelled. “I’m in the basement!”

Shadoe looked at Julita. “You must have heard that.” His eyes scoured the ceiling. “Where is it coming from?” His search stopped when he saw a ventilator shaft tucked neatly away from the main part of the room, hardly noticeable. He ran to it. “Hello!” he yelled.

An excited smile pulled at Garret’s lips. The voice was still faint, but the words came through with much more clarity. “Hello, my name is Garret Van Dare, and I’m trapped in the basement!”

Shadoe’s eyes filled with shock. Then he looked at Julita. “Did you hear that? Did he say he was trapped in the basement?”

Julita shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said in a timid, frightened voice.

He reached over and grabbed her shoulders. “What the hell do you know about this?” he demanded. “Is there someone in the basement?”

“No....” She shook her head, tears beginning to fall. “No ... I don’t know.”

She still seemed to be hiding something, making his anger spiral once again. “Julita, stop all this playacting, and talk to me” he bellowed. Taking hold of her shoulders, he shook her. “Don’t you understand for God’s sake, someone’s life may be in danger!”

“I don’t know,” she sobbed, looking at him in fear.

“Speak up for God’s sake!” he shouted angrily. “What do you know about this? Is someone down there?”

“I don’t know ... I ... really, I d-don’t know!”

“All right, damn it, so don’t tell me. I don’t know what the hell is going on in this place, but believe me, I’m going to find out.”

“Find out what....” she whispered, her face showing confusion. “I d-don’t know what you mean.”

“Are you in on it?” he asked, his hungry eyes looking the voluptuous child/woman up and down. “My God, I hope not.” He turned to leave the room, then noticed the mask in his hand. He turned and tossed it to her, but it landed on the floor in front of her bare feet. “Here’s your mask. Sorry to throw a damper on your plans. Try seducing some other sucker. I’ve got other things to do.”

Julita looked down at the mask that lay on the floor, crouched down, picked it up and clutched it to her. She stared sadly at the door he had slammed through, and knew her chances of leaving this place had gone out the door with him. For the first time in her life the thought of suicide flitted through her mind. Lightly, of course. Not landing anywhere. Not taking root. But it was there ... and it was a tantalizing idea.

\* \* \* \*

While Shadoe was hurrying down the steps he remembered the door he’d seen beneath the staircase. The door could lead anywhere, but he was counting on it leading down to the basement. Since the inn was full, he knew everything would wind down reasonably early. And with no expected guests, Lucretia would probably do her paperwork in the study. Then at a certain hour the recessed lighting would come on and the inn would sink deep into pools of shadow.

That was when he would make his move.

\* \* \* \*

Garret sat beneath the ventilator shaft still looking up into it. The music and the voices had stopped. Had they heard him? He thought so, but wasn’t sure. Suddenly he leaned forward coughing. It was a wonder he had the strength to lift his voice above a whisper. He was getting weaker and weaker. If Lucretia didn’t bring him some decent food soon he doubted he’d be strong enough to even sit up. He’d be bound to his bed, unable to do anything but lay there and die. He leaned his head back, almost too weak to lift it. He had to keep his mind on the man in the attic. If he had heard him, maybe, just maybe...

His eyes closed. It wouldn’t be long now. One way or the other, if someone didn’t find him soon, Lucretia would be burying him along with her other victims on the north side of the inn. Everytime she disposed of a victim, the next day a tree or a bush was brought in and placed over the grave like a headstone. The yard must be full of foliage or unique-looking statues she used to top graves. On windy nights he could hear her digging and imagined what her wild-eyed scrawny figure must look like in the dark. Even the rain didn’t stop her. If someone had to be buried, she took care of it.

Someday it would be him.

He sat there with his head leaning on the back of the chair, his weakness exhausting him. He dared to hope that maybe someone had heard him. And if they had, to have the good sense God gave a sand flea to not mention it to Lucretia. He hated to think of what he would have to face if she found out. No doubt about it, his time of demise would come earlier than expected.

\* \* \* \*

When Shadoe reached his room, his phone was ringing. He ran for it, taking a belly flop across his bed and grabbing for it. "Hello!" he barked into the receiver while rolling over and getting tangled in the cord.

The woman was unprepared for his loud voice. "Oh ... I ... I'm sorry, did I disturb you?"

"No, not at all," he said, trying to untangle himself. Giving one too many tugs on the cable, the phone clanged to the floor. "Oh, hell!" he grumbled, then reached down and picked it up quickly. "Hey, I'm sorry. I dropped the phone."

The woman on the other end chuckled. "Is everything all right?"

"Yeah, this damned telephone wire is all twisted up. Hold on a minute while I untangle myself." Dropping the receiver, he carefully lifted wires over his head and from around his chest until he was free. "Thanks for waiting," he muttered. "Damned things could kill you."

"Is this Mr. Madison?" she asked, looking at the name on the package.

"Yes."

"I'm Ms. Robbins from the gift shop. Your pictures are ready."

"Already?" Shadoe questioned. "Are you sure? I left them only yesterday."

"Well, Mr Madison ... that's because there were so few pictures on the roll."

"Do you know if they came out all right?"

“I have no idea, sir, the package is sealed.”

“Could you check for me?”

“Certainly,” she said, wedging the telephone receiver between her ear and her shoulder while she tore into the package.

Shadoe could hear paper rattling.

Reaching in and pulling the pictures out, she looked at them. “Let me see now,” she said, shuffling from one to the other. “Yes, they seem quite clear. Pictures of some old house or church ... in a wooded area....”

Shadoe felt like shouting, “Yes!” It was the church. So he wasn’t crazy after all. He had proof.

“Two very good ones of our incredible sunrise. You also captured the inn very well, and the grounds as well.”

“Thanks a lot. I’ll be right down for them.” Shadoe started to hang up, but heard the woman say something else. “Sorry, what was that?”

“Will you pay cash, or should I add them to your bill?”

“The bill,” he decided quickly. “Just add them to my bill, and I’ll pay for them when I leave. And thankyou. Thankyou very much.”

\* \* \* \*

That night Shadoe waited for Julita’s timid knock, but it never came. He was almost sure it wouldn’t, not after the awful things he’d said to her. She would probably avoid him from now on, and even though it bothered him, he knew he had to keep his mind on the important things. Ordinarily a night of the hottest sex he’d ever had with a little tease like her might be uppermost in his mind, but not tonight. Tonight he had other things to do. He knew he was right on the verge of a big discovery, and had to keep his mind clear and his hormones in check.

While watching the hands of the clock move painfully slow, the time finally came, and Shadoe grabbed a flash and crept out of his room. He took his time, creeping smoothly along, watching

for movement other than his own. He hesitated with every step he took, not wanting to run into the same thing he had the other night. When he finally reached the stairway, he crept down, then took a sharp turn and hid himself behind the tall lattice that obscured the door.

Standing perfectly still, he looked out between the squares and waited a while, just to make sure no one was around. Seeing no one, he turned the knob and opened the door. A rush of cold air hit him in the face, pungent with the damp smell of wet dirt and mold. He clicked on a flashlight and looked down through the dark tunnel of narrow steps that seemed to fall sharply into nothingness.

The cement steps were cracked and cobwebs danced overhead, suspended in the cold, damp air. Closing the door behind him, he began his flight down. To his ears, his scraping shoes sounded louder than a freight train, and he cringed with every step he took. He felt a cold, damp mist tickle his neck, reached back and found he had torn a cobweb from the wall. He brushed at it wildly as it draped across his shoulder, and the light jumped around crazily. Finally seeing the silken threads float toward the steps, he continued down, hanging on to the rail that seemed to be coming loose from the stones that in the narrow shaft took on the color of ghostly gray. Finally at the bottom he swept the light around, seeing more of the odd-sized concrete block walls. Realizing he'd been holding his breath, he was forced to take in a lungful of foul-smelling air.

He followed the narrow hall until he saw an iron door. Oh, God, how was he going to get past that? he wondered. He looked around, but there was nowhere else to go. If anything was down here, it was beyond that door, and he had to get it open. He tried the door, but it was heavy. With every bit of strength he had, he slowly opened it to a little chamber that housed rusty yard instruments that were caked with dirt. Overhead he noticed a wire with a naked bulb hanging down. He reached up and pulled a knobby chain, and the bulb flickered to life, the weak globe doing a poor job of revealing the dark corners of the room. The odor of wet dirt was gagging him, so he reached up and shielded his mouth and nose with his hand while he flashed the light around until his eyes anchored on a wooden door directly ahead of him. He quickly doused the little light and weaved through the yard instruments to the other side of the room.

When he finally paused in front of the door, he shuddered, realizing that he was surrounded by the deepest darkness he'd ever known. Feeling like he was in the center of the earth instead of the belly of an ancient old inn, he lowered his hand and carefully turned the knob, wondering what he would find beyond. Would it be another door? Another chamber? The maze in the belly of this old mansion was intriguing, but terrifying. Holding the knob in his hand, he turned it, hearing the old hinges squeak with pain as he pushed it open. Slowly the picture of a flickering light, a bed, and four walls of broken bricks and mortar came into view. Even though the dim light didn't give off much illumination, Shadoe could see someone lying in the bed. As he crept closer, he gasped at the hollow, skeletal face and body that lay almost undetected among a tangle of sheets and blankets.

"Garret Van Dare," Shadoe muttered. Looking at the old man, he could see the pallor of death on sunken cheeks, shadowed eye sockets, and a thin, papery skin, almost transparent. Shadoe could almost see the prints of his teeth against the thin skin ... something like a macabre skull grinning up at him in death. Shadoe couldn't keep a chill from dancing over his spine, and up his arms. No wonder

she had said he was dead, he was right on the threshold. He knew instantly that it must have been his voice he heard through the ventilator. He swept the light around, seeing exposed pipes that leaked, a cement floor, and a crude wall that looked more damaged than the others. The floor was littered with chips of brick and broken mortar. In one corner, beneath the overhead pipes was a sink streaked with rust, a dirty mirror full of rust patches, and a commode that barely served its purpose. Through an archway was another part of the basement filled with broken furniture, boxes, trunks, high windows, and a cement floor that was cracked and broken.

With the sweeping light continuing its search, he found the ventilator system within its bright circle. Looking back down at the old man, Shadoe's eyes searched his face once more, and Shadoe was surprised that Garret Van Dare had summoned the strength to yell. He imagined that the old cuss was strong despite the way he looked. It pleased Shadoe to believe that. To believe that the old man had refused to die, to have the strength of character to go on. He also knew he was probably a lot younger than he looked. His hair had receded a little, but was still thick and curly. It hung below his collar and was uneven, as if the man had chopped on it himself. Not completely white, but getting there. His face was not only lined with age, but had the suffering and anguish of hard times tattooed upon him. Shadoe looked closely at the old face. Despite all his wear and tear, the old man had an elegance about him that told Shadoe he had been someone at one time. Still looking down at the near-corpse on the bed, Shadoe knew he had found one more victim of the evil-eyed Ms. Van Dare.

He saw a chair at the end of the bed, moved away, and sat in it, thinking about what Lucretia had said about him being dead for fifteen years. My God, had he been down here that long? Now that Shadoe had found him, he worried about him. If the old man died tonight, then Shadoe had come too late. "God," he prayed softly, "please let him live." He repeated the prayer over and over while he watched the old man sleep.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, while Shadoe was dozing in his chair, Garret began stirring. Because Shadoe was hidden in a dark far corner, Garret didn't notice him right off, and went about his usual morning activities of lifting himself into his chair, washing as best he could, brushing his teeth, and using the bathroom in a jug, then flushing it down the commode.

He'd been wheeling around in his chair for a bit, when he came to a complete halt, his eyes falling on the young man asleep in the chair. He hadn't had time to react when he heard someone outside the door. He knew it was Lucretia with his breakfast. My God, she'll see him, he thought. He just had time enough to quickly grab a sheet and throw it over his head when Lucretia entered. The old man quickly wheeled away, not wanting to draw attention to it. He slowly turned his chair around and watched her as she lowered his tray on the mobile table, then wheeled it over to him.

He looked down at what she had brought him and closed his eyes while anger seethed within him. With the odor of rotten fruit and sour cottage cheese smothering him, he lost all control and threw the tray into the air.

“Is this what you call food?”

The clatter of the tray and the loud voice woke Shadoe, giving him a slight start. His eyes opened to see the sheet over him and didn't move. Through the white material he could just make out the old man in the chair and Lucretia leaning over him threateningly.

“Pigs eat it. I don't think it's too good for you!”

“Then feed it to the pigs. Better yet, eat it yourself.” He felt especially venomous today, so he continued. “Go ahead, you pig, eat it. I dare you to bite into one piece of that fruit. It's rotten, Lucretia, almost as rotten as you are! And I can smell the cottage cheese from here! It smells like something you dug out of the garbage!”

“You bastard. I'm getting sick and tired of your mouth. I'm the only reason you're alive and you know it.”

“Don't do me any favors, bitch! If this is the way you feed your guests, I'm surprised they don't turn you in to the Board of Health.”

“That does it, old man. I'm not going to stand around and listen to your mouth one more minute. Hell will freeze over before you see me again.”

She turned to stalk out, but caught a look at the sheet thrown over the chair. “What is your sheet doing draped over the chair?” She turned to him, her eyes demanding an explanation.

“I ... I ... just had a ... well a wet dream, and....”

“Oh, I see. You were trying to dry it out before I saw it, right?” She leered down at him. “And you make fun of me! Well, dream on you old bastard because your fucking days are over.”

Shadoe was shocked at Lucretia's crude language. It seemed to trip over her tongue easily, as much at home in someone's mouth as he had ever heard. And the sound of her voice seemed strange as it dug deep into her throat and came out a snarl. Either she had two different personalities, or hated her father to such an extent that it wasn't possible for her to speak to him in a civil tone as she did her guests, or even her help. He'd heard her on several occasions when she spat out orders. Even the times she'd turned her anger on him her tone of voice wasn't the same.

Suddenly the sheet was swept up, leaving Shadoe exposed, but Lucretia never turned her eyes

upon him, she simply laid the sheet over her arms and stalked out the door.

The minute the door closed, the two men's eyes met.

"Welcome," Garret said. "What the hell kept you?"

Shadoe chuckled, then shrugged. "Sorry, I got here as fast as I could." Seconds later, his eyes fell to the mess on the floor. He scowled at the fruit salad that was shriveled with age.

"My God, she expected you to eat that?"

"Are you kidding?" the old man said, jerking his wheelchair around. "That's one of her good meals."

Shadoe brought his eyes back up to the man. "How long have you been living down here?"

"Living?" Garret snorted, putting a cigarette in his mouth. "I wouldn't exactly call it living, but it's been fifteen years ... and counting."

"She's been taking care of you for fifteen years?"

"Taking care of me? Hell, man, you get funnier and funnier. She's been torturing me for fifteen years. I don't know what the hell I'm doing still alive." He looked down at the cigarette, reflecting for a moment, then lifted it slightly as if inviting Shadoe to look at it. "I keep sucking on these things hoping they'll kill me, but no. I just keep on breathing, day in and day out." His mouth twisted into a shrewd smile. "It's the only reason Lucretia buys them for me. She's hoping I'll die of lung cancer." He scowled at Shadoe through the thick smoke. "Do you know I haven't seen the sun, felt a raindrop, or enjoyed a breeze that hasn't been filled with that sickening magnolia muck in years?" Garret leaned conspiratorially toward Shadoe. "Know what I do for fun?"

Shadow was afraid to ask.

"I sit here day in and day out, in the dark, fantasizing about how to kill her." He sat back, his discerning eyes watching for Shadoe's reaction. Then with a dark, scowling smile, he said, "It's better than sex."

"Hell," Shadoe said, "I can top that. I've had fantasies of that sort, and I've only known her a little while."

Lifting the cigarette to his mouth and drawing the smoke into his lungs, he said, "Believe me, if the day ever comes that I do get to strangle that bitch, it'll be the best day I ever live. Maybe I'll let you watch."

Shadoe liked the old man. Even in his weakened state he was funny, and angry enough to stay alive for a long time to come. "By the way, my name is Shadoe... Shadoe Madison."

"I'm Garret Van Dare."

A slow smile spread across Shadoe's face. "No, you're not just Garret Van Dare ... you're the Garret Van Dare."

"Well," the old man began, flicking his ashes on the floor. "I'm the only Garret Van Dare that I know. If that earns me a the in front of my name, then I guess I'm him."

"You know for a long time I ... hell the whole world thought you were dead."

"I am ... so to speak. I just haven't had the sense to lie down yet."

"Your disappearance caused a big splash in the news. They were saying all kinds of things. You lost your mind and wandered off somewhere. You were abducted by aliens. One religious nut said you'd been raptured."

Garret looked at Shadoe, his usual scowl twisting into a smile. "That's the world for you."

"Just to let you know, I'm an undercover cop with NYPD. I'm supposed to be on vacation, but since I've been here I've seen some pretty strange things. I've decided to stay and try to find out what the hell's going on. How does that set with you? You willing to help me if I help you?"

"Welcome to my hell," Garret said, lifting his eyes and his weak arms, indicating the small, smelly space.

Shadoe just sat there staring. He couldn't believe he had solved the strangest case of all time. The mysterious disappearance of Garret Van Dare. Even beneath the thin face, the pallor, and the lines, he recognized him, and could discern the handsome, powerful man he had been. "My God, at one time you must have been worth millions."

“Still am. Say, I don’t want to break up this little tête-à-tête, but how hard would it be for you to get me something to eat?”

“Oh, God,” Shadoe said, jumping up, anxious to please the old man. “I’m sorry. What ... what do you want? Anything special?”

“I’ll eat anything that doesn’t eat me first. Tell you what, a sandwich ... a roast beef sandwich.” Then the old man frowned. “Hell, you’d never be able to get into the kitchen now, it’s....”

“I can order you something ... bring it down.” He looked at the old man. “Is there another way down here other than the door under the stairs?”

“None that I know of, unless you count the dumbwaiter.” He pointed to the two small doors in the wall with rusty handles.

Shadoe rushed over and opened it. He saw a rope and a flat wooden board. “My God, this thing is older than my grandmother.” He stuck his head in and looked upward. “Where does it lead?” He looked at the old man and smiled sheepishly. “Stupid question. The kitchen, right?”

“The kitchen’s just overhead. God, the smells that come out of that place.”

“Yeah, I can imagine. That must be hard on you.”

“Hell, I’m surprised I’m still in my right mind.”

Shadoe turned and looked toward the door. “Well, it’s for sure I can’t go that way. That witch is always at the front desk.”

Garret looked at his watch. “Just about now breakfast is being served in the dining room. Only the chef and his assistant will be in the kitchen, and he’ll have his back to you. It’s a chance in a million, but you may be able to make it.”

Shadoe looked inside the hole, then down at himself. “I don’t know, is it big enough?” He looked over at Garret. “What do you think? I’m pretty big, I don’t know if I would ever get my legs curled up in there.”

“I don’t know, but it’s either that, or taking your chances on the stairs.”

Trying to make a decision, Shadoe looked pensive for a moment, then began looking around for something to stand on. “Hell, I’ll try anything once.” He pulled a rickety wooden box over and climbed up on it. Using the rope inside as his leverage, he pulled himself up and managed to just barely fit himself inside.

“Got it?” the old man asked, hopefully.

“I think so.” He shifted a little. “I don’t think I could manage this if it weren’t so old. If they still have these things around today, they’re probably not quite so roomy. You know how the world is,” he said, smiling from within the hole. “Smaller, sleeker, more compact.”

“Good luck,” Garret said.

Shadoe saluted. “Be back as quick as I can.”

The shadows of early morning fell across Garret’s face while he watched Shadoe pull himself up into the narrow shaft of the dumbwaiter. Knowing he was at last rescued, his first thoughts didn’t anticipate seeing the sun, feeling cool breezes, or enjoying soft raindrops, his first thoughts went to Lucretia, his oldest daughter. Where, he wondered, would be a good place to bury her?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

While Shadoe was very subtly emerging from the dumbwaiter, Lucretia stood at the front desk staring at the screen of lattice that stood in front of the alcove. Something was wrong. It looked as if the screen had been moved. Who could have been back there? None of the guests would have reason to go back there, in fact guests and employees alike had become completely indifferent to the little touches of decoration that enhanced the beauty of the foyer. It could be no one but the cleaning crew. They must have moved the screen when they cleaned the floor and simply forgot to put it back. But still, she had to be sure. She looked down at the phone, picked up the receiver and buzzed the kitchen. "Send Hank to the front desk."

A ruddy-faced, red-haired teen looked toward the swinging doors leading into the dining area. Seeing Hank cleaning off tables, the teen went over, hung out the door and yelled, "Vampira wants to see you. Front desk, pronto."

"Hey," Hank said, indicating to the door. "She'll hear you, creep! Keep your voice down."

"Who cares?" Roy said, bravely while thumbing toward the front desk. "The old witch wants you. Better move it."

Turning back around, Hank mumbled, "Shit. What the hell have I done now?"

In only a matter of seconds Lucretia looked up and saw the young man hurrying in from the dining room, a cleaning rag in his hand.

"Have you cleaned the foyer today?"

"Not me, but I put one of our new people on it," he said, looking around as if she'd found dirt somewhere.

"The lattice screen," she said, "What about that?"

He looked confused as he looked around. "Which one? I told him to dust between the squares, and...."

"That one," she said, pointing.

The young man hurried over and stroked the white wood carefully, seeing no dirt. “Yeah, it’s clean.”

“That’s not what I mean. It’s been moved. I told you not to move it ... never to move it.”

“I’m sorry Ms. Van Dare ... he’s new ... he didn’t know....”

Lucretia breathed a sigh of relief. “It’s all right. Just make sure you tell him. If I find it moved again, I’ll fire you both.”

“Yes ma’am,” he said, backing away, “I’ll be sure and tell him.” Hardly believing his good luck, he rushed back to the kitchen and began dicing some vegetables. While his eyes darted around the room he whispered out the side of his mouth to another worker. “You won’t believe what I just saw.”

“Yeah?” she said. “What?”

“The old witch. She just turned into a human being.”

“You’re nuts,” the girl said, then walked away, and opened the refrigerator.

“Hey, I ain’t lyin’!” he said, following her. This time she just threatened to fire Mark and me, not cut us up in little pieces.”

“Well, don’t count on it lasting too long,” she said, grabbing something, then going back to the counter. “Crazy people have mood swings, you know. She must’ve had a good dose of blood for breakfast.”

He snickered, then said, “Yeah.” When he heard the board buzz and light up, he reached over and pressed the room number and mumbled, “Room Service.” He nodded as if the party on the other end could hear him. “Yes sir, right away, sir.” He looked over at the chef. “Room twenty-four wants a picnic basket packed. Roast beef sandwiches, chicken, potato salad, the works.”

“Comin’ up!” the chef called out. Then with a pair of kitchen knives in each hand he struck the glittering blades together like the professional he was, and began slicing, dicing, and calling out orders over his shoulder. Within minutes a basket was packed, and on its way to room twenty-four.

Shadoe heard the knock and turned quickly to answer the door. “Hey, great!” he said, digging

in his pocket for a tip, then extending the bills. "Good service, thanks a lot."

"Kind of breezy out there," the smiling young man said, as he took the money. "Not much of a day for a picnic."

Shadoe was about to say something, but the young man interrupted. "Hey, if you're interested, I know a spot. Down on the beach on the other side of the bones. It's a little cavelike thing. Good place to take a girl..." He winked. "Special girl, ya know? You'll be out of the wind at least."

Shadoe smiled. "Well, thanks ... uh ... what's your name?"

"Hank ... Hank Swanson."

"Thanks, Hank, I might just check it out."

"Can't go wrong," he said, backing up. He lifted his hand with the money in it and said, "Hey, thanks."

"You bet," Shadoe replied, watching as Hank headed for the back stairs. When he stepped back into his suite, he looked down at the large basket and wondered how he was going to get it downstairs.

Shadoe pictured the basement in his mind, and knew there had to be another way to get down there. He knew houses, even those as big as this one. It would be against some code if there wasn't another way out of that basement. There would be windows, high maybe, and difficult to get to, but they had to be there. That was one of the things he noticed about the section of basement where the old man was. No windows. He occupied only a small part of the basement, though. They probably started on the other side of the arched door, then extended all around the mansion. He felt a chill. As big as this mansion was, there must be a maze down there that any vampire in town could make himself at home in. He wondered where the door was. If it was in the part of the basement where the old man was, then it would be on the north side, probably in the part where the furniture, boxes, and wine racks were. Just then a bright idea came to him and he quickly pulled the door back open, and yelled down the hall. "Hank!"

The young man had already gone halfway down the back stairs, but stopped when he heard his name. Turning, he quickly skipped back up and looked around. "Yes sir!" he said with a big smile, running down the dimly lit hall to Shadoe's room.

"Hank," Shadoe said, thoughtfully, "I'm doing an article about the inn, and..."

The boy smiled widely. “No foolin’?”

“I’d pay for any information you could give me about the place. I’ve already taken some photographs, and now I need to fill in the story with some information.”

“Yeah, ask me anything. I know about this old place. Been workin’ here since I was sixteen. Part-time at first ‘till I finish school.”

“What about college?”

Hank shrugged. “I don’t know. You don’t have to go to college to be a chef, do you?”

“A chef, huh?”

Hank smiled. “Yeah. Otto’s teaching me all he knows. Then when I get the money, I’ll shoot on up to Savannah to their cooking school there.” He smiled, looking excited. “I’ll make a little money with what I learn there. Then soon as I can I’ll shoot on over to Paris. I hear they have some terrific cooking schools. I should learn a lot. Man, I can hardly wait. Hope to own my own restaurant someday.”

“Well, that’s great,” Shadoe said. “A French chef. Sounds good. I wish you luck.”

“Thanks,” Hank said. Then his face turned inquisitive. “You had a question ... something I can help you with?”

Shadoe hesitated, a frown appearing on his face. “Hank ... the basement ... how do you get down there? I mean, there must be more than one way.”

“Why would you wanna go down there?”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I don’t want to go down there, I just want to make sure there is more than one entrance into it. If there’s not, it could be a fire hazard you know.”

Hank smiled mischievously. “Lookin’ for ways to report the old bat, huh? Well, don’t bother. There’s a set of concrete steps behind a door under the stairway that she doesn’t think we know about. Then there’s a door on the north side of the inn. Leads right in there.”

Yes! Shadoe thought. He was right. He dug into his pocket and pulled out a bill. “Thanks, Hank.”

The boy looked down at the ten spot and his eyes widened. “Hey, thanks,” he said, then pushed it down into his jeans pocket. “Hey, anything else you wanna know, just ask. Like I said, I been here a long time, and I know where the bodies are buried.”

The joking words made a chill creep along Shadoe’s spine. The boy apparently didn’t know how close he had come to the truth, but Shadoe managed a responsive smile to his words and waved as he walked away.

Just as he’d suspected, Shadoe thought, while swinging a jacket across his shoulders and pushing his arms into it. He quickly grabbed up the basket and opened his door. He looked out to make sure no one was around, then caught himself. Jeez, what the hell am I being so careful about? I have perfect right to go on a picnic if I want. Been sneakin’ around too long, I guess. Comes kind of natural. He wondered why the old man hadn’t told him about the door. Apparently he didn’t know, Shadoe thought as he walked. Otherwise he might have managed someway to get out. Maybe he was wheelchair-bound, but he had the guts of a warrior, which filled Shadoe with respect when he thought of him.

After strolling down the steps, he boldly walked to the front door. Just as he reached for the knob, he heard Lucretia’s voice.

“A picnic? Today? A bit cool, don’t you think?”

“No, not at all. I like brisk weather. Besides, a very lovely weather girl said it would warm up later. I thought I’d take a walk in the woods. You know, make a day of it. Still looking for that waterfall,” he said, lifting up his camera as it swung from around his neck.

The moment he said it, her smile fell. “Yes, the waterfall.”

Shadoe knew what she was thinking, and turned to duck out before she decided to say anything else. Taking a quick glance at the lattice screen that hid the alcove, he hesitated, noticing that someone had moved it a little to the right to cover the door. He cut his eyes toward her, and wondered. Apparently she wasn’t suspicious.

She looked up, and saw him lingering in the doorway. “Something else?”

“Oh ... no ... just wondering if I’d forgotten anything.”

“It’s getting a little chilly, do you mind closing the door?”

“Oh, sure,” he said. “Well, later.”

She ignored him as if he’d said nothing, quickly turning to the phone when it rang.

He closed the door softly, then walked as if he were heading for the woods until he was on the other side of the inn. When he turned he didn’t see the door Hank had mentioned and felt a flash of worry. It must be in the back, he thought, then skirted around the cars, SUVs, trucks, even motorcycles until he saw the welcome sight of some steps leading down. It seemed very unobtrusive. Six steps were built next to the house with an iron rail around them, and the top of the door had four small panes that had been painted over.

Shadoe stopped and looked around, but didn’t see anyone. His eyes narrowed on the cars in the parking area, one by one. He’d been on a lot of stakeouts where he waited in cars all night and part of the day. Someone could hide out in a car and never be detected, especially at night. Most people didn’t think about it, only cops and criminals. He had been trained to look in car windows, and his eyes just naturally sought out anyone that might be sitting in one, hiding or not. The day was bright and breezy, and even though his eyes raked across the vehicles closely, he could tell at a glance that no one was around.

Feeling completely alone, he approached the stairs and began to descend. He kept a lookout while trying to open the door, but it wouldn’t budge. It was locked. He looked down at the doorknob and saw a keyhole. “Damn!” he muttered, knowing at once that a key, somewhere, was needed to open it. But where was it? Could it be hidden? Lost? He looked around on the ground, then felt along the door frame above the door, but found nothing. He stood wondering if he should break in. He examined the lock, finding it rusty and antiquated. Apparently it hadn’t been used in years. In spite of the age, he knew he could do it, but it would be difficult. He decided he would make a brief search for the key first, but if he couldn’t find it, then he would force the lock.

He put the picnic basket down and went up the steps, being thankful that the weather was cool and the sun wasn’t directly overhead. He could leave it there where it would be out of sight, snuggling in a cool shadow until he returned.

He hoped it would be done with the key ... otherwise he could be suspended for breaking and entering when the showdown finally came.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

As soon as Shadoe opened the door of the inn, his eyes fell on Lucretia. He was disappointed to see her. He had been hoping he'd catch her away from the desk, but there she was, big as life, as usual, and even uglier than he remembered.

Lucretia looked up, surprised to see Shadoe. "Picnic over already?" she asked.

"Not quite," he said. "I just thought of something I need to do." He walked to the desk hesitantly, his mind racing as he spied the key rack behind her. His eyes followed the long board, until he came to the very end where a hook with two keys dangled. One well used, the other old and rusty. A word was inscribed above them ... basement.

"Something I can help you with?" she said, bringing both his thoughts and his eyes back to her.

"You know the church I told you about?" he said, almost shyly.

"Yes," she said, while working.

"You were right. It wasn't there when I went back." He laughed, trying to act embarrassed.

She smiled, coming under his spell. "I knew it wouldn't be. After all, I've lived here all my life, Mr. Madison. You should learn to listen to people."

"You're right, of course. I guess I must have been dreaming." How the hell was he going to get rid of her? Finally he said, "I came back to get a bottle of wine. Can't have a picnic without a bottle of wine."

"The kitchen is closed, you'll have to order it from Room Service."

"Yes I know," he said, watching her closely. "You know, I hate to go all the way back up to my room. Could you do it for me since I'll be taking it with me?"

"I suppose," she replied, laying her pen down and picking up the phone. "Any preferences?" she asked, angling her eyes up at him. "White, red?"

“House wine will be fine ... red if you have it,” he said, thinking of the roast beef.

Waiting only a moment, she said, “Paula, bring a bottle of the red house wine to the front desk. Yes, thank you.” After hanging up the phone she reached for something, but couldn’t find it. She lifted papers, folders, then looked toward the door behind her.

“Lose something?”

“Yes ... would you excuse me, I lost my glasses. I must have taken them off in the back room and laid them down. I won’t be a minute.”

What a break, Shadoe thought. “Take your time. I’ll just step over here and wait for the wine.”

He shuffled backward, but kept his eyes angled on her, ready to jump when she was out of sight. Instead she stopped and looked back at him suspiciously. “I can trust you to leave the register alone, can’t I?”

Shadoe forced a laugh as if she’d made a joke, then lifted his hands. “I won’t touch a thing ... promise.”

The minute she was out of view he hurried over to the counter. Just as he was about to reach for the keys, a girl appeared around a corner carrying his wine, followed by Lucretia stepping out of the back room, carrying her glasses. What now? Shadoe thought. Then an idea came to him. “Say ... uh ... Paula,” he said, suddenly remembering her name. “Could you bring out two glasses and a corkscrew?”

“Sure,” she said, then turned and disappeared around the corner.

He was jumping inside, precious time passing while he waited for the girl to appear with the items he had requested. When she had, he quickly jumped at her, grabbing them from her hands and putting them on the desk with the wine. Then looking at Lucretia, he cleared his throat self-consciously. With the flair of a fine gentleman, he bowed slightly and said, “Ms. Van Dare, may I escort you to a table?”

She looked up from what she was doing. “What?”

“Please,” he said, indicating toward the dining room. “I’d like to speak with you for a moment. May I?”

She frowned and angled a suspicious look at him. “What are you up to now, Mr. Madison?”

He gave her a flirtatious smile. “I assure you my intentions are honorable.”

“Why the dining room? Why can’t we talk here?”

He frowned in distaste. “Too officious. For what I have in mind we need a social setting.”

Not sure why she was humoring him, Lucretia came out from behind the desk slowly, watching him as if she didn’t trust him.

He gently led her to the dining room, then to a table in the corner, making sure it was private, and obstructed her view of the desk.

He pulled her chair out and she became watchful. As she slowly sat down, she said, “I almost expected you to pull it out from under me.”

“Ms. Van Da--” His words stopped abruptly, his face softened, and he flashed her his most charming smile. “Lucretia,” he continued, his words a sexy whisper as he took her hand in his. “What a beautiful name.”

“Mr. Madison, what...?”

“Shadoe,” he said, “please call me Shadoe.”

“Is this some kind of joke?” she asked, looking at him in total disbelief, then narrowed her eyes. “Just what are you up to? This isn’t your way of getting an interview out of me is it?”

“As a matter of fact...” Unexpectedly, he stopped his flow of words and looked around. “It seems I’ve forgotten something.” He jumped up as if anxious to get on with romancing the witch and hurried to the counter. He glanced up at the basement keys, turned his head and looked back to make sure she wasn’t watching. With a quick hand he grabbed them and slipped them in his pocket. Not wasting a minute, he made one giant swoop and grabbed up the wine, glasses, and corkscrew and hurried back to the table. Placing everything on the table in front of him, he made a big deal of opening the wine, poured two glasses, then sat opposite her and made a little speech. “I’d like to make a toast to you, Lucretia, and to the success you’ve made of this place.” His eyes traveled over the structure, then returned to her and tried to look apologetic. “I know I’ve given you a hard time, even tried to find something wrong with the inn, but I’ve been unsuccessful. It really is a four-star establishment, and I just want to say I’m sorry for the way I’ve acted. From here on in I’m just going to enjoy myself and

give the inn a top-notch review. What do you think about that?"

"Well ... you didn't have to do all this, I...."

"No, no, I've been a royal pain, I know, and I just wanted to bury the hatchet." Bad choice of words, he thought, remembering what he'd seen in the foyer the other night.

"Yes, you have," she agreed. "But ... well, your apology is accepted. Now, I really must get back to the desk."

"But we haven't had that toast yet."

To indulge him, she lifted the glass to her lips.

"No, no," he said, "first we clink the glasses." He lifted his glass toward her.

"I thought we already did that."

"No, not yet. I know, let's do it like they do in the movies."

"Whatever you say," Lucretia said, and watched him as he made the toast.

"To this first-rate establishment, and its very charming owner," he said, then winked. Somehow it seemed like an intimate gesture, and when their eyes met, he had to force himself not to turn away, sick to his stomach. All he needed now, he thought, was for this witch to fall in love with him. When she just sat there staring at him, he said, "The toast has been made so now we clink and drink." When she still didn't move, he said, "Go ahead ... you know ... the way they do it in the movies."

"Oh ... yes," she said, coming out of her reverie. She moved her glass close to his, and they touched, clinking softly in the hushed atmosphere of the dining room. While watching him sip his wine, she carefully put the rim of the glass against the crimson line of her snakelike lips and opened slightly. She drank one short sip, then put it down. "There," she said, her midnight eyes still holding his captive, "how was that? Okay?"

"Just like Joan Crawford," he said, almost spewing his own wine when he made the comparison. Mommie Dearest was a pussy cat next to this witch. He looked down at his watch. "Hey, I didn't realize it was so late. I guess I'd better get going." He jumped up and pulled out her chair, and

helped her around the table.

“Well,” she began, sorry their little rendezvous had to come to an end, “enjoy your picnic.”

“Thanks,” he said as he slipped through the dining room door, praying that she wouldn’t notice that the basement keys were missing.

Again he hurried toward the path in the woods until he was around the side of the mansion and out of sight. Doubling back, he skirted the cars once again, his cop training still in overdrive as he found himself staring into the dark interior of the car windows. He hurried down the short flight of steps, his basket still waiting for him. He thought of ruined roast beef and again gave thanks that the weather was almost cold, and that the chilly little shadow had kept the basket as cool as any refrigerator. Drawing the keys out of his pocket quickly, he tried first one, then the other, finally feeling the doorknob give way.

But he was immediately faced with another problem.

Something was jammed tight against the door. He pushed as hard as he could, but it moved only a fraction of an inch. He turned to push with his back, heaving and shoving and breathing heavily as he scowled, strained and grunted, but the door had only moved a few more inches. He stopped for a moment and looked at the tiny opening, then down at himself. Knowing this was a battle he couldn’t lose, he took a deep breath and tried again, this time trying to force his slim frame through sideways. It took a while, but once he worked his way in between the door and the frame, it gave him leverage, and he managed to push the door open a little wider, getting the picnic basket through. Once he was in, he got busy restacking the boxes in another spot away from the door, giving him a hasty entrance and exit from the basement. Exactly what he needed.

The windows overhead allowed for just enough light to let him see that this side of the basement was filled with broken furniture, boxes, trunks, and old appliances. But at least he was in. He coughed, inhaling dust, and fighting cobwebs as he set the basket aside and began making a pathway for himself to get to the old man. When he’d almost made his way through, he could see him napping in his chair. But something wasn’t right ... he was too still. His breathing ... my God, he couldn’t tell if the old man was breathing or not. Coming closer, a shot of fear traveled up his spine.

The old man was dead ... he knew it.

Rushing over to him, he began to shake him. “Garret, Garret!” He wasn’t responding. Oh, God, he wasn’t responding! He immediately put two sensitive fingers on his pulse and felt only the slightest response. He looked around wildly, wondering what to do when he spotted the sink. He rushed over to the sink and wet a ragged old washcloth, then brought it back and began hurriedly stroking it along his face and neck. “Garret,” he yelled, “Garret, wake up ... you’ve got to wake up!”

Slowly the old man began moving, his heavy lids fighting to open.

“What the hell is it, Garret? Are you okay?”

“Thank God you’re here,” he managed to barely rasp out. Then with lids that were still heavy, he tried to pull his shirtsleeve up to show Shadoe his arm. Shadoe reached over and pulled it up. He found a pin prick and it was bruised. The old witch had used a hypodermic on him.

“She’s trying to kill me,” he whispered, his speech slurred. “I’m not dying soon enough for her, she’s trying to kill me.”

“What did she give you? Do you know?”

“S-sedative, I think. She came down right after you ... after you left.”

“Hell, she must’ve given you enough to make an elephant sleep for a year.” He pulled at the old man’s collar, shaking him. “You’ve got to fight it off.” The old man was limp, hardly any life in him at all. Desperate, Shadoe reached out and grabbed the basket and put it on his lap in front of him.

He pushed it away. “I can’t eat ... appetite gone.”

“You’re going to eat you old bastard, now sit up and chow down.” Shadoe wrestled with him, slapping his cheeks, and trying to force his lids open. “Has she done this to you before?”

“No ... leave me alone ... want to sleep.”

Shadoe knew the effects of a sedative. All you want to do is sleep, your appetite becoming a thing of the past. She wouldn’t give him enough to kill him, just keep him so drugged up that he’d lie down here and eventually starve to death. He reached into the basket and pulled out a roast beef sandwich. Without unwrapping it, he waved it under his nose. “Wake up, I’ve got food for you.” It didn’t seem to help, so Shadoe began pleading with him while he continued to wipe him down. “Garret,” he said, his voice almost a whisper. “Don’t let that witch win. Eat so you can get enough strength to fight back.” He finally grabbed the bottle of wine he had shared with Lucretia and turned it over and forced it down the old man’s throat. He gurgled, the wine overflowing his mouth and dripping down his chin to his hollowed chest. “Where does she keep these drugs, do you know?”

“I don’t know,” he said, trying to keep his eyes open, “her room, I suppose.”

“Which one is it?” When the old man didn’t answer right away, Shadoe shook him. “Garret, stay awake. Which room?”

“Room tw-twenty-nine ... near the ... attic.”

The attic, Shadoe thought, then wondered, did she give Julita drugs as well?

When the old man began to get a good taste of the wine, he suddenly grabbed the bottle from Shadoe and began drinking, the ruby liquid streaming down his chin like blood.

“Hey, watch it. Don’t drink too much. At least not without food to buffer it ... at least that’s what I’ve heard. I wish to hell I’d brought some coffee. I’ve got beer, though. Think you could get some of that down?”

“Beer? You have beer?”

“Hell, yes, I’ve got beer,” Shadow said, becoming excited that the old man seemed to be waking up. Just wait ‘till you see all the goodies I’ve got for you.”

“F-food” the old man muttered. “Give me s-some food.”

Shadoe dug down into the basket, pulled out the roast beef sandwich he’d waved under his nose earlier, and gave it to him.

The old man grabbed it and began eating.

“Hey!” Shadoe yelled, half laughing. “Take the wrapper off. It’ll taste better that way.” He reached up and pulled the shredded paper out of the old man’s mouth, then off the sandwich and let him go at it. The old man almost growled with pleasure as he ate. “You know, you’d better take it easy at first. Too much might make you sick. You’re stomach’s not used to it.”

“Don’t worry about me. How about opening up one of those beers?”

“Sure,” Shadoe said, then settled back with a chicken leg and watched the old man guzzle down three bottles along with cheese, wine, potato salad, and a few pieces of chicken. It did his heart good to see the old man eat, but laughed when all at once he fell back and moaned. “Hey, I have no sympathy for you. I told you.”

The old man didn't reply, just looked at Shadoe, and said, "Thanks. I haven't had a full stomach in years. By the way, how'd you get down here?"

Shadoe lunged forward. "Oh, my God, I forgot to tell you. Do you know there's a door back there?" He pointed past the wall that partitioned off the two sides of the basement.

"Sure, I know about it, but it's been sealed up, or something."

"No, it hasn't been sealed, just locked with a load of boxes and furniture piled against it."

"Are you saying you got in through that damned door? How'd you do it?"

"I stole the key," he said, "then managed to push a few things out of the way. The best part is, I don't have to use the friggin' stairs anymore, or the dumbwaiter."

"Do you think you could make a path wide enough for me to get out?"

"I've already started. But just outside the door is about six steps. You'd never get up unless someone helped you."

"Hey, that's what you're here for."

"You got it, pops," he said, and winked.

The old man looked at him, giving him a sly, scowling, intelligent smile. "You young bastard. I wouldn't let anyone but you call me that."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The two men were just finishing up their beer when the faint, tinny notes of a music box began playing.

“What’s that?” Shadoe said, looking around.

Garret put a thin finger up to his lips. “Shhh,” he whispered, then nodded his head in the direction of the ventilator.

A voice began speaking, but it was faint and hard to hear.

“It’s Lucretia,” Garret whispered. “She’s in Julita’s room.”

Shadoe inclined himself closer and cocked his head to hear better.

Suddenly Lucretia’s angry voice shattered the silence. “You filthy little whore! He was here, wasn’t he? What did he do? Did he touch you?”

“No,” Julita sobbed, her voice trembling with fright. “He brought ... he brought my m-m-mask.”

“You mean he saw you without your mask on?” Lucretia shouted, insane fury showing on her face.

“I left it....”

“You ugly little monster,” Lucretia snapped, her midnight eyes squinting at her with hate. “You had your mask off outside this room?” Lucretia’s voice dropped to a low, threatening tone. “You will never leave this room again, do you hear? You will diiiie in this room.” The word came out as a hiss among all the others. “Just like your father in the basement.” Her lips thinned, then viciously coiled. “Who knows? Maybe he’s dead already.”

“What?” Julita’s usually timid voice was strong as she mounted to her knees. “You told me my father was dead.”

“Did I? A lie, to keep you in your place.”

“Then he is down there,” she breathed softly.

“Yes, he’s down there, but you’ll never get to see him. He’s weak, starving to death. If the bastard won’t eat what I give him, then let him die! He’s been a pain in my butt long enough.”

Julita felt a sweep of anger such as she’d never known blossom inside her. She remembered Shadoe saying he’d heard something. A voice ... a weak voice coming up from the basement. She hadn’t been sure at the time, but it was true ... they had heard something. They had heard her father calling out for help. Tears welled in her eyes. She wanted to jump at the witch and scratch her eyes out, but she knew the danger of moving on Lucretia. Instead her enraged violet eyes became pointed, watching every move she made. Lucretia had been the closest thing to a mother Julita had ever known, and now she found she’d been lying to her. What else had she lied to her about? She reached up and touched her face, not feeling the scars Lucretia had convinced her were there. Suddenly she realized her mind was crisp and clear, not muddled by drugs. She could reason, think things out.

She looked around her room, looking for a mirror. The fear she’d felt was suddenly gone and she wasn’t afraid to see what her face might look like. She wanted to know the truth. Why wouldn’t Lucretia allow mirrors in her room? She couldn’t believe her evil sister would be so kind as to want to spare her the hurt of seeing her ugly face. She knew if there was something horrible to see, Lucretia would quickly push her face into the mirror and gloat on her scars. No. None of it made sense. Maybe that was why Lucretia had stripped her room of mirrors and forced her to wear a mask outside the room. She was afraid Julita would see her face ... and know the truth!

Julita remembered the beatings she’d received through the years. When Lucretia wasn’t hitting her she was twisting her limbs, pulling her hair, and knocking her around. Lucretia’s tyranny left Julita literally beaten down, existing night and day with a fear that to her was a living, breathing thing. An ugly monster she couldn’t see, but could feel everywhere. All the lies had been so deeply inbred into her that they weren’t easy to put aside now that she was grown. In all that time the question of looking into a mirror was foreign to her. Lucretia had said no, so she didn’t. She had thought about it a few times, but would cringe at the prospect, because she knew if she ever saw the face Lucretia described to her, she would never get over it. She felt secure in her mask, and tugged on it many times during the day to make sure it still hid her face. Now that she had found out Lucretia had lied about her father, she knew it was possible that she had lied about so many other things, even her face.

But it had to end. The lies, the tyranny, the beatings, it all had to end! She wanted to see her face, her father, and she wanted help, help from the stranger. Without him she didn’t know how well she could manage, but she would try. She could hardly believe her father had been imprisoned in the basement all these years. It suddenly dawned on Julita that through the years she had been imprisoned herself. Maybe not physically, but she’d been subject to Lucretia’s insane whims.

She looked down at herself, her eyes at last open, and for the first time really saw the ridiculous costume Lucretia made her wear. The large, shapeless dress, the binding, the dog ears. She’d

never even owned a pair of shoes. She'd been robbed of the chance to grow up as other girls had. To go to school, have boyfriends. Instead Lucretia had imprisoned her in an attic nursery, controlling her with drugs and lies, teaching her only the merest facts to get along.

She had to be able to read to help out around the inn, so Lucretia taught her. Some of the others had taught her about numbers ... how to add, subtract, multiply, but she hadn't learned any more than that. She listened to some of the others talk about high school and college, and a yearning would fill her. She stole magazines and read them, looked at the pictures. She knew there was so much to learn, to experience, to see, and she wanted to, but knew she never could while she was here ... here in Lucretia's insane world. All at once she picked up her mask and threw it at Lucretia. "I won't wear it anymore," she yelled.

Lucretia looked at Julita with her hellish, midnight eyes that glinted like shards of ice, thinking this was Julita's latest form of rebellion. "What do I care?" she snapped. "You'll never leave this room anyway." She leaned toward Julita. "Do you understand, you filthy piece of trash? You're going to die!" A small smile tilted Lucretia's snake lips and a look of wonder filled her eyes as she shifted them and looked away. "And I'll be free," she hissed. "It's time. Yes, it's time," she said, looking once again at her sister. "I've met someone," she said, giggling like a schoolgirl. Then cutting her cruel eyes toward Julita, she said words she knew would hurt. "It's the big, beautiful savage. You know, the one you were so hot to have?" She snickered. "Poor little Julita, he was only playing with you, don't you know that? But now he's made his choice. And it's me!" She saw what she construed as jealousy on Julita's face. "Did I tell you I drank wine with him today? Yessss," she hissed, feeling triumphant over her beautiful sister. "Me. Ugly Lucretia. And the way he looked at me--" she looked away, remembering his eyes, "--oh, so intimate." She cut her malicious eyes back toward Julita, and they filled up with hate. "It's time both you and Papa were out of the way. I've taken care of you long enough. Now I have my own life to live. At last I'll be rescued from this--" she lifted her eyes to the rafters, "--this crumbling old inn." Her eyes drifted down and looked at Julita. She began speaking as if engaging her in a sisterly chat. "He's from New York, you know. We'll live there ... in the big city. I would invite you to come and visit, but--" she hesitated, furtively sliding her hand into her pocket, "--you'll be dead!"

"No!" Julita whimpered, shaking her head in fearful denial as she watched Lucretia's hand grope around in her pocket.

"Oh, yes!" Lucretia said, walking toward Julita, the long, glinting hypodermic needle dripping with poison as it pointed toward the ceiling.

"No!" Julita cried desperately, inching back in the corner of her bed, "No!" When Lucretia kept coming, Julita's eyes rose to the ceiling, suddenly remembering the ventilator. "Help!" she screamed, desperate. She didn't know if anyone could hear her, but hoped her voice was being carried through the square hole to someone ... somewhere.

"Be good, now, and take your medicine," Lucretia said, her voice soft and threatening. She

stepped toward Julita, her eyes shining with dementia. “You need a nice, long, nap,” she whispered. “A nice loooooong nap,” she emphasized, an eyebrow arching.

Shadoe heard a sob and looked at Garret. The old man had tears creeping down his thin, wrinkled cheeks. “Julita,” he sobbed, his face in his hands. “My little Julita.” He cast a pleading look at Shadoe. “She’s going to kill her.” He pounded on his legs. “Damn these legs!”

Suddenly a loud sound brought their eyes back up to the ventilator.

A rattle of furniture sounded as Julita suddenly jumped off the bed to the other side. Lucretia was between her and the door, but she lifted the cradle, threw it at her, and saw Lucretia fall backward, bump into the vanity, which sent the music box crashing to the floor. This gave her the chance she needed and she quickly skirted around Lucretia while watching her grope for the hypodermic she had dropped. Finally grabbing the doorknob, Julita flung it back, but Lucretia was immediately behind her and slammed it closed. Julita was trapped against the door, looking fearfully at the hypodermic in front of her eyes, poised and ready for penetration. All at once she raised both arms, one knocking the hypodermic to the floor, and the other rapping Lucretia in the chin, causing her to stumble backward.

When Julita saw Lucretia sprawled on the floor, she flung the door open, lunged through it, and quickly ran down the steps. She didn’t know where to go. The only place she could think of was his room, so she sprinted down the hall. When she found the door, she rapped on it, not with her usual timid knock, but with a pounding of her fist. She knew she didn’t have much time, and rapped again, and again while looking around for the first sign of Lucretia coming for her. But still there was no answer. Realizing he wasn’t there, she tried to turn the knob and found it locked. She turned with a start when she heard a scrambling sound coming from the attic stairs. It was Lucretia. Where could she go? She looked around frantically. She saw the back stairs and turned. Scrambling down them, she found herself in the kitchen, only steps from the back door.

The two men heard the grappling, and were hoping Julita had managed to escape. Garret turned to Shadoe when he heard the door slam. “Go get her! Hurry! If Lucretia gets her hands on her, she’ll kill her!”

Shadoe nodded, then turned, heading out through the maze of boxes and broken furniture. He slammed through the door, ran up the steps and around the mansion just in time to see Julita burst out the back door. He waited, seeing her turn and head for the woods, then lunged out and grabbed her. At that instant a wail rose from her throat and Shadoe reached around and clamped his hand on her mouth. She struggled and kicked against him, but he held her secure as he drug her down the cellar steps and inside.

Julita continued to struggle, scratching at him like a wild animal.

“Julita!” he yelled. “Stop! It’s me, for God’s sake!”

Julita was struggling so hard she didn't hear him. He finally grabbed her wrists and pinned her hands behind her, holding them with one hand. With his free hand he buried his fingers in her hair and jerked her face toward him and quickly closed his mouth over hers.

Slowly the struggle stopped and the hurried bruising of her lips turned to a melting, delicious sensation that naturally relaxed the hold on her wrists, allowing them to creep up around his neck. All at once she remembered the cruel things he had said to her and pulled away, wiping at her mouth and looking at him with fearful eyes.

"What's wrong?" he said, watching her back away from him. "You're safe, do you understand? I'm not going to hurt you."

Her head turned, her eyes taking in the dusty, dirty, crowded room.

"This is the basement," he continued, walking toward her, carefully reaching for her hand.

"The basement?" she repeated, her eyes becoming bright with hope. Her eyes darted around. "Where is he?" she whispered, "Where's my papa?"

While she had her head turned he suddenly grabbed her hand and began to drag her along with him.

She pulled back, sliding on the cold concrete. She yanked at his hand, then leaned over and bit him.

"Ouch!" he yelled, breaking his hold.

She quickly turned and ran.

He chased after her, grabbing her from behind boxes where she tried to hide. When he had her tight within his grasp, he circled his arm around her waist while he pulled her along with him.

Still she reached out, grabbing at boxes or furniture, anything to help her pull away from him. But it was no use. His hands were strong, his fingers like cords of steel.

He continued to pull her through the maze until they rounded a corner and came out into another part of the basement. She immediately saw a grizzled old man in a wheelchair and knew the

stranger must be her father.

“Papa?” she whispered.

“Yes, baby, it’s me,” he said. Tears coursed down his ragged old cheeks while he held out his hands to her. Just then Shadoe released her, and she ran to him.

The very second she crawled into his lap, pictures flashed through her mind of a younger man with dark curly hair, a strong body, and handsome features. Now he was weak, old, his body emaciated from years of starvation and torment ravaging his body. She could feel his hands trembling as they touched her, and she knew he must be very weak. Being afraid her weight might be a burden on him, she pulled away, but he wouldn’t let her go. And so she nestled in his arms, expecting the feeling to be so natural ... so right. But something was wrong. Why did his words suddenly have the barest hint of vulgarity as they whispered in her ear, his hands go from a loving caress to a pawing brute, and the warmth of his arms suddenly feel insistent, forceful ... like she should be fighting his touch instead of welcoming it.

And his kisses ... why did they seem so ... hungry?

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Shadoe watched Julita's face being showered with her father's kisses and had a crazy feeling for a moment that she was struggling with him ... fighting off his crazed affections. But after watching them for a moment, he dismissed the feeling as an overactive imagination.

"I ... t-thought you were dead," she said shyly while furtively trying to loosen herself from his grip. "Lucretia ... she told me...."

"I know, baby. She told me the same thing about you." He turned toward Shadoe. "She never actually told me she was dead, she just alluded to the fact, keeping me in torment, not knowing. Being trapped down here, it's hard to know what's real." Turning back to Julita, he pulled back, a frown etching his face. "What in hell is that on your face?"

Julita reached up and touched her skin, realizing her father was seeing her without her mask. "I...."

"Lucretia's handiwork," Shadoe interrupted. "Damn, that woman's a piece of work."

Garret grabbed Julita's face, and turned it back and forth. "My God, it looks like someone has drawn scars on her face." He looked up at Shadoe. "What the hell is going on?"

"It's a long story, Garret."

"Yeah? Well, for some reason I find my calendar empty. No meetings to go to, no phone calls to make, hell, all I have is time. Now, I want to hear it, damn it."

"You'll hear it all, I promise, but before all that we have some plans to make."

"I suppose you're right," Garret growled, "but don't make me wait too long. I'd like to have just one more reason to cut her heart out and serve it to her on a platter."

While the two men continued to talk, Julita nestled in her father's arms. She tried to keep her eyes off Shadoe by allowing them to dart around the dark basement, but it did no good. They always came back, searching his dark and savage face until they found his lips. Full and beautiful. She had always thought watching him was like watching the leading man of a wildly sensuous movie. She thrilled when she and he began to kiss, her eyes closing while the music surrounded her. His presence was so strong he took her breath away, and then their bodies would begin to meld.

But she couldn't go any further.

She knew that something lay beyond the kisses, a dark and dangerous something that could easily turn into ecstasy. She wanted to know what it was, and she wanted him to teach her. Her eyes moved up to his, their green glow reminding her of something primitive and untamed. She'd never known a man, at least not one like Shadoe. He reminded her of the ones she'd seen in magazines and on TV, yet he was so much better. They were so flat, unreal, not at all like him. He felt like a man ... even smelled like one. He had a presence that was forceful and compelling ... almost formidable. She shivered as she nestled in her father's arms, timidly watching the man she'd been willing to give herself to. The dark stranger, the leading man of her fantasies.

"So what have you got in mi--" Garret began, but his words faded when he saw the two of them looking at each other as if no one else were in the room.

The looks in their eyes gave Garret a sudden jolt. His eyes darted from one to the other, realizing for the first time what was going on. His body may be frail, and he might have to sit on an ass so bony it almost cut into his flesh, but his eyes were sharp ... and he didn't like what he saw. Being very quiet, he observed them, knowing all too well what Shadoe was thinking about his daughter. He looked back at Julita, and the look she gave Shadoe triggered something inside him. Anger? Maybe, but also jealousy. He hadn't felt it in a long time, and it was as surprising to him as it would be to either of them if they knew. But there it was ... a bitter, sharp bile that pushed up into his throat so hard that he thought he might choke on it. His eyes narrowed when they darted back to Shadoe, trying to see what Julita saw. Strong body, rippling muscles, and a handsome face. His eyes moved along that handsome face, taking in his dark skin, the imbedded jade jewel and long hair. He could easily picture Shadoe in Indian attire ... feathers all over him. Another sensation rose up in him, and the word half-breed whirled around in his mind. Ugly word to be sure, but to him he was just calling it the way he saw it. And he'd be damned to hell for all eternity before he let his daughter get mixed up with a dirty redskin. In that instant he felt a huge rush of determination while fresh red blood filled his veins. He already felt like his old self ... a big, bawdy, harsh businessman who commanded others. No one told him what to do. He came and went as he pleased, did what he pleased. For some people having money meant a lifetime of leisure on beachfront property, boats, and perpetual golf games ... but not for him. He put his money to better use. It could be turned into a weapon ... an enticement ... even a threat. He didn't let anything get in the way of what he wanted. And if what he wanted was sometimes perverse ... even bordering on immoral or corrupt ... well ... it didn't matter. It's what he was ... is. His eyes narrowed on Shadoe, knowing this was one of those little irritating things he would have to take care of ... and he would, he sure as hell would. But not now, the time wasn't right. Right now he had to play along ... let the Indian call the shots. But not for long. So, with great effort he pushed these feelings aside and again asked, "So, what have you got in mind?"

Shadoe looked at him, his eyes dazed. "Huh?"

"I said," Garret repeated a second time, a twinge of impatience settling over him, "what have you got in mind?" When Shadoe didn't answer right away, he looked down at Julita. "Honey, this is...." His eyes slid back up at Shadoe. "How much of the truth does she know? I mean...."

"I know him," she whispered, now looking at Shadoe as she would a bully on the playground that had been mean to her. "I mean ... well, I've seen him ... around the inn."

"Let me do this, Garret," Shadoe said, his gaze settling intently on Julita. "Julita, I'm Lieutenant Shadoe Madison with the New York Police Department. My job as an undercover cop leads me into situations just like this one. I masquerade as someone else until I get the lowdown on my target, then close in with an arrest."

"You mean ... like in the movies?"

Shadoe shrugged. "Yeah, I guess so. Except we use real bullets. When you see blood spurt, it's real. No special effects and no actors. When you're dead, you're dead. No getting up and walking around the next day."

Her eyes widened, looking at him in a different way. "Really?"

"Yeah, really." Shadoe chuckled at the childlike quality he still found appealing.

His eyes turned toward Garret, then began explaining. "When I first came here I knew something wasn't right, but I had the crazy notion that Julita was the dangerous one." His eyes shifted to Julita. "Now I know I was wrong." His eyes became pointed, and delved deeply into hers, holding them captive. "Wrong about a lot of things."

Her eyes lowered, painfully remembering the scene in her room.

"Hell, Shadoe, how could you think...?"

"I don't know," he answered apologetically, still looking at Julita. "I saw a lot of things ... the markings on her face ... the mask ... the way she dressed...."

"Mask?" Garret muttered curiously, but Shadoe didn't hear him.

"I tried to put it all together. And then when I found her room quite by accident, I couldn't believe anyone could live like that. I figured it had to be a hoax, an act of some sort. I thought the two of them were...." Hesitating, he took a deep, agonizing breath. "Oh God, I accused her of some awful things." His eyes reluctantly slid from Julita toward Garret. "You might have heard me."

“Not all of it. That ventilator has turned into a regular mystery box. When the inn is full like it is now, I never know what I’m going to hear. Sometimes I’ll be listening to a conversation in one room, then it gets interrupted by a loud TV in another room, or people arguing at the top of their lungs. It’s pretty frustrating.” He laughed and winked. “Especially when I’ve just tuned in on something pretty juicy.”

Only half listening to Garret’s words, Shadoe responded with a slight smile, then looked away from him, and into Julita’s eyes. Picking up her hand, he said, “I’d like to apologize for the way....” He felt her hand withdrawing. “No, Julita, listen to me,” he said, grabbing her hand and holding it in a firm grasp. “I need to apologize for the things I said. You didn’t deserve that. I know that now.”

“It’s okay,” she finally managed, her eyes downcast.

“Anyway,” Shadoe said, pulling back and looking around the shadowed basement, “now that you’re here, you’re going to have to stay.”

“Here?” she said, her lids flying open and staring at him. Her head turned slightly as she gazed around the room.

Shadoe’s head jerked back around at her question. “Of course here. You can’t go back to her and expect things to continue as usual. She tried to kill you.”

Julita cringed, thinking about it. “But where will I sleep?” she asked timidly.

“I’ll fix up a place for you, and make sure you and your father are well fed.”

Garret was pleased with that plan, and looked at Julita. “He’s the good guy, Julita, and a cop to boot. He knows what he’s doing, sweetheart, so listen to him. Okay?”

Julita nodded, looking back at Shadoe with a strange depth in her striking violet eyes ... eyes that made Shadoe a little weak in the knees.

“Lucretia will continue looking for you unless she has reason not to.”

“What do you mean?” Garret asked.

His eyes darted back to Garret. “Well ... I’ve been thinking....” His words faded as he rubbed his jaw, considering what he was going to say. Finally he looked up into the old man’s watery blue

eyes. "I think we should make it appear that she has drowned in the ocean."

Julita gasped, her eyes full of fear.

Catching his attention, he looked at her. "I'm sorry, Julita, but the only way Lucretia is going to stop searching for you is to believe you're dead. Otherwise she'll continue looking, and eventually make it down here."

"He's right, sweetheart. If she finds us down here together there's no telling what she'll do." He looked at Shadoe, unable to keep the respect from shining in his eyes. "Any other thoughts?"

"Our next problem is you. We can't allow her to shoot you up again, so we have to stage your death ... make it look like you've slit your wrists."

"Now you've lost me."

"We know she'll eventually make it down here to check on you. When she comes in, you're slumped over the basin, blood everywhere. Your eyes will be open, your skin pasty. I've got everything we'll need out in my car."

"You do come prepared don't you? Why in hell would you have something like that in your car?"

"I keep it there ... in the trunk. Like I told you, I specialize in undercover work. My schedule usually keeps me hopping from one job to another, not much time in between. It's easier to keep it there instead of spending my time packing and unpacking. I've got all kinds of gadgets. Theatrical makeup, disguises. I've even paraded through haunted houses as a ghost lots of times. Actually in my line of work you have to be an actor ... sort of."

"Well...." Garret said, with some hesitation. "I don't think it'll work. What if Lucretia feels for a pulse?"

"She won't. The scene will be too gory. Keep in mind she only has to see you for a few seconds. If my guess is right, she'll turn and run."

He snorted. "You don't know Lucretia."

"Think about it. The basement is dark. Cobwebs hanging, and in among them is a corpse

dangling over the basin. You're pale, your eyeballs have rolled back in your head. If she doesn't run from that, she's not human."

"Eyeballs rolled back? Pale? How will we do all that?"

"Just leave it to me."

"You mean she'll just leave me lying there?"

"Let's hope she does, otherwise she'll find out it's a fake."

"Damned bitch. It'd be just like her to leave me lying there until I'm nothing but a lot of bony remains." He looked up at Shadoe. "Not even a proper burial in sanctified ground!"

"Garret, hell man, you'd better hope she hates you as much as you say she does, otherwise we're in deep shit. One finger on you and that's all she wrote. Nobody would believe a warm corpse no matter how bad they look. Let's just hope I can make the scene gory enough that she'll decide to leave you down here until hell freezes over."

Garret scowled and scratched his head. "Why? I can understand staging Julita's death, but why mine?"

"Garret think a minute. What has been her reason for coming down here before?"

"To make my life miserable," he answered hotly.

"To see how close to death you were. Sure, she fed you...."

"Fed me? That slop?"

"Exactly. She knew you couldn't eat it. She was just watching ... waiting. Then when you weren't dying fast enough she gave you the hypodermic. That one was only a sedative. You can bet the next one will be full of poison."

Garret shivered. "Well, you're the boss. Okay, so what about a note? Do I leave a note?"

"I thought about that, but I don't think so. We sure as hell don't want her hanging around, and

if she took the time to read a note, then she's not scared nearly enough. The note is out. Can't take the chance. It's imperative that we scare the hell out of her so she'll run and never look back."

"I wish I was as sure about this as you are. I still think a funeral...."

"Garrett, how long have you been down here?"

"You know how long. Fifteen god-awful years."

"Then why would she have a funeral at this late date? She's told Julita you were dead. The guests think you're dead. She slipped up when she didn't tell the same story to the help, but thank God she didn't, otherwise I'd never have known she was lying. To everybody who counts, you're as dead as the goddamned bricks in the wall. The nine-to-five crowd comes and goes, here one day, gone the next, so what they believe is not important. But the others ... the ones who believe you're already dead? Hell, man, it would be insane to have a funeral for fifteen-year-old corpse. I doubt she'll even have a memorial service for Julita. If I know Lucretia, she'll probably tell everyone that she had to send her away. Whatever the story, it'll be something she can get out of the way as soon as possible to get on with her life."

"What are you going to do in the meantime?"

"Stay the hell away from her if I can. She already thinks I have a thing for her, and I don't want to encourage her. Maybe I can think up something that'll tighten the screws in her coffin." Shadoe paced, thinking. "She gave you the hypodermic this morning, so she'll probably come down and check on you a little later. That's when she needs to see you hanging over the basin." When Shadoe turned back, he saw Julita staring longingly at the picnic basket. "Julita, are you hungry?"

Julita nodded timidly, pulling her eyes away from the basket.

"Garret, is there anything left in the picnic basket?"

"I don't know. I think we drank all the beer and wine." He stretched his neck. "I see some cheese there."

Shadoe knelt by the basket and moved the cloth back. "Bingo," he said, bringing some chicken and cheese out. He put them on the mobile table and Julita scooted out of her father's lap and sat on a stool in front of the table. She grabbed up a piece of chicken and began eating voraciously.

"When was the last time you had anything to eat?" Garret asked, looking at her with a curious

scowl.

Julita shrugged while looking at him and munching on a chicken leg. “Two nights ago I had a sandwich.”

Garret’s eyes sparked anger. “Two nights ago? Isn’t Lucretia feeding you?”

Julita shook her head. “Not anymore. I sneak in the kitchen at night.”

Garret looked at Shadoe with fear in his eyes. “My God, she’s already started starving her.”

“I’ll feed her, Garret, don’t worry.” Looking back over at Julita, he didn’t see the mask anywhere. “Where’s your mask? Did you lose it again?”

“That’s the second time you’ve mentioned some kind of ... what ... mask ... is that what you said? What the hell are you talking about?”

Shadoe looked at Julita as if she should be the one to tell the story.

Garret’s eyes slid toward Julita, waiting for her to speak.

“My face...” she mumbled, her mouth full of food, “it’s all scarred ... and everything. Lucretia makes me wear a mask. She made it for me. It hides my face.”

“Who told you that?” Garret asked curiously.

“Who the hell do you think?” Shadoe answered.

“But she can see....” Garret began.

“Garret, don’t tell me you didn’t know.” Shadoe began, “Julita’s been living in a world of lies, drugs, beatings, you name it.”

“How the hell would I know? I’ve been down here for fifteen years.” He indicated to the ventilator. “That’s not a friggin’ TV, you know. I can’t see a thing, and can hardly hear some things. And if I do happen to hear a familiar voice, it gets interrupted by somebody’s loud TV or argument.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. I just didn’t realize,” he said. “Apparently Lucretia has brainwashed her into thinking she has scars on her face. Mind control. I’ve seen it before. Someone becomes obsessed, takes them prisoner, uses hypnotism, mind-bending drugs. That’s why all the crazy marks you see there. It’s my guess she got a head start on Julita. Must have started when she was young. Can you imagine? The only thing that saved Julita is growing up ... having a mind of her own. Being brave enough to burst out of her shell and fighting Lucretia. Suddenly being free became more important to her than the scars she still believed she had on her face.”

“My God, she’s crazier than I thought. It must have started the minute she put me in the basement. Julita was three.” He looked back at Julita. “Did it start then, sweetheart?”

Julita shrugged. “I guess. It’s just always been that way. Way back as far as I can remember.” She had just opened her mouth to take another bite of chicken when she happened to look up at Shadoe and saw him staring at her. She suddenly became aware of how she must look. Quickly dropping the chicken, she looked at her hands and felt of her face, feeling crumbs and cooking oil. Wanting the floor to swallow her up, she wiped her hands on her dress and lowered her eyes. “What is it?” she managed when he kept staring.

Shadoe leaned toward her and took her arm. “Come with me.” He led her to the sink, picked up a wash rag and saturated it with soap and water.

“No,” she said, struggling with him when he took her face in his hands.

“Julita, please. I just want to show you how beautiful you are. I’m not going to hurt you.”

She shook her head and recoiled, afraid.

“Julita....” Shadoe urged, then looked at her father. “Garret, tell her.”

“Julita, baby,” Garret said while looking at her with a gleam of love in his eyes. “You can trust Shadoe. He’s here to help us.”

Her eyes burned into his. “You want me to Papa?”

“Yes, baby, I do.” He saw her reluctance. “I wouldn’t tell you to do something that would hurt you, sweetheart. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, Papa,” she answered. He had to be telling her the truth, she reasoned with herself. She

could see it in his eyes. Slowly she forced herself to turn toward Shadoe, looked down at the dripping cloth, then murmured, "Okay."

Shadoe approached her slowly, careful not to frighten her. He wanted to kiss away her fear, take care of her, but after a lifetime of abuse, she was fragile. Being very careful, he cupped her face in one hand while he rubbed with the other. Several minutes passed, and when her face was finally clean of the macabre drawings, it was like the sun just came out from behind a dark cloud. Large, violet eyes, lips that were full, pink and pillowed into the sweetest softness he had ever seen. Dark, sooty lashes with a tilt to the corners of her eyes that could have convinced him that they held all the mysterious secrets of the Far East. Her lids were lazy, and her brows fanned up into an intriguing arch, making her face hers alone ... not like millions of other women. Shadoe had felt all along that she was different, and she was ... in her own way. Her creamy, heart-shaped face went well with her red-gold hair that tumbled around her face, the last few riotous hours pulling it out of a rubber band at her nape. He wanted to kiss the loveliness, the innocence, but instead, slowly turned her to the dingy mirror. She stared, but her face was shadowed and indistinct. It seemed to get lost within the gloom of the room and the dark patches where the silver backing had worn off. Realizing the problem, Shadoe quickly plunged his hand in his pocket and retrieved a lighter, then placed it near her face and struck it. The flame revealed a perfect face. No scars ... nothing.

"I can't believe it," she whispered, while lifting a hand to her face and feeling around on it. "Am I pretty?" she asked while still mesmerized by her reflection.

"No," Shadoe said. She turned, looking at him with fear in her eyes, but smiled when he continued, saying, "you're beautiful."

She turned back and looked at her hair. Reaching up, she pulled at the rubber band and allowed it to fall into a bouncing, red-gold, glossy curtain that hung well below her shoulders, reaching her waist. "Look, my hair, it's ... what color is it?"

"A beautiful reddish blonde," Shadoe answered while looking into the mirror where her face was framed. He looked back at Garret. "She seems to be in love with that mirror. I think we might have started something here."

"So what?" he said with a grumpy voice. "She deserves to know she's beautiful."

Julita was still staring at herself, her violet eyes luminous and bright, and her creamy skin perfect. She turned to Shadoe. "She told me I was ugly ... that I had big, ugly, puckering scars on my face." She frowned as the painful memories returned. "And ... and I believed her." She looked back up at Shadoe. "She said an animal scratched my face when I was a child...."

"She scratched you face!" Garret roared. "She was the rotten, low-down animal that got in your cradle. Did you know that? Did she tell you that? And then she threw me off the balcony!" Garret

lowered his head, trying to get his temper under control. "How God could let a woman like that exist in this world is a mystery to me!"

"I'm sorry, Papa," Julita said, kneeling before her father's knees.

Garret sobbed. "It isn't your fault, baby. I'm sorry I yelled." Then he looked up at Shadoe. "I can blame a lot on Lucretia, God knows she's evil, but it's my fault as well. I made no secret of the fact that I hated her. Hell, I could hardly stand the sight of her, but I needed her. She helped in the inn, took care of both Julita and me. For a seventeen-year-old, that's a pretty full plate. And then Lucretia told me that my consultation with the doctor fell through."

"Why the hell didn't you follow up on that?" Shadoe asked. "You must have known you couldn't trust Lucretia."

"I ... hell I don't know. Something happened to me. Lucretia was feeding me good then...." He hesitated, looked up at Shadoe as he realized the truth. "My God, I'll bet she was treating my food. Never in my life have I given in to depression. I've always been strong ... come out fighting, but hell I just gave up and Lucretia took over. I'll be damned," he muttered. "Julita was only a baby...." Garret continued, telling Shadoe the whole story of the night he fell, and the three years following.

"When she'd taken all she could, she put me in the basement and began Julita and me on a descent right down into hell. A small child ... well, it was easy to twist her mind, but me ... well, that's how I wound up in my new home. She's a cruel woman ... crazy. She's been that way since the moment she was born, getting worse every year she lived. She didn't kill us because she wanted us to suffer. The only thing is, she suffered as well. That's another thing she blames us for ... her misery. She resented me for loving Julita, and she resents Julita for having the beauty that she has wanted all her life. It stands to reason she'd try to keep that beauty hidden. Apparently she brainwashed the child, conjured up an ugly-looking mask and a story to go along with it." He looked over at Julita who was still eating. "Look at the way she's dressed. I'll bet that child hasn't had a new dress in her whole life. It's my bet that Lucretia lives that night over and over."

"But why?" Shadoe asked, mesmerized by the story.

"Because it was the night of her triumph. She still sees the blood on the child's face, the scratches that were superficial, and sits in the rocking chair as she did that first night, rocking the baby. I've heard her ... night after night ... the rocking chair squeaking ... that damned music box."

"But to go to such lengths."

"Hell, she's crazy. Crazy people do that. I don't know. To them I guess it's worth it."

“But why the nursery, the baby bed, the way she makes Julita dress. Did you know she bound up her ... well, you know,” Shadoe said, indicating to his own chest.

“Don’t you see? Apparently she wanted to keep Julita just as she was that night, but nature ran it’s course causing the whole thing to become macabre. She couldn’t let Julita grow up because that would mean freedom, a mind of her own. And worst of all, competition. She had to keep Julita young to keep her dependent on her. She couldn’t kill us. Death would mean freedom. She wanted to keep us alive to torture us ... hold us captive ... feel the evil satisfaction of having us dependent upon her. But now that we’re in her way, she wants to get rid of us.”

“I can’t believe you heard all that through the ventilator.”

“Hell, sometimes, when there’s no interruptions, it’s like listening to some goddamned soap opera. I’ve heard that bitch threaten, torment, rock her to sleep, sing to her. At times it was sickening. Julita, a grown woman being treated like a baby.”

“Then why wouldn’t you have known about the mask?”

“Hell ... I don’t know. I didn’t even know if Julita was actually alive. I never heard her voice, only Lucretia’s. Knowing how crazy the bitch is, I thought maybe she was up there all alone living in a fantasy world. The sounds come and go. Sometimes it’s hard to hear, other times it seems like the volume is turned up. I think it’s my hearing. You know, old age and all that.” Garret became angry. “It doesn’t matter what I know or don’t know. The fact is Lucretia stole her life ... it’s all over.”

“All over?” Shadoe said. “She’s only eighteen. She has her whole life ahead of her. The best part at least.” His eyes shifted to Julita, and he saw her looking in the mirror again, caressing her skin, mesmerized by what she saw. My God, he thought, it’s the first time she’s ever seen herself. While looking in the dingy mirror, her eyes caught his, and they locked. She was unsettled, things were happening so fast, and she still wasn’t sure of him. But for Shadoe her beauty caused a warm, electrifying heat to pulse through him. He still wanted her like no other woman he’d ever known. Had he ruined that with his accusations ... his stupidity?

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lucretia huddled at the edge of the ridge, the hard, raw wind whipping around her. She watched the seagulls as they wheeled through the air, their excited cawing sending out a warning of bad weather. The clouds were dark, roiling, and close to the earth. There was a storm at sea, and it was heading in. The water was choppy, and cold, causing the waves to crash against the rocks, sending the chilling spray high into the air.

Julita had been missing for hours, and now it was getting late, and cold. How could the girl do this to her? Disappear like this. Didn't she know it would worry her? She had to find her soon or she'd be caught in the storm. Where could she be? She had searched the woods, the beach, even the underground caves ... at least the ones she could get to. Julita was nowhere to be found.

Just as Lucretia was about to turn and go back to the inn, her eyes caught something moving on the rocks below. It seemed to float upward, swirling in the incoming tide, then fall against the craggy rock as the tide withdrew.

Something was down there. Caught on the rocks.

She lifted a hand to shield her eyes from the pelting spray, and squinted. Her pulse began pounding. There was something familiar about it. The colors, the movement. She had to know what it was. She looked over at the steep incline that led to the beach. It would be suicide to try to climb those rocks in this weather only for a piece of rubble. No, not rubble, she decided. A piece of material. Not hesitating another minute, she quickly turned and ran toward the trail. When she reached the bottom she left the well-worn path and took a sharp turn toward the rocks that resembled bones. With some hesitancy she discarded her shoes and entered the human jungle. The bones surrounded her ... large and hideous. She felt like she had stepped into a science fiction film and was walking through the remains of some fabled giant that had been dead for centuries. She saw a large, horrifying skull half buried in the sand, eye holes, grinning teeth, a line of vertebrae, then the joint of what looked like an elbow that seemed to attach itself to the tall, long-standing raw-boned rocks that resembled the ulna. Extended from it were five bony fingers that splayed out along the ridge as if it were trying to climb up. The scene was morbid, sending chills spiraling through her. Suddenly she stopped when she saw what looked like a line of bones extending from the sand. My God, she thought. It looked like a rib cage that housed a slow-crawling creature. The sight was horrifying. Macabre. She felt death in the air as she stepped in and crept through it, her hands holding fast to the rib bones when the waves threatened to wash her out to sea.

All at once the rocks became crowded together and she began climbing. The rocks were craggy and sharp, her feet finding footholds while her toes sunk into the crevices. The waves drenched her ... forcefully moving her body as she hung on dangerously, climbing higher and higher. She caught her breath when she looked down and saw her feet bleeding as they struggled to hold their grip against the forceful waves. Still she kept climbing, being driven, and feeling a chill when she saw the waves wash her blood out to sea. Every giant wave that came crashing in brought her to a standstill. They

collided against the rocks and were tall and savage, flooding the bones, racing between them, then receding, slapping, spraying, becoming so violent at times that she felt herself almost slipping off into the ocean.

And then she reached it.

The rock where she'd seen the bit of material.

She suddenly felt foolish. She couldn't believe she was putting her life in danger to get a closer look at the strange piece of useless debris that had probably drifted in from the ocean ... but still she didn't give up.

Her pulse raced as she climbed. Her breath was coming hard. Most of her hair had escaped from her chignon, the ravenous waves plastering the dark strands to her face as they slapped across her gaunt features. She hurried. Quicker now. Her hands became bloodred, being scratched raw as she tried to hold on to the jagged edges of the boulder's mysterious shape. Was it still there, or had it come loose from the sharp edges that had held it fast? She stumbled several times before she got to the top, almost falling, but finally ... before she knew it ... there it was. "Oh God," she gasped. It was Julita's dress. It was ripped and water soaked, but she recognized it as it lay on the rocks where her body must have been. Lucretia darted around as if afraid someone was watching, then reached out and snatched it. She turned it in her hands, looking closely at the torn cloth, the familiar print, the shapeless style that Lucretia had made her wear. Then she looked out into the vast ocean, all doubt that she had disappeared into the pounding surf, gone. Before turning to go, she lifted her eyes toward the top of the ridge and gasped when she saw someone. A dark silhouette stood against the roiling clouds. The girl ... young ... wind whipping at her hair ... was naked! She stood perfectly still, watching Lucretia struggle along the rocks. The figure was far away but it looked like ... oh, God, it looked like ... Julita. No, it couldn't be, that was impossible. She must be dreaming. The roaring of the sea was in her ears, and a sudden splash of saltwater hit her in the face. She closed her eyes and wiped the brine from her face, but only for an instant. When she looked again the girl was gone. Lucretia's eyes raked along the edge of the ridge, but she had disappeared ... as if she'd never been there. Had she just seen Julita's ghost? She looked down at the dress in her hands, then back up to where the naked girl had stood. An eerie feeling washed over her, and she became convinced that it had been Julita she had seen. What had happened? Had she jumped? No, Julita wouldn't jump. She must have slipped. Ventured too close to the edge, the violent weather being too much for her. Once she hit the rocks a dead body would be swept out into the raging ocean in no time. Yes, she must have been swept off the rocks and into its depths.

Her sister was dead, and her ghost... She looked back up at the ridge. Her ghost had been here ... watching her. The wind's fierce growl, and the constant battering of cold spray sent a chill deep into Lucretia's soul. A paralyzing fear coursed through her. She seemed to be frozen clear through, and suddenly wanted to feel the warmth of the inn around her. She couldn't stay here another minute. She had to get back. She'd be safe at the inn. She had probably been missed already. She finally managed to move and began to climb down, more quickly this time, and ran, stumbling through the bones, her sobs choking her. She didn't realize the death of her sister would affect her so deeply. It was a shock, a jolt,

that was all. She was glad it had happened. It would save her the trouble. Julita had become too hard to handle and was just in the way. Now the only thing Lucretia had to worry about was her father.

And she would take care of him tonight.

\* \* \* \*

The murky daylight was dying, slowly sinking the basement into a shadowy stage. The atmosphere was right, Shadoe thought. Wind keening outside, and if he was lucky there would be a lot of lightning and thunder to go along with the scene he was setting up. He hurriedly worked on Garret, applying stage makeup, fake blood, and directed him as to how to put on the contacts that would make his eyes look as if they'd rolled back in his head. He positioned the old man over the sink, had a bloody knife hanging out of Garret's hand, spread blood and cobwebs around, trying to make the scene as gruesome as possible.

"Where's Julita?"

"She's in back, waiting for her cue." He looked at his handiwork. "God, Garret if you could see yourself, you'd run screaming."

"That's because I'm human," Garret said, his sightless eyes looking at Shadoe. "That witch isn't human."

"Well, that's something we're about to find out," he said, whispering. Suddenly he gave a start. "Did you hear that?"

"Oh, goddamn it, she's coming down!"

"Quick, slump over the sink, and remember everything I told you," he hissed. "Don't move, don't even breathe. If you need a breath do it like I told you. Very small, shallow breaths that won't heave your chest and stomach."

"Shit ... I don't know...."

"Don't worry, she'll be in and out of here in a second. The minute she sees you, she'll turn and run. I can almost guarantee it." Thinking everything was set, he furtively receded back into a shadow and waited.

In only seconds the door moved slightly, scraping noisily against the floor. Shadoe stood silent, his shifting eyes making one last check over the scene. All at once he gasped. The picnic basket was in plain sight. “Oh, God,” he muttered, then took a lunge and kicked it, sending it into the other part of the basement before sinking back into the darkness. Lucretia wouldn’t be able to see it from where Garret was, but if she stepped farther into the basement, she couldn’t miss it.

His eyes looked back at the door and he heard the rusty hinges let out a painful squeal. When he heard it he almost laughed out loud. The scraping door, the squeal, it was perfect. It was just what he needed to bring the whole scene together, and Lucretia had provided it.

She entered slowly and stopped dead in her tracks. Her eyes raked across the dark basement, sensing something wasn’t right. The scene ... the whole thing ... it seemed too elaborate. The eerie feel, the hush, the undulating candlelight that gave the shadows a monstrous quality had somehow, for some reason, all been staged. But why? And then she saw him ... the old man laying over the sink, covered with blood.

Shadoe could see several expressions of shock travel across her face. She struggled for a moment, her throat working into a scream, but simply cried, “Oh, God!”

Shadoe’s hopes sunk. She didn’t run screaming as he had thought. Instead she looked at Garret as if she was transfixed.

She closed her eyes, her throat moving as if trying to swallow the fear she felt. Forcing herself, she began to walk toward him slowly. She couldn’t believe it. Was he really dead? Could she be that lucky? Both of them gone in one day, and not at her hand? Make sure, she told herself, hesitantly putting one foot in front of the other, her soles scraping on the hard, dirty cement. With each carefully placed step, she could see the horrible scene draw near, but she wouldn’t stop ... couldn’t stop ... not now.

She remembered the night he fell, and felt like she did then. Weak at first, but then stronger. Now her eyes were burning into the old man. He had to be dead. He was pale, his eyes ... oh, God, his eyes! With a hesitating, trembling hand she reached out to touch him. But before she laid a finger on him he moved quickly and grabbed her wrist. She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out. Her throat was closed, choking her. She tried to pull away, but he had her wrist in his strong grip. Suddenly his head jerked around and he was looking at her with a twisted, evil scowl creasing his deathly gray face. His ashen lips slowly stretched into a malicious smile, showing a mouthful of dingy teeth. “Hello, Lucretia. I’ve been waiting for this day, you dirty bitch!”

She watched him lift the bloody knife toward her and opened her mouth in a scream that wouldn’t come. She looked around to find a weapon, then scoffed at her own stupidity. What good would a weapon be against someone who was already dead? Realizing she was helpless, a slow, cold, agonizing terror slithered up her spine as she tried to struggle free. Then she heard a sound. Something moving from the other side of the basement. She lifted her eyes and saw a naked Julita shuffling toward

her slowly, her hair and body drenched with ocean water.

The pale zombie stiffly held out her hands and shuffled toward Lucretia. Her eyes glowed like two burning coals, seaweed was caught in her hair. “Lucretia,” she said, her voice echoing as if coming from her watery grave. “Come with me. We can be together.”

“No!” she rasped out of a constricted throat while shaking her head. She finally jerked her hand away from the old man so violently, his wheelchair toppled. She began backing away, watching as he followed her, reaching for her while he pulled himself along on the floor with his hands. She looked from one to the other. Julita’s stiff gait as she reached for Lucretia, and her father pulling himself along on the floor.

“Stay away!” she cried, then quickly turned away from the horrible sight that was strangling her in its deathly grip.

“We need you, Lucretia. Who will take care of us?” they said in ghastly unison.

She stumbled backward, flailing her arms as she staggered. “No! Go away!” she rasped while bumping into walls and tables as she stalked erratically toward the door.

She grabbed it. Like a lifeline. But before she stumbled through, she looked back to see Julita and Garret still coming, still reaching out. One dripping seawater, the other, dripping blood.

She desperately climbed up the stairs on her hands and knees, struggling, scratching, pulling herself up until she got to the door at the top. She managed to crawl up, grab the knob, open it, and fall through. She looked up, but everything seemed normal. No one in sight. All at once the phone rang, and she lifted herself up and went to answer it.

“S-Scarlet Bay I-Inn,” she said, leaning her head down into her hand and closing her eyes. She jerked her head up when she heard the voice on the other end.

“Lucretia,” the voice whispered, the echoing voice sounding weak as if coming from a great distance. “Come back down. I want to see you ... touch you ... kill you!”

Lucretia sobbed, banging the receiver down, looking at it as if it were a snake about to strike. Suddenly she heard the little box behind her begin to screech even though there was no connection in the basement. Yet now it screeched, telling her that her father wanted her. Suddenly the room was full of noise. The ringing phone, the screeching box. Faint voices coming from the ventilator. She clamped her hands over her ears. She was going out of her mind. All at once she turned, skirted the desk and ran up to her room. As soon as she opened the door she heard her phone ringing. She looked at it for a long

time, listening to the pleasant chime that had suddenly turned hollow and insistent. The sound filled her ears, plundering her eardrum. She had to stop it, so she grabbed at it and picked it up.

“H-hello.”

“Lucretiaaaaa,” the voice hissed. “Coooom baaack.”

She quickly banged the receiver down, only to hear the constant chime again ... and again ... and again! She couldn't stand it, she had to stop it, so she yanked the wire out of the wall and welcomed the silence ... but not for long.

“Lucretiaaa, I'm waaaaiting.” The hoarse sound of her father's voice floated in the air.

She whirled around. Where was the voice coming from? Her eyes finally lifted to the ventilator that snaked through the mansion all the way down to the basement. The faint voice kept urging her while she clamped her hands over her ears.

“Shut up, you bastard! Shut up!” she yelled. Then in desperation she picked up pillows, knickknacks, anything she could get her hands on and began throwing them toward the ventilator. But the voice continued, indestructible. She began backing up, shaking her head, trying to escape the rasping voice. After several seconds she couldn't stand it anymore and became dizzy, everything going black. She slumped to the floor.

\* \* \* \*

They all stood looking up at the ventilator, listening to the sudden quiet. Julita, with a sheet wrapped around her, and Garret peering through his sightless eyes. After a while, Shadoc turned around, looked at Garret and winced. “God, Garret, get those things out of your eyes.”

“Oh, yeah.” He leaned over and stretched each eye, managing to pull each lens out, then laid them in his palm. “I forgot they were there. I didn't know you could see through them.”

“Well ... a little. It's like wearing sunglasses. Especially when you wear the kind Julita had on.” He reached over and took the lenses from each of them, then smiled. “You two surprised the hell out of me.” He looked down at Garret. “What a move that was, Garret. Why the hell didn't I think of that?” He turned to Julita. “And you. God, I'm proud of you, Julita. I didn't know if you could go through with it or not, but there you were... uh--” his eyes lowered, devouring her breasts, “--big as life, if you'll forgive the pun.”

“You’d better stop right there,” Garret said, slightly scowling at him. “How come I wasn’t informed of this? You think I want my daughter parading around naked as the day she was born?”

“She’s come a long way since then.”

“Enough with your insults.”

“Hell, Garret, that wasn’t an insult. This is exactly why I didn’t tell you. You wouldn’t have approved. Appearing on the ridge unsettled Lucretia. She need to be convinced of Julita’s death, putting her in the right frame of mind to accept yours. Besides Julita was only to come out if Lucretia didn’t immediately turn and run. I didn’t know you were going to do a little scene of your own.”

“Well ... neither did I. When I knew she was going to touch me I had to think up something, and that ... well ... it just happened.”

“It was a hell of a good move. And the wheelchair falling over. I almost swallowed my tongue when that happened, but you made it work. I’ve gotta hand it to both of you. You two are pros.” He looked at Julita, reaching over and plucking the seaweed from her hair. “Thanks,” he said, winking while he chucked her under the chin. “You’d better go get dried off and get some clothes on. I think I saw a box of old rags in there before. Not very fashionable maybe, but I’m sure you can find something.”

She reveled in his praise as she turned to go back into the other part of the basement. Before she turned the corner she hesitated, looked back, and saw his eyes following her. She put a hand up on the small width of the arch, and looked at him, her lids almost closed, her lashes making a tangled shadow across her beautiful cheeks.

Shadoe saw the invitation and felt a melting heat gather in his groin. When she disappeared behind the wall, Shadoe cast an angled glance down at her father, wondering how he was going to wait until the old man went to sleep. He looked back up at the arch, remembering her naked silhouette beneath the sheet. Julita was ready. He knew it. His hands opened and closed, burning with the imagined feel of her body. He knew his savage side would emerge the minute he laid a hand on her. He looked down at the old man again and wondered if he could count on Garret’s hearing to be as bad as he needed it to be.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The old man began getting ready for bed. "So what's our next move?"

"No next move, yet," Shadoe said. "We've got to build up your strength before we go to the next step. You're weak, both you and Julita. We've got Lucretia off our backs, so we can afford to just lay low for a while. Eat, drink and be merry until I decide what's next."

"Sounds like a plan," the old man said, tiredly.

Shadoe helped him into bed and fussed over him until he was comfortable.

"I'll say good night now," he said, looking up at Shadoe through tired eyes. "Julita must be asleep by now. Why don't you go on upstairs? We'll be all right until we see you in the morning."

"I'll leave as soon as I check on Julita."

The old man nodded, then turned his head, nestling it into the pillow.

Instead of leaving, Shadoe silently crept into a chair and sat for a few moments. Leaning forward with his elbows resting on his thighs, his eyes never left the old man, but waited in the darkness for him to fall asleep. He felt a certain guilt spread through him, knowing he was waiting to seduce the old man's daughter. What would Garret think if he knew? Would he like the idea of Shadoe and his daughter getting together, or would he somehow object? Shadoe wrung his hands, then put them up to his face and rubbed as if trying to rub the guilt away. The longer he sat there watching the old man, the more restless he became, his eyes darting past the arch in the wall where he knew Julita was waiting. Finally he leaned back, trying to relax. He knew he might as well get comfortable because it would be a while before the old man was fast asleep.

As he sat, slowly his eyes drifted to a close. He told himself that he wouldn't fall asleep as he listened to the soothing night sounds of cicadas chirping, night birds calling, and the surf pounding just outside the high windows. Before he knew it Garret was shaking him awake.

"What the hell? Did you stay down here all night?"

Shadoe lunged forward, looking around. He immediately knew what had happened. In waiting for the old man to go to sleep he had drifted off himself, his night with Julita never happening. He raked his hand through his hair while trying to quickly think up an excuse. "I ... well, I ... was worried."

“About what? That witch upstairs? Don’t bother. We scared the pants off her, that’s for sure. She won’t be back down here. Hell, you said so yourself.”

“Yeah,” he gave a soft, sheepish laugh. “I did, didn’t I.”

He quickly rose from the chair and stretched. “Is Julita up yet?”

“I don’t think so, I haven’t seen her.”

“Are you hungry?”

The old man angled a frowning look up at him. “Is the Pope Catholic?”

Shadoe laughed. “Okay,” he replied, punching his escaping shirt back down into his trousers. “I’ll get us all some breakfast.”

Snatching up the picnic basket, he made his way through the arch to the back door, taking a small detour to the little nook he’d fixed up for Julita, far back in a secluded corner. Boxes were stacked on both sides of the old water-stained mattress, erected to give her some privacy. Looking in he saw her sleeping, using little cover since the basement was pretty warm. Her hair spread wide over the mattress, and her naked body beneath the thin sheet taunted him. The play of light and shadow over her form had his mouth watering.

He felt like a king-sized jerk. The flashy beast falls asleep with a woman, hot and ready, waiting for him just a few feet away. If the guys back at the precinct knew this, he’d never hear the end of it. His male ego, and his sexual prowess had definitely taken a nosedive. The worst part was, he might not get the chance again. Looking at her now, so innocent, he wondered if it had even been an invitation. Maybe he’d placed too much emphasis on the look. Hell, she was young, had lived a sheltered life. She hadn’t been schooled in the ways of the world. And yet the look she had given him last night had all the earmarks of a woman who knew exactly what she was doing. It had him sizzling in his boots. Only a fool would have fallen asleep after a look like that.

\* \* \* \*

Following a quick shower, a change of clothes, and a big breakfast order, Shadoe came slamming through the basement door with the picnic basket. He could see the anticipation on the faces of both Garret and Julita. He opened the basket and brought out eggs, bacon, hash brown potatoes, and pancakes. “I’m sure the kitchen help thinks I have a tapeworm,” Shadoe remarked, passing everything around. “I just hope no one gets suspicious. The odd thing is, they’ve never asked about the picnic

basket. I think they forgot that I still have it.”

“Well, don’t go trying to explain,” Garret said, digging in and shoveling the food into his mouth. “Nothing makes a man look guiltier than when he’s stumbling through an explanation that nobody’s asked for, or cares about.”

“Yeah, you’re right. The only one I really have to worry about is Lucretia. As long as she’s in the dark, to hell with everyone else.” While making Julita comfortable, and then settling down with his own breakfast, he continued. “I suppose I ought to put in an appearance upstairs, though. Other than the wine we shared the other day I haven’t been around. Since I was a royal pain in the ass up until then she might think it’s a little strange. It sure as hell wouldn’t do for her to start looking around.”

“Be careful,” Garret said, looking at Shadoe with his well-known scowl in place. “She’s a tricky one. If she finds out you tricked her, she’ll have you for breakfast.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Shadoe said, barely listening while gobbling down food.

Following breakfast, Garret settled back with a cigarette and a cup of strong, hot coffee. Patting his stomach, he said, “Hell, I’m supposed to be a corpse. Whoever heard of a corpse gaining weight?”

“I know what you mean, I’m....” Shadoe’s words faded when Julita rose and excused herself to go to the back.

Garret watched Shadoe’s eyes follow her. Besides the surge of jealousy it brought forth, it also reminded him of his plan. In an effort to distract him, he said, “I’m feeling so damned good I’m looking forward to the day I can get out of this damned basement. A stroll outside would be just the ticket.”

“Hey,” Shadoe said, putting up his hand as if to slow Garret down. “That’s a whole new ballgame. I want you out of here too, but I can’t just go wheeling you around outside. We’d be seen.”

“Hell, Shadoe, just let me sit out in it. Breathe in the fresh air, feel the wind.”

Shadoe thought for a few minutes, then went to take a look outside to see what he could do. The most he manage right now was to roll him out in the little square where the steps were and let him bask in the sunshine when it was overhead. But he had to limit his time since he had to watch for the guests who streamed down the trodden path to the beach. One thing was to his advantage. He had learned that the guest rooms lined the back of the inn, giving them a view of the ocean, and Lucretia’s room was on the other side. Knowing that she spent most of her time at the desk anyway, there would

be little chance she would see them.

When Shadoe came back in, Garret said, "What about tonight? Think we can venture out on the ridge? Take a stroll along the beach?"

"The best time would be late, after the inn shuts down for the night. It makes me nervous just thinking about it, but I guess we can give it a try."

That night, knowing that he shouldn't, Shadoe took the chance and wheeled the old man out, managed to get him up the stairs, then out onto the ridge, letting him sit a while, taking in the moon on the ocean.

"This'll have to be it, Garret. I don't want to have to wheel you down that incline to the beach. We'd never get back up."

"Hey, this is fine," the old man said, looking with awe out at the moon on the water. "God, this is beautiful," he said, listening at the crashing waves. "The wind, the spray ... I never realized how much I missed it."

While the old man sat there, every once in a while his eyes would dart toward Shadoe, until finally he spoke. "I sure as hell hope you don't have any interest in my daughter, because as soon as possible, I'm going to get her into a school, move up north, and put all this behind me." Hesitating, he said, "I'm afraid that includes you."

As soon as he heard it, it all came clear. "Is that what this is all about?" Shadoe said, fuming. "Hell, you didn't care anything about fresh air and friggin' sea spray. All you wanted was to get me away from Julita so you could...."

Garret lunged forward in his chair. "All right, so I had an ulterior motive, but you're wrong about the fresh air and sea spray. I love it. It just gave me the opportunity to do what I knew I had to do. Besides, what choice did I have? I saw something going on between you, and couldn't talk in front of her."

"You didn't need to say a damned word. Sure, there was something between us, but the time to do anything about it is long past. You should be having this talk with Julita, not me."

"Julita? Why?"

"Because she's the only one who'll listen to you, that's why. I don't give a good goddamn

what you say, old man. You might as well know that if she gave me the slightest indication that she was still interested, I'd take it. And to hell with you!"

"Sure you would. You're a fuckin' son of a bitch that don't care that she's nothing but a baby. Too young for someone like you."

"I know," Shadow said, the truth hitting him square between the eyes. "I know." Hell, he shouldn't be thinking of Julita in a romantic way. If he had a few more years on him, he'd be old enough to be her father. He looked at Garret, and could understand his worry. "Don't worry," he said regretfully. "I'll stay away from her."

"Well, thank you for that. Now that we've got that settled, how about getting me inside? The wind is beginning to get a little chilly."

\* \* \* \*

That night, once again seeing that Garret was comfortable in his bed, Shadoe sat, thinking about what he said out on the ridge. Mulling it around in his mind, he knew the old man was right. How could he even think about Julita that way ... it was almost ... well, hearing Garret say it, it made him feel like a dirty old man. Before he knew it, the old man was breathing easily and Shadoe rose from his chair and walked through the arch into the other half of the shadowed basement. Besides, he had pretty much given up the idea of getting together with Julita. He wasn't sure she wanted it, plus the opportunity just never came. It was just as well because Shadoe had felt a rising guilt every time he thought of going behind the old man's back to be with her. Now he carefully crept around the boxes to check on Julita, and saw her sleeping soundly. Seeing that she was all right, he turned to leave.

"Don't go," a deep, silky voice said.

He turned and saw her leaning up on one elbow and clutching the sheet to her breasts with her other hand. "Sorry if I woke you. I just wanted to check and see if you were all right."

"You didn't wake me. I'm not sleeping too good. Restless, I guess."

Julita looked at his solid frame, his dark hair, glowing green eyes, and remembered the first time she'd seen him. How he had excited her. He still did. She didn't want him to leave, but how did she get him to stay? She wasn't used to this. She didn't know what to do, how to perform a seduction. What words should she use? What mannerisms? She saw him waiting for the magic words, the seducing look, that one elusive thing that all men looked for. She didn't know what they were.

"I ... I'm sorry, I don't know what to say."

“About what?”

“Well...” she said shyly. “I haven’t been out in the world, so I guess I don’t know how to tell you that I like you.”

Shadoe smiled easily. “You said it the other night. Remember? The Hall of History?”

“What ... what did I say?” she asked, curious.

“You called me a flashy beast.”

She smiled when she recalled the incident. “Was that an invitation? I ... I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

“One of the reasons I kissed you.”

She smiled shyly, her eyes raking across his sturdy body beneath his open shirt that exposed his muscled chest. The jewel tucked neatly into his skin made him look even more exotic than he actually was. “You are, you know.”

“I guess I should say thanks ... that is if you meant it as a compliment.”

“I guess you could call it a reaction to your--” her eyes continued to rake down his well-muscled body, “--to everything ... everything I see.”

“Well, I’ve been called a lot of things, but a flashy beast is not one of them. Very original.”

“I didn’t ... I didn’t hurt your feelings, did I? I didn’t mean to.”

“Oh, no,” he said, slowly making his way into the little hutch that was protected from prying eyes, and far away from the father Shadoe had been afraid of waking up with sounds of passion.

Julita’s eyes widened as he entered. The sheet came up a little higher, and she felt herself pushing back away from him. His closeness ... his dizzying closeness was doing things to her. She tried to quell the hammering of her heart, and the flush of heat that swirled like a tiny tornado deep within her groin. She felt confused by his presence, thinking she’d die if he touched her, yet knowing

she'd die if he didn't.

"Are you afraid of me, Julita?"

"I ... I seem to be," she said, trying to keep her voice from trembling.

He reached out to stroke her arm. "I won't hurt you. I would never...."

"I ... I know."

"Just tell me," he said, his voice soft. "Do you want me here, or do you want me to go?"

When she hesitated, he started to move. She reached out, grabbing his arm. "No ... don't go."

"But if my presence...."

"No, it ... doesn't."

"You know I won't do anything you don't want me to," he whispered, while stroking her cheek. He felt the beast inside him scratching to come out. His hand lowered to the sheet, his eyes savoring the uncovering of the round, luscious breasts Lucretia had tried so hard to hide. He felt his mouth tingle. He looked back up at her, delving deeply into her violet eyes. "I'll go slow...." he whispered, almost as if he were begging her. He knew he was lying again. With her beneath him there was no way he could go slow. If he were in his right mind he'd stay away. She was too young, too innocent. Pulling his hand back, he said, "Maybe I should go...."

"N-no!" she whispered. "I just don't know how to ... I'm willing ... I just don't...."

There it was ... the word he'd been waiting to hear. Willing. It was invitation enough for him. He leaned forward placing his hand on the back of her neck and drew her to him, covering her full lips with his own. He drew her closer and closer until she lay between him and the mattress. His kiss sent her stomach into a wild swirl, and she responded with a surrendering sigh, melting into his arms. It would have taken one small move to mount her, to feel her beneath him while he parted her legs and whispered her name, but he held back.

Even when her arms went around him, he pulled back begrudgingly, all the things he knew was wrong with what he was doing playing and replaying in his mind. But he couldn't escape those violet eyes. They made him do things he might not otherwise. Like tug on his shirt, then his trousers,

his arousal straining to be released. His hands moved faster until he was finally undressed and sinking down onto the mattress beside her. With his heart pounding, he pulled the sheet over him, and their bodies melded together, burning for release.

He lifted himself over her and planted a tantalizing kiss at the hollow of her neck. Then his lips made a hot, burning trail downward, climbing each mountainous breast, seeking the tantalizing buds that had swollen to their fullest. Once he was there, he cupped her breasts in his hands and covered each nipple with his mouth and suckled like a starving man. His hunger caused a deep growl to escape his throat as his lips scoured her body, bringing her to a fevered pitch. She arched her body against him, feeling sensations she had never felt before. His lips opened and drew on her flesh while he held her captive, imprisoned in the web of his arousal. Flesh against flesh, man against woman, his shaft pressed against her abdomen, large and heavy. First it excited her, then frightened her. It was as if her body were half ice and half flame.

All at once she felt his fingers on her thigh. While he sought the center of her soul, he whispered calming words to her, sensing her nervousness. She felt him open her up. Gentle, like the petals of a flower. Then his fingers began to caress her, playing as if he'd found a new toy. She gasped, her desire shimmering upward until she felt an exploding release. She opened her eyes to see the tiny stars she felt had fallen around her, but only found his lovely silhouette hovering above her.

He was potent, dangerous. A schoolgirl hero, a movie idol, the man who had filled her most ardent fantasies. She felt a thrill spiral through her, and submitted to the probing hands that lifted her knees, opening her wider. Then she felt his shaft gently press against the tiny bud just inside her. His hardness electrified her, causing her to twitch and jerk, the flames of ecstasy attacking her again.

“Are you ready, Julita?” he whispered.

“Yes,” she answered, her breath coming in gasps, her heart throbbing out a pitter-patter of erotic pleasure.

She felt his cock enter her, then plunge deeper, causing a moan to escape her lips. She clung to him, her legs surrounding him, wanting ... urging him closer. And then the pain came, swift and harsh. She sucked in a breath.

“It won't hurt again,” he whispered in her ear. “Just once, then it's over.”

As soon as he'd said it the beast within him surged forward and his plunges became hard and fast, taking her upward to an elusive plateau. With each plunge she moaned loudly, her voice almost rising to an erotic scream. He clamped his hand over her mouth, his thoughts of Garret just behind the wall, and plunged ... over and over into an erotic feast of pleasure he'd never known before. She was tight, God, so tight. But she opened to him, enclosing his shaft in her velvety softness. Her sweet, sensual surrender melted against him, her fragrant breath coming to him in long silky moans against his

face.

All at once the point of no return was there, sweeping both up into its heavenly sphere. Their bodies jerked, rolled, and slapped against each other. Their breath panted, their skin sweated, etching their faces into determined passion. Together they rode the swirls of lust that locked their bodies together until they crashed into waves of hot, burning release. And then came a shower of scorching passion, deeply satisfied, spreading through them. Shadoe stiffened as his lusty fountain spewed within her, then at last he slumped over her, savoring the warmth of satisfaction.

He held her gently for long moments. Then she spoke very low, still catching her breath. “You really are a flashy beast.”

He laughed softly, then lifted his head and looked at her. “And you’re a woman ... and what a woman.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Shadoe felt like a worm sneaking out of the basement while Julita was asleep, but he didn't want Garret to catch him in the basement again, it might make him start asking questions. He didn't want to go another round with him like he had on the ridge. The old man was sharp, and one false move would give it all away.

Later, again filling the picnic basket with the enormous breakfast order he had sent for, he made his way back down to the basement, and the three of them were enjoying the inn's famous Southern Country Breakfast of hearty biscuits, gravy with crumbled sausage, eggs, potatoes, and three kinds of breakfast meats.

"You know," Garret began, while shoveling the food in, "I'm going to repay you for all this, don't you? Hell you must've spent a lot of money on all this."

Shadoe almost strangled on the food in his mouth. "No, no," he said, coughing with a napkin pressed against his mouth. His guilt immediately brought up visions of his night with Julita. He knew if Garret had any idea what had gone on between them, this conversation wouldn't be taking place. "I don't expect to be paid back. In these situations I'm always reimbursed by the department. It's not anything you should worry about."

"But it seems unfair. Me with all my money, and you having to foot the bill on all of this."

"Garret," Shadoe said, finally clearing his throat and finding his voice. "You shouldn't worry about it, it's taken care of, okay?"

Garret shrugged, but continued eating. "Sure, whatever you say." After consuming the food in short order, Garret took a deep breath, pushed his empty plate away, threw his napkin down, then lit a cigarette to have with his coffee. "You know, with all that makeup and stuff you've got stashed away, I'd love to be able to get out of this chair and scare the hell out of Lucretia. It'd serve her right. She'd lose what little mind she's got left."

Shadoe's eyes fell to Garret's legs. "How much can you feel? You know, if we could swing it, I'd love to take you to a specialist and see what difference a little therapy would make on those legs."

"Hell, there's nothing wrong with my legs. It's my back that's the problem."

Shadoe's brows lifted in surprise. "So you're saying if we get the back straightened out, then the legs would be okay?"

“I assume so. They’d be weak at first ... I mean, I haven’t walked on them for ... what ... eighteen years. The only time I’ve come close to getting up on these legs again was the other night when Lucretia pulled me up out of my chair. I fell, but not before I took a couple of steps in her direction.”

“A couple of steps?” Shadoe said, looking at Garret with surprise. “Where the hell was I? I didn’t see that.”

“You probably had your beady eyes on my naked daughter,” Garret rasped, his voice low while he slid his eyes toward Julita who sat in a far corner eating. “I’m sure you would’ve loved seeing me go down on my skinny ass....” His words stopped abruptly and his eyes shifted toward Shadoe, meeting them with intensity. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

Shadoe smiled. “I sure as hell am. How is your back? Any pain? Can you move around all right?”

“My back is fine. I haven’t had pain in my back for years.”

Shadoe’s face slowly stretched into a happy smile. “Why, old man, you’re not paralyzed, just damned lazy. Put that coffee down and let’s get you up on your feet.”

Garret smiled as he placed the cup in the saucer. “Now you’re talkin’.”

Shadoe folded the footrests away, then jumped up and began tugging on Garret. “Did it ever occur to you that Lucretia might have known that? Hell, maybe that’s why she wanted to keep you weak. She must have know you weren’t completely paralyzed.”

Garret felt his frail body being lifted like a sack of potatoes in Shadoe’s arms. He tried to help, but couldn’t do much. “Damned bitch. I tell you, Shadoe if I ever get my hands on that woman I’ll strangle the life out of her!”

“I’ve got you now. Try to take a step. By the way, how much do you remember about that night? Did the doctor...?”

“That damned doctor ... letting her intimidate him,” he began, while trying to move his legs. “I could hear them talking. I think they were outside the room. I don’t know, maybe the door was open or something. I had been sedated, and they must have been far enough away to keep me from hearing everything, but I distinctly remember him trying to get her to approve surgery. He tried to make it clear that it might not be necessary, but he needed to examine me, take tests to know for sure. I don’t know all of it, but I remember he mentioned a walker, and a cane ... yeah, that’s it. A cane. He said I’d

eventually be using a cane.”

“And the mysterious Ms. Van Dare knew all along she wasn’t about to let you be examined, or have surgery. She didn’t want you out of that wheelchair.”

“Yeah, she knew, that damned bitch knew. I remember trying to say something. My mouth moved, but nothing came out. I even struggled to get up, but I couldn’t move a muscle. I think it was then that I got the idea in my mind that the paralysis had taken hold and there was no hope.”

“God, your whole life wasted.”

“Yeah,” Garret said, a menacing look on his face as his fiery eyes pierced the ceiling to the upper floors. “But I’ll get my revenge if I have to crawl to do it.”

“Why not walk?”

Garret looked at Shadoe as if he’d lost his mind. “Sure, make fun of an old....”

“Garret, you’ve been standing alone for several seconds.”

Garret looked down at himself, but the minute he realized he was standing on his own, he tumbled back into his chair.

Shadoe knelt down in front of him. “You know what did it? Your anger at Lucretia. Whatever you do, don’t get in a forgiving mood when you think about her. Stay mad, and someday you’ll be walking again. Now, how about letting me look your legs over?”

“Only if you don’t start lusting after me.”

Shadoe snickered. “Sorry, but your daughter’s already stolen my heart.” Shadoe was sorry the minute he’d said it. His hands stalled and he looked up into Garret’s heated stare.

The two men’s eyes met and held, a long silence stretching between them until Garret said, “Yeah? Which one?”

The silence became charged with memories of the night on the ridge hanging between them. Shadoe knew he could smooth it over, but he stayed silent, tired of pretending he didn’t feel something

for Julita. Besides it would be better if it was out in the open. They needed to deal with the problem and reason it out. But with someone as stubborn as Garret Van Dare, it wouldn't be easy. He'd never met a man so set in his ways.

Garret watched Shadoe as he gently pushed up his pants legs. The man was one of the good guys, no doubt about that, so why wasn't he happy about Shadoe's infatuation with Julita? After all, the man had literally saved his life ... or what was left of it. And now Shadoe wanted his daughter. His eyes stabbed Shadoe critically while he still felt around on his legs. Dark skinned, Indian heritage. Handsome devil, though. Good guy ... as good as they come. Payment of his daughter for his freedom? Wasn't that what Indians did? Trade? If this was what Shadoe had in mind ... the price was too damned high!

"God, your legs are skin and bones."

"What the hell did you expect? Betty Grable? Oh, sorry," he said sarcastically, "you're too friggin' young to remember her."

"I've heard of Betty Grable. Great lookin' dame. Some legs." He looked back down at Garret's legs, feeling around on them. "You're not going very far on these, though. We'll just have to build you up."

Something drove Garret as he observed the dark-skinned savage rubbing his legs. He knew he was being unfair, but he couldn't stop himself. "You're really into this touchy, feely stuff, aren't you? Julita's not enough for you. Now you're after her old man. That it?"

Shadoe jerked his head upward, and looked at Garret with a frown. "What the hell is wrong with you? I'm straight as an arrow...."

Garret couldn't stop himself, and barreled on. "Yeah, you'd know a lot about arrows, wouldn't you?"

"What the hell does that mean? I'd much rather be feeling around on Ju--"

"Leave my daughter alone, you savage." Garret was fuming. He knew he shouldn't say anything with Julita around, but he couldn't seem to keep his mouth shut. He leaned forward, trying to keep his voice down. "I thought we went through this on the ridge. She's off limits!"

Shadoe didn't know why, but for some reason Garret was gunning for a fight. Ordinarily he might try to defend his relationship with Julita, but he'd only heard one thing ... savage. He'd heard it before, many times. His anger sprang to life, and his tone was low and threatening. "Are you saying

you resent my heritage?”

Garret suddenly realized what he was doing, and lowered his head. “No ... yes ... hell, I don’t know.”

“Come on, Garret, just say it. I’ll get you out of this goddamned basement no matter how you feel about me.” He indicated toward the outside. “But in that world out there you’re going to be walking around again one day. Will you resent me then? If I try to see Julita ... if we fall in love ... how would you feel about that?”

“Fall in love?” Garret yelled, then looked hard at Shadoe. “Have you had your hands on my daughter? Touched her?”

“You know who you sound like? That bitch upstairs!”

“Stay away from her,” he snarled, “do you hear?”

Shadoe looked at him with pain in his eyes. “Yes, I hear.” His eyes lowered sadly, his anger draining away, turning to hurt. Why couldn’t he stay mad at the old man? Instead he felt like he’d been shot in the heart with an arrow. Hell, why should he be surprised? Bigotry had become part of his life. He’d faced it before, and he’d face it again. In most cases he’d learned to live with it, but sometimes it reared its ugly head in the strangest places. This was one of those places. Except for his obsession with his daughter, Garret seemed like such a right kind of guy, he never thought he’d hear it coming from him.

The silence in the basement was strained while Shadoe pulled the pants back down over his legs. “We’ll ... we’ll have to build up those legs. Tomorrow we’ll start an exercise regimen. We’ll get you up on your feet again, you should...” His words faded as his eyes drifted up to Garret and saw the old man looking at him, his hands crossed in his lap, his permanent scowl back in place. Somehow he knew there would be no tomorrow, and found himself wanting to apologize. But for what? His Indian heritage? He wasn’t ashamed of his heritage, and he certainly wouldn’t apologize for it. Besides, a man apologized for things he could help, things he could’ve have done differently, not those things he had no control over.

“Garret, would you rather me bow out now? There’s another way we can play this, you know. I could contact the local PD, have you out of here in a matter of hours.”

“Now he tells me,” Garret retorted.

His eyes flickered at the smart retort. “You knew it, you old bastard. Why didn’t you say

something? No, you didn't want to play it by the book, because you wanted that witch upstairs to pay for what she's done to you and Julita. It didn't matter what my heritage was as long as your stomach stayed full and you knew you'd eventually get out of this goddamned basement. Right? What suddenly changed your mind? Me and Julita? Can't stand the thought of a half-breed savage touching your daughter, much less joining the family. Sure, I'm good enough to feed you and help you scare the pants off Lucretia, but not quite good enough when it comes to your daughter. Am I right?"

"Keep you voice down, you bastard. Where's Julita?"

"Don't worry, she can't hear us, she's in the back."

But Julita had heard it ... heard it all. She was about to come around the corner when she heard them talking, but stopped dead still when she realized they were arguing. How could her papa treat Shadoe like that? Not only had he gone to great personal expense to come to their rescue, he had turned her to a woman with the passion of a tiger. The way they felt about each other, that should be the important thing. Not what he was, or where he came from. It didn't matter to her that he was a half-breed. He was beautiful, and good. And her papa had hurt him.

And then Shadow's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"You don't have to worry, Garret. I'll get you out of this basement. Then you and Julita can go live on the moon for all I care."

"Shadoe...."

Shadoe put up his hands. "Hell, no. Don't say a thing. I've been through this hundreds of times. Why should I expect anything different from you?"

Garret saw Shadoe get up from his crouch and stack their dirty dishes in the picnic basket. He had to hand it to the boy, he hadn't thrown all the help he'd given them in his face. He'd just cut it off clean and neat. Garret felt a certain sadness about what had gone on between them, but somehow he couldn't change his mind. He knew there were a lot of things about himself that were less than desirable, but he would never have admitted to being a snob.

\* \* \* \*

Shadoe banged through the back door of the basement on his way around the inn to get to the back stairs. He didn't want to see Lucretia, and figured she'd be at the front desk as always.

But he was wrong.

When he went to rush up the stairs, he found her coming down. Both stopped on the steps, looking at each other. A smile twitched at her lip. “Why, hello, Mr. Madison.” Her eyes lowered to the basket. “Another picnic? At this hour?”

He looked at her robe. It seemed strange to see her in anything but the high-collared dresses she wore. “I’m an early riser. I like to eat outside,” he said, feeling the answer was a stupid one.

His answer making her suspicious, she frowned. “Why are you coming in through the kitchen? I really must ask you to come in through the front. This is off limits to the guests. It’s only for deliveries, and such. I’m sure you understand.”

He forced a smile. “Oh, sure, I certainly do.” He indicated toward the door. “I was just walking down by the beach. Thought I’d save a few steps.” Placing the picnic basket on the floor, he walked up a few steps as if to go around her, but she didn’t move.

“Got any wine in that basket?” she said, hoping a reminder of their glass of wine the other day would be a gentle reminder to continue what he had started.

“Don’t drink wine for breakfast.” His eyes darted up to her, then quickly away. “Now ... if you’ll excuse me....” he said, shuffling his restless feet, anxious to get away. I need ... I need to get upstairs.”

She looked at him in a way she hoped was coy. “You should try it sometime.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean wine is not like hard alcohol. Many people drink it for breakfast.”

Hell, yes, if you’re a wino, Shadoe thought, looking at the woman as if she’d lost her mind. “Maybe I’m just not worldly enough,” he muttered.

“Oh... I think you are,” she said with a lopsided smile, and a voice she hoped sounded sexy.

Shadoe gulped. She was flirting with him. This cadaver in a light blue robe was flirting with him! “Yeah, well ... look I’m in an awful hurry, would you excuse me?”

Her smile faded, and a cold look crept into her eyes. "Yes ... of course," she said, turning sideways to let him pass.

He had climbed a few steps, then hesitated. Finally, turning back to her, he said, "Say, I was wondering ... I haven't seen the girl in the mask around lately. What happened to her? Seems like she just disappeared into thin air. Kind of strange." His eyes narrowed on her to get her reaction to his question.

Lucretia stiffened. "I ... she ... I had to send her away. You were right, of course."

"Right? About what?"

"When you suggested she wasn't quite right. I thought about it a lot, and finally had to commit her to an asylum. Yes, she was becoming a danger to herself and to the guests." Her smile was nervous when she looked at him. "I want to thank you for your professional observation. It ... it was just what I needed to take another look at Julita. One that wasn't biased since she was my sister."

God, she's good, Shadow thought. "Too bad. What was it that unbalanced her? Her face, perhaps?"

"Yes, I think that might have played an important part in it. She's had to wear the mask since she was a baby, and ... well, you can imagine how something like that can play on your mind."

"You mean wearing the mask day in and day out?"

"Yes ... and the scars. Ugly, puckering things. Living with something like that day after day is bound to unhinge a person." She angled a nervous look at him. "I thought you had seen her without her mask once. Did you get a look at the scars? Ugly things."

"No, I didn't," he assured her. "I would have liked to though. I still say a good plastic surgeon...."

She breathed a little easier, a satisfied smirk playing around her mouth. "Really, Mr. Madison, in Julita's case she couldn't have benefited from it. She was too... well you know."

"I suppose your right. Well, if you'll excuse me, I have to get my camera. I was going to take a few shots of the bones down below the ridge." He saw the blood drain from her face.

“Yes ... well, be careful.”

He turned, hoping the conversation had done a little bit to stamp out any romantic notions she'd had about him. As soon as he reached his room, he picked up the phone.

“Give me the local PD.”

\* \* \* \*

With the report burning in his ears, Dan Simmons, Chief of the Scarlet Police Department, immediately applied for a search warrant. After it was procured, someone from the judge's office tipped off the media.

“I'll handle this myself,” Simmons said, then turned to two other officers. “Wilson, you and Dodd back me up. Sounds like Scarlet Bay is at it again.”

The two squad cars peeled out, their tires burning rubber, and their sirens causing a piercing scream to split the mist-shrouded morning. Revolving blue and red lights cast a moving rainbow of color on the trees and shrubs that lined the road until they reached the famous Scarlet Bay Inn. The caravan of squad cars, news vans with their stations logos emblazoned on the side, and an ambulance, took a sharp turn and bumped up into the famous crushed-shell drive.

Before the vehicles even came to a halt, doors were thrown open, and several people spilled out, some in uniform, others carrying camcorders, lights, and high-tech equipment. This was a small town, and a story like this didn't come along often. The TV stations were a little hesitant to jump into the big middle of something that might prove to be a false lead, but once they checked it out with the police department they didn't waste any time. They carted their equipment out of their vans, swarmed into the yard and ruthlessly fought their way into the crowd of officers that were constantly pushing them back, yelling for them to get out of the way.

Hearing the noise, Lucretia quickly ran to a window. Her eyes widened at the crowd of uniformed officers and news vans. Having no idea what was happening, she let the drape drop and made her way to the front door and swung it open. She rushed out and stood on the curve of the portico, watching as Shadoe Madison preceded a line of uniformed officers walking toward the inn.

“That's her,” he said, pointing her out.

The lead officer walked up to her. “Are you Lucretia Van Dare?”

“Y-yes,” she said, hardly looking at the officer as she made her way around him to get to Shadoe. “What has happened? What are all these policemen doing here?”

Before he could answer, the officer who had approached her, barked at her from behind. “Ms. Van Dare!”

She turned. “Yes. What do you want?” she asked impatiently.

He extended a folded piece of paper toward her. “I’ve got a search warrant to search your basement.”

“W-what?” she said, looking down at the formidable document he waved in front of her face. She looked back up at him. “W-why ... I....”

“We have a report that you’re keeping a man ... I believe he’s your father ... prisoner in your basement. Is that correct?”

Her face paled. “No ... it ... it’s not true ... it’s simply n-not true.”

“Then you won’t mind if we look.”

“No, you can’t come in here upsetting my guests. I ... my ... my father is ... he’s dead ... he ... died.”

“Please step aside.”

“No!” she shouted in his face. “You can’t!” She looked around at the milling crowd. “I don’t understand any of this!”

“Ma’am, charges have been filed against you,” the officer said. “You understand that, don’t you?”

“But who...?”

“Lieutenant Shadoe Madison of the NYPD.”

Lucretia felt as if the wind had been knocked out of her. “H-he’s a c-cop?”

Just then she saw Shadoe being pursued by a reporter with a microphone while he directed the other officer, a medic, and a police photographer around to the back. She sidestepped the officer, and ran toward Shadoe. "You bastard! Coming in here, masquerading as a goddamned photographer, then a journalist. What is this? Is this another disguise you're wearing?"

"Afraid not," he said, indifferent to her anger, "what you see is what you get."

"That mouth of yours ... I should have thrown you out when I had the chance, you scummy bastard! I want you out now, do you hear? You will not spend another night in this inn."

He turned and looked down at her, a smirk on his face. "Neither will you, lady."

She gasped at his words, then turned to the crowd. "Just a minute," she shouted, but no one was listening to her. "This is my home, and you're on private property. What do you want here?"

Suddenly a microphone was pushed into her face, and blinding lights spotlighted her. "Miss Van Dare, we received a report that you have people held captive in your basement. Any truth to that?"

Lucretia's face drained of any blood, while squinting at the lights. "Where did you hear ... really, that's preposterous." Her eyes widened when she recognized some of the guests who were streaming out of the inn to see what was happening. "No ... no one's in my basement," she said to the reporters and other faces she didn't recognize. "I ... don't know...." Her voice faded when she heard a noise, and everyone began running toward it. "Who are these people?" she shouted, watching the crowd tramping around on her property. She began crying. No one would listen to her. No one ... God, what was happening?

A reporter stood in front of a camera just a few feet from Lucretia who could be seen in the background whirling around wildly and screaming obscenities at the people around her. "As you can see," she said, "Lucretia Van Dare, and the latest scandal at Scarlet Bay Inn has just made headlines ... again!"

\* \* \* \*

Garret turned with a start when he heard a commotion outside the basement door. Within seconds the door banged open, leather shoes scraped on dirty concrete, and clamoring voices all talking at once preceded the crowd that rushed into the room. He jerked himself around, looking at the unfamiliar faces. All at once he was surrounded, and had to hide his eyes as flashbulbs exploded in his face.

“What is this?” he demanded, trying to see past the assaulting flashes of light.

“My God,” someone said in a hushed tone, “he’s skin and bones. The man is starving to death.”

“You Garret Van Dare?” the officer asked.

“Yes,” he replied, “who are you?”

“I’m Chief Dan Simmons, and my second here is Officer Galen Brecc. We got a report that you were being held prisoner in this basement. Any truth to that?”

Garret knew immediately what had happened. Shadoe had called in the authorities just as he’d suggested. “Yes,” he said, sounding tired, “thankGod you’re here.”

Just then a medic with a stethoscope hanging around his neck pushed through. “I need to examine him.”

“This is Medical Examiner Druce Aldrich,” the chief said to Garret. “He needs to check you over. Then we’ll remove you from the premises.”

“I understand,” Garret said, then saw Julita making her way through the crowd from the other part of the basement. He held his arms out and she went into them. “This is my daughter, Julita. It’s okay, baby,” he whispered when he heard her sobbing and felt her body trembling with fear.

Officer Brecc, taking in Garret’s gaunt face and bony frame, turned to the doctor. “How is he, Doctor?”

“Very strong for someone as undernourished as he is. What did you live on?”

“Not much. Rotten food, mostly. That’s all my daughter would give me. After a while it started tasting pretty good ... until she didn’t want me around anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, she gave me food mixed with roaches, ants ... God--” his stomach lurched, “--sometimes alive, crawling...” He hesitated for a moment to get his nausea under control, then

continued. “When she was upset with me she would put a dead animal on my plate. After a while the food became sparse, undercooked, if cooked at all.”

The medic looked at him with a face mixed with compassion, and disgust. Trying to stay objective, he forced his voice to maintain its authority. “Sir, we’re going to transport you to the nearest hospital.”

“Yes, thank you,” Garret said, grateful that his torture had finally come to an end.

The medic looked at Julita. “Is this the child that suffered abuse?”

Garret looked down at her, tears shining in his eyes. “Yes, she was beaten, drugged....”

The medic reached for her arm, but Julita shrunk back.

“It’s okay, baby,” Garret said. “Let him see your arm.”

“Two daughters?” the medic asked, while looking at the bruises on Julita’s arm as well as the rest of her body. “Is that all you have?”

Just then Garret looked up and saw Shadoe.

When their eyes met, Shadoe made a mock salute and said, “Be seein’ you, pops.” His eyes shifted and lingered longingly on Julita for several seconds, then turned away.

Garret looked after him, remembering the last angry words he had said to Shadoe in this room. He should be relieved, happy to be out of this prison, but instead, a sadness enveloped him. Would he ever see Shadoe again? Would he have a chance to say thanks? Was this just another case Shadoe was putting behind him? Why couldn’t Shadoe understand why Garret had acted like he had? He respected him ... trusted him. There were very few men on this earth he felt that way about, and Shadoe was one of them. Indian or not, he was a good cop. Knew what he was doing. Hard not to respect a man like that.

He knew he’d overreacted, using Shadoe’s heritage like a weapon against him. Garret had done wrong, but could he really say he was sorry? It wasn’t Shadoe’s heritage, not entirely. Garret just wasn’t ready for his daughter to belong to anyone but him. He’d been robbed of her presence in his life for fifteen years, and had a lot of catching up to do. To see her in someone else’s arms ... he just wasn’t ready for it. She was only eighteen. She needed to grow up, live a little, buy new dresses, take a trip around the world, catch up on all the things she’d missed. And he wanted to give her all that. He

wanted to be her teacher, her mentor, the only love in her life right now. There'd be plenty of time for men later on.

"Mr. Van Dare, please."

Garret's thoughts dissipated like so much smoke when he heard the medic's voice. "I'm sorry," he said, looking up at the man, "what was the question?"

"You have two daughters, is that correct?"

"Yes," he said, "Lucretia runs the inn, and Julita here was living upstairs in the attic...."

"The attic? Was she held prisoner?"

"No, not in the way you mean. She was tortured, made to wear a mask ... really, Officer," he said turning to the chief, "can't this wait until later? I'm feeling very weak."

"Of course," he said, then nodded at the medic. "Better get him out of here. "The daughter can go...."

"She stays with me," Garret said, possessively.

The chief signaled the uniform who had his hand on Julita's arm, subtly telling him to check things outside.

The crowd made way for the gurney Garret was on, to pass. He held Julita's hand as she walked beside him. When they turned the corner of the mansion he saw Lucretia struggling while being taken into custody.

When Lucretia saw him, she ran up to him, yelling in his face. "You bastard, you tricked me. Well, this is not the end, do you hear?" Her eyes shifted, looking up at Julita. You and your precious little whore will rue the day you...."

Suddenly she felt a jerk from behind. "Come on Ms. Van Dare, don't make threats on top of everything else you've got stacked against you." With that he began pulling her toward the squad car.

"Bastard!" she yelled out at Garret while resisting the officer who had his hand on her head,

pushing her inside.

Garret saw her glaring at him from inside the car. With the play of light and shadow on her face making her ugliness even more sinister, he could almost hear the obscenities she mouthed at him. He was finally rolled into the back of the ambulance, and heard the sirens scream as they made their way out of the drive and sped back down the coast highway.

Back at the inn, several digging instruments clanked loudly as they were thrown down in the yard. As soon as the ambulance had left, the chief and the other officers began digging. By late afternoon they had found several corpses while cameras whirled, the grisly pictures scheduled to be broadcast all over the country.

\* \* \* \*

Julita seemed to be in fairly good health and was released before Garret. He arranged for her to have a room right there in the hospital since he couldn't stand to have her very far away. She eventually became a soothing presence, helping the doctors and nurses as they tried to treat him. His gruff manner made him a difficult patient, but the doctors and patients, aware of his ordeal, tolerated him, trying to make him as comfortable as possible.

The day came when he had to testify at Lucretia's trial and was wheeled in front of the courtroom. He knew how he looked, and didn't blame some for the shock in their faces when they saw him. His hair was still a chopped-up mess, and his limbs were weak. His voice, when he tried to speak, was raspy, but the courtroom was held in rapt silence as he described in detail the story of his accident, and his fifteen year plight in the basement at the mercy of his insane daughter. Murmurs, gasps of shock, and even tears fell from those who saw his pain.

Then when Julita's sad story was told, a sobbing woman separated herself from the crowd and ran toward Lucretia. "You bitch!" she yelled, before anyone could stop her. She reached out to attack Lucretia as she hovered behind her lawyer. He struggled with the woman, shielding Lucretia. The press immediately hopped on this, and a flurry of reporters crowded around the attack, aiming their cameras at the two females before the guards were able to stop them. She was pulled away while screaming obscenities at Lucretia, and led outside.

When Shadoe got up on the stand, Lucretia looked at him, wishing she had taken a hatchet and cut out his heart. Choosing his words carefully, he told the court all about his initial suspicions, then his covert activities to find out the truth. He described in detail about how he found Garret held prisoner in the basement trying to exist on rotten food, and living in conditions a rat would find offensive.

"The old man was almost dead," he said, looking over at Garret and seeing the scowl he had come to know so well. "I had to feed him, build up his strength. Moving him in that condition would

have been too dangerous. Until that time I had to make Lucretia believe they were dead to keep her out of the basement. If she had any idea what was going on, it would mean death for all of us.”

He avoided talking about the falling out between him and Garret, saying only that he took a few days to see that they were well fed and had enough fresh air. He added that he was just about to start Garret on an exercise regimen when he realized that the old man couldn’t last much longer under those conditions, and a professional therapist would do a much better job than he could.

“Every minute we spent there was taking a chance that Lucretia might begin to get suspicious and find them, and I just couldn’t take that chance. That’s when I decided to bring in the local authorities.”

When the trial was over, and the whole story hit the press, Shadoe’s face, along with those of the Van Dare family, was plastered on every front page, detailing the story again and again. When it was over, Lucretia was surrounded by an explosion of flashbulbs, shouts, and rushing bodies while the brutal hands of uniformed officers handcuffed her and carted her off to the State of Georgia Lunatic Asylum.

The day that Lucretia rode up to the building, her eyes raked over the aged, chipped façade of the crouching old hospital, and she felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. When she walked through the doors and encountered the cold, impersonal stares of the staff, saw the ripped linoleum on the floors, and walls that had lines of rust stains running down them, something inside her rebelled. Her mind immediately began working. She refused to be buried and forgotten in this hell!

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

One year later, New York City

It was early evening, and the night was slowly becoming brightly decorated with neon lights and strange creatures oozing from the shadowy cracks of the City. Shadoe hadn't been the same since Lucretia's trial. He was moody and silent, seemed to be thinking a lot.

He and his partner were cruising down Broadway when he heard gunshots coming out of a little shop that did body art. He skidded the squad car to a halt and the two of them spilled out. Shrieking people, running in every direction, erupted from the brightly lit shop, followed by an older man who came staggering out while holding his stomach, blood seeping through his fingers.

"Freeze!" Shadoe yelled, seeing two youths running away from the scene. He drew his gun and fired a wild shot, but the youths kept going, melting into the shadows of the night.

"You stay here," he yelled at his partner. "Get on the radio and call emergency. I'll try and catch the bastards!" He turned quickly and raced toward the two bodies that by now were nothing but tiny specks in the distance.

Later he and his partner walked into the station, a pair of handcuffs on a lanky boy of only sixteen with a pierced body. "Book the bum for burglary and possible attempted murder. Two perps. One got away. Don't know yet who did the shooting. Victim's in the hospital. If he lives he'll identify our guest here," Jerking the boy around, he peered into his face threateningly. "but I have a feeling this creep is gonna spill his guts. Right?" The boy gave Shadoe a "go to hell" look before he was brutally pushed into a seat beside the desk of a sergeant.

Shadoe walked toward the back of the room while rolling his aching shoulders. It wasn't easy trying to work out twelve hours of wrestling down thieves, murderers, and drug dealers. Running helter-skelter through alleyways, and shooting at shadows in the dark. Finally he picked up a reasonably clean mug and poured himself a cup of stale coffee.

Parenti looked at Shadoe closely. "Hey, it's been ... what, a year since we last had to kick you out of here? What the hell is with you? You didn't kick, yell, or curse once. Don't you feel like plowing down the population since the other kid got away?"

The cup hovered in front of Shadoe's lips as they curved into a smile at the gibe. "Not this time."

"Well," Parenti smiled. "Glad to hear it. Looks like you finally got your head on straight."

“Can’t win ’em all, I guess,” Shadoe said, wincing at the foul-tasting coffee as he slumped into his chair.

Parenti perched on the side of Shadoe’s desk. “So what’s the latest on the gruesome Scarlet Bay mystery? The father and daughter just seemed to vanish.”

Lifting his feet and resting them on top of the desk, Shadoe said, “I don’t know. Haven’t heard anything.”

“Something strange there.”

Taking a sip, Shadoe scowled while looking into his cup. “God, why do I drink this stuff?” Setting his cup down and pushing it away, he looked up at his partner. “Okay, so what is it that’s so strange?”

“That bastard didn’t even say thanks. All through the trial he didn’t speak to you once. Didn’t even try to make contact later. Something’s wrong.”

“Hell, Parenti, I didn’t do it for thanks, I did it--” he hesitated, “--well, hell, I couldn’t not do it. You know how I am. I see something’s not right, and I have to stick my big ugly nose in it until I can make it right.”

“Yeah, but the man owes you, Madison. If someone had rescued me from the hell he endured, I’d be down on my knees kissing his feet.”

“You don’t know Garret Van Dare the way I do. He’s ... I don’t know ... not the gooey type. The man probably chews razor blades for breakfast to sharpen his bite.”

“Face it, Madison, the old man’s a jerk. He could have at least given you a big chunk of change. The old bastard could easily afford it. He’s richer than God.”

“He doesn’t owe me a damned thing. I did what I did because somebody had to. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time.” He shrugged. “That’s all there is to it. Case closed.” He picked up the cup and handed it to his partner. “Here do something with this,” he said, swinging his legs off the desk. “I need to get in to see the captain, see what he’s got for me.”

“If you say so,” Parenti remarked, then took a sip out of the cup and frowned. He quickly threw it out, then nodded toward the captain’s office. “He’s in now, looks like.”

Shadoe picked up a pencil and began looking at his own teeth marks, evidence of his past stress. "How about the man that got shot? How bad was he hurt?"

"Huh? Oh, he'll be okay. Lucky son of a bitch. Only got a flesh wound. Lot of blood, though. Scared hell out of me."

Throwing the pencil down, Shadoe stood up. "See you around," he said, his tone restless, then headed for the captain's office. He stuck his head in. "Hey, Captain, if you don't need me anymore, I'm checkin' out."

"Come on in. Got something to go over with you."

"Yeah? What's cooking?"

"I might need you to go into the Leopard Club as a bouncer. Seems there's some drug dealing going on there."

"Drug dealing, huh?"

The captain looked up at him, observing his laid-back attitude. "Not, drug dealing, you wimp," he said with a whiney voice, "fuckin' DRUG DEALING!" he growled, his voice digging deep into his throat.

Shadoe smiled. "Oh, I see. The big time."

"You're damned right, the big time. Nobody but you can handle this one. You up for it?"

"I'm there. When do you want me?"

"Not for a while yet. For the time being keep riding shotgun with Parenti. I should be getting something solid in the next few days."

"Where's Delaney?"

"Had an emergency. Family thing. Had to go to Vermont ... mother died or something."

Shadoe's brow creased at the bad news. "Too bad," he murmured, then looked up. "Okay, well, you need me anymore tonight? I'd like to get out of here."

A surprised look crossed the captain's face. "You mean you're going to walk out that door without me kicking you out?" He gave Shadoe a slow grin. "My God, has the earth toppled off its axis?"

Shadoe smiled. "Okay, so I deserved that. Now, if you can bring yourself to act like a responsible law enforcement officer, I'd like an answer to my question. I need to unwind a little. Me and Parenti have been here for twelve friggin' hours for God's sake, give me a break ... hell, give us both a break."

"Hellfire, Madison, you're not foolin' me. You forget how long we've known each other, bud. It's a woman, isn't it? You always start acting like this when you're thinking about a woman. You become distracted, moody...."

"You're so damned cold, you're peein' icicles," Shadoe denied hotly.

"Yeah? Something tells me I'm not."

"Hey, am I out of here, or not?"

"Sure, go ahead. You might as well leave since you won't be doing the department any good until you get her in the sack. Who is she? Someone you just met? Good-looking, huh?"

Shadoe stood up, and turned. "I'm outta here. You need me, you can get me on my cell phone."

"Hey Madison!" he yelled. "Do her once for me, okay?"

Hearing the words, Shadoe lifted his hand and gave his captain the finger.

"Bastard," the captain muttered to himself, "Why the hell do I put up with that sonofabitch?"

"I give up. Why?"

The captain looked up, surprised to see one of his officers standing in the empty doorway.

“Because he a damned good cop, Sosa. You’d be doing yourself a favor if you took lessons.”

“Can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Hey, somebody’s gotta be the slacker,” he said jokingly. He lifted his hands, palms up, and moved them up and down counter to each other. “Balance out the precinct, you know?”

“And you do it damned well,” he said, frowning up at him. “Now, what the hell do you want?”

“Little penny-ante burglary on the Southside. Want me and....”

“You and Nash get on it.”

“You got it.”

“By the way, tell Parenti to get his ass out of here,” he said, then mumbled, “It’s a sad day when Madison is the voice of reason around here.”

\* \* \* \*

Shadoe slammed into his Toyota Landcruiser, turned the key, recklessly backed up, then charged out of the parking lot. As soon as he was on the street he reached back and pulled the rubber band out of his hair and let it blow free in the strong breeze. He drove fast, trying to get the cobwebs of the past out of his mind, but it didn’t help. Thoughts of Julita came creeping back. During the trial he’d tried to talk to her, but both Garret and their lawyer held on to her, keeping her safe within their circle. It was easy to see why. She was probably overwhelmed by all that had happened, and the press didn’t play favorites. They pursued all of them relentlessly. She still wore the large clothes that hung limp on her curvaceous body, her face hidden behind red-gold strands of hair. He couldn’t forget her frightened, darting eyes. When her face could be seen, it was without color, and without expression, except fear. She stayed in the arms of the lawyer who had gained her trust. It was a tight circle, the three of them, Garret in his chair, the lawyer, and Julita. From that circle of safety, she looked out on the throngs of people as if afraid they would attack.

Shadoe reached over and pulled a piece of material out of the glove compartment and handled it gently. It was a piece of the evidence he had lied to get. Now, looking at the dingy handcrafted mask he held in his hand, he wondered where she was. Every time he saw her in his mind, she was in that

baby bed. Hair in dog ears, dressed in provocative baby doll pajamas that were painfully thin. He knew she was in his head to stay. Try as he might, he couldn't get her out.

Shadoe stopped by a package store and stocked up on scotch, bourbon, and beer, then slammed into his apartment, throwing keys on a table, and dropping his jacket wherever convenient while digging out the bourbon. Opening it, he looked around at the dirty dishes and wisecracked to himself, "Where's the damned maid?"

Not bothering with a glass, he took the bottle, peeled off his shirt, then strolled over to a window, looked out on the busy, brightly lit city, and opened the window. Feeling the cool wind on his overheated body, he sat on the ledge and drank until he wasn't good for anything but sleeping it off. Eventually his eyelids fluttered to a close while haunting shadows played on their blank screens.

He saw himself surrounded by trees. Wind, rustling trees, screeching night birds and serenading cicadas. It was all so familiar ... as if he'd been there before. All at once an eerie voice lifted on the night wind.

Shaaaaaadooooe, pleeeeeease coooome! Pleeeeeease help my baaaaby. She's in daaaanger. He's going to hurt heeeer."

He thrashed along, working his way through the foliage, then stopped and looked up, seeing the moon, perfectly round in shape, and shining down on something. What was it? He pushed the low-hanging branches back and saw an old church. He'd seen it before, but why was he thinking about it now? He'd pushed it so far back in his memory, he'd forgotten. But there it stood, the spiral reaching up as if to pierce the moon. It was old, ashen, and alone. Forgotten by the world. Now it was silent, mist creeping around it, and shattered windows that looked out like eyes across the clearing. It struck him at that moment that the church was also a corpse. It might have stood tall and proud at one time. On some corner where believers came to gather. Its stained glass letting in a sunlight that painted the walls in rainbow colors, a bell in its proud steeple that clearly chimed out every Sunday morning just as services began. Now, it was dead, its walls holding some restless spirit that cried out in pain for her baby.

Bring her to meeee ... bring my baby to meeee, the voice urged just before Shadoe lunged forward, finding himself still on the window ledge.

Some kind of knowing suddenly filled him up inside, and he knew now what the woman was saying. "In danger," he repeated. "He's going to hurt her," he muttered, mulling the words over in his mind. Julita. Garret. "He's going to hurt ... oh my God," he muttered. "It's Julita. She's the baby." Shadoe knew a little of the history. He knew that her mother had died in childbirth, never getting to hold her daughter, never even getting to name her. Could it be Julita's mother crying out into the night? Capturing someone's dreams, calling for help?

"But not Garret. Garret wouldn't hurt her ... would he?" he muttered. Oh God, he thought. She had been left in the hands of the enemy. He raked his fingers through his hair, arguing with himself. But why? Why would he? He loved Julita. He lov--" oh God, he thought, remembering Garret's obsessive behavior in relation to his daughter. He'd never suspected such a love could be unnatural. His mind whirled. He had no idea where Garret had taken Julita. Would they have gone back to Scarlet Bay? No, he didn't think so. Garret wouldn't want to face the memories. It would be too much to bear for either of them. A thought came to him. Charlton Memorial. The hospital where Garret had been taken. He knew they would have the Scarlet Bay address, and was hoping their records would be extensive enough to include any referrals for treatment, names of surgeons, chiropractors, everything he needed to know to find Garret. Shadoe jumped up and grabbed his jacket and his keys when he realized his shirt was gone. Looking around, he saw it, grabbed it, and ran outside.

As Shadoe drove, he called the precinct, but got an answering machine. "Where the hell...?" he muttered. Someone was always there. When the sound indicating the recording had begun, Shadoe began speaking. "Captain. Madison here. I've got somebody to track down. I might be gone a few days. Sorry ... gotta do this." He clicked off, threw the phone down, and watched as his headlights invaded the thick darkness, their brightness revealing a ribbon of road that wound long and lonely through the cold night. His sturdy van cut through the wind that whipped at his window, making a moaning sound, giving him a chill. The long, narrow road cut through tall pines, gradually giving way to flat farmland, and now he passed a cemetery where the tombstones stood cold and white, like old bones in the moonlight.

What the hell was he doing? he asked himself. Had he gone mad? What would he say to Garret once he found him ... if he found him?

The scene began to unfurl in his mind, so vivid he could almost see it projected onto his windshield. The picture was hazy at first, but slowly it came into focus. Garret's permanent scowl was firmly in place, the old man's cold, icy gaze, familiar. His curly hair was wild and untamed, giving him a look of stark insanity while sitting in his wheelchair in a room richly decorated. Suddenly the voice pierced his ears.

"What in hell do you want?" he growled, the voice a faraway echo.

Shadoe heard himself speak, his voice sounding as if it came from deep within a well. "Garret, I need ... I'm taking Julita."

The old man laughed insanely, the mad reverberation ringing in his ears. "Are you insane? Get the hell out of my sight!"

"Garret, listen to me," Shadoe pressed. "I've been having these weird dreams. It's a woman, see, and she's dead...."

“What the hell does that have to do with Julita? Nurse!” he yelled, “Show this bastard the door, he’s bothering me.” And to Shadoe, he rasped, “You keep your hands off Julita. She’s not going anywhere with you.”

“Please ... Garret, the woman ... she says Julita’s in danger. I need to take her to this church ... see the woman.”

“Church? What the hell ... what are you talking about?”

“There’s a church ... in the woods, there at Scarlet Bay.”

The old man became angry, pushing himself up as if he were trying to stand. “You’re nuts, you know that? Nurse!”

Shadoe persisted. “This is something I’ve got to do, Garret. Hell, if I’m right, the woman is her mother!”

Shadoe moaned at the absurdity of the vision, and closed his eyes for half a second, but that was all it took. In the next minute he saw himself careening down the side of a cliff, and then nothing.

Later ... he didn’t know how much later ... he opened his eyes, but everything was moving at such a rapid pace that he became dizzy. He could feel hands on him, strong hands, jostling him. He mumbled, trying to speak, but his mouth was dry, and his lids heavy. His short glimpse revealed people running everywhere through revolving lights that lit up the night. They hurt his eyes, sent a piercing pain into his head. A million hands, it seemed, worked around him. One gave him oxygen while another stabbed his arm with a needle. Suddenly a wicked siren stabbed his ears ... just before everything faded.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Julita, wrapped only in a towel, sat on the edge of her bed while she hung on to the post of her bed, crying. Big tears rolled out of her, deep and hot, a flood that wouldn't stop. Her father had just left, and her room was in shambles. Lamps broken, furniture toppled, and hot, stinging scratches on shoulders where he had tried to grab her. She took her time, slowly making her way toward the bathroom and treated the red, fiery scars.

She looked at her reflection. Who was the woman staring back at her? She didn't know who she was anymore. Her thoughts went back to the day Lucretia's trial was over and the smirk of triumph that etched her father's face when they carted Lucretia away to the sanitarium. Their life was front-page news. Every secret they'd ever had was a secret no longer. Their dark closets had been swept clean of skeletons ... all except one.

She saw people staring at her. What did they see? A head full of stringy hair, frightened eyes, and a big, shapeless dress. She'd been so ashamed. She hadn't realized she'd looked so different until the piercing eyes of the public looked at her ... watched her, their eyes raking up and down her as if she were an odd piece of debris that had just washed up on the shore.

Garret's operation had been scheduled for soon after the trial, and it had been successful. He slowly gained strength with round-the-clock care that did wonders for him. He had regular meals and daily doses of high potency vitamins. He went through physical therapy, gaining strength in his legs, and after months on a walker, he graduated to a cane. The muscles in his legs were firming up and he was beginning to get around almost as well as before.

And then he moved them to New York and made preparations to send her to an expensive charm school in Paris. She was frightened at first, and it would have been very easy to beg off, but she knew her father had spent a lot of time and money on it, so she strengthened her resolve and forced herself onto the plane bound to a place she'd only dreamed about.

It was there that she became educated on the ways of the world. It was a strange sort of schooling for her, especially since she had never gone to college, but she knew how to carry herself correctly. Her movements became gracious, and her walk, a seductive sway. She worked on her speech, enunciating clearly. Carrying on conversations with her dialogue coaches taught her how to speak softly and like a lady without having everything come out in a hesitant stutter. This made it necessary for her to be up on current events, learn who was who in the social circles, and know high fashion. She knew what colors looked best on her, how to apply her makeup and how to dress in the most beautiful and expensive clothes available.

She remembered the first time she put on a dress that actually fit her. She looked wide-eyed at her curving form, her long, lovely legs, and had to gasp. She knew in an instant that all of this was what Lucretia had been trying to hide under those pitiful things she called dresses. The worst part was that Julita had let her. But what choice did she have? She remembered the rebellion she had felt, and a chill

crept down her spine when she knew the price she might have had to pay if the events in her life hadn't taken a sudden turn. Her innocence and total gullibility had put her in a cell without bars. She might have been trapped in a world of pain and torment, but at least it was familiar, and better than going out alone in the big bad world that lay just beyond the front door of the inn.

After almost a year, she returned to her father, a different person. Her beautiful red-gold hair was cut in the latest fashion. A blunt cut, parted on the side, and falling into deep waves. She detested pins, letting the full side fall down, covering one eye seductively. She remembered the day she walked in the door and saw her father for the first time in almost a year. She opened her arms and they embraced. Then she paraded before him while he looked her over. He seemed speechless, his eyes roaming over her as if he couldn't believe the change.

But then that night when she stood before him in a lovely white antique lace negligee she'd bought in Paris, his speech was slurred as he fingered her red-gold hair, caressed her golden skin, and pulled her to him. Thinking he wanted only to kiss her good night, she embraced him, but when it came time to part as father and daughter, he resisted, his hands pawing, and his eyes looking at her in a way she knew was wrong. She tried to back away, but he held her, his hot breath whispering in her ear while scorching her neck with his wet, hungry kisses. She managed to get away, thinking he was drunk. But in the days that followed he got worse.

And then tonight he came into her room reeking of bourbon. The advances he made were indecent, and the words he said to her were lewd and salacious. She struggled to get away, but he was strong.

"How the hell do I know you're my daughter? I lose you when you're three years old. Then you come back into my life, a beautiful grown woman that I don't know. You say you're my daughter, but...."

"Papa, you know I'm Julita. Don't try and make excuses for your actions. For years I wondered about you, missed you, wanted to know you, but I thought you were dead. Now, when we can be together, you ruin our relationship with your pawing hands, and your bourbon breath." Julita's lovely young face frowned and tears came to her eyes. "You're not a father," she whispered, "you're just a dirty old man who thinks he owns the world."

His staggering figure came toward her, his head bobbing with a vulgar leer on his face. "I do own part of it. I own you." His drunken gaze swept around their sumptuous penthouse. Then he waved his arms toward its rafters. "And I own all this." He looked back at her. "I did it all for you, Julita. Now you owe me something in return."

"I didn't ask for it, and if I owe you anything, it doesn't include--" sobs broke out, threatening to strangle her. "--Your hands all over me." Trying to gain control of herself, she continued. "When I think of the way you've tarnished something that could have been beautiful." The tears in her eyes momentarily blinded her, and she bowed her head, trying to wipe the tears from her eyes.

At that instant Garret lunged at her, his cane clattering to the floor. He caught her, a searing pain from his clawing nails scratching her across her shoulder. He grabbed her around the waist with one hand while his other hand moved down, cupping her between the legs, and began squeezing. He moaned, his hips moving against her.

The familiar position tugged at something within Julita, and she vaguely remembered him behind her as he was now. His hands were holding her tight, and something hard was pressing into her. All at once a long-buried memory burst through, and Julita remembered sitting in her father's lap, feeling his hands on her beneath her dress. She was only a small thing, but remembered that every time she sat in his lap his hand would instantly reach beneath her dress and rub her between her legs. She could remember feeling a hard ridge beneath his trousers, and him pushing against her, again and again. She was an active child, and her little bottom moved against him until he was moaning with pleasure. Suddenly she would feel hands beneath her arms pulling her away, and harsh, angry words would literally fly between him and Lucretia. She didn't understand then what was happening, but now it came through with a crystal clarity that was blinding, and unbelievable.

"My God, you bastard!" she yelled, pulling away from him and whirling on him to slap his face.

With his cane lying somewhere on the floor, his legs weakened, and she managed to topple him. He looked up at her with a red face. "You dirty little bitch!"

"Don't try that with me again, Papa," she said, her words hissing, and her teeth clenching. "I'm not three years old anymore."

\* \* \* \*

Now she looked at her face once more, and the eyes that once were innocent and pure, were now cold. Now she had the look of a woman who had seen too much. She lowered her head and brushed at the fresh tears the memories had brought to her eyes.

While in Paris, the love capital of the world, she had learned another very important lesson. She learned about love, about men. She listened to her coaches while her mind wandered, looking out the window. She watched Paris bloom around her, Parisians lazily flourishing in love, even walking down the street in an embrace. She heard lovely old romantic songs play freely in the streets. They made her smile, lonely for the closeness that could be shared by two people.

It made her think of him.

His long, thick mane, so dark it was as blue as the night. So tall he towered above her. She remembered the first time she'd seen him, and the feelings that came alive inside her. He'd made her realize she wasn't a little girl anymore, but a woman. And now, after Paris, it all made sense.

He was a man ... and she was a woman.

When she went to sleep at night, the city of Paris glittering outside her window like a thousand jewels, she relived the night they made love. Seeing his face above her ... seeing his glowing green eyes, and the intriguing little stone that twinkled just beneath the corner of his eye. When she hugged her pillow, it wasn't just a pillow ... it was him. She would close her eyes and feel the swirling sensation of something hot melting inside her, settling in the deepest part of her.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a sudden knock.

She looked up, and her father stood there, leaning on his cane with tears in his eyes. "Julita, I...."

"Get out of my room!"

"I got carried away ... I didn't mean...."

"I said, get out!"

He backed out and stood silently, feeling as if the bottom had fallen out of his world. Julita wasn't the only one who had changed. His curly hair was fashionably styled, a sleek mustache adorned his top lip, and he dressed in only the best. He looked around at the lush elegance and riches that he'd surrounded her with. All of it done with her in mind. Shining blond wood, floor-to-ceiling windows that stretched across the walls, bringing the twinkling city of New York into their living room.

He could look out and see moving marquees all the way down Broadway and the lush vegetation of Central Park dotted with street lamps. He enjoyed seeing the carriages wind around the broad paths, men in tuxedos, women in glittering dresses. He wanted Julita to wear clothes like that. To be among the magnificent, glittering crowd that streamed into clubs and restaurants in a city that never slept. Yes, he wanted to give New York to Julita, and all it had to offer. To have her cling to his arm, and hear her squeal with delight. But he had no intention of stopping there, next would come the world. City by city, continent by continent.

Now it was gone, and he felt the pain again ... pain he couldn't brush away like so much dirt, or buy off with money. How could he have let it happen? he asked himself, then thought back to the day she'd come back from Paris. She had walked in dressed in the latest Paris fashion. He would never

forget it. He'd been looking for her. Anxiously awaiting the big unveiling. And then he saw her, even more beautiful than he ever thought possible. She appeared to him, almost as a dream. He couldn't help the lustful jolt that turned on a passion he hadn't felt in years. It wasn't Julita he saw, but a beautiful woman. He hadn't had a daughter in fifteen years, and now with her new hairdo, makeup, and clothes, she could have been anyone.

When he looked at Julita now, he didn't remember the basement, the mansion and fifteen years of imprisonment, he saw the future, and all that he could give her. The haunting in his soul, the memories, old hurts, bad times, were gone, not just dimmed through drink. She was the blinding light that revealed the future and cloaked his past in shadows.

That night when she innocently modeled her new negligee for him, everything he had always loved ... beauty ... youth ... resided in Julita now. No wonder he was so anxious to give her the world. He couldn't help it if his hands tingled for her touch, or if his tongue hungered for a taste of her breasts. The swirl of lust he felt in his loins after the red hot feeling had being dormant for so long made him crazy. The night Julita was born, he never thought he would someday feel this way about her. But here she was, stirring the deepest part of him. His face might have lines, his hair may be sprinkled with gray, but he was strong and healthy and loved everything about her. Her look, her smell. It was like having his life back again.

And then, with a bottle of bourbon heating up his lust and destroying what morals he had, he'd burst in on Julita.

Now his daughter ... the daughter whom he loved more than life itself ... hated him, and his world was coming apart, ravaged as if it had been through a war. How could he live another minute ... another day ... with this on his conscience?

He stumbled, and the old music box fell to the floor. The haunting tune of Pretty Baby filled the room. Angered at the reminder, he picked it up and threw it. The small round box shattered the glass that covered a portrait of Greta hanging above the fireplace. His eyes shifted, catching a glimpse of himself in a mirror across the bar, wearing a lush, red smoking jacket, and he hated himself. On the surface he saw lust, greed, and depravity, but when he looked deeper, he saw a corrupted soul.

His eyes darted back, traveling up to the lines of the broken glass that filled Greta's beautiful face with wrinkles. As he stood there looking at her, the flesh of her face slowly melted away and turned to one of skeletal proportions. The teeth spread into a bony grin, and the eyes, cold and dark, became hellish whirlpools of death. They looked at him accusingly, as if they were damning him to hell. Guilt washed over him as he hid his face in his hands. In his drunkenness, he stumbled toward the balcony, the tinkling tune still madly playing in the background.

Pretty Baby, pretty baby....

While the haunting tune echoed, bouncing off the walls of his soul, Garret stood at the French doors open to the black night, the twinkling city of New York at his feet. He stumbled to the baluster and looked down, his eyes plunging all the way down the thirty-four flights. He swayed, leaning dangerously over, imagining what it would be like to finally end it all.

No more pain, no more guilt.

His eyes closed, and in his mind he went over, imagining it would be like flying. The wind in his face, soaring into the darkness, the lights of the city strung out below him like so many glittering stars. It seemed like heaven, and he wanted to go to heaven.

His cane clattered as it fell to the cement, and one leg lifted. He wanted to be out there, among the stars, but something was stopping him. It was the baluster. It was too high ... hard to lift his leg that high. But he must. A little higher ... just a little ....

Just then the doorbell rang.

The chime sounded again and again before Julita crept out of her room, keeping an eye out for her father. When she didn't see him, she went to answer it. She opened the door and looked up into a familiar face that made her gasp. Then they both turned to see the figure hanging along the balcony.

"Papa!" Julita's scream shattered Garret's dream and he opened his eyes. He was almost all the way over, looking down into a tunnel of balconies, one piling on top of the other. The ground rose, then fell, as a whirling dizziness encompassed him. He felt himself falling forward as if he were top heavy, but suddenly heard rushing footsteps behind him and felt two large, strong hands pull him backward. He turned to see who it was that saved him, but before the face appeared he lost consciousness. He only remembered two glowing green eyes ... the eyes of a panther.

It was Shadoe Madison.

Shadoe carried him to the couch and crouched down beside him while he took his pulse.

"He'll be all right," he said to Julita. "He's had a shock. What happened here tonight?"

Julita quickly became defensive, and shrugged. "I don't know what you mean. He's been drinking, that's all."

"Did you two have an argument?"

“Maybe,” was all she said as she paced, a drink in her hand.

Shadoe followed her with his eyes. He’d never seen her like that. So worldly, so sophisticated. He could tell at a single glance that this wasn’t the same Julita he’d known at the inn. Something had happened to her. He couldn’t deny she was beautiful ... her hair, her makeup, the way she carried herself. Coming to a halt in front of him, he saw her look down at him with a hot, moist look of sex he’d never seen in another woman’s eyes. “What the hell has happened to you,” he whispered.

She gave him a brazen smile. “I’ve been educated, Lieutenant. Educated and initiated into a world of pain and suffering.” She looked down into the dark liquid. “I sometimes think I was better off not knowing a damned thing.” She drank the biting liquor down in one gulp, then winced when it burned her throat.

Shadoe watched her, amazed. She talked without stumbling, and fear was a thing of the past. Now she faced the world head-on ... and dared it to try and hurt her.

“Julita, alcohol’s not the answer.”

“Isn’t it?” she asked sarcastically, looking down at the empty glass in her hand. A frown suddenly appeared on her beautiful face. “How do you go back, Lieutenant? Back to ignorant bliss?” Her eyes became cloudy as she looked at something in her mind that he couldn’t see. “It’s no problem going forward. Anyone can learn, become someone else, but how do you go back and get something you’ve lost? A certain innocence ... a purity.” She shifted a pair of eyes toward him that reflected pain and sorrow. “The answer?” she said, not really asking a question, then reached for her father’s bourbon and made a big flourish of pouring herself another drink. “You can’t,” she said coldly, looking at the stream of liquid as it flowed from the bottle’s neck and into her glass. “You have to live with it.” Then she lifted the bottle, and they both looked at it. “And this is how.”

“And what is it you have to live with? You’re rich, beautiful. You could have the world at your feet.”

She looked toward the balcony and made a flourish with her hand that held the drink, her full, red lips forming a smile without depth. “Apparently I do. All of New York is out there. And I live on the very top floor of an ivory palace my father built for me. No one can touch me.” Tears glinted in her eyes. “He’s here when I wake up, and he’s here--” she paused, a sob catching in her throat, “--he’s here ... when I go to bed.”

The word caught Shadoe’s attention.

“His tapping cane, his raspy voice, his bourbon breath, and his....” Her eyes shifted, settling on his reclining form, wondering how it would be if he never woke up again. Suddenly she dropped the

glass and began crying, burying her face in her hands.

Shadoe rushed up to wrap her in his arms. “My God, Julita, has he hurt you?”

“Take your goddamned hands off my daughter!”

The two of them whirled around, and they both looked at Garret as he pulled himself up off the couch. “Is that what you came here for? To molest my daughter?”

Julita was stunned by his words. “And how would that be different from you, Papa?”

“Shut up!” he commanded.

A heat of anger flooded Shadoe. How could the bastard do it? He had known that Garret was protective of his daughter. Holding her, caressing her, looking at her as if she were made of gold, but he thought it was because it had been so long since he’d seen her. He never suspected this. No wonder Julita was bitter. Suffering first from Lucretia’s obsession, how from her father’s.

Garret leaned on his cane, looking at Shadoe after so long a time. “I’m surprised you haven’t been around sooner. Why now? Why come looking after all this time?”

“I did, but a car crash stopped me. I was on my back for several weeks. Concussion, cracked ribs, almost died.”

The old man gave him a twisted smile, and a scowl. “Too bad you didn’t.”

“I gave up then, decided to hell with you, but I’ve been....”

Garret stood looking at Shadoe, waiting for his next words. “You’ve been what? You know, it’s bad form not to finish what you were saying. Is that what they taught you in the police academy?” he asked sarcastically, trying to ridicule Shadoe.

“Garret, I’m taking her away.”

His sarcastic leer fell, and one of murder replaced it. “You’re what?”

“You heard me, old man, I’m taking her away.”

“And I’ll see you in hell first.”

“It’s not what you think. I have to take her back to Scarlet Bay. There’s someone there she has to see ... someone who wants to see her.”

“You must be nuts to think I’d let you take her away from here ... from me!”

Still standing within the circle of his arms, Julita spoke up. “I’m going with him,” she rasped, “and you can’t stop me, Papa. I’m nineteen, almost twenty now, and I can do what I want.”

“But the man doesn’t have a cent,” Garret said, stumbling forward. “He wants your money, Julita. Don’t you see?”

“Oh? I’m so repulsive no man would want me without my money?”

“Of course not,” he sputtered. “Julita, don’t....” He’s ... hell, you deserve better!”

“White man speak with forked tongue,” Shadoe said, his voice deep in his chest.

Garret whirled on Shadoe. “You shut your mouth, you filthy red....”

“Don’t say it!” Shadoe shouted, a look of war on his face. “Don’t even think it!” He hesitated for a moment, then said, “Look, I don’t want a dime of her money, or yours. I’ve got something to do and I need her with me. After that she can come back here to you and both of you can go to hell for all I care.”

“And what’s in Scarlet Bay that’s so damned interesting, you bastard, or is this just some pitiful excuse you’re using to get her away from me?”

“It’s her mother ... I’m going to take her to see her mother.”

Garret’s breath caught in his lungs, a graveyard chill gripping his spine. “Are you crazy? Greta is dead.”

“I know. And I realize it sounds crazy, but the only way her mother can rest in peace is to see Julita one last time ... to know she’s safe.”

“How do you know it’s Julita she wants to see? Maybe it’s me.”

Shadoe looked at Garret, thinking over his strange words, and wondering. “Because she ... hell ... all I know is what she said.” He looked down at Julita, the tone of his voice growing softer. “Will you come with me, Julita? Will you come and meet your mother?”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying, but...” She hesitated. “I’ll come ... I’ll do anything to get away from him.” She looked over at her father. “And after that I’m getting my own place, Papa. Away from you. I’m going to live my own life.”

“I’ll cut you off!” he shouted. “Not a dime will you give to this bastard!”

“You can’t scare me, Papa. I’ve been through the worst a daughter can go through with her father. I’m leaving now and if we pass on the street, please don’t acknowledge me.” A sob caught in her throat. “I’m ... I’m not your daughter anymore.” Her eyes were filled with tears and she looked at him through a teary smudge. “I wanted a father ... I wanted you, Papa, but you wanted something I--” she sobbed, emotion crowding her throat, “--I just can’t give.”

The words she said crushed him just as surely as if a death sentence had been pronounced over him, and he grasped his stomach. “I’ll kill myself, Julita,” he rasped with great effort. “I will, so help me God. I’ll jump....”

Her voice was low and cold. “Do what you have to do, Papa, but remember one thing. If you do there’ll be no one here to stop you this time.”

Suddenly all the elegance around him meant nothing. It was so much tinsel and glamour that glittered brightly as it sifted through his fingers. “If you have to go, then go, but do one thing for me.”

The silence was deafening as they waited for him to continue.

“Take me with you,” he pleaded. “If Greta is there, I want to see her.”

“It’s up to Julita,” Shadoe said.

“I don’t care,” she hissed with a chill in her voice, “but just stay away from me.”

They each packed a bag, then went out to Shadoe’s Landcruiser.

Garret took one look at it and said, "That mountain climber? I wouldn't be caught dead in that thing. Take my Bentley." He threw the keys to Shadoe, and they climbed in.

As a blur of headlights whizzed by them, Garret sat in the back and watched the two people that he knew were still attracted to each other. "I'm watching you," his steely voice said to Shadoe, "so keep your goddamned eyes on the road."

Shadoe was oblivious of the fact that a gun was being pointed toward him, and that the only thing between him and sure death was the plush seat ... and Garret's itchy trigger finger.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

The wild wind roared and shrieked, crashing the savage waves against the bones, then bled back into the ocean. The wind was the breath of the gods, playing through the chanter marks. It played to the sea, and the sea applauded with large fists of crashing foam, spewing as high as the ridge where the spray fell away and scattered over the rocky terrain.

The giant would walk tonight.

In the distance the old mansion stood. The sign with the elegant swirl stood swaying in the wind, one leg almost completely broken in two, while the other creaked eerily in the wind. The inn was haunting and dark, no inviting golden glow spilling out onto a perfectly combed lawn. No guests walking along the paths that led to gardens and ponds, and no lovers sitting at the kissing fountain. Now the dark rooms were filled with furniture that had a heavy covering of dust, cobwebs that tangled around the dead leaves of the plants, and a collection of ghosts that refused to leave.

Stepping away from the shelter of a massive magnolia tree, a dark silhouette began to walk toward the ruins that was once Scarlet Bay Inn. It was her world she was looking at, and no one had a right to take it from her. It was waiting for her. She watched the mansion slowly advance as she walked closer and closer, her bare feet muddy from running through wet grass and puddles. From the moment she had sneaked out of her room and ran barefoot and almost naked through the cold halls of the asylum, she had crawled and scratched her way here. Thrashing through brush, running through grotesque trees that reached up like hands to the cloudy sky, climbing muddy hills, sliding down steep inclines, and hitching when she could. Black clouds roiled behind the mansion. Rain would be coming soon. She must get in before it began.

She took a single key from her pocket and turned it in the lock. The door creaked as she opened it, the inside black as a cave. She reached to the side and flipped on a switch. Lights from the twin posts that stood on each side of the first step of the staircase burned brightly, but as her eyes followed the steps, the leaning shadows that gathered at the top looked mysterious and dark.

Deep into the night, after she had fallen asleep, she heard a sound, scuffling feet, murmuring voices. She looked up at the ventilator, knowing it was carrying the sound. Someone was here, she thought, trying not to panic. But who could it be? Oh, God, she thought, they'd come for her. They discovered her missing, and knew she'd come back to the inn. She ran to a window, seeing a car. It was shiny, elegant, the metallic silver color glittering like tiny stars in the heavens. It seemed large to her, the pale color the same as the asylum van. It was them. The burly orderlies who pushed her around, some pushing their ugly faces into hers, enjoying the thrill of terrorizing her. Surely they hadn't found her here.

They'll be coming up, she thought, looking around. She had to hide, but where? She thought of the basement, and cringed. She had to go somewhere. She'd kill herself before she'd go back to that mad house!

She crept out of the room and made her way down the back stairway, and out the back door. Once outside she ran. Would the outside door to the basement be open? It had to be!

But it wasn't.

She rattled it, pushed, pounded, but it wouldn't open. She looked around. She was trapped. She could get to the basement by the other door, but it was in the foyer and they'd be there by now. She looked around, out toward the choppy sea. The only other place she could go was to one of the caves, but they were on the other side of the bones. It would mean climbing, getting drenched by the surf ... still there was nothing else she could do. She turned and began to run, her thin garment whipping around her legs. When she reached the jungle of bones, she hesitated, looking at the gigantic freak of nature, then entered hesitantly.

It was flat at first, the sand deep as she picked her way around the giant skull, thinking of the legend that said the bones were those of a mighty warrior of the past, and that this portion of beach was his grave. She looked up at the moon that was almost completely round and stepped through the shadows the bones cast in the spectral light. She believed none of it, but had heard that the gods of the sun, moon, and wind mourned his death. On the nights of the full moon, its silvery rays spotlighted the giant, causing the sea to turn and pound upon the rocks. Then the wind savagely blew the breath of life back into the giant. When the eerie sound of the chanter marks would begin to play, the surf that was his heartbeat, would pound harder and harder until the bones began to move. Slowly and laboriously at first, clattering together as he walked the beach.

Stupid legend, she muttered as she climbed, doing battle with the waves that crashed against the rocks until she came out on the other side. Sure the wind whipped, and the surf pounded, but it only meant a storm was heading in from sea. It certainly didn't mean that a clattering giant would be walking the beach.

Seeing the first cave, thoughts of the legend left her and she ran in, thankful for the shelter. It seemed dry enough, but it was cold. She cursed, knowing if she had to stay out here any length of time she'd have to somehow sneak back in and steal some matches, candles, and anything else she might need to make this cave habitable. She thought of the bones and how hard it was to get past them. They were easy enough to climb, it was the force of the pounding surf that made it so impossible. She made a mental note to get shoes, it wouldn't do to cut her feet on the rocks.

\* \* \* \*

Shadoe led the way up to the portico with Julita and Garret following. Garret passed him the key, but the door gave way before he turned it. "The door was open," he whispered. "Has anyone been in here since you left?"

“Not that I know of.”

Feeling suddenly defensive, Shadoe’s hand rested on his gun as he walked in, the flashlight in his hand piercing the darkness. A sudden sound caused them to halt in their tracks.

“What was that?” Garret rasped.

“I don’t know. Someone might be in here.”

They stood still, but no other sound came, so Shadoe said, “Garret, do you have any candles around here?”

“What the hell do you want with candles?”

“What the hell do you think? We need light.”

“Why don’t you use the light switch?” he said, reaching over and flipping a switch.

“What’re the lights doing on? You’ve been away from this place over a year.”

“The utilities are automatically drawn out of the account. It helps when you move around a lot. Don’t have to worry about having your utilities turned off while you’re away.” He became irritated with himself. “Why the hell am I explaining anything to you? And why is everyone whispering for God’s sake? I own the place. I have a perfect right to be here.”

Shadoe looked around, his suspicious eyes digging into every shadow, and behind every piece of furniture. “Everything looks pretty much the same except for a thick layer of dust and dead plants.”

“All right, so when do we get this little shindig under way?”

“When the time comes,” Shadoe said irritably.

“You mean we can’t get this over with tonight?”

“Hell no!” Shadoe yelled. “We can’t go until the time is right.”

“And how do we know when the time is right?”

“She calls me. It may be tonight, or it could be a month from now.”

“What?” Garret barked. “We’ve got to spend a freakin’ month in this dump?”

“Look, I can’t help it. It’s the way it is.”

“Why the hell didn’t you say something about this before we left?”

“Look, nobody forced you to come, old man. You can go back anytime you wish.”

“I’m not going back without my daughter!”

Shadoe didn’t say anything. Just stood there while his anger cooled, then looked at Julita. “It’s up to you, Julita. If you want to go back with your father, I can’t stop you.”

“But if I don’t stay, what will you do?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I’ll have to stay. I know it’s hard to believe, but there is a church out there, and a woman who mourns for her baby. If you refuse to see her, someone has to do something to put her at rest.” He cut an angry eye at Garret. “It’s apparent that her husband couldn’t care less if she’s at rest or not.”

“It’s not me she’s calling,” he growled at Shadoe.

“She knows you better than I thought,” Shadoe retorted.

“But you need me, don’t you?” she asked, hoping he’d say yes.

“I don’t know. I’ve got my camera. I could take a picture of you. Maybe it’s all she’ll need ... just get a look at you.”

She seemed to be thinking. Then she slowly looked up at her father. “I’m staying,” she whispered. “You can do whatever you want. My place is here.”

“With him you mean? Is that what you’re saying? Julita, don’t be stupid. He’s probably insane on top of everything else.”

“Papa,” Julita said, sounding completely annoyed, “how can you treat him like that? He saved you from being buried in that basement. You’d still be trapped there if not for him. I haven’t heard you say thank you once.”

“Julita, please,” Shadoe said.

“No!” she shouted at him, then turned back to Garret. “I would never have thought it of you, Papa. The way you treat people. The way you treat me. You’re a selfish bastard, Papa. What is it that makes you like this? Your money? You think the laws don’t apply to you. Not even the laws of God.”

The slicing pain of her words went all the way through Garret. “That was a mistake, baby. I’ll never do it again.”

“You’ll never get the chance,” she said stonily, the tone of her words venomous. She picked up her suitcase and turned to Shadoe. “Where will we sleep?”

“Anywhere you want. I’d rather we be close together. I’ll need to know where you are every minute, so don’t wander off.”

Garret stumbled forward, his face scowling in rage. “If you think for one minute I’m leaving my daughter up here alone with you, you’re crazier than you look.”

Shadoe looked at him, wondering why he didn’t see this side of the old man a lot sooner. “If Julita and I want to get together, old man, we will. And there’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

“No?” Garret asked, feeling the weight of his gun in his pocket. “If you think that, you’re stupid as well as crazy.” He picked up his suitcase and shuffled toward the elevator, got in, then ascended slowly, his blistering eyes burning a hole through the two while they talked easily together as they approached the stairs. There was only one reason why he hated Shadoe, and that was because he was a contender for his daughter. He saw the way they looked at each other, the way they’d always looked at each other, and he couldn’t stand it. The thought of another man’s hands on Julita caused his killer instincts to come out.

While Shadoe and Julita climbed the stairs, their talk was soft and hushed, Julita enjoying his handsome looks, and him still living with the haunting taste of her lips and breasts in his mouth. All at once they arrived at room number twenty-four, then slowed, remembering that it was the same room he had stayed in before. When he looked down at her, he noticed she was smiling. “I remember the

morning I brought coffee to this room,” she said.

Shadoe smiled. “It was rather a milestone.”

“As I remember it, my binding burst, and I ran out scared to death.”

“I’ll never forget seeing what I thought was a little girl of about twelve turn into a woman before my eyes.”

“God, I was so dumb,” she said, then raised her lashes, giving him a sensuous look. “You may as well know, I fantasized about you. I was like a little girl fantasizing over a movie star. I longed for you to talk to me but when you did I became tongue-tied and ran away.” Silence for the space of a few heartbeats passed. “But still I dreamed of the moment....” Her words died and her face turned pink.

“The moment?” he urged.

She smiled a slow smile. “I think you know what I mean, Lieutenant.”

“Julita,” he whispered, “my name is Shadoe. We’ve had some pretty intimate moments as I recall....” Their eyes met in a meaningful gaze, and his voice became raspy. “And I think we know each other well enough that you can call me by my first name.”

She was silent.

“That is ... if you’re comfortable with it. I don’t want to do anything that makes you uncomfortable.”

That brought tears to her eyes. “I can’t tell you how kind you’ve been.” She reached up to brush away the tears. “I know Papa will never say thanks, but....”

“Please, Julita, you don’t have....”

“Please, Lieu--Shadoe, let me say this.”

Nodding, he listened.

“I think we both know how stubborn Papa is, and you’ll wait a long time before he ever says

thanks, but....” She looked up, her eyes soft, and shimmering with tears. “I’ll say it for both of us. If it hadn’t been for you, I’d still be wearing those silly dresses, binding myself up, and Papa would ... well, maybe we’d both be dead by this time. I don’t know how to....”

He drew her to him, and placed his fingers gently on her soft lips, halting her words. “You don’t?” he whispered, their lips almost touching, their heated breath shared.

“Shadoe, you know you were my first, and since then I’ve never known....” She looked deeply into his eyes. “You do believe me, don’t you. Papa hasn’t ... I’ve had to fight him off, but....” Suddenly her shoulders began to shake, and her tears flooded down her cheeks.

“Julita, don’t.”

All at once she went stiff in his arms. “It might be best if we kept our distance.”

“Why?” he asked, noticing a difference in her. “Julita, what’s wrong?”

“I ... I have my own battles to fight, and you....” She looked across the hall. “I’ll stay in twenty-five.”

“Julita,” he said, jerking her around. “It doesn’t matter to me what you’ve been through with your father.”

Tears gathered in her eyes as she looked at him. “But I feel dirty ... I....”

“Dirty? Hell, Julita you’re not dirty, he is!” He hesitated, then continued. “Oh God, Julita, stay in my room tonight. He won’t know. We’ll lock....”

“Don’t you see?” she interrupted, trying to turn away. “I don’t even know if I could submit to a man now. I’d always hear that wheezing sound, smell his bourbon breath.”

He jerked her around. “I don’t have any of that, so how could you confuse me with that bastard?”

Suddenly she broke away from him. “You don’t know how it was!” she cried, her breath turning to jerking sobs as she ran across the hall and slammed in.

Just then the door down the way opened and Garret stepped out, looking at Shadoe as he leaned against his cane. “Struck out, huh?”

“She thinks her life is ruined.”

“It would be if she hooked up with you.”

“I couldn’t do her any more damage than you have.”

His eyes narrowed angrily. “I haven’t touched her. It’s true that we’ve had a few reckless encounters, but she’s still a virgin.”

Shadoe looked away quickly, a heavy load of guilt resting on his shoulders at Garret’s words.

“Hell, man after fifteen years I had a hard-on. It could happen to anyone. All I know is I was out of my mind at the time.” He looked at Shadoe and shrugged. “The bourbon helped.”

Looking at the old man with eyes flashing anger, Shadoe threw the words at him like stones. “Your mouth stinks, old man, and not of bourbon. A father doesn’t get a goddamned hard-on for his daughter! There’s only one thing I want you to remember. Julita is your daughter ... not a plaything. You think you can remember that the next time you get falling-down drunk?”

The look in Garret’s eyes turned to nasty rage. “I’m sure if I do, you’ll be here to remind me.” He stepped back and slammed his door.

The nighttime wind whipped and moaned as Shadoe stepped into his room, wondering if the ghost bride would summon him tonight.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Shadoe found Garret in the study the next morning mixing a drink. “You’re drinking this early?”

Garret didn’t turn, but continued pouring his drink. “Nothing else to do. No food, nothing in the house.”

“Hell, you’re right,” Shadoe said while raking his fingers through his hair. “Well, where’s the nearest place to shop? I’ll run down and pick up a few things.”

Garret turned, the ice in his drink tinkling as he moved the squat Old Fashioned glass toward his mouth. “How the fuck would I know? I never shopped. I had people to do that.”

Shadoe gave Garret a hostile glare. “Don’t use that kind of language around Julita.”

Garret’s eyes shot fire, glaring at Shadoe as if he were a disobedient servant. “You’re telling me what to do? In my own house? With my own daughter?”

“You got it, you bastard. Because right now you’re not capable of making those decisions.”

Garret’s face immediately twisted into an amused scowl. “Well isn’t it fortunate we have the-- his voice turned sarcastic, “expertise of Lieutenant Shadoe Madison with us since apparently I’m as crazy as my loony elder daughter.”

“I didn’t say that,” he began with contempt, “but I wouldn’t dismiss the idea.”

“You bastard! There was a time when I thought you hung the goddamned moon. Anything you said, anything you did had to be right.”

“Oh, hell, Garret, drop the ceremonial crap. You never thought any such thing. You were just using me to get out of that goddamned basement. When I started talking about exercising your legs you’d had a bellyful by then. I wasn’t moving fast enough for you, so you played out the little scene in the basement attacking my heritage. Hell, you knew I’d call the authorities.”

The glass of dark liquid stopped suddenly on its way to Garret’s smirking mouth. “And just when did you figure that out?”

“It didn’t take long.”

“Not entirely wrong, I have to admit,” Garret said, his eyes darkening as they met Shadoe’s. “Yes, I wanted out, but the main thing was to get you away from Julita. The way you two looked at each other ... a blind man could have seen that.”

“Is that why my part in this whole charade was played down by your lawyer? Garret Van Dare went out in a blaze of glory, and wanted to come back the same way. To do that you had to stay in the limelight. I remember now. It’s always been your habit to crush your competition under your heel.”

“So that’s it. The good lieutenant wants a pat on the back.” Garret chuckled. “I would have never thought it of you.”

“I didn’t want anything from you then, and I don’t want anything now. I didn’t even expect it. But it became crystal clear to everyone in my crime unit that you were a bitter old man bent on making himself a saint in the eyes of the public and you wanted no competition.”

Resenting the words, he answered quickly. “I simply wanted my place back in society ... my daughter by my side!”

“Well, you got it, you old son of a bitch. You were put on a pedestal, sympathy poured out like wine and made you drunk. You have the mistaken idea that the world owes you for what you went through. It was hard for me to open my eyes to what you really are, so I kept making excuses for you.” Shadoe raked his fingers through his hair, an embarrassed flush rising into his face. “God, when I think of the way I ran around in circles trying to please you. You must have had a good laugh.”

The old man’s smile turned to an amused scowl. “Better than TV.”

“Well, I’m through making a fool of myself for you. Get your entertainment somewhere else!”

Garret’s eyes narrowed to a slit. “You say you don’t want anything from me, and yet I see the way you look at Julita. It seems to me that you want something very precious from me.”

“The fact is, if all your fatherly interests in Julita are dead, then what I feel for her is none of your business.”

“Are you saying that we are simply two men competing for the same woman?”

“It’s a sick way of looking at it, but yes.”

“You’re a bastard, Shadoe. I almost wish you’d never come down to that basement. I would have found a way out.”

“After fifteen years? Half dead? No way. And what about Julita? Could you have helped her? Of course not. If anything good came out of this it was her freedom from Lucretia.”

Garret looked pensive. “When I was hauled out of the darkness of that hell, I thought I’d never see you again.”

“I felt the same way. And if it weren’t for this dream I keep having, you wouldn’t have.”

He lifted his glass as if toasting Shadoe. “Well, with any luck we can get this over with and never have to see each other again.”

Refusing to let it drop, Shadoe looked at Garret, detecting the lack of soul, the twisted morals, the darkness that resided in the old man. “When we first met I thought you were just a crusty old man. Hell, I even liked you. I had no idea your hard veneer hid a dark, twisted side that included molesting your daughter.”

Garret didn’t lash out as Shadoe thought he would. Instead he looked down into his drink, swirled it in his glass, then began talking. “Lucretia moved me down into that basement when Julita was only three years old, and I didn’t see her again for fifteen years.” He looked pensive, then moved toward the fireplace and stared down into the low-burning flames. “One day she comes strolling in like a stranger. Hell, if I had passed her on the street I wouldn’t have even known her.” He took a sip of his drink. “To me Julita was dead.”

“But you told me you heard the music box.”

“I did,” he said, turning, “and Lucretia had even spoken about Julita many times, sometimes saying she was dead, other times telling me about her latest escapade. But hell, she was crazy. It was confusing, I admit, but since I heard only Lucretia’s voice come out of the ventilator when she was in the attic, I had my doubts and thought she was only acting out a fantasy. I never heard Julita say a word. I wasn’t aware that Julita was so intimidated that she was afraid to speak.”

“So you’re saying you forgot your daughter.”

“In a sense.”

“What the hell do you mean, ‘in a sense’?”

“Because I thought she might be dead, she simply didn’t exist anymore,” he yelled in exasperation. “She ceased being a daughter to me a long time ago.” He was silent for several seconds. “Hell, I don’t know if that’s the reason why I feel the way I do or not, but when I look at her I don’t have a fatherly thought in my head. It’s as if she’s not connected to me at all. To me she’s just a beautiful young thing that I want in my bed.” Garret’s guilty eyes cut toward Shadoe. “You want the same thing, don’t tell me you don’t.”

“There’s one slight difference. I have a right. You don’t!”

“Right?” he said, the shock of Shadoe’s words giving way to anger. “Right?” he shouted louder. “What right do you think you have to my daughter? Just because you saved her from her sister?”

“I mean, you bastard, that I’m not her brother, her father, or even a distant cousin. That gives me the right I was referring to.”

Garret stumbled toward Shadoe, his cane holding him up. “You have no rights, as I see it, and I resent the fact that you think you do.”

“And I suppose you do?”

“I told you. That’s none of your business,” his raspy voice hissed.

“Garret,” Shadoe pleaded, “don’t you realize if you keep this up you’re going to drive Julita away from you?”

“Don’t you think I know that? It haunts me, but I can’t stop. Hell, for fifteen years Julita was dead to me ... as dead as Greta is now. I only saw Lucretia, never Julita ... never even heard her voice. Lucretia was the only one left in my world. Julita was gone. Days, months, years went by. Then one day you come along and a beautiful woman walks into my life. She tells me she’s my daughter, but how do I know? One day a child, the next a goddess.” He looked at Shadoe as if pleading for him to understand. “Don’t you see? By that time I had no daughter ... not even Lucretia! It was a word that meant nothing. I try to stay away, but I can’t. She moves me like any man would be moved by a beautiful woman.”

“A man with no morals, a selfish man that wants what he wants, when he wants it!”

“I can’t help that. As long as I can remember no one has refused me anything. Because of my money I lived the way I wanted to, had anything I wanted. Now it’s hard to have something within my reach and not be able to possess it.” His eyes traveled up to Shadoe’s. “Daughter or not.”

Shadoe didn’t answer, only looked at him for the space of a few seconds, then said simply, “Now get this straight. I consider myself in charge here. I don’t care whose house this is, or whose daughter she is. I’m looking out for her best interests.”

Garret’s words quickly spewed from his mouth. “And I’m not?”

“Raping her is not in her best interests.” With those damning words he left, slamming out the front door.

Garret stumbled to a window where he watched him get in the car to search for the nearest supermarket. “I hope you fall into the ocean, you bastard!”

“Where’s Shadoe going?”

Garret’s head whirled around, his words bitter. “Your boyfriend has gone out searching for food.” He walked back to the bar and mixed another drink.

“Papa, don’t start.”

“Don’t start what?” he said, turning to look at her. His eyes dropped to her yellow ballerina sweater and her black skin-tight leggings. “My, you look pretty this morning. Since I know you’re not dressing for me, it must be for the lieutenant.”

“Do you have to start drinking so early in the morning? Why can’t you at least wait until after you’ve had your breakfast?”

“How sweet,” he said sarcastically. “She’s worried about my health. Don’t worry, baby, I added an olive.”

“I don’t want you calling me that anymore. Julita’s my name. You should know, you named me yourself.”

“So I did,” he said, the dark and disturbing memories flashing through his mind as he turned back to the window. He remembered lifting a beautiful pink and gold baby in the air, and whispering her name over and over again, like a chant. “Julita, Julita, Julita!” He smiled. “Yes, that’s your name, my little love. It means young. With a name like that you’ll always be young and beautiful.” As the scene faded, he felt the pain of another arrow piercing his heart, her long-ago squeal ringing in his ears as he lifted her in the air.

Julita looked at the broad frame of her father’s back, realizing she was in the house alone with him. “How... how long will Shadoe be gone?”

Garret turned, the ice tinkling against the glass. “Why do you care?” he asked, taking a drink while looking at her. “What’s the matter? Afraid to be alone with me?”

A sudden thin chill hung on the edge of her words. “N-no, of course not.”

“Why now, Julita? We’ve lived together for weeks since you returned from Paris. Even after ... our little encounters.”

She shot him a cold look. “I said I’m not afraid.”

“Of course you are,” he said chuckling nastily, an amused scowl twisting his face. “I want you to be.”

His words kindled her fear. “Why? Why would you....”

“I don’t know. But somehow I do. I guess it adds a little zest to the ... well, you know ... pursuit, I guess you’d call it. I find you’re fighting infuses me in a way I never knew it would.” His suggestive stare raked along her curves. “It seems I’ve become ... addicted.”

“Papa....” Seeing the look in his eyes, alarm rippled along her spine, and she began backing up. “Don’t.”

“Don’t call me papa, Julita,” he said, his watery blue eyes studying her face. “I’m not your papa, you see.”

“What?” she hissed incredulously.

“What I mean ... well, we’ve been away from each other for fifteen years. You see, any

connection there was is broken. Maybe if things had been different ... but, why speculate? We're just two people ... a man ... a woman...."

Panic began to spread through her as she listened to his insane words and knew what they meant.

"Don't you realize what I could give you, Julita?" The hand with the drink lifted and gestured as if encompassing the world. "Anything in the world you want. Clothes, cars, minks, diamonds, jewels, trips around the world. Tell me. What is it you want?"

She stepped backward, bumping into a chair. "I want a father! Can you give me that?"

"Sweet Julita," he said, laughing as if she'd made a joke. "Haven't I made myself clear? That's not even an option. Think about all that I've given you already. It seems only fair that you give something in return." His eyes captured hers. "Understand?"

"You promised you wouldn't," she whispered, trying to keep her fragile control.

"Yes, I know," he said, looking down into his drink, watching the ice dip and swirl. "But ... well, I was feeling guilty." Suddenly his eyes darkened, becoming lecherous. They moved upward and looked at her from beneath his tangled brows. "I don't feel guilty anymore."

Her blood pounded. "P-Papa."

"My name is Garret. We're just Garret and Julita, my pet ... that's all. A man ... a woman...", Suddenly, in one move, he threw the drink, smashing it on the grate in front of the fireplace, then lunged at her, forcing himself on her.

She struggled, but her energies were wasted against his granite stand. "Papa," she yelled desperately, "Don't, please!"

"You want it, you little tramp, you know you do," he said, his breathing harsh. All at once his cane tumbled to the floor, freeing both hands to tear at her clothes. "You're willing enough to give it to that stupid cop."

Her stomach churned as she struggled, but his hands were like stone as he wrestled her down on the couch. "But you're my father ... we're not supposed...."

"I don't care about rules, Julita, I only care about...." All at once, he saw her naked breast uncovered and quivering. He was like a starving man looking at a feast. He could taste it, and felt his tongue, pushing between his lips, ready to devour it. Just as he was about to cover her nipple with his mouth, he felt a strong arm around his neck, pulling him backward. All at once he was forced around by a hand grasping the front of his shirt and saw Shadoe's burning green eyes, his hair unbound from the confines of the rubber band, and his hand coming forward in a backward slap. The blow sent Garret reeling to the floor.

"You dirty old bastard!" Shadoe shouted. "You touch her once more and I'll kill you! I swear it!"

Julita had pulled herself up and was sitting on the couch crying while clutching at her torn clothes and holding them to her naked breasts. She was filled with humiliation, and not wanting to face Shadoe, she turned and ran.

Shadoe turned, yelling, "Julita, are you all right?" Seeing her disappear around the door, he turned back to Garret, his nostrils flaring with anger. "You know, old man, maybe Lucretia's not so crazy after all. I'm tempted to put you in the basement myself."

"Does this make you feel like a big man?" Garret spat, looking up at Shadoe from the floor. "Hitting a crippled old man that can't defend himself?" He quickly grabbed at his cane, wielded it upward, then with a grimace on his face, he brought it down with all his strength. The thin spindle of wood broke on Shadoe's husky shoulder before he could grab it.

"You'll have to do better than that, old man," he said, throwing the two halves of the cane on the floor. "Get up," he said, looking down at Garret.

"You know I can't ... not without...."

"You're lying," Shadoe said. "Come on, get up and show us how you can walk. Is that the way you get sympathy? Hobbling around on a cane you don't need, feeding on the admiration of those who don't know you? Have you told them how you molest your daughter? Have you told them how you made your money? Not through a national jewelry empire, but through cheating, underhanded stock investments," he yelled. "Through the blood, sweat and tears of those weaker than you, that's how! Did you tell them that, you old bastard? Do they know you for what you really are? How many times have you told the story, huh? Lying about everything, and painting yourself as a hero. Even sold the film rights to your story, didn't you?" Shadoe's face revealed disgust. "You make me sick."

Garret looked at him with narrowed eyes, hating him at that moment because he seemed to be able to see right through him. It was as if everything inside him ... his darkest thoughts, the twisted workings of his mind, even the place where his black soul lay ... were revealed through nothing but a thin veneer of flesh and skin. "This is an all out attack. I should bring charges against you for this,"

Garret said as he struggled up by hanging on to the furniture.

“Don’t waste your time. If I can persuade her, Julita will be bringing charges against you.” He looked at Garret with a smirk, his words digging into the old man’s pride. “Tell me, old man. Whose hero will you be then?”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lucretia waited on the beach for hours it seemed, watching the old mansion's massive silhouette loom forebodingly against the deep blue of the night sky. She'd already sneaked in once, creeping around and stealthily grabbing the things she needed. She'd even tried the inside basement door, but found it locked. It surprised the hell out of her. Why would anyone lock an inside door now that the inn was empty? She didn't have the first idea of where the keys were. The key rack behind the desk was empty of all keys, even the room keys. It was killing her to stay in the cave, but she had no choice. She'd tried to make it habitable with the things she'd taken so far, but could still feel the cold dampness creeping into her bones.

The night they came, she hid out until dawn, waiting for them to leave, but they didn't. Finally she crept around the house and found the shiny new Bentley and knew immediately who was there. Only he would drive around in a rich car like that. It didn't take long to learn who he'd brought with him, either. It confused her at first, not knowing why they were there. Then it dawned on her that they were there waiting for her. All three of them. Knowing she'd escaped, they must have come here, waiting, the cop with them. Sure, that was it. The bastards at the hospital must have called, and they came down to trap her. Of course, it was a trap, she knew it.

Well, I'm not going back ... I'll die first! she thought, standing there in the wind, feeling the wet kisses of the mist on her cheeks. She shivered as the fog continued to creep inland. She tugged on her sweater, watching the few lights that glowed in the darkness even though the hour was late. As the minutes crept by, the lights slowly became fuzzy in the gathering mist, but still she waited. All at once a light clicked off, then another. Hurry, she urged silently, and paced, rubbing her arms against the cold. The mist continued to thicken and swirl around her, making her restless. She was freezing in the wet cold, and just about to give up and go back to the cave when she looked up and saw the rest of the lights click off one by one.

And then the last light went dark.

Her feet began moving, slowly trudging along the sinking sand until she came to the incline just this side of the bones. One foot after the other gained toeholds as she began climbing the steep wall. Once she had reached the top, she stood on the windswept ridge, silent for a moment, feeling for the key in her pocket that she'd found on the frame above the back door.

\* \* \* \*

Julita stood at her window looking out at the ocean. She thought she'd seen someone down on the beach, but looked around when a voice, steeped in husky sensuality, spoke to her.

"Hey, I'm over here," Shadoe said.

She looked over at the bed and smiled, seeing Shadoe resting on his elbow.

It was inevitable that the two of them would find a way to be together. What started out as the meeting of expressive eyes, hot, melting stares and the sensuous brushing of hands and bodies, had turned to burning kisses, heavy breathing, then at last, the bedroom. But Shadoe worried constantly that Garret would find out.

Now, she turned and sat down on the side of the bed and allowed him to tug at her until she was lying beside him.

“I know how you feel,” she whispered as she stroked his jaw. “I can see it in your eyes.”

He laughed softly. “Sure, I can protect you from your father, but who’s going to protect you from me?”

“So who wants to be protected from the big, handsome cop? Not me.”

“I’m serious, Julita. I do everything I can to protect you from your father, and then I sneak into your room to do the very thing I order him not to. What the hell is wrong with this picture?”

“You know the answer to that as well as I do. He’s my father, Shadoe. He’s treading on property he has no right to. It makes him criminal, maybe even insane since he’s part of the Van Dare family.”

“You’re not afraid of me, are you? If I ever thought you were submitting to me out of fright I couldn’t live with myself.”

“The only thing I’m afraid of is that you won’t make love to me,” she whispered, her tongue lightly licking his.

“Mmmmm,” he said, tasting it with relish. “That wasn’t your feelings the other night. What happened?”

She looked up into his glowing green eyes. “I couldn’t get you out of my mind,” she said, stroking his lips. “You’re not only my flashy beast, you’re my gallant warrior, my prince, my defender. And it doesn’t hurt that you’re as handsome as the very devil himself.” She smiled wickedly. “That’s enough to make any girl swoon.”

He leaned down and took her lips with his own, and she wound her arms around his neck while breathing his name with a moan. As usual, his kisses were like a drug. The more he gave, the more she wanted. "Oh, God, Shadoe, I do love you." Her eyes flew open immediately, and she tried to pull away from him, embarrassed.

He pinned her to the bed. "Where the hell are you going? Especially after a statement like that."

"I ... I'm sorry ... it ... it just seemed to slip out somehow."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, Julita. Maybe you do love me ... maybe I love you. We'll find out someday."

Reclaiming her lips, he crushed her to him, and she parted her lips to receive his kiss, responding with a hot, new fervor. The delicious sensation he was awakening in her spread from her lips down through the dark tunnel that held her heart, and filled her groin. She moved beneath him, arching herself upward, feeling his delicious weight, his closeness, and his smell. His fragrance was that of the wilderness that his heritage represented. Just touching him, feeling him touch her, made her imagine the dark woods she loved, the wind, even the ground soft with leaves. With him she felt free ... free to become wild like him. She felt his kisses spreading a scorching trail over her, and the heat he ignited caused her to spread her legs as he mounted her. Her hips cradled him, and she felt his hot, heavy arousal against her. His weight on her became forceful, his passion moved his lips from her neck to her breasts, causing tiny gasps to escape from her throat. And then he pushed her legs farther apart and the tip of his cock pressed her, parting her until she throbbed with desire. Then suddenly a low growl emerged from his throat and he began to move with savage intensity, pressing himself further in until he filled her. Her thighs rose, her legs encircled him, holding on as he rode her. Deep and hot, in, then out, pulling from her a naked desire that wanted more, and more. His hands cupped her buttocks, pulling them closer to him as he delved even deeper inside her. It took her breath away. Her hands splayed across his back, clinging, scratching, clutching. The two of them rolled, becoming tangled in the sheets. He became hot and demanding, the bed shook with the intensity of their jerking movements. Then suddenly the pleasure burst, pure and explosive. Lights exploded in her head ... stars fell around her ... heat infused her very being. Then she felt his lusty fountain let go, filling her to capacity. It was over, they had been satisfied, but still she wanted his touch, his nearness, his kisses, his whispers, his love ... yes, she wanted his love.

\* \* \* \*

Later, while Shadoe slept, Julita saw the same dark figure standing on the ridge. She could hear the waves becoming savage, and shivered when the cold, wet wind keened through the cracks in the trembling window frame. She stared for a moment, seeing the wind buffet the figure about, then recognition widened her eyes. "Oh my God," she gasped, pressing her fingers against her mouth. "It can't be. She's locked up." When the dark figure began moving toward the mansion, it seemed to float

in and out of the mist. It's a ghost, she thought. It has to be. No one would be out on that ridge at this time of night. She turned away from the window and went to Shadoe to wake him. "It ... it's Lucretia..." she said, her words lapsing into their nervous stutter. "She's out ... she's out ... there," she said, pointing to the window.

Shadoe jumped up, but by the time they were both back at her window, the figure was gone. He turned her to him, and gently held her shoulders in his hands. "It was probably your imagination."

"But it ... I know it ... it was her. S-she was there ... I saw...."

"Julita, think about it for a moment. Lucretia is locked up for God's sake. How would she have gotten here? And as for anyone else, the inn is closed, and too far from town for anyone to be walking along the ridge."

"Well ... maybe it was a ... I don't know, a bum, or a homeless person."

"Would it make you feel better if I take a look around?"

"If you would ... I...."

"It's no problem," he said as he turned. "I'll be right back."

"Can I...?" she flinched, knowing she was using bad English. She'd been working on herself for so long, and had been doing so well, but she was scared, she wasn't thinking about how to talk, walk, or carry herself. She had been dealt a jarring blow. Like seeing Lucretia ... or at least thinking she'd seen her. Just the possibility was enough to turn her into a stumbling idiot for sure. Finally she took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "M-may I come with you?"

"No, you stay here. If I do find someone I don't want you in any danger." He turned to leave, then turned back and saw her huddling on the edge of her bed, the words she'd said, ringing in his ears.

Oh, God, Shadoe, I do love you.

She'd said it in a fit of passion, but it had made a stab of guilt spear through him, and had opened a whole floodgate of emotions ... emotions he had chosen to ignore as long as possible. She looked like a goddess in the moonlight, but Shadoe could tell she was fragile, needy, probably the clinging-vine type.

And he didn't want it ... didn't need it.

He didn't like needy women. Soft, feminine, cuddly, sure. But not needy, and there was a difference. "I'll be back soon," he whispered. "Why don't you get in bed and try not to worry. It's probably nothing."

"B-be careful."

Shadoe was moved by her concern, and smiled. But before he could turn and leave, Julita began sobbing out her fears while she hid her face in her hands. He rushed over and knelt before her, wiping the tears, stroking her hair, and trying to think of something to say. But she pulled away, embarrassed. "It's okay, Julita, I understand." When she looked at him, tears glistened on her face. She wanted him to kiss her, and he swayed toward her, the next step a deep, sultry kiss. But he couldn't. He kept hearing the same words over and over again.

Oh, God, Shadoe, I do love you.

Needy. She was too damned needy, he kept reminding himself. And she was young. Too young. She needed someone, but not a thirty-four-year old burned-out cop like him. Maybe he'd been a cad for taking her to bed when he knew he could never be what she wanted. Hell, she needed a kid in his twenties. Someone just starting out. Not someone that had been through the wringer like he had.

Someone who could give her kids.

There it was. He'd opened the wound again after years of pushing it down, ignoring it, hoping to forget, but you didn't forget something like that.

He'd been traveling in a jet. It was right after his captain had kicked him out of the office, and his nerves were tied up in knots. It was the middle of winter, so he'd decided to go someplace tropical to relax. The plane had to make an unscheduled stop in Miami, and it really ticked him off. He remembered thinking he'd paid big bucks for a nonstop flight, and intended to complain to high heaven about being delayed. So he sat in his seat seething for at least twenty minutes before the plane took off again. And wouldn't you know it? A dark-eyed, bearded man had sneaked on, took the stewardesses hostage, then turned a gun on the passengers. The friggin' plane had been hijacked by two bearded men who looked like Castro! Why the fuck was he always in the wrong place at the wrong time?

"You!" the deeply accented man had called.

Shadoe lifted his eyes and saw the dark-eyed man looking at him, waving his hand. "You mean me?"

Dark-Eyes growled with impatience. “Yes!” he barked. “Come here!”

Shadoe pulled himself up out of his seat and began walking, but it apparently wasn’t fast enough, because the other man grabbed his collar and practically dragged him up the aisle, throwing him against the wall of the plane.

“Go!” Dark-Eyes shouted, pointing toward the door to the cockpit. “You tell Captain we go to Cuba. Tell him to come out with his hands up.” Dark-Eyes indicated to the other hijacker. “Shamir will take plane.”

“Shamir?” Shadoe asked, looking at the other man, then back again. “Does he know how to fly?”

A smirk appeared on the man’s face. “You do not worry about that, my friend.”

“Friend?” Shadoe said with an incredulous chuckle. “You must be watching too much American TV if you think I’m your friend.” Then the smile faded from his face. “Hey, tell you what. I’ll get you a dictionary for your birthday. When you get it, look up lunatic, daft, crazy, and then look in the mirror ... friend.”

The man’s dark eyes flashed and his nostrils flared as he angrily punched him in the gut with the butt of his rifle. “I do not have time for your insults. You do as I say, or you will have this for lunch.” He stuck the nozzle of the ominous-looking submachine gun in Shadoe’s face.

“Never did like airline food,” Shadoe gasped, recovering from the jab in the stomach. He looked around, wondering if there were only two of them. “Where’s the rest of your party, creep?”

Dark-Eyes gave him a back-handed slap, causing Shadoe’s anger to begin to boil. “You do not worry about anyone but yourself, understand?” Indicating with a nod toward the cockpit, he yelled, “You go! Now!”

“All right!” Shadoe shouted, his eyes darting around, trying to think of something ... anything ... to do. There were only two as far as he knew, and if one was going to fly the plane, that would leave only one. Hell if I can’t overpower one, he thought, I need to turn in my friggin’ badge.

But he’d have to be careful. With the man’s gun on him, he turned and pushed aside a curtain and saw a short hall that led to a door. On the left side was a telephone with microphone capabilities. Probably used by the stewardesses to make announcements to the passengers. He looked down at the straight handle on the door and closed his hand around it and pushed down. Much to his surprise, it

opened. When he walked in, the sight almost took Shadoe's breath away. The pilot and his co-pilot were sitting looking out a large, wide window, into a clear, beautiful sky. The sky had been overcast when they left, but now the plane sailed above the clouds, making it look as if you could step out and walk on them. Just then he felt a brutal nudge from behind and felt the man circle his neck with his arm and push him in. A painful jab in his left side told him it was the nozzle of a gun that was itching to go off and blast him to kingdom come.

"If you do not do as I say, he will die!" Dark-Eyes yelled, causing a sudden movement of both men turning in their seats.

"Oh, my God!" the pilot said. "What the hell...?"

Feeling sarcastic, Shadoe said, "Captain, may I present hijacker number one. Hijacker number two is outside. He's going to take over the plane and fly it to Cuba."

Just then he heard a raspy voice in his ear, and the prickle of a beard. "No funny business," he hissed loudly. "This is not Saturday Night Live!"

Shadoe managed to turn his head slightly, a look of surprise on his face. "So you do watch a little TV."

"No more wisecracks," the man said as he jerked Shadoe's neck brutally, and Shadoe gagged.

"Okay, okay," he gasped. "No more wisecracks." He looked down at the pilot who was watching the two of them as if on alert. "He means business," Shadoe gasped out. "He wants his partner to take over the plane and fly it to Cuba."

"Oh, God," the captain muttered. "How many are there?"

"Only two," Shadoe said, his expressive eyes catching the captain's, hoping to convey a message. "The other one is holding a gun on the passengers." Shadoe saw the captain's eyes flicker, and a slight nod.

Shadoe knew, as did the captain, that two little Cuban men were nothing to overpower, but their weapons were large, powerful, and intimidating.

With a lot of yelling, hitting, and threats, the two men were quickly shuffled out and Shamir took the plane. He sat looking at the instruments, fiddling with buttons, throwing switches, and turning

the plane in another direction.

That night Shadoe watched the man, whose name he didn't know, fall slowly into an unwelcome sleep. Shadoe kept glancing from the man's face to his weapon that was being held with limp hands. Shadoe knew the man hadn't intended to go to sleep, but as the night wore on, and the plane winged its way to Cuba, a silent, comforting hush fell over the plane while everyone nodded off.

Everyone but Shadoe.

With Dark-Eyes fast asleep, he fiddled with his ropes until he finally got his hands free. Moving very carefully, he freed the captain, then approached the snoozing hijacker, finally snatching the gun from his limp hands and turning it on him. Unfortunately, just then Shamir opened the cockpit door and hit Shadoe in the back. The brutal shove jolted Shadoe's trigger finger, a blast sounded, and Dark-Eyes went down, being hit point-blank in the chest. The loud blast woke everyone up, and Shamir, finding himself without his weapon charged on Shadoe. While the two fought, the captain grabbed for the gun, but wouldn't shoot, afraid he would hit Shadoe.

Shamir quickly realized he was no match for Shadoe, so he used the only weapon he had, his foot. As soon as he could, he lunged a booted foot upward and kicked Shadoe where he knew it would do the most damage.

Shadoe doubled over and went down. The pain was unbelievable. When he woke up in the hospital, he had learned from the doctor that he had experienced testicle rupture. Shadoe didn't know exactly what that meant, but it sounded bad. The doctor explained that such a brutal hit in the testicles had caused bleeding in the scrotum, and surgery was needed to stem the flow as well as untwist the cords. He tried to assure Shadoe that everything was completely normal, except that he had been left sterile. Hearing the words, Shadoe felt a jolt and lunged forward, brutally grabbing the doctor's lapels.

"My God," Shadoe had said. "Can I still...?"

"Of course you can," the doctor assured him while gingerly prying Shadoe's hands off his lapel. "You just can't father children."

"You're sure," Shadoe urged, frowning into the doctor's eyes.

"Quite sure. Now you get some sleep, and in no time at all you'll be pinching the nurses around here."

He later learned that the captain had managed to wrestle the gun away from Shamir, then blasted him in the head with it. He then quickly alerted the Miami airport, told them to contact the

authorities to be on the scene when the plane arrived. Once there, the two dead bodies were carted off the plane and Shadoe was rushed to the hospital. All this had happened under the flashing bulbs, screaming voices, and the helter-skelter of the media.

Now he was thankful for the darkness that hid his face. Getting to his feet, he said, "Guess I'd better check out...."

Julita caught his hand in hers and he halted in his tracks. He hesitantly looked back at her questioningly.

"I don't know what's wrong, Shadoe, but ... well, whatever it is, with my past I'm in no condition to judge anyone. You wanted to kiss me, but you wouldn't. I don't know why, but your story couldn't be any worse than mine."

"Hey," he said, trying to act cocky. "I don't know what the fuck you mean, Julita. I'm a cop. I deal in the underbelly of humanity. Hell, in my business you never know if the next bullet that's fired is the one meant for you. That's why I can't get too close to those I'm trying to help, that's all. I'll be moving along soon, and I'd like the satisfaction of knowing that you're better off when I leave than you were when I came."

"Of course," she whispered, feeling the sting of his words. She turned and went back to the window and looked out. When she realized he hadn't moved, she turned around. "You'd better go and check the place out ... Lieutenant."

Shadoe couldn't see the tears that glittered in her eyes, or hear the thoughts that rummaged through her mind. He had made it clear to her that she was no more than a good roll in the hay. No involvements. Very cold, calculating, and impersonal.

He made his way downstairs hating himself, but knowing that the best cure for love was having her feel that he was a heel hiding behind a cop's badge.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Shadoe vaulted down the back steps, then out the back door, turned, and headed toward the ridge. His flashlight floated around, exposing the heavy, smoky mist. He ran toward to the edge and looked to the right where he could see the beach spread out below him. When he saw nothing, he felt that Julita must have been imagining it. He made a half turn, about to go back in, when he looked straight down into the giant warrior bones and saw movement. He trained the light on something, but could barely see the small shadow. He was convinced that someone was down there. He turned and quickly ran to the incline, sliding down most of the way. He then made a sharp left turn and found himself at the entrance to the bones. His eyes squinted, trying to see through the mist surrounding the jungle of bones, and could just barely make out a dark shape ahead of him.

Who in God's name would be out here, and where were they going? Maybe it was an animal. Sure, it had to be. No human being would be out on a night like this fooling around inside these petrified bones. He entered the hideous jungle very carefully, keeping his eye on the dark figure that climbed in and out until he came up behind it. The fog was so thick, and the ocean raged so, crashing in and out, that even at this close range he couldn't tell who or what it was. Just then the dark figure turned around, looking, as if it knew it was being followed. His flashlight illuminated the face that looked back at him. It was a scowling, ghastly, scarecrow face, corpselike in the night, but full of fear and animal instinct as it stared back at him. It jolted him. The scars that covered her ... evidence of what she'd been through on her long trek from the asylum to the inn. By the looks of her face, it was a wonder she was still alive. But like an animal ... the determined face was full of survival instincts.

"My God, it is Lucretia," he muttered, then hurried, seeing her come out at the other side and run toward one of the caves. He chased her, being hindered by the sinking sand, and the constant spray of the crashing ocean waves. After climbing over sharp rock crevices, losing his footing many times, he finally came upon the wide mouth of the cave and looked in. He saw only darkness. "Lucretia," he called out softly, "are you in here?" Hearing no reply, he pointed his flashlight, again illuminating her face.

Lucretia was huddled in a corner, her fears escalating when she saw the floating light, and the form that came toward her.

She clamped her hand over her mouth to keep from screaming, but she could see him edging ever closer. Finally her desperate voice screeched, "Get away!"

Shadoe kept his eyes on the mass of darkness hovering against the craggy, uneven wall of the cave. Even though there was nowhere to go, she tried to move away from him, the light glittering in her dark eyes.

"Lucretia, my God, is that you?" he asked, squinting in the darkness.

“Get away,” she hissed. “Get away, get out, and leave me alone!” As she moved along the wall, terror was etched on her face. Her wild eyes darted from him to the entrance to the cave, trying to figure out a way to get past him.

“What in hell are you doing here?” As was his habit, he shot question after question at her. “How did you get out? Are you all right? How did you get here?” He looked around at the cave, seeing a blanket and some food that she’d stolen from the mansion. His searching eyes fell on the few matches she’d grabbed to build a campfire. “Don’t you know you can’t build a fire here? It’s too wet. You’ll die out here.” He tried to edge closer to her. “Let me help you....”

“Stay away. Besides, what the hell do you care?” she hissed. “You sent me to that place! You, my father, and that ... that tramp.”

Shadoe could hear her labored breathing sawing in and out. “Lucretia, you’ve got to listen to me. Staying in this cave is sure death. Come back with me ... to the mansion.”

“So you can call the authorities? Get out of here and let me be. I’d rather die than go back.”

“But I can’t leave you here. Inside it’s warm, comfortable. There’s food.”

“And a telephone.”

“No. I won’t turn you in, I swear. Just let me take you back up to the mansion where it’s warm. We’ll talk things through.”

“I told you I’m not going anywhere with you, so get the hell out!” she hissed, then began sobbing as she slid down the wall, hiding her face in her hands. “Leave me alone to die.”

“Won’t you....” His words faded, and he sighed, realizing it was no use. “All right, damn it. Whatever you say, but ... but first let me make you comfortable. I can hear you shivering all the way over here. Come on and sit down at least and let me put the blanket around you. I’ll even try to build a fire.” He reached in his pocket and pulled out a cigarette lighter. He moved the flashlight around, trying to find a few dry twigs, but instead he saw a flashlight that apparently Lucretia had brought out of the mansion. He quickly reached for it. It was the heavy-duty type and a careful flick of the switch lit up the small cave with a luminous glow. He looked around the cave. It was small and close. At the other end was a vertical tunnel that looked as if it led somewhere, but it was too small for a human body to climb through. “God, Lucretia, this is impossible. You’re stuck here. You can’t even get deep enough into the cave to stay dry. That space is way too small....”

“There are other caves,” she said bitterly. She hadn’t moved from where she sat, and Shadoe

could see her huddling to keep warm.

“Yeah? And how long do you think these things will last? The batteries will eventually go dead, the matches will run out. Lucretia, don’t you see that you can’t live in these caves forever? You have to come back with me.”

“I’ll find a way,” she said, glaring up at him.

“You’ll get sick. It’s wet, cold. You’ll be dead before spring.” He saw her head lower into her hands. “Lucretia?” he urged, then heard her sobs. They seemed suppressed, as if she were trying to keep him from hearing. As was his usual habit, he moved immediately upon hearing a woman cry. He grabbed her away from the wall and closed his arms around her, bringing her close to his chest. “You’re shaking. You’re scared, cold, and....” When he felt movement, he looked down and saw a kitchen knife heading toward his stomach. He reached out and grabbed her wrist, forcing the knife to fall into the dirt. “You bitch!” he yelled jerking her face toward him. He saw the evil in her eyes. “You are crazy! I’m here to help you, but you try and kill me. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I hate your guts! That’s what’s wrong with me!”

Shadoe released her abruptly, sending her stumbling backward. He reached down and picked up the knife and turned away, stalking angrily toward the mouth of the cave. When he reached the opening, he stopped and looked back. “All right, “Lucretia, you win. Stay out here and die. No one cares. No one will even miss you.” He turned then and ducked out, knowing his intent was to get back to the mansion and call the authorities.

“No!” she yelled.

He stopped, looked back in and saw her cringing in the light of the flash.

“Don’t ... don’t leave me,” she sobbed. “I ... I can’t s-stay here. I ... I j-just can’t.”

“Lucretia, you’re dangerous. I can’t take you inside where the others are. I’d be putting them in danger. You don’t have to worry, though. I’ll call the authorities and have you out of here before morning.”

“No!” she yelled, reaching out with her skinny arms in desperation. “Don’t call anyone, please. I ... I’m sorry. It w-won’t happen again.”

“Look, you crazy bitch, I’m not taking you inside, and that’s final. You’d lose your temper

one time, and....”

“I won’t, I promise,” she cried, her sobs sounding erratic and deep. She cringed, pulling her sweater around her arms while her teeth chattered in the cold. To stay warm she sank to the ground, wrapping her arms around herself. “I just want....” She hesitated. “I just want to be warm again, sleep in a soft bed.” Her shoulders trembled and heaved with fresh sobs. She looked up at him. “If I have to stay here, I’ll run into the sea and drown myself. I know I will.”

Shadoe walked deeper into the cave, wondering if he could trust her. If he took her back, then she’d be his responsibility. He could keep her locked in her room, or even in the basement if that didn’t work. At least she’d be out of the elements.

“Who’s with you? I-is Papa....”

“Just the three of us. Me, Julita, and Garret. No one else.”

“Why ... why d-did you come back?”

Shadoe thought about the church. “You know the church I told you was in the woods?”

She nodded, sniffing.

“It’s there, Lucretia. No ... I mean, it’s not always there, it’s a ghost church ... a....

“A dream,” she said harshly. “I told you that. A figment of your imagination.”

“No ... anyway that’s not important. If you want to come with me, you’d better gather that stuff up and come on.”

“No.”

He looked at her, puzzled.

“I mean first I ... I need to tell you something ... warn you.”

“Warn me? About what?”

“It may not be me that you need to protect yourself from.”

“What in hell do you mean?” he said, crouching down in front of her.

“Papa....” she said softly, “h-he’s ... I know you thought it was me, and I guess ... well, it was in some ways, but Papa is the one you should really watch.”

Believing her words held some truth, he became interested. “What do you mean?”

“Well, Papa was always cruel ... to everyone. Even Mama. He held nothing sacred, not even family. He was always selfish, only thinking of himself. He’s a hedonistic old bastard, living his life only to satisfy his own perverted lusts. I always knew that, but when Mama died I had no one else. I wanted him to love me even if I knew it was the wrong kind of love.”

“Wrong kind of love? I don’t understand.”

She looked down at her hands twisting nervously. She’d never said any of the things she was thinking out loud. And now ... well, now it was hard. “P-Papa was never a pedophile. At least not in the usual sense of the word. I mean ... well, he didn’t go out stalking children, raping them and killing them. But he liked beautiful things, and was partial to fresh young beauty. Any child he saw, or young girl that he considered extremely beautiful, became the recipient of his attentions.” She hesitated, then looked up at him. “Like Julita.”

Shadoe thought about Julita and the horror she had already been through with Garret.

“I grew up loving my papa--” she hesitated, “--even though ... well ... even though I knew something about him wasn’t right. When Mama died giving birth to Julita, I turned to Papa.” She lowered her head, and her voice softened. “But he hated me.”

Shadoe saw new tears coursing down Lucretia’s face at the memories.

A sob caught in her throat. “I wasn’t beautiful enough.” She wiped at her face. “Knowing how he felt about Julita, I blamed her, yet I couldn’t help loving her because she was my sister, I guess. Anyway, that love ... that tiny spark of love ... was the only thing that kept me from killing her. But still, I felt I had to do something to make her suffer. That’s when I sneaked into her room and scratched her face. I was a child, I didn’t know any better. I thought she’d be scarred for the rest of her life. When she wasn’t, I was disappointed. She was still beautiful, still a threat. Then, years later when I moved Papa down to the basement, I began working on Julita’s mind. I told her she was ugly, drumming it into her head day after day, then scrawled the marks on her face and made a mask for her to wear. By that

time she was convinced and wore it gladly, becoming obsessive, never taking it off. The plan worked better than I thought it would. When she began to grow, she began asking questions ... too many questions ... questions I didn't want to answer, so I began feeding her drugs."

"Lucretia, it's not that easy. How in hell did you know what to give her?"

Lucretia shrugged. "I didn't. I mean, I read a little... and I guess I learned some things, but the rest was easy. I went to the doctor and described the symptoms set out in the book I'd read and he prescribed just what I needed." She cut her eyes up at him naughtily. "I even stole some things out of his office." She looked pleased with herself. "I'm sure he must have noticed, but he never traced it back to me." Her half smile held dark secrets as she angled her eyes up at him and said, "Anyway, I managed, going from doctor to doctor until I amassed a fortune in drugs and medication." She shrugged. "I guess it sounds strange, but when desperation sets in, fear no longer lives. I did what I had to do."

"Very well, apparently."

His words pleased her. "Yes. So you can see, Lieutenant, you're not dealing with an idiot here."

"I never thought you were an idiot." His eyes danced with shadowy mirth as he added, "Only crazy."

Her sinister eyes darted back to him. "You stupid bastard, listen to me! I'm trying to warn you. Do you want to hear this or not?"

"All right, I'm sorry. Go ahead."

She turned her head, her eyes seeing much, but staring at nothing. "I knew I was playing with Julita's mind, but I wanted to stay in control. I couldn't stand the thought of her growing up. I even went crazy a few times, imagining her as a child. It was so real in my mind. Reality and insanity warred within me constantly. And then she began to fill out, become a woman." She turned back to him. "That was when I knew I'd have to kill her."

"Which is what you tried to do."

"Yes. All my life I struggled with both love and hate for both her and Papa. I was already mentally unstable ... hell the whole Van Dare family was. But the struggle I went through with both of them tipped the scale, and I went a little crazy." She looked up into his eyes. "And then you came along. I realized for the first time what it might be like to have someone...." She sobbed, and dropped

her head. "To love me," she said under her breath, then she lifted her glittering eyes and stared straight into his. "Papa made me feel like a servant. His demands were ... well I think he did it on purpose."

"What do you mean?"

"Demanding, always demanding. Make his bed, vacuum his carpet, not a speck of dust on his furniture. His food had to be prepared in a certain way, and steaming hot when he ate it. I don't know how many times I traipsed up and down those stairs cooking and recooking his food to perfection. There could be no spots on his utensils, he...."

"You think he was doing this to get back at you because his accident?"

She nodded. "I'm not saying anything I did was right, but Papa was wrong too. It's just that when everyone saw his condition, they sympathized, treating me like so much dirt under their feet. I don't know. Maybe I deserved it. All I know is after three years of constantly waiting on him hand and foot, it got to be too much. He had a lot of visitors ... phone calls...." She stopped speaking suddenly, her eyes reflective. "But it was the doctor that made my mind up for me. I found out that Papa had set up a consultation with him about his back. I knew what would happen. He'd be out of that wheelchair making my life even more miserable. That's when I thought up the idea of the basement, telling everyone he was dead...."

"By the way, why did you tell the guests he was dead, but the help...."

"Because of the extra food. I had to tell them something, so I told them he was a recluse ... disabled. I explained that I took care of him, and never let them get near his room. Besides, except for the chef, the help consisted mostly of schoolkids. No one came to stay. The turnover was rapid, but that's the way I liked it. No one ever stayed around long enough to get curious." She looked up at him, her eyes saying what her lips didn't.

"Until I came along ... I know."

"That's why I told the guests he was dead. The plan seemed like a good one. But before all of that ... well ... I admit I took a sadistic pleasure in hauling him down to that basement. Then when I staged his funeral, I invited all his acquaintances and business colleagues. It seemed to work. The visits stopped, and the phone calls. He was hidden down there the whole time. During the funeral, the condolences, the news media announcing the untimely death of the Garret Van Dare. It was wonderful at first, but from there everything went downhill. Now that everyone thought he was dead I went a little crazy. I knew that nothing I did to him would ever be discovered, and found that I delighted in torturing him."

"Then he never tried to molest you ... right?"

“He wouldn’t touch me. The funny part is, I was so starved for love I would have welcomed his attention, no matter what kind it was.” Her eyes stared into space as she continued. “I remember seeing him with Julita, and knew what he was up to. She was in his lap constantly, and his hands would always find themselves up under her skirt. Once when I snatched her away, I saw his dirty old cock pushing against his pants. I vowed then that Julita wouldn’t go near him again.” She hesitated, looking embarrassed to have to tell him her family’s secrets.

“It’s okay, go on,” Shadoe whispered. “I understand.”

“I’ve thought every day about them being together. Maybe she should be warned ... or maybe not. I don’t know ... maybe Julita’s too old now. Maybe....”

“Lucretia, I know what your father is. He stripped off his mask long ago. Julita knows as well.”

“You don’t mean....”

“Not yet, but not for lack of trying. So far Julita’s managed to keep him at a safe distance. She’s different now. You might not even recognize her.”

“What do you mean?”

“He sent her to some kind of charm school in Paris. It not only made her a different person, it opened her eyes to a lot of things. When she returned, Garret was totally mesmerized from what I understand. Couldn’t keep his hands off her.”

Lucretia looked up, her eyes wide in fright. “Oh, God, no!”

“No, not what you think. When I found them, Julita was holding her own ... fighting back. Just like she did with you. She’s stronger than you think.”

“That bastard doesn’t deserve to live,” she rasped, her anger causing her chest to heave. She cut her eyes toward the knife. “He needs to have his....”

“Lucretia, don’t even think that way. Hell, I agree that Garret is a bastard, but I can’t take you up to the mansion if I can’t trust you.”

She bowed her head, then reached up and pulled her fingers through her hair. “Okay, okay. I’m sorry.”

“I’m taking care of Julita now. I’m keeping her father away from her, and I think Julita is becoming strong enough that she won’t need me much longer.”

Suddenly she began crying. “Oh, God, I’m so sorry for what I’ve done. Oh, I don’t mean the things I did to Papa, but Julita. I ruined her life.”

“She’s still young. She’ll get along fine.”

She cut her gleaming eyes up at him, and said, “He won’t leave her alone until he’s dead.”

“Then we’ll have to put our faith in Julita. Will you help me with her?”

She jerked her head up. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’re going to have to convince Julita that you’ve changed. It won’t be easy, but you have to try. When she sees you she’s going to be very frightened. All the old memories, the hurts might come back. But you can win her over, I know you can.”

“What about Papa? You’re worried about me ... what about him? The minute he sees me, he’ll want to kill me.”

“I’ll take care of Garret. You just do as I asked, okay?”

She let out a sigh that told Shadoe she thought it was hopeless. Then she gave a small shrug, and said, “I’ll try.”

“Lucretia,” he said, not happy with her answer.

“All right, I’ll do my best, but you want the truth, don’t you? All hell is going to break loose. Now that the devil is out of his hole, he’s going to wreak havoc on all of us.”

“We’ll work together to see that doesn’t happen. Agreed?”

“I suppose,” she said.

He drew her attention when he halted his movement in response to her answer, and gave her a look of reprimand.

“Okay, sure,” she finally agreed. “But don’t expect too much.”

“Let’s get this stuff gathered up so we can hurry.” He gave a shiver and looked over at her skinny frame. “God, I can’t even stand this wet cold. How the hell did you think you were going to live here?”

“I didn’t intend to live here, I was only going to stay as long as the mansion was occupied.”

“Why the hell didn’t you stay in the basement?”

Smirking at his stupid question, she said, “The door is locked, Einstein, I couldn’t get in.”

“Hell, that’s no excuse. You could have found some way in ... I did.”

“I suppose I would have eventually. It’s hard to think when you’re cold and hungry.”

They worked in silence for a few minutes, then stepped out of the cave to begin their journey through the bones.

Just then a rogue wind blew up and a haunting tune began playing through the chanter marks. Shadoe, leading the way, halted abruptly, then reached out to hold Lucretia back. They stayed still for a moment while the unearthly tune skipped down their spines in a chilling arpeggio.

“Oh, my God,” Shadoe muttered, remembering the legend.

“What’s the matter?”

He couldn’t tell Lucretia that the bones were about to walk. “I don’t know. Nothing, maybe, but I thought I saw something move.”

Their frightened eyes stared steadily at the jungle of bones, watching them begin to move ever so slightly.

“My God, did you see that?” Lucretia whispered.

“Be still,” Shadoe urged. “Don’t say a word.”

“But the bones ... they....”

“Shhh!” he demanded, his arm still flung across the front of her body to keep her from moving forward.

With chills of terror still running rampant along his spine, Shadoe pulled his eyes away from the bones and looked out at the ocean, the pounding coming harder and harder ... like a heartbeat. Suddenly a deep moan sounded as the bones continued to stir. He backed up, seeing them slowly gather themselves together under the haunting sound of the song that echoed on the wind.

The wind seemed to be infusing life into the scattered bones until they were completely assembled. The picture was awesome. The enormous creature picked himself up off the sandy beach and stood mythically tall and large, a sword being held in his bony hands. Slowly he moved, the giant skeleton clattering as it moved away from its resting place and walked through the tunnel of winds that had become shrill with triumph.

The two of them watched quietly while the towering giant waved his sword in the air as if entering a battle.

“Come on,” Shadoe whispered.

“What? Now?”

“His walk is slow and labored. If it’s his intention to walk the entire beach we can be out of here and upon the rise before he comes back.”

“I can’t believe this. The legend is true? It’s preposterous.”

“Lucretia, we can talk about all of this later. Right now we have to get out of here before he gets back. Otherwise we may become his next battle.”

“I can’t go through the place where his bones were lying. I can’t ... I just can’t!”

“Yes you will unless you want me to leave you here. Now come on.”

He grabbed her arm and pulled her along beside him as he headed for the giant’s resting place. Lucretia hurried to keep up, but couldn’t help notice that the sand had been broken, disturbed, as if the bones had been deeply buried.

“Come on, will you?” Shadoe urged, turning around to see what was keeping her.

“It’s hard to walk,” she said, constantly falling into the sandy holes.

All the time they walked, Shadoe kept his eyes on the giant that clattered along the beach, looking for a war to engage in.

All at once Lucretia stumbled and fell. She tried to get up but felt a sharp pain in her ankle. Thinking she might have twisted it, she called out to Shadoe to help her.

At the same time that Shadoe heard her, he noticed that the giant halted in his tracks and looked back.

“Oh, my God!” Shadoe said, throwing the things down that he’d been carrying, then yanking Lucretia up off the sand. He hoisted her up in his arms and ran to the incline. He stumbled, climbed, slid backward, then desperately gained toeholds until he was at last at the top. He put Lucretia down and ordered her to run, but when he tried to follow, he found his ankle caught beneath the root of a tree. He tugged, but it wouldn’t come free. He pulled at his leg, struggled with his foot, all the time watching the giant gain on him, his sword raised, and hellish flames spitting out of his eyes. The height of the giant didn’t quite reach to the top of the ridge, so he reached out with his bony fingers, trying to grasp Shadoe. Shadoe managed to duck out of his reach, then saw the creature’s sword swing through the air. Shadoe had nothing to fight him with, so he fell on the ground, ducking, or rolling out of the way as the sharp instrument sliced through the air.

Feeling like David in the battle with Goliath, he scratched along the ground picking up several large rocks, the only weapon he had. He stood then, and began hurling them at the giant, seeing them whizzing in between the rattling bones. Finally one sharp, well-placed, baseball-sized rock managed to hit him on his skull, knocking the giant to his knees.

Shadoe dropped the remaining rocks and looked around to see where Lucretia was. He saw her huddling beneath a tree and gave one more strong pull, finally managing to jerk his foot free. But when he began to run, pain shot through his ankle and he stopped, moaning in pain. He found he couldn’t bear much weight, so his progress was slow, but he finally reached her. With pain etching his face into a scowl, they both turned and began a slow hobble back to the mansion, she helping him more than he was helping her.

After walking only a few feet, Shadoe hesitated and looked back, seeing the mammoth creature nowhere around. It was hard for him to believe he had actually felled the giant with one small blow to the skull, but suspected with the battle over, the giant went back to his graveyard until the next full moon, bound by some supernatural force to only prowl the beach. Whatever the answer, Shadoe was grateful, and turned, continuing his limp back to the safety and warmth of the mansion.

Shadoe was right. With the conflict over, the clattering giant made his way back to his resting place ... until the next full moon when the gods would arrange another battle for him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The back door of the mansion swung open with a bang and in stumbled Shadoe and Lucretia with wet sand sticking to their clothes and feet, making a noisy scraping sound against the tile floor.

Garret had risen early and was sitting in the library reading, a smoking cigarette clasped between the fingers of one hand, and a glass of his usual early morning brandy held in the other. The room was dim, only one lamp lit, its brightness spread across the old man and the book he was reading. The smoke that circled above his head was disturbed when he turned slightly at the noise he heard. He quickly put out his cigarette, put the book down, and set the glass down on the coaster. With the help of his cane, he pulled himself up. He made his way toward the dining room to see what the confusion was.

By that time Shadoe had placed Lucretia in a straight-backed chair, then found one for himself. He was leaning over, rubbing his throbbing ankle, then cut his eyes toward her. "You okay?"

Lucretia was unresponsive while huddling in her chair shivering.

Knowing she must be chilled through and through, he forgot his ankle for the time being and turned toward the stove. Pulling himself up, he scraped over to the oven and turned it on. His eyes quickly scanned the walls, then asked, "Where's the damned thermostat?"

"I-it's in the f-oyer b-behind the front d-desk," Lucretia answered with chattering teeth.

He didn't think it wise to leave her alone while he searched for it so he pulled the oven door open. "To hell with it. I'll turn it up later. This'll have to do for now." He put his hands up to feel the heat that was coming through, then looked back at her huddling across the room. "Come on, get a little closer." She began moving, but seemed to be having a hard time. Watching her struggle, he finally asked, "Can't you do a damned thing for yourself? I'm the one with the bum ankle."

"I'm okay," she muttered, managing to drag the chair across the floor and up to the heat.

Shadoe looked at her critically. "You need a hot bath and dry clothes. Get those off."

She stared at him as if he had said something entirely unsuitable.

"Lucretia, those clothes have to come off. They're soaked, and heavy with wet sand."

"Here? With you...."

“Luc--” he began, then stopped. He’d started to give her a lecture on one’s survival not being the place for modesty, but decided against it. “Okay, well,” he finally said, looking down at her while dragging his fingers through his hair. “I’ll go up and run you a bath and get you some dry clothes. Where’s your room?”

“What’s all the damned noise?” a deep, grumbling voice asked from the doorway. They both looked up to see Garret standing there, leaning on his cane. His harsh eyes cut toward Lucretia, the sight of her turning his face to pure hate. “What the hell...? What is she doing here?” he demanded.

Lucretia looked away quickly.

“I don’t want any trouble, Garret,” Shadoc said, urging himself forward, then halted his steps when he felt a nudge in his stomach. He looked down to find Garret’s cane punching him.

“Stay right where you are,” Garret warned, then indicated to Lucretia. “I don’t know how she got here, or what the fuck she’s doing here, but I want that bitch out of my house.”

Shadoc forcefully pushed the cane away and glared down at it. “Where the hell did you get that?”

“I have several canes ... a collection in fact.” He lifted it up, and showed Shadoc the handle and the tip. “Pure silver.” He turned the handle around and looked at it, then slid past it to Shadoc’s eyes. “Could be used as a weapon ... if I ever need one.”

“I’m not interested in what your money can buy, but I am interested in keeping Lucretia alive. Hell, Garret, she’ll die out there.”

“Out where? Where did you find her?”

“One of the caves.”

His face melted into a scowling smile as his eyes cut into her. “Hiding out, huh?” Then he looked back at Shadoc. “Well, I don’t care. I endured fifteen years of hell at that woman’s hands, and she’s not staying in this house one minute longer.”

“Whatever she’s done, Garret, she’s your daughter, and she needs help.”

“What the hell are you, daft? She’s insane, a killer! Let her live in a cave like an animal, she’s not welcome here.”

“That would be murder, Garret, pure and simple. You put her out and I’ll see that you go to prison for her death!”

“And just what the hell is your interest in her?”

“I need to keep her alive long enough for the authorities to come and pick her up. After that, she’s their responsibility.”

Lucretia’s eyes flared. “You promised, you bastard!”

Shadoe whirled when he heard her voice. “I only promised I wouldn’t turn you in tonight ... or today,” he said, so confused and tired he couldn’t think straight.

Her lips thinned, thinking she’d been tricked. She looked at the door, and thought about what was beyond it. She couldn’t go back, she’d die out there. She needed to regain her strength, think, plan. But he wouldn’t send her back. She’d kill him first. If she had to kill every one of them, she wouldn’t go back. Not to that place. Never again. Her eyes lifted, roaming over the room. This was her home, not theirs. She’d taken care of it for more than fifteen years, and she belonged here. Not them. Never them. Finally her thoughts quieted and she listened while Shadoe continued his argument for her safety.

“Garret, my God, she’s your daughter. I would think you’d be able to scrounge up a little compassion for her.”

“Compassion?” he growled. “Where the hell was her compassion when I needed it? Answer me that! And what about Julita? Do you think she’s going to welcome the sight of her tormentor? I don’t think so!”

“Lucretia stays,” Shadoe said, the muscle in his rigid jaw wrenching with anger. “At least long enough to build up her strength. We have no choice. She’s not fit to travel in her condition.” Pushing past Garret he walked into the dining room and out to the foyer.

“Where are you going?” Garret barked, stumbling after him.

Shadoe halted in his tracks, his eyes closing in annoyance. He was tired of having to report his every movement to Garret. “To run Lucretia a bath, get her some dry clothes, and wake Julita. I need her help.”

Garret moved forward threateningly, his cane supporting him. "You'll stay away from Julita."

Shadoe turned toward the old man. "For God's sake, Garret, I'm not going up there to get in bed with her, I need her help ... Lucretia needs her help. Now if you'll excuse me, I have things to do."

Garret squinted at him. "Not until you answer some questions for me. Why in hell do you insist on helping someone like Lucretia? She needs to be locked up. She's insane, a killer. My God, she was plotting to kill her whole family. Probably still is!"

Shadoe's annoyance apparent, he raked his hand down his face, still feeling sand sticking to him. "She'll be locked up in due time. Right now she needs food and sleep. As soon as she's stronger I'll call the authorities."

"You mean like you did with me."

His steps halted once again, he turned, and the message in Garret's eyes hit home. "Like I did with you," he repeated.

"What a boy scout you are," Garret said, derisively. "It's not the same, you know. I'm not a friggin' killer!"

"No, just a child molester." Shadoe shot back, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "If I had known then what I know now, I would have left you down there."

"Why you bas--"

Shadoe had finally reached his limit. "Hell, Garret, we can talk this out later. Right now Lucretia needs a hot bath and dry clothes." He nodded toward the shivering lump that was still sitting in the chair. "After I get some food down her I'm going to find a place for her to sleep. I hope I can trust you to control your emotions and stay away from both women."

"I'm getting sick and tired of you giving orders in my house."

"Well that's just too damned bad," he retorted, then abruptly turned away from Garret and headed for the staircase, finding his weak ankle stronger now.

Shadoe was about halfway up the stairs when both men noticed Julita coming down dressed in

nothing but a flimsy nightgown.

“My God, what is this?” Shadoe whispered as he stopped dead still on the staircase.

Her eyes were open, but glazed. She seemed to be looking at something in the distance.

Fear clutched at Garret’s insides when he realized Julita wasn’t acting normal. “My God, what’s she doing ... what’s wrong with her?”

“I don’t know,” Shadoe answered in a soft voice. “She seems ... I’m not sure.”

All at once she reached out and cried, “Mama! Don’t go, Mama, please! I’m coming!”

Watching her come toward him, Shadoe began to back down the stairs, speaking softly so as not to frighten her, “Julita ... where are you going?”

“I have to find my mama ... she needs me ... wants me.”

Julita kept reaching ... following someone ... a voice ... a darting figure appearing, then disappearing. Her eyes were focused on something, but not for long, they jumped from one ghostly figure to another. Shadoe watched her, knowing from his own experience that whatever she was seeing, it wasn’t in the real world, but the world of the dead. It was still early enough that the woods would be dark, a ghostly figure darting in and out of the trees until she saw the clearing ... an ethereal light spotlighting the church ... and then....

“Don’t just stand there, do something!” Garret said sharply.

“Get back!” Shadoe shouted. “Get out of the way!”

“Oh, hell, she’s coming toward me!” Garret said, frightened.

“She doesn’t see you. Move, Garret, goddamn it move! If you wake her, it could be traumatic.”

“What the hell’s happening?” he asked, seeing her go past him toward the front door. “Where’s she going?”

“She’s dreaming!”

“Why isn’t she in her bed?”

“She’s sleepwalking, for God’s sake, and it’s dangerous to wake a person when they’re sleepwalking.”

“But she’s heading for the front door. Stop her!”

“I can’t ... not now. She’s dreaming about the old church, and the woman inside.”

“I thought you were the one that had that dream,” he said, his words hostile. “Isn’t that why we’re all here?”

Shadoe ignored his sarcasm, watching each step Julita took. “Stay here with Lucretia,” he said to the old man. “I’ll have to follow her to make sure she doesn’t hurt herself.”

“Look at the way she’s dressed. She can’t go out like that.”

Just before she reached the door, she shouted, “I’m coming, Mama. I’ll be there. No, don’t!” she screamed. “Wait for me!” All at once Julita slumped, and fell to the floor.

Shadoe rushed to her while Lucretia came to the door to see what was happening. She saw Shadoe kneeling beside someone on the floor. “What’s going on?”

Shadoe felt for a pulse, then touched her forehead, making sure she wasn’t running a fever. “She’s okay,” he said, pushing her hair out of her face. Then he picked her up in his arms and carried her toward the stairs. Seeing Lucretia, he paused. “Lucretia ... what the hell ... go back into the kitchen. When I get back I’ll help you upstairs. I just have to....”

“What’s wrong with her?” Lucretia asked timidly. Then she stepped up and began stroking her face. “My baby, what’s wrong with my baby?”

Shadoe and Garret’s eyes met in a knowing look, then Shadoe turned back to Lucretia. “Don’t worry about her, she’s just sleeping. You just take care of yourself right now, okay?”

“You’re sure?” she asked, then shivered, her teeth chattering. “Ohhh ... s-someone must be

walking over my grave.”

“I’d like to walk over your godda--”

“Garret!” Shadoe shouted, then shot him a scathing look.

“And you,” Garret began, his deep, grumbling voice speaking to Shadoe with authority. “When you get her to bed I want to see you in the library.”

Shadoe’s nostrils flared with anger, then said, “I’ll be there as soon as I have the two women down.”

“I want you there immediately,” Garret snapped.

Clenching his teeth, he looked at Garret with fury burning in his eyes. “Get the hell in line, okay? I’ve got my hands full here, can’t you see that? Why can’t you stop thinking of yourself for one fucking minute? After I get Julita back in bed, I need to see to Lucretia. She’s freezing for God’s sake. She needs food, a bath, and dry clothes. I think that whatever the hell is bothering you can wait a few minutes.”

“Why, you impertinent, dumb-assed cop,” Garret growled, “Okay, so go and do your good deed for the day, but if you know what’s good for you, you won’t waste a minute. I have some things to say, and you will listen. Do you understand? You will listen!”

\* \* \* \*

Shadoe laid Julita down gently, covering her carefully. He ached when he looked at her. His eyes shifted down to her lips. God, how he wanted to drink in her kisses, be buried so deeply inside her that the throbs of ecstasy would never stop. It was true. He did love her. But he couldn’t tell her that. He couldn’t saddle her with a dumb-assed cop who might be dead tomorrow. Besides, if they did somehow get together it would only be half a marriage. She deserved to have children, and a husband that wasn’t only half a man. He would leave this place and never see her again. Never letting her know how much he really cared. She’ll find someone someday, someone better than him. “I’m sorry, my love,” he whispered, backing toward the door. “But Garret was right. I’m not nearly good enough.” He suddenly remembered her calling him a flashy beast, and smiled. “That’s right, that’s all I am. Go get someone that has more to give you than just flash and glitter. You don’t want tinsel, you deserve pure gold. I’m sorry I can’t give it to you.”

He turned away, his heart hurting.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Shadoe had just put Lucretia down and was on his way to Julita's room to check on her before heading for the library to talk with Garret. Trying to stay quiet, his steps were slow and careful, but when he heard a series of muffled sounds coming from her room, his stride quickened, knowing she must be having another nightmare. With his hand on the doorknob, he put his ear to the door. The sounds he heard were very soft at first, but began to rise, the garbled words edged with panic. He pushed the door open quickly, and saw her tossing about in her bed. Rushing to her, he sat down and leaned over her. "Julita," he whispered, shaking her gently. "Wake up."

All at once her eyes flew open and she grabbed him, her body trembling in his arms. "Don't let them get me," she cried. "The trees, they have eyes. They're looking at me!"

"Shhh," he whispered gently, "you're all right, Julita. It was just a dream. Go back to sleep now."

"No!" she sobbed, her arms winding tightly around his neck, refusing to let him go. "It's true. You haven't seen them, but I have, and they have eyes."

He managed to break her fierce hold, and looked at her closely. "What trees, Julita? What trees do you mean?"

"The magnolias," she said, her eyes darting toward the balcony, then quickly moving back again, "the ones outside my balcony. They're big, scary, and they have eyes ... big eyes, and they watch me!"

Shadoe remembered Garret telling him that Lucretia buried dead bodies in the earth, then planted trees over them, or placed statues over the graves, but didn't think Julita was aware of it. At the time the old man told him the story, he could almost see her. A thin, cadaverous woman frantically digging a hole in the earth, her ghoulish face showing signs of insanity as the wild wind blew off the ocean and the moonlight shaded her face with hideous planes of light and shadow. If it was possible, did the ghosts of the dead somehow intermingle with the trees and statues, causing them to walk and see? Ridiculous, he told himself, and pushed it from his mind. "Julita, you're dreaming." Taking her by the hand, he said, "Come with me. I'll prove to you...."

"No," she sobbed, struggling to pull her hand out of his. "I'm not going out there."

"Julita, you're safe. I'm here with you, and I'm not going to let anything happen to you. Come on," he gently urged, pulling her to her feet. "You'll see there's nothing out there."

“But I can’t!” she cried, still holding back.

Shadoe put his arm around her resisting body and pulled her the rest of the way.

When they passed through the French doors, she buried her face in his shoulder. “I can’t look,” she sobbed, “please don’t make me look.”

The early morning had turned extremely cloudy, rain begging to burst free from the low-hanging clouds. Shadoe’s eyes darted around at the stately magnolias that seemed to cast moving shadows across the grounds from a cold, stiff breeze that rustled restlessly through the branches. “See?” he said. “They don’t have eyes. It was just a dream.”

Hearing the cool wind hissing eerily through the trees, a chill washed over her. She knew the wind was whispering a message that only they could understand. Then the wind’s cold fingers gently ruffled her hair, causing her to hesitantly turn her face toward the trees. Her frightened eyes darted from one to the other, seeing nothing but the magnificent magnolia branches dancing in the wind, their silhouettes engaged in a mysterious shadow dance on the massive lawn.

Shadoe looked at her, then out at the trees. “Do you see any eyes?”

“It’s because you’re here,” she said. “The eyes won’t come out with you here.” She looked up at him. “And they walk. Did you know they walk?”

“Julita, that’s ridiculous. Trees don’t have eyes and they don’t walk. Come on,” he said, refusing to listen to anymore of her wild tales. “You need your sleep. Later everything will look better to you. Shadowy monsters have a way of disappearing when you’ve had enough sleep.”

She allowed him to guide her, feeling his gentleness as he laid her down. She wanted to stay in his arms. There was something reassuring about his presence. With him there she felt protected, warmed throughout her body. All at once her trembling stopped, and she felt something ... some kind of weird sensation curling through her. As the feeling spread she could feel a low, throaty laugh wanting to gurgle up her throat accompanied by a kind of brazen defiance that spread throughout her, daring to stamp out her fear and shyness.

While smoothing the covers over her, Shadoe noticed her eyes following him. The look on her face ... the features. They had physically changed somehow. She seemed older, more experienced ... brazen.

Julita’s lids had lowered, a tiny seductive smile playing at the corners of her mouth. Just looking at him caused gusts of desire to whip through her. She wanted him to make love to her and

turned her magnetic eyes on his, capturing them boldly. He was so handsome. A dark and dangerous hero coming to her in the shadows of early morning, the scar on his cheek lending a sinister touch. She reached up to touch it, but he caught her hand and pulled it away. "How did that happen?" she whispered, her voice deep and throaty.

"A bullet kissed me," he said simply.

"A kiss? By a bullet?" She laughed softly.

Shadoe's eyes searched her face. Her whole manner had changed, the fear she had been feeling earlier, gone.

Her hand moved along his cheek, her eyes anchoring lustily on his tempting mouth. "Perhaps you would prefer a kiss from a woman," she whispered, tracing the tip of her finger along his soft pillowy lips.

"Maybe I would," he answered, seeing the invitation in her eyes.

She waited while his bold stare searched her face. "Well, come and get it," she said boldly, with flames of passion burning inside her.

Needing no further invitation, his eyes shifted to her lips and was drawn toward them, anxious for their touch.

But just as he came so close that his hot breath warmed her face, her lips moved away from his and kissed the scar lightly, then made a sensuous trail from the seductive slash to the edge of his mouth.

Slowly, teasingly, her fragrant lips finally reached his and parted erotically. He was in a haze, eagerly waiting their dizzying, heated crush that brought with it an assault on his groin. The savagery in his blood quickly responded to the lush, succulent, sensuous, and passionate message in the kiss, making his half-breed blood boil. The kiss, together with the mysterious scent of musk she was wearing sent the pit of Shadoe's stomach into a wild whirl. With one quick movement, now he was the one holding her, his breath coming erratically, his cock becoming rock hard in only seconds. He knew he shouldn't, but he was a man goddamn it. His mouth opened wider and covered hers hungrily, his tongue pushed forward, urgent and exploratory. He felt himself plunging deeper and deeper, his lust for her getting out of hand. When he felt her responding with a fervor, he mumbled, "Julita..." his eyes just barely catching a look ... a look that wasn't Julita's. Feeling a chill cut to his bones, he stopped, his hands releasing their hold. "Julita ... what's wrong with you?"

She ignored his question, arched her back, then pushed her breasts, firm and round, against his chest.

He tried to resist, but finally a spurt of hungry desire spiraled through him. His hands grabbed her roughly, roamed over her body, a wayward thumb pressing against the side of her breast, causing his fingers to tingle. He wanted to touch their sweet softness ... to have the taste of her nipples on his tongue. With his eyes closed in passion, and his lips opened in hunger, he tasted the softness of her neck, nipping at her earlobe, then down to her breasts. He wanted to bury himself inside her. Deep, so very deep....

Suddenly they pulled apart when a noise sounded outside her door. They both turned and looked, but the sound went away. "The wind is high," she whispered. "It's just the house settling."

He turned and looked at her, again his eyes filled with confusion. Those weren't words Julita would say. She'd be afraid, hold tight to him, but this woman ... whoever she was...

All at once she pressed herself to him and his mind became clouded. With her so close he couldn't think straight, feeling only her hot breath on his neck, her body willing and trembling beneath him.

"Stay with me." She whispered the invitation against his ear, soft and sensuous.

"Julita ... God ... you know I can't. Garret ... he's just downstairs waiting for me. He'd find out and kill me."

He looked down at her. He liked what he saw ... and yet he didn't. He didn't know how he felt. She was different, yet he wanted her ... to take her in wild abandon. To have her so deeply and completely that their heated flesh would go up in flames together. But something else ... something inside told him to go ... told him he must go.

"No," she whimpered as he pulled away from her.

"You know it would be suicide for me to stay here with you. Garret is expecting me in the library. I have to go before he comes looking for me." Her hands grabbed his shirt, refusing to let go. She scratched and pulled, but he managed to wrench them away. He stared at her as he backed toward the door. Never had he seen this kind of wild desire in Julita's eyes. They had become hard, pointed, almost like an animal. And the way she looked at him. Her lids half closed, the sensuous half-smile turning to one of base sensuality. The sweet Julita was gone, and in her place was a ... a ... wanton.

"Come back!" she yelled, then rose up on her knees, crouching like an animal and growling

like a tiger. “Stay with me or I’ll tell Garret that you raped me!” Her voice had dropped an octave as she hissed out the threatening words.

Shadoe couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “Another time,” he mumbled, catching the doorknob and turning it. He opened the door and backed through it, feeling something wasn’t right here. The way she looked at him, the hunger in her eyes, the way her breasts bounced ... God, he wanted to stay, how he wanted to stay. But if he did ... if he kissed her once more he would be in bed with her, damn the consequences. But instead he said, “Get some sleep,” then closed the door. Standing there, he heard her fling a mouthful of curses at him, together with an object that hit the door.

He turned and made his way toward the stairs, but Julita’s actions nagged at him. In only seconds she had turned from a timid nineteen-year-old to someone much older. Had her experiences with Garret somehow tarnished her? She’d acted bold, and raw, even brazen. So different than before when she cowered at the very sight of him. Not that he wanted her to cower and stutter like a village idiot, but the innocence she’d had then was beautiful and pure. He hated to see it sullied by life. He realized she couldn’t stay a child forever. She had to grow up, and both Garret and the school had done their part in making that happen. But apparently her schooling in life had been too abrupt and much too cruel. Shadoe wondered as he touched the lips she had kissed. Had she learned too much in too short a time?

Just as Shadoe reached the bottom step of the staircase, the wind blew the front door open. He rushed over and struggled against the wind to close it. After he had it securely closed and locked, he turned to see Garret standing at the library door.

“What the hell was that?”

“Another storm brewing.”

“This line of coast has more storms than I’ve ever seen anywhere. You’d think the gods were angry about something.”

“Gods?” Shadoe questioned as he turned to follow Garret into the library. “Do you believe in such things?”

“Not really, it just seems we get our share of storms here. There must be a reason. Some meteorological mumbo jumbo I suspect.”

Shadoe thought about the bones of the giant that lay beneath the ridge, and felt his ankle began to ache. “What about the legends surrounding this place?”

“A bunch of nonsense.”

“I don’t....” Never mind, he sighed to himself, letting the subject drop. He had too much on his mind to get into that weird tale. He remembered what Julita had said about the trees having eyes, looked toward a window and saw the swaying of limbs against it. Hell, maybe the trees did have eyes. Maybe they did walk. He wouldn’t have believed a bunch of bones could come to life during the full moon, but they had. Either that, or he was as crazy as the rest of them. He walked over to the bar and mixed himself a drink. “So what’s on your mind, Garret?”

“The fact that you’ve made me wait, among other things.” He banged his cane on the floor in anger. “I’m not accustomed to waiting for any man, and certainly not waiting for some woman to be taken care of before me.”

“You’re not only a selfish bastard, but a chauvinist, and a goddamned snob,” Shadoe muttered.

“I don’t give a good goddamn what you think of me. You’re going to have to learn a few things. I ... do ... not ... wait!” Again his cane smashed against the floor.

Shadoe’s eyes cut toward the cane the old man used like a weapon, then up at him. “You waited for fifteen years, Garret. Another few minutes more or less are not going to matter.” Saying that, he upended the glass, then bared his teeth and cringed when the liquid made a burning path down his throat. He leaned his head over and shook it. He needed that drink. He needed that one and a lot more.

Garret watched his reaction to the strong drink. “You planning on getting drunk?”

“This sure as hell would be the time for it, don’t you think?” While mixing another drink, he said, “All right, Garret, I’m here. No more waiting. Let’s get this out on the table. I’ve been up almost all night and I’m tired. What did you bring me in here for?”

“I want to talk to you about Julita.”

Oh, God, here it comes, Shadoe thought. “Okay, so what the hell did I do this time? Go ahead, goddamn it. Rant, rave, have your say, but be quick, will you? I’m tired.”

His eyes cut into Shadoe, his mind coming up with several angry retorts, but said none of them. “All right, I guess I deserved that, but--” he hesitated, concern showing in his eyes, “--it’s nothing like that.”

Shadoe frowned suspiciously. “What is it then?”

Garret frowned. “I’m getting concerned. She’s ... she’s acting strange. I know you won’t believe this ... hell I can hardly believe it myself.”

“By ‘she’ you mean Julita I take it.” Shadoe heaved a sarcastic snicker. “After what I’ve seen tonight, I’d probably believe just about anything.” He looked at the old man waiting. “All right, so get to it, Garret, I can hardly hold my eyes open. I’ve been up almost all night, and I ache like hell. The girls too. Don’t look for any of us before noon.”

“You, of course, are aware of my relationship with Julita.”

“Relationship?” Shadoe chuckled softly and stared down into his drink. “Relationship,” he kept repeating.

“What the hell are you laughing at?”

“The word. It’s a nice, normal word. Doesn’t seem to fit into this conversation.” He tossed back another drink.

“You’re either drunk, or so tired you’re silly. As I was saying, my relationship....”

Shadoe tried to stifle a giggle, but couldn’t. When he saw Garret scowling at him, he straightened his face, and said, “Sorry.”

Garret let out a big sigh. “Hell, I know my conduct has been less than perfect,” he rasped. “In my saner moments I’m sorry for it, but when ... when I see her ... especially when she ... well ... when she....”

Having managed to compose himself, Shadoe said, “When she what, Garret? Spit it out for God’s sake.”

“When she provokes me,” he finally managed.

“What?” Shadoe yelped, and looked at him as if he were insane. “I don’t believe that for a minute.”

“No, not all the time. Just sometimes. And not at all in New York, but since we’ve been down here ... I don’t know, she’s different. Her actions are so much like those of my late wife. The way she smiles, the look in her eyes, even the way she walks, her mannerisms.” He scratched his head as if trying to figure it out, then turned to Shadoe. “At those times she calls me Garret, not Papa.”

Shadoe’s eyes widened. He could hear her words now. If you don’t stay, I’ll tell Garret that you raped me! He didn’t notice it at the time, but now....

I tell you, Shadoe, something’s wrong with her. Hell, she invites me with her eyes.”

“Invites you?” he said, remembering. “What do you mean?” Sweat was breaking out on Shadoe’s forehead. He knew what the old man meant since he’d seen it in action not a half hour ago.

“I mean she ... God, I don’t how to say it. She tries to entice me ... tempt me, I guess.”

“You mean into making love?”

“Of course that’s her intent. What else could it be?” He turned away to look at the approaching storm through a window.

Shadoe laughed again. “Yeah, sure. Dream on, old man.” With the old man turned away, he didn’t see the haunted look in Shadoe’s eyes, or detect the forced levity in his laughter.

“I knew you wouldn’t believe me. The worst part is, with her acting like that, it ... well it makes things different somehow.” He took a drink from the glass he was holding, then turned back to Shadoe, looking almost ashamed. “I mean, I still want her. God, I want her bad. And I know all I have to do is ... hell, I don’t know why I feel the way I do, but with her acting like a little whore ... it ... well, it just seems different. Makes me feel different.”

Shadoe was unusually silent, Garret’s words confirming what he had experienced with Julita upstairs.

“It’s not all the time, mind you, just sometimes. It’s at those times when she comes on to me ... brazen, bold that I ... well I realize that I don’t want her unless I can’t have her. But it’s because she reminds me of....”

“Garret,” Shadoe interrupted. “I don’t understand you. One minute you seem ashamed of your actions toward Julita, but at other times you seem to have a malicious gleam in your eye, just waiting to get her alone.”

“I know,” he said, stepping over to the bar and rattling the ice making himself another drink. “Hell, I’m....”

“Crazy!” Shadoe yelled. “Crazy is the word you’re looking for, Garret.”

“I’m not crazy,” he lashed out. “I just ... well, my emotions battle against each other.”

“You’re a scream, Garret, you know that? Standing there telling me you’re warring inside yourself. An angel on one shoulder and the devil on the other, huh? I’ll tell you what’s wrong with you. Your control is nonexistent, and you have no morals!” Looking down at his glass Shadoe noticed the liquid had gone. He stepped up to the bar to mix another, listening as Garret rattled on.

“I know what I am, I’m talking about Julita. I think she’s....”

Shadoe waited for several seconds, then turned on Garret. “What ... what ... WHAT?”

“I think she’s ... possessed.”

A grave look stretched across Shadoe’s face, changing a look of anger to one of fear. His eyes slid away from the old man and took on a reflective look. After only seconds, and a host of wild thoughts snarling his mind, they shifted back to Garret. “Are you sure of what you’re saying?”

“Yes.”

“But ... by who?”

“Greta ... my ... my wife.”

Suddenly the clinking ice stilled, and Shadoe held his breath. What a goddamned bombshell, Shadoe thought as he stood grasping a bottle so tight he thought it might burst in his hand. He hated to admit it, but it would explain everything. And it wasn’t any more idiotic than anything else that had happened around here. He looked upward as if he could see past the high boarded ceiling into her room. Was she ... she must have been. He had known she was acting differently. But possession ... the idea never occurred to him. But it had to be true. She’d always been shy, even after Paris ... well, sure he could tell she was different, but different in her own way, more savvy, more worldly, not ... hell, not acting like a damned whore.

“Greta was trash,” Garret said, interrupting Shadoe’s thoughts. “I didn’t know it when I married her, but hell, I probably would have anyway.” He leaned against the mantle of the fireplace, and stared thoughtfully, but didn’t see. “I loved her ... I didn’t care a whit about her faults. I had my own. She knew about them too. I figured if she was willing to forgive me of mine, then I was willing to overlook hers. After all, I’m no white knight. I’m as dirty as they come.”

“Apparently her mother’s been playing with her since she’s been here,” Shadoe said, his voice almost inaudible.

Garret shifted his eyes toward Shadoe. “I think we need to get her out of here.”

“No,” Shadoe said quickly. “The only way to defeat this is to keep her here.” He turned an icy stare toward Garret. “And Garret you’re going to have to stay away from her.”

“Back to that again? Hell, I....”

“I know, but not only because she’s your daughter, Garret, it’s gone beyond that. She’s ... Greta ... she’s angry about something.”

“But what?”

“I’m not sure, but I think she blames you, or Julita ... maybe both for being dead.”

“How the hell do you know all of this? I’ve never told you....”

“I don’t know, damn it I’m just speaking from ... hell, things I’ve heard ... read ... even feel. A lot of it’s intuitive.” Hesitating for a moment, he said, “There’s something else.”

Garret waited, seeing Shadoe’s hesitancy. “Well, what for God’s sake?

Shadoe cut his eyes toward Garret. “She came on to me upstairs.”

Garret’s jaw jerked in anger. “She what?”

“You heard me. Julita ... only it wasn’t Julita, it was her mother. I’m sure of it. I was passing by her room and heard her. It sounded like she was having another nightmare, so I went in. She was thrashing about on her bed. I managed to calm her fears but then she....” He looked at Garret, seeing the

anger on his face. "She kissed me ... and I ... I responded."

"You bastard!" Garret said, limping toward him on his cane. "How far did it go?"

"It was only a kiss ... a few words."

"Are you sure it wasn't Julita?"

"No, I don't think so. Julita's never ... well, she's never acted like that ... so brazen, raw."

"Like a whore, you mean."

"Something like that, yes."

Garret's eyes narrowed on Shadoe. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I haven't got it all figured out yet." He rubbed his forehead. "Hell, I just don't know yet."

"Have you had any of the dreams you were having for a while?"

"No, and I don't think I will. It's a whole new ballgame now. She's concentrating on Julita ... but with the whole family here, I think she intends to make an appearance ... and soon."

"And she's using Julita to do it," Garret said thoughtfully.

"That's the tough part. She wouldn't hurt her. The woman I saw in the church loves her daughter ... wanted to see her ... warn her..." Shadoe turned to Garret and looked him in the eye. "She said you wanted to hurt her."

Garret's brows lifted in shock. "Hurt Julita? Me? I would never hurt Julita."

Shadoe's eyes lowered slightly as if he were remembering. "No, she didn't mean that. I know that now. She meant..." His eyes found Garret's once more, but couldn't get the words out. "She ... never mind ... I know what she meant. I didn't know then ... in New York, but now..."

"It's changed now, hasn't it?"

“Yes. What Greta wants now is....

“Come on. What are you thinking?”

He looked at Garret, feeling for the first time that Greta’s ghost was aiming at him.  
“Revenge.”

“What? Revenge? On who?”

“You. Be careful, Garret. Stay away from Julita. Greta may be using her body to get back at you ... somehow.” He looked around. “Are there any weapons around here?”

“I have a gun I brought with me from New York, but other than that there’s nothing in the house.”

“Lock it up. Keep it out of sight, and away from Julita.” He put his glass down, then continued. “I’m not sure how ... in what form the revenge will come, but just stay on your toes. Now, I think we both need to get some sleep. I’ll be able to figure this thing out a whole lot better after a little sleep.”

“It seems to me somebody ought to stay awake and watch out for Julita.” He looked down at his watch. “I slept a little last night. Besides, I don’t think I could sleep now, I’m too damned keyed up.” Turning, he went back to the bar and began rattling glasses. “You’ve been through a lot, you need your sleep. I’ll call you if anything happens.”

Shadoe wondered for a moment if he could trust Garret. He seemed different tonight, and since he was dead tired, he decided to take the chance. A man couldn’t stay up twenty-four hours a day if he had ghosts to catch, spells to destroy, and crazy people to see to. Speaking of crazy people, how did he know that Lucretia wouldn’t take up her trusty hatchet and plunge it toward his neck? Hell, at this point he didn’t care. He’d be asleep. Maybe it would be fast and painless.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Garret sat under a dim light in the library, a pipe in his mouth, a smoky haze hanging above his head, and a drink tinkling in his hand. He stared down at the book he was reading, the words meaningless as his mind wandered. The wind whistled around the old mansion causing a chill to settle in his soul. His eyes slowly lifted from the page and looked around. He could feel something ... something strange ... creepy. No sooner had the thought formed in his mind than he heard the familiar tinkling sounds of the music box playing. The melodic tune was soft and familiar, and then the words began, soft and breathy as they echoed around the room.

Pretty baby, pretty baby. Won't you come and let me rock you in your cradle of love, and we'll cuddle all the while. I will be your loving sister, brother, dad and mother too. Pretty baby of mine, all mine. Pretty baby of mine.

Garret jerked himself around looking everywhere, his eyes wide, his heart jumping in his chest. The words ... the voice, he knew them. But it was impossible ... it couldn't be.

Hello, Garret, the voice said, her chilling voice soft and cutting. It echoed as if rising from a dark, deep, grave ... from the caverns of hell ... from some other world.

"Greta, my God is that you?" he said, still looking around. All at once a white, glowing specter appeared. She seemed to float, her shroud moving in a nonexistent wind.

Who else would know your favorite song, sung by that wimpy little blond bitch with the legs. And then you had the gall to put that song on my daughter's music box. You pathetic old man, mooning over a dead woman that wasn't even part of your generation. You even played it for Julita ... for her to hear night and day.

"But ... y-you can't be here, you're dead ... you ... I can't believe...."

You'd better believe it, she said, her sarcastic tone turning treacherous, because I've come for you.

"For me? What ... what do you mean? I've done nothing to you."

Nothing? she shrieked. You killed me, you bastard, and blamed it on childbirth! Do you remember? she hissed, her eyes narrowing on him. My contractions had started, and were getting closer and closer. I was bleeding profusely. I begged you to get me to the hospital ... to call a doctor ... anything, but you laughed. She hesitated, looking at him with eyes of loathing. After you delivered the child you left me there to bleed to death!

“You were having problems. I ... I didn’t know what to do. I was frightened. I had to see to the child, make sure she was taken care of.”

That wasn’t it, Garret, and you know it. She moved toward him, her shroud trailing after her. I was growing older, and you liked youth and beauty. She smirked. You still do. Poor Garret. I wasn’t young and beautiful for you any longer, was I? And then the child was born. She was just what you wanted, wasn’t she?

“It might please you to know that I didn’t get to enjoy her for long. I suffered at the hands of that demon of a daughter you gave me, and I’ve been a cripple for the last eighteen years. She put me in the basement,” he rasped. “I wasn’t locked in, but I might as well have been. I didn’t have legs, and couldn’t get out. So you see, you have your revenge.”

No, that wasn’t the revenge I sought, but it gave me time. I knew you were safe from Julita down there.

“What about Lucretia? Don’t tell me she escaped your wrath!”

No, she’ll pay. But at least she had an excuse.

“What? Her dementia? She knew what she was doing. She’s only crazy when it serves her purpose. She’s here ... now ... just escaped from an asylum, did you know that?”

Don’t change the subject, you slimy bastard!

“I don’t have to stand here and listen to this,” he growled, pulling himself up on his cane, and hurriedly stumbled toward the door. But before he took two steps he was slammed back against the wall, and couldn’t move.

She watched him for a moment savoring his fear, then continued. For fifteen years she was safe....

“Safe! With Lucretia?”

Shut up! she shouted, then continued. Then the stranger came, upsetting everything. I knew I had to do something, so I tried to use him to get Julita to the church. I wanted to warn her ... both of them. To go ... to leave! But as usual you interfered, made your way out of the basement, and back on your feet. Then the inn was shut down ... everyone gone!

Garret cast her an incredulous look. "My God, you ... you were the woman in the church Shadoe keeps talking about?" He was stunned. "Why a church? What was the significance?"

Significance? I don't know. Because it was dead, I suppose ... like me. Damaged beyond repair. Once beautiful ... loved. Now lonely and forgotten. But I needed it mostly for the shock value. What would a church be doing in the wilderness? She hesitated, then said decidedly, Yes. It was out of synch ... misplaced. That was the significance, and it worked.

"Even dead you're as crazy as a loon. I don't see that it's accomplished anything."

You're wrong. I found that he's a good man, Garret. He let you ... the very devil himself ... out of your cage because he's a good man. You always have been prejudiced, but you fooled him into thinking you liked him. Then when you were ready ... had Julita firmly in your grasp ... your mask came off. You used him.

"Who was hurt, huh? Who the hell was hurt?"

I want him for Julita. She needs him. I'm not sure either of them know it yet, but they're in love.

Garret's jaw tightened at that statement. "Over my dead body!"

That can be arranged, she hissed ominously. I wouldn't make any long-range plans if I were you. Some day ... or night ... very soon you're going to pay for your sins, Garret!

"You don't scare me, bitch."

That's too damned bad, because I'm going to repay you for every moment of hell both me and my daughter have experienced at your hands. I still haven't forgotten the moment you grabbed the child from my arms. I reached out to hold her, but you took her away. My arms were empty ... and remained empty. For years, Garret, I had no child to hold, no child to love ... to fill my empty arms.

"What do you mean? You died right after she was born."

I was there ... and I've been there every day ... every night since.

Garret suddenly remembered hearing the music box playing at odd hours. It haunted him ...

the music whirling around in his mind. His dreams were dark and chilling, and filled with a pale, sorrowful woman looking down at a child. Wanting to reach out and touch her, to hold her, but knew she couldn't.

Greta's ghostly face became etched in sorrow, her words tearful and faint. But I couldn't do anything for her, not even protect her... Her eyes shifted up to him. From you ... from Lucretia. I couldn't do anything but watch her torment ... until now! All at once her face changed to one of hellish determination as she looked up at him, her once dim, cloudy eyes now alive with the flames of hell. I've watched you make her beg, plead, throw up in terror. I've seen you stalk her late at night, putting your dirty hands on her. She began circling him, her shroud trailing after her. He turned drunkenly, watching her, his fear mounting. I read your thoughts before I came in, she continued. With everyone in the mansion in bed you were thinking of going up to Julita, weren't you? What were you planning to do, Garret? she asked, her shrill words cutting him. Tuck her in like a good father? Read her a bedtime story? Rape her? The words kept beating him like sharp stones. You won't stop until you're dead, will you, Garret? As long as you're alive, Julita will never be safe.

"You bitch," he said, his voice trembling in anger. "So I'm not perfect, so what?. What about you? You were nothing but a whore."

Only because you liked me that way. Remember the games I had to play to keep your interest? They were disgusting and sick.

"You have a lot of nerve casting blame on me. You've taken possession of Julita several times trying to tempt me!"

For a very good reason, Garret. I knew the only way to keep you away from her was for her to be willing. That spoils the game, you see. After all my years with you I've learned something. You have to be in control, Garret, the one in power. A willing woman is too easy. No challenge. You'll back away every time. You like the dark ... the forbidden ... a struggle ... a fight.

"What about tonight when you tried to entice Shadoe?"

That wasn't entirely me. I had entered her for another task, but something inside Julita began to react by his closeness and I had to take over and act so out of character for her that he would know something was wrong. With a little help from you he figured it out. Now their relationship has a chance.

"There won't be any relationship. I'll see to that."

You won't ruin it between them, she hissed. He already thinks he's not good enough. He's willing to give her up so she'll have what he feels she deserves. That's how much he loves her. But

they'll be together. I'll see to it. And you? You'll be dead!

"No ... n-no ... you're talking crazy. I ... what have I done that's so bad? I am what I am ... a man of the flesh, always have been. There are millions in the world."

There are also millions in hell ... but don't worry, there's a place for you.

"If there is a hell, why aren't you in it? Besides, I don't believe in hell."

Your hell is inside you, Garret. You hold nothing sacred, not even my daughter's body. When you did take me, you took me by force, just as you take everything you want.

Trying to find words that would hurt her, he spat out, "Even at your best you were never as good as Julita." He knew the only way to get back at Greta, and the words began rolling off his tongue. "Julita has a soft, hot little cunt. Tight and luscious. When I enter her I can taste it as well as feel it. She gives...."

Stop it! Greta yelled, her voice wet with sobs.

"She gives begrudgingly," he continued, his voice taunting, "but that's the way I like it, so I take ... no I steal, plunder, ravish until I reach that summit where I become a fountain, spewing forth my hot, hellish, burning seed!"

You're a liar, she rasped, her nostrils flaring with anger. Oh, you've been close, I'll admit that, but she was always faster than you. I almost felt sorry for you limping along, trying to catch her. But it never happened, and you know it. And I promise you this. You'll never get another chance, she cried. I'll kill you before I let you put your disgusting hands on her again.

He looked at her with loathing in his eyes. "To think I loved you at...."

Stop lying! she shouted. How could you love me when the word is foreign to you? You never loved anything in your life.

"All right, so I admit it! I never loved you. The nearest I ever got to love was Julita."

That isn't love, you bastard! That's ... dirty, filthy, disgusting, animal! She looked at him as if he were scum. If anyone deserves hell, Garret, it's you.

“Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I’m not going to hell or anywhere else ... so get out!” He pushed himself away from the wall and limped across the room and got as far as the door, then stopped when he heard her voice, but didn’t turn to acknowledge her.

Haven’t you found it strange that I keep referring to Julita as my daughter?

He turned quickly. “What do you mean?”

I mean she’s not yours.

Garret’s face suddenly paled. “What the hell are you trying to say?”

Remember the oil man from Texas? Richard ... Dick, I called him ... for one very important reason. He came up to sell you stock in his oil wells. Blond, rugged, and beautiful. We....

“You bitch!” he bellowed. “Behind my back, you....”

So what? she hissed. You weren’t interested! We weren’t even sleeping together then. I’m surprised you didn’t figure it out for yourself. But you were so sure that no woman would choose another man over you that you never considered the possibility. What a pompous ass you were! Still are! The years haven’t changed you at all.

“Then ... then I’m not ... never was ... my God, Julita’s not even my daughter. All this time I thought....” He looked at the apparition, hate glittering in his eyes. “Why now? Why didn’t you tell me before?”

I wanted to pick the right moment ... the moment of your death!

“God, I wish you were still alive so I could have the pleasure of killing you all over again!”

Sorry, she said, with an echoing whisper, now it’s my turn.

“Yeah? And just how do you intend to do it?”

I’m not going to tell you, she said, her voice faint and breathy. I’m going to make you wonder. Will it be today ... tonight ... in the next moment ... or a year from now? Will it be...?

“You think you can beat me?” he said, turning crazily, lifting his eyes, and shouting into the dark spaces of the dome, but she had disappeared. “Garret Van Dare?”

The voice was silent for several seconds, then the damning words came. Why don’t we put it to the test?

“What do you...?”

In only seconds the musty smell of wet grave dirt rose on the air just before the front door slammed open. Walking over to close it, he looked outside, but there was nothing. Just bushes and trees blowing in the high winds. My God, what had he just seen ... heard? Had it been an hallucination, a vision? Or had it been real? Had Greta crawled out of her grave to haunt him ... to make him pay for his sins? “Ridiculous,” he muttered, feeling his defiant streak rise up. She was dead, what hold could she possibly have over him? Finally turning, he looked up at Julita’s room, and his eyes filled with fire. “Not my daughter, aye?” He thought for a moment, then said, “Why not?” His eyes shifted to the little elevator that was nestled in the corner of the rounded staircase, shuffled toward it, and got in. The gentle whirr of the little mechanical room sounded for a moment, then abruptly stopped when it reached the top landing. Garret got out and headed for Julita’s room. “She’s gone ... dead,” he muttered, “there’s no way in hell she can keep me away from Julita.” He would prove it, he thought, standing in front of her door. She was not his daughter so who the hell could stop him? Not God, not the devil, not every fucking ghost in the universe!

He slammed the door open and Julita awoke, seeing a dark silhouette with a cane crowding the door. A sharp fear cut through her. Slowly she lifted herself up on her elbow and began backing up toward the headboard.

He could hear her crying. Good. He wanted her fear, her terror. It made it better somehow. And it was going to be good tonight. Throwing his cane aside noisily he crossed the room to her bed and reached down and pulled the covers back. She lay there trembling.

“Papa, please don’t!”

“I’m not your papa,” he said, then reached down and ripped her gown down the front, then fell on her. His hands had begun grabbing, tugging, and scratching when all of a sudden he felt himself being pulled off her, and thrown through the air, landing against the four walls time and again, over and over until he was weak and bruised.

But no one was in the room.

Fear spiked inside him, cutting deep. He had to get away, so as quickly as he could, he pulled himself up and began running, limping as he ran. He didn’t take the elevator, it was too slow, so down

the stairs he stumbled, grabbing the baluster, leaning on it until he finally made it to the foyer. Crazed with fear, he ran toward the front door, not seeing the other three running out of their rooms and gathering on the landing.

“What the hell is going on?” Shadoe said, running with Lucretia and Julita down the steps. They followed Garret, watching as he ran toward his car, then suddenly stop. The wind howled, the overcast sky rumbled, the clouds low, darkening the day almost into night.

From out of the corner of his eye he saw something glowing. The vision was white, and drifting. Somehow he couldn't take his eyes off it and followed as it led him to the ridge. She stood on the edge, her soft white arms waving for him to come closer. He could see it was Greta, and ran crazily toward her as if he had lost his mind.

When he neared the edge Shadoe yelled for him to stop, but he kept running, stopping only when he had almost reached the edge. She was there ... her white, trailing garment blowing in the wind, her hair lifting and becoming tangled. Behind her was the restless ocean. The wind whirled, the waves crashed, and the mist that had come in from the ocean stayed low to the ground.

You don't listen very well, do you Garret? she called out, trying to be heard above the whistling wind.

“Get back in your grave, you bitch. I killed you once, and I can do it again!”

Show me, Garret. What can you do to me now?

He heard the challenge and anchored his eyes on her undulating form, shifting from her to the edge of the ridge, then out to the raging ocean, then back to her again. Slowly he began walking toward her.

You're a coward, Garret Van Dare, and you know it, she said, egging him on. All cowards are the same, you know. They love to torment women. See them cry, beg, and plead. Like you, Garret, they need to feel in control.

A chuckle came from deep within his throat. “But that's not cowardly, my love. That's entertainment!”

I forgot to tell you. Secretly I liked it. Your force, your energy, your constant drive. Oh, yes. I wanted it even more than you.

“That’s a lie, you bitch! You were terrified, on your knees in fear, many times. You trembled, shook, there’s no way....”

It was all an act, Garret. So you see, you weren’t in control at all. I was.

“It’s not true, damn it!”

But it is Garret. Every minute I knew what you were thinking, she said, inching backward as he came forward.

It was now or never, he thought just before he ran toward her. “You fucking whore,” he yelled. Not realizing he was only a few feet from disaster, he lunged forward to push her off and found himself stumbling, his hands pushing through nothing but mist ... no substance. He became unbalanced, his arms flailed, grabbing at her, but only a chilly mist greeted him just before he went over.

“Aaaarrrrrgggghhhh!” he yelled, while falling. As he descended he could hear the angry waves crashing against the bones, then felt a sharp object pierce his back. “Ugghhf.”

“Oh, my God!” Shadoe yelled, then saw Julita running toward the edge, her eyes wide with fright. “Get the hell back!” he yelled, grabbing her arm.

While they were struggling, Lucretia made her way carefully to the brink, mindful not to get too close. Loose rocks tumbled over the edge as she knelt, crawling toward it.

“I’ve got to see!” Julita yelled, struggling with Shadoe, urging herself toward the sharp drop. She finally freed herself from his grasp and ran to the edge and looked down. She saw her father skewered face up, the giant’s rib bone sticking up out of his stomach. He hung there, his dead body being buffeted by the wind and waves.

Her scream pierced Shadoe like a bolt of lightning. He lunged into action, catching her just as she turned her head away from the grotesque sight of Garret’s body hanging limp, being eerily moved by the elements in a dance of death, his blood dripping down the huge bone. Her shoulders heaved while wracking sobs flooded through her trembling body. “He’s gone ... my papa’s gone ... dead.” She cried until she felt like her insides were bruised, then looked up at Shadoe. “Why did he jump off the ridge, Shadoe? He seemed to be shouting at someone. Did he go crazy at the end?”

Shadoe scowled down at the tragic sight, then turned his head away sharply. “No, not crazy,” he muttered. Even though the old man was a monster, Shadoe had tears in his eyes as well. It didn’t take a genius to know what had happened. He had been skillfully maneuvered to the edge by Greta. His

insane ramblings were at her. She must have taunted him until he lost control and tried to kill her once again.

She finally had her revenge.

“Are you okay?” he asked, concern deepening the lines in his face.

“Oh, Shadoe I ... I just wish it could’ve been different.” Shadoe cradled her close to him, letting her talk it out. “All those years that I thought he was dead, I wished for a father. I even remember crawling up into his lap when I was little. And then--” she brushed at her tears and looked up at him, “--When ... when I found out he was alive, I was out of my mind it happiness. I thought ... I had someone to protect me ... someone to love me ... someone to go to when I was afraid. I....”

She suddenly quit speaking, and Shadoe felt her body stiffen. He looked down and saw her looking out into nothingness.

My baby ... my pretty, pretty baby.

“Mama?” she whispered, hearing the soft purr of loving words being swept into her ear in hushed tones. “Is that you?”

I love you, my precious, and will always love you.

“The words ... they’re coming from her.”

Come to me, baby. Come now, and we can be together forever.

“She’s calling me.”

Shadoe followed Julita’s eyes to the edge of the ridge, and saw a floating apparition. While he was looking away, Julita began walking ... reaching out. All at once she stumbled, her arms flailing, her body falling down on the edge. She scratched, grasped at anything, but she kept slipping over the edge.

“Julita!” Shadoe shouted, running toward her. By the time he reached the edge, he saw her dangling from a root, but he couldn’t reach her. Desperate, he looked around and saw the apparition floating beyond the ridge. “She was coming to you,” he pleaded. “I can’t reach her, but you can. Don’t take her with you. I love her. I want her with me ... always.”

She's mine now. I have suffered all these years without her, and I....

"No! Please! I love her. Don't take her!" Shadoe begged.

Greta saw Julita's hands losing their grip in all the mist and surf, and saw the look of terror on her face. She heard her call out to Shadoe to help her and knew that in only seconds she would plunge to her death and they would be together. She shifted her eyes and saw the young man's face, the passion, the love as he begged for her life.

While he continued his plea, Julita lost her grip and began screaming. Greta gasped, seeing Julita begin to fall, and fear grabbed her. She knew she couldn't let it happen. She quickly moved forward and caught her, carrying her in her arms to safety and placing her on the ground with her back resting against a rock.

Shadoe stood looking on as Greta sat beside Julita's unconscious body looking at her. Then her hand caressed Julita's cheek, her eyes searching her face. Finally she leaned forward, placed her misty lips on Julita's cheek, and whispered, Good-bye, my love. Be happy. I will see you again someday.

Feeling the mist on her cheek, Julita's lashes began fluttering, her head turning, and a moan escaping her lips.

Greta turned to look at Shadoe. She'll be all right now. Go to her ... and never let her go.

Anxious to get to her, he ran and gathered her in his arms. "ThankGod you're safe, Julita. Don't leave me, don't ever leave me. I love you so."

Julita looked around. "Where's my mother?"

"She's gone, Julita, but she saved you. Did you know that? You were falling and she caught you and brought you to safety. She even sat here looking at you and touching you just before she said good-bye."

Julita began crying, then leaned on Shadoe's chest. "Shadoe, I'm frightened, and cold." Her arms encircled his neck as he lifted her into his arms and headed for the warmth of the mansion. "Don't leave me, Shadoe. I love you."

"I won't, Julita. I'm here for you, my darling ... forever."

Watching them, Greta smiled, then turned and looked over at Lucretia who was still huddled near the edge. Only one more thing left to do, she thought while lifting her hands and orchestrating the winds. In a sudden fury, a blast of air circled around Lucretia, making her sneeze, and giving her a chill.

Yes, Greta thought. That will do ... for now.

Lucretia didn't know it ... but her hell had only begun.

## EPILOGUE

Lucretia could taste death on her lips. She'd been feverish for the last few days and could see the shrouded phantom lingering in the shadows of her room. It had come for her like it had come for her father. She was not afraid of dying. She invited it. She wanted to be snatched from her misery. From seeing the two people she hated most whispering together, stealing kisses, and locking themselves in their bedroom. Even now she could hear their heavy breathing, kisses, and moans. She had worked her whole life to prevent this, but she had failed to hide her sister's beauty.

Even though she had nothing left, she had still won her escape from that tomb where people crazier than she merely existed. With death on her doorstep she would never have to go back.

As her illness worsened, her vision clouded, and the room around her became blurred. People surrounded her bed. They spoke words that echoed in her brain, but she couldn't understand their meaning. Faces floated above her, hands wiped her brow, eyes looked deep inside her, lips curled in strained smiles. The room smelled of alcohol and soap. Dim lights undulated, making grotesque shadows on the wall.

Maybe she was in hell.

No. She could hear the ocean outside her window. Water. Cool water. She struggled to rise from her bed, but hands from out of nowhere pushed her back down. She wanted the water. It would cool her raging fever. She muttered something and the edge of a glass was put to her lips. She pushed it away, trying to get to the balcony where the sheer curtains fluttered in the cool air like a ghostly vision.

Later, when the house was silent, and all the hands were gone, she woke from a dreamless sleep and stumbled to her balcony. She looked out at the restless ocean, longing for it ... reaching toward it. She didn't know how she got there, but she found herself walking along the beach, feeling the sand between her toes. Slowly the sand became wet and she could feel the icy water on her toes, her ankles. She welcomed the cold water, its coolness now riding up around her, washing along her hips, then her neck, her head. And then she felt a floating lightness as a comforting darkness curled around her, holding her like a beloved child in a warm blanket while she eased into death.

She smelled the flowers, heard the sobs of the sister she had tormented. Where is the forgetfulness? Where is the peace? Even now she can't forget, for you see, her thin, smoky form walks among them, confined to the foreboding old inn with its tall tower, its maiden's walk and magnolia trees. The statues seem alive, even the trees. Their eyes, their murmurings, their monstrous shadows flung long and frightening over the manicured lawn.

The inn is open again, being run by the two lovers that finally found each other. The laughing guests come and go, but they don't see it as she does. They know nothing of the horror and fear that

took place within its walls. To her, the cursed old inn is dark and foreboding, as cold and hard as the gravestone that stands above her head. Someday the old inn will crumble into dust, but she will not leave. She will continue to haunt the restless coast of Scarlet Bay....

...until she is cast into flames!

**The End**