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# *Like Lazarus*

*Ellen  
Margret*



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## **Like Lazarus by Ellen Margret**

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Rafe Acer never ceased to exist when murdered. He spends twenty years as an avenging spirit in the astral realms, visiting his frozen corpse regularly. Miraculously brought back to life by Doctor Selena Steele, he seeks justice and finds his second chance at life becomes a second chance at love.

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**Chapter One**

Snowflakes fell, so fine that they appeared not to be settling upon the two figures that stood staring down at the body lying on the ground. Rather, the virgin white flakes seemed almost to fall right through their forms to merge silently with the flawlessly smooth, white covering on the ground below.

The features of the corpse were not discernable until a sharp gust of icy wind tore the white dusting from his face and blew it away, depositing it onto the sharp, jagged rocks nearby.

“Damn it!” the taller of the two figures cursed as a wave of anger washed over him. “This never gets any easier.” He didn’t look away though, for all his attention was riveted upon the waxen face of the corpse.

“Then you should stop coming here and cease tormenting yourself, Rafe,” the figure at his side said, somewhat impatiently.

“Cerdic, my friend, I can’t help it. I feel compelled to come, but there is no reason for you to come with me every time. This need not concern you any more.”

The other snorted. “Of course, it concerns me and, Rafe, I don’t come every time. If I did then I would get nothing done, would I?”

Rafe grimaced, for he was still looking at the corpse’s white face and thin blue lips. Those were lips that had once been full and warm and capable of kissing a woman into a state of ecstasy. The eyelids were closed, frozen to the eyeballs beneath, but the eyes had once been lapis blue, and they had often twinkled with humour in a face that had been classically beautiful. The strong jaw was just discernable above the zipped up collar of the mountaineer’s jacket.

So, too, was the dimple in the chin that now held a tiny reservoir of compacted snow. A few strands of light-blond hair poked out from the padded hood that covered his head. “You just won’t let go, will you, my friend? You have practically devoted your entire existence to watching over me.”

“But not for much longer, you know that I will have to leave quite soon. The bosses have fresh plans for me.”

Rafe sighed and took a long hard look at his friend. He wasn’t much to look at, and the image presented was that of a short man with fine straw-coloured hair and a nose too large for his round face. “And I wish you well in your new venture, Cerd, and I apologise for being so tetchy today. It’s just that I don’t always get to see those facial features so clearly, but now that I can, it brings it home to me yet again just how much has been lost.”

Cerdic nodded in total understanding. He was, in general a very understanding and a very patient soul. “A life, a very precious life.”

Lost in reverie, Rafe knelt down and went to touch the frozen face, but his hand merely passed through and came out the other side. He sighed forlornly. “Yes, and all the more precious to me since it was my life. Look at me, Cerd, look at my body lying there.”

“I am, what else is there to look at in this God forsaken place other than snow and rocks and sky?”

“I look like I died yesterday rather than twenty years ago. These frigid conditions have kept me fresher than a trout in a freezer. Murder is a wretched business, Cerd, my murder in particular.”

“Yes, it is.”

“I still can’t truly believe it. My own climbing partner kicked me off the mountainside up there.”

“I know. I saw the look on his face when he stared down at your broken body, and it could only be described as smug. You know, I wish that I’d got there earlier, but I arrived seconds too late. God, I wish that I had been able to warn you in time. A whisper in your ear maybe or imparting a feeling of impending doom, anything to have stopped it. I was your spirit guide after all.”

“Curse the bastard!” Rafe hissed. “That son of a bitch planned it all along. Garth had taken the lead and was about six feet above me whist I was attempting to scale a near vertical face. It was stupid, I should have known better, but how was I to know that Garth would suddenly pull out his knife and slice through my rope? He was laughing as he told me that he was doing it for Veronica so that the

two of them could be together at last.” Rafe shook his head and sighed. “Cerd, I must hold the record for being the most miserable, discarnate soul ever.”

Cerdic turned to look at him. “Lord no, Rafe. You of all people know that’s not so. There are millions of wretched souls that have yet to find eternal peace. Earthbound souls that have done terrible things to others or, like you, have had terrible things done to them and bear a grudge. Either way, they find no rest until they let go and move on up, or accept that payback is due for crimes and return to earth for another cycle where the law of karma will weave its spell. My friend, you know that is the way of things. After all, you are the one who works so closely with Micah to ensure that the most evil and malevolent spirits are taken out of the fourth dimension. And you do a fine job, too. I admire you, and I only wish I had a fraction of your courage.”

The complement fell on deaf ears. “I’ve been coming back here for twenty years now to stare at a stiff corpse that used to be me, and yet, still, all I can feel is bitter resentment, anger and hostility. I lost a lot, Cerd. Not only did I lose my life but I also lost my wife to my partner. Damn, but I wish that I had been permitted to see what happened to those two after my death, but I could never seem to locate them, and the angels wouldn’t help.”

“The angels didn’t want you to, Rafe. In their infinite wisdom, which we have no right to question, they didn’t deem it wise.”

“Hell, I wanted to know how their lives panned out, and I still do. You should have been able to find out for me. You were my spirit guide on earth.”

“I did ask, but they wouldn’t let me undertake a visitation. I am as ignorant as you are as to what happened there. They told me that they wanted closure, and you, suddenly arriving as some tormented spirit hell bent on haunting your partner and your widow, wouldn’t have achieved that. Anyway, Rafe, you just aren’t the ghoulish, haunting sort.”

“I could have tried bloody hard, Cerd, and who are they to say that they wanted closure? I haven’t got closure. I’ve got to deal with the on going hurt, anger and an overwhelming desire for retribution that doesn’t lessen with the passing days.”

“Apparently not, indeed I would say that it gets worse. Look Rafe, you led a good life, and I know because I was there most of the time. Your only crime was to break a few ladies’ hearts and, the way I see it, looking as good as you did, it was your divine right. If I’d been

blessed with your looks when I was incarnate then, by God, I'd have likely done the same. But that's all in the past, and you've earned the right to move on up. But instead of embracing the possibility, you cling to the past and keep coming back here. Admit it, you're going nowhere, pal."

"Then be thankful that you won't have to stick around me for much longer. Cerd, you've got better things to do with your time. I suggest you hie yourself back to your new body and relish the warmth and security of your new mother's womb. You know that you're only allowed to be away for short periods of time and that the closer your new mother gets to full term, the longer you have to stay with your new body."

Cerdic gave a huff. "You're right, of course, but Rafe, do you have any idea of just how interminably boring the life of a fetus is?"

Rafe grimaced. "Can't say I recall."

"All they do is kick their little legs about and wave their arms in the hope that a thumb might happen to fall into their mouths. And it's so dark and wet and smelly. I mean how would you like to have to swim in a bath of amniotic fluid mixed with your own pee?"

"Since you put it that way, then no, I wouldn't." Rafe shrugged. "Come on, Cerd, accept it as your lot because as you reminded me, it's just another one of those experiences to be embraced. So, what sex are you going to be?"

Cerdic looked at him blankly. "Haven't really noticed."

Rafe laughed. They had been together in one form or another for a very long time, and he was going to miss Cerdic very much. "So you don't know whether or not you've got a penis?"

Cerdic glowered at him. "Like I said, it's dark in there."

"Well, old friend, I suggest that you shoot back off there and have a good feel around with those new little hands of yours. You'll hit upon the answer soon enough."

Cerdic scowled and shook his head before disappearing. His curiosity had been aroused.

Which left Rafe, a non-corporeal spirit, staring down again at his once corporeal body that had been so perfectly preserved for twenty years. He doubted that he would ever find peace, but he did know that it would help if he got back to work.

\* \* \* \*

Although Rafe worked closely with Micah, he had never actually seen his true form. Micah's swirling energy exuded immense power



though, and his presence was awesomely massive. From experience, Rafe knew that there was absolutely nothing in heaven or earth that could faze him. He was fearless, he possessed limitless courage, and Rafe had worked alongside him for twenty years. Communication was by thought, as indeed was all communication in the higher spheres, although at times it seemed as though there was speech. It had been Micah who, for some reason still unknown to him, had sought out Rafe immediately after his death. It was he who had striven to mould him into the warrior spirit that he now was and needed to be in order to protect the living from the negative entities and energy draining spirits that, for whatever reason, saw fit to attach themselves to the living. That was the task that the ‘bosses’, as Cerdic referred to them, had deemed appropriate for Rafe. Under Micah’s tutelage, he had excelled at it.

Rafe was making his way up the long, brightly illuminated corridor that led directly from the earth plane to the heavenly levels. He came to an abrupt halt when he felt strong pressure on his shoulder.

“You have been there again haven’t you, Rafe?”

He recognised it for what it was— a reprimand. “Nothing gets past you, does it, Micah?” Rafe was hearing speech, his own speech, and he felt his etheric lips moving, but despite those sensations, he knew by now that he was communicating via thought alone.

“Correct. Very little gets past me, as you choose to put it,” the being responded. Although his thrumming overall shape was humanoid, no clear boundaries could be defined, and no facial features were evident. Micah’s huge form pulsed with undulating light energy. “You have been spending too much time there. You should stop doing so for it is not healthy.”

He couldn’t have agreed more. “I’ll say it’s not. Dead is never a healthy state to be in.”

The reply was terse. “Except that you are not dead, are you?”

Rafe folded his astral arms. “Now you are being pedantic, Micah. You know what I mean. If you don’t then you come and take a look at my body lying in the snow on the side of a damn mountain. It is not a pretty sight.”

“Then the solution is obvious, is it not? Cease going there, and cease looking at it!”

The corridor positively vibrated. Micah’s form suddenly brightened, and sparks sizzled and flew out in all directions. Rafe

knew what that meant, he should have known better than to antagonise Micah. “Sorry, I take it back. You are a far more enlightened and powerful being than I am, and I apologise for being flippant. I know that you don’t like it, but it’s a habit that I’ve had for a long time and one that I can’t seem to shake.”

Micah was still bristling as he moved away.

“Look, I said I’m sorry. Should I grovel at your feet?”

Micah halted. His thoughts hit Rafe with a massive thud that reverberated around his head. “Others have done so, but I would not have it be thus with you. You are a warrior, Rafe, and above all, warriors stand tall and cower to no being. My advice to you is to always remember that.”

Rafe looked up at the divine presence, wishing that he could discern some visible features. Expressions gave away much, but Micah had none that he could see. “Point taken, and on that note may I ask if there are any tasks pending for me?”

“You may.”

Micah did not communicate willingly. Rafe waited a good while for a reply. He missed humour, and there seemed to be precious little where he was. So, are there?”

“Yes.”

“What are they?”

“There is one task that is most pressing and which requires your assistance as a matter of urgency.”

“Fair enough, I am ready. Can you give me any of the details?”

“It is a possession, a particularly nasty one.”

That was all to the good. He felt like kicking some nasty spirit’s backside. “I am sure that I can handle it.”

“I hope so, Rafe. It involves a young woman and, although she does not realise it, she has been carrying a negative entity with her for six years. In fact ever since she, as a young medical student, became involved in a séance with a group of other students in a haunted inn. The entity is the spirit of a man who was lynched in the courtyard of the inn for stealing the innkeeper’s horse. He has never been able to accept that he is dead, and during the séance, he attached himself to the young woman where he has remained ever since, steadily weakening her and destroying her health. He is most active at night during which time he causes severe, crushing sensations to her chest, which the doctors have diagnosed as chronic asthma. She takes a

great deal of medication, none of which will, of course, ever solve her problem.”

“Of course not. It will take more than an inhaler to shift a spirit like that from her body.”

“Which is where you come in. She is currently in great distress and is having an attack whilst she sleeps. The likelihood is that this one could even kill her.”

“Then I must go. I will need her name and location, Micah.”

“Naturally. She is in Southampton, England, and her name is Selena Steele.”

## Chapter Two

Selena was dying, of that she had no doubt. This was her worst attack to date, and it had come upon her in the dead of night. During other previous night attacks, she had awoken and used her inhalers, but this time, she had not woken up, and by now it was too late. She couldn't move. Her body was experiencing some type of odd sleep paralysis and, having a vague knowledge of the paranormal from reading a couple of books on spiritualism, she recognised the point at which her spirit detached itself from her wheezing body and glided a few feet away.

She should have felt fear, but that wasn't the emotion that was uppermost. In fact she didn't know what it was. She looked down at herself just as the thought struck her that surely if she was dead then her body wouldn't be suffering with the dreadful laboured breathing. If she were dead then she wouldn't be breathing at all. By the light of the bedside table lamp, which she always left on at night, she could see that her pallor was dreadful.

She stared long and hard at her body and then finally became aware of a dark amorphous mass that hovered just inches above her bare breasts. She preferred to sleep in the nude but began to wish that she hadn't when the dark mass began to take on a human form and came to sit directly on top of her chest. Now she felt fear. It was squashing the life out of her, its large hands smothering her nose and mouth. She could hear things too, disturbing things. The male voice was guttural as it swore and cursed vilely.

In her out-of-body state, Selena tried to attack the phantom, for she recognised it as such, and did her best to push it away. "Get off me!" she heard herself scream even though she wasn't really making any sound at all. "Get off, don't you know that you're killing me?"

He didn't budge and merely swore at her as he proceeded to fix his hands around the neck of the near lifeless body on the bed. "How does this feel then, pretty missy? Can ye feel me 'ands throttl'n' ye? It

‘urts, don’t it? It ‘urts a lot. Just like ‘avin a noose around yer neck and I should know ‘cause I was ‘anged and left to dangle like a bloomin’ fish on a line. But ye know wot? They didn’t ‘ang me, not really ‘ang me. See I be still ‘ere. Old Bernie’s still ere, and, as ye can see, I ‘aint dead.”

The phantom didn’t see it coming, but the next second, he was torn away from the body on the bed and sent flying through the air with an impetus that had him careening right through the solid bedroom wall.

“Oh you’re dead, Bernie, and the sooner you face it, the better for all of us!”

“No, I ‘aint,” he responded gruffly as his spirit body reassembled itself in the bedroom, and he symbolically dusted himself off. Feeling very belligerent after his treatment, he confronted Rafe with his arms akimbo. “I ‘aint seen you before.”

“No, you haven’t because if you had then you wouldn’t still be here.”

“Who the bloody hell be you then?” he demanded. “Come on, tell me. Who are ye?”

“Your nemesis.”

“Me what? What do that mean?”

Rafe could tell that Bernie had, in life, not been an educated man. Which probably explained why he had made his living stealing horses, which ultimately led to his demise.

“It means, I hope, that he’s here to exact retribution for your attack on me,” Selena blurted out. She was gazing down at her body on the bed and wondering why she couldn’t jump back in. She felt panic. Was she dead after all?

“‘Ere you keep yer mouth shut, missy, I’m talkin’ to this nem..... er nemsis bloke. Don’t rightly know what he’s ‘ere for though.”

Rafe rounded on him and glowered. “I’m here to kick your low-life rear end out of this dimension!” he boomed.

“Ah....right.” And Bernie began to back away, for now he found Rafe, a figure of much greater stature than he, intimidating.

“Unless you are prepared to listen to reason,” Rafe added, fingering the astral sword that had suddenly appeared in his hand.

“Don’t have a choice, do I?” Bernie grunted.

“No, you don’t. Now Bernie, I want you to listen to me.”

“And if I don’t.”

“Then I’ll chop your evil energy into tiny little bits and pack it off down under to where it’s eternally dark and hot.”

“Fair enough, I’m listenin’”

“Good, that’s progress. First, you need to accept that you’re dead.”

“But I ‘aint dead, I’m here talkin’ to you.”

Rafe sighed for this was always the hardest part, and this time was going to be no different from any other. Some spirits were determined to maintain contact with the earth plane because they adamantly refused to believe that they were dead. Bernie was obviously no exception. “That’s right, you are talking to me. But actually I’m dead too, and that’s why I can communicate with you. Now, are you with me so far?”

“You don’t look dead.”

“Well, I am. I’ve been deceased these last twenty years.”

“Prove it then. Prove to me that you’re dead, and then maybe I’ll believe that I am.”

“No maybes, you will.” Rafe put his hand on Bernie’s shoulder. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

“Are ye takin’ me somewhere?”

“I am. You wanted proof, and I’ll give it to you.”

Selena was watching and listening and since she couldn’t seem to get back into her own body she decided to grab hold of Rafe’s arm and go with them. There was momentary blackness, and then she found herself standing on the side of a mountain and gazing down at a lifeless corpse that was the spitting image of the avenging spirit beside her.

“Yep, that’s you all right,” Bernie confirmed and then looking away from the corpse. He began to stare around. “Blimey, are we up a mountain?”

“We are.”

“I ‘aint never been on one ‘afore. I been on a hill though, one with lots o’ sheep. I stole a few o’ the sheep to feed me family. So, how did ye come to die up on this flippin’ mountain?”

“I was murdered.”

Selena was aghast. It took courage to look upon one’s own body. It scared her enough looking at her own although she didn’t actually know for sure whether she was dead or not.

“Don’t ‘spose ye could show me my body then.”

“Bernie, where were you when God handed out the brain cells?”

“What?”

“Clot, you’ve been dead for over two hundred years. You’re nothing but dust now in a pauper’s grave in London.”

“So they did ‘ang me.”

“Yes, they hung you by the neck until you drew your last breath. You are dead, Bernie, and you have caused this woman a great deal of upset. With that said, are you prepared to rise up to the light?”

“What light?”

Rafe gazed up. There was no clear blue sky above them, but instead there appeared a brilliant swirling vortex of light that seemed to beckon. Two angels hovered, one on either side, and they held out their hands.

“That light. The angels will show you the way.”

“Aye, I think I’ll go now.” Bernie nodded, and he barely had enough time to look apologetically at Selena before he was drawn up into the vortex and disappeared.

Glad to see the back of him, Selena turned to Rafe. “What’s your name?”

“Rafe.”

“Thank you, Rafe, for coming to my assistance.” Standing beside him, her fear had evaporated, and a calm resignation of the inevitable came over her. “Will they come back for me? Do I go next?”

“Go where?” Rafe found himself staring at the astral body of the woman. It was naked, just as her corporeal body had been naked in the bed. Odd, but none of them had seemed to truly notice until then. Certainly, Bernie hadn’t noticed because if he had then Rafe doubted that even the angels could have persuaded him to leave because Selena Steele was radiantly beautiful. He especially liked the way that her black hair tumbled over her ripe breasts, but he appreciated even more the sight of the black triangle of hair lying between the tops of her long, slender legs. He suddenly cursed the fact that he was dead.

“To heaven. She glanced down at her breasts, realising now what it was that had gained his rapt attention. She suddenly gasped at her nudity.”

“I’m sorry.” He deliberately looked away although the image of her naked body stayed with him. “Forgive me, but you are a very beautiful woman.”

“But am I a dead one?” she asked, covering herself with her hands.

Rafe smiled and shook his head. “The silver cord is still in tact and joined to your body. You’re not dead, Selena, and I think that from now on you will be just fine. No more breathing problems because Bernie won’t ever bother you again.”

And then she too saw the glowing cord coming out from her belly. “Oh, yes I see it,” was all she could utter before she was yanked away from him with the force of a stampeding bull.

Which left Rafe alone with his corpse once again.

\* \* \* \*

Rafe lost count of the number of soul retrievals that he dealt with after Bernie. He sensed that the world was becoming an unsafe place with so many evil forces at work, and it troubled him as to why this might be so. When he questioned Micah about this, the advanced being merely replied that it was a minor hiccup, just a short deviation from the norm and that soon things would settle back down. In the history of mankind, these things had their peaks and their troughs and likely would continue in the same vein for all of eternity.

But Rafe wasn’t too sure that he wanted to be doing this kind of work for all of eternity although it had its perks especially when he’d met Selena and had gotten such a good view of her body. Retrieving lost souls was hard work, not that he particularly minded. What he minded was that he too pretty much felt like a lost soul.

He needed a friend to talk to. He needed Cerdic, but his visits were now few and far between. Perhaps he was, after all, growing accustomed to the warmth of his new mother’s womb.

“What, are you kidding?” came the instant response from behind him.

Rafe grinned and spun around. “Hey, buddy, good to see you. Short visit, I assume?”

Cerdic grunted disconsolately. “Yes, can’t stay long, wish I could though. You really can’t imagine what it’s like in there, it’s so damned confining and uncomfortable.”

“Like trying to wear a pair of shoes three sizes too small.”

“Worse!” Cerdic threw his hands up in the air. “Oh, Rafe, I’m not at all sure about going back for another life. The earth’s a tough school ground, and being born is like trying to squeeze a mouse out of a toothpaste tube.”

Rafe laughed, the image was a vivid one. “That’s a crap analogy, Cerd. How did the mouse even get into the tube?”

“Oh shut up!” Cerdic snapped.



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“Sorry.”

Suddenly Cerdic started. “Oh drat, I’m being pulled back already. Gotta go.”

It certainly was a short visit, but Rafe had been glad to see him. “Will I see you again?”

“Maybe once or twice more. Oh well, back to the toothpaste tube.”

## Chapter Three

Rafe was tired of saving other people's souls. He wanted to save his own, he wanted to escape the endless suffering that tormented him still. But he could never, ever do that, not so long as he was free to look down upon his own dead face. He was back on the mountainside again, all alone with himself and the silence. For once, there was no lamenting wind, and no snow fell. The sky above was a clear blue. He glanced around at the awesome beauty of his graveyard. Had he been breathing then the sight would have robbed him of breath, but he wasn't breathing because he was dead, and he was feeling very, very alone.

Except he wasn't alone! Rafe heard the sound of voices, of a man and a woman. He listened again. No it was two men and one woman, and now he could see them coming down the track toward him. He was amazed because this was such an isolated spot. That was the very reason why he and his traitorous partner had chosen it in the first place. They had wanted to explore uncharted territory, but of course that never happened because Garth Blackwell had had different plans all along. It had always been Blackwell's intention to return home alone.

He saw that they had spotted his corpse and that they were hurrying towards it. He guessed that they thought that he might still be alive. Alive after twenty years!

Finally they were staring down at his corpse whilst he stood beside them waiting to hear what they might have to say.

"Been dead some time by the looks of him," the taller of the two men declared impassively as he poked the body in the ribs.

"You're right, Jacob. Poor bugger. He's merely one of the dozens of bodies that litter this mountain," the other man replied, "but who would have thought that he was lying here and only a hundred yards or so from our camp?"

The woman was kneeling down. Tenderly she brushed away the light covering of snow from his closed eyes.

“He doesn’t need a medic, Selena. Much too late for that.”

Selena. He knew that there was something terribly familiar about her. She just looked so different with her clothes on, but of course, the voice was the velvety smooth voice of Selena Steele. The way that she so reverently scraped away at the ice and snow on his face moved him deeply.

“Selena, leave him in peace.”

In peace! Bloody hell, what did he know? Did he look at peace lying all broken down there?

“No, just a minute, Rex, I have to do this. He looks, well, he looks so familiar, but I’m not sure why.” She suddenly rocked back on heels and cursorily glanced around at her immediate surroundings. “Oh, God, it’s not possible. It can’t be.”

Rafe knew what she was thinking. She was remembering being there with him and with Bernie. She knew.

Her gaze flew back to his chalk white face. “It’s him,” she croaked.

“Who?” Rex and Jacob chorused.

“I... I...” What could she say? That she had seen him in a dream and in that dream he had been her salvation? They would laugh their socks off and tell her that she was insane. She knew that she couldn’t tell them. “No, no I’m mistaken, he just reminds me of someone I once met.” She was nonplussed though. She had convinced herself that her supernatural encounter had been a dream, but looking at him lying there in the snow, she knew that she had to reassess that. It had been all too real, that some avenging spirit had truly saved her from the loathsome Bernie. And after that, her asthma had magically disappeared. She realised now that it wasn’t magic at all. It had been spirit possession.

Rex pointed at Rafe’s outer clothing. “Look at his gear. He’s wearing stuff manufactured in the late eighties. I’d say he’s been lying here for a very long time, maybe for over twenty years. Come on, we can’t do anything more here, and we’ve got to fetch our provisions before we set off again.”

Her feeling of gratitude and her deep sense of curiosity told her that she couldn’t just abandon him, not after what he had done for her. “I’m not leaving him,” Selena resolutely declared.

“What! Selena, the man’s dead meat!” Jacob exclaimed.

Rafe thought that was a rather less than respectful way to speak of the dead.

“I don’t care, I want him brought to camp. He may have documents on him, and I need to find out who he is.”

“Why?”

“I just want to. Please, humour me.”

“Look, Selena, it doesn’t matter any more who he is, he’s dead. In fact he’s long dead.”

And Rafe couldn’t have agreed more. Although he hated looking at his own corpse, he wasn’t sure that he wanted it moved, and he certainly couldn’t fathom what might be gained by it.

“I don’t care, Jacob. I want to find out who he was. Likely he has identification on him. Likely he has a family, and that family must want to know what happened to him.”

“He died!” Rex was in total agreement with Jacob. “Selena, for God’s sake, be reasonable, and leave the corpse be.”

“No, I want you to help me to take him to our camp.”

“To our camp!” Rex exclaimed.

“Yes.”

“No way,” they replied in unison.

“Right, then I’ll do it myself.”

“How?” Jacob said in exasperation.

Rex scratched at his chin. “She’ll ruddy well drag him, knowing her.”

Selena nodded. “Yes, I will if I have to.”

\* \* \* \*

It had never been Selena’s intention to venture any further up the mountainside. She had agreed with the team, prior to leaving, that she would remain at camp six, leaving Rex and Jacob to make their attempt on the summit. She was there to provide medical assistance if required. So far it had not been.

The body lay outside the tent exactly where Rex and Jacob had so unceremoniously dumped it. As soon as they left, Selena gave her attention to the corpse. She unzipped his jacket and rifled through his pockets until at last she found what she wanted; a passport and a wallet containing money, most of it in old notes, and a very damp photograph of a dark haired, pretty woman. Tossing the wallet aside she hastily opened the passport, not daring to believe for one second that she might have been correct in her assumption that the man lying dead had indeed been the spirit figure that had saved her from a

malevolent entity. Maybe she was wrong and the resemblance was purely coincidental. Nervously she searched for his name and then when she finally found it she gave a very audible gasp.

“Rafe Acer.” She spoke the name out loud. “Rafe,” she said again, staring down at him and gently touching the side of his face with the palm of her hand. “You are he, aren’t you? I was right. Oh, I knew that I was right. This is so incredible, and such an amazing coincidence that it should have been me who found you.”

Rafe wished that he were able to talk to her. He also wished that he were able to feel the touch of her skin on his flesh. He wanted to be alive, he wanted to breathe and feel and love. True, he had seen her naked, but it wasn’t that that made him so attracted to her, rather it was because she was such a caring soul, as beautiful on the inside as she was on the outside. He barely knew her at all, but he really liked her. He would have given anything to have simply held her for a second. Momentarily forgetful of his non-corporeal state he moved to place his hand on her shoulder, and then swore bitterly when it passed straight through her.

“Staring at your body is pointless as I have told you many times before.”

Rafe cursed, aware that Micah was close by, but he wasn’t altogether surprised by it. Micah had the habit of turning up at the oddest times, and he had grown accustomed to that. Still, right then, he didn’t want another lecture. “And yet I still feel compelled to do it. Why do you think that is, Micah?”

“Because it is there to be looked at, and you are just as stubborn in death as you were in life. You do not listen to those who know better.”

He would not deny the truth and didn’t try. “I concede that you are right.”

“Of course, I am,” Micah replied. “Now I really must take you from here.”

“Duty calls, I suppose.”

“Yes, you are needed once again.”

“Will it take long?” He wanted to stay with Selena.

There was a long pause. “Why? Do you have something else to do?”

Rafe shook his head. “No, nothing else.”

“Good then let us go.”

As Rafe gave one more glance at his body, he wondered what Selena had planned for him. Perhaps she intended to say a few appropriate religious words and bury him. Could she manage to bury him alone in the frozen ground? She might try, but he doubted that it was possible. He wasn't at all sure that he even wanted her to. He realised, with surprise, that he would miss visiting his body if she did. With that thought troubling him, he left.

\* \* \* \*

Selena didn't try to bury Rafe's body. Instead she felt compelled to do something that any normal person would have considered not just eccentric but insane. With enormous difficulty, she dragged the stiff, heavy corpse inside the tent. Then she pulled down the zips to seal the entrance and block out the wind, and finally she proceeded to light three gas heaters.

She had every intention of warming him up, but as to why she wanted to do this, she had no rational explanation. She was simply driven to do it. After five hours, she was able to remove Rafe's outer garments. After ten hours, his skin was beginning to thaw, but she knew that she had a long way to go yet.

\* \* \* \*

Rafe was leaning against a celestial wall that appeared to be formed of a million tiny gemstones that radiated light in all directions. Milling around him were teams of angels and spirits, busily going about their duties. Heaven was a pretty harmonious place, and it was certainly beautiful, but Rafe would have been the first to admit that he felt discontented there. He still felt like he didn't belong. He had an inner restlessness and knew that he hungered for something more.

There was a burst of laughter, and Cerdic appeared. "You long for something more than heaven! You're a hard one to please, Rafe."

Rafe looked at him askance. "Thought you were on the point of being born. What are you doing here whilst your mother's labouring to bring you into the world?"

"Taking a break. All that screaming and panting is doing my head in."

"I guess that labour can be pretty drawn out sometimes."

"Sure can. Likely she'll be at it for hours yet."

"Maybe she will," he agreed.

"I guess that Peter knows how long she'll be at it, but I can't be bothered to go and ask him."

"Of course. He keeps the tally, doesn't he?"

“Yes, basically it’s one in and one out. He lets one in through the gates at pretty much the exact same time that a baby is born into the world. I’ll get word soon enough from my new spirit guide. He’ll tell me when some poor sod’s croaked off its mortal coil and then it’ll be my turn to pop out of the birth canal.”

“So, have you met your guide yet?”

“Yes, a couple of times. He’s a bit of a raw rookie though, never done it before. Guess I’ll be in for a pretty hairy time on the earth plane with a new recruit as my guide. His name’s Walter should you happen to bump into him.”

“You know, Cerd, I really will miss you. We’ve been together a long time, and I was kind of hoping that we might be together for a while longer yet.”

“Yes, I’d hoped the same, too. We have a unique understanding.”

“Yes, we do.” Rafe stared at Cerdic with an expression that could only be described as forlorn. “Come with me one last time, friend.”

Cerdic nodded willingly. “One last time then.” He didn’t need to ask where they were going.

Micah knew where they were going too, and he knew that that did not bode well, especially in view of what the woman had done to Rafe’s body.

## Chapter Four

She couldn't help crying, she felt so emotional. Tears spilled down her cheeks and dripped onto the face of the waxen corpse whose head rested in her lap. All she could think about was the spirit that she had met in her out-of-body state and of how he had been so compelling and not to mention hugely attractive. Now though, looking down at him, the male beauty that even death could not rob him of near mesmerized her. Jacob had said that he had been dead for perhaps twenty years, but by the look of him she could almost believe that he had only just died. His hair, now dry, was thick and blonde and curling slightly at the nape of a neck that was broadly muscular. In fact, he was extremely well muscled pretty much all over. She knew that for a fact because she had undressed him and seen him naked. To her mind, he had the physique of professional rugby player.

"Did you ever play rugby?" she heard herself ask, almost as if she were expecting him to hear her question and reply. She touched his strong jaw line, for that was possibly the first thing that she had noticed when he had appeared to her in spirit all those months ago. She knew that in life he must have been a strong person too, just as he had come across in spirit because, even in death, he radiated power.

She had thought about him most every day since he had rescued her from Bernie, some days convinced that what had happened was real and others that it had been a dream. She knew now that it wasn't a dream and, staring down at him, all she could feel was regret that she had never met him in life. She knew in her heart that they would have got along fantastically, she had no doubt whatsoever. All her adult life, she had been looking for that certain special someone but had never even come close to finding him. She had found all the men in her life wanting, every last one of them with shortcomings, some worse than others. None of them had been her perfect man. She suspected that Rafe might have been, and that was causing her deep anguish.



“Did I play rugby?” He did, in fact, hear her question. “Bloody hell, Cerd, what in God’s name is she doing to me?” Had he been incarnate, the sight that greeted him would have rocked him off his feet.

“She’s holding your body in her arms, stroking your chin and asking you if you played rugby?”

“I know that, but why is she doing it? This is beyond my comprehension, why it’s almost obscene. Cerd, she’s stripped me. She’s seen me naked.”

“As I understand it, you saw her naked too. That’s what you told me and in very great detail I might add. It was all you talked about for weeks.”

“Yes, she was naked, but that was entirely different, and it was none of my doing. It was all completely passive. This,” he spluttered as he pointed with his finger, “Well, this isn’t. She deliberately did this, and what the hell for? What does she hope to gain by this?”

“Hmm, odd, isn’t it.” Cerdic suddenly felt a tap on his back. He glanced around. “Walter, meet Rafe,” he said.

Walter paid scant attention to the very odd scene before him and briefly nodded at Rafe. “Cerdic, you have to return immediately.”

“Look, there’s no rush. Don’t panic, Walter. I’ll be there as soon as I can. Leave us alone a little while longer. This is interesting.”

“You promise to return soon. Your mother is nine centimetres dilated.”

“Trust you to be so damned precise.”

“You will come soon?”

“Yes, yes, I won’t be long.”

With that Walter, seemingly satisfied, disappeared.

Selena sniffed. She was feeling incredibly upset. “I don’t know why I’m doing this, truly I don’t,” she said hoarsely. “As a doctor, I do know that this is futile and against all the rules. I know that you are dead and that you are not breathing and that your heart has not beaten in many years, but I can’t help myself.” She laughed humourlessly. “Oh, look at me. I’ve lost it, and I’m talking to a dead body. But you saved me, Rafe. You saved me from that awful evil spirit that was sitting on my chest and crushing the life out of me. You sent him away, and once he was gone, my asthma vanished. I couldn’t tell anyone about what happened, but I do honestly believe that you live on in spirit. I can’t believe that I’ve actually found you.” She looked down at him, bemoaning the waste of a life, and her long black hair

tumbled onto his chest. “Rafe, you saved me. If I had but one wish in the world then it would be to save you, too.”

Rafe knelt down and looked long and hard at his own body. It was discomfiting in the extreme to see himself so clearly now, without the padded clothing that had covered his corpse for the last twenty years. He looked strangely vulnerable.

Walter suddenly appeared again. “Cerdic, come now, and I mean now!” he snapped, trying to push him toward some invisible exit place.

Cerdic resisted him and didn’t budge. “Look, Walter, I’ve got, give or take, seventy years to spend on the earthly plane so for pity’s sake will you allow me another few minutes here? This is mighty intriguing, and I don’t want to miss it.”

“No, Cerdic, it is my duty to....”

“Sod your damn duty. Walter, get lost!”

“But it’s my duty....”

Rafe had other things on his mind, and he didn’t want to listen to Walter whinging on. He took hold of him, spun him around and pushed him away. “Hang your duty. Cerdic has said that he will come soon enough, now go!” Rafe growled. He didn’t want any more distractions right then. He still couldn’t believe what he was witnessing. Selena was distraught and all, it seemed, because of him.

Faced with Rafe’s not inconsiderable wrath, Walter departed, muttering bitterly about abusing accepted behavioural practices.

“How long do you think that she’s going to remain with me like this? Lord, but it smacks of necromancy and to think she’s a ruddy doctor!”

“A pretty deranged doctor at the moment, Rafe. You know, she really seems to be grieving for you. It’s beyond my comprehension, I can tell you.”

Rafe looked on as she rocked him back and forth and stroked his brow, but the watching just made him ache to be back in his body again. And then quite suddenly, she burst into tears as she lowered him to the ground. The next instant she stumbled to her feet and rushed to the corner of the tent where the medical equipment was stored. It took her little time to locate what she wanted, and then she dashed back to the body.

“I don’t know why I’m rushing, silly, isn’t it?” she sobbed, kneeling down beside him as she applied gel to the two paddles. “This is the craziest thing that I’ve ever done in my life but, you know,

there's a voice in my head telling me to do it, and I am not going to argue with it."

"You must ignore the damn voice! Bloody hell, she's lost it," Rafe gasped. "Look what she's doing to me, Cerd! Look at what she's doing."

"Yes, I see it. Isn't that a defibrillator that she's about to use on you?"

"Yes." He was stunned. "She should tell those voices to bugger off."

"I don't believe it! The crazy woman is actually going to try to resuscitate you."

Rafe could see that for himself. "Fat chance of that when I've been dead and frozen solid for twenty years. Besides look at my twisted right arm, that's broken for sure and most likely my skull too."

"She's about to do it. Stand clear," Cerdic declared as he moved back.

"Stand clear!" Rafe glared at Cerdic. "Cerd, we're dead, remember?"

"Sorry, in the excitement I forgot," he muttered just as Rafe's lifeless body was shot through with so much current that his body lifted off the floor.

"All she'll end up doing is cooking me," Rafe groaned as a blazing ball of light formed behind them in the tent. He sensed the higher being's presence and decided to get a word in first. "Yes, I know, and you don't need to tell me. I know that I shouldn't be here, and I'm sorry, Micah."

"You say that you shouldn't be here? Rafe, you are not the issue this time," shot back the pulsating light form. "What about him? What about Cerdic and his appointment with life?"

"Yes, you're right of course. I'll go right now." Cerdic didn't want to hang around any longer and face the wrath of the mighty being. He knew exactly what he was capable of doing for, having been in the spiritual levels rather longer than Rafe, he also knew just exactly who this was. Micah, however, had forbidden him to tell.

"It is too late."

By now Cerdic thoughts were centred on himself. Rafe was for the moment forgotten, and the fact that Selena was about to attempt to use the defibrillator again held no interest. He was in deep, deep trouble. "Too late? No, surely you're joking."

“Joking?”

Cerdic cringed. “Sorry.”

“So you should be you irresponsible fool. The child has been born, and since you were not present to provide the necessary soul then the child is stillborn”

“Oh Lord, it’s dead,” Cerdic gasped. “Oh, what have I done?”

Rafe tore his gaze away from the distressing scene that centred round him to the other that focussed upon his friend. “I think that you have just deprived yourself of a human incarnation.”

Micah bristled. “Not only that but you have caused a young woman, the woman chosen to be your mother, unbearable heartache from which she may never fully recover. Losing a child is a terrible ordeal especially after a very protracted labour which you saw fit to take little part in.”

“Well that’s just it, it was so protracted. I thought that there was no rush.”

“Walter has told me that he did his best to summon you.”

“Yes, I know, and he should face no blame. I’m sorry, but I didn’t realise that the birth was quite that imminent. I’m sure she’ll manage to get pregnant again though, and I’ll make sure that I’m there on time for the next birth.”

Rafe was watching Micah closely. He observed that the countless pockets of light that formed him began to coalesce and take on a humanlike form. It was fascinating, for he had never observed such a thing before.

“Oh, no, that’s much too easy. There won’t be a next time for you, at least not for a very long time,” the powerful being declared flatly.

“But surely the balance must be maintained,” Cerdic protested.

“Indeed it must, for that is our law, but it need not be you who returns to the earthly plane. Perhaps there is another more worthy.”

Rafe gave a humourless laugh. “Yes, and this poor deranged woman seems to think that it could be me. Can you credit it? She’s a doctor fighting to bring a stiff corpse back to life? She might just as well wave a magic wand over an urn full of ashes for all the good it will do. It’s ridiculous.”

“Is it?” Micah asked in all seriousness.

“Of course it is. It’s never been done, and it can’t be done. She can go on cooking me until I’m medium rare, but that ticker is not about to restart, and that body will never walk the earth again.” Rafe

looked up and what he saw stunned him. He watched the swirling energy pockets condense into a very substantial looking form. It was the form of a warrior, a god-like warrior with a gleaming sword and a huge shield. He had long flowing hair that fell down his neck and swirled about the enormous wings that emerged from his muscular back.

“So you believe that it is ridiculous?” the warrior repeated. “You think that it cannot be done.”

Rafe couldn’t take his eyes off him. “Who are you? I’ve known you for twenty years, and yet I sense that I’ve not known you at all.”

“Why is it ridiculous, Rafe?” he demanded as he towered high above Rafe’s head.

“I just told you why. You’re an angel, aren’t you? Yes, of course you are.”

The angel made no comment as to what or who he was but simply asked. “Was it ridiculous also that our Lord fed the five thousand with only five loaves and two fishes?”

“No, but that was a miracle. A good old-fashioned miracle.”

“And so, can miracles no longer happen?”

“I suppose they can, but truly there’s no way that that corpse is going to take up its bed and walk.”

“Are you familiar with the story of Lazarus?” Micah asked.

“Yes, he rose from the dead. But, Micah, I’m not Lazarus, and you are not Jesus.”

Cerdic gave a nervous cough. “Rafe, I think that this mighty being is trying to say that you need a little faith, particularly in him. Particularly since he is capable of bestowing a miracle if he sees fit. I do believe now that he was the voice that Selena heard.”

“You can give me life again?” Out of the corner of his eye, Rafe saw Selena turn the defibrillator up to two hundred joules and prepare to use it.

Cerdic smiled. “My friend, I do believe that an archangel can do pretty much as he pleases. Bon voyage.”

Rafe was astonished. In a flash he realised who this being was. He had been working with Archangel Michael. The thought hit him with almost as much force as the electric current that surged through his body and gave warmth and life to his heart.

## Chapter Five

As a doctor, Selena should have remained calm. No medical crisis should ever have ruffled her.

This one did.

The emotional shock that shot through her was every bit as powerful as the electrical one that had just started Rafe's heart.

"Oh, my God, this can't have happened!" she cried, repeating those words at least a half dozen times in her disbelief. Her own heart rate had doubled in a few short seconds once she realised what she had just done.

"You're alive, and you're breathing. Oh, my God!" she gasped incredulously. "Oh, this can't be. What have I done?" She felt the pulse at his neck. "But I have done it. I have truly brought you back!"

She sat back on her haunches and stared at him lying there naked, with only a blanket covering his lower body. She half expected him to sit up and thank her, but instead he lay there oblivious to her presence, utterly inert. Now she could make out the bruising to his chest, and the fracture to his lower right arm was clearly evident also. The large swelling on the side of his temple suggested that he would at best suffer concussion and at worse a fractured skull. She hoped it was the former because with the minimal medical supplies that she had with her, she could maybe cope with the broken arm but not a broken head.

"Pull yourself together," she scolded out loud. "You've gone and pulled off a miracle, but you'll lose him again if you don't act fast. You're a doctor so behave like one. Be professional and stay calm." That was easier to say than to do. She pushed firmly to the back of her mind the troubling thought that no sane doctor would have done what she did in the first place because now, having done it, she had to deal with it. She had a living casualty, and he needed her.

The tent was already warm inside, but she lit another gas heater anyway. Then she checked over his ribs, decided that at least three were badly cracked and secured his rib cage with bandaging. Setting

the broken arm proved to be more of a challenge, but once that was accomplished, she immobilised it with a splint. Then she methodically checked over the rest of his body, fearful that he might have damaged his neck or spine in the fall. To bring him back from the dead only for him then to endure spinal paralysis would have been too cruel. To her relief, she found no further injuries and so finally gave her attention to his head. Brushing away his wavy blonde hair, she checked the bruising to his temple. It was very puffy and swollen, but the skin had not broken so she decided that there wasn't much more that she could do there.

She felt his hands, and they were deathly cold. His face was still white as chalk, and his fine straight nose was almost as blue as his lips. She piled on another blanket and then placed her own sleeping bag on top of him. She was going to get him warm, and she was utterly determined to make him well, not because she had just made medical history but because it was quite simply so desperately important to her. She knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he had once helped her when her life hung in the balance. Now it was her turn to reciprocate and return the favour.

\* \* \*

“Garth, what the hell are you doing?”

The man sawing at the rope with his knife merely gave a bark of laughter and continued with his task.

“Garth, for Christ's sakes. Have you lost your senses, man? That rope is all that stands between me and oblivion, and you're hacking away at it.”

Garth leered down at Rafe. His eyes glittered more brightly than usual. “My thoughts precisely.”

His heart was in his mouth. “Garth, this isn't funny.”

“No, it isn't. I don't see either of us is laughing. In fact, you look rather worried.”

Rafe dug his boots into a crack that traversed the rocky face and struggled to gain a hold on the slippery boulder in front of him. He needed to get a grip for it was the only way he could save himself if the rope was severed. “For the love of God, Garth, why are you doing this?”

“Why? Oh, that's easy, Rafe. But you're a bright sort of chap. Surely you can guess.”

“I'm not in the mood for guessing. Garth, stop it, and give me a hand up.”

“No hand up, Rafe. And since you won’t play the guessing game then I’ll tell you why I’m about to kill you. I’m doing it for myself and Veronica.”

“Veronica. What’s my wife got to do with it? For pity’s sake, will you leave that rope alone?” Rafe glanced down at the drop below him, and his wildly beating heart thudded in his throat.

“I’m afraid not. You see, this plan was hatched months ago. With you dead, she’ll get your fifty percent share in the business, and then when I marry her, I’ll effectively have control of the lot. It’s a sound plan, don’t you think? I have no doubt that it will work.”

Rafe’s fingers were throbbing from where he was trying to hold on. “You’re crazy. What makes you think that my wife will ever want to marry you?”

Garth gave a bark of laughter. “Poor deluded sod. Do you know how many times she’s slept with me in the past six months?”

“What! Don’t lie to me, she wouldn’t, she couldn’t.” It wasn’t possible that his sweet and loving wife could have cheated on him. He knew that they weren’t a perfect couple, but they got along fairly well. Or so he had thought, until now.

“She could, and she did. Dear me, I can tell that this has come as such a shock. Don’t worry, Rafe because I’ll take care of her after you’ve gone. And, by the way, I’ve fucked her rigid ninety-three times. I kept a score, you know. It’s a hobby of mine, like cutting notches on a gun handle after every showdown.”

The rope suddenly fell away, and Rafe remained sticking to the rock face through determination and tenacity alone. He lost his footing momentarily and scrambled to regain it, knowing that if he didn’t then certain death awaited him below.

“Now don’t waste your energy, Rafe. Oh, I know that with your strength and fitness you could still be clinging on for possibly an hour or more, but I wouldn’t imagine that you could last much longer than two, at least not in these temperatures. You’ll slowly seize up, and then you’ll fall to your death. Goodness, don’t look down, old buddy. It’s such a long way to tumble.” Garth Blackwell gave a sinister smile. “I think I should take pity and put you out of your misery.”

Rafe was breathing hard, and his blood was roaring in his ears. “Bastard,” he hissed, glaring up with loathing into the face of the man whom only minutes earlier he had thought to be his friend. Was he really such a bad judge of character? He looked down at the sharp



rocks fifty feet below. It didn't really matter any more what he thought.

Garth threw his head back and laughed heartily. Then his boot connected with Rafe's head. "Rest in peace, old chum."

\* \* \* \*

He wasn't resting in peace, at least not yet.

He was cold, so very, very cold. Prying his eyes open was proving near impossible since a layer of ice was sealing them shut. Rafe tried to lift his arm but gave up as pain knifed along it. His arm was definitely broken, most likely his back too. It took enormous effort to breathe because even the slightest movement of his chest made his ribs hurt. He could only manage to snatch at the occasional shallow breath to keep him alive.

He worked the muscles of his eyes and finally managed to open his left eye only to find himself gazing at a pink-tinged world. Now he knew why his head hurt. He realised that he had hit his head and that blood from the gash had pooled in his eye sockets and frozen there. There was so much frozen blood covering his right eye that he didn't even attempt to try to open it.

Garth, you fucking bastard, he inwardly seethed, unable to speak at all because his lips were stuck together. The fall had been endless, but mercifully he must have blacked out before his body hit bottom. By rights he should be dead, but instead he was almost dead. That was far worse because he was in agony. Garth wanted him dead, but he would be rubbing his hands together with glee if he knew that he was still alive and suffering a slow and painful death.

Rafe knew that he wouldn't last long for he recognised the signs, well aware that hypothermia had already set in. Inwardly he cursed Garth yet again as he stared up into the brilliant blue sky above. Without a cloud in sight it could almost have been the blue sky of a warm summer's day. But he would never be warm again. He was dying, and he knew it. And it was all Garth's fault.

*I'd give anything to get my hands around his scheming neck and squeeze the life out of him.*

But he knew that he would never have that satisfaction. Death was close by, and he could feel its dark sinuous fingers reaching out to touch him. Soon he would sleep the eternal sleep of the dead. As he drifted into unconsciousness he thought of Garth Blackwell's parting words to him.

"Rest in peace, old chum."

\* \* \* \*

Rest in peace! His fevered and foggy brain began to think that there was no such thing, at least not for him. He didn't think that he had lived a particularly wicked life, certainly not compared to other lying, cheating, and duplicitous bastards that he had known. He hadn't committed adultery. He hadn't committed murdered, and he hadn't schemed with evil intent. Hell, he hadn't even overly lied, except when diplomacy demanded it. He had been an honest businessman, had given to charity and had basically been an all-round upstanding guy. So why was he now, in death, roasting in the fires of hell?

"Heaven's a bloody myth," he muttered bitterly wondering why, if he was dead, that he was still in pain from head to toe. He felt a cool hand on his brow and fleetingly wondered what that blessed thing was doing in Satan's stronghold.

"Oh, I think not, and you of all people should know that it is not."

He dare not open his eyes in response to the softly spoken words. It was a trick. If he opened his eyes, he would see a red devil with horns drooling over him. "Don't deserve this," he croaked through parched throat and dry lips.

"No, you don't." A cool cloth touched his chapped lips. "You've had a tough time. You really are quite an enigma, Rafe."

"You know my name. Yes, I suppose Lucifer knows the names of all his minions, but it's not right. Not right that I should have gone to hell."

She reached for his hand and held it. "Oh, I'm not Lucifer, and you are not in hell."

He tried to move and then gasped as a wave of pain swept through his chest. "Bloody hell, I'm dead. I shouldn't hurt."

She pressed a gently restraining hand upon his bandaged chest. "Rafe, you are not dead, and you hurt because you have quite a few broken bones, but I've set them and they are mending. You just need complete rest so that you can recover."

Mending! No he was broken and on the point of spontaneously combusting. "Too hot. Fires of hell lapping all around me."

"No, they are not, and the reason that you are so hot is because you have got a high fever. But I promise that you are getting better. At least you're talking a bit of sense. Up until now, you were ranting and utterly incoherent. I'll sponge you down again in a minute. That should cool you a little."

“Fever?” Nothing was making much sense. His mind was so addled. He didn’t know who he was or where he was. And why would Lucifer have a sponge?

“Yes, you’ve had a fever for almost three days now. I’ll give you a shot to make you sleep.”

“No, not have the devil sticking his trident into me.” He tried to lift his arm, intent on defending himself. His muscles refused to respond, and he felt something prick his skin.

“I promise you that you will feel better soon. It’s only a matter of time.”

A fog descended, his thoughts began to float away from him. For a second, he fleetingly dared to hope that at last he was finally going to rest in peace.

## Chapter Six

Selena was satisfied that her tireless ministrations were at last having a positive effect upon her patient. She had pumped him full of antibiotics and morphine and had lost track of how many times she had sponged his fevered body to cool him. But it had finally paid off. He had been sleeping peacefully for several hours, and she was satisfied that the fever had at last broken. But what to say to him when he finally awoke? *Hello, how are you, and how do you feel about the fact that you were dead for twenty years?* She hung her head and rubbed at her tired eyes, realising how utterly ridiculous it would sound. She knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she had witnessed a modern day miracle, but how would Rafe, now very painfully corporeal, react when he awoke? How much did he really know? How much would he remember?

She sucked in a deep breath and blew it out on a long exhalation. “How are you ever going to adapt to all of this? How will you begin to come to terms with what has happened to you?” she said aloud for she had got used to talking to herself by now and thought nothing of it.

“What has happened to me?” came the croaky reply to her question.

She hadn’t realised that he was awake and so was utterly taken aback for a second or two. His eyes were open for the first time and she was at once drawn to them. She had wondered about their color and was pretty sure that they would be blue. But his eyes weren’t merely an ordinary blue; rather they were a gorgeous intense lapis lazuli. “Oh, goodness,” was all she could say. Those eyes could thaw a winter freeze. They were certainly making her feel warm inside.

Rafe glanced down at his body and winced at the effort that even such a small movement caused. “I shouldn’t be alive,” he simply stated.

She shifted closer and felt his brow. His temperature felt near normal. “No, I guess that you really shouldn’t.” She paused for a moment. “I honestly don’t understand it, and I have no explanation, but you are most certainly one for the text books.” Well, either that or one for the dissection table. If the world knew about this, he would be treated like an alien, like something that had crash- landed near Roswell. As far as she was concerned, she was going to keep quiet, not tell the rest of the world about what had happened to Rafe.

“The fall...I remember it. Garth tried to murder me. He cut the rope, kicked me in the head and then I went spiralling down. The impact must have knocked the senses out of me, and I was unconscious for a while. I don’t really know how long. When I came to, I was cold and hurt and convinced that I was dying.”

Selena gnawed at her lip, unsure of how much he might ultimately recall and even more unsure of what to tell him. “You were dying.” She stopped short of adding that he had died. The shock might kill him, again.

“But then, I guess that you found me and saved me. Was it just you, or do you have friends around? Anyway, I’m indebted to you.”

She smiled down at him, pleased he was recovering so well.

“That’s a lovely smile in an even lovelier face,” he said softly. “So, do you have friends, or do I get to keep you all to myself?”

Selena blushed crimson, and that was something that she rarely did. It hadn’t occurred to her that he might be such a charmer. She had been complemented on her looks before on numerous occasions but never before had one affected her so deeply. “There are two others, but they are not here right now.” She thought of the two other men and realised that they could be back any day. That is, unless they had hit bad weather near to the top. But when they got back then what the devil would they have to say about a man who had risen from the dead?

“Right, well I guess that it was rather fortunate for me that you and your friends were in the right place at the right time. After all, this is a pretty big mountain to be lost on. I suppose it’s a minor miracle that I’m still here.”

“Minor!” she spluttered. “It wasn’t minor. Personally I’d say that what happened to you was of biblical proportions and never likely to be repeated ever, ever again. I am still shocked to the core by everything that has happened, and doctors don’t shock so easily. We

spend years being trained to deal calmly and rationally with most things.”

“Really, you’re a doctor? No, you’re too pretty to be a doctor.” He squinted. His vision had clouded, and he wanted to focus on this lovely woman who had saved his life. But it was hard, and his eyes felt so heavy and sore. He doubted that he could stay awake much longer. He wasn’t at all sure what she meant about biblical proportions. “No, it was simply luck. You happening by was merely luck, and, Lord knows, after what Garth did to me, I needed a break. You know when I get my hands on him, I really am going to kill him for this. And Veronica is going to get what’s due to her, too. I still can’t credit that she was in it with Garth.”

Selena pursed her lips as she thought about what he said. Hadn’t it occurred to Rafe that Garth and Veronica might not even still be alive? After all, a lot could happen in twenty years.

“Bloody bastard,” Rafe hissed in a sudden rush of anger. “I’ll bet he’s already back in England, sitting in his solicitor’s office with Veronica whilst the two of them mentally count pound signs. Do you know my life insurance alone was worth four million? And then there’s the business, a chain of five highly successful camping and leisure shops. On top of all that, we were set to expand. And he thinks that he’s going to get it all! Well, I can’t wait to see the expression on his face when I get to him, and I won’t be alone either. I’ll have the police with me with a warrant for his arrest.” Anger gave him a little strength, and he tried to sit up. The groan, which the movement elicited, came from deep within, pain etched into his face.

“Rafe, don’t you dare move just yet,” Selena warned, gently easing him back down. “You’ve got a broken arm, broken ribs and extensive bruising. I even feared that you might have fractured your skull.

He closed his eyes as he lay back. “No, I’m too thick-skulled for that to happen.” It dawned on him that she had been using his name. “So, how do you know my name?” He suddenly recalled hazy moments of his delirium and being cared for by someone. “I thought that you were the devil,” he sighed, “but now I can see that you’re more of an angel.”

She well recalled his ranting and the deep fear that it evoked, fear for him and that he might not survive. “Oh, I’m no angel.” He had touched the angels, not her.

“So how do you know my name?” Her shocked silence forced him to open his eyes again. “I know, I guess that I must have mentioned it in my ranting. Yes, that’s it. I already told you, didn’t I?”

She stared at him, not really knowing what to say. He didn’t recall their meeting on the astral plane, and he quite clearly didn’t realise that he had been dead, long dead in fact. This was going to be so hellishly difficult to explain.

“So, what’s your name?” he asked again.

So he had forgotten her. “It’s Selena.” She rose to her feet and went over to the storage bags. He needed food. Anyone who hadn’t eaten in twenty years must be famished. The very thought made her give a sharp bark of laughter.

The laughter apparently struck him as odd. “What’s so funny, Selena?”

She dare not say. “Nothing, nothing at all. Merely a private thought.”

“Selena is a nice name, and it suits you. You know, I once knew a girl by that name, and she was pretty too.”

She turned with a pack of dried soup in her hand. “I’ll take that as a complement.”

“You should. You are a beautiful woman, but then I’ve already told you that.” He suddenly received a breathtaking vision of her standing before him in the nude, and he could see every luscious curve and contour of her lithe body. He felt suddenly overheated, astonished that his imagination could be so incredibly vivid?

She found to her chagrin that she was blushing once again. “So, where did you meet her?”

Where had he met her? His brow furrowed for a few seconds and, whilst he struggled to come up with the answer to that question, Rafe merely stared at Selena as she tore open the soup packet. He noticed that she was wearing unusual clothing, clothes that would protect her from the elements he guessed. But the material looked unusually lightweight and unlike the usual gear that he often sold to mountaineers. “Damn, that’s odd. You know, I can’t remember. I wish I could.” His eyes began to rove the interior of the tent and he saw design features that were new to him, and the gas heaters looked different too. Smaller, more compact and, judging by their performance, certainly more efficient.

Selena filled a pan with water, added the soup powder and then placed it on the small cooking stove. She began to stir the contents.

“So, you’ve forgotten. It’s not surprising after what you’ve been through. I daresay that you might have a few memory lapses before you are back to your old self once again.” He might have forgotten, but she hadn’t, and she was convinced that it was her that he remembered. There was only one Selena, and it was she.

“I guess so. Maybe it has got something to do with this bump on my head.” Still it bothered him because he sensed that remembering the other Selena was somehow very crucial.

“Could be.” She didn’t look up from her task of preparing lunch.

“But you don’t think so, do you?” He sensed she knew something that he didn’t, something very important. He wished that she would look into his eyes. Suddenly it was vital to him that they make eye contact.

She shrugged. The smell of chicken soup wafted around the tent.

“What are you cooking?”

“Chicken soup.”

“Smells better than any packet soup that I’ve ever made. God, I’m hungry, but I’ll bet it doesn’t taste as good as it smells. Never does.”

“Oh, I think it will,” she replied. “You know, food technology can progress a long way in a couple of decades.” She abruptly stopped stirring. She shouldn’t have let that slip. At least not right then. What he didn’t need was a big shock, and the one heading his way was titanic.

“I’m sure that it can, but why do you say that?”

She turned down the heat to let the soup simmer. “It was a silly thing to say. Forget it.”

“Selena, you are hiding something from me, I can sense it.” In fact he was sensing altogether too much, like he knew that he could even read her thoughts. It was absurd, but strange impressions were forming in his mind. He realised that he felt different from before, and he knew that it had nothing to do with broken bones or concussion. He struggled up into a sitting position and sat there, breathing hard and clutching his ribs with his good arm.

“Rafe, please lie back down. You have to rest.” She moved closer, worried that he would hurt himself. It was utterly ludicrous, how could she tell him that it was two thousand ten and that he felt so hungry because he hadn’t eaten in twenty years? How could she tell him that he had died and that she had done the craziest thing that she



had ever done in her life and brought him back to life? Words couldn't begin to explain all that.

But Rafe didn't need spoken words. He caught her gaze, jade green eyes locked with lapis, and then incredible thoughts flooded his mind. He used her to help haul himself to his feet, the shock of what he now knew temporarily numbing the pain of his battered body.

"No, no, don't get up." She had her arm around him, struggling to steady him and prevent him from falling flat on his face. She could see clearly the expression on his face, and it was one of stunned disbelief and utter shock.

"I died?" he gasped disbelievingly. "I actually died, and you brought me back to life!"

She had to put her two arms about him. He was wobbling precariously. "Do you remember now? Do you remember everything?"

He couldn't hold his head up, and his chin dropped down onto her head. "No, no I don't but I do know these things. And the reason that I know is because you know. The year is two thousand ten, and I've been lying in the snow on this mountain for twenty years. Bloody hell, I was stone cold dead. I was a frozen lifeless corpse! Christ, but that's damned hard to take in and even harder to deal with."

Selena's jaw went slack as she lifted his head and peered into his eyes. "How do you know?"

"How do I know?" he shot back, digging his fingers into her shoulders. "How do I know? Oh God, Selena when I look into your eyes, I can read your thoughts. That is what you are mentally screaming at me, and you don't even need to open your mouth for me to hear it."

He was leaning into her and breathing hard. She tried to remain calm, but it was hard seeing the distress in his face. "It seems that your ordeal has made you telepathic. This really does get stranger and stranger." She threw a blanket around his shoulders and held him close to her, sensing that he needed the comfort, real human comfort.

Rafe's world tilted, and his knees gave way. Selena, being slight of build, didn't have a hope of holding onto him, but she did direct him so that he fell onto a sleeping bag rather than the hard floor. It didn't really break his fall, and he lay there, shaking and in obvious pain and distress whilst she piled blankets onto him and began rubbing his icy hands and arms.

Rafe groaned. His body hurt like crazy as he peered at her through hazy vision. “This can’t be real.”

“Yes it is, Rafe. You know I hate to see you like this, but I am not sorry for doing what I did even though it smacked of insanity. You are alive, and that is what is important. It is very important to me.”

He blinked, trying to clear his vision. “But don’t you see my predicament?”

“I suppose it’s impossible for me to even begin to imagine.”

“For me, yesterday was nineteen-ninety. We both know that the dead don’t rise from their graves, not ever, but I did. What sort of monster does that make me, do you think?”

“Stop it, don’t say that! You are no monster. You are a man, but I also think that you are a very special and unique man. I also believe that I was meant to help bring you back. And I am pretty sure that I didn’t do it alone.”

He didn’t have a clue what she meant by that. “But where was I all that time? I mean where was the essence of the real me?”

“You don’t remember?”

“No, all I recall is lying in the snow waiting to die and then nothing until now. So where did I go, and more to the point, why have I been brought back?”

Selena shook her head. She didn’t have the answers that he wanted, but the least that she could do was tell him about his previous encounter with her and Bernie. She would tell him all about that over lunch in the hope that it jogged his memory.

## Chapter Seven

Rafe ate little, his stomach unable to take even chicken soup. His thoughts were jumbled, and nothing made any sense at all to him. Selena had told him about Bernie's possession of her and how he, in spirit form, had convinced Bernie that he was dead. Then she went on to explain how he would only believe Rafe when finally he was taken to see Rafe's own corpse.

Then apparently this Bernie had been taken up into the light. It all sounded so incredible, like a work of fiction from an overactive imagination. The more he thought about what she had just told him then the more his head began to ache. Had he been some avenging spirit? It was too much to comprehend, and, as exhaustion overcame him, he gave up trying to work it out altogether. He needed sleep, only sleep would help. When he awoke, things might make more sense.

In fact they didn't, and his frustration at not being able to remember gnawed away at him worse than a starving dog at a bone. And that was how it continued for the next few days. Selena took care of him. She fed him, helped him wash, and she even shaved him. She joked that twenty years between shaves was a very long time, but it didn't even muster a smile from a man who was beginning to think that he was on the point of insanity.

He didn't understand why he couldn't remember and was even beginning to think that Selena had made the whole thing up. But she hadn't, and he knew it. After all, he could read her thoughts on the rare moments that she made eye contact with him.

But then she knew that too, and that was exactly why she determinedly avoided his eyes. No woman wanted a man to know her deepest and most personal thoughts. He knew that he had to respect that or risk losing his friendship. That was something that he had come to value very much. Still, it would be nice to know what she thought about him, what she really thought about him as a person. After all, he

didn't know whether she even liked him. She had physically cared for him, but did she really care for him?

After a week in her company, Rafe knew that he cared very much about her. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, she was the most caring and genuine person that he had ever met. Added to that, he owed her everything; he owed her his life.

\* \* \* \*

They had been alone together for almost a week in a small tent. Selena had told Rafe that she expected Rex and Jacob back at any time. With their help, they could get Rafe down the mountainside and back to civilisation.

Selena sat brushing her hair and humming some song that Rafe had never heard before.

"That's a lovely tune. What is it?"

She ceased mid-stroke. She hadn't even realised that she had been humming the song, and the fact that she had momentarily disturbed her. "It's the tune to a song that my aunt wrote back in the sixties. She was a professional folk singer. Her name was Cassie Jane Kent. The song is called Peering Around Corners."

Rafe shrugged. "Don't know the name, but the tune's pretty."

"I've always liked it." Suddenly she cast him a sympathetic glance. "Strange to think that you missed all the music of the nineties."

"Was it worth listening to?"

"Hmm, some of it was, but an awful lot of it wasn't."

"I like the tune that you're humming now. Will you sing the words to me?"

She didn't look up and continued to stare at the ground. "Err, well no. You see, I can't remember all the words." That was a lie, she could recall them, but she didn't want to sing them for Rafe. She suddenly realised that they expressed her own deepest feelings far too succinctly.

"I'll tell you what. Why don't you look at me, and then I'll see if I can get the lyrics for you?"

She shook her head, her vision fixed on the ground.

"Hey, it might be worth a try. Sort of an experiment to see how good I am. Selena, why won't you look at me?"

She did then. She looked at his right ear.

He gave a strangled sound of exasperation. "Look me in the eyes."

“No.”

He sighed.

“My thoughts are personal, and they belong to me,” she protested.

“And I suppose that I’ve got no business knowing them.”

She nodded.

“If I told you that I think that you are the loveliest and most sensitive woman that I have ever met and that I care a great deal about you would that make any difference?”

It was only natural for her eyes to lift to meet his then, but she focussed hard on forcing the image of her cat, Bathsheba, into her mind. She wasn’t going to have her deepest thoughts openly displayed.

He laughed. “Nice trick, Selie.”

She averted her gaze. “My mother calls me Selie.”

“So do you mind if I do as well?”

“No, I guess not.” And she didn’t, it seemed right. The words to her aunt’s song came sharply back into her mind. ‘Forever peering around corners just hoping to glimpse him and daring to think that he could be mine.’ She felt as though she had just peered around the right corner.

“So, whom does the cat belong to?”

“Bathsheba is mine. She’s half Maine Coon. My mother’s taking care of her for me. She’s a bit of a head case.”

He grinned. “Who is, your mother?”

She chuckled. “No, Bathsheba, you idiot. When she’s not chasing her tail, she’s chasing dogs. She also likes to eat cold, boiled runner beans that she steals out of the pan. She’s an expert at getting the lid off the bread bin and tearing open the polythene wrapping to nibble at each and every slice. She also eats woodlice, pees in the bath and destroys the upholstery on antique furniture, but despite that...” she said fondly as she inadvertently met Rafe’s stare.

“Despite that, you still love her.”

“Don’t read my thoughts,” she growled.

“I didn’t have to. I could tell from your expression and the tone of your voice.”

“Oh, sorry.” She wasn’t entirely sure that she believed him though.

“So, Selie, you love your cat.” Lucky cat, he thought as he moved closer to her.

“Lots of people love cats.”

“I’m sure that they do, but I’m more of a dog man. I’ve got a dog, a lovely German shepherd called Fritz. Oh shit,” he swore.

“Who is now dead.” She knew it was painful for Rafe to think of his dog. It tore at her heart to see him close to tears. She began to stroke his back. “Tell me about him.”

“No, what’s the point?”

Selena sat down on the floor beside him and put her arm around him. “It might help.”

He gave a half-strangled sound. “Therapy, hey? How is talking about my dog going to help me, Selie? A lifetime on a therapist’s couch wouldn’t even begin to scratch at the surface of my problems. It’s a damned certainty that no books have been written about my dilemma. I’d say that I’m pretty unique.”

She wasn’t sure what to say to that. She knew that there were bigger issues involved here and issues that he would have to address at some time.

“Sure I liked that dog, I liked him a hell of a lot. I loved our walks in the park, I liked the way he greeted me every evening when I got home from work. I even liked that lopsided look he used to give me at feeding times.” He dragged a hand through his hair. “Oh God, Selie it’s not the dog so much. It’s everything else. My mother is most likely dead. After all, she was forty-two when she had me, and that was fifty-one years ago. I’ve lost my life. I’ve lost twenty years, and I haven’t got a clue how I’m going to pick up the pieces. Honestly, I don’t even know if I can. I’m a one off. I’m a bloody freak.”

She knew that he was hurting and hurting badly, and she wanted to comfort him if he would let her. She drew his head down onto her shoulder and began to stroke his hair.

A shudder coursed through his body. Selena took that as an indication that he didn’t want her comfort. “Sorry, perhaps you’d rather be left alone.”

“Are you mad? He grabbed her by the shoulders with two hands and held her tightly. “Lady, I have been alone for twenty years. Don’t you think that’s long enough for anyone? Do you think that I want to be left alone for a single minute longer? Would you?”

She met his gaze, saw his raw pain. It was practically oozing out of him. And she knew then that he could tell how she truly felt about him. How she cared about him.

“I care deeply about you, Selie.” His hand gently cupped the back of her neck, and he drew her toward him.

“Rafe I... I think that I should tell you something. You might consider it to be important.”

“Later, this is more important.”

He wasn’t looking at her eyes; he was focussed on her lips and she knew that he intended to kiss her.

“Are you going to kiss me?” she asked softly, hoping that he was.

“Oh yes, and I know that you want me to, sweetheart.”

“Oh yes, I do. I really can’t have any secrets with you around, can I?”

“None at all,” he groaned as their lips came together.

“Selena, are you in there?”

The two exchanged startled glances. Although now fully clothed once again, they had been locked in a tender embrace until the sound of Jacob’s voice brought them sharply out of it.

“Damn!” Rafe swore softly. He was just beginning to feel human again, and it was all thanks to Selena.

Selena said nothing, for she was frantically trying to think about what she was going to say to Jacob and Rex. On no account could she let them know the truth about what had happened to Rafe.

“What did she do with the stiff?” she heard Rex ask as Jacob unzipped the tent flap and ducked in.

“Let’s ask....” Jacob’s mouth dropped wide open. Eyes beneath eyebrows white and stiff with frost grew huge. He stood there blocking the doorway, disbelief and incredulity written on his face.

Rex pushed him inside thinking that something had happened to Selena. “Selena, honey, are you all right?” he said with concern as he plunged into the tent. “Bloody hell,” he gasped. He rubbed hard at his eyes. “Jacob, do you see what I see?”

Jacob could only manage a nod that sent clumps of snow tumbling down to the ground sheet.

Rex edged around his friend and, stepping closer to Rafe, he pointed a gloved finger at him. “You’re supposed to be dead!”

“Well, as you can see, I’m not,” Rafe responded, rising to his feet and offering his hand in friendship.

“I gather that you are Rex. Pleased to meet you and you too, Jacob,” he added, taking in the dumbstruck form of the other man. “Selena said that you would be back soon. Did you reach the summit? I imagine that it must have been a glorious sight to behold.” If he had

hoped to distract them from what was uppermost on their minds then he was sadly mistaken.

“You were dead,” Rex insisted. “You were a stiff corpse, and we found you and brought you here on Selena’s insistence. She wanted to find out who you were.”

“And she did. My name’s Rafe, and thank you for your assistance.” Rafe dropped his hand. Neither of the two men seemed happy to shake it. They were looking at him almost as though they thought him to be a ghost.

Selena came between them ready with what she hoped would be a plausible explanation. “Actually, Rex, he wasn’t dead at all which you can both clearly see for yourselves since he’s standing here talking to you. Oh, and it’s normally polite to shake hands when you meet someone for the first time.”

“We already met, and when we met, he was as dead as dead gets.” Jacob had finally found the power of speech. “If we’d dropped him, he’d have shattered into a thousand icy shards. Hell, he was frozen solid inside and out and that means that his heart was frozen too, and frozen hearts don’t beat.”

“Well, mine was beating,” Rafe got in, ready to back up Selena. “I had an accident on the mountainside. It might have looked bad, but I had hypothermia, that’s all.”

“And a concussion and a broken arm,” Selena added sounding very much like the doctor that she was. “He was close to death without a doubt, but with careful nursing, I’ve managed to restore him to health.”

The bark of laughter that shot out of Jacob’s mouth made her jump back. Rex firmly shook his head. “No way,” Jacob insisted.

Rex didn’t stop shaking his head. “I always thought that you were a good doctor, Selena but this, well this is something else. There’s something really odd going on here and very, very wrong. It would have needed Jesus himself to get this fellow back on his legs.”

Selena did her best to look indignant. “That’s where you’re wrong, Rex. It only took me, and it wasn’t that difficult.”

“But look at the clothes, honey,” Rex protested. “They’re decades out of date, and I’ll bet his passport and papers say the same. Let me see them.”

Rafe shrugged, wondering why Rex kept calling Selena, honey. “So I got the outfit from a charity shop. Budget wouldn’t run to new togs. As for my paperwork, well it’s mine, and it’s personal. Hope



you understand,” he finished, trying to sound as polite as he could. What had happened to him was extraordinary. He didn’t as yet understand it, but all the same it had to be kept a secret—a secret that he was prepared only to share with Selena.

Rex’s eyes narrowed to mere slits. “Only a fool would climb a mountain like this in out dated clothing.”

“I made it up this far didn’t I? Likely I’d have made it to the top if my partner hadn’t turned on me.”

“So who was your partner?” Jacob asked.

“I’d rather not go into that right now,” Rafe replied. “That’s between me and the police.” If only it were though. If only he could merely go back to civilization and report what had happened to the police, but if he did, they’d laugh him right out of the station.

Rex grunted and didn’t seem convinced. Rafe watched him closely as he went over to Selena and put his arm about her. It made him bristle especially when Rex’s hand moved too close to her breast. It was covered in clothing now, but only minutes earlier he had been kissing it. His anger quietly simmered.

“So you weren’t really dead then?” Jacob said.

“Do you know how stupid that sounds?” Rafe merely raised an eyebrow and stared him in the eye. In the past, others had found that intimidating, and he hoped that Jacob would too.

Jacob did find it intimidating, and he swallowed hard. “But, of course, you weren’t. You look hale enough to me despite your unfortunate experience with your partner. Bad business, hey? Never mind. We’ll give you a helping hand back down the mountain. Well, that is if you’re heading down.”

“Oh, I’m heading down. I’ve had enough of this mountain to last a lifetime.” And as Rafe held his gaze, he was relieved to see that Jacob, at least, believed his story.

Rex had his gloves off, and he was stroking Selena’s hair. “I’d still like to see his passport.”

Rafe clenched his fists. He wanted to kill him for touching her. “Sorry, I don’t take a good picture. Far too embarrassing for anyone to see with the exception of passport control, and they don’t count in my book.” He couldn’t stand to see him pawing Selena and wondered why she didn’t say or do anything. Finally he could bear it no longer. “Is he bothering you, Selie?”

“Bothering her!” Rex looked at the woman in his arms. “Why is he calling you by that name, honey? Only me and your mother call you Selie.”

Her face grew pink. She didn’t know what to say, but Rex’s touch was making her skin crawl.

“Is he bothering you?” Rafe, repeated. He wished that he had two good hands so that he could throttle him. As if touching her and stroking her hair wasn’t galling enough, Rex suddenly tipped her head up and kissed her. Then he looked at Rafe.

“Bothering her? Oh, no, I’m not bothering her. You’ve missed me, haven’t you, honey?”

Selena tried to smile but only succeeded in swallowing bitter bile as she stared morosely down at the groundsheet. She really would have to have yet another long talk with Rex in private.

It annoyed Rafe that he couldn’t see into her eyes.

“Sure she’s missed me,” Rex added with a sickly sweet grin, “After all, what woman wouldn’t miss her fiancée? We love each other, and we want to be together.”

It was a strange, new world that Rafe had found himself in but, in her own unique way, Selena had helped ease him gently into it. He knew that in just over a week he had come to love her and that it had been the easiest thing in the world to do. He had made love to her, and he was beginning to believe that the future might not prove to be so bad after all so long as she was by his side.

Perhaps naively he had hoped that she would be by his side, but now he knew that he had been wrong. With Rex’s smug declaration, the bottom dropped out of his unstable world. He wanted to leave. He wanted to get out of the tent, run and never look back, but he couldn’t because he needed their help and that galled him.

“Congratulations.” That single word almost stuck in his throat. Selena still couldn’t look at him.

Fleetinglly he wondered if she would ever be able to look her fiancée in the eye again after having cheated on him. For the sake of what was left of his own sanity, he began to work on convincing himself that he really didn’t care. His legs felt unsteady, and Rafe sat down hard on the ground. The future beckoned him.

He had a score to settle, but it was going to be so damned hard. He felt so incredibly alone, and his heart surely felt as dead now as it had when he was frozen stiff. He was out of sync with the world and his real time, and it was making his head ache, thinking about it. He

didn't want to face the future alone. He didn't want to face the future at all. But then he thought of Garth, and he knew that he had no choice.

He wanted retribution, and that was a powerfully motivating force.

## Chapter Eight

Rex remained close to Selena's side throughout the journey down the mountain, ensuring precious little conversation occurred between her and Rafe. He need not have bothered though since Rafe saw no point in conversing with her anyway. It annoyed him that she hadn't told him about her relationship with Rex. He in no way acknowledged the hurt that he felt, merely submerged it beneath the all consuming desire to get back to England and seek out Garth.

It was Jacob who gave Rafe assistance when needed. Jacob also loaned Rafe his airfare back to England. Rafe had told him that he had lost his wallet in the fall, rather than tell him the truth that—his notes were likely now out of print and that his cheque book and credit cards were years out of date. There was also the problem with the out-of-date passport, but with a cool head and a little guile, Rafe simply flashed the picture at the custom's officer and prayed that he would go through with no fuss. He was, both times, and with that accomplished, he was back in England. At Heathrow, Selena had attempted to speak with Rafe while Rex located their luggage but, still smarting, Rafe simply thanked her for helping him and walked out of her life.

He refused to acknowledge the tears that welled up in her eyes.

\* \* \* \*

Rafe had thirty pounds left of the money that Jacob loaned him. It was just enough to get him to Exeter. He arrived there late on a Saturday afternoon still wearing his climbing gear and feeling pretty much like a fish out of water. His hair was dirty and altogether too long. Looking at the men passing by, he gauged that much shorter hair was the current norm. Not surprisingly, he attracted numerous stares and those who got wind of him wrinkled their noses and hurried on by. He needed a place to stay, he badly needed a bath, and he definitely needed new clothing.

With a dejected sigh, he sat down on a bench and dug his hands into his pockets. He was stone-broke, tired, cold, and he was hungry. He was also somewhat in awe of what he saw around him. The roads were heavily congested. Cars were more streamlined, and they had certainly come a long way since nineteen-ninety. Fashions had changed too but not ridiculously so. In fact after studying passers-by for ten minutes or so, he decided that pretty much anything went in twenty-ten, well anything except climbing gear. His spiked boots were playing havoc with the pavements. But long hair on men was out, and he would need to get a hair cut soon. He supposed that if he could get his hands on some scissors then he might even do it himself. It couldn't look worse than it already did.

But he didn't have scissors. He didn't even have a comb. In fact, he had nothing. Twenty years earlier, he had been on the road to becoming a millionaire, and now he was a stinking pauper that people commented on derisively and gave a wide berth.

He could have cried, but he laughed instead.

He suddenly glanced over his shoulder and, drawn to the alleyway behind him, Rafe got up and began to walk down it. Shops backed onto it, and one of them happened to be a charity shop. Black bags, crammed with clothes unfit for sale, had been dumped outside for collection by the ragman. Rafe swallowed his pride and delved in and soon found a pair of brown corduroy trousers that were torn on both knees but were roughly his size. Next he located a grey shirt with stains beneath both armpits, but it was a size sixteen collar and, as far as he was concerned, that made it his no matter that it was missing three buttons. There was little lining left in the old anorak that his hand fell on and it certainly had seen better days, but it would serve to ward off the chill of the March weather. Finally he needed footwear. But he realised, as he rummaged through the last bag, that actually finding a size twelve and a half would be like asking for the moon. He settled for a size thirteen and a half and decided that he would have to put on two pairs of over darned socks.

He took his stash of clothing with him into the public conveniences and emerged a few minutes later a transformed character. Transformed to the extent that the mountaineer had turned vagrant and still smelled every bit as bad as before. In fact, he smelled even worse. The odour of mothballs made his empty stomach churn.

He walked down the street. People still stared but not as much as before. He supposed that was a good thing. But he needed money, and

short of robbing a bank, he didn't know how to get any. Looking as he did, there was no way in the world that he was going to be able to get a job. Until he got a job, he would have no money. No money meant no food. That was all that he could think about right then. His rumbling stomach made loud noises, and the excess acid gave him heartburn.

He looked like a vagrant, but would he have to resort to doing what vagrants did? Search through food bins in the hope of finding a less-than-edible morsel? God, he hoped not, but if he got hungry and desperate enough then it would be his only option, well either that or begging at the back doors of cafés and restaurants.

He felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Would you care for a roll up, old chap?”

Rafe looked directly over his shoulder, but he saw no one. However since he was a several inches over six feet tall that often happened.

“It's the best tobacco. Do you want one, friend?”

Rafe turned around. He had to look down at the fellow who was talking to him. He was a good deal shorter than Rafe, perhaps five feet six and slight of build. He looked like he had been through the charity bags too, but what held Rafe's attention was the accent. It was impeccably clipped English. Was this some blue-blooded member of the aristocracy down on his luck?

The short fellow stuck out his hand and grinned, revealing an even set of white teeth. “Good day to you. I'm Herb.”

Rafe took his small hand, and it was lost as his large palm folded around it. It occurred to him that for a tramp he had remarkably clean teeth. “Glad to meet you, Herb. Thanks for the offer, but I don't smoke.”

“Fair enough, actually I don't either. Most disgusting habit.” He put the tobacco and papers away. “So, how about a drink then?” he asked, drawing a bottle out of his torn pocket.

Rafe half expected it to be methylated spirit—something undrinkable—but was pleasantly surprised when a small bottle of cognac emerged. “Is that really brandy?”

“Well, it's not cold tea.” Herb offered it to him. “Go on. Take a slurp. You look like you need it.”

Rafe took the flask and drank some. It was like fire bursting in his belly, wonderfully warming and welcoming. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Jolly good, thought that would hit the spot.” Herb took a long draught and then smacked his lips.

Rafe scratched at his head; it felt itchy and lousy. Doubtless the clothes on his back harboured a small army of parasites. “Herb, do you mind me asking why you carry smokes if you don’t smoke yourself?”

“Not at all. I carry them for others.”

“I see.” Rafe wasn’t exactly sure what else to say to that. Herb, he had already decided, was an odd sort of character.

Herb pointed down the street. “Walk with me, friend. I surmise that we may be going the same way.”

What did he have to lose? Herb was pleasant enough company although odd. Still what was odd anyway? What could be more odd than rising from the dead?

They strolled for perhaps a couple of hundred yards and then Rafe suddenly halted outside a large store, a leisure store with weight lifting equipment in the window, and skis and outdoor clothing. It wasn’t that, however, that caught his attention. It was the name on the window. Rafe read the words aloud. “Acer and Blackwell Leisure.”

“Nice workout bench, don’t you think?” Herb prodded Rafe’s upper arm. “Not that you need beefing up, my friend. Mighty impressive biceps you have there, only wish that I could boast the same. It was years ago, but the last time I tried to lift a bar bell, I nearly decapitated myself. My girl friend had to rush to my rescue. Mind you though, she was a shot putter and had muscles on muscles. It was she who tried to persuade me to get fit, but what can I say? That relationship soon petered out?”

Rafe had stopped listening and was staring at the window. “My God, Acer and Blackwell Leisure.”

Herb turned and stared at him. “Don’t tell me that you’ve never heard of them.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of them.”

“Of course you have, everyone has. It’s one of the biggest chains of leisure stores in the country. This store opened only last year, but I believe that there are at least a dozen others. A few are even larger than this one. Mind you, this one’s pretty large. It’s on three floors. This is one of the few stores where the owner actually graces the staff with his esteemed presence. Apparently he comes in and likes to tell the manager what to do. I know that for a fact because my cousin is the manager.”

“Is he?”

“Certainly is. His name’s Ben Winters.”

“And the owner spends a lot of time here?”

“Yes, you’ll often find Garth Blackwell sitting in the back office in there. You know, he used to have a partner. That’s where the other half of the name came from, but Rafe Acer died in a tragic accident on a mountain many years ago. It made headline news, you know.”

“Did it?” Rafe put his face to the window, hoping to spot the face of the man who had pushed him off the mountainside, but the shop was in darkness and obviously locked up. He felt a sharp stab of disappointment.

Herb suddenly gave a shudder. “It’s getting awfully cold, old chap. Say, what is your name anyway?”

Rafe gave his new name a moment’s thought. “Ralph.”

Herb gave Rafe a good-natured slap on the back. “Now Ralph, do you have a place to stay for the night?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Thought as much. You had best come with me then, my friend, and I’ll lead you to the finest dwelling for the homeless that Exeter has to offer. It’s been my humble abode for the last month, and I feel sure that the fine young lady in charge of that charitable institution can find you a mattress to go on the floor of my small room.”

It was better than nothing. Maybe there would be food there, too. “Sounds too good an offer to pass up,” he declared wryly. “So what’s the name of this charitable institution?” He watched as Herb pulled off his wool hat and scratched at his head. Clearly he had a case of the head lice, too.

“The Veronica Blackwell Home.”

Veronica had actually married Garth Blackwell! Rafe spun on Herb, grabbed his shoulders and stared into his face. “Veronica Blackwell, as in Garth Blackwell’s wife?” Rafe made direct eye contact with the smaller man.

Herb didn’t need to say, ‘late wife’. Rafe saw it for himself. “Christ, she’s dead then.”

The shorter man raised both eyebrows. “Yes, she’s dead. You seem suddenly animated, old chap.”

Rafe let go of Herb’s shoulders.

“Well, she’s been dead these past ten years. She was into charitable works, and the house stands as a kind of memorial to her. Look, I’ll take you to the Home.”



Shouldn't he have felt some small degree of sorrow? After all, he had just been told that his wife had died. But he didn't. He felt nothing but hatred. Veronica had plotted and schemed with Garth, and his death had been what they had sought. It made no difference to him that she had done charitable works. She still helped hatch a murder plan, his murder in fact. Then, after his death, the bloody scheming bitch had married Garth. Rafe suddenly realised that Herb was talking to him. "Sorry, Herb, what did you say?"

"I said, let's go home. With any luck, Mira will have made a big batch of soup. You know she makes the best soup that I have ever tasted."

"I look forward to it, Herb."

"Do you know what Herb is short for?"

"Herbert?"

"That's right. Allow me to properly introduce myself. I am Herbert William Harrington-Kinsey."

Rafe gave a chuckle. "So pleased to meet you all."

## Chapter Nine

The Veronica Blackwell Home was a large, red brick Victorian residence arranged on three floors. As they walked up to the front door, Herb told Rafe that it had once been a vicarage.

“I’ve got the tiny attic room, the only one available when I first arrived, but I was happy to take it. It’s clean, and it’s certainly preferable as a roof over your head to a damp cardboard box in the park. There are spare rooms available now, since the others went, but the painters are working on them right now.” Herb pushed open the door. The smell of chicken soup wafted along the hallway from the kitchen to greet them. “God, that smells good.”

It did too; in fact, it smelled the same as the chicken soup that Selena had prepared in the tent. Rafe felt that familiar lurch in the solar plexus, that uncomfortable sensation that always overcame him whenever he thought about her. He dismissed it as soon as it presented itself, pushed all thoughts of her to the back of his mind and followed Herb into the kitchen.

She had her back to them and was stirring a large pot on the cooker. Rafe assumed the woman to be Mira. She seemed young, maybe seventeen or eighteen. She was tall, perhaps five feet nine and slender with long blonde hair flowing in waves that tumbled down her back. Her jeans were frayed at the bottoms, and her tee shirt seemed a little too large.

“Good evening, fair damsel,” Herb said cheerily. “I’ve found a stray who needs a bed for a few nights. I know that we’re pretty full up here, but I thought this fellow in need might have a mattress on my floor.”

Mira turned with spoon still in hand. She was every bit as pretty as Rafe thought she would be. Smooth, creamy complexion, lovely pink oval mouth, slightly upturned nose and stunning blue eyes. He felt a sudden jolt, almost like an electric shock. Fleetinglly he thought there was something familiar about this young woman, but common

sense told him that was impossible. He, after all, had died before she was even born.

She held out her right hand.

“I’m Ralph,” Rafe said suddenly feeling faintly queer.

“Pleased to meet you, Ralph. I’m Mira Blackwell, and I help run this place.”

Mira Blackwell! The surname bounced back and forth inside his skull. Was she related to Garth Blackwell? If she was then he had no desire to shake her hand. “Mira Blackwell?” he repeated. “Would I be right in assuming that you are related to Garth Blackwell?”

“Of course, he’s my father, and he owns this house. Veronica Blackwell was my mother, but she died when I was quite young.”

“I’m sorry.” He felt obliged to say it, but he wasn’t sorry for one minute that Veronica was dead.”

“Perhaps I should explain that I spend most of my time here. I cook and clean. Daddy doesn’t like me working here. He says I’m demeaning myself, but I find it rewarding and satisfying. So I continue to do it despite his displeasure.” Her hand was still extended in welcome.

Herb pushed Rafe towards her, not liking that he hadn’t taken Mira’s hand. “Go on, Ralph, shake the lady’s hand, or she won’t let you stay. And you won’t get to taste her cooking.”

“What utter nonsense, Herb, of course I will let him stay. I never turn anyone in need away no matter how rude they are.” She suddenly sniffed the air. “I shall assume that the brandy has robbed him of his good manners and leave it at that for now. There’s a mattress in the cupboard under the stairs. You can take that up to the attic, and then I’ll dish up some soup for you both. Oh, and I’ve got some freshly baked bread, too.”

Herb glowered at Rafe, evidently irritated by his lack of manners. He knew he wasn’t drunk, and so as far as he was concerned there was no excuse for his behaviour.

As for Rafe, he was re-evaluating his first opinion of Mira. She had a good nature, she had spirit and she also saw fit to defy her father. It was that which appealed to him the most. He took her hand in his and shook it firmly. “I apologise, Mira, but it’s not alcohol that’s robbed me of my sense. I fear it is hunger. I haven’t eaten in over twenty-four hours, and it’s made me a bit light-headed.” And that, in fact, was part truth. He was feeling a bit spaced out. Maybe it also had something to do with the overpowering odour of the

mothballs. He wasn't surprised that moths didn't like it; he didn't like it either.

She smiled and ushered him over to the table where she bid him sit. "Herb, off you go and find that mattress. I'll see what I can do for our new guest."

Once Herb was gone she filled a bowl with the thick creamy soup and cut a chunk off the end of a crusty white loaf. "There's butter in the dish if you want it," she said, sitting down on the chair beside Rafe.

He tasted the soup and rolled his eyes in appreciation. "I have to tell you that this is very good."

Her face lit up. "Thank you, I made it from scratch with fresh chicken, celery, leeks and stock. It took me all afternoon, though, and I did taste it throughout. I have to agree that it's a success. Maybe it's the mixed herbs and the cream that I added at the end. I think that cream makes such a difference, gives it a richness."

"I think that you must be right." Faintly amused by the cookery lesson, he smiled and began to butter his bread. "Mmm, this is a luxury," he declared. "I would have been grateful for just margarine, and I imagine most others in here would, too."

"Daddy says that margarine is good enough for here, but I disagree. Butter is so much tastier, especially salted butter. I think we should all be allowed a few little luxuries. He doesn't know, of course. He thinks I buy cheap margarine." She lowered the tone of her voice and looked at him furtively. "I assume that my secret is safe with you?"

"Absolutely." He grinned and gave a devilish wink; he found Mira quite amiable. She was so unlike her father in looks and in manner. He was dark while she was fair. He was ruthless and greedy; she seemed kind and giving.

"Gosh, look at those wonderful dimples of yours," she suddenly declared, taking a closer look at him. "I can see them even beneath that straggly beard which by the way will have to go if you are going to stay around here. It's horrid, and I'm quite sure that it makes you look so much older than you actually are. By the way, how old are you?"

Rafe almost choked on his soup, and his eyes suddenly began to water. She was a very forthright young lady, and as for his beard going, he had worn one since his late teens and wasn't too sure about losing it.

“Oh dear, that was very rude of me, wasn’t it? I have no right to tell you what to do, no right at all. Here, take this.” She tore off a piece of paper towel and handed it to him. “Sorry. Did I embarrass you? Shouldn’t have mentioned the dimples, should I? It’s just that I’ve got three dimples too, just like you. One on each cheek and the big one on my chin, but it’s not as big as yours. Dimples are very attractive you know, especially on men.”

He coughed and dabbed his bearded chin above said dimple. “Then we surely have something in common.” Saying that faintly galled him though. He really didn’t want to have anything in common with Garth Blackwell’s daughter, no matter that she was utterly charming.

“Yes, I suppose that we do. Anyway, you didn’t answer my question about your age, but then I guess that you didn’t want to. Sorry, I was just curious. I guess I should learn to think before I speak.”

“No, you are not rude, and I don’t mind you asking.” But what could he say that in one form or another, he had existed for fifty-one years? “I’m thirty-one,” he answered ignoring the twenty years he had spent in his non-corporeal state. He realised that he wanted to know a lot more about Mira Blackwell because she intrigued him. More importantly though, she was a link to Garth Blackwell, and he wanted to know everything that there was to know about him. There was strength in knowing the enemy. “So do you work here full time?”

“Oh, pretty much. I’m here every afternoon. I used to be here most evenings but unfortunately that caused friction between my fiancé and me. He said he didn’t see me nearly enough and didn’t want to share me with a load of drunken sots. Christian is a doctor, and he works for Daddy. He’s basically a good man, but sometimes he gets cross and says hurtful things. Still, Daddy thinks the world of him. In fact, I think that he’s going to make him a partner in Acer Blackwell Leisure.”

“Oh really?” Rafe was losing the flavour of the soup. All he could taste was sour bile in his mouth.

“Christian also thinks that I work too hard. I know he blames me for...” She lowered her voice to a whisper that quivered badly.

“He blames you for what?”

She took a shuddery breath. “He blames me for.... Oh dear, this is hard to tell.” She squeezed her eyes shut almost as if she were trying to prevent herself from crying. “Oh never mind, I don’t really

know why I'm telling you all this. After all, I've only just met you, and there is no reason why you would want to know anyway."

"Oh, I do want to know. I want to know why you are so upset." Rafe put down his spoon and covered her hand with his. "What does your fiancée blame you for? Tell me Mira, I want to know, and you need to talk."

She opened eyes that were misty pools of deepest blue. "I can't say. I've really got to go now, or Christian will be cross."

He held her hand. "He blames you for losing the baby." It still stunned him that he had the incredible ability to read other people's thoughts, but he knew for a fact that he was right.

That stunned her. "What! But how?"

"Mira, I know that I'm right. You lost the baby, and you think that it's your fault."

"And maybe it is."

"Do you want to tell me the whole story?"

She shook her head, and her blonde hair tumbled over her shoulder. "You shouldn't know about the baby. Nobody knows about it except me and Daddy, and Daddy agrees with Christian."

"And what do they agree on?"

She gnawed at her lower lip. "Well, I guess that I can tell you. For some reason, I trust you, Ralph"

"Thank you."

"It seems they think I overdid things by working too hard here. I had been cleaning the floor, and I went into premature labour. But it was only a month early, and the baby should have survived. Honestly I wasn't really overdoing things. I was only lightly mopping the passageway." She was shaking, and she didn't even notice that Rafe had his arm around her. "Oh, Christian is such a damn hypocrite," she cried, clenching her fists. "When he found out that I was pregnant, he was furious and claimed that I'd done it deliberately to trap him. As if I would do such a thing! When I lost the baby, he said that he was bereft. Doesn't he think that I was too?" she sobbed. "I carried that baby for eight months, and all that time he couldn't bear to be near me. He thinks pregnant women are gross and ugly."

"Then he's an ass. Look Mira, I don't know how he thinks, but I can see that you're hurting deeply. You mustn't blame yourself. Sometimes these things happen, and we never know why."

"But my baby died," she wailed. "I held him in my arms after he was born, and he didn't move, didn't cry. It was a terrible, terrible

thing. Christian couldn't touch him or me and walked out of the delivery room. I didn't see him for two days." Her eyes were probing his, almost as though she searched for answers within.

Rafe, however, saw something, and it was the oddest of things. Deep within those misty pools, he saw a reflection, but it was not his own. It was the face of a man with a crooked nose and expressive eyes. It didn't make any sense at all, so he dismissed it. "Mira, you should go home. Do you live with your father, or are you living with Christian?"

"Both," she said on a hiccup. "Daddy's not been well, and he likes to have Christian close by at all times. He lives with us."

"Ah, I see." It was becoming apparent that Christian certainly was Garth's golden boy. He disliked him already.

Mira seemed to reach a decision and quickly dried her tears. "Do you know what, Ralph?"

"What?"

"I do believe that I would rather stay here with you, Herb and the others. Yes, I shall stay here for the evening, and I don't care what Christian or Daddy says. And," she declared as she pulled open the drawer in the kitchen table, "I am going to give you a trim." She held up a pair of scissors and grinned. "In fact, I'm going to practically shear you. Underneath that wild mop of hair lurks a handsome gentleman. We have razors too and soap and plenty of hot water. You are in dire need of them." She wrinkled up her nose. "Moth balls really do stink," she declared, "so that means clean clothes, too."

Rafe looked at her. She was pretending cheerfulness on the outside, but inside she was still in pain. He could feel it. "I don't have any clean clothes."

"Ah, but I do. Upstairs there's a whole wardrobe full of Christian's cast offs. Believe me, he'll cast off something after wearing it only once or twice. Sometimes he doesn't wear it at all. He's fickle, you see. Likes a shirt one minute and hates it the next. It's the same with everything else, jeans, jumpers, shoes. Maybe I shouldn't say this since he is my fiancé, but people too. And he spends money like there's no tomorrow." She suddenly paused and looked at him. "I'm imposing my wishes on you, aren't I? You can tell me to leave you alone, and I will. I suppose I could get used to the beard."

He treated her to a momentary glimpse of those dimples just visible again beneath the beard that she so disliked. "No, you're right.

I confess that I do need tidying up, and I appreciate you offering to help, but Mira, why are you doing this for me?”

She shrugged. “Because you listened to me, and because I know you care about people, and that is something that I value very much. You know, I’ve never told anyone else how I feel. It’s really peculiar that I opened up to you on our first meeting, but I feel better now that I have. I wish that I could tell Daddy how I feel, but I mustn’t upset him because of his heart. He’s been in hospital quite a few times with heart problems.”

“Has he?” Served him bloody well right. If there were any justice in the world then that vital organ would have expired on him long since. There wasn’t any justice though, but that was a situation that Rafe intended to rectify one way or another.

“Anyway, I appreciate you listening.”

“You’re welcome.” Rafe was suddenly glad that he had met Mira.

He was also looking forward to being clean.



## Chapter Ten

Rafe knelt down on the mattress and punched it several times with his fist. Dust flew out in all directions and tickled his nose especially now that his moustache and beard were gone. He sneezed a couple of times and lay down on the lumpy thing that had long since seen better days. A stray feather from the pillow pricked his neck, a neck now strangely exposed since Mira had given him a hair cut almost worthy of a member of the armed forces. Still it was a good cut and made him look a good deal younger than his 'thirty-one' years. Ever since his teens, he had hair on his face and long hair on his head. It was good that he now had a new look. That might prove to be useful in the near future. He pulled out the feather, blew it away and lay down again. "Ah, well, I guess this beats a rocky ledge on a freezing cold mountain," he muttered, thinking he was alone.

Herb heard him. Rafe saw him standing in the doorway with an old sleeping bag in his arms. "So you've slept on a mountain then?"

"I can't deny that I have."

"I'll wager that you didn't sleep that well."

Rafe grimaced, and for a fleeting second, he imagined that he was looking down at his own dead body. His face was waxen, and it was so vivid that it shook him. "Oh, you'd be amazed. I slept the sleep of the dead."

"You know, you almost sound as though you mean that." Herb tossed him the sleeping bag. "This should keep you warm tonight."

"Thanks, Herb, I appreciate it."

Herb crawled into his own bed. "You are most welcome, old chap."

Rafe draped the open sleeping bag over his body and lay back with his hands behind his head. "Herb?"

Herb yawned. "Yes, Ralph."

"I hope you don't mind me asking but exactly what is a person like you doing in a place like this?"

Herb waited a few seconds before replying to that question. “Trying to get to sleep. What are you doing here?”

Rafe sensed that he was being deliberately cagey. Herb had a story to tell just as everyone else did, and Rafe badly wanted to hear it. He had a suspicion that it would be very interesting. “You brought me here.”

Herb snickered. “I do believe that we both have innumerable questions that we wish to ask of each other, and neither of us are phrasing them quite satisfactorily to get the answers that we want.”

“You are very astute, Herb. It’s been a long day. Maybe we should talk in the morning.”

“That’s fine by me. One last question for tonight though.”

“Yes?”

“There is an air of mystery about you, Ralph, that makes me ask not so much who you are but what you are. So, what are you?”

Yes, Herb was astute indeed. “What am I?” Where to begin? “Okay, I’m a man who has lost his fortune, his wife and his life as he knew it but whom now seems to have found a few new friends. You are one of those friends.”

“I see, and thank you for that. If a chap makes a handful of real friends in a lifetime then I reckon that he can consider himself blessed.”

That was a fair comment. “So do I get one last question, too?”

“Of course, and then we sleep.”

Ralph was half asleep already. It really had been a long day, and he was exhausted. “So, what are you, Herb?”

“Me, old chap?” Herb said drowsily. “Oh, I’m an undercover police officer.”

“Nice one, Herb.” Ralph chuckled as he drifted into sleep. He liked Herb’s sense of humour.

\* \* \* \*

The corridor was long, very long and illuminated with a light so brilliant that it hurt his eyes. He had been walking the corridor for what seemed like hours and yet the end seemed to get further and further away. It was futile; a pointless exercise that was getting him nowhere except to take him further on down the path that led to sheer exasperation.

He stopped, feeling cross and utterly alone. Above all else, loneliness was a feeling that he couldn’t abide. “Okay, that’s it, I’ve

gone far enough, and I am not going a step further,” he shouted out. His voice echoed around him and died away until all was silent again.

Rafe thumped the glistening wall with his fist. “Did you hear me? I said that I’m not going to go any further. This ends now!” His voice died away, and he could have heard a pin drop. Frustration coursed through him. “Why am I here? Is this a dream? If it is then it’s a pretty pointless one.”

He sat down on what appeared to be marble slabs and yet they weren’t cold beneath him. He was, in fact pleasantly warm, and that struck him as odd. In some time and some place before, he had been so tired and so cold, so utterly bone chillingly cold. But when was that? When was it that he had been so cold and so weary? He couldn’t recall, but he knew that following the numbing coldness there had followed a poignant moment when he knew that his consciousness had been confined to a tiny spot inside his head. Then the last vestige of warmth had left him and, in an explosive flash, his consciousness had expanded and flown free.

He was dead then, he knew it. He wasn’t cold anymore, and the essence that was truly him was rising up from his body. Finally it stood beside his corpse and gazed down upon it.

He heard himself speak. “I can see my dead body. Garth killed me.”

“Yes, he did.”

Rafe turned to face the person who communicated with him. “Who are you?”

“Your spirit guide. I’ve been beside you all your life. I am Cerdic.”

“Have you come to take me somewhere?”

“Oh yes, but first you must meet Micah.”

A light form appeared from nowhere, a huge pulsating light form. “Welcome. I am Micah, and you are to work with me for the foreseeable future.”

Awareness flooded him. He was asleep. But paradoxically he felt as though he were awakening from a deep sleep, and with it came the restoration of his memory. “No, no you’re not, Micah. You should have told me who you were in the first place and not tricked me for all those years.” Rafe was remembering with crystal clarity all that had happened before. The pieces of the jigsaw were falling into place so fast that it catapulted him right back into the bright corridor. Now he remembered everything.

Rafe ran toward the even brighter light at the end of the corridor. “Cerd, where the bloody hell are you when I need you?”

“Stay calm. I am here.”

Rafe skidded to a halt. Cerdic was in fact hovering right behind him.

“Stop that. You look ridiculous floating in mid air.”

His feet touched base. “And I am so glad to see you again, too. It took you long enough to remember everything.”

Rafe scowled. “Well, maybe it had something to do with two hundred Joules being zapped through my frigid heart.”

“Hmm, perhaps that and the best wishes of an archangel whom, I might add, is sorely missing you although that he will not admit it.”

Rafe glanced about, half expecting him to appear. “Michael’s busy and off doing bold and courageous things, I suppose.”

“That’s the gist of it. He really does miss you, Rafe.”

“I’m touched. Okay, so are you going to fill me in on what’s going on?” Rafe suddenly stilled as a thought struck him. “Christ, I haven’t died again have I?”

Cerdic smiled and clapped Rafe on the back. “No, you’ve gone astral.”

“Yes that’s what I thought, but I wanted to check. I assume that I am going to recall all of this when I wake up.”

“This would all be pretty futile if you didn’t. Then we would both have been wasting our time.”

“True enough. So come on then, Cerd, it’s time to lay the cards on the table. I want to know exactly why the high powers upstairs decided to let me grace the earthly plane once again. And don’t tell me that they’re not involved in it because I know they are.”

Cerdic crossed his arms. “You were sent back partly because you yourself so badly wanted to. You did have a pretty restless soul.”

He wasn’t going to argue with that. “And the other part.”

“The other part is a little more sinister. You had to come back because Garth Blackwell has to be stopped.”

“Stopped from doing what?”

“Can’t tell you.”

“Oh bloody hell, Cerdic, don’t play games with me. Tell me what you know. Tell me what I have to stop him from doing? Give me more than this.”

“I’ll give you what I can when I can, but that will not be now. Look, I shall be in touch, my friend, but right now I really do have to go. Take care of yourself. There are hungry sharks down there.”

Rafe saw that he was fading. Cerdic had never faded on him before, not when he had needed him. “No, stop! Don’t go, not yet. I must know more.”

“Sorry, but I will be back. You must stay strong for us, Rafe. Once an avenging spirit, always an avenging spirit, I suggest that you remember that.”

His frustration grew immense. “No, don’t go, Cerdic. Tell me what Garth Blackwell has done. I have to know!”

Suddenly his voice was cut off as a hand clamped over his mouth. “Ralph, you are shouting loud enough to wake the dead. It’s three o’clock in the morning,” whispered a calming voice.

Rafe stilled. His face was dotted with perspiration. He had kicked the sleeping bag off his body. His pillow was across the room. “Oh God,” he gasped, sitting up and rubbing his face with his hands. “Herb, I remember it all now, and it’s so incredible as to defy belief. But I know that it’s true. I remember everything.”

Herb sat down on the mattress. “Who is Cerdic, and why should he know what Garth Blackwell has done?”

“Oh, you’d never believe it, Herb.”

“You could try me. You know, there is very little in life that truly shocks me.”

“No, you really couldn’t comprehend it even if I told you, and the telling of it would take till morning.”

Herb reached across to the bedside table, and his hand fell on the bottle of cognac. “So, I’m sitting comfortably.”

“No, you won’t believe this.” Herb offered him the bottle, and he took a swig of it. “Unless you believe in the supernatural, you would think that I was mad and ready to be locked up. I wouldn’t blame you one bit.”

“Who says that I don’t believe? I’ve spent many an hour in the local spiritualist church and heard things that would make your hair stand on end.”

Rafe grimaced. He was thinking about Bernie and the thousands of other malevolent spirits that he had sent on their way. “I don’t think they would, Herb.”

Herb took a drink of the brandy. “Okay, I’ll strike up a deal with you. You tell me who Cerdic is and who you really are, and I’ll tell you what Garth Blackwell has been up to.”

“You actually know about Blackwell?”

“I know a good deal, but I don’t have solid evidence that would stand up in a court of law. That I hope to soon find.”

Rafe flopped back down on the mattress. “You really weren’t kidding about being an undercover detective, were you?”

“No, I wasn’t, but seriously that has to remain between you and me. Like I said, I am undercover.”

“Fine, and what I tell you must likewise be in confidence.”

“Of course, it shall go no further.”

“Put the light on, Herb.”

Herb reached out to the small bedside lamp. A soft light illuminated the small room and cast a glow on Rafe’s face.

“How old do you think I am?” Rafe asked, deliberately keeping his voice low. He didn’t want anyone else in the building to hear what he was going to say.

Herb was taken aback. “What the devil has that got to do with anything?”

“An awful lot. So come on, how old am I?”

“Well, I suppose I would put you at twenty-seven or twenty-eight.”

“Then you’d be way off.”

“Surely not? Thirty at most.”

“Herb, I’m fifty one. I was born in nineteen fifty nine.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, that’s the year my mother was born. Ralph, that’s not possible.”

“Yes, it is possible, and my name is not Ralph. It’s Rafe. I’m Rafe Acer, and I want you to be the first to know that Garth Blackwell killed me.”

“Rafe Acer? Don’t be daft man, he’s dead.” Herb began to laugh. Rafe merely watched him until the laughter ran its course and petered away. Herb wiped away a tear and watched as Rafe slid his hand under the mattress and pulled out his passport. “Hard to believe, hey? Well, take a close look at this and then see if you want to laugh again,” Rafe insisted, shoving the passport under his nose. “See my picture, and see those dates? Now tell me that I am lying.”

Herb examined the document for a long time. Finally, looking serious, he handed the passport back. “Tell me everything, Ralph”

Like Lazarus – Ellen Margret

“Rafe.”

“Of course, Rafe. Tell me everything, and, no matter how supernaturally fantastical it may sound, please leave nothing out.”

“I warn you it is mind-boggling.”

“Then my mind is prepared to be boggled.”

## Chapter Eleven

Rafe was clean and he looked pretty respectable in the new clothing that Mira had given him. Outside Acer Blackwell Leisure, he halted for a second and looked at Herb. “Do you think that this will work?”

“It has to be worth a shot. One of us has got to get a foot inside the company, and after what you told me, I think that it’s more likely going to be you.”

Herb still looked like a vagrant. Rafe guessed that he was actually enjoying being undercover because it really didn’t seem to bother him that he smelled like a camel in the steaming desert. Rafe put out his hand to push the door open, but with a hiss, they automatically parted. “Damn, this takes some getting used to. You wonder what God gave us hands for.”

Herb smiled and followed him inside. Ben Winters was at the far end of the store, and as soon as he caught a glimpse of Herb, he dashed toward him waving his arms in a shooing gesture.

“Good morning, Ben, and stop waving at me like that. It makes you look ridiculous.”

“Me? Look ridiculous? Have you seen yourself in a mirror lately?”

“I try not to, it is not a pleasant sight. Look, I know that you don’t want me here, but I won’t stay long,” Herb said rather apologetically.

Ben Winters dug his hand into his pocket. “How much do you want to go away, Herbert? Come on, I know that you’ve fallen on hard times what with losing your job and such, but I really can’t have you visiting me here at work. It really is not good for business. Will fifty do? No, no, I’ll make it a hundred, but you must promise never to set foot in here again.”

“Ben, I don’t want your money. I merely came to show my new friend the way here. He needs a job.”



Winters gave Rafe a long hard stare. “He looks presentable enough but, sorry, we don’t have any vacancies. If we did then likely I would even offer it to you if you smartened up your act and gave up the drink. You know you really have got to want to help yourself, Herb. Being thrown out of the police force for receiving drugs doesn’t mean that your life has come to an end and that you have to fall to this level.”

Rafe was beginning to piece together the story that Herb must have earlier presented to his cousin. “Mr Winters,” Rafe got in as he held out his hand, “I was hoping to meet with Garth Blackwell personally. I don’t suppose that he’s here, is he, because I would very much like to speak to him.”

Ben Winters glanced toward the back of the store. “He’s in his office as it happens, but I can assure you that he won’t speak with you. I make the decisions around here regarding staffing, and Mr Blackwell is quite comfortable with that.”

Rafe wasn’t about to be rebuffed. “Excuse me, but we’ll just have to see,” he declared as he strode toward the door that had Garth Blackwell’s name upon it. He knocked resoundingly and waited.

“Winters, is that you? Come right in.”

Rafe pushed the door open and, as he stepped onto the plush carpet in the overly warm, cosy office, his fists were clenched every bit as tightly as his jaw. The last time he had seen Garth Blackwell was when he was staring up at him while dangling over the edge of a mountainside. That was just seconds before Blackwell kicked his boot in his face and sent him to his death. That smug image would remain with him daily until Garth Blackwell was finally dispatched to hell.

A man glanced up from the other side of an enormous mahogany desk, a man with thinning grey hair, gaunt cheeks and deep-set wrinkles beneath both eyes. He looked smaller, perhaps even a little bowed, but Rafe wouldn’t be able to tell until he stood up. The last twenty years had aged Garth significantly. He was nearly fifty-five, but he looked ten years older.

Rafe strode into the office with Ben Winters hot on his tail. Herb stayed within earshot just outside the door. He didn’t want to miss a thing.

Ben panted heavily. “I am truly sorry, sir, but he barged past me. I’ll show him the door right away.”

Rafe scowled at him and gnashed his teeth. “You might try, but I can assure you that you won’t succeed.”

Blackwell looked up from his books. His eyes on Rafe registered immediate and total astonishment. “Good God! It can’t be!” He clutched at his chest, his face lost all colour, and his breathing became ragged. “Can’t...can’t breathe,” he rasped.

Winters dashed forward and yanked open the desk drawer. “He’s having another angina attack, and it’s all your fault for barging in like this. He mustn’t be upset.” He fiddled with a bottle of tablets and finally managed to extract one from the bottle. “Here, sir, here’s your pill. Pop it under your tongue, and I’ll get rid of this man immediately.”

“I told you that you might try, but you won’t succeed.” Rafe watched as Blackwell took the pill. Within seconds his colour returned, and his breathing slowed. Evidently his pain was subsiding. Damn, he enjoyed seeing him suffer; he deserved to suffer. He deserved to die.

“Out now!” Winters said nervously as he pushed Rafe. Like a mountain, he didn’t budge an inch. “I’m sorry, Mr Blackwell. Obviously this man is distressing you.” Rafe prodded Ben Winters, and he stumbled back.

“I must apologise if I have shocked you.” Rafe saw Garth Blackwell gaping at him with wide eyes and knew he saw him as a ghost from the past. Would the shock kill him? Part of him was wishing that it would, but the other part was reasoning that he had to remain alive. After what Herb had told him, Rafe needed Garth Blackwell on the earthly plane just a while longer.

Words eluded Garth. He managed to haul himself to his feet using the desk as support.

Rafe enjoyed his discomfiture. “No, please sit back down. Clearly you are unwell. Perhaps I should not have come, but I did so want to meet my father’s old partner.”

“Your father’s?”

Rafe thought that his voice sounded extremely feeble.

“Ah, then you’re not Rafe Acer. No, no of course you’re not.” Clearly Blackwell seemed to think he was hallucinating in broad daylight.

“Of course I’m not. After all, you were with him when he died, I believe.” It took great effort, but somehow Rafe managed to smile. “I guess that you see a resemblance.” He laughed. “You know my grandmother used to say that we were like clones, but my mother took quite an offence to that, especially since she thought that I had her

eyes. She and my mother didn't always see eye to eye, but I think that my grandmother was right. You see, my mother kept a photograph of my father on the sideboard, and I used to look at it every day. I reckon that we were pretty damn similar."

Blackwell edged along the corner of the desk. "You are Rafe Acer's son?"

"I am." He thrust out his hand. "So pleased to meet you at last, Mr Blackwell. I would have come sooner, but Australia is a long way away and I didn't have the finances to make the trip. I've been moonlighting for the past six months to get the air fare together."

"Rafe Acer didn't have a son. Veronica only had one child and that was my daughter, Mira."

"Hard to believe, isn't it, but he did. He met my mother a year before he married Veronica. They had an affair, and like many affairs, it came to a sorry end. But I," he declared in a cheery Australian accent, "am the result. I am Rafe Acer's son. I'm Ralph Acer."

"I cannot doubt that you are. You look so very much like him."

"Yes, I know. Eerie, isn't it."

"Did he know about your existence?"

"Oh yes, he kept in touch, and he sent money, but sadly I never got to meet him. Of course, that all stopped when he died, and my mother had to do cleaning work in order to get by. Guess a little bit of my old dad's wealth would have been appreciated. It might have helped me get a better education, but hey, let's not dwell on that. It's water under the proverbial bridge and I'm not one to bear a grudge."

"Well, well. I didn't know. Of course I would have arranged for funds to be sent to you. Goodness, this is all so unexpected."

Was he really supposed to believe that? "Quite a shock, I'll bet. Sorry about that, Mr Blackwell, I hope that you've recovered now."

Blackwell's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Is it money that you're after? I can't believe that you came all the way from Australia just to meet me."

"Now, that's where you're wrong. I did come to meet you, but I'll also admit that I've been dying to see England for years. So here I am, unemployed, penniless and in need of a job."

"Now let me see if I've got this right. You want me to give you a job?"

"I do. Do you have one?"

“No, I don’t, but the least that I can do is to create one for Rafe Acer’s son. Damn, but I miss him. And, of course, I’ll help his son.” He held his hand out. It shook slightly.

*Lying bastard!* Rafe knew that he was wary of him. Likely he perceived him as some kind of threat, and well he should. Rafe took his hand and gave it a very exuberant shake while wishing that he had hold of Blackwell’s neck instead. “I appreciate it, and I promise you that I am a good worker.”

“You will work right here with Ben Winters. It will be most interesting having you around and, when I’m here, I’ll be able to chat to you about your father.”

“Excellent, so when do I start.”

“The company’s policy insists that all new employees must have a full medical exam, and I will have to ask you to fill in a form with your personal details and so forth. When those few formalities are completed, you can begin working here at Acer Blackwell Leisure.”

“And where should I take this medical? Do I need to register with a doctor?”

“No, no of course not. Acer Blackwell takes care of its own. We have a medical research establishment some five miles from here. One of the doctors there will see to you.”

Rafe grinned even though it made his teeth ache to do so. “Sounds good to me, and thank you, Mr Blackwell.”

## Chapter Twelve

The Acer Blackwell medical research institute was a vast complex of laboratories, offices and a large glass walled refectory. Over a hundred acres of woodlands surrounded the modern building, all owned by Garth Blackwell. Rafe had walked the five miles from Exeter, following the directions that Ben Winters had given him, and snow fell heavily by the time he arrived there. He walked in and announced to the receptionist that he had come for a medical as instructed by Garth Blackwell.

“Ah, yes of course. Mr Winters telephoned to say that you were on your way. I assume that you must be Mr Acer.”

“Yes, I am. Shall I sit and wait?”

“Oh no, there is no need. Fortunately the doctor is free at the moment, so you may go in directly. There is no need to knock since the doctor is expecting you.”

Rafe was impressed. This place was just about as far away as one could get from the old-fashioned National Health Service that he had once known.

\* \* \* \*

Although Rafe was about to become the newest recruit to Acer Blackwell Leisure, the doctor herself was only a day ahead of him. She had started work the previous morning and had yet to totally familiarise herself with where everything was in her consulting room. She knew that she would need to take blood tests, and she had located the equipment for that, but the specimen bottles for urine samples had so far eluded her. Guessing that the cardboard box sitting on top of the wall unit next to the door might house them, she dragged the three-legged stool over to the other side of the office and climbed onto it. It rocked slightly, and she teetered precariously, but she was just able to reach the box with her right hand.

Then the door opened and, as it caught one of the legs of the stool, she was thrown off the stool and into thin air. She gave a shriek,

but as the ground rose up to meet her, she suddenly found herself caught about the waist by a pair of strong hands.

“Damn, I knew I should have knocked, but the secretary said to come right on in. I am sorry. This is my fault. You’re not hurt, are you?” He still had a hold of her, but her back was to him. She smelled nice though, too familiarly nice in fact. The thought crossed his mind that doctors shouldn’t smell that good. They should be old and musty and wear cardigans and tweed skirts, not bosom clinging Lycra tops, skimpy skirts and ankle high leather boots.

She was flushed with embarrassment at being held in the arms of this man. The snowflakes from his coat were melting and dripping onto her top. She needed to be on her feet and regain her composure. “No, don’t concern yourself, I am not hurt. You know you can put me down now. Perhaps you would like to take that wet coat off before it drips all over the floor as well as me.”

“Ah right, sorry again.” Above their heads, the dislodged box began to fall. With lightning reflexes, Rafe set her on her feet and deftly caught the heavy box. “Is this what you were after?” He put it on the examination couch then took off his coat and hung it on the hook on the back of the door.

She noted his Australian accent as she turned to look at the man who had caused such calamity in her surgery. “Yes, I was hoping it might be the specimen bottles.”

“Ah, so that’s what you were doing perched up there like a...” He never got to say what she was perched up there like. He saw those jade green eyes in that pretty oval face and the words died on his lips. “My God, Selena!”

“Rafe?” She was equally stunned.

He swallowed hard and nodded dumbly. She was the last person on earth he had expected to see.

“I...I was told to expect a Ralph Acer. I, well I didn’t make the connection with you, with Rafe Acer.”

“It’s not a common name.” He shut the door with his elbow and leaned against it while waiting for his wits to return. “I’m calling myself Ralph, and as far as your employer is concerned, I am Rafe Acer’s son,” he simply said, noting with interest that she was avoiding his stare and focussing on his right cheek instead.

“But you are not Rafe Acer’s son. You *are* Rafe Acer.”

“Well now, not a lot of folk know that. You are one of the privileged few, and before you ask, yes I have regained my full memory, and I do know what I was in the after life.”

“Oh my goodness.” Her mind was reeling. “So what happened to your voice? You sound like an Australian.”

He treated her to a lop-sided smile and dropped the phoney accent. “Good, that was the intention. Glad it was convincing, but I’ll give it a rest for now. It does take a lot of concentration. I guess I’ll get used to it with practise.”

“Oh, this is all too much. What on earth are you up to?”

He stroked his clean-shaven chin. “Since you are working for Garth Blackwell then I don’t know whether I should tell you that.”

She glared at him indignantly. She was still feeling incredibly annoyed with him after he gave her the cold shoulder on the mountain and had not allowed her to explain about her and Rex. “If you don’t tell me what you’re up to then how...? What did you say, that I am working for Garth Blackwell? It was Christian Wilson who appointed me, and he just told me that I was working for a Mr Blackwell.”

“I’m calling myself Ralph,” he cut in, “and yes, you are working for Garth.”

“Ralph then.... Oh whatever.... whoever. Look, either you tell me what’s going on, or I’ll tell my employer exactly who you are.”

His expression turned deadly serious. “What, you’ll tell him that I’m really Rafe Acer, the man you brought back from the dead on a mountainside and whom while non corporeal saved you from a malignant spirit? Oh, and that I’m the man that your employer killed up on that mountain so that he could get his hands on my money? Now think really hard, is that what you want to tell him?”

“No, of course not. Garth Blackwell is evidently my employer.”

“He certainly is. Not very fussy about who employs you, are you, Selena?”

She fiddled nervously with her hair. “Oh Lord, I really didn’t know. I didn’t know until now, until you just told me that the head of this company was Garth Blackwell. I only knew him as Mr Blackwell. Like I said, he didn’t interview me. Oh, this is intolerable! Exactly what have I got myself into?”

Somehow he felt better, knowing that Selena had not deliberately chosen to work with the enemy. “Potentially a lot of trouble, I would think.”

“I needed a job, and this one was advertised in the paper. That’s all there was to it.”

“Then we have got something in common. I needed a job too. It buys food and pays the rent and keeps me from rummaging through charity bags that even self-respecting moths give a wide berth to.”

She looked at him in horror. “Don’t tell me you have been doing that?”

“I confess that I have. Remember I had no money.”

“You might have asked me for some.”

“No way, Selena. I didn’t lose my pride when I died, and it was still with me when I came back. Anyway, we were talking about you and this job.”

“The job looked good enough, and I thought that a move into research would be quite challenging. I suppose it wasn’t such a good move after all. I really don’t want to get involved with Garth Blackwell, especially not after what you told me about him. Maybe I should leave. Yes, that’s it. I should get away from here immediately. I can do that. I haven’t signed a contract yet so I can’t be held accountable.”

He could tell that she was working herself up into a state of intense agitation. Rafe calmly put his hands on her shoulders and gently squeezed them. “Hey, I need that medical, remember?” He took a deep breath and blew it out on a sigh of resignation. Right there and then he opted to tell her the truth. “Okay, Doctor Steele?”

She flinched outwardly at the formality.

“What’s wrong? You don’t want me to call you that?”

“Rafe, we were close. Good lord, we made love.”

He shrugged and stepped away from her. He decided that he wasn’t going to let her get close to him again. It hurt too damn much. “Okay Selena, I am going to be straight with you. If you stay here then you can help me. Believe me, I could surely do with some. The fact is that someone on the inside could prove invaluable to us.”

“Us? Rafe, what is going on? Why exactly do you want to work for Acer Blackwell Leisure? Why do you want to be employed by the man who killed you?”

“Why do you think?”

“I imagine that you want retribution.”

“Oh yes and a whole heck of a lot more. I want what is left of my life back. I want my money returned to me, and I want Garth Blackwell to get what is coming to him.”



“You said us.”

“Yes, me and Herbert, but we call him Herb. He’s an undercover police officer who is posing as a vagrant. I share a house with him and a dwindling bunch of other homeless folk. Three have gone missing in the last two months.”

“This gets more complicated by the second. So, what is it that I am supposed to be on the inside of anyway? I thought that I was here to primarily assist the chief surgeon in carrying out organ transplants and continue the ongoing research into combating tissue rejection.”

“For the most part, I daresay that is what you will be doing.”

“And is there a problem with that?”

He led her over to the padded leather chair behind her desk and sat her down. “No problem with that, as such, assuming that you are not too fussy about where the organs come from.”

“Oh, I know where they come from. They are from willing donors, from people who have died in accidents and carry an organ donor card.”

“Well now, Selena that is where you are under a misconception.”

“Or we get permission from their next of kin if they don’t carry a card.”

He sat on the edge of the desk, picked up the sharp envelope opener and stabbed it into a notepad. “Or we, or should I say they, murder them?”

She sucked in a sharp breath, and a cold shiver seemed to shoot down her spine. “Murder?”

“Yes murder, premeditated first degree murder. Herb has reason to believe that the increased number of vagrants that have gone missing during the past year have all ended up here for spare parts. I’ve shocked you, haven’t I. Well, I can tell you that it shocked and sickened me too.”

“No, no that is simply not possible. Surely not. You have to be mistaken.”

“Selena, Herb thinks that it is possible. He would not be living his life as a stinking tramp if he weren’t pretty damn sure about it. He has strong suspicions, but he needs firm evidence. And, my own reasons aside, that is why I have come to work for Acer Blackwell Leisure. Let me fill you in on this and paint a clearer picture.”

“Please do.”

“For a start, do you know about Garth Blackwell’s poor health?”

“No. Like I said, I haven’t met him, and no one has told me anything about the man.”

“The truth is that Blackwell has a serious heart problem. So serious that it’s life threatening.”

“He does? I didn’t know.”

“Yes, he is already surviving on his second heart, and his body is now rejecting that one. The man is truly desperate, Selena, and he wants to live. Christ, don’t we all,” he hissed as he tore his hand through his hair, recalling all that he had been through. Recalling his frustration in the after life when, although aware of what Blackwell had done to him, he couldn’t actually do anything about it.

Now that he was back he was going to do something. “He will do anything, and that includes taking other people’s lives, not only for his own benefit but for others just like him. This research organization isn’t only funded by Garth Blackwell but by several other wealthy businessmen who, like him, want as close as they can get to eternal life no matter that it necessitates killing others. We are talking businessmen in France, Denmark, Germany and America, and they all think the same way. They believe that tramps and vagrants won’t be missed. They don’t even think of them as people. They are like baboons to them, bodies that can be killed and cut up to provide kidneys, hearts, livers and lungs.”

“Rafe no, no you can’t be serious.”

“Oh, Selena, I’m deadly serious, and that is why I’m here. I’m going to get the evidence for Herb that will shut this place down forever. I’ll make bloody sure that Blackwell never gets a new heart.”

“But this is risky business. You might get killed in the process.”

He gave a scornful laugh. “So what, I’ve already been dead. It’s not so bad really, and I’ve got good friends on the other side. I don’t fear death because it is far too familiar. I have to do this, but understand that I’m not doing this just for myself.”

She gnawed on her lower lip. “And you want me to help you?”

“Yes, but only if you are willing, and only if you keep your head low. At the first sign of danger, I want you to leave and never come back. I don’t want you harmed in any way.”

“And why is that, Rafe?”

He stared at the floor. “You brought me back to life, and I owe you. I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you.”

She held up her hands with a grim laugh. “I hope these stop trembling long enough for me to complete your medical.”

He looked up and raised an eyebrow. “You are actually going to give me one? Oh come on now, that really isn’t necessary.”

“Oh, yes it is. You are my first patient at Acer Blackwell, and I want to check you over properly. Besides I don’t think that taking some blood samples, measuring your blood pressure and listening to your heart will pose any serious risks to my health.”

His heart was thumping wildly in his chest already at the thought of her about to touch him with those soft hands, hands that had once caressed him all over. “So long as you are aware that any values you come up with won’t be an accurate indication of my true physical state.”

“Oh, and why is that? Could you open your shirt?” she said as she picked up her stethoscope and put it around her neck.

He raised both eyebrows then. “Why? Try and guess.”

She placed the stethoscope against his chest. “I don’t play guessing games. Your heart is beating way too fast, Rafe.”

“Precisely, I rest my case.”

“No, we will carry on with this.”

“If you insist, Doctor Steele, but I warn you that if you take my blood pressure then you will undoubtedly find that is off the scale too. Will you tell Garth Blackwell that?”

“No, I won’t.”

“Oh Selie, stop this.” Rafe unhooked the stethoscope from her neck and placed it on the desk. “Just make it up, say my pulse is seventy, and my blood pressure is one-twenty over sixty.”

“Lie, you mean?” She rolled up his sleeve and put a strap around his upper arm. Deftly, she inserted a large syringe into the raised vein and carefully took a sample of blood. “I find lying difficult.”

He gave an exasperated groan. “Selena, if you are going to help me then you will likely be doing an awful lot of lying and, in my book, lying to Blackwell doesn’t even count. Look, I am perfectly healthy, and you know it. Christ, you know full well that it’s you who makes me feel like this.”

“Feel like what?”

“Like I’m on a roller coaster with no brakes.” He wanted to hold her in his arms and kiss her, just as he had done before but he couldn’t because she was engaged to Rex and that infuriated him. He was, he knew, exceedingly jealous, an unfamiliar emotion to him. At the same time, he thought Rex the luckiest man in the world. He suddenly shot to his feet; his insides were all knotted up. He rolled down his sleeve

and did up his shirt. “I really have got to go. Mark me down as A1, and then you can go back to doing whatever it was when I came in. Well, that is go back to doing what you were doing before perching yourself up on that stool which, by the way, was a pretty damn stupid thing to do.”

“So I suppose a urine specimen will be out of the question?”

He grunted irritably. “You suppose right. I’ll be in touch, Selena. Oh and another thing.”

She waited. “Yes?”

“I did play rugby.”

“You what?”

“Oh, come on now. Don’t you remember crying over me and asking whether I had once played rugby? You know, that really was a moving scene to witness.”

“Yes, it must have been.”

“Give Rex my regards,” he growled as he headed for the door.

Only after he left did Selena notice that his coat still hung on the back of the door and, poking out of the top pocket, was his wallet.

## Chapter Thirteen

Rafe smelled the stew even before he opened the front door. He made his way to the kitchen and, just as he thought, Mira was slaving over the kitchen stove with her long fair hair trailing over her face. The last time he had seen her it had been tied neatly back. How odd that she now let it hang loose, especially while cooking.

“Beef stew?” Rafe asked as he sat down at the table along with Herb and three other residents he had yet to meet.

“Lamb actually,” she explained as she carefully stirred the concoction. She gestured to each of the men in turn. Rafe noticed that her movements were rather stilted almost as though she had a stiff neck. “Ralph, this is Thomas, Perry and Ennis. Gentlemen, this is Ralph, our new friend, who is sharing a room with Herb.”

“Evening,” Rafe said, glancing at each man in turn.

Perry didn’t look up. He was staring into a cup of what Rafe guessed was some form of clear spirits. Gin by the smell of it. He looked a mess, every bit a mess as Herb, except in Herb’s case it was all a fabrication.

“Evenin’,” Ennis said, his accent thickly Irish. His clothing was also little better than rags, a threadbare grey blanket around his upper body and a dirty woollen hat on his head. “Bleedin’ cold, ‘aint it?”

“The heating is on, Ennis,” Mira said with concern.

“Don’t reach me innards,” Ennis complained, and he leaned across to take a gulp of Perry’s drink straight from the bottle. “But this do.” He smacked his lips.

Rafe was surprised that Perry didn’t complain but then, he really didn’t seem to notice. Rafe took a seat opposite Thomas who nodded. He at least seemed clean even though his clothing had seen better days. He was sober too. Rafe could tell that by looking into his steely eyes; strange, probing eyes, indicative of a man who wouldn’t suffer fools gladly. Thomas looked oddly out of place, but then Rafe guessed that most likely he did too.

“Good to meet you,” Rafe said as he held out his hand across the table.

“Likewise,” Thomas responded as he shook his hand.

He didn’t have an accent that Rafe could discern. “Been down on your luck for long?” Rafe asked. He felt a strong need to find out more about the man.

Mira almost dropped her spoon and winced at the sudden movement. “Really Ralph, what a question to ask. Can’t we talk about something else, something more cheerful?”

“Like what, Mira?” Herb chuckled. “Embroidery?”

Thomas waved his hand dismissively. “No problem, I don’t mind. I’ve been out of work for two years now. Just over a year ago my wife left me. That what you wanted to know?”

“Sorry, bad luck.” Rafe had probed those steely eyes. It was all a pack of lies. Thomas had never lost a job in his life. Furthermore, he had never been married. He was here under false pretences, just like Herb, except Rafe knew that Herb was the good guy. Thomas, however, was not.

“Bah, we’re all down on our ruddy luck,” Ennis muttered, “and some are unluckier than others. Do you know that me room mate’s gone missing just like Rab, Bert and Hector did?”

Mira came over to the table. “Oh no, I thought that Wally was merely keeping to his room and taking solace in his brandy bottle.”

“Well, if he’s taking whatever you said with his brandy bottle then he ‘aint doin’ it in our room. He ‘aint slept in his bed for the past three nights. Nope, he’s gone exactly like the rest and I don’t reckon that he’s comin’ back. It’s a bad business. I’m wonderin’ if I’ll be next.”

Herb tried not to look as agitated. “So no one here has seen Wally in the past three days?”

Perry didn’t hear, as he was semi-conscious with his head on the table.

“Thomas, are you sure that you haven’t seen him?” Herb asked.

Thomas simply shook his head.

Rafe was having none of it and didn’t trust Thomas with his steely eyes. “Surely someone must have seen him in the last three days. Are you sure that you haven’t, Thomas?”

Thomas glowered hotly at him. “What do you care? You’ve only just arrived here. You didn’t even know him.”

“Just concerned, that’s all.”

“Don’t be, it’s none of your affair. We knew Wally, and you didn’t. But since you asked then no, I haven’t seen him in the last few days. Satisfied?”

Rafe held up his hands. “Fine, sorry I said anything.” But he was glad that he had. Thomas *had* seen Wally, and the images that Thomas was unknowingly sending his way, told Rafe that Wally had not left willingly. There had been a struggle, and Wally had been bundled into a car. Doubtless that car headed for the Acer Blackwell Research Institute. It was glaringly obvious to him that Thomas was in Garth Blackwell’s pay.

“Food’s ready,” Mira declared as she moved her handbag off the table and onto a spare chair then began to ladle the stew into bowls.

Thomas picked up a bowl and a chunk of bread. “I’ll take mine to my room. I’m not in the mood for company tonight.”

“Me too,” Ennis agreed, “and I don’t want no food.” He picked up Perry’s half empty bottle and shuffled to the door. “Can’t stomach it after losing another good friend. I’m off to drown me sorrows.”

Perry was drooling on the table and snoring heavily. Herb picked up his head and then let it down gently. “He’s comatose.”

“Oh dear. He’ll have to sleep it off there unless you can carry him up to his room.” Mira checked her watch. “I really do have to go now.” She put her hand on Rafe’s shoulder. “Ralph, I spoke to Daddy this afternoon. You know I wish that you had told me that you were Rafe Acer’s son.”

“Why?” He dipped his spoon into his stew. “Would it have made any difference?”

“Yes, of course, it would. Why, this makes you practically family. Father is keen that you come and stay at the Manor with us. He really doesn’t like the thought of Rafe Acer’s son staying here at the Home. He was appalled when he realised that you were living with down and outs. Would you like to come and stay with us?”

Rafe put down his spoon. If he ate another mouthful he likely would have choked on it. The Manor had been the home that he had shared with Veronica and now Garth Blackwell lived there. He truly had taken everything. “Actually, Mira, I’m quite happy here for now, but tell your father that I appreciate the offer.”

“I will. Oh, and he also asked me to invite you to a party on Saturday evening. It’s in your honour so I do hope that you will come.”

“He’s throwing a party in my honour?” Rafe decided that Blackwell was most definitely up to something.

“Yes, of course. He really is happy you are here in England. You will come, won’t you?”

“How could I refuse? Thank you.”

“Well, enjoy your food. Oh and I almost forgot, Daddy sent you this.” She reached into her back pocket and drew out a watch. “Daddy says that this was your father’s watch. He found it among his things after the dreadful fall that killed him. Apparently he wasn’t wearing it when he died. Anyway, Daddy thought you might wish to have it.”

Rafe took the watch and fingered it. Seemingly it still kept good time; it had been an expensive watch. He did notice that it had a new strap though, some soft felt fabric rather than the leather it once had. He didn’t like it and decided to get that changed as soon as possible.

“Anyway, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Sure thing. Bye, Mira.” Why would Garth want him to have the watch? It made no sense, but he was happy to have it back so he put it on his wrist. His thoughts returned to Thomas and what he had said.

With Mira gone, Rafe turned to Herb. “Thomas is lying, Herb. He was the one who dragged Wally off. No prizes for guessing where he dragged him off to.”

Herb did actually drop his spoon into the stew which splattered all over him and Perry, not that he noticed in his stupor. “What! You can’t possibly know that.”

“I can, and I do.”

“What, are you a mind reader as well as everything else?”

“Basically yes, I suppose I am. It kind of comes with the package, and it can be pretty useful.”

“Oh that’s impossible. You can’t read minds. Can you?”

Rafe fully understood Herb’s disbelief. He supposed that he would simply have to prove it. “Herb, look at me.”

“Very well.” But Herb avoided his gaze.

“Look me in the eyes.”

Reluctantly, he did just that.

“Now think about your family. Think about each member in turn.”

Herb did that, too.

“You have a widowed mother, a grandmother with a crippled arm, twin sisters and a wayward younger brother. Oh, and you’ve got a girlfriend too. She’s short and has red hair and is most definitely not



a shot putter.” He gave Herb another hard stare. “Haven’t seen her in a while, have you? Still, looking the way you do now you’d frighten her off so I reckon it’s just as well.”

Herbs mouth flopped open. “Bloody hell.” He knocked over the pepper, and it tumbled off the table and onto Mira’s bag that she left on the chair.

Rafe spotted it. “She’s left her bag,” he said. “I’ll try and catch her before she leaves.”

Herb’s senses were still reeling. “She drives the red soft top. It’s parked just outside.”

Rafe grabbed the bag. “I’ll be back.”

\* \* \* \*

Perhaps he should have realised that Mira couldn’t have gone far. Her car keys were in her bag after all. As he raced out of the door and onto the pavement, he bumped into her as she came hurrying back toward the house. They collided with a jolt and, with she being slight of build, Rafe had to steady her to prevent her from falling flat on her back. As he held her arm, she cried out in obvious pain. Beneath the light of the nearby street lamp, he caught the dark shadow that ran down the side of her face and onto her slender neck. Rafe stilled. He knew bruises when he saw them, and these were as ugly as some of the ones that he had received in his fall from the mountain. Now he knew why she had kept her hair loose. She had been trying to hide the bruising.

“Christ almighty, Mira, what happened to you?” He tucked her hair behind her left ear and studied the swollen flesh on her cheek.

Neither noticed the blue car that pulled into the parking space behind the red soft top, but the driver spotted them.

“N...nothing. I fell, that’s all.”

He rolled up her sleeve and gently touched the blue swelling on her lower arm and wrist. “You fell on your face, neck and arm?”

“Yes,” she stammered, her eyes filling with tears.

“Come on now, do you really expect me to believe that?”

“Yes, that’s what happened, Let that be an end to it.” She trembled when his arm slipped comfortingly around her. Her head fell onto his shoulder, and she sobbed quietly.

“Mira, who did this to you?” He wanted five minutes with whoever it was. Correction, in the mood that he was in, just one minute would do. He’d beat whoever did it to a bloody pulp.

“I told you, I fell,” she sniffed onto his neck. “Don’t ask me again.”

The door to the blue car opened, and Selena stepped out carrying Rafe’s coat. She thrust it at him. “Excuse the interruption,” she said tersely, “but I assumed that you would be needing this. Now I really must be going. Sorry for interrupting your little dalliance.”

Rafe took the coat, more than a little surprised to see Selena. He was also experiencing that strange fluttering sensation in his chest that he always felt when she was around him. “Dalliance!” Damn, but she had got the wrong end of the stick and seemed so angry about it too. “Look, Selie, this isn’t what it seems.”

“Do I even care what it is?” she said hotly.

“Selie, don’t dash off. I want to introduce you to Mira.”

“Oh no need for introductions. I really must be off. I’ve got a busy day tomorrow and, under the circumstances, Selie isn’t appropriate. My name is Selena, Doctor Selena Steele.”

Mira dashed away her tears and shakily put out her hand. “Glad to meet you, Doctor Steele.”

Selena swung away from Mira in an open gesture of rudeness, as she faced Rafe head on. Her eyes were spitting sparks, and in her state of discomposure, she lost her caution and forgot to avoid his gaze. “Please carry on with whatever you were doing. Obviously I am in the way. “Perhaps I’ll see you some time about that other matter,” she said as she slipped back into her car.

“Yes, of course. When?” She was leaving. “Selena, no, wait we need to talk about...”

The car revved up and sped away, leaving Rafe alone with Mira. He sighed. Mira might not be prepared to tell him what happened to her, but at least he now knew something new about Selena. She wasn’t with Rex and hadn’t been for a long time. She’d been incredibly angry and dreadfully hurt, wanting to return his coat and wallet. She’d wanted him to know she and Rex had not been together since the climbing expedition.

Though she wasn’t happy with him, that information made him rather happy. Yes, he would see her again and not just about that other matter.

## Chapter Fourteen

Rafe spoke at length with Herb concerning what he had sensed about Wally's disappearance. Both agreed that another visit to the Acer Blackwell Medical Institute was necessary and that Selena had to be informed about Wally's disappearance. Herb wanted Rafe to visit the next morning, but that wasn't possible since Rafe had to attend an introductory morning at Acer Blackwell Leisure. He would learn how the company worked and what was expected of its staff. It was a trial being told all about a company of which he had once owned half and, by the end of the morning, his jaw ached so badly from gritting his teeth that he had generated a great thumping headache. However when he finally left at lunchtime, he was at least convinced that Ben Winters was ignorant about the shadier side of Acer Blackwell. He might lick Garth Blackwell's boots, but he wasn't involved in his illegal activities. His face was an open book, and Rafe was able to read it easily. The idiot worshipped Blackwell, but that was, as far as he could tell, his only crime.

Rafe badly needed the long bracing walk to Acer Blackwell Medical because he hoped that it would help clear his head and dispel the annoying feelings of nausea that had taken up residence in his belly. It didn't help at all though, and by the time he reached the reception area, his headache was no better, the nausea was worse and his vision was blurring. His fogged brain was trying to piece together what he was going to say to the receptionist in order to get past her and into Selena's office, but as it happened, he didn't need to do anything at all since the receptionist was apparently on her lunch hour.

Rafe weaved his way erratically down the short corridor that led to Selena's consulting room and twice walked into the wall before he at last found her door. He stood for a few seconds panting and staring at her name on the door and wishing that the cramping in his gut

would go away. ‘Dr Selena J Steele’ it said. He knocked on the door, fleetingly wondering what the J stood for.

“Come in.”

Relief flooded through him as he opened the door and saw her sitting at her desk. “Are you alone?” He glanced around. The room was going in and out of focus, so he wasn’t entirely sure that she was alone.

She glared at him and put down her pen. “Do you see anyone else?”

“Err, not entirely sure.” But he guessed that she was alone. “Well, that’s a fine, warm welcome and good afternoon to you, Dr Steele.” He stepped in and closed the door.

“What are you doing here?” she said sharply

“Maybe I wanted to see you.”

“Oh stop it, Rafe. What are you doing here? I wasn’t aware that you had an appointment.”

“I didn’t.” But he looked at his watch anyway and noted that the strap felt much too tight. It took a while before the hands became sharp enough to see, but he did notice at the same time that there was an extensive red rash on his wrist that extended down to his hand and up his forearm. Why hadn’t he noticed it before? He guessed because he couldn’t see properly.

She tapped her fingers on the desk. “Then why are you here?”

Her tone made him wince. “Selena, must you sound so haughty?”

“I do not sound haughty, and I repeat, why are you here?”

He decided that he might try to work on eliciting her sympathy. The hurt that she had felt after seeing Mira in his arms had not subsided. If anything, it was worse. “Maybe my being here has got something to do with the headache and the stomach cramps that I’ve been suffering. Oh, and the vision’s not too good either. So, I thought that I should see a doctor, and you happen to fit that bill.”

She snorted in an unfeminine way. “There is nothing wrong with you that an early night alone wouldn’t cure. Perhaps you would like me to prescribe a hangover cure as well.”

He placed his hand over his heart. “What, you think I’m hung over? Selie, why must you think the worst of me? For your information, I was alone in bed by ten last night, and no alcohol touched my lips.”

“And I’m the Queen of Sheba,” she said scathingly, “and I asked you not to call me that.”

“Sorry, Your Highness.” He reached out to brace himself against the wall. The room was beginning to rotate around him. He sucked in a deep breath and decided to tell her why he was there before he disgraced himself and threw up in front of her. “Okay, I’ll get to the point and not waste any more of your precious time. The fact is that a chap named Wally has gone missing from the Home. We have reason to believe that he may have ended up here. My guess is that he is dead.”

“We?”

“Okay, correction, I have reason to believe that he ended up here. No, I know for a fact that he ended up here.”

“Been mind reading again, have you?”

He shrugged and then wished he hadn’t. It made his head hurt and his stomach lurch. He felt sick as a dog. “Shall I apologise for that, too?”

She made a tushing sound and got up from her chair. “So, what do you want me to do? I know that you are not sick, so I assume that you came to ask a favour of me.”

He cringed at her lack of compassion. “I did think that you wanted to help.” He swallowed hard. He felt like he was going to puke up the contents of his stomach any minute. It was hard being alive again and having to deal with the downsides, pain being one example.

“Hmm, maybe I did. So, what do you want me to do?”

“I merely want to take a look in the mortuary. I’ll be really quick, and then I’ll be out of here.”

“I see, is that all? Are you sure that you wouldn’t like to take a look outside too, just to check that there aren’t any unmarked graves. Oh, I know I could find you a spade and maybe I’ll give you a hand with the digging too. Oh no wait, I didn’t bring my rubber boots, and I would hate to ruin my shoes.”

He had his hand on the door. “Sarcasm doesn’t become you, Selena, and the way I’m feeling right now, I don’t intend to go digging anywhere.”

“Except into Blackwell’s affairs. I suppose that you do have reasons.”

“Exactly. Now will you take me to the mortuary, or shall I find it myself?” He hoped that she would take him. His vision was so blurred he doubted that he could find his own hand if it was held up in front of his face.

“If it gets you out of my hair then why not but don’t go that way, someone might see you. We’ll have to use this back door,” she explained, moving aside the dividing curtain. “I’m taking a risk here, you know. Dr. Wilson had me sign at least a half dozen forms and all of them relating to non-disclosure of company information. Working here must be like signing up for MI5.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Rafe muttered as he followed after her. He staggered slightly a few times, but she forged on ahead and didn’t notice. Damn, but his legs were failing him now as well. What the bloody hell was wrong?

Finally she reached the door that led into the mortuary. Selena peered through the glass panel. Satisfied that no one was inside, she went in cautiously. As soon as Rafe was inside, he spotted the body lying on the table. It was covered with a white sheet. He went straight to it and tore the cover away.

He almost lost his breakfast. It was a gruesome sight.

“Oh, my God.” Selena covered her face with her hands. The smell was awful. “Is that Wally?”

“I believe it is, or what’s left of him,” Rafe declared and, to prove it, he took from his shirt pocket a small photo that Herb had taken of Wally a few weeks previously. “See,” he said, holding it up so that she could see. “Herb made sure that he took photos of every occupant, not only in our house, but in every house for the homeless in Exeter.”

Selena paled. She looked at the body and at the line of bruising around his neck. “I don’t think that Dr Wilson intended for me to see this. When I asked him who the body in the mortuary was, he told me that it was a man who had died falling from an old railway bridge. Once the police had found his donor card, he’d been brought here.”

“Didn’t it occur to you that a post mortem would have been carried out prior to that?”

“Yes it did, but Dr Wilson said that this was a special case. That his organs were needed in a hurry, and that some young boy’s life hung in the balance.”

Rafe scanned Wally’s naked body from head to toe and then he rolled him partially over. “Right, so this sick boy needed a new heart, a new liver, two new kidneys and two new eyes. Poor kid, they pretty much rebuilt him then.”

Selena couldn’t take her eyes off the line of bruising around Wally’s neck. “Don’t be flippant. You know it looks like Wally was strangled.”

“Evidently but most likely the good Doc Wilson will tell you that he fell and broke his neck. Since you’ve signed all those forms, then it won’t be your place to disagree with him. I’ve got to get back to Herb. The police need to search this place today before this body can be disposed of. This is the evidence we need for a conviction.”

Rafe suddenly groaned for the stench of death was overpowering to his acute senses. Once again his stomach convulsed, and he clutched at his abdomen while the room gyrated. Sweat broke out on his brow, and he gasped as he went to grab the edge of the table but got hold of Wally’s hand instead.

“Shit!” he swore, now aware of the bitter taste in his mouth. The itching on his arm was driving him insane.

Selena swung around to look at him. “What’s wrong? Are you really ill?”

“No, I’m play acting just for the hell of it,” he said with a hint of scorn just as he heard footsteps approaching from the corridor outside. “Blast, someone’s coming. That’s all I need right now.”

“It’s most likely Dr. Wilson. Rafe, he can’t find you here.”

Rafe looked quickly around through foggy vision. “There are no damn windows in here. Selena, there’s no way out.”

“No, there’s not. The way out is the same as the way in.”

Rafe spotted the refrigeration units that were used to store the dead. “Are those empty?”

She stared at the line of metal containers. “Oh, no, you can’t mean to...”

“Yes I can. I have no choice.” He staggered over and yanked on the handle of the nearest one. It slid out like a huge drawer and, relieved to see that it was unoccupied, he quickly laid down. “Now shut it and deal with Wilson. And for pity’s sake, please try not to be too long.”

She paused; she didn’t want to consign him to the cold and the darkness. He had been there before. “I’ll make sure it’s less than twenty years.”

“Is that your idea of a joke?” He didn’t bother to smile. “Push me in, and try to get rid of him.”

“But you’ll be so cold.”

Ah, so she did care after all. “I’ve been cold before. Now do it.”

She slid the drawer in and moved away from the refrigeration unit as the door opened.

Dr. Wilson gave her a quizzical stare. “What are you doing in here, Selena?”

“Nothing specific. Merely taking a look around, familiarising myself with the building. I hope you don’t mind.”

“And I see that you have also familiarized yourself with the body over there. You know, I did specifically tell you that the corpse in here was my project and that you weren’t to concern yourself with it. Remember those non disclosure forms you signed.”

“Yes, of course, and I’m so sorry. I was just curious.”

“And you know what curiosity did to the cat?”

She swallowed hard. “Sorry again. I’ll stick to my own projects in future.”

Wilson suddenly smiled. He strode across and patted her hand. “Now, now, Selena don’t look so scared. It was only a little rebuke on my part. I’m not really going to kill the cat, you know. I like cats, and I like you. In fact,” he said throatily as his finger trailed across her cheek, “I find that I like you a great deal. I shall go further and say that I think that we will make a great pair.”

“A pair?” she croaked.

He laughed and stroked her hair. “Yes a pair, a working team. Goodness, what did you think I meant, Selena? I am, after all engaged to be married to Mira Blackwell.”

“I really didn’t understand what you meant.”

“Mind you though, Selena, while we are on the subject of cats, you do of course know that while the cat’s away, the mice will play. What harm is there in a little kiss, do you think?”

She backed away. “This is my second day here. I really don’t want to get on the wrong side of Mr. Blackwell or his daughter.”

“Hmm, you may be right. Doesn’t do to offend the old man, does it? Shame though, your lips do look quite kissable.”

The door to the mortuary swung open at that moment, and a porter came in pushing a trolley.

Christian Wilson stepped away from Selena. “Your timing stinks, Peterson.”

“Sorry, Dr. Wilson.”

“I suppose that you have come for the body.”

“Yes, sir,” the man said as he pushed the trolley over to the body. “The incinerator’s all fired up and ready to go.”

“Then what are you waiting for? Take him away. He’s served his purpose, and the odour in here is vile.”



The porter rolled Wally's body onto the trolley, and within minutes, they were gone.

Selena's heat sank. With Wally gone, Rafe had lost his evidence, and it would be hard to prove murder with no body. And what about Rafe? She had to get him out of the refrigerator as soon as possible and that meant getting rid of Christian Wilson, but with his sudden penchant for her she fancied that might not be so easy.

He studied her with insipid grey eyes and ran his tongue over a bottom lip that was unusually large and pronounced. "So, here we are, alone again."

"Isn't it your lunch time, Dr. Wilson?"

He ran a hand across his taut belly. "Oh please, call me Christian, and I never eat lunch. I'm a two-meal-a-day man. I find that a hearty breakfast and a hearty dinner serve me well enough. Ten years as a doctor have certainly proved one thing. People eat too much. Obesity is rife in the country, and it is responsible for so many deaths. Keep healthy, I say, and avoid overeating if you seek a long life. Of course, Selena, that doesn't apply to you," he said, gazing on her cleavage, "because you have a most admirable figure. I'm sure that I could circle your waist with my hands."

"Then I'll take that as a complement."

He rubbed his hands together. "Now then, enough small talk. I have much to do, and since you're here, I'd like you to help me with a little project that I've got on the go."

"Yes, of course, I'll meet you in your room shortly, and you can tell me all about it."

"Oh no, I do my work in here. You see it's not hygienic having animals in my office, so I keep them here. Surely you've noticed the cages stacked over on those shelves."

She hadn't, but she did now. And, now that Wally was gone, she detected the smell of animals, rodents in fact. She went across to look at the cages, which as she had already guessed, housed rats. Very large rats, most of which were partially shaved. On the shaved areas of skin were large fabric patches. Some of the rats seemed quite healthy, but they were the unshaved ones without the patches. Of those with the patches, some were lying on their sides in obvious pain and distress. Others were walking blindly into the walls of their cages. The rest were dead.

“Those without the patches are the controls,” Wilson explained. “The dead rats have been wearing the patches the longest time, and just as I predicted, they died.”

“And the sick rats have had the patches on for a shorter time.”

“Yes, but the trick is to see if I can make them well again. The dead ones I intend to dissect this afternoon to see the effects of the toxins on the vital organs, especially the heart, but the live ones I intend to inject with differing concentrations of antidote. Then we’ll see which survive.”

He only had half of her attention because the other half was still working on how to get Rafe out. “And the point of this experiment?”

“Naturally it is rather complicated, but in a nutshell, the drugs that we use are common herbs that can be found along the country wayside. So, they are without patent and thus cheap to use. I picked most of them myself while walking the dog. Some will make a diseased heart function better while others will make a healthy heart fail. The research is ongoing, Selena. I’ll let you know my final conclusions in around six months, assuming that you are still here which I sincerely hope. I really do think that we are going to make a wonderful team.”

“So are you going to tell me what these particular patches are impregnated with?”

“Of course, I’m so thrilled that you’re taking an interest. It’s a cocktail of Bryony, Lilly-of-the-Valley, Foxglove and Hellebore.” He reached up and took a bottle off the shelf. “Here, smell it.”

She wrinkled her nose. “It’s quite pungent.”

“And it can be very toxic. Now, as you can see, it can be fatal, but never fear for I do have an antidote. The antidote is in those bottles up on the top shelf next to the syringes. It took me two years to come up with it, but I think that it’s pretty effective, though in some cases, it does cause convulsions that can lead to death. Anyway, I’m going to inject a few of these rats with the antidote and observe the results. Will you help me?”

“You’re trembling. Oh, don’t tell me that you’re scared of rats?” He put his arm around her neck and the palm of his hand dropped down onto her breast.

“No, no. I used to have one as a pet when I was a girl. I’d love to help you, Christian.”

“Then let’s get started.”

“I’d like nothing more, but first I have to go to the ladies room.”

Like Lazarus – Ellen Margret

“Ah, of course. I’ll have everything ready when you come back.”

“I won’t be long.”

In the meantime, Rafe had been in the refrigerator unit for over fifteen minutes. When would Selena get him out?

## Chapter Fifteen

In the ladies room, Selena fumbled with her mobile. She needed to speak with Herb so that she could tell him everything that had just happened. She had also formulated a plan to save Rafe. It took a couple of calls to the operator to locate the telephone number of the Veronica Blackwell Home. Her hands trembled as she rang the number.

“Hello.” It was the voice of a woman. It had to be Mira.

“Hello, can I speak with Herb?”

“He’s in his room. Can I take a message?”

“No, please get him for me now. This is really urgent, and I have to talk to him.”

“Hold one moment.” The phone was placed down on a hard surface.

Selena gnawed her lip. She had never felt so frightened, and the fear wasn’t entirely for herself. Finally she heard Herb’s voice.

“Hello.”

“Oh thank God. Herb, you don’t know me, but I’m Selena.”

“Yes, Ralph mentioned you.”

“No, Rafe mentioned me, not Ralph. Herb, I know who he is, and I know all about what happened to him. I’m calling to tell you that he’s in serious trouble. You have to help him.”

“Go on.”

“I can’t go into details right now, but Rafe is stuck in a mortuary refrigerator. I have to get Doctor Wilson out of the building immediately so I can let him out.”

“He’s stuck in what! No, never mind. Please go on. I realise that this is urgent so what can I do?”

“You need to call Doctor Wilson.”

“No problem, I’ll get the number right away. What do you want me to say to him?”

“Tell him that Mira has been in an accident and that she is seriously hurt. Naturally you can not let Mira overhear the conversation.”

“Of course, I understand.”

“Good, tell him he needs to get to the hospital right away. Oh, and meet me as soon as you can at my place. It’s flat two, Owl Lodge on Stanley Hill. Hopefully by then I’ll have Rafe with me.”

“I’m on it,” Herb said, “and, Selena, be careful. Wilson is dangerous.”

Selena dashed back to the mortuary. Rafe had been in the refrigerator for almost twenty-five minutes.

\* \* \* \*

The cramping in his belly was acute, and he had already vomited in the cooler. He had always believed that once you vomited you felt a lot better, but he didn’t. In fact, he felt worse. The pain in his head was unbearable. The worst of it though was his heart. It was beating out a staccato rhythm so rapid that he thought it would burst right out of his chest. He wanted to cry out, but instead he gritted his teeth until he tasted blood.

He had to remain silent at all costs and not be heard, thus giving away his hiding place. Minutes went by, and he was steadily growing colder. His hands and feet were already numb, and the only way that he could take his mind off the cold was to listen to the conversation in the mortuary. He could hear every word.

Wilson’s lewdness disgusted him. Next to Garth Blackwell, he probably despised him more than anyone else in the world. If he laid a finger on Selena then he was personally going to have to answer to him. He’d cut his heart out and feed it to the bloody rats that he so loved to experiment on.

And when he heard him say that he could circle her waist with his hands, Rafe immediately wanted the throttle the life out of him. But that was his last coherent thought before the veil of unconsciousness descended upon him. And then the nausea was gone along with the cold, and Cerdic was with him.

Cerdic threw up his hands as Rafe came towards him. “Before you ask, no, you are not dead. But I can tell you that you are not that far away from crossing over to us. What a crazy stunt, Rafe, sticking yourself in a refrigerator. You spent twenty years in a big one so I would truly have expected you to come up with a plan more sensible than this and to have carried it out someplace a lot warmer.”

Rafe glowered at him. “Like where, buddy? Come on, tell me.”

Cerdic shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know.”

“Exactly! So keep your opinions to yourself unless they’re constructive. Look Cerd, I had to hide in the freezer simply because it was the only place. I’m a bit too big to hide in a rat cage.”

“Ah well, I only hope that Selena can get you out before you freeze solid. I must warn you that if you do then I don’t think there’s the option to bring you back again. That was a one time offer, never to be repeated.”

Rafe pretty much realised that was the case. “She’s got to get me out, Cerd. I’ve got so much to do down there. Selena needs my help, not to mention Mira. Some bastard’s been beating her.”

“It’s her fiancée, Christian Wilson, the chap who’s currently bothering Selena. He’s lower than a reptile, but I think you already know that.”

Rafe had guessed as much, and it came as no surprise. “Yes, I’ve managed to work that one out, Cerd, but thanks for telling me.”

“Oh and there’s something else that you should know.”

“Go on.”

“It concerns Garth Blackwell.”

“Doesn’t everything!”

“Blackwell has recently been pretty brutal to her too, both emotionally and physically.”

Now that was a surprise. “You’re kidding. I was under the impression that Mira was one of the few things in life that he had great regard for.”

“Yes she was. She was the apple of his eye, but now everything’s changed. He recently found out something about her that made him meaner than a bull facing a red rag. As a consequence, he turned nasty on her. Trouble is that the poor kid doesn’t even know why her beloved father is now rejecting her.”

“Go on, tell me more.”

“He had some tests done, medical tests. She didn’t know. It was after she lost the baby, and she was pretty sick.”

Rafe became aware of someone shaking him. It was loosening his link with Cerdic. The agonising cramping was returning to his guts, not that it had ever really gone away.

Cerd tried to maintain the link, but it was tenuous and growing weaker. “For a long time he had pushed it to the back of his mind, but he questioned whether he was really her biological father. So he had

DNA tests done and discovered that he was not. So that means that you... Rafe, you're fading, my friend."

"Oh God." The pain hit him like a wall. Everywhere! In fact, there was no part of him that didn't hurt. Cerdic was gone, and Selena was staring down at him. Even on the mountain, she hadn't looked so worried. He should have been touched by her concern, but he couldn't even think. He closed his eyes. He was shivering uncontrollably, and the shivering was exacerbating the cramps. He was dimly aware that she had helped him to sit up. He promptly doubled over and landed on his knees on the hard floor.

Selena was trying to pull him up to his feet but with little success. "Rafe, we have got to get out of here and quickly."

He prised his eyes open but couldn't focus on anything. "Where's that bastard, Wilson?"

"I hope that he is on his way to the hospital. I got Herb to ring him. He thinks that Mira's had an accident."

"Just as well he's gone. I was going to kill him with my bare hands for the things he said to you and for what he's been doing to Mira."

"I'm impressed with the intended bravado, but I don't think that you're in any state to so much as swat a fly right now. Rafe, what is wrong with you?"

His head flopped onto his chest; it was too heavy to hold up. "I told you earlier, but you didn't believe me." He sucked in a breath and hissed in discomfort. "You want a list of symptoms? Okay then here goes. I've got a severe headache, blurred vision, vertigo, racing pulse and agonising stomach cramps. Oh, and I also can't feel my extremities. But then I think we know the reason for that one."

She was down beside him, feeling his pulse. "Perhaps you're suffering from food poisoning. Did you eat something you shouldn't have?"

"No, and you don't need to feel my pulse because I can already tell you that it's firing faster than a machine gun in a war zone." He put his left hand out and grabbed her arm for support. "I ate what Herb ate, and he's okay so it's not the food."

Suddenly she pointed to the livid red rash and the yellow pustules on his hand wrist and forearm, now so swollen that the watchstrap was cutting into his flesh. "My God, Rafe, look at your arm."

"Yeah, it's stinging like crazy, but right now I reckon that's bottom of my list of symptoms. Mira gave me the watch last evening.

Blackwell had it. It was mine, and he thought that I, or should I say Ralph, should have it back.”

“Oh, did he now? And putting this at the bottom of your list of symptoms would be a mistake. It should be at the top since I think that it is the cause of your troubles. Rafe, I think I know what has happened to you.” She put her nose to the strap and sniffed. “I thought you had exceptionally acute senses. Couldn’t you smell this dreadful thing?”

“With Herb around, it’s been hard to smell anything except him. He positively reeks.”

“I have to tell you that it’s the strap causing all your troubles. It’s impregnated with a cocktail of potentially lethal herbs, and your body has been steadily absorbing them through your skin and into your bloodstream. There are dozens of bottles of it on that shelf over there, and Wilson has been using it in his experiment on the rats.”

Suddenly his condition made sense. “He’s poisoned me?”

“Yes, I think so. If only you had noticed the strap earlier. It’s got to come off.” She grabbed his wrist and quickly unfastened the strap, shoving it into her pocket and out of sight.

Rafe wondered if things could get any worse. “Bloody hell, Blackwell wants me dead and maybe even Mira does too. Do you think that she knew about this? Oh Christ!” His jaw clamped shut, and he clenched his teeth as another spasm hit his stomach. His breathing became ragged, and his pulse roared in his ears like a tidal wave hitting the shore. “I don’t want to die again, Selie,” he groaned pitifully, “not again. “Not this way.”

“And I promise that you won’t. There is an antidote, and if it works on the rats then it has got to work on humans, too. It simply has to.” She ran to the shelf and grabbed the antidote, the syringes, surgical gloves and a scalpel. She dropped it all into her bag and hurried back to him. “Come on, you’ve got to get up because I can’t carry you. All you need to do is stay on your feet until we get to my car.”

“Oh, is that all?”

“With any luck, we should be able to get back to my office unseen. My car is parked directly outside so all you need to do is climb out of the window.”

Climb out of the window, he wasn’t sure that he could do that, but Rafe nodded anyway simply because he couldn’t talk. He was aware of Selena hauling him to his feet and putting his arm around her



neck then they were walking. It was a mammoth task, but he willed his legs to keep moving, focussed on putting one foot in front of the other.

He was dimly aware that they were in the reception area and that the receptionist had returned from her lunch break. He heard Selena swear.

“Just keep going,” she urged him.

Through his half open eyes, he saw the receptionist walk toward them.

“Doctor Steele, do you need help?”

“No, no thank you. I can manage.”

“It doesn’t look to me like you’re managing. That man is about to fall over, and you can barely hold him up. Shall I call for someone to help you?”

“No, as I said, I’m fine. This patient has tried out a new drug, and he needs to walk around for it to take full effect. He’ll be right as rain just as soon as he gets to my office.”

“But that’s Mr Acer, isn’t it? I didn’t think that he was sick.”

“He’s a willing guinea pig, and, besides, it’s only a temporary thing, I assure you.”

“I do hope so, and I hope that his recovery is swift. Unfortunately, I shall not be here to find out though since I’m flying off to Bermuda in the morning. It will be my first holiday in three years.”

“Oh, how nice, do have a lovely time.”

“Thank you.” The receptionist returned to her desk.

Finally Selena pushed open her office door and led Rafe to the window. By then he had his eyes closed, but he heard the sounds of a chair scraping across the floor and suddenly felt a blast of cold air on his face. When he opened his eyes, she was urging him to climb onto the chair and out the open window.

“No way, can’t do it. Why didn’t we just take the front door?”

“Because we will be seen by even more people, and I can’t risk that. No one must know that you were here. If that receptionist is leaving for her holiday, and I have no reason to believe that she is lying, then no one else will.” She was looked through the window at her car. “Rafe, just climb up onto this chair then you’ll be able to get through the window.”

“Not possible. Legs too heavy.”

“We didn’t come this far to give up now. Oh yes you can, and you will.” She lined him up with the chair and then with a superhuman effort borne out of sheer terror, she pushed him up onto the chair. He literally fell through the window. Selena nimbly followed after him. When he opened his eyes again, she was leaning over him and struggling to get him to his feet. “You’re too heavy, Rafe. I can’t get you up. Look, get as far as your knees and then crawl onto the back seat.”

His mouth clamped shut, and he tasted blood.

She was panting heavily. “Rafe, I am scared to death. We have to get out of here. Now do it.”

He summoned up the energy, and the next second she was shoving him into her car. He collapsed onto the back seat and stared at the floorboard for possibly five minutes or so while his belly convulsed, and spasms shot through him. He thought the car was moving, but he wasn’t certain until it screeched to an abrupt halt, throwing him against the backs of the front seats. Selena leaned over him, wearing surgical gloves and holding a medicated wipe.

“What... what are you doing?”

“Cleaning away as much of the surface toxins as I can before they kill you.”

“Too late...might die anyway.”

“Come on now, where’s that fighting spirit?”

“Lost it on the way. I’m dying, Selie. Recognise the signs.”

“Damn the signs. I’m redirecting you.” She filled the syringe with the liquid in the bottle. “Rafe, you’re not going to die. I’ve got the antidote here. I’m going to give you a shot of it. The trouble is, though, I’m guessing the dosage. I only hope I get it right.”

He managed to lift his hand and touch her face. “Well if ....if you get it’s wrong then I’ll die a happy man in.... in your arms.”

“Oh, shut up. I don’t want to hear such dross and stop feeling so sorry for yourself. This will work, it has to.” She found the vein and gave him the antidote. “Rafe, you are not going to die. Do you hear me?”

He didn’t respond.

“Rafe, I said did you hear me?” she cried out as she dropped the syringe and lifted one eyelid.

“Yes, yes I heard you. Christ, you can be a real harpy when you want to be. Look, drop the shutter. The light hurts my eye.”

She muttered a word of thanks. “Right, I’m taking you home.” She slid onto the driving seat and started the engine up.

“Whose home?”

“My home, of course.”

“Oh, of course,” he muttered weakly. “Glad Rex isn’t there. You’re all mine, Selie.”

She was driving but managed a quick glance back at him. “But how did you know about Rex?”

He was losing consciousness. “All in the eyes. Very pretty eyes too.”

## Chapter Sixteen

As Selena pulled up outside her flat, she noticed a man leaning against the wall. He was dressed like a vagrant, but she saw the grim expression on his face that told her he was extremely worried. She jumped out of the car, convinced that this must be Herb. “Herb?”

“Yes. What’s happened?”

“I need your help.”

He vaulted over the low front garden wall. “Of course, I’ve been waiting for you. Where’s Rafe?”

“He’s on the back seat of the car, in a pretty bad way. Garth Blackwell tried to kill him with a cocktail of pretty deadly herbs. It’s made him really sick, but I’ve given him the antidote to counteract the effects. Unfortunately it’s brought on convulsions. Thankfully he’s fairly quiet at the moment though, but I doubt that will last much longer.”

“Then we’d better get him inside.”

They got Rafe into the bedroom, but no sooner had they gotten him through the door than another seizure took hold of him. This one was particularly bad, and his body jerked violently. He lashed out with his fist and caught Herb squarely on the jaw. The shorter man staggered but determinedly held on to Rafe.

“Put him down, lay him on the floor, and let it run its course. The last turn lasted around two minutes. I pray this one will be shorter.

Herb had never seen someone like this before, and he found it distressing. “Damn, will he be all right?”

“I don’t know, really I don’t. I think he was exposed to quite a high level of toxins. Lord knows what damage it might have done to his body. I’ve never dealt with anything like this.”

“But how did it happen?” Herb moved quickly to stop Rafe’s rolling body from colliding with a freestanding swing mirror. Then he stopped him from demolishing a footstool with his left arm. For his trouble, he received another smack, this time on the nose. He swore

beneath his breath and felt warm blood trickle onto his lips. “He certainly packs a punch.”

She saw the blood. “I’ll take a look at that later.”

Herb waved a dismissive hand and gingerly mopped up the blood with his sleeve. “Don’t trouble about me, Selena. You’ve more pressing problems here to keep you busy. So are you going to tell me how it happened?” He was still using himself as a buffer to protect Rafe from the furniture. He was going to be black and blue by morning but then so too was Rafe.

“Can you believe it? He was poisoned with a toxic watch strap.”

“In my job, I’ve learned to believe almost anything can happen because it invariably does. I don’t shock easily. Anyway, go on.”

“Mira gave Rafe his old watch back but with a new strap. Blackwell wanted Ralph to have it.”

“He thought that he was giving it to the son.”

“Yes, a son that Blackwell obviously doesn’t want around. The strap was impregnated with the toxins, and Rafe’s been absorbing it through his skin for over eighteen hours.”

“Yes, I was there when she gave it to him. Damn, but that’s devious. Honestly though, Selena, I really don’t think that Mira’s implicated in this. She likes Rafe, and he likes her.”

She was holding Rafe’s head, he was calming and his muscles were relaxing slightly. “Yes, I figured that one out for myself,” she declared tartly. “In fact, I saw them in each other’s arms.”

Herb looked perplexed. “You did?”

Selena felt Rafe grab her arm. She glanced down at him and realised with relief that the convulsion had subsided. And his eyes were open, too.

“No, no you didn’t see that. Jumped to conclusions,” Rafe croaked.

“How do you feel, Rafe?”

“My throat aches, and it hurts to speak. Look, never mind how I am. Selena, I want you to know that I was simply comforting Mira.” He wondered if he’d loosened a few teeth, but he had to set things straight and make Selena understand. “I was comforting her, that’s all.”

“Okay, if that’s what you want to call it. Look, don’t talk. You’re too weak.”

He sighed. “Have to and that’s not what I want to call it, that’s how it was. She was upset, and I was trying to be supportive.”

“Come on, Herb, let’s get him into bed.”

He grabbed her hand. “No, no Selie, listen to me. This is important. You have to believe me. There’s nothing going on between Mira and me for God’s sake. How could there be?” They were lifting him up and taking him to the bed. He wished that she would listen.

“Actions speak louder than words. She is a woman, and you are a man,” Selena simply said as if that explained all.

“But I’m not just any man. I think, well I think that I’m her father. Mira is most likely my daughter.”

“What!” Herb and Selena spoke in unified astonishment.

Rafe wanted to tell them more, but he wasn’t able to continue with the conversation since it felt like a sharp knife had just been plunged into his belly. He rolled onto his side on the large bed and, as he began to dry heave, he drew his knees up. “Oh shit,” he gasped. “I hurt all over. I’m dog-tired, and I think I’m going to be sick again. God, but I feel so bloody thirsty.”

“Shall I get him a drink?” Herb asked. “I’ve never seen anyone look so ghastly.” “What, so that he can lose it straight away? I don’t think so.”

“You’re the doc, but he’s obviously dehydrated.”

“Yes he is, and that’s why I need to set up a drip along with a pretty powerful sedative to knock him out for the night. He needs intravenous fluids, and he needs rest.”

Herb looked surprised. “And do you have all that.”

“There’s a box in the boot of my car with everything that I need. If you could bring it in, I’ll get started on him right away.”

“It’s as good as done.” Herb put his hand on Rafe’s arm. “Don’t worry, this woman knows what she’s doing. She’ll have you on your feet in no time, and then we can all have a long talk about what’s been happening.”

Rafe knew that she could make him well. He had every confidence in her. She’d done it before, and he hoped that she could do it again. If not, he would soon be conversing with Michael and Cerdic on a one-way ticket. He tried to thank Herb for helping him, but his mutterings sounded largely unintelligible so he gave up trying and welcomed the blackness that took hold of him.

\* \* \* \*

When he awoke, he was relieved to find that he was in no great pain and that the sickness had largely subsided. There was a drip in

his arm suspended over the top of a metal clothes rail, and Herb sat watching him.

“Welcome back. How do you feel?”

Rafe tried to speak. His voice sounded scratchy. “Like I’ve just been on the underside of a rugby scrum.” There was movement at the end of the bed. A large tortoiseshell cat sat there, fastidiously washing itself. Obviously this was Bathsheba.

“I can imagine.”

He grimaced. “Bet you can’t.”

“Well now, that is where you’re wrong. I used to play rugby, you know. Broke a few bones doing it, too.”

Rafe peered into his face and saw the bruising on his nose and chin. He did look like he’d been in a rugby scrum. “Hell, Herb, what happened to you?”

“You did. You got a bit restless, and I got in the way.”

“Ah, sorry. Guess I caused you both a bit of bother.”

“Just a bit but I’m sure that we’ll forgive you eventually,” he said glibly.

Rafe glanced about and took in the bedroom. It was so obviously the room of a female with its cream carpet, cherry curtains and pink and white striped duvet cover, and of course, there was a long furred cat at the end of the bed. It was Selena’s cat, and he was in her bedroom. It was a vast improvement over lying on an old mattress and listening to Herb snoring. “So, where’s Selena?” Bathsheba took a leisurely stretch before padding over to Rafe and rubbing her wet nose against his arm. He stroked her, and she began to purr before curling up on his belly.

“Lying down, I hope. She was up with you all last night, and I only managed to persuade her to leave you in my capable hands a couple of hours ago.”

“I’ve really been here that long?”

“Yes, all evening and all night. I don’t mind telling you that Selena was beside herself with worry even though she tried to hide it. She kept fussing over you, listening to your heart, taking your pulse and endlessly feeling your brow. You know, I’m damn sure that if it was me in your place that she wouldn’t have given me half the tender care.”

“I’ve got to be honest, Herb, that might have something to do with the way you smell. You might do us all a favour and consider doing something about it.”

“Hey, I’m undercover. It goes with the territory.”

“Maybe it does, but I have to tell you that it’s a part that you’re playing rather too well. Look, I’m sure Selena has a shower. Why don’t you go use it?”

Selena appeared at the door with a tray in her hands. “Yes, why don’t you, Herb? There’s a clean towel and plenty of soap in the bathroom. Tell you what, have a nice long soak in the bath instead and take this cup of coffee with you. Oh, and don’t forget to clean the tub afterwards.”

Herb took the cup from the tray. “Hmm, what makes me think that you’re trying to get rid of me?”

“Because for now, she is,” Rafe explained with a deliberate lack of tact. He knew that Herb was pretty thick skinned though and wouldn’t take offence.

Herb took a long sip of his drink. “A man knows when he’s not wanted, I guess.”

“Sure does,” Rafe muttered, and his eyes were on Selena. She was wearing a robe, and it was driving him insane wondering what she was wearing underneath it. Maybe she was naked.

“I will see you anon.” Herb saluted and left with a smirk on his face.

“You seem a lot better,” she said, placing the tray on the table beside the bed.

“I am, and I owe it all to you, again. Selie, you’re the best, and I will add the prettiest, doctor I have ever known.”

She handed him the cup and smiled. “Here, can you manage this, or are you still too shaky?”

“I guess I can manage it. Is it very hot?” He was looking forward to a cup of strong coffee.

“No, it’s cold.”

He raised a quizzical brow. “You’re giving me a cup of cold coffee?”

“No, I’m giving you a cup of diluted orange juice. I freshly squeezed it for you.”

“Hmm, that’s very kind, but I don’t like oranges.” He dropped his hand and looked at her like a petulant little boy. “Sorry, I won’t drink it.”

“Actually,” she declared, pressing the cup to his lips, “you will because there is medication mixed in with it, and you need it to get better. I warn you that I shall hear no arguments.”



“Damn, the harpy’s back, and she takes no prisoners.” No sooner had he opened his mouth than she had the cup to his lips, tipping the contents into his mouth. He had no choice but to swallow. He screwed up his face in disgust. “Ugh, that was a mean trick, and it tasted vile.” He gave her his best smile then. “So can I have a coffee now?”

She sat down on the bed. “Coffee will make you sick again. Tell you what though, how about a cup of weak tea?”

He folded his arms across his bare chest, and Bathsheba meowed in displeasure at the disturbance before readjusting her position. “Sorry puss,” he said, stroking her neck.

“I see that Sheba’s taken to you.”

“I have a way with females.”

Selena snorted. “You might think that you do. So do you want that weak tea or not?”

“Yes, I do. Can I have something to eat as well?”

“You mean like bacon, eggs and fried bread?” She took hold of his wrist and felt his pulse. With her other hand she looked into his eyes and studied his pupils.

“That would be nice.”

She pursed her lips. “Hmm, wouldn’t it.”

“It would.” He suddenly put his arm around her neck and drew her down toward him. “It would be very nice, but I know that all you’re going to give me is a piece of lightly buttered toast.”

“Mind reading again? Ah well, I’m getting quite used to it now, and you know what, Rafe?”

“What?”

“I really don’t mind. I don’t want there to be any secrets between us. I am sorry for jumping to conclusions about Mira.”

“No secrets at all,” he agreed.

Her robe parted, and she saw the hungry look in his eyes as he gazed upon her naked body. Clearly he wasn’t too sick to desire her. “None.” She studied his eyes, apparently forgetting he could read her thoughts.

He chuckled. “Thank you. I like to look into yours too, but until now you’ve never really liked me doing it.”

She laid her head on his chest as his finger began to stroke her nipple. “Perhaps it’s that I trust you now.”

He kissed her silken hair. “That’s good to hear. So, you really do believe me now. You know that there was nothing going on between me and Mira?”

“Like I said, I always was one for jumping to conclusions too readily. Yes, of course I believe you, especially after what you told us. Do you really think that Mira is your daughter?”

“I don’t know for certain, but it seems pretty likely. Mira was born seven months after I died, and Veronica and I were still sleeping together right up until Garth and I left for our trip. Of course I didn’t know that she was also sleeping with him too, or I might just have throttled him.”

“So what makes you so sure that she’s your daughter?”

“Oh, it’s something that Cerd told me when I was in that damn mortuary fridge.”

She sat up sharply. “Cerd?”

“Yes, Cerdic. My spirit guide.”

She showed no surprise. “Ah, I see. So what about him?”

He pulled her back to him. “Cerd keeps in touch whenever he can, and he has a habit of coming out with the odd useful titbit. He told me that Garth recently got upset after some DNA tests were carried out on Mira. It was after she lost her baby.”

She sat up again.

“Stop doing that, I want to hold you. Besides, you’re disturbing Bathsheba with all this fidgeting.”

“Never mind Sheba. Rafe, you keep telling me startling things. Mira was pregnant?”

“Yes she was and by Christian Wilson, but she lost the baby not long ago. Since then he’s been beating her black and blue. Garth’s been acting pretty nasty too according to Cerd.”

“So you think that he discovered that she wasn’t his child?”

“That’s about it, but I need to find out. I honestly think that Mira’s life may be in danger.”

“I suppose that I could look through her medical records and see what I can find out.”

“No,” he replied flatly.

“What do you mean no? You need to know, and Mira has a right to know why she’s suddenly being treated so cruelly.”

“There has to be another way. Selie, I don’t want you returning to that damn place. It’s far too dangerous, and Wilson can’t be trusted.”

“I can handle him, and I can take care of myself.”

“I’m not so sure. Don’t you understand that that place is probably crawling with murdering rats, and I’m not talking about the four-

legged variety? Garth Blackwell likely has his henchmen everywhere. Hell, one of them even lives with me and Herb.”

“Then you had better watch your back. Look, Rafe, you can’t stop me returning there. Besides, it should be safe assuming that the receptionist is really gone.”

“Exactly, but you don’t know, do you. You could be walking into the lion’s den.” In exasperation, he raked a hand through his hair. “Stupid woman, do you want to worry me into an early grave?”

“Oh you’ve been there and done that.” She pouted and kissed him on the lips. “I’m glad you care so much, but I don’t think that’s going to happen. You have far too robust a constitution as you have already proven. The fact that you’re still alive is a minor miracle, but then I guess you’re used to miracles happening.”

“I guess. Still I don’t like it one bit.”

“You don’t have to. Right then. I’ll go make you that cup of tea.”

“Just one more thing,” Rafe said.

“Yes?”

“What happened to you and Rex?”

“Oh, and there was me thinking that you knew everything.”

“I know that you’re not together.”

“We haven’t been together for a long time. Our engagement was very brief, and it didn’t take me long to realise that it was a mistake. You see Rex is a possessive man, and I found that stifling. That’s what I told him when I called off the engagement. The trouble is though that it took Rex a lot longer than me to accept it.”

“But finally he did.”

“Yes. Now I really don’t want to talk about him ever again.”

“Of course, I understand.” He flopped back on the pillows, and his empty stomach began to rumble. He wanted food. “I’m starving, Selie. Is a bacon sandwich out of the question?”

She smoothed the bedclothes and kissed him on the cheek. “Yes, it is.”

## Chapter Seventeen

The next day, against doctor's orders, Rafe went to work at Acer Blackwell Leisure. He had hoped to speak with Blackwell, but that chance didn't present itself until Friday afternoon two days later.

Rafe had just sold some ski equipment to a wealthy American customer when Garth entered the store. Rafe handed the credit card back to the American and watched Blackwell out of the corner of his eye. He looked frail as he shuffled along, and his breathing was rapid and wheezy. He looked like a man in pain. That suited Rafe just fine because Blackwell deserved to feel pain. Dying on a mountainside was bloody painful, too.

Blackwell tapped Rafe on the arm.

Rafe turned and managed to hide the loathing that he felt. "Good morning, Mr Blackwell, and how are you?"

"Ralph, glad to see you and thanks for asking, but if you want to know, I am not having such a good day today so I think I'll just sit down in my office. Make me a chamomile tea, will you?"

"Chamomile tea?" Rafe rather stupidly repeated, more than a little surprised by the request. Garth Blackwell's favourite brew had been percolated coffee, so thick that the spoon could stand up in it. He would drink gallons of it a week with thick cream and sugar, and now he was drinking herb tea!

Blackwell did not hide his irritation at his response. "Yes, you've heard of it, haven't you? It is a calming herbal tea."

Rafe thought it was a lady's drink. He had never heard of a man drinking it. "Yes, I have heard of it, but I've never made it myself."

"Wilkins simply pours water over a tea bag in a cup. It suits my delicate digestion right now."

Ben Wilkins arrived from dealing with another customer. "I'll make it for you, sir. I'll make it just as you like it."

"Oh, no, you won't. Ralph is going to do it for me, and then he and I are going to have a chat in my office. I am quite sure that you

can manage to make me my drink, Ralph. You will find the necessary things in the back kitchen. I shall see you in my office in five minutes and feel free to make a beverage for yourself.”

Rafe made the chamomile tea, and he even sipped it to see what it tasted like. Why Blackwell wanted to drink something so flowery and pungent he really didn’t know, but making it wasn’t that difficult he supposed except he was only sorry that he didn’t have some of Christian Wilson’s lethal herbs to lace with it. He would have loved to see how that might affect Garth’s delicate constitution. Holding the steaming drink, he knocked on Blackwell’s office door.

“Come in, Ralph.”

Rafe stepped inside and handed over the drink.

“Didn’t you want a drink for yourself?” Garth asked as he took a sip of his tea. “Oh, and do sit down.”

“No, sir, but thank you for offering.” Rafe sat down in the chair on the opposite side of the antique desk. It gave him a clear view of Blackwell’s face and more importantly his eyes. He wanted a window into Blackwell’s dark soul, and they were it. “No, my stomach is still a little queasy,” he lied because he felt as fit as a fiddle.

Blackwell put the drink down on the desk. “Ah yes, you had a day off work with food poisoning did you not?”

“I’m not sure what it was, and I’d hate to blame your daughter’s cooking.”

“My daughter? Yes I suppose that she is quite a fair cook.” He wasn’t looking at Rafe; he was staring down into his tea.

Zero eye contact. Ah, well, he wasn’t going to get any information regarding the daughter then. “Obviously something disagreed with me. Somehow something toxic must have got into my system, but I can’t imagine what it could have been.” Blackwell glanced up and Rafe fleetingly caught his eye. It was long enough, though, and it told him specifically what he wanted to know. Wilson had prepared the watchstrap on Blackwell’s orders, and that meant that Blackwell really did want him dead. Rafe decided to probe for further information. “It was good of you to give me a job, Mr Blackwell.”

“Let’s dispense with the Mr Blackwell at least when we are alone. Call me Garth. Goodness young man but you look so like your poor late father. I swear that it is just like talking to him face to face. I do believe that if it weren’t for your southern hemisphere twang then you would also sound exactly like he did.”

“So you see a strong resemblance.”

“It’s uncanny. You could almost be his clone.” Blackwell leaned forward, his expression stern and the tone of his voice now faintly menacing. “I also find it odd that you took twenty years to seek me out.”

“As I said before, Australia is a long way away, and long haul travel isn’t cheap.”

Blackwell opened the desk drawer and drew out a chequebook. “Let’s not beat about the bush any longer, young man. You are here for a purpose, and I believe that I know what it is. You want money, do you not? I am willing to pay you, but do bear in mind that even I have my limits. It is not wise to cross me. Others have tried and have lived to regret it. Do you take my meaning?”

“Actually, no.” Rafe’s expression remained impassive. “Ah, of course, you’re referring to my wages. You know, I’m not exactly sure what my salary is to be since the figures have not yet been discussed. Perhaps we should talk to Ben Winters.”

Blackwell gave a harsh laugh. “You misunderstand me, Ralph.”

“I do?” Rafe was doing his best to appear as simple as he could.

Blackwell put his elbows on the table and entwined his fingers as he leaned forward. “Yes, you do, and don’t pretend that you don’t. It is my contention that you want something from me. In fact you want money and plenty of it. I believe that your reason for coming here is to try to recoup you father’s half of the business.”

Rafe tried his best to look shocked. “I can assure you that the thought never crossed my mind.” He hoped that he sounded convincing. He probably sounded a little too simple but no matter.

“Oh, did it not? I confess to finding that rather surprising.” He unlocked his fingers and proceeded to tap the desk top with the fingers of his right hand. “However I must tell you that, should that notion enter into your head, then you must be warned that you are entitled to nothing. Your father never mentioned you in his will, and everything that was his went to my late wife, Veronica. When she died, it all became mine, and once something becomes mine, I don’t part with it. Acer Blackwell is mine.” His eyes narrowed. “All of it.”

“So I gathered. Mr Blackwell...”

“Garth.”

The man had a nerve. What was this, friendly intimidation? “Garth, as I said before, I had a desire to come to England and meet

you. I have done both so who knows? Perhaps in six months or so I shall return home.”

“So, you do not intend to contest the will?”

“It seems rather late to be doing that.” Blackwell was peering at him intently, trying to gauge whether he was telling the truth. It allowed Rafe the time to discover that no matter what he said, Blackwell wasn’t going to believe him. He perceived him as a threat, a big threat and one to be eliminated as soon as possible. Selena was right. He would need to watch his back and if he had any sense his front, too.

Blackwell nodded and picked up his herb tea. “Then I am satisfied. Glad that’s been cleared up.”

Rafe knew, of course, that he wasn’t satisfied. “I’ll get back to work,” he said as he rose from the chair.

“Oh, Ralph.”

Rafe halted in the doorway.

“I’ll see you at the party tomorrow evening. I suggest that you arrive at seven.”

So the party was still on? He really would have to watch his back. “I look forward to it.”

\* \* \* \*

“So, what do you think of this one, Rafe?” Selena gave him a twirl. The black dress was cinched in at the waist, hugged her firm bottom tightly, showed off her cleavage to perfection and had a hemline that was almost indecently short.

He lay back on the bed with his arms behind his head and gave a harsh snort of disapproval. “Are you insane, Selie?” Actually he loved the dress because it made her look like some sex siren. All he wanted to do was rip it off her and taste the goods underneath.

“What, don’t you like it? Rafe, this is the sixth dress that I’ve tried on. I honestly think that this one is the most suitable to wear this evening.”

“Well, I don’t. Look in that mirror, and I mean really look at yourself.”

She did. “It’s black and slinky, and I like it.”

He sat up. “Yes, so do I.”

“Then I’ll wear it.”

“You will do no such thing. If I like it then so too will every other man at the party. Christian Wilson will appreciate it too. Tell me do

you really want him pawing and ogling you all ruddy night because that's what he's going to do if you go in that sexy little number?"

She adjusted her cleavage. "Oh, I hadn't thought."

Did she have any idea what that little action did to him? He had watched her putting on and taking off clothes for the past hour, and it was all that he could do to keep his hands off her. Seeing her in nothing but underwear made him decidedly uncomfortable in his groin area. "Well, do think, think about the consequences. I swear that if he touches you then I'll take immense pleasure in beating him to a bloody pulp. Hell, I might even do it before the end of the evening anyway."

"And that would be foolish, wouldn't it? As far as Wilson is concerned, he's never even met you so why should you wish him harm."

"True, he hasn't, but that little fact didn't stop him from trying to kill me with that damn poisonous watch strap. He'll dance to any tune that Blackwell sings including attempted murder." Unable to look at her any more, he rose from the bed and went to her. He stood behind her so that the image of the two of them was reflected in the tall swing mirror. "Selie, this isn't a good idea."

"What isn't?" She was talking to his reflection. He had his hands around her waist, and he was nuzzling her neck.

He inhaled deeply. "God, I love the way you smell."

"Rafe, I'm not wearing perfume."

"I know. I said I love the way you smell."

"You rogue. I believe that you were saying that something isn't a good idea. What isn't?"

He ran a finger lightly over the mounds of her breasts. "This party. I've decided that I don't want you to go."

"But that would be rude. Garth Blackwell invited me. He wants me to get to know everyone. He wants me to meet you."

He pulled down the strap of her dress and kissed her creamy shoulder. "You've met me. Just ring and say that you're sick."

"No, Rafe, I won't. If you're going then so am I."

"Yes but it's supposed to be a party in my honour so I have to go. Besides who knows what else I might find out while I'm there? Speaking of finding out things, did you manage to locate Mira's medical records?"



“No, I didn’t but I did look. Her records weren’t kept with all the others, but I’ll do another search on Monday.” She suddenly felt the zipper at her back come loose. “Rafe, what are you doing?”

“Unzipping your dress.”

“Why?”

“Well now, since I zipped it up then I have the right to unzip it. Besides no matter how appealing you look in the dress you look even sexier without it. Selie, do you have any idea what you have been doing to me during the past hour? I’m a man, honey, not a saint, and my balls are aching.” He took great satisfaction in seeing the dress fall away and then, grinning mischievously, he glanced up at her scantily clad reflection in the mirror.

“Do you like what you see now?”

“Oh, I liked what I saw before but this, my love, is even better.” He slipped his right hand into the right cup of her bra and lifted the full breast out. Then he leaned down and flicked his tongue over the tip of her bare breast. “I love your breasts.”

She made a faintly cat-like sound in her throat. “Ah, so you like them even though you didn’t like the dress.”

In one dexterous manoeuvre he unfastened the bra with one hand and slipped it off her. “I told you, I loved the dress, but I don’t want you to wear it this evening.” He had the measure of each perfect mound in his hands as his thumbs stroked lightly upon her erect nipples.

She shuddered, still watching him in the mirror. “God, that’s so nice.”

His right hand trailed down her belly and slipped inside her panties. “But I’ll bet that this is better.”

“Oh yes.” Still facing the mirror, she hooked her thumbs into the elastic of her panties, pulled them down her hips and let them drop to the carpet.

“Bloody hell, you’re beautiful standing there like some naked goddess.” She turned to him so that he was then treated to a display of her naked back and bottom in the mirror. “And what about those incredible dimples in your lovely derriere?”

She chuckled and then stood back with her arms akimbo. “Rafe Acer?”

“Yes, goddess?”

“You are seriously overdressed.”

The side of his mouth curled up. “Hmm, that can be quickly remedied.” Her hands were on the buttons of his shirt while he unfastened his belt. “Especially with a little help from the lovely lady.”

“Am I lovely, Rafe?”

“Oh yes,” he murmured as, finally naked, they tumbled onto the bed. “So lovely in fact that I just can’t help myself.”

“You can’t?”

“No, I’m powerless to resist you, and therefore I am going to have you here and now. I’m hard as a rock, Selie, and my balls really do ache.”

She flushed and opened her arms to him. “Well, I think that this doctor might just have the cure.”

## Chapter Eighteen

Since they couldn't be seen arriving at the party together, Rafe set off an hour before Selena. He was going to set off on foot while she would leave later in the car. Last minute attempts by him to persuade her not to attend fell on deaf ears, and finally he gave up asking. He had come to learn that Selena was a strong-minded woman and that she would do just as she pleased.

Rafe was within perhaps a quarter mile of Garth Blackwell's house when the heavens opened up, and rain began to fall in torrents. His jacket gave a little protection at first, but when the rain finally soaked through to his shirt, he shivered and quickened his pace. He hurried on round a wide bend, and Blackwell's house came into view although it was still a little way off in the distance. On either side of the lane were fields, pasture land with sheep and cows. Behind him he could hear the drone of a car engine, and he stepped up onto the grassy verge so that the vehicle would have room to pass him by.

He expected, for the sake of safety, that it would slow down, and he felt a stab of surprise when it did not. But worse still, it was accelerating and coming towards him at full throttle. Adrenaline coursed through him, and Rafe began to run, alarmed that he had no place to go except to keep to the lane. The hedges were dense and over six feet high and, without sprouting wings, there was no way he could get over them and into the safety of the field. He raced down the lane, his lungs bursting and his heart thumping crazily. A quick glance over his shoulder told him that the car was gaining on him and coming straight at him. In desperation, Rafe flung himself into the thorny hedge, protecting his face with his arms, and the car sped up onto the verge and came within inches of hitting him.

Swearing, Rafe hauled himself out of the brambles in time to see the car screech to an abrupt stop before the gears were slammed into reverse and the car was careering crazily backwards, toward him again. He began to run again back the way he had come. He managed

to reach the bend in the lane when he saw another car driving toward him. Relief washed over him. It was Selena. He ran on toward her, waving his arms. She slammed on her brakes, leaned across to throw the door open, and Rafe leapt into the passenger seat beside her.

“Reverse,” he cried out. “Back up!”

“What’s going on?” She glanced back over her shoulder and saw that there were a couple of cars behind her thus making reversing impossible.

“Just do it. Get out of here as quick as you can.” Horrified, he was staring at the car reversing crazily toward them.

“Rafe, I can’t. There are cars behind me. I can’t drive into them.”

“Christ, the crazy idiot’s not going to plough into all three of us, is he? Okay Selie, we’re going to have to jump for it.”

“No, no look.”

The car reversing toward them suddenly stopped. The next second it shot forward like a bullet and disappeared down the lane, splattering showers of water from the deep potholes.

“He’s gone. Oh thank the lord,” she gasped. She was trembling like a leaf. “He’s given up.”

Rafe hung his head and sucked in a deep lungful of air as he was finally able to breathe properly again. “Christ, that was so damn close. That bastard tried to kill me.”

“I gathered.”

“If you hadn’t come by then he would have done.”

“Rafe, I don’t want to think about that. Did you see who was driving?” She put the car into gear, and they moved off.

“No, no time to see his face. Too busy running,” he said still a little breathless. His hands were bleeding, and there were scratches on his cheek and neck. “You know, that makes three times.”

She was gripping the steering wheel, making an attempt to stop shaking. “What?”

“You’ve saved my life three times. You’re handy to have around.”

She glanced at him. His hair was dripping wet, his face was plastered with mud mingled with fresh blood, and twigs were sticking out of various parts of him. “You’re welcome, but let’s hope that I don’t need to do it again.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” he muttered wearily as Selena turned into the driveway that led up to Blackwell’s house.

“Are you sure that you still want to do this?” she asked. “There are people in that house that definitely want you dead.”

He nodded. “I know that, but Selie, I have to do this.”

\* \* \* \*

Selena was switching off the ignition just as Garth Blackwell appeared at the front door, holding an umbrella. He studied the two of them before finally walking down the three steps and onto the driveway. Rafe and Selena got out of the car and Blackwell, impeccably dressed in a black suit and white shirt, stopped before them.

“I wasn’t aware that you two knew each other,” he declared eyeing Rafe up and down rather dubiously. He raised a brow. “Good God, Ralph you look like one of those vagrants that you choose to live with. I suspect though that something untoward has happened to you. So what was it?”

“We don’t know each other. We’ve only just met,” Selena hastily explained. “I picked him up only minutes ago. He was having a spot of bother back down the lane, and I arrived on the scene just in time to be of help.”

“Please forgive the appearance,” Rafe said, managing to make that vital eye contact that would tell him so much. “You ask what happened to me.”

Blackwell lowered the umbrella since the rain had just stopped. “Is it an interesting tale?” he asked, standing directly beneath a bright exterior light.

*You bloody well survived, that’s what happened to you! What does it take to kill you? How many damn lives do you have?*

Rafe nonchalantly picked a twig out of his hair and flicked it away. “Someone tried to kill me back there, tried to mow me down in the lane.” He knew that Blackwell had been behind it. The man’s thoughts confirmed that.

*And I’ll have his skin for failing! How hard can it be to run someone down in a narrow lane?*

“Guess I’m a bit like a cat,” Rafe added with a grimace. “Got a few lives left yet.”

Blackwell was instantly taken aback by the reply. “What! Oh yes, quite. So you say that someone tried to run you down?”

“They tried, and they failed, thanks to this lady here. She arrived just in time to save me.”

“How fortunate for you. I can scarce believe this happened so close to my own home. I must say that is worrying.”

“Very,” Rafe agreed. His hands were bleeding from dozens of tiny gashes. It would take hours to dig out all the splinters.

“You can clean up inside. I hope that you’re not too badly hurt.”

Rafe wanted to punch his lights out. His feigned concern sickened him. “No, merely a few scratches. Evidently someone doesn’t like me very much.”

*And why should I like a scheming, opportunistic bastard like you? You are a threat and as such must be eliminated.* “Well, at least you’re still in one piece. Come now. Let’s go inside for drinks. So tell me, in the excitement, have you two managed to introduce yourselves?”

“No, not as yet,” Rafe lied.

“Well then, Ralph, allow me to introduce you to Selena Steele. She is one of my new doctors at the Institute, and I daresay that she’ll take a look at those scratches for you.”

She glanced down at Rafe’s hands and studied the damage. “Yes, of course.”

“And Selena this is Ralph Acer, son of my late partner Rafe Acer. He’s a fine man just like his father was, and I’m pleased to have him here at my house.”

Rafe shook Selena’s hand. “Pleased to meet you.” It galled him that Blackwell kept calling it his house. It wasn’t Blackwell’s house; it was *his*. It would still have been his if the man hadn’t killed him.

“So, let’s go inside, it’s a tad chilly out here,” Blackwell declared, rubbing his hands together.

Rafe wanted to plant his fist in that smug face. A tad chilly? It was more than a tad chilly when he lay dying on that mountain in subzero temperatures. He looked forward to the day when Blackwell would feel the cold hand of death around his throat.

\* \* \* \*

Blackwell showed Rafe and Selena into the drawing room where they were immediately given a glass of champagne and offered canapés. Rafe and Selena exchanged worried glances before declining the mushroom topped canapés, particularly since neither of them could spot anyone else eating them. Rafe knew that Blackwell wanted him dead and that he would use any devious means to obtain it including substituting mushrooms for deadly toadstools. Selena knew

it too, and she placed her glass down on the highly polished sideboard without taking a sip.

Rafe hadn't touched his champagne either, and he didn't intend to. He looked up, wondering who the man in the tailored suit was coming toward them.

"Ah, Ralph, allow me to introduce Dr. Christian Wilson," Blackwell explained. "Christian works with Selena at the Institute, and he's engaged to my...." Blackwell seemed to pull himself up short... "to Mira."

"Christian," Selena said without so much of a trace of a smile upon her face. He wasn't looking at her face anyway. Now she was glad she'd taken Rafe's advice and not worn the revealing black number. As it was, he was practically drooling at her modestly exposed cleavage.

"Ah, Selena, you look wonderful." He kissed her hand.

"Thank you, Christian. You look very smart yourself."

He laughed. "Damn well should with what this suit set me back. Handmade in London by a tailor." He suddenly turned to face the man with the scratches on his face, bits of twig in his hair and tears in his not-so-fine suit. "Now I am guessing, of course, but am I correct in assuming that this is Ralph Acer? I heard that he had a bit of an accident earlier in the lane. Damned unfortunate business."

Rafe extended his hand. Christian was making it easy by staring so intently into his face. "Pleased to meet you, Dr. Wilson, and yes, I'm Ralph Acer. I didn't see you when we arrived."

Wilson briefly shook his hand, and his dark eyes narrowed. *No. You wouldn't have done. I'd been detained outside. I was busy concealing the car that should have killed you, and I would have done if Selena hadn't showed up. You're a damned lucky man, but your luck can't hold out for much longer.* He smiled. "No, of course, you didn't. I was upstairs getting ready."

"Ah, of course." As he cursorily glanced around, Rafe fought to quell the fury that simmered within him. He was standing face to face with the man who had just tried to mow him down, and he had to pretend to be civil. It stuck in his craw. "Dr. Wilson, I was wondering where Mira might be. She will be joining us this evening, won't she?"

"Last I knew she was busy in the kitchen," Blackwell interjected, "but I daresay that she will make an appearance at some stage. I only hope that she has the common sense to get herself out of those

tasteless, unflattering jeans and into a dress before she does. I don't want the silly chit to let us down."

"Quite," Wilson concurred, "but I fear that she might not be joining us at all. She did mention to me a little earlier that she thought that she might have a migraine coming on."

"A migraine? So why is she working herself to the bone in the kitchens?" Rafe asked, barely able to conceal his anger.

"Alas, my fiancée is a bit of a workaholic as well you must know. Tell you what, though, I'll see if I can track her down. If you'll excuse me, I'll return shortly."

"And I've just spotted Phelps, one of my accountants. Must have a quick word with him," Blackwell declared before leaving as well.

"Good riddance," Rafe muttered under his breath. Across the room, he spotted a vaguely familiar face. The face had aged somewhat, and the hair was grey, but it was still unmistakably the face of Charles Farwell. Charles had been a good friend, and Rafe had gauged him to be a genuine and sincere guy. But hadn't he thought that of Garth Blackwell too? How far could he rely upon his judgement? He nudged Selena. "My God, that's Farwell. He was my solicitor years ago. Selie, I've got to go speak to him."

"But you can't. You're not supposed to even know him. What are you going to do, go up to him, shake his hand and say how are you after twenty years?"

Rafe swung on his heels. "I'll think of something."

"But..."

"Just mingle with the guests and keep smiling," Rafe said, "and...damn...don't eat or drink anything."



## Chapter Nineteen

The wooden bowl of fruit went tumbling from the table. Apples, pears and oranges rolled across the carpet, and one of the oranges came to a standstill against Charles Farwell's left foot.

"Sorry, so clumsy of me. Hope I haven't bruised the apples," Rafe said as he stooped to pick up the orange.

"Good God almighty," Farwell gasped. His left eye began to twitch just as it always used to do when something greatly surprised him. "How utterly, utterly amazing. I wouldn't have thought it could be possible."

Rafe stood before him palming the orange. "Excuse me?" he said in feigned ignorance. Farwell didn't really look so different; he had kept in good shape. Probably still played tennis in the summer and squash in the winter.

Charles Farwell grasped him by the shoulders, and he was grinning from ear to ear. "You have to be Ralph Acer. I knew your father."

"I am, but alas, you have me at a disadvantage, sir," he lied. He and Farwell had been drinking partners in the local pubs, and they had played countless strenuous matches of squash in the leisure centre. On most Sunday mornings, they could be found together at the golf club.

"Of course I do, how remiss. Come shake an old man's hand, lad, the hand of Charles Farwell. I was your father's solicitor and a very good friend. I dealt with all his legal affairs. I am still mystified as to how I remained in ignorance of your existence."

Rafe squeezed his hand and smiled thinly. "Guess I was merely a well-kept secret."

"Damn, but you are his living double. This is so utterly incredible."

He was staring at Rafe's left eyebrow and didn't meet his gaze. "Mr Farwell."

“Charles, please. Let’s have no formality here. As I said, your father and I were the best of friends.”

“Very well, Charles. Might I ask you a few personal questions pertaining to my father?”

“Of course, of course, a few minutes of my time shouldn’t cost you more than fifty quid.”

Rafe saw the twinkle in his eyes and recognised it for what it was—a jest. “Sorry, I’m not carrying cash on me.”

“Oh, a cheque will do.”

Rafe had to laugh. “Always the joker, Charlie.” He hadn’t meant to call him Charlie, but it slipped out and once out, it couldn’t be taken back.

Charles Farwell didn’t return the grin. A look of puzzlement flashed across his face. “I think that we should talk in the study. I’m sure that Garth won’t mind.”

“Hopefully he won’t even know,” Rafe said as he led the way out of the drawing room, across the hallway and into the study. The room was empty, and once Farwell was inside, he shut the door.

“I thought that you hadn’t been here before,” Farwell said, still looking puzzled.

And then Rafe realised what he had done. It was stupid enough of him to call the man Charlie, but to then lead him through the house almost as though he owned it. “No, I haven’t. I spotted the study on the way in. The door was open, and I noticed the book shelves.”

“Ah I see. So what was it that you wanted to ask me?”

“I’d like some information, some personal information regarding a woman.” Rafe spotted the decanter on the table. What he would give for a stiff glass of whisky.

“Carry on.”

“You knew Veronica Blackwell?”

“Yes, I did. She was a fine woman.”

“A fine woman who married Garth Blackwell within a few months of my father’s death. Some would say that was perhaps a tad insensitive and not a little untimely.”

“A fair point, I suppose. Some could have said that, but no one did.”

“Of course not. Who would stand up to the might of Garth Blackwell?” Rafe saw that Charlie’s gaze was once again focused just about his eye. He needed to make eye contact.

“I take it that you bear enmity toward Mr Blackwell despite the fact that he is hosting this lavish party for you.”

“Perhaps I do, and this party has cost him peanuts. The man has to be worth tens of millions.”

“Perhaps he is.” Farwell took a step toward him, and their eyes locked. “A word of advice, don’t cross Blackwell. Some have tried, and all have failed. Many have lived to regret it.” *Veronica regretted it, and she paid the price.*

Rafe started. His blood ran cold. “Charles, exactly how did Veronica die?”

“I fail to see why you have so much interest in this woman whom your late father married.”

“Maybe because technically she was my stepmother.”

“Did you ever meet her?”

“No, but I heard a lot about her from my father.”

“I see, but surely you must resent her somewhat. After all, your father married her, not your mother.”

“No, he didn’t. Look I didn’t want to talk to you about me. It was information about Veronica that I wanted so I’m asking you again, will you tell me how she died or not? I could ask Mira, but I suspect that it might very well upset her and I really have no wish to do that.”

Charles Farwell went to the door and checked that it was firmly closed then returned to Rafe. “Very well, I will tell you what I know. It was Veronica’s birthday, and they were celebrating on Garth’s yacht. By all accounts, Veronica was acting very peculiarly following an argument with him. Now probably I should also tell you that they argued quite a lot, sometimes over the most trivial of things. I know for a fact that she was filing for divorce because I still have the papers stashed away in the filing cabinet in my office. Garth, of course wanted neither the scandal of a divorce nor the financial drain that it would naturally incur.”

“No, he wouldn’t.”

“You appear to know a great deal about a man whom you have only just met.”

“I’m a quick study. I can read him like a book. You were saying?”

“Well, in the early hours of that morning, she and Eric Simmonds disappeared overboard. Drugs were found in her cabin, and witnesses claimed that they had seen her on deck with Simmonds. They were injecting each other, so the witnesses said in court. Anyway to cut a

long story short, a verdict of accidental death was recorded despite the fact that the bodies were never recovered.”

“This makes no sense. Veronica didn’t do drugs.” Rafe was certain now that Blackwell murdered her, and likely Simmonds, too.

“How would you know if you never met her? Witnesses said that she did, and the police later found drugs in her cabin.”

“Then they were planted there. You say that she was involved with Simmonds? Just how involved were they?”

“How should I know?”

“Of course you knew. Simmonds was your ruddy cousin, and you were as close as brothers.”

Farwell studiously eyed Rafe up and down. Unconsciously he tapped his chin a couple of times with the index finger of his right hand. Then he nodded his head just once almost as though he had arrived at an important decision. “Yes, he was my cousin, and yes, we were close, but I fail to understand how you are privy to that information. You couldn’t possibly know that.”

Rafe swore harshly under his breath.

“I also find it odd that you seem to know so much about a woman that you never met, and that you also seem to know your way around a house that you’ve apparently never been in before. You are hiding something, young man.”

Rafe cursed, annoyed that he had let so much slip out, irritated because he had not guarded his tongue more closely. It was simply impossible for him to treat Charlie like a stranger. He sat down wearily in a plush chair, wondering what to say next. The way he was going, he was likely to dig himself into an even deeper hole.

“You call me Charlie like you’ve always known me, and you understand my sense of humour which few can claim to do.”

Rafe shrugged. “I like you. You’re easy to get on with.”

Farwell went over to the table and poured two large glasses of whisky. “Shall I tell you what else I’ve noticed about you?”

Rafe sighed. “Why not, the night is young.”

“You have a very unusual shaped birthmark on the back of your right hand, and you have a scar just above your left eye.”

“And?” Rafe had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He knew exactly where this was leading, and he fancied that there was no way that he was going to be able to talk himself out of it.

“So did Rafe Acer. He had an identical birth mark and the exact same scar.”

“Well, he was my father, and lots of people carry scars. It doesn’t really signify anything.”

“Oh yes it does, and you know it. I gave Rafe Acer such a scar when I accidentally hit him in the head with my golf club when I was teeing off.” He put the glass into Rafe’s hand and squeezed his shoulder. “Here have a drink, Rafe. This always was your favourite tippie.”

Rafe downed the drink in one shot. It was fiery and welcome. “And you always were a crap golfer, Charlie.”

“Ah, but to be fair to me, I have improved.” Farwell sipped his own drink and then sat down on Blackwell’s table. “So, are you going to tell me exactly how this miracle came to pass? You didn’t die on the mountain like he claimed, and then you went on to discover the secret of eternal youth. Either that or you have a bloody marvel of a plastic surgeon.”

“Er, you’re wrong on all counts.”

“Then enlighten me. Come on. You obviously didn’t die.”

“I know this is hard to believe, but actually I did.” Rafe was about to try to put it all into words when he spotted a hazy figure across the room gesturing frantically.

Charlie saw the look of concern on Rafe’s face. “What are you looking at?”

“Him,” he said pointing. “Do you see him, too?”

Charlie peered in the direction that Rafe was pointing. “Don’t see a thing.”

Cerdic rushed toward Rafe. “Never mind me, and never mind him. Mira is in a great deal of trouble, and I suggest that you get to her fast!”

“What sort of trouble. Oh never mind, where is she?”

“She’s upstairs in her bedroom. Hurry, Rafe, Wilson’s raving like a mad man!”

## Chapter Twenty

“You are not going down to the party, and that’s final! You’re dressed like some whore in that flimsy scarlet dress!” Wilson yelled angrily.

“Oh, I can’t win. First you complain when I’m in my jeans, and then you see a problem with me wearing this. Very well then I’ll change into something else.”

He grabbed her arm and hauled her toward him. “Don’t bother. I don’t want you down there at all.”

“Why not?”

“You know why not!” He had his nose in her face, and he was shouting.

“No, I do not.”

“No? Then for whom have you dressed up this evening? It’s for *him*, isn’t it? For Acer. You want to impress him.”

“No, I don’t want to impress him. Why should I? And I don’t care for what you are insinuating. Will you please lower your voice?”

His face had turned a shade of purple. “I’m not insinuating anything. I’m stating a fact. You want Ralph Acer.”

“Christian, you are deluded if you think that. That is utter nonsense, but it is Ralph’s party after all, and, as hostess, I should at least look presentable. Now, step out of my way because I’m going downstairs to greet him.”

“Don’t antagonise me!” He pushed her all the way back until she collided with the wall, knocking the breath out of her. “You will stay here.”

“Don’t you dare treat me like some child. I am going downstairs, and you can’t stop me!” Mira cried, pushing against him with both hands.

He grabbed her wrists, twisted and squeezed them hard. “I have told everyone that you have a migraine.”

She winced but continued to struggle. “Well, it’s suddenly got better. Christian, get your hands off me. I’ve got guests to attend to and food to serve, food I spent all afternoon preparing.”

“We have waitresses to do that!” he yelled into her face.

She suddenly stopped struggling, realising that it did her no good. “Christian,” she blurted out, “this has to end. Please let go of my wrists. I can’t feel my hands any more.”

“What has to end?” he barked, maintaining his vice like grip.

“We have to end, our engagement has to end. You are constantly rude to me. You treat me badly. I mean, look at yourself now. Look at what you’re doing to me. It is quite obvious that you don’t love me. You used to once, but...”

He snorted. “No, I didn’t, you silly chit,” he broke in. “I never loved you. I only wanted the partnership with Blackwell, and what’s more I’ll still have it. You’ll not come in the way of that.”

“Well, that is where you are wrong.” She saw her father suddenly appear in the doorway, and relief washed over her. “Daddy, I’m not going to marry him. He doesn’t love me. He only wants to be my husband so that he can get a partnership in Acer Blackwell Leisure. Look, he’s hurting me, and I can’t feel my hands. Daddy? Do something!”

Garth Blackwell stepped into the room and slowly closed the door.

“Daddy, call for help. I know that you’re too sick to stand up to him, but there are others that will. Ralph will. Call down to Ralph, and say that I need him.”

Garth Blackwell calmly stroked his chin. “Ah yes, of course, Ralph.”

Wilson snarled. “I swear that there’s something going on between those two. She spends so much time at that damned poor house with him that it begs the question as to why?” Angrily he slapped her hard across the face, and then he hit her again so that she cried out. “Have you been in his bed yet, bitch?”

“Christian, I don’t know what you are talking about? You’re seeing things that aren’t there. Daddy,” she screamed. “Daddy, stop him. He’s hurting me!”

Blackwell folded his arms and walked slowly toward them. He made no attempt to prevent Wilson from hurting her. “Well, have you been in his bed?”

“No, of course not,” she sobbed. “I’m engaged to Christian—at least I was. That is now off.”

“No,” Blackwell said, calmly. “The wedding is not off. It will proceed as planned.”

“But you can’t expect me to marry him. I loathe him for what he’s doing to me. Daddy, listen...”

With a resounding thud, Blackwell brought his fist down so hard upon the dressing table that the assortment of perfumes and make up tumbled to the floor. “Don’t call me ‘Daddy’.”

She was aghast. “Why not? You’re my father.”

“No, I’m not. I’m not your father because your father was Rafe Acer!” he yelled out in his fury. The stress proved too much for him. The colour drained from his face and his breathing became erratic. “You are not my daughter, and it is time that you knew it.”

The colour left her face as well. “Yes, I am,” she said feebly. “I am your daughter.”

“No. You are Rafe Acer’s daughter, conceived before your mother and I married.”

“You can’t know that for certain.”

“Yes, I can. I had tests done on you after you lost the baby. They proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are not my daughter, which means that you are Rafe Acer’s brat.”

“But I might not be.” If Christian hadn’t been holding her by the wrists, she would have fallen.

“Good God, girl, how many men do you think your mother was sleeping with. Besides, have you looked in the mirror recently? You’re the image of that fortune seeker, Ralph Acer. He’s your damn brother so if you have been sleeping with him then that is incest!”

“Stop it, stop it. Of course I haven’t been sleeping with him. He’s a friend.” She glared at Wilson. “Will you let me go? You’re hurting me.”

“The wedding will go ahead as planned,” he snarled as he let go of her wrists.

She collapsed onto the floor. “Oh, no, it will not,” she declared vehemently. “I don’t understand this. I don’t understand why you’re in this house, Christian. Daddy, why are you allowing him to be here when all he wants is your money?”

“You are never to call me that again,” Blackwell gasped as he leaned back against the wardrobe. “Christian is my doctor, and as far as I am concerned, he is the best surgeon in England, possibly in the



world. When we locate a heart, it will be he who transplants it. My only wish is that it is soon. As for you, girl, in the eyes of the world, you are still my daughter, and that is how it shall appear. I shall have no scandal attached to this family, and whatever Christian wants, he can have. Name, status, wealth, it can all be his if he makes me well again.”

“And what about me? What am I to do? Live in your world and do as you bid because if I don’t then Christian will beat me again?”

“Yes, that’s about it.” Blackwell sank down onto a chair and popped a small pill under his tongue. “And the wedding will proceed in three weeks as planned.”

Somehow she got to her feet and, in a fit of defiance, she launched herself at Wilson and raked her nails across his face. “You are cruel, scheming and vindictive. I will never, ever marry you!” she screeched.

“Yes, you will!”

His fist met the side of her face and, stunned, she fell back onto the bed. She started sobbing and vaguely heard the door thud open just as Christian lifted his fist to beat her once more. She ached inside more than she did on the outside; unable to believe the man whom she had called Daddy was actually leaving her to the mercy of this deranged man. “Christian, please, no,” she sobbed. “Don’t hit me again.”

But it wasn’t Blackwell leaving the bedroom. It was Rafe stampeding in like a bull.

“Low life, bloody son of a bitch!”

There was a crashing sound as the full weight of Rafe’s body impacted with Wilson’s right side. Both went sprawling to the ground. In the next instant, he straddled Wilson, pummelling his fists into his face. Mira lay on the bed, so terrified that movement was impossible. She knew that it was highly likely that Ralph was going to kill Christian. Perhaps even, a part of her now hoped he would.

Garth Blackwell stumbled from his chair and threw the door open. “For the love of God, leave him be. Security, upstairs immediately, and Phelps get up here!” he yelled out.

Rafe delivered a series of bone-cracking punches. He didn’t hear the footsteps on the stairs. The next thing he knew, three men were hauling him off of Wilson.

Wilson’s face was a mess, but he was still conscious. Blackwell bent over him

“He didn’t damage your hands, did he?” Blackwell stammered. “No, I see he didn’t, but what about your eyes. You need your eyes, don’t you? Oh, this is terrible, simply terrible.”

Wilson groaned.

“Look what you’ve done to him! You’ve broken his jaw!” Blackwell railed as he spun to face Rafe, still held by the three guards.

Rafe was still struggling. “The bastard got what he deserved. Take a look at Mira. She’s not too pretty at the moment either!”

“Never mind her, she doesn’t have to perform surgery on me at a moment’s notice. He does.”

“You heartless, selfish piece of scum,” Rafe seethed.

A man suddenly appeared in the doorway. He held a large, brown leather case.

“Phelps, do you have it?” Blackwell demanded, beckoning to him.

“Yes, sir. Three quarters of a million pounds in cash.”

“Let him go,” Blackwell ordered, snapping his fingers.

The three guards stepped away from Rafe.

“Give it to him,” Blackwell growled.

Phelps, with a great deal of trepidation, stepped forward, put the case in Rafe’s hand then scurried back a few yards. “You are to take this, and you are not to have any association with Acer Blackwell Leisure ever again.”

Rafe gave a bark of humourless laughter. He looked from Phelps to Blackwell. “Have I got this right? You are paying me a paltry three quarters of a million to leave?” In disgust he threw the case to the carpet.

“Yes,” Blackwell replied tersely, “I suggest that you take it and consider yourself fortunate to have it. It is what you wanted, isn’t it? You call it paltry, but to someone who has nothing, I’d say that it’s a healthy sum of money? Although you claimed otherwise, I know that you thought simply because you were Rafe Acer’s son you had a right to some of my fortune. Well, let me tell you here and now that you don’t. You don’t have a right to a single penny, but since I’m a reasonable man...”

“Reasonable!” Rafe bellowed. “Take a hard look at yourself sometime, Blackwell, and think on all the people that you’ve trod on over the years during your climb up the Acer Blackwell Leisure ladder! Ask them if you’ve been reasonable!”

“Oh for God’s sake, shut him up!” Christian Wilson groaned from where he sat on the floor, nursing his bloody face.

“Yes, I’ve heard enough, too,” Blackwell agreed as he snapped his fingers at the guards.

Two of the burly men stepped forward. Before they knew what was happening, Rafe had grabbed them both about their necks. With a resounding crack, he brought their exceedingly thick skulls together then let go to watch them crumple in a heap.

The third guard took a step forward, thought better of it when Rafe growled at him and took two large steps back.

“Just take the money and go.” Blackwell sighed, grimacing as he glanced about at the carnage in the bedroom. “And make a promise that Ralph Acer won’t ever bother me again.”

An almost feral grin crossed Rafe’s face. He looked at the case and, in a split second, decided that he would take it after all. He needed to live on something. Three quarters of a million in cash was nothing to sneeze at. “So that’s all that I have to do. I merely have to promise that Ralph Acer will never trouble you again?”

“That’s it, and I warn you that if you do then things might get nasty for you. Do you understand what I mean, Acer?”

“I understand perfectly. And, Blackwell, as you well know, things have already been pretty nasty for me. I swear that you will never have to talk to Ralph Acer again.” But he’d see Rafe Acer again without a doubt, and he wondered how the man’s failing heart would stand up to that when he revealed his true identity.

“Good. Now get out of my house.”

“I’m not leaving Mira,” Rafe declared. He went across to the bed and gently helped her to her feet. “She’s coming with me to the Veronica Blackwell home.”

Blackwell waved a hand. “Take her, but I warn you that she’ll not stay there. She’ll be back here before you know it. And she will marry Christian as we planned.”

“You think so?” Rafe said angrily as he put his arm around Mira’s waist and led her to the door.

“I know so.”

Mira sucked in a deep breath and tried to calm her frantic heart. “I shall not be back. I’m going with my brother.”

Brother? Rafe had to find out what Blackwell and Wilson had told her although he had a pretty good idea. The hard part was going to be in the telling her the truth.

“You’ll be back soon enough, girl,” Blackwell declared, “because if you don’t return within the week then I shall make sure that squalid home, that you spend so much of your time in, is sold. Every vagrant under its roof will be thrown out on the streets where they belong. Do you want that on your tender conscience?”

“Bastard,” Rafe growled as he led Mira out of the room and slammed the door. “Christ, I’m glad to see the back of him,” he muttered.

“Will he do that?” Mira asked on a shaky breath as he helped her down the stairs. “Could he be so cruel?”

“Most likely, yes. As for cruelty, he has a bloody degree in it, but you’re still not going back.”

“Ralph, are you my brother?” she asked weakly.

He saw Selena at the foot of the stairs. Charlie was with her. Both appeared worried. “We’ll talk about that later. You look about ready to pass out.”

“No, tell me now. I have to know. I want the truth.”

He knew that this wasn’t the time. “Very well then. No, I’m not your brother.” He saw a single tear trickle down her pale cheek. She looked so damned vulnerable.

“Oh, dear, then I’ve got no one in the world, have I?”

She sagged against him. “Mira? Oh hell!” With one hand, he hoisted her up and over his shoulder while still holding onto the case with the other. He called down to Selena. “Selie, we’re leaving, and Mira’s leaving with us. She’s in a bad way. Wilson’s been beating her again.”

She seemed agitated. “I wish we could leave,” she said as he met her at the bottom of the stairs. “I just went out to the car to see if I’d left my purse in there...”

“Selie, never mind the purse. We’ve got to get Mira away from here. She needs your help.”

“It’s not the purse. It’s the car. There’s a lot of thick, dark fluid underneath it.”

He knew immediately what that meant. “Oh shit, Wilson must have had the brake lines cut.”

“But why would he want to harm me?”

“Because you saved me earlier, and since he was driving the car, he saw you do it. Hell, I don’t know how the man thinks. He’s totally insane. Just look at what he’s done to her.” He pressed the case into Selena’s hand so that he could better carry the unconscious girl.

“Here, hold this for me. We’ll have to take Mira’s car except now she can’t tell me where the keys are. Damn.”

Charles Farwell held up a set of keys and jangled them. “Looks like I’ll have to be your chauffeur for the evening.”

“Charlie, you’re a true friend.”

“Always was, Rafe, always was.” He grinned. “Now come on, let’s get out of here. I think the party’s over.”

Selena gaped at him. Farwell knew; he’d called him Rafe.

“And the guest of honour is leaving,” Rafe gladly agreed as he cradled Mira against him and strode towards the door.

## Chapter Twenty-one

Charles Farwell emerged from Selena's kitchen carrying a tray laden with steaming cups and a packet of biscuits. "Here we are, four piping hot, very strong cups of coffee and chocolate biscuits to dunk, err that is assuming that you folk do dunk. It's a weakness of mine, a legacy from childhood."

"What have you made, Charlie?" Selena asked as she finished cutting off the last stitch to the gash on Mira's chin.

"It's coffee. Is that okay?"

Selena looked across at him and made a tushing sound. "When I said that four hot drinks would be nice I was really thinking of cocoa. I don't think that right now any of us needs a shot of caffeine."

Rafe didn't like being told what to drink, not even by Selena. His beverage of preference would always be coffee, and during his twenty years stay in the otherworldly levels, he had missed it enormously. Therefore he wasn't going to be denied now. "Mmm, that smells wonderful, and, Selie, coffee suits me fine. Thanks Charlie," Rafe said as he took one of the cups.

Farwell put the tray on the small table and added sugar to his own cup. "Do you have any whisky, Selena?"

"Whisky?" Selena helped Mira to lie down on the sofa and then covered her with a sleeping bag. She had told her that she was going to stay at her place until she was stronger, no matter how long that took.

"I think he wants to add a nip to his coffee," Rafe explained, recalling how Charlie had always liked to liven up his coffee in that way.

"Ah, I see. Sorry no, I don't."

Rafe pointed to the cabinet. "There's brandy in there. I'm sure that'll hit the spot just as well, but remember, old friend, it's a *shot* of alcohol, not fifty-fifty."

Farwell grinned. “Indeed it will hit the spot. I fear that you know me so well.”

“You haven’t changed so much in twenty years, Charlie. It’s reassuring for me to know that some things remain the same.”

He located the bottle in the cabinet. “And you’ve not changed at all. So, my friend, are you going to tell me how you managed it? What is your secret of eternal youth, and why were we all led to believe that you had died?”

Mira let out a groan as she suddenly tried to sit up. She was trying to make herself comfortable but still feeling decidedly groggy. “I think,” she said weakly, “that there is so much that I don’t understand. My life is in tatters, and I need someone to tell me exactly what is going on. What is all this talk of eternal youth anyway?”

Rafe put down his coffee and perched on the edge of the sofa. “Do you think that she is up to hearing this, Selie?”

She picked up her coffee, sniffed it and then put it back down on the tray. “I think she must be the judge of that.”

Rafe wasn’t sure that now was the right time. “Are you, Mira or do you want to talk in the morning? This could cause you a bit of a shock, and you’ve had a big enough upset today as it is without me adding to it.”

“This is important. I know it is. I want to hear all of it right now.”

“As do I,” Farwell concurred. “I know who you all are, but...”

Mira butted in before he could finish. “I thought that I knew who you were too, but something tells me that you’ve been lying to me. Have you been lying, Ralph?”

“Well, yes I have.” Rafe covered her hand with his hand. It was going to take him quite some time to come to terms with the fact that this sensitive and caring young woman was his daughter. “Mira, it was necessary, believe me. I couldn’t tell you who I really was.”

She gazed at him with those huge blue eyes. “Okay, so tell me now. If you are not my brother then who are you?”

Rafe stroked the back of her hand. He looked into her face. It was badly bruised, but underneath the bruising were features that were quite remarkably similar to his.

“Okay, brace yourself.” He watched her tilt her head in a way that was really quite endearing.

“Oh, come on, Ralph, I’m a big girl now. Out with it.”

Yes, she was a big girl now, and he had missed her childhood. He hated Blackwell for that, for denying him the right to be her father

when she most needed him. “Mira, you are my daughter.” He saw her catch her breath. Her eyes went wide with confusion.

“Your what!”

“You are my daughter. I’m your father.”

“But I can’t be—I mean, you can’t be.”

He saw those eyes begin to glaze. “Oh heck, you’re not going to faint on me again, are you?”

“I... I think that I might,” she whimpered.

“No, you won’t,” Selena said. “Come on now, I want you to lie down on your side. Charlie, fetch a pillow from the bedroom and then I want you to prop her feet up with it. Let’s get the blood back to her head, and she’ll be fine.”

There was a flurry of activity for the next few minutes. Finally Charlie had two pillows under her feet and one under her head.

“How do you feel now?” Rafe asked once her feet were propped up.

“Very confused.”

“Well, that’s not surprising,” Farwell agreed. “Feel a bit like that myself, you know.”

Mira stared at Rafe. “You can’t be my father. Just look at you, you can’t be more than ten years older than me.”

“Right. Prepare yourself for another shock. I was born in 1959.”

“But that’s not...”

Rafe pressed his finger to her lips. “Shush now, I’m going to explain everything as best I can, but please allow for the fact that I don’t have absolutely all of the answers either.”

She nodded. Her blue eyes gazed at him in absolute trust.

Charlie made himself comfortable in one of the armchairs, and Selena sat down on the rug in front of the fire.

“Well,” Rafe said as he blew out a long sigh. “I guess it all began with me dangling over the edge of a mountain and staring up at the sole of Garth Blackwell’s boot.”

“And it ended?” Mira asked.

“Oh, it’s not ended yet. It’s far from ended. But I suppose that particular chapter of the story concluded with me dying while the next chapter that would be of interest to you begins with me receiving a pretty damn powerful jolt from a defibrillator that was being wielded by this lovely woman sitting here. But let me go back to the beginning, to the point where Garth Blackwell kicked me down the mountain.”



\* \* \* \*

“That is such an incredible story,” Charles Farwell, declared. “My rational mind honestly can’t bring itself to believe it, but the fact that you are here must make it so.”

“Well, you had better believe it,” Rafe replied, “Because it is the gospel truth. That is how it happened.”

Mira was now propped up with all three cushions, and her dizziness had passed. She was sipping a mug of cocoa that Selena had made. “And you were actually dead for twenty years?”

“Yes, in that my physical body was quite dead, frozen solid in fact. Pretty gruesome really.”

Selena nodded in confirmation. “Clinically dead. He was frozen through, and I should know because I was the one who thawed him out and brought him back to a corporeal state. It was an insane thing to do, and I acknowledge that. All I can say is that I was driven to do it.”

Rafe winced, the pain and the memory of that time still vivid in his mind.

“Driven by what?” Farwell asked unaware of the ball of light that had appeared and was now rapidly growing in intensity six feet behind him.

Selena and Mira both gaped at the luminescence with disbelief as they watched it take on a humanoid shape. Rafe had seen it too, but what astonished him the most was the fact that the others were aware of it.

Farwell glanced about. “Did someone switch on a light?”

“Not the kind of light that you’re familiar with. If I’m not mistaken, I think that Cerdic may be attempting to make himself visible.”

Farwell jumped up. “What, Cerdic, your spirit guide? The one that you’ve just been telling us about?”

Rafe nodded. “Yes, I believe so. Understand that this is likely very taxing for him. It’s not something that he customarily does, but I’m pretty certain that it has to be him. I suspect that he’s come to give you the proof that you evidently still seem to need in order to believe my story.”

They waited and watched, and as they watched, the humanoid figure grew in size and stature until finally it had assumed the massive proportions of something that most definitely was not Cerdic. Its

presence seemed to fill the room and emitted an aura that was crackling and alive with energy.

“Bloody hell!” Rafe shot to his feet and almost came to attention.

“Is this Cerdic?” Mira croaked, angling her neck sharply to look up at him “He’s so big.”

“No, surely not.” Selena was shaking her head. “Rafe, this surely can’t be the spirit guide that you described to me.”

Driven by foolish curiosity, Charles Farwell edged closer to the being and reached out to touch it with his hand.

“No, Charlie, don’t do that!” Rafe’s warning came too late, and Farwell found himself swept off his feet and catapulted backwards so that he slammed hard into Rafe and almost sent him flying.

Farwell shook his arm. “Damn, that hurt. A shock went right up my arm and down to my toes.”

Rafe righted Farwell and even though he too had most of the air knocked out of his lungs, he stared intently into the face of the being. The last time he had seen that face was just before Selena had jolted him back into his physical body. “I think that is what happens when you try to touch an archangel. Compared with you, he has the energy of a supernova.”

Farwell was rubbing his arm. “An archangel?” he gasped. “Amazing.”

“Oh yes, an archangel. Charlie, Selena, Mira, allow me to introduce Archangel Michael. Micah,” Rafe said sincerely, reverting back to the name that he always knew him by, “I’m honoured to have you here.”

Michael nodded, his expression one of total impassivity. He folded his mighty arms across his even mightier chest and leisurely surveyed his surroundings. “I sent you back to this? This is a dull, dreary place and devoid of the brilliance of heaven.”

“Well yes, but then surely all things pale into insignificance compared with heaven. This is Selena’s flat, and it’s not dreary at all in comparison to where I’ve been living lately.”

“Ah yes, Selena.” The archangel looked down at her, and the hint of a smile played about his heavenly lips. “The lovely woman with whom I confess to have been in cahoots.”

“Cahoots?” Rafe thought that was a strange word for Michael to use. He wasn’t entirely sure what the angel meant by it.

Selena scrambled to her feet. “Me in cahoots with an angel?”

“An archangel,” Michael boomed, but he still wore the hint of a smile about his lips.

“Sorry, I stand corrected, but will you please tell me just how I was in cahoots with you?”

“This man,” Michael explained, pointing to Farwell, “asked what drove you to attempt to bring Rafe back to his mortal life.”

“Yes I did,” Farwell said, still rubbing his smarting arm.

“I know you did,” Michael snapped with a terseness that Rafe was most familiar with, “and isn’t that partly why I deigned to come here to this dreary place, to tell you why. Actually, I do have matters to attend to, matters of earth shattering proportions, of which you could not possibly conceive.”

Stunned by the fact that he was conversing with an archangel, Farwell snapped his mouth shut and said nothing.

Selena edged closer to the archangel but not too close for fear that she might be thrown back across the room too. She strained her neck to look up at him. “You were saying. We were apparently in cahoots?”

“Yes, in the sense that we both desired Rafe to draw breath again. I put the idea into your head even though you knew that it was utterly insane and illogical. We both had our reasons as to why we wanted him to live again and while yours was a personally selfish one, mine was for the good of humanity. Added to that of course, Cerdic’s incompetence did leave a spare slot available down here when she lost her child,” he announced, nodding his head at Mira.

Mira looked suddenly puzzled. She was about to ask exactly what he meant by that when Selena butted in.

“Hey, hold on one minute, why was it personally selfish?” Selena asked. “That seems a very unfair thing to accuse me of.

“Oh no, it’s not unfair. That is how it was.”

Frowning, Selena glanced at Rafe. “He reads minds too, I gather?”

“And a heck of a lot more,” Rafe confirmed. “He doesn’t need to see your face either. He just knows.”

“So why was it selfish of me to bring him back?” she asked, still looking at Rafe.

Michael threw back his head and laughed, creating a mini vortex in the room that forced everyone to hold onto something tightly or get swept away. “Because,” he declared as the laughter died away, “you

think that he is the most wonderful and handsome man on the planet. You are screaming it to the world.”

Rafe beamed and grinned from ear to ear. “You do?” He was suddenly glad that Michael had come.

Michael continued. “One look at his face and you were smitten even though it was the face of a dead corpse. You looked upon him and bemoaned the waste of his life. You looked upon him and wondered what colour his eyes were and how his voice might sound. You looked upon him and wished with all your being that you could make his heart beat and his lungs breathe so that you could ultimately hold his warm flesh in your arms and call him yours. That was your fantasy, and I helped you make it come to pass. Not bad, I think for a warrior angel. Normally I don’t concern myself with affairs of the heart, but in this case, I made an exception.”

“Selie, you actually wished all that?”

“Err, oh this is so embarrassing.”

Rafe felt like dancing on the spot, but instead he grabbed her and looked into her eyes. “Yes, by God, you did. Oh, Selie!” And the kiss that he gave her, although of necessity brief, was the most meaningful kiss ever. It didn’t matter that two mortals and an archangel were watching them because it mutually conveyed their deep feelings for each other.

Charles Farwell gave an awkward cough. Mira was smiling and had a tear in her eye.

Michael, with his arms akimbo, simply waited. “Very touching, very, very touching but this really isn’t my forte.” He began to fade. “Well, I must be away. I have things to attend to.”

“What, no, wait.” Selena pulled away from Rafe. “You said that you had a reason for bringing Rafe back and that it was for the good of humanity. Will you tell us what that reason is?”

Michael shook his head. “No, he already knows.”

“But...”

Rafe put a hand on her shoulder. “Leave it, Selie. I know what I have to do. That’s for the last chapter.”

Michael’s brilliance was lessening by the second, but before he finally disappeared, he pointed to Charles Farwell. “You must tell them what you know,” he ordered sharply.

Farwell swallowed hard because he knew exactly what Michael meant.

“Tell them!” Michael repeated. Then he was gone, and the room was left in relative darkness. It also seemed a lot colder.

Selena turned the fire up; she hadn’t felt so cold since she was on the mountain.

Farwell poured a stiff brandy and was about to toss it down his throat.

“Charlie, I knew there had to be a reason for us meeting again,” Rafe said taking the brandy and drinking it himself.

Farwell found another glass and poured a fresh drink. “So you think that this is all part of some divine plan, do you?”

“Most likely. At any rate, a certain archangel thinks that you have something to tell us, and that something, I fancy, must be very important and very relevant to what’s been happening around here.”

Farwell shrugged. “You might be right, but my lips are sealed.”

Mira, who had remained quiet throughout, suddenly spoke up. “Mr Farwell, I’ve known you for a long time. You’re a good honest man, but I do believe that you are keeping from us a secret that is of vital importance. Now if that is the case then you must tell us.”

He diffidently shrugged again and took a drink of his brandy.

“And,” she added, “to be fair, I also think that you are doing it out of a sense of loyalty. Otherwise you would already have told us.”

“Well, is she right, Charlie?” Rafe, asked.

Charlie inhaled deeply and looked up at the ceiling. “Damn it, some things are best left alone.”

Rafe was getting angry. “Charlie!”

“No, Rafe, nothing will sway me, and don’t you try looking into my eyes. I’ll wear dark glasses if I have to. I’d rather put out my own eyes than tell you anything.”

“You do have a secret,” Selena said. “I can tell that you do, and I don’t need to be a mind reader to know.”

He rubbed his eyes. “Don’t we all have secrets?”

“Perhaps,” Rafe agreed, understanding how on edge Charlie was but needing to know the truth. “But few people have secrets important enough for an archangel to personally come down here and demand the telling. Will you ignore Michael’s wishes? I’m warning you here and now that if you do, he will get very angry. And his anger shoots way off the top of a colossal anger scale.”

Farwell took out a handkerchief and dabbed at his perspiring forehead “Look, I made a promise, a solemn promise. I can’t tell you. My lips are sealed.”

Selena tugged open the drawer of her bureau and pulled out a pen and a sheet of paper. She thrust them at Farwell. “Then write it down!” she snapped.

“Come on, Charlie, give us something,” Rafe agreed.

Farwell looked decidedly uncomfortable. He hesitated with the pen poised above the paper. He supposed that it was a way out of his predicament.

“Please, Mr Farwell,” Mira, pleaded. “Please, we know it’s important, and so do you.”

Farwell hastily scribbled on the paper, folded it and then placed it in Rafe’s top shirt pocket. “I’ve got to go now.” He found his jacket and put it on.

Rafe didn’t want him to leave. It was three in the morning. “Surely not, wait until morning. Besides you can’t take your car, you’ve had too many brandies.”

Farwell tossed him the keys.

Rafe caught them in his right hand. “Charlie?”

“No, sorry I must go. I’ll hail a taxi. I’ll see you when you get back. Feel free to use my car for as long as you like. Goodbye, Rafe.” The door slammed behind him, and he was gone.

“Get back, back from where?” Selena asked.

Rafe took out the sheet of paper and unfolded it. Then he read out the address that Charlie had scribbled down.

“Seems we’re going to Edinburgh.”

## Chapter Twenty-two

“Is this the place?” Mira asked as she gazed out of the car window at the large double fronted stone house with its slate roof and abundance of ivy covering. It was in an isolated spot, in a small village that was some four or five miles north of Edinburgh. It was six-thirty in the evening, and they had arrived at their destination after a long day of travelling. Not even the comfort of Farwell’s executive car had done much to lessen their fatigue and ease their aching joints caused from ten solid hours of travelling.

“This has to be it,” Rafe replied. The car pulled up outside the wrought iron gates, and he switched off the ignition. “I followed Charlie’s directions exactly.”

Selena was already getting out of the car. She assumed that Mira would need a hand since her bruising was causing her some significant discomfort. Although she had not complained once during the journey, it was obvious that she had not travelled well. She opened the back door and held out her hand to Mira. “Come on, let’s see what awaits us here. There are children playing in the garden,” she said, glancing over her shoulder.

Mira took her time getting out. Her face was badly bruised, and her wrists were stiff and swollen. “Yes, I see them, a small girl and a boy.”

“Well, I doubt that we are here to see them,” Selena said as Rafe pushed open one creaky old gate.

“Let’s go and find out shall we.”

Mira hesitated. “Maybe we’re intruding.”

“She’s right, it’s rude to arrive unannounced,” Selena agreed thinking that maybe they had come on a wild goose chase. “Perhaps we should have rung first.”

“Rung who? We don’t know who we’re here to see.” Rafe scowled at the pair of them. “Both of you, in now,” he snapped sharply as he saw them into the garden and then let the gate slam shut

behind him. “I’m damn sure that I didn’t drive all this way just to turn right around and go right back to Exeter. We’re here for a reason, and I’m going to find out what it is.”

“Watch out!” Selena suddenly shouted in warning as a football came winging its way on a direct course for them.

“Mine, I think,” Rafe declared as he neatly headed the ball right back to the lad who had kicked it. He was about eight years old with dark curly hair and dark eyes, and he caught the ball in his hands.

“Whoops, sorry,” the boy cried out. “Didn’t see you arrive. Hey, that was a terrific header, mister.”

“He doesn’t sound Scottish,” Mira whispered to Selena just as they drew level with the large summerhouse. The summerhouse, like the main house, was entirely covered with ivy. It even blocked the glass windows thus hiding anyone inside still oblivious to their arrival.

“He’s better at football than you are, Sol,” the little girl cried cheerily. She came running toward them with her thick, dark ringlets bouncing about her shoulders.

The boy followed behind her, dribbling the ball with his feet. “I should think so. He’s older, and he’s probably had more practice.”

“True enough,” Rafe agreed, “but I doubt that I could dribble that ball as well as you do. You’re pretty nifty.”

Sol lapped up the compliment and beamed at him. He put the toe of his boot on the ball and brought it to a standstill. “Thanks.”

The girl stopped and looked up at Rafe. Her two front teeth were missing. “Are you here to see Mummy or Daddy?”

“We live here too, Lizzie” the boy declared. “They might have come to see us you know.”

The girl gave a lively little twirl and giggled. The lack of her front teeth made her lisp ever so slightly. “Of course they haven’t come to see us, Sol. They’re grown ups, and we’re only children. Well if you’ve come to see Daddy then he’s not here. He’s in Switzerland on business. He’s an important man.”

“The fact is that we’re not quite sure who we’ve come to see,” Mira explained, thinking that the girl was unusually pretty.

Lizzie now took notice of Mira for the first time. She cocked her head to one side, screwed her face up almost as though she were deep in thought and simply stared for a long while at Mira’s face.

Mira assumed that she was upsetting the little girl. “I’m sorry. Don’t be frightened by my bruises. They don’t hurt so badly now,”



Mira said, reaching for the little girl's hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

"Oh, I'm not frightened, but I think they must hurt a lot even though you say they don't."

"Ah, I thought that was why you were staring at me."

Sol prodded his sister. "It's rude to stare at people, no matter what the reason."

Lizzie shoved him away with a huff. "I wasn't being rude and I was only staring because she looks so much like Mummy. Look at her closely, Sol, and you'll see that I'm right."

And, ignoring his own earlier advice, it was then Sol's turn to stare. "Crikey she does too. Go and get Mum, Lizzie."

As if on cue, a woman stepped out of the summerhouse. "It's okay, darling, I'm here. Oh do we have visitors? I was just doing a spot of spring cleaning inside the summerhouse so that you could play without those nasty cobwebs bothering you and..." She forgot what she was going to say next as Mira stepped forward. Astonishment and disbelief were written all over her face, and she gasped, utterly lost for words.

If the older woman's shock hadn't been bad enough, Mira's own seemed to surpass it, and her whole body began to shake. She gaped at the woman with eyes that were huge and round as saucers. "Mummy?"

"No, she's our Mummy," Lizzie protested, grabbing her mother's leg.

She didn't even hear the little girl. "Mummy?" Mira said on an incredulous whisper that was so soft as to be barely audible.

Rafe was staring at the woman too. Deep within him, powerful emotions were sparring for an upper hand. He didn't know which was going to win, anger, hatred, the hurt that stemmed from betrayal or the deep desire for vengeance. She hadn't seen him yet, the woman whom he had once loved, who had shared his bed and also a large part of his life. But then she hadn't just shared his bed, she had shared Garth Blackwell's too and it was that which made him loathe her so much. He had been told that she was dead, but she wasn't. Dead in his heart Veronica might well be but she was standing before him as large as life. She looked her age too; she looked every bit of her forty-nine years. Her once luscious hair was thinning and turning grey and her creamy smooth complexion had given way to dry, lined skin. Now Rafe knew why Michael had wanted them to come here.

Veronica took a shaky step that brought her closer to this young woman who was her grown up daughter. “Mira?”

Mira nodded.

“Mira, is it really you? What are you doing here? How did you find me? Oh, but you were never to know about me. I don’t know what to say except I’m so sorry. But look at your poor face. What happened to you, darling?”

Mira fell into her mother’s open arms and burst into tears. “Mummy, they told me you were dead. This isn’t fair. I’ve been without you for ten years, and all the time you were alive. Do you know what I’ve been through?” she sobbed as tears coursed down her cheeks.

Veronica held her daughter close and sniffed away her own tear. “Yes, darling, yes, I do. Believe me when I say this has been difficult for me, too.”

Rafe studied Veronica closely. She suddenly looked up at him through a haze of tears. Disbelief and dismay transformed her features. He gave her a half smile, for within an inner fury simmered because this was his former wife who had duped him. He folded his arms across his chest and knew that the smile had vanished.

Veronica dropped her arms and stepped away from Mira. “No. You... you can’t be here!” She clawed at her head and squeezed her eyes shut. “You’re not real, you’re not! Go away!”

Her immense discomfiture gave him, in some small way, a tiny measure of satisfaction, but it wasn’t nearly enough. He wanted more, much more after what she had done to him. He didn’t like being cheated on. “Did you think that you were the only one who could come back from the dead, darling Veronica?”

Veronica had his full attention, but he happened to glance at Selena. She looked anxious, sick. She clearly wasn’t happy to see him talking to the woman who was still his legal wife.

Veronica was trembling badly. “You are not Rafe Acer. It’s impossible. You can’t be.”

His face was an open show of hostility. “Can’t I? Last time I looked in the mirror, I thought I was.”

She swayed slightly, clutching the air with her hands as if that simple act would steady her. “You died!”

“Oh, did I?” he calmly replied, revelling in her discomposure.

“But.... but you’re not dead, and I can see with my own eyes that somehow you haven’t aged.” She was hyperventilating acutely, her breath coming in short sharp bursts.

He advanced towards her, his anger at the boiling point. He could not stop thinking of this woman making love with Garth Blackwell while married to him. “Well, lucky me. Shame that time has been less than kind to you, sweetheart, but then beauty is a transient thing. Here one minute and gone the next so all you see when you look in the mirror is an ageing woman with sagging skin, crow’s feet and baggy eyes.”

“Stop! Don’t come any closer. Oh dear.” The shock of seeing him overcame her. Her eyes rolled back in her head as she toppled forwards.

Rafe growled as he caught her. “She always did have to have the last bloody word.”

## Chapter Twenty-three

When Veronica began to stir, she was lying on her own bed. Selena and Mira were standing beside the bed while Rafe sat on the stool by her dressing table. He noticed the bottle of perfume standing beside her hairbrush and comb. It was the same type of perfume that she had always worn; her taste in perfume, unlike her taste in men, evidently hadn't changed.

"Eric, Eric are you here?" she suddenly whimpered as her fingers clutched at the duvet. "Oh, I've just had the most upsetting dream."

So she thought he was a dream. Well, the dream was about to become a waking nightmare. "Dream on, honey," Rafe said with scorn as he fingered the perfume bottle. The scent was nauseous, as nauseous as she was.

"Stop it," Selena warned him. "Ease off, Rafe. She's had a shock, and the last thing she needs right now is for you to give her a hard time."

Oh, he wanted to give her a hard time, the harder the better. She deserved it. "Excuse me if I really don't care," he grunted. "You were blessed with the perfect bedside manner, not me."

Veronica groaned and opened her eyes. "Oh, dear, it wasn't a dream. It was real after all."

"Yep, all real," Rafe said in his most matter of fact voice. "Mira's real, you are real and as for me," he pinched himself, "I'm real too. Sorry, I'm not a ghost if that's what you were hoping." He noted the dark circles under her eyes. She was still in shock.

Veronica hauled herself up and Mira quickly placed a couple of pillows under her head. "So you didn't die, Rafe?"

"It's not quite that simple, darling."

"Will you stop calling me darling?" she said weakly.

“Sorry, sweetheart.” He got up, needing to escape the cloying scent of the perfume. He couldn’t though because when he stood by the bed he realised that she was wearing it.

“That too,” she snapped.

Rafe put his hand on his heart. “Oh, but Veronica, you once loved me to use those quaint endearing words. You said that it made you feel special.”

Selena winced. The nausea had returned, and it clawed at her belly. She had felt sick during the journey but, assuming that it was carsickness and not wanting to bother Rafe, she hadn’t mentioned it. Now it was back with a vengeance.

“Yes it did, when we were married.”

“Now correct me if I’m wrong but it’s my belief that we are still married. I don’t recall signing any divorce papers.”

Veronica looked appealingly at Mira, needing some emotional support. “Oh, God, he infuriates me. Now do you see why we drifted apart?”

Rafe suddenly felt like throttling her. “Drifted apart! We didn’t drift apart. You plotted a direct course for Garth Blackwell and went full steam ahead. Well, you got what you wanted, Veronica. Me dead and Blackwell’s ring on your finger. Congratulations, dear.”

She stared at him in confusion. “What are you talking about? I never wanted you dead. We were too young when we married, and it didn’t work out. But I never wanted you dead. I truly had nothing to do with it. You have to believe me,” she insisted, grabbing his arm.

Rafe looked into those dark brown eyes, eyes that once upon a time he had so easily gotten lost in. Now they truly were windows into her inner world, and he had the advantage of being able to see into them. He sank down on the bed. That revelation came as a huge surprise to him.

Veronica squeezed his arm. “You have to believe me.”

And he did. “I believe you,” he simply said.

She closed her eyes in obvious relief.

“So you had no part in Blackwell’s plan to murder me on the climbing expedition?” he asked, needing to be sure on that point.

“God, no. Is that what he tried to do? Oh Rafe, how could you think that I would play any part in trying to kill you? I once loved you. How could you think that?”

That was the truth too. “Perhaps because you were having an affair with him, and maybe because with me out of the way, you could marry him and have all my hard earned money.”

“You are right about one thing only, Rafe. I was having an affair with Garth. But I tell you truly that when I was told of your death, I was horrified. But then you didn’t die, did you? So did Garth lie to me?”

“No, he didn’t lie. That wasn’t one of his little sins, Veronica. His sin was that he was the one who murdered me. His foot kicked me off the mountainside and sent me falling over fifty feet to a slow and painful death.”

She looked at him. He was fit and healthy. “But you’re not dead,” she insisted.

“And neither am I fifty-one years of age. You yourself said, just before you fainted, that I haven’t aged.”

“Yes I did, and that’s what I can’t understand.”

“I understand that it must be difficult for you, and I’m sorry for upsetting you.” He realised that was the first kind thing he had said to Veronica. He had been harsh to her, he acknowledged that, but then he thought that he had good reason to be. As Selena said, perhaps he should ease up a bit.

“So what did happen to you?”

He shrugged. “I died.”

“No, no, you didn’t.”

“Yes, he did,” Selena confirmed, “and he is going to tell everything, aren’t you, Rafe? You are going to tell Veronica absolutely everything, and if she has any questions then you are going to answer them.”

“Yes, I’ll tell her. It makes an interesting story I suppose except that it’s not a mere story, it’s an actual account of my life and my death. Maybe I should amend that to my death and my life.” He looked down at Veronica again. “First, though, I’d like to hear about you. The whole world, with the exception of Charles Farwell whom I now assume was in on all this, thinks you dead. Garth Blackwell has in his possession all of your money.”

“Correction, all of your money, it seems,” Veronica replied.

“Never mind me for now, it’s you I want to hear about. Charlie told me that you died on Blackwell’s yacht.”

“I nearly did.” She dropped her head and stared unseeing at the counterpane. “Garth tried to kill me.”

“What?” Mira cried. “No, surely not.”

Rafe snarled. “Oh he’s a past master. Why not? The more the merrier if it gives him what he wants, money, power, prestige? Dead bodies practically litter his rose-strewn path. So what did he do? Did he push you off the yacht and leave you to drown?” He saw that Veronica was even more distressed and unconsciously fingering the counterpane.

“Yes, that’s what he did. You see, I owned half of Acer Blackwell Leisure, your half to be exact, and he couldn’t risk losing me along with all of that.”

“And why was he going to lose you?”

“Because I was having an affair with Eric Simmonds.”

He momentarily forgot that he had told himself to ease off. “So a leopard never does change its spots.”

“Rafe stop it. Don’t be so harsh,” Selena warned, “and just let her finish her story before you stand as accuser, judge and jury.”

Rafe held up his hands. “Sorry. Veronica, please continue. Why were you having an affair with Simmonds?”

A trace of a smile flitted across her face as she thought of Eric. “Because he’s the only man in the world who ever truly loved me.”

“I loved you once.”

She grimaced. “No, you didn’t, Rafe, not really. We married at twenty, which in our case was far too young. We began to drift apart after the first year. I’m convinced that it was only lust that held us together during that time. We had nothing in common, nothing at all, and that quite soon became apparent.”

Rafe didn’t respond to that. He knew she was right.

“I thought that I loved Garth, but I was so very wrong. He didn’t want me. He wanted your money, and after a while he made no secret of it. To my knowledge, he had at least seven affairs during the time we were together. When I objected to his dalliances, he responded with physical violence.” She pointed to one of the scars above her left eyebrow. “I still bear the scars to this day. I got this one when he hit me with a broken whisky bottle. It needed eight stitches.”

“Oh Mummy.” Mira sat down beside her mother and put her arm around her. “I know what that feels like,” she said sympathetically. “I’ve got a few bruises, too.”

Rafe looked at the two of them together, his wife and his daughter, and it gave him a strange feeling inside that he really didn’t want to dwell on for too long. “So I’m guessing that you told

Blackwell that you wanted a divorce. The upshot of it was that he tried to kill you and make it look like an accident.”

Veronica nodded. “He knocked me out then pushed me overboard into water that was near freezing. Eric saw what happened and, thinking that Garth had killed me, he went after him. But Garth was stronger, and he had a knife. He stabbed Eric and threw him overboard, too. Fortunately, Eric is a fine swimmer. He used to be in the Navy. Despite the fact he was losing blood from his wound, he managed to find me. I don’t know how he kept us afloat in those freezing waters, but he did until finally a fishing boat came along.”

“And then you came to Scotland and began a new life?” Rafe said.

“No, we went to Switzerland first. Eric had money in Switzerland, in four separate accounts, money Garth knew nothing about. We spent two years there before returning to Britain.”

“And you just forgot about your earlier life?” Mira said, her voice showing the strain. “You just forgot about me?”

“No, not for one moment did I forget you. Look over on the windowsill. Look on the desk in the study, look in the kitchen and in the sitting room. There are photographs of you all over the house, photos that Charlie took and sent to me. Never did I forget you. How could I? You are my daughter, and I love you.”

“But you left me! I was only a child, and I cried for years afterwards.”

“I had to leave you. I was supposed to be dead, and I had to let Garth continue to think that I was. One way or another, if he had found out I was alive, he would have had me killed. But I took some small consolation in the knowledge that you, at least, would be safe with him. He loved you. You were the apple of his eye, and I knew that you would be well cared for.”

“You call that being well cared for?” Rafe snorted, pointing at the bruises on Mira’s face. “Do you know who did that to her? Her fiancé, the man in league with Blackwell. The two of them are running a covert organization that drags people off the streets so they can remove their organs for profit.”

Veronica gasped. “Oh, good heavens. This goes from bad to worse.”

“And as for loving me,” Mira continued, “he doesn’t. Not since he found out that I wasn’t his child at all.”



Veronica wistfully shook her head. “Oh,” she sighed. “I never could be absolutely sure but,” she added, smiling wanly up at Rafe, “with hindsight I am extremely glad that you are her father. You are a good man, Rafe Acer, a very good man. I hope that you’ve got some plan up your sleeve to bring Garth Blackwell down.”

He smiled and was shocked to discover that he was patting her hand. “I’m working on it, Veronica.”

“Good. Now, are you going to tell me your story? I have a feeling that it’s going to be most interesting.”

## Chapter Twenty-four

Herb hadn't seen Rafe in a while and that bothered him. The last he had heard, Rafe was going to the party at Blackwell's. He had eagerly awaited a report from him as to what transpired there, but Rafe never returned after the party. Assuming at first that he spent the night with Selena, Herb waited until the Sunday morning and then telephoned her flat. All he got was the answering machine. Since he didn't have her mobile number, he couldn't contact her that way either. As for Rafe, although he now had a mobile, Herb couldn't find where he'd left the number. He'd written it on a scrap of paper somewhere but where he'd put it he couldn't recall. Worried about Mira since he had not seen her either, Herb decided to take yet another look in his room in the hopes of finding it.

He took the stairs two at a time, but at the top he halted, disturbed to see that the door to his room was open. It occurred to him that Rafe might be in there.

"Rafe, are you there?" Herb called out.

Silence greeted him. Cautiously he peered inside, but no one was there. At first glance, everything looked in order. Well, almost everything. He didn't recall leaving the wardrobe door open. Now that was worrying because inside the wardrobe in a cardboard box were certain personal things that Herb wouldn't have wanted anyone else to see. Also his mobile was in there.

Herb went to the wardrobe and located his mobile hidden under a pile of dirty washing and, as he shifted a threadbare shirt aside, a scrap of paper fell out of the pocket. His relief was huge; he'd found Rafe's mobile number. It was dim in the room so, wasting no time, Herb went to the window so he could see more clearly. He punched the number into the mobile, but even before it could ring, he saw a van pull up outside. Alarm bells went off in his head when he saw two men step out of the car and reach for their guns. Then he heard footsteps in the corridor. Dashing to the door, he saw Perry and

Thomas storming toward him. A burly man he'd never seen before was with them, and he didn't look like any vagrant.

Selena was on the other end of the phone. He didn't want to talk to her; he needed to talk to Rafe. He managed to blurt out that Perry and Thomas were likely involved with Blackwell and that more men had arrived outside the Home when he was overpowered and his mobile was tossed against the wall. Perry and the burly man held Herb while Thomas delivered a series of agonising blows to Herb's belly.

"Careful now, Thomas," Perry advised. "You can have your fun, but don't damage anything vital. Steer clear of the liver, and don't break any ribs near the heart."

"No reason why I can't break his nose and jaw is there? No one wants that," Thomas declared as he attacked Herb's face. "We found your badge and your papers, you know. We went through that wardrobe with a fine toothcomb and found all sorts of interesting stuff. Can't abide a spy," he growled as his fist connected with Herb's chin.

Herb's head snapped back as pain exploded in his face. "Well, what are you then, Thomas?" he grunted. "And you, Perry, if those are even your real names."

Thomas glared at him. "Oh, those are our real names, Herbert. Yours is a bloody mouthful though. I don't care for you, Herbert William Harrington-Kinsey."

Herb looked at him through vision clouded with sweat and blood. "Feeling's mutual, moron." And for that he received yet another punch in the gut. He sagged to his knees only dimly aware that he was being dragged to the door.

"Damn, I hope you haven't damaged anything important," Perry muttered, "because if you have then it'll be you who answers to Christian Wilson and not me."

And with that, Herb knew that he was the next victim for the Acer Blackwell Institute.

\* \* \* \*

Garth Blackwell had been pacing up and down the floor of his study for over fifteen minutes. His acute agitation was overtly obvious, and no amount of pill popping was helping him.

"Garth, sit down. This is doing you no good," Christian Wilson warned. "You are stressed to extreme and unless you calm down, your

health will suffer even more.” He gestured to the couch. “Please, sit down.”

Garth brushed him aside and continued to pace.

His complexion was sallow. There were dark circles under his eyes, and his breathing sounded ragged. At his next turn, Wilson physically halted him in his tracks and managed to keep him still long enough to take his pulse.

“Don’t you dare tell me that I’m having a bloody palpitation. I damn well know that already!” Blackwell bellowed in Wilson’s face. He shoved the doctor aside and continued to trek the path in the carpet.

“You are a fool, Garth.”

“You are possibly the only man alive I would permit to tell me that.”

“Garth, your heart cannot stand this much longer. Your pulse is over two hundred.”

“It probably is. What do you expect after coming here and delivering news like that to me. Did you think that I would say thank you and never mind?”

“No, I didn’t think that.”

Blackwell clutched his throat. Breathing was difficult. “Good because I do mind. I mind that I’ve paid off and sent packing the one man who could save my life.”

“Perhaps I shouldn’t have told you.”

“Not told me! I must be informed about anything that concerns me, and this concerns me intimately. Of course you had to tell me, but I wish that you had told me sooner.”

“I told you as soon as I knew.”

“And it might be too late.”

“I’ve sent men to look for Acer, but he’s not at the Veronica Blackwell Home. Some of his clothes are there though. He might return at any time.”

“Not likely though, is it? I made it clear to him what would happen if he stayed around. Ralph Acer isn’t stupid. Like everyone else, he values his life.”

“No, he isn’t stupid. He managed to keep secret the fact that he was having an affair with Selena Steele. I found some of her letters in his room. I guess we were wrong about him and Mira.”

“I don’t care a jot about Mira, and I care even less about Acer and the doctor. But I do care about me. Hell, this is an intolerable situation.”

Blackwell tore a shaky hand through his hair and stopped just long enough to kick the cat that was dozing under his desk. It was Mira’s cat, and he hated it. The cat howled and raced off.

“Yes, it is rather. I couldn’t believe it when I ran the routine checks on the computer and found out that the tests on Ralph Acer’s bloods showed that he is likely to be as near a perfect match for you as we will ever find.”

Blackwell was panting, and he had to stop pacing. “I want his heart, Christian. Damn it, I have to have it, or I shall die very soon.”

“Yes, you will.”

Blackwell glared at him. “Do you have to agree with absolutely everything I say?”

“Yes, I do since it generally calms you down, sir. You are not a man to be crossed.”

“Hell and damnation, do you have to be so frank? Oh, don’t answer that.”

“Please sit down. As your doctor, I order you to sit down because if you don’t then I must warn you that your heart could give out on you at any moment, rendering this conversation irrelevant.”

Blackwell staggered slightly and put his hand on Wilson for support. “Very well, I will sit but only because I can’t remain standing any longer and not because you order it.”

“It amounts to the same thing.” He led Blackwell to the couch then went to his bag to find a sedative. “A shot of this should sort you out in the short term and ease that palpitation.”

“And in the long term? It’s that which concerns me.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll find Acer and then you’ll have his heart. I will personally be the one to give it to you.” Wilson lifted Blackwell’s feet onto the couch and injected him in his arm.

“God, I hope so.”

“Trust me. I’ve got men watching the Home in case he returns there. I also have men posted at the Institute in case Selena Steele shows up. If we have her then likely we can lay a trap for him.”

Blackwell closed his eyes and sighed. “Good man, Christian, good man. I have absolute faith in you.”

\* \* \* \*

Promising to see her again soon, Rafe left Mira in Scotland with Veronica and her two children. It seemed that she had, at last, found her family, and they were more than happy to have her stay with them indefinitely. Rafe warned Mira and Veronica that the two of them should, for the time being, stay well away from Exeter at least until he was able to expose Blackwell for the murdering criminal that he was. Both agreed that it was probably for the best, but Mira's main concern was that Blackwell would carry out his threat to close down the Home. Rafe understood her concern. He would do what he could to see that didn't happen, but his priority, he explained, was to ensure that she and Veronica were safe. That meant them staying in Scotland.

As for Selena, she was in total agreement with Rafe, but now travelling back with him in the car, she was experiencing unexpected stabs of jealousy. It was, of course, only right that he and Veronica should have parted on cordial terms, but she hadn't expected them to be quite so cordial. Intimate might have been a better word.

Just before they took their leave of Veronica, Lizzie had dragged her off to the summerhouse to show her the little play corner that she had created there. A few minutes later, she happened to glance out of the summerhouse, and to her dismay, she saw Rafe and Veronica in a warm embrace. In fact, she was almost certain they were kissing. She said nothing about it, but the image stayed lodged in her mind and she couldn't shake it. To make things worse, all Rafe talked about on the long journey back was Veronica and how he had so unfairly maligned her. In Selena's eyes, it seemed that he had gone from hating her to possibly even loving her again. She was therefore unsure where that left her. Rafe was definitely going to visit Veronica again; she had heard him say so. Selena was certain he had deep feelings for her, no matter that she was twenty years older than him. Selena felt hurt and a deep sympathy for Eric Simmonds. Wouldn't he be in for a shock when he got back from Switzerland and found out what had been going on in his absence?

"You're very quiet," Rafe commented.

Selena was staring out of the window at the hills and fells of the Lake District. Her stomach was knotted again while an unpleasant sensation of heartburn hurt her chest.

"Am I?" She had promised herself that she wasn't going to talk about Veronica even though the woman was all she could think of. Thus she had hardly spoken at all.

“Yes, you are. You haven’t spoken more than a word or two in the last hundred miles. Are you feeling okay?”

She choked up but was determined to fight back the tears. He had enough worries and didn’t need her to add to them. He had no need to know that her emotions were on a roller coaster and that her hormones had gone haywire. “I’m fine.”

He glanced at her. “You don’t look fine to me.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat and hoped it would get rid of the metallic taste in her mouth. It didn’t, and her stomach didn’t help matters as it knotted up again. “Well, I am. Just keep your eyes on the road, and concentrate on driving.”

Rafe didn’t believe her. He also didn’t like the look of her. All wan and drawn. “You look sick. Shall I stop off at the next service station and get you a coffee?”

Coffee! The very thought made her belly convulse. She hadn’t been able to drink coffee, or tea for that matter for over two weeks. “No, let’s keep going.” She suddenly looked over her shoulder, thinking that she heard a phone ringing.

“Yes, I hear it. It’s the mobile that Herb gave me so that we could keep in touch. It’s in my coat pocket. Can you reach it?”

Selena stretched back and found it. “I didn’t even know that you had a mobile.”

“Forgot to mention it,” he said.

“You forgot to mention it!” With everything that was happening, didn’t he think it was important for them to keep in touch?

“Yes, sorry.”

“Did you give the number to Veronica?” She decided there and then that if he said that he had then when they got back to Exeter she would pack her bags and leave the area. She didn’t have a job left to go back to anyway so what did she have to lose?

“Of course,” he replied. “She’ll need to be in touch.”

She wanted to throw up. She had Rafe to lose and it was all too obvious that she had already lost him. She had lost him to Veronica.

“So are you going to answer the phone for me?”

Selena pressed the button that allowed her to receive the call.

The voice on the other end of the phone sounded anxious. “Rafe, is that you?”

“It’s Herb,” Selena said to Rafe “and he sounds kind of breathless.”

“No, Herb, this is Selena, Rafe’s driving at the moment.”

“Selena, give him the phone!”

“But he’s driving and a bit too fast if you ask me.”

“I don’t care if he takes off into flight, just give it to him!”

She put the phone in Rafe’s left hand. “Herb’s made it pretty clear that you have to speak to him.”

Rafe took the phone. “Hello, Herb, what’s up?”

“Things are bad. Blackwell’s men have surrounded the house. It’s only me, Thomas and Perry left. And, Rafe, I think that they’re both in with Blackwell.”

“What, are you certain?” He knew about Thomas, but he had no idea about Perry.

“Yes. I heard him on the phone. He’s not daft, and I don’t think he’s ever really been drunk. Damn! Someone’s coming down the corridor. Hell, it’s Perry and Thomas with two of Blackwell’s henchmen.”

“Herb, get out of there.”

“No way out! Oh, Christ!”

“Try the window.”

“Too late... Damn!” Herb grunted as though hit by a blow then the phone went dead.

“Herb... Herb, are you there?” It was all Rafe could do to concentrate on driving. “My God, Selie. They’ve got Herb.”



## Chapter Twenty-five

Selena didn't know what scared her the most, Rafe's frantic driving or the knowledge that Blackwell had Herb and was most likely going to kill him. But finally, as Charlie's car came to a screeching halt outside the Home, she managed to take a deep breath. It didn't calm her at all though. All she could think of was what they might do to Herb. The image of his body, robbed of vital organs, came all too vividly mind. She really was on the verge of throwing up.

Rafe charged up the stairs that led to the attic room he shared with Herb. Herb was his good friend. He had taken care of him when he most needed help, and he had always been there with a listening ear. Rafe couldn't and wouldn't allow anything to happen to him.

"Shit!" he swore as he flung the door open and saw the utter disarray of the room. The bed was upended, the mattress that Rafe slept on was slashed from top to bottom so the stuffing and springs were falling out. The legs were snapped off the chair, and the window was broken. And worse still, there was blood all over the carpet and curtains.

"Hell and damnation!" he bellowed, mentally envisaging what must have occurred.

Selena followed him into the room. "He must have put up quite a struggle."

Rafe pushed a hand through his hair and desperately tried to think. "They'll have taken him to the Institute. We'll have to go there and get him out."

"If it's not already too late."

Rafe rummaged in the trunk. He knew Herb kept a gun in there. "Don't say that, Selie, just don't. Got it!" he cried as he came up holding the small revolver.

Footsteps on the stairs alerted them, and by the sounds, they belonged to more than one person.

“Blackwell’s men?” Selena whispered with dread.

“I don’t know but could be. Damn, I’ll bet they’ve been watching the place all along.” He was busy checking the gun and swore harshly once he realised that it wasn’t loaded. “For Christ’s sake,” he muttered. “Can things get any worse?”

“I think so,” she gasped as two men came barging into the room.

Selena dodged the first and made a dash for the upended bed. She slipped behind it and looked frantically about for some kind of weapon.

“We’ve been waiting for you,” the tall, brawny man declared. He had a gun in his hand, as did his companion.

“Waiting a long time,” the other who spoke with an Irish accent added.

“You shouldn’t have bothered on my account,” Rafe snarled, pointing the gun. “Come one step closer, and I’ll pull this trigger.”

“You can pull it if you like. If that gun was loaded then I’m damn certain the cop would have used it to save himself. But since he didn’t then I have to assume that it’s not. I’ll take that chance. I can’t begin to tell you how annoyed Mr Blackwell is. He doesn’t like cops, especially undercover ones who think they can pull one over on him. Still he wasn’t so clever was he, bloody useless. When we were done with him he was only too happy to tell us his life history.”

“Yeah, and we found his badge too. Still, his only use now is as a supply of spare parts,” the Irishman laughed. “I bet they’re cutting him up as we speak.”

Fear for Herb transformed into rage and anger. Rafe threw the gun at the tall man with the force of a missile, and it connected solidly with the centre of his forehead bringing him down just as David had laid low Goliath. He didn’t even have time to pull the trigger of his own gun. Rafe launched himself at the Irishman, but he had just sufficient time to let loose a single bullet that grazed across Rafe’s shoulder. In his crazed state, it didn’t stop him though. He charged right into the Irishman, knocking him to the floor. One hefty blow from his right fist was all that it took to render him unconscious.

Selena dashed out from behind the mattress and scooped up the two fallen weapons.

“Let’s get out of here!” Rafe beckoned to her.

She followed him out of the room and down the two flights of stairs. They were running down the hallway just as the front door was thrown open, and four burly men barged in. Rafe recognised one of

them as Perry. He knew that they had only seconds to save themselves. “Selie, give me a gun.”

She fumbled with her bag, cursing the fact that she’d been so stupid as to put both weapons in there. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think that there would be any more of them!” she gasped, stunned by the speed with which her bag was suddenly wrenched from her hand by Perry. Then she witnessed with horror the three other men leap onto Rafe and begin to rain down blow after blow upon him in rapid succession until he finally gave up the struggle and lapsed into unconsciousness.

\* \* \* \*

A familiar mist swirled all around him, a thick mist that obscured his view and irritated him by its depressing presence. “Look, I know that this is a prerequisite to one of you appearing, but do you think that this time we could dispense with the fog and just get on with things? There’s a lot going on at the moment.”

A tendril of mist licked at his feet. “Come on, I haven’t got time for this.” He peered ahead and saw, through a parting in the mist, a dim figure approaching. “Micah, is that you?”

As if a switch had been flicked, the mist vanished, and Cerdic stood beside him. “No, it’s me. You are in a lot of trouble, my friend.”

“As if I didn’t already know. Is that what you came here to tell me, Cerd, because if it is then you shouldn’t have bothered?”

“I didn’t come here to tell you anything. You summoned me, albeit unconsciously.”

“Did I? Then I guess that I am pretty damned unconscious.”

“Yes, you are. Not surprising really with those three heavies laying into you. They didn’t spare the rod so to speak.”

“Quite. I assume that they are taking me and Selena to the Institute.”

“Yes, they are.”

“Is there a reason for this? After all Blackwell paid me to keep away. So what’s he doing dragging me off to the Institute?”

“Blackwell wants your heart, Rafe. Wilson found out that you are a near perfect tissue match for him.”

“He wants my heart! The son of a bitch kills me once, and then he wants a second go? Only this time he gets my heart, too? Over my dead body!”

Cerdic grimaced. “Bad choice of words, Rafe.”

“Cerd, you’ve got to help me. You’ve got to do something. Get a message to the police, and tell them what’s happening.”

Cerdic gestured at the long, white flowing robes he was wearing. “In case you’ve forgotten, I’m dead. I can’t tell any mortal being anything.”

Rafe wasn’t about to give up. “Come on, you can think of something. I’ve seen you make lights flicker, and you’re a dab hand at table rapping.”

“I see, so I go along to the local police station and start playing ghostly little tricks in the hope that someone might just understand that the knocking sounds and flickering lights are actually a form of Morse code?”

“Yes, yes that’s it. That’s excellent, Cerd.”

Cerdic snorted. “Come on, Rafe. This is the twenty-first century. How many people do you believe know Morse code?”

“Someone might. There might be a Boy Scout turned Bobby.”

“Well, even if they did, I don’t.”

“You don’t know Morse code?”

“No.”

“Shit!”

“Do you?”

“No.”

“That makes me feel better then.”

“Stop messing with me, Cerd. Look, if you don’t help me then pretty soon I’m going to be back up here with you permanently.”

“True enough. I’d help you if I could, Rafe but, as you know, spirits work best in the field of communication when there is a blood connection with the human that they are trying to give a message to. In my case, there’s no one that I can use. Even if there was, it relies upon them being sensitive enough to receive my message.”

And then it came to Rafe in a blinding flash. “There is someone.”

“No, there isn’t. I have no blood connection with anyone alive.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Who?”

“Mira.”

“Mira?”

“Yes, Mira. You spent enough time in her womb, didn’t you? That makes the two of you about as closely connected as it gets.”

“Goodness, my friend, you are so right. It might just work. I’ll give it a go.”

“Just make sure she understands that we are being taken to the Institute and that we need the police to get there in force.”

“I’ll try to do my best.”

“No, Cerd, you will do your best. I’m counting on you.”

\* \* \* \*

“Lizzie, when was the last time this room was dusted?” Mira held a duster and a can of spray polish.

Lizzie was lying on the bed playing with two of her dolls. “About a month ago.”

“A month!”

Lizzie rolled over onto her belly and traced the pattern on her duvet with her fingertip. “Yes, a month. Mummy was going to do it, but Daddy said it was my job since it’s my dust. He said that I should do my own cleaning up.”

“Fair point.” Mira suddenly felt a tickle on her right ear. That was the third time that had happened in the last hour.

“Anyway, Daddy said that I had to do it, and Mummy was not to do it for me.”

“And yet you haven’t dusted, have you?” A cold blast of air brushed against her face and made her blink a few times. And then she saw it again—a dark amorphous shape across the far side of the room. She didn’t want to tell Lizzie about what was happening since she didn’t want to alarm the girl.

“No, I haven’t.”

“And why not?” The shape vanished.

“Because Daddy’s not here. I’ll do it when he gets home.”

Mira heard the sounds of a car pulling up outside, and she peered out of the window. “Actually, Lizzie, I think your Daddy is home.”

“He is?” Lizzie leapt off the bed and dashed for the window. “Ooh,” she cried, “it is Daddy. I wonder if he’s brought me a present from Switzerland.”

“So, what about the dusting?”

Lizzie was already out the door. “Oh, you can do it. What are big sisters for?”

Mira had to chuckle. Lizzie had a nerve. She picked up the duster and was about to spray the polish on her dressing table when she fancied that she heard something, a faint sound in her ear. But it was too faint to make any sense of.

Cerdic didn’t know whether a spirit could go mad with frustration, but he was beginning to think that he was as close to it as he would ever get. What did he have to do to get her to understand him? He’d even tried the flickering lights, but her reaction to that was

to switch the light off. She couldn't hear him clairaudiently either, and he was running out of ideas.

Then he saw the thick layer of dust. The rest was comparatively easy.

Mira stared unbelievably at the dressing table as letters started to form. "No, this isn't happening." In denial, she looked away. But when she glanced back, she saw two complete words written in the dust.

*Call police.*

Intrigued now, she watched as the next words took form beneath the first two.

*Rafe is in danger.*

Her heart began to thud.

*Go to Institute.*

Mira dropped the duster and dashed out of the bedroom.

And when she was gone, Cerdic added his own private apology.

*Sorry for being late.*

## Chapter Twenty-six

Even through his closed eyes, the lights above were excruciatingly bright. The overpowering odour of antiseptics and disinfectant made his sinuses ache, which only served to compound the misery already brought about by his throbbing head. The sounds of footsteps on a hard floor echoed loud in his ears and, somewhere close by, a clock ticked his life away.

Rafe knew, even before he opened his eyes, that he was in an operating theatre. His bruised and aching body was naked. Feeling chilled, he sensed he had only the thinnest of cotton sheets covering his lower half. Clearly his personal welfare wasn't top of the list of priorities. Two men were talking, and Rafe recognised the voices of Christian Wilson and Perry. But now Perry, the sot of the Home or so he would have others think, sounded altogether lucid. He also sounded intelligent because he was discussing in-depth medical procedures with Wilson and apparently using all the correct medical jargon. Perry had done a fine job of duping them all at the Home. He was obviously there to assist in finding victims for them to butcher and rob of organs.

Rafe finally opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the clock on the wall, but the second thing he saw was Selena sitting in a chair, gagged and bound. He was doubly horrified, horrified to see her in obvious distress and horrified at the time: four o'clock in the morning. All hope that Herb might still be alive suddenly faded.

Selena had apparently been watching him, waiting for him to regain consciousness. They exchanged eye contact, but she was too far away for him to glean any clear information. Besides, he knew what fate awaited him. Blackwell needed his heart. His only hope of rescue would be if Cerd managed to contact Mira. That, he knew, was a slim shot.

"Ah, so he is awake," Wilson motioned toward him.

Perry went across to Rafe and double-checked the straps that bound him to the trolley. “These are secure enough. You should have done yourself a favour, Acer, and stayed unconscious. What happens next isn’t for the faint hearted.”

Rafe decided the man was a weasel, even looked like one. “Bugger off, Perry. Your clarity of speech might have improved, but you still smell like a ruddy fish market. You are still an obnoxious bastard.”

“So I smell like a fish market, do I? We’ll see if this packs more punch than a wet fish,” he spat as his fist connected with Rafe’s jaw.

Rafe saw stars and spat out a mouthful of blood, dimly noticing that the wound to his shoulder oozed puss and blood. They hadn’t cleaned or dressed it, which meant that he wasn’t going to be kept alive too much longer. “Where’s Herb?” he asked, doubting that they would give him an answer.

“Ah, the undercover officer,” Perry replied. “Oh, he’s out of it.”

Rafe swore. He had liked Herb. “So he wasn’t the only one incognito,” he muttered grimly. “I’ve got to hand it to you, Perry. You did a fine job of fooling us all.”

Perry’s smile didn’t reach his beady, dark eyes. “Didn’t I just? Reckon I deserve an Oscar for my performance. You’d never have guessed that this odious bastard was actually a fully trained staff nurse.”

“No, I wouldn’t. Why did you give it up then? Were you struck off for misconduct or did you misappropriate hospital equipment?”

A nerve twitched in Perry’s jaw.

“Guess I hit the nail on the head.”

Perry suddenly made a lunge at him. “Speaking of hitting heads!”

Wilson was swift in hauling him back. “No, we need him alive for just a short while longer.”

Rafe turned his head so that he could get a clear view of Wilson. His face was discoloured. He had a dressing on his nose, and both eyes were bruised. “Does it hurt, Wilson?” Rafe said. “Guess I broke it then. Ah, well, it’s nice to know that some things go according to plan.”

Wilson elbowed Rafe in the ribs and took immense satisfaction in watching him flinch. “Shut up, Acer, or I’ll have to resort to taking your heart out without any anaesthetic.”

Perry suddenly turned to the door. “Listen, I think Mr Blackwell is arriving. I hear activity in the corridor.”



Rafe looked back at Selena. She was terrified. “Why is she here? What are you going to do with her?”

“Oh she has a ringside seat, here to see you die. Actually I’m not quite sure what we’re going to do with her after that,” Perry replied. “I think Wilson’s got something in mind though.”

“Yes, I’ve got plans,” Wilson said throatily. “I’m going to do to her what I’ve wanted to do since the moment I first saw her. She is going to play with me. We are going to have some fun, and you, Acer, won’t be around to do anything about it.”

Selena visibly cringed just as the door to the operating theatre swung open, and Blackwell was wheeled in on a trolley.

“I’ve run some tests, and he’s very anaemic,” said the doctor who had just been attending him. “I fear that he won’t stand up to the transplant without an immediate transfusion.”

Wilson pulled down Blackwell’s lower eyelid and shook his head. The tissue was almost white when it should have been pink. “So why have you not already given him one?”

“Because,” Blackwell answered for himself, “it appears that in this state of the art research institute, they don’t have any AB rhesus negative blood. This is intolerable. I am surrounded by incompetent idiots, and I am particularly disappointed in you, Christian. You let me down after I told you that I put my faith in you.”

Wilson held up the medical records in his hand then pointed at Rafe. “No, sir, I have not let you down. We may not have any AB negative in our store, but we do have an on-tap supply right here.”

Blackwell looked at Rafe. “What? You mean Ralph Acer has my blood type?”

Wilson rubbed his hands together, eager to commence work on the man who had broken his nose. “I told you that he was a spot on match for you, Garth.”

“By God, so you did. So what are you waiting for? Get the blood out of him and into me as swiftly as you can. I need to be strong to receive a new heart.”

“Bastard,” Rafe seethed. “Is there anything else you want while you’re at it? Tell me, Blackwell, are your kidney’s up to scratch, or have you had a recurrence of those painful, debilitating stones that you had in your mid-twenties? Don’t suppose you’ve bugged up your liver with all those vodkas you were always so partial to? Sometimes fifteen a night, wasn’t it? Surely that must make you a candidate for cirrhosis of the liver. And what about your eyes? Your

father had cataracts, didn't he? Maybe it's hereditary. Take what you can, you bastard."

"How do you know all that?"

"A little bird told me."

Blackwell felt uneasy and stared at Rafe warily for a few seconds. Finally he addressed Christian. "Doctor, I believe I need a transfusion."

"Yes, sir, you certainly do. I'll attend to it immediately."

Still bewildered, Blackwell looked away from Rafe, to watch Wilson and Perry go to work.

They lined up the trolleys side by side then rigged up a system whereby Rafe's blood could be drawn out of his vein and pumped directly into Blackwell's arm. Being strapped down, Rafe was powerless to do anything. Within minutes, he was loosing his lifeblood, and Blackwell was receiving it.

"We've got to scrub up," Wilson finally declared. "Perry and I will be back in ten minutes with the anaesthetist then we shall begin the operation. Take it easy, Garth. Oh and Selena," he said giving a mocking salute, "enjoy the show."

"I'll just lie back and relax," Blackwell declared as he watched, with enormous satisfaction, Rafe's blood flow down the clear tubing to merge with his own.

Rafe shivered from incredible cold. Impressions flooded his mind, and suddenly he realized he could hear Blackwell's thoughts.

*This is the moment I've been waiting for; this is going to be the first day of the rest of my very long life. I'm getting a new heart and am as excited as a child at Christmas. If only your father could see what is happening to you now, Ralph. If my old partner knew just what was about to happen to his son then he would turn in his unsanctified resting place.*

He didn't need to see into Blackwell's eyes; the transfusion had created a kind of informational conduit. "He won't turn in his unsanctified resting place, as you put it. He's not even there, Blackwell."

Garth Blackwell gasped so suddenly that it made him cough. He gaped at the man beside him.

Rafe stared at the ceiling. "You didn't pay me enough," he simply said.

Blackwell was still stunned by the earlier comment. "What?"

"I said that you didn't pay me enough."

The point at which the blood was flowing into his arm had grown strangely cold. “No, maybe I didn’t.”

“Oh, you certainly didn’t. My heart is worth a hell of a lot more than three quarters of a million pounds.”

Blackwell smirked at him, the excitement apparently having returned, the earlier discomfiting comments forgotten. “Yes, it is. I’ll have a cheque made out to you immediately.”

“Scum,” Rafe snarled. He was feeling light-headed already.

Blackwell chuckled. “Shame that you won’t be alive to cash it.”

Rafe turned his head so he could look at the man responsible for turning his life into an ongoing nightmare. He wished him dead with all his heart, but ironically it was his heart that would keep Blackwell alive. He didn’t want his heart inside a man that oozed evil from every pore. “Then make it out to my daughter. No, on second thought, make half out to my daughter and half out to my wife. That seems most fair.”

Blackwell raised an eyebrow. “Ah, so you have family.”

“Yes, I have family.”

“In Australia?”

“My, isn’t this turning into a cosy little chat.” His whole body was now shivering convulsively just as it had when he had been in the morgue chiller and, more alarmingly, just as it had done before hypothermia had set in on the mountain and his senses had left him.

“It passes the time. So, are they both in Australia?”

Rafe’s brain felt fuzzy. The ceiling tiles were going in and out of focus. “No, they’re not in Australia.” He wasn’t going to tell him where they were though. He wouldn’t put them at risk.

“Then you’d better give me their names so that I can have the cheques written out properly.”

“How generous of you,” Rafe said, his voice thickly laced with scorn, “but forgive me if I doubt your sincerity. You and I both know that you wouldn’t give them a penny. Greed is your middle name, Blackwell. Always has been.”

“Now I feel that I must protest. In the odd weak moment and to the right people, I have been known to display generosity, Ralph.”

“It’s Rafe.”

Blackwell was momentarily preoccupied with the numbness of his arm, and he didn’t seem to register the correction. “Yes, I might just surprise you, and I might actually give them some money. You are, after all, doing me a great favour.”

Rafe was looking at the clock. It was dancing about on the wall, and the hands were waving at him. Lethargy was weighing him down. His thoughts were all jumbled.

“So, what are their names?” Blackwell pressed through chattering teeth. “Damn,” he muttered, “I should be feeling stronger, not weaker. I just want to sleep.”

Rafe closed his eyes, trying to see in his mind’s eye the images of his wife and daughter but all he could see was Selena’s face. She was the woman he loved. She was the last thing he wanted to see before he died. “Their names are Mira and Veronica.”

Blackwell barely managed to turn his head in Rafe’s direction. “The blood loss is addling your mind, Ralph. You’re spouting nonsense.”

“I told you, Blackwell. It’s Rafe. I’m Rafe Acer.”

“No, lad, Rafe was your father.”

“You’re wrong. How do you think I know so much about you? I lied to you. I’m Rafe Acer. I’m the partner that you killed on the mountain. I’m the one you kicked in the head and sent tumbling to his death. You wanted Veronica, and you wanted the business. But it wasn’t all plain sailing when you got it, was it? Mira’s my daughter, not yours.”

“No, don’t believe...”

“What, you don’t believe that she’s your daughter?”

“No, I know that.”

“Ah, you don’t believe me? You don’t believe that I’m Rafe Acer. Well, how about this for proof then. Do you recall telling me that you fucked my wife rigid ninety three times? You kept score; said it was like cutting notches in a gun handle. How do you think that made me feel, old partner?”

Blackwell tried to speak, but he began to cough again instead. His throat and his lips didn’t seem to work properly, and all he could do was gurgle like a babe.

“Got a problem, Garth?” Rafe said, his own speech greatly slurred. “Guess my blood doesn’t agree with you after all. Probably something to do with the fact that good and evil don’t mix too well.”

“No... it’s the right type,” he managed to get out. “It’s AB negative. You, you’re not Rafe Acer. It’s just not possible.”

“Not possible? Why, because you killed me?”

“Yes,” he groaned. His whole body was numb with cold. “I killed him.”

“Correction, you killed me. But you know what, Garth? I didn’t stay dead. After twenty years of lying frozen on that mountain, I had a bit of help. And guess what? I just jumped right back into my body. I’ll bet you can guess what my immediate priority was.”

“You’re talking rubbish. I don’t have to listen to this.”

“Why? Are you going somewhere?”

“Shut up.”

Rafe was gasping and having trouble drawing a breath. “I’ll tell you what my priority was, Garth. My priority was to get you because I wanted retribution. Even though I may ultimately be denied it, I at least gave it my all. Given you something to think about, haven’t I?”

Rafe was semi-conscious now. The next instant he felt his body being propelled down a long corridor. It was rather like *déjà vu*, and he knew that his end was near. This wasn’t how it was meant to be. “Micah, this sucks!” he inwardly screamed, hoping that the archangel might hear him. “This isn’t what I came back for!”

Garth weakly turned his head to face the man on the other trolley. “Well, now, your all wasn’t good enough, was it? It’s your lifeblood draining away, and it’s draining into me. Soon your heart will be beating in my breast. You are a failure, Rafe, if that is who you really are.”

Rafe was lapsing into unconsciousness. “Rather a failure that a fucking leech like you, Blackwell. You know I’m no failure.” He sucked in a breath, but it didn’t seem to reach his lungs. “You may yet have chosen the wrong man to rob a heart from. I’ve bested better than you. I’ve brought down spirits that would leave you quaking in your boots. I’ve sent them packing. When all is said and done, you are not really so big.”

A mist was descending, a thick mist that enveloped Blackwell’s head, penetrated the orifices of his skull and filtered down into his shoulders and torso. “You’re damned insane.” His head lolled to the side.

Rafe followed him into that otherworldly state and, on his astral face there resided the mere ghost of a smile. This was his second home, and he was familiar with how things panned out here. With innate knowledge, he now realised exactly what was going to happen to Blackwell. As far as he was concerned, that was divine retribution with a vengeance. No matter if the price of it did result in his death. It would be worth it.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

Mira contacted the police by telephone but they initially refused to believe her story just as they refused to believe that she was who she said she was. They even laughed over the phone when she tried to tell them that Veronica Blackwell was alive and in hiding because she feared that Garth Blackwell would make another attempt on her life. Without more proof, they were unwilling to send men to the Institute. Neither were they prepared to search the Veronica Blackwell Home.

In desperation, Mira went to Eric Simmonds. Both she and Veronica had hastily relayed to him what had transpired. Fortunately he believed them and understood it was imperative that the two of them get back to Exeter. Together they had to convince the police of what was happening at the Institute. Time was running out and the car journey south would have taken much too long. Eric at once contacted a friend who not only had a pilot's licence but also small plane. He agreed to take them immediately to Exeter airport.

All that remained then was for Mira and Veronica to get to the police station and convince them of who they were and of what they knew about Garth Blackwell and his illegal operation. And with that successfully accomplished, they hoped that a team of armed men would be headed for the Institute.

\* \* \* \*

With his long legs in a wide stance, Rafe faced Garth Blackwell head on. The swirling mist tugged at their bodies and tried to pull them every way. Blackwell was rocking like a boat on a stormy sea, but Rafe was well used to this. His association with the ephemeral mist was long established. He stood his ground while Blackwell was buffeted about.

"Where are we?" Blackwell asked, trying to bat away a misty tendril.

Rafe folded his arms. This was going to be most interesting. “It’s sort of a half way house.”

Blackwell turned full circle, but fog surrounded them. “Half way to where?”

Rafe shrugged. There was a feral gleam in his astral eye. “Half way up, half way down. I wonder, which way are you going, Garth?”

Blackwell took a step back and almost fell over. “I am not going anywhere. I am about to have your heart and live a long life because of it.”

Rafe laughed in his face as he poked him in the chest. “You are wrong.”

“Don’t you dare touch me!” Blackwell said in horror.

“Oh, I dare,” Rafe snapped. “Take a look around you. There are none of your menials here to come rushing to your assistance. It’s just you and me, and this happens to be my second home.”

Blackwell looked around again, seeing no one but the two of them. “And what did you mean when you said that I was wrong? You are the one who is going to die, not me.”

Rafe prodded him again. “Actually you are the one who is going to die, Garth. Yes, I suppose that I might die too, but hey, it’s all in a good cause if it rids the world of vermin like you. It’s a fair trade off and, after all, maybe this is what I came back to do.”

“You really did come back from the dead?”

“Oh yes I was dead, and then I returned. Just like Lazarus.”

“Bloody hell.”

Rafe grinned. He could tell that, even in his astral body, Blackwell was terrified. He, on the other hand, didn’t fear death. Death was nothing new to him.

“But why am I going to die? Your blood and your heart should save me. Wilson is the best doctor in his field.”

Rafe was enjoying this immensely. “Felt cold, didn’t you?”

Blackwell nodded. The mist about his feet had turned from grey to sooty black. Unbeknownst to him, it was looping around his ankles like a coil.

“Well,” Rafe said, “what did you expect? If you take the blood of a dead man into your veins then you have got to accept that it is going to be thick and cold.”

“But you are not dead, not yet,” he countered.

“Ah, but I was. Every molecule in my blood was frozen motionless for twenty years. You know, I often used to return to visit

my body. I would look down upon my dead face, all the time praying to God that you would eventually suffer as I did. Now maybe, just maybe, He's listened."

"So, there is a life after death."

"Oh yes, but don't get complacent, Garth."

"But God is supposed to be all-forgiving, isn't he?"

"Generally yes, but then there is the small matter of accumulated karma. You have accumulated a deep well full of the stuff and all of it negative. I believe there is a biblical saying, as you sow so shall you reap. Everything you've sown has been thoroughly rotten."

"I don't believe you. I don't believe your blood is killing me. Neither do I believe that Veronica is alive. You made it all up."

"Suit yourself."

Voices, female voices, suddenly echoed around them. Rafe heard the voices clearly enough, but he couldn't manage to go to them. Blackwell, however, immediately disappeared. Rafe knew that his partner, for the time being at least, was back in the operating theatre.

\* \* \* \*

Blackwell tried to open his eyes, but they felt like lead. He had never been so cold in his entire life. He didn't even have the energy left to shiver.

"Bad... bad dream," he muttered. "Christian, are you there?"

Someone touched his hand. "Garth, how are you feeling, dear?"

His eyes flickered open, and the image of a woman came slowly into focus. "*Veronica?*" On the far side of the theatre, he also saw two police officers holding Christian in a firm grip.

"Yes, it's me, dear. We came as soon as we could. How are you feeling?" She was still smiling, as if she were enjoying every moment of their reunion.

"You didn't die. Oh, God, it wasn't a dream. Rafe spoke the truth." Selena appeared, and the drip was suddenly pulled from his arm. "No, I must have his blood." His groan turned into a throaty rattle. "I must have his heart."

"My goodness, it's all me, me, me, isn't it, Garth? You always were the greedy one, weren't you, dear?" Veronica said, stroking his cheek. "You got the money and the power and the prestige, but that wasn't enough. You wanted me out of the way for good, so you tried to murder me. Now you want Rafe's heart. You know, I think that he deserves to keep it."



“Oh, he’s going to keep it,” Selena vowed as she slid the needle out of Rafe’s arm. He was pale, almost as pale as he had been when she first saw him lying on the mountainside dead. She guessed that he had probably lost over three pints of blood. That was before the blood loss from the wound to his shoulder. She put her finger to his neck. His pulse was there but weak and alarmingly fast. His flesh felt like ice. She rushed to cover him with blankets.

Blackwell whimpered like some small child. “I need...I need his heart.”

Veronica laughed as she put her mouth to his ear. “Poor dear, you are so cold. I know what, Garth. Why don’t you just go where it’s warm? Go roast in hell!” she spat.

And with her scorn still ringing in his ear, Garth Blackwell felt the tug of the dark mist once more. Although he tried to fight it, the mist naturally won.

\* \* \* \*

“So, you’re back then,” Rafe said nonchalantly. “I heard what was going on. Shame, I’d liked to have seen your face when Veronica turned up. Pretty scathing, wasn’t she?”

“Piss off!” Blackwell snapped.

Rafe laughed. “Why? Do you think that might cool down the furnace of hell?”

“I’m not going to hell. There is no such place.” The inky black mist was coiling its way steadily up his leg and had reached his groin.

Rafe watched its ascent with interest. An unusually hungry black mist, he had seen many of its ilk. “Very well then, let us assume for now that there is no such place as hell. So tell me, Garth, where do the evil go when they die?”

“How should I ruddy well know?”

“But you seem to know so much.” Rafe stroked his chin. “I’m going to let you in on a secret. Do you know what I did during those twenty years while I was dead?”

“No, and I don’t care. Look, I’m not staying around here.” For the first time he felt the black mist snaring his body. He glanced down in horror as it snaked up level with his waist.

“I think that I’ll tell you anyway. I was an avenging spirit. I kicked the stuffing out of evil spirits that tormented the innocent. I did that every day, sometimes several times a day, and I did it because it was my job. And because I was damn good at it and because I had the authority from on high to do so. You are in that category, Garth

Blackwell. You are vermin. It is my duty to tell you that you are going to whatever passes as your own personal hell for a very long time to come. Maybe even for eternity.”

“No, this is a mistake. You are wrong.” The mist coiled tightly around his neck. Then from below, the inky thread tugged, and he was yanked clean off his astral feet.

Rafe sighed. “And you, of course, are always right.” He saluted as Blackwell was drawn screaming along the corridor to disappear in a whirling vortex of dark energy. “Safe journey,” he muttered scathingly.

Rafe glanced about. He was alone, but far in the distance he heard a woman’s voice.

\* \* \* \*

“Rafe, can you hear me? Rafe wake up!” Selena rubbed his hands and arms, trying to restore his sluggish circulation.

“Can you do anything for him?” Veronica asked with concern.

Christian Wilson snorted from across the room. “There’s no AB negative here. That’s why we were giving his blood to Blackwell. Guess he’ll just have to make up the loss himself. Or not. In which case he’ll die.”

Rafe was coming to, latching on to bits of the conversation.

“Take some blood out of Blackwell. He’s only just died. Surely that’s possible,” Veronica said hopefully.

“Maybe it could be done,” Selena replied. She was still trying to figure out what exactly caused Blackwell’s death. She decided that it had to be heart failure because it was so sudden.

Wilson gave a cruel laugh. “Well, best of luck in trying. That is a corpse lying there, and since Garth Blackwell never freely gave anything away in life then I don’t see why he should be any different in death.”

Selena made up her mind. She would do anything to save Rafe, including taking blood from a dead man. “I’ll give it a go.”

“No.” Rafe’s hand brushed her aside. “Don’t you dare give me his blood. It’s filthy evil stuff, and I won’t have it in my body”

“Thank God, you’ve come to. I was so worried. But Rafe, some of it is your own blood.”

“No, it’s contaminated. Selie, help me up then get my jeans. They’re over in the corner.”

“No, you can’t get up. You need to rest.”

He used her to haul himself up then sat watching the room spin for a few disorientating seconds. “What I need is to find out what happened to Herb. I’ll rest later.”

“The police are searching the building now. They haven’t found him yet,” Selena explained.

“Then I’ll find him.” He swung his legs over and lowered himself gingerly to the floor. Veronica handed him his jeans, and he tugged them awkwardly on. His muscles felt cramped and stiff. His knees were wobbly as a newborn lamb. “Oh, bugger this,” he moaned.

“Here, let me help,” Selena draped his arm around her neck and helped him to the door then out into the corridor.

It was a long corridor and Rafe peered into the distance. There at the far end, he saw a familiar figure. It pointed to the right. He suddenly felt hopeful. “Do you see him?”

“No.”

Mira suddenly joined them. She had been speaking to the police and showing them around the main wing of the building. “I see him.”

“What do you see?” Selena asked as she supported Rafe who tottered along the corridor.

“It’s a man, and he wants us to follow him,” Mira said surprised that Selena couldn’t see him.

Cerdic heard, and he was so overjoyed that he was literally jumping up and down in his joy. Michael had helped him, and he had personally put so much effort into becoming temporarily corporeal but he knew that he couldn’t maintain the state for much longer.

“Who is it? I wish I could see who you’re talking about,” Selena asked.

“It’s Cerd,” Rafe said breathlessly. “I think he knows where Herb is.”

Selena whispered, “I think we’re too late to help him.”

That was a possibility, but Rafe had to find out for certain. “Mira, have the police searched this wing of the building yet?”

“No, not yet, so take care,” she answered. “So, who is this Cerd?”

“He’s my spirit guide, and he was going to be your baby. Damn, me and my big mouth!” It just slipped out, and he couldn’t take it back. But now wasn’t the time to talk about that matter.

She gaped at him. “What did you say?” Mira pressed.

“Later, I promise that we’ll talk later, but now I’ve got to find Herb.” Rafe took deep breaths, his body sorely lacking in oxygen. Cerdic was moving fast, and it was all he could do to keep up with

him, even with Selena's help. He did keep moving nonetheless because he sensed Cerdic's urgency. Finally Cerdic stopped and pointed at a door. In that instant, the door opened, and a man in a white coat splattered with blood came hurrying out with a metal box in his hand. When he saw the group approaching, he panicked and ran in the opposite direction only to run straight into a wall of policemen.

How he managed it he didn't know, but suddenly Rafe began to run. Unaided he burst into the room. It was immediately apparent that it served as another operating theatre. Except this one didn't have the high tech equipment of the one that he had just come from. On the operating table was a man lying on his belly. There was a great gaping hole in his back that was spilling blood onto the floor.

Rafe knew instantly that it was Herb. He dashed to him and saw that his left kidney had been removed. "The bastard's taken his kidney," he groaned. "Selie, is he dead?"

Selena checked him over. "He's not dead, Rafe but this is butchery. He needs urgent medical attention. He's bleeding badly. The blood vessels haven't been tied off."

Three police officers shoved the man in the white coat into the room. One of them had the metal box.

Rafe was incensed, and that was the fuel that gave him the energy to do what he had to do. Ignoring the ringing in his ears and the feeling that he was going to pass out at any moment, he stormed over to the man, grabbed him by the collar and hauled him off his feet. "You bloody butcher, you've cut out his kidney and left him lying there to bleed to death!"

The man couldn't speak, and his eyes bulged.

Rafe shook him until his teeth rattled. "Is it in that box?"

"Yes," he croaked.

"What were you hoping to do with it?"

"There...there was supposed to be a car waiting to take it. A kidney is worth twenty thousand pounds."

"We've got the driver of the car," the sergeant explained, "and sir, I suggest you put him down before he chokes to death."

Rafe dropped him, and he fell to his knees. "I'm not going to choke him. He's far too useful. He's going to put that kidney back into my friend."

The man was spluttering and rubbing his neck. "I can't. I only take organs out. That's the easy bit. I'm not trained to put them back in."

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I swear to you, I’m not lying. It’s the truth. I’m not a proper doctor.”

Rafe swore bitterly. “Selie, can you do it?”

“No, but I can assist. I’m afraid that you’ll have to get Christian. I suggest that we get Herb to the main theatre and carry out the operation there.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.”

## Chapter Twenty-eight

Wilson crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head. “No,” he said resolutely. “I won’t do it.”

“You will do it!” Rafe roared, his face inches from Wilson’s.

Wilson didn’t flinch. “No, I won’t.”

“Then I’ll make you.”

“And just how will you do that? Break my bones? Snap my fingers? I’d be useless to you then, wouldn’t I?”

Rafe visibly sagged. He was exhausted, and the theatre was spinning all around him. “Look, all I want is for you to put the kidney back into that man lying there.”

Wilson held out his hands to the police officer nearest to him. “I believe that handcuffs are in order before you take me away.”

The police officer looked over his shoulder at Herb. “That man there is my friend. It would bode well for you to help him.”

Wilson laughed in his face. “Bode well for me?” he spluttered. “Do you think I’m simple? I know that I’m looking at a life sentence. Besides he can manage well enough on one kidney. Lots of people do.”

“He might if he doesn’t bleed to death first,” Rafe growled, loathing the very sight of Wilson. “You had him accosted and dragged in here with two kidneys so I think it only fair that he should leave with two.”

Wilson shrugged. “As if I care what you think.”

The operating theatre was already illuminated with bright lights but even they paled to dimness when the room suddenly took on a brilliance of supernatural proportions. And there, in the centre of the room, stood the glowing and awesome figure of Rafe’s spiritual tutor, Archangel Michael himself. His head reached the ceiling; his shoulders were twice the width of a human and his long, muscular legs stood powerfully braced. It took but one mighty step to place him directly in front of Christian Wilson.

“You,” he boomed, “will cooperate.”

Wilson was unnerved but not totally fazed. “I have said that I will not. What, in God’s name, are you anyway?”

Michael rested his large hand on the hilt of his gleaming sword. “Your nemesis if you don’t do as I say.”

Rafe thought it pretty obvious who this was, but he thought it best to explain anyway. “Wilson, allow me to introduce Archangel Michael.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. There’s no such thing as angels.”

Michael drew his sword.

“This is some kind of trick. Some kind of hologram maybe.”

The sword pressed against Wilson’s windpipe, and a jolt of electricity surged through him. “Christ!” he yelped.

“Can holograms do that?” Rafe asked.

“What? I’m being cooked alive!”

“Archangel Michael doesn’t like to be gainsaid. I must warn you against doing it. Either do as he says, or face the consequences,” Rafe warned.

“But if he is an angel...”

“An archangel,” Michael roared.

“Okay, an archangel. If he is then shouldn’t he be loving and kind and forgiving?”

“No, he’s a ruddy warrior, and warriors are a breed apart. They don’t abide by rules. They get the job done. They fight against evil in whatever way they see fit and right now you are evil, so be warned. Defy this being, and you will die to regret it.” Rafe was staring at Herb. Selena was working on him, doing her best to keep him alive. “So I ask you again, will you help that man?”

The sword was advancing towards Wilson’s throat again. “Okay, okay I will replace the kidney.”

Michael vanished as quickly as he had come, but Rafe silently sent him a mental message of sincere thanks.

\* \* \* \*

Rafe, Veronica and Mira took themselves off to wait in the small room next door to the operating theatre. Selena assisted Christian Wilson under close watch of several police officers. She warned them that they might be there for some time.

Rafe leaned forward in a chair, his head in his hands. He was exhausted. The blood loss affected him profoundly, and he barely had enough energy left to stay upright. He was worried about Herb, too,

and that didn't help matters. Someone lightly touched him on the shoulder.

"I know this isn't the best time to talk," Mira said softly.

He looked up. "But you want to anyway."

Veronica glanced from Mira to Rafe. "I think she wants to ask you something, Rafe."

Rafe rubbed his aching eyes. The two women standing before him seemed to keep changing places. "Fine, ask away, but can you please keep still."

Veronica put her finger under his chin and tipped his head up. "Rafe, we're not moving. I'm worried about you. You've been through a lot. I think that you need to get away from here and get some rest in a nice warm bed."

He yawned and winced at the ache in his jaw. "Sounds good to me but later when Herb's out of the woods. So, what did you want to ask, Mira?"

"I think you know."

He screwed up his face. Even thinking required a superhuman effort. "Right, you want to know about Cerd."

"Yes, I do."

"You might find it upsetting. You might also refuse to believe it."

Mira shook her head. "Rafe, you've told me so many incredible things. What's one more added to the list?"

"Fair point."

"And besides I think that he's already communicated with me. He's the reason that we're here, I believe."

"Yes, I think so. Glad he got through to you. He wasn't sure at first whether he could do it. I'm relieved that he did. I'd be dead if he hadn't, and so would Herb. I don't even dare think of what Wilson would have done to Selena."

"He wrote me a message in the dust on my dressing table."

Rafe smiled thinly. "Now that's clever. Good old Cerd."

"He told me you were in danger, and you were at the Institute. We tried to convince the police, but they wouldn't believe anything we said. So finally we decided that we had to come here ourselves."

"Yes, I've been meaning to ask. How did you get here so quickly?"

"We flew."

"Ah, right." Rafe rubbed his eyes, feeling decidedly woozy.

"But there's one more thing."



“Go on.”

“There were four more words written in the dust. They said ‘sorry I was late.’”

Rafe nodded in understanding. “There’s no easy way to put this, Mira, so I’ll just come right out and say it. Cerdic was due to come back to the earthly plane. His soul was meant to pass into your baby at the moment of birth. In fact, it should already have been in place prior to birth. I’m sorry, but Cerd’s timing can be a bit off. Regrettably he wasn’t there when your baby was delivered.” He saw tears in Mira’s huge doe eyes.

“An absent soul means a dead baby, am I right?”

Veronica put her arm around her daughter and held her close.

“That’s about it, but if it’s any consolation, your child never really died just as it never truly existed without Cerd. For a while, Cerd was your child. He’s still around. In fact, he’s standing right behind you. I think if you turn around, you’ll see him.”

Mira turned slowly. “I see him. I truly can see him, and he’s smiling at me. Cerdic is holding out his hand to me.”

“Then go to him,” Rafe thought he had never seen his old friend looking so happy.

Tears streamed down Mira’s cheeks. “He’s touching me above my heart. I feel so warm inside and so at peace with myself. Cerdic, thank you for this.”

Rafe watched her eyes close. The smile upon her face was nothing short of serene. By the time she opened them, Cerdic had gone.

Rafe got awkwardly to his feet and went to Mira. “Feel any better?”

She sniffed and wiped her eyes. “Yes, much better. Things kind of make sense now.”

Veronica was still staring at the spot where Cerdic had apparently been. “But I didn’t see a thing,” she complained. “I wanted to be a part of all this.”

“Veronica, you are a part of all this,” Rafe said as he put his arm around her and drew her into an embrace. “You are Mira’s mother, and she needs you. I will be forever grateful to you for getting here so fast today.”

Veronica beamed at him then suddenly kissed him on the cheek. “Guess that we were the cavalry then.”

Rafe chuckled. “Yes, you arrived at the eleventh hour.” He kissed her back. “You are a very special woman, Veronica, and Eric is lucky to have you.”

“Yes, he is, isn’t he?” she laughed. “I’ll have to remind him of that.”

\* \* \* \*

Outside in the corridor, Selena saw the touching scene through the glass in the door. They were a family, albeit an unusual one but nevertheless they were a unit in themselves. She felt very much the outsider. She knocked then opened the door, knowing now with absolute certainty that she had no part to play in Rafe’s life. “Sorry to intrude, but I wanted to tell you that Herb is going to be okay. The ambulance has arrived to take him to the hospital.”

“Thanks, Selie. I owe you.”

She turned to leave.

“Hey, where are you going?”

She had to get away; her heart was breaking. She was departing from Rafe’s life, but a part of him was going with her. She had already decided that it was best he never know. “I’m going with Herb to the hospital then I’m going home to bed.”

“So shall I call you?”

“Not for a few days. I’ve got some sleep to catch up on and so have you. I suggest that you get back to the Home and fill up on steak, liver and black pudding then go to bed.”

“That doesn’t sound like such bad medicine. So, are you going to feed it to me?”

“No, you’ll manage. Make sure you eat a lot of it. You need the iron to make up fresh blood,” she simply said before closing the door. She didn’t want him to see the tears streaming down her face.

She didn’t belong with him and his family unit. It was time for her to go.

## Chapter Twenty-nine

He didn't see her in a couple of days because when he arrived at her flat, he found that she wasn't there. Since he had a key, he let himself in only to discover that all of her things were gone. He checked each room and found that her clothes, her books, her music system, all of it gone. Rafe stood in the middle of her living room, sick with dismay. He could still smell her perfume. It made him feel as though she was close by, but it was all too painfully obvious that she wasn't. He couldn't understand why. He checked to see if she left him a note, but there was nothing. He was hurt and mystified. Surely she wouldn't just leave him? She couldn't because she loved him. He was taking consolation in remembering that Michael told him just that when he heard the front door open.

It must be her; it had to be her. "Selie, is that you? Where have you been?"

His heart sank when he recognised the woman who cautiously poked her head around the door. It was Selena's landlady, Mrs. Prentis.

"Goodness, I thought I had a burglar. Selena didn't tell me that she gave you a key. I'm really sorry, but I'm going to have to ask for it back now that she's left."

He reeled as if he had received a physical blow. "She left?"

Mrs. Prentis stepped into the room, wearing her usual red apron. "Yes, didn't she tell you?"

He hurt; he hurt so much. How could she leave him? "No, she told me nothing."

"Oh dear, and there was I thinking that the two of you made such a lovely pair."

He had thought so too. "When did she leave?"

"Late yesterday. She seemed very upset too."

But why had she gone? That was what he wanted to know. They had shared so much together. “She was upset? Upset about leaving me?”

“I wouldn’t know about that. She didn’t confide in me to that extent. I do know that she was upset about her cat though.”

Rafe looked at her incredulously. “She was upset about her cat?”

“Yes, her cat. Sheba had been missing for a couple of days. Then yesterday morning when a motorist came to my door and told me that he had just knocked over and killed a long furred tortoiseshell cat, I had to come up and break the news to her. Well, the poor dear just cried and cried as she was packing her suitcases. I’m sure she must have soaked half of her clothes. Anyway she paid me her rent until the end of the month then left, asking me if I would bury the cat, which of course I did. I dug a deep hole and then I put the poor mite in and...”

He held up his hand. “Please, Mrs. Prentis, spare me the details.” He was finding it hard to take all this in. He didn’t want to hear about the cat either, although he was sorry that Bathsheba had been killed. “So did she leave a forwarding address?”

“No, I asked her for one, but she refused to give it to me. I don’t think that she even knew where she was going herself. She seemed to be a confused young lady.”

“I’ve been ringing her mobile, but my calls aren’t getting through.”

The landlady sighed. “Then it looks like she doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“But I’ve got to find her. I have to find her.”

“And I hope you do. My, you’ve got it bad, haven’t you? I wish you good luck because, like I said, I thought that you two made a splendid couple.” She walked over to the nest of tables and picked up a music cassette. “Here, give this to Selena if you find her. It fell down behind the unit over there, and I know it’s one of her favourites. I hope she won’t mind, but I listened to it a few times. In fact, I even made a copy. I know that the singer was her aunt, Cassie Jane Kent.”

“Yes, she said that she had an aunt by that name who was a folk singer.”

“The lyrics are as beautiful as the tune. Have you heard it?”

“I haven’t heard the words.” He thought of Selena humming the tune in the tent on the mountainside.

“Well, it’s about a woman who meets her soul mate at a music festival.”

“Really?” He wanted to leave. The last thing he wanted to do was waste time talking to the landlady.

“It’s such a sad tale because her soul mate never really existed. He was just a figment of her drug-induced imagination. Yet she spent the rest of her life looking for him and peering around corners. In the end, she took her own life because she knew how hopeless her quest was. Isn’t that so very, very sad.”

“Yes, it’s sad. Look, I really do have to go.”

“Of course. Take the tape. Selena was always singing bits from this album so I reckon she’ll miss it.”

She would miss the tape, but would she miss him? He was beginning to wonder. Numbly Rafe put the cassette into his pocket. “Here, you wanted the key,” he said, pressing it into her hand.

“Thank you.”

Rafe was about to leave when she called him back.

“No, don’t go yet young man. There’s something else of hers that I think you should have. Now, you’d better have it because I can’t have it here. I’ve got four of my own.”

“What is it?”

“Follow me,” she said, beckoning to him. She led him down the stairs and into her kitchen, and there in a cardboard box laid a cat washing itself. As soon as she saw Rafe, the cat shot out of the box and literally leapt up onto his shoulder and began purring in his ear.

“Sheba!” Rafe said in amazement as he petted her. “But you said that she was dead, Mrs. Prentis.”

“Wrong cat,” the landlady explained. “You see, the dead cat was a bit of a mess. All covered in blood and such, but it was a long furred tortoiseshell. So of course I assumed that it was Sheba. Anyway now I’ve got someone else’s poor dead pet buried in my garden, and I’ve no mind to be digging it back up. Sheba came strolling in late last yesterday evening. I can tell you she’s been missing her owner something awful. She cried like a baby all night long. There was nothing I could do to console her.”

And she wasn’t the only one missing Selena. He felt like crying too. He wanted consolation, but he wasn’t going to get it. “Okay I’ll take her with me then when I find Selena, I’ll give her back.”

The landlady gave a toothless smile. She didn't have her dentures in. "Hoped that you'd say that. I'll even lend you a cat basket, but I'd like it back some time. Do you promise to return it?"

Rafe nodded. "As soon as I find Selena, I'll get the basket back to you." He just hoped that it would be sooner rather than later. Without her, he felt so utterly alone. That was a feeling he loathed more than anything.

\* \* \* \*

Rafe asked Mira if she knew where Selena might be, but she told him she knew nothing. He saw that she was telling the truth. Rafe was confused and deeply hurt. What was happening? Why? He had never known such pain. He had made plans for the future that involved both of them, and he wanted to talk to Selena about them. He loved her. He thought, no he knew, that she loved him too. Hadn't he seen it clearly in her eyes?

So, why the hell did she leave him?

Finally, after two months of doing nothing much save moping around the Home and talking to Sheba, Rafe found himself walking up the steps to the front door of the police station. He hoped that Herb was back at work because he was Rafe's last hope. He had rung Herb several times and asked him to help track down Selena, but each time he flatly refused. Now Rafe was going to face him in person.

He marched up the steps of the police station, past the sergeant and barged directly into Herb's office. Herb was sat at his desk with a cup of tea. He leapt up when Rafe stormed in and knocked the tea all over a stack of official looking papers.

"Hell, look what you've made me do," Herb said bitterly.

Rafe looked at the brown sodden mess. "Sorry about that."

"No matter, I'll get them copied afresh. So how are you, Rafe?"

"How do I look?"

"Like you lost a pound and found a penny."

Rafe growled in exasperation. "You know what I've lost, Herb, and it's worth a darn sight more than a pound!"

Herb sighed. "Yes, I know what or rather whom you've lost, but I can't do it," he said apologetically as he mopped up the tea with his handkerchief. "I told you before that if Selena doesn't want to be found then I can't set the wheels in motion to find her. If a crime had been committed then maybe, but Selena's done nothing save move away from the area. She is entitled to her privacy. The police force can't intrude into that."

Rafe put his two hands on Herb's desk and leaned forward. He wasn't going to give up. "Can't or won't?"

"Won't."

Rafe raked a hand through his hair and made a strangled sound. "Herb, you owe me, and you bloody well know it."

"Do you think I don't know that?"

"I helped save your life."

"Rafe, I know, and I'm grateful. I've got two working kidneys, and that means a lot to me."

"Then it's pay back time. You've got the computers and the databases that you use to track down criminals so use them to find Selena."

"No, Selena is not a criminal."

Rafe slammed his fist angrily down on the desk. "No she's not, she's the woman that I love. Hell and damnation, just find her for me, Herb, before I go totally insane. I spend every day talking to her cat and telling the beast that I'm going to find Selena. Christ, I'll be talking to the wall soon while I'm slowly climbing it. Please, find her for me."

"No." Rafe glaring at him should have made Herb feel decidedly uneasy. "I can't actually tell you where she is."

Rafe detected a change in the tone of Herb's voice. Herb, he knew, could be quite a devious bastard when he wanted. "Maybe you don't actually need to tell me. Herb, you sly old devil. You've already searched, haven't you?"

"Have I?" Herb gave him a wide grin.

Rafe looked directly into Herb's eyes, and what he saw in their depths made his hopes soar. "She's working at Cheltenham Hospital in the casualty department."

Herb winked at him. "Is she now? How very interesting. Damn, but we could use someone like you in the interrogation room."

"Sorry, gotta go. Take care, Herb. I'll be in touch."

"Wait!" Herb called to him before he could leave.

Rafe paused long enough to catch the set of car keys Herb threw at him.

"Take my car. I can use one of the police vehicles to get home. Just don't tell the inspector."

"Herb, you're a champ."

\* \* \* \*

The traffic on the M5 was atrocious. Road works were causing periodic bottlenecks and finally all three sections of the motorway came to a grinding halt. Rafe was totally stressed out. What should have been a relatively short journey was taking hours and hours. Bathsheba, sitting in the cat basket, which Rafe had yet to return to Mrs. Prentis, began to meow like some demented feline. All his endless talking to her did nothing to shut her up. Finally Rafe resorted to playing the cassette that he had brought along, the cassette he was meant to return to Selena, along with the cat. He didn't have a cassette player, so had not been able to listen to it until now. He glanced at the picture of the pretty young woman on the cover of the case. He supposed it was Cassie Jane Kent because Selena did quite closely resemble her. Both were beautiful women.

"Okay, Sheba, how do you fancy listening to 'Peering Around Corners'?" he said, raising his voice above all the meowing and wailing coming from the back.

Bathsheba continued to wail until the music began to play then she miraculously fell silent.

"Thank Christ for that," Rafe muttered. He drove along listening to the album until finally the three lanes came to a halt once again, and the car stopped. He was beginning to think that it would be quicker to walk. To take his mind off things, he began to skip tracks, finally selecting the actual song that was titled *Peering Around Corners*. He rested his aching head on hands that gripped the steering wheel altogether too tightly for a car that was stationary, and he listened as the haunting lyrics unfolded.

By the time the lovely, sad song ended, his hands were wet with the tears that slipped through his fingers and dripped onto the leather-covered steering wheel. The song touched him deeply, just as Selena herself had. With red-rimmed eyes, he looked back at the cat. "We're going to find her, Sheba. I promise you we are going to find her. Then she's never going to leave us again."

Evidently satisfied with that, Sheba curled up and went to sleep.



## Chapter Thirty

He stood at the desk, holding a cat basket in his right hand. In the basket, Bathsheba still slept. He didn't have a plan, but he would make it up as he went along.

"So, can I take your name and address, sir?" The receptionist in the casualty department at Cheltenham Hospital asked.

Rafe looked perplexed and scratched his head. "Sorry, I don't know."

She put her pen down and looked up. "You don't know?"

He was rubbing his chest and wincing. "I think I've lost my memory. I bumped my head falling down some steps, and a stranger brought me here."

"And is that why you're here? Because you've hurt your head and got amnesia?"

"No, I'm here because I think I've got a problem with my heart. It hurts, and I keep getting palpitations."

"Dear me." The receptionist peered over the desk and saw the cat for the first time. "I'm sorry, but we don't allow pets in here. It's hospital policy, I'm afraid."

Rafe hadn't brought Sheba all this way to have her taken from him.

"Is she yours?"

"Err, not sure," he muttered. "God, my chest hurts." For maximum effect, he suddenly doubled up and began to groan loudly. He had no intention of waiting hours in a queue. "I might be having a heart attack."

"Oh, my goodness! I think that you had better go straight to the triage nurse."

"No, I need a doctor urgently," he gasped clutching his throat and making wheezing sounds.

“Yes, I see that perhaps you do.” The receptionist called across to a nurse. “Quickly, get the wheelchair. This man needs to go straight through to a cubicle. Get the doctor immediately.”

Rafe refused to part with the cat, and so a few minutes later, a young nurse pushed him in a wheelchair, the cat basket resting on his lap. In a short time, he was lying on the bed in a cubicle. He lay on his side and moaned.

The nurse pushed the basket under the bed. “I’ll get the doctor,” she muttered before hurrying off.

Still lying on his side, Rafe waited anxiously. What if the wrong doctor came? What would he do then? But in less than a minute, he heard the sounds of footsteps approaching. Then the curtain was pulled back.

“Hello, I’m Doctor Steele. I’m told that you’ve been having chest problems.”

Rafe had his back to her, but as she came in, he could smell her perfume. His heart was beating wildly. “Yes,” he groaned. He wanted to jump up and take her in his arms, but he told himself to wait.

“Can you describe your symptoms?” She put her hand on his back and tried to turn him over, but he resisted her with a pitiful moan.

Her touch was soft as ever.

“My heart aches,” he said, the pillow muffling his voice.

She slipped her stethoscope over his shoulder. She slid it inside his shirt and put it to his chest. “It aches. Can you be more specific?”

He loved the sound of her voice and her fingers on his bare flesh. He had badly missed hearing her voice. “It feels like it’s broken.”

“Other than beating too fast, your heart sounds fine to me. Any other symptoms?”

“Yes, I feel sick all the time.”

“Very sick or just nauseous?”

“I suppose I can only describe it as feeling vaguely like being love sick.”

“And have you ever been love sick?”

“Oh yes, most definitely.” And he had never spoken truer.

Selena stood back. “So, let me get this straight. Your heart aches fit to break, and you are feeling lovesick?”

He fancied that she sounded annoyed. “Yes, that’s it.”

“Idiot.” She swung on her heels to leave. “I have got a waiting room full of sick and hurt people out there. I don’t have the patience to deal with malingering time wasters such as you.”

She was going to leave him again. He panicked and sat up. “Selie, don’t go. For Christ’s sake, don’t you dare leave me again.”

She froze and slowly looked over her shoulder. “*Rafe?*”

He drank in the wonderful sight of her. “God, I’ve missed you, Selie.” With her white coat and stethoscope, she looked every bit the professional doctor, but underneath she was just Selie, the woman he loved.

“Rafe, I can’t believe you’re here. What *are* you doing here?”

“I came to find you, of course. Did you think that I would just let you walk out of my life and do nothing about it? I’ve done everything possible to find you. Finally I had to resort to reading Herb’s mind to track you down.”

She looked at the tiles on the floor. “You shouldn’t have bothered.”

“Don’t look away from me. Why shouldn’t I have bothered?” He grabbed her by the shoulders, unable to comprehend her coldness towards him. He felt like shaking the sense she had obviously lost somewhere back into her. “I shouldn’t have bothered! Are you seriously telling me that I shouldn’t have come looking for the woman I love?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sakes, you don’t love me.”

“Oh yes I do. I love you more than I can begin to put into words. There aren’t the right words to describe my feelings for you because they go too damn deep. If you can’t understand that then you’re not the woman I thought you were.” He stood back from her and scraped his hand across his unshaven face. “Selie, I love you.” There were tears in his eyes again. He would shed buckets of them if she rejected him. His throat ached. “Why can’t you understand that?”

“Why?”

“Yes, why?”

“Simple, because you love Veronica.”

He could only gape at her, as the realisation of what this was all about finally hit him. He had gone through torment because she was under a stupid misapprehension. It was too ridiculous for words. “No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Selie, you can’t tell me what I’m thinking. Remember I’m the only one who can perform that little trick. You have got to believe me when I say that I do not love Veronica. I did once, but that was over twenty years ago. I don’t any more. Besides if I did then I think that Eric Simmonds would be rather more than a little miffed. I’ve seen them together. They are practically soul mates like I thought we were until you saw fit to cut me out of your life.”

Selena swallowed hard and rubbed at her stomach.

“You look like you’re going to be sick.”

“I’m fine. Rafe, I saw you at the Institute. You were kissing Veronica.”

“Kissing her? Selie, that was an affectionate peck on the cheek, and you know it.

“No, I don’t,” she blurted out.

“For Christ’s sake, woman. This is what kissing is like,” he growled as he hungrily drew her into his arms and proceeded to give her the most passionate kiss ever. She momentarily seemed to enjoy it, but she suddenly drew back gasping. She was also incredibly pale.

“So,” she took a deep breath, “you weren’t kissing her with passion?”

“No, silly woman, that’s reserved for you.” It struck him then that she really looked rather washed out.

“Rafe, I don’t understand. On the way back from Scotland, Veronica was all that you could talk about, and I thought...”

“You thought that I’d fallen in love with her again?”

“Yes.” She suddenly staggered.

“Well, you couldn’t have been more wrong. Selie, are you okay? You look like you’re going to faint.”

“I know. It’s annoying. I’ve done that a few times already. It’s low blood pressure.”

“What? Are you sick or something?” He picked her up and laid her down on the bed, but his worry transformed into total amazement when her white coat fell open to reveal the rounded bump of her pregnant belly.

She looked up at him sheepishly. “Or something.”

“Selie, you’re pregnant.”

“Well spotted, Rafe.”

“You’re having a baby.”

“Yes, that’s what pregnant means.”

He was frowning. “My God, you’re having a baby. My baby!”

“You’re not pleased, are you? I can tell.”

“What!”

“Actually, it’s my baby. I’m carrying it. I’m the one suffering morning sickness, and I am going to be the one who has to give birth to it. Your part in this is passive. In fact, you really have no part to play in this at all.”

He gaped at her with incredulity, unable to comprehend what she had just said. “Passive?” he spluttered. “Passive! Damn it, Selie this isn’t a virgin birth, you know. I did have a part to play, a very big part, because without me, you wouldn’t have that child in your womb. That baby is as much mine as it is yours. You are not going to get rid of me that easily. Now listen to me, and listen well. You brought me back from the dead. I fell in love with you from the very first moment I looked up into those wonderful hazel eyes. So, like it or not, I’m here to stay! You’ll have to put up with me for better or for worse.”

\* \* \* \*

For several long agonising moments she just looked up at the ceiling and said nothing. Her thoughts raced, but they were racing to a happy place. Rafe loved her; he had always loved her. He was going to stay with her whether she liked it or not. And she knew that she liked it a great deal.

“Selie? Selie, talk to me.”

Finally she looked at the man who had just bared his soul to her and smiled. “Actually, I think that it will be for the better.”

“For the better?” he stupidly repeated.

“Yes, I hope so. I am so glad that we’ve cleared all that up.”

He plonked down beside her on the edge of the bed.

She put her hand on his trembling shoulders and saw with amazement that tears were spilling down his cheeks. “Aren’t you glad, too? Oh dear, you’re not glad.” Now she was worried. She had never seen him cry before. He had always been so strong.

“Selie,” he said hoarsely, “do you have any idea what you put me through?”

“I’m sorry, yes, I think I do. I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions and left without talking to you.”

“Christ, I nearly lost you. If it hadn’t have been for Herb then I would have done. You would have had this baby without me,” he said, laying the palm of his hand on the rounded mound. “You would have raised him...”

“Or her,” she added, putting her hand on top of his.

“Whatever. I don’t care. I’ll love it all the same. But I can’t bear to think of you raising it all alone, thinking that I didn’t love you when you are truly the most important thing in my life.”

“Really, am I truly the most important thing?”

“Yes, you are, but I have to confess there is another female who comes a close second.”

“Are you talking about Mira?”

He chuckled as he pulled out the basket from under the bed. “No, I’m talking about this four-legged pain in the butt. Do you know she keeps me up half of the night with her caterwauling and when I do get to sleep, she curls up on my face so I can barely breathe?”

“Sheba!” In a flash, Selena had the cat in her arms. “Oh, you didn’t die!”

“You know, it’s great to see you smile. No, Sheba didn’t die. It seems that Mrs. Prentis has someone else’s cat buried in her garden.”

“You poor thing, and to think that I went and left you,” she cried, kissing the cat. “How could I have been so cruel? Poor angel, how you must have missed me!”

Rafe cocked his head to one side and raised an eyebrow. “I’d be grateful for half the affection you show that cat.”

She laughed and kissed him too. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself, you gorgeous hunk of a man.”

He laughed but still had tears in his eyes. “You know we are truly going to live happily ever after.”

Selena wiped away his tears with her finger. “I love you, Rafe. I think that we will have a good life together.”

“Oh, we will, I know it, but Selie, you know that I can’t marry you. Legally I am still married to Veronica.”

“Can you divorce her?”

“I am supposed to be dead. How can a dead man file for divorce?”

“Well, Veronica successfully came back from the dead so why can’t you?”

“Because I was dead. As a consequence of that, I look twenty years too young. Selie, I’ve been thinking long and hard about all this. I have to stay dead. We have to make a new life in another country.”

“But what about Acer Blackwell Leisure? That company should be yours.”

“I don’t want it. It belongs to Veronica and Mira now. I’ve heard they intend to sell it which suits me fine.”

“So you come out of all this with nothing?”

He grinned and shook his head. “Oh no, I come out of all this with you. Plus I still have the three quarters of a million that Blackwell gave to me. It’s not a fortune I know, but it should give us enough to make a new start in Australia. Herb has provided me with a new identity and a new passport. From now on, I shall be known as Rafe Acre.”

That was reasonable; it almost sounded the same. “Then I am pleased to meet you, Rafe Acre.”

He put his arms around her neck and kissed her lips. “Rafe Acer stays dead, Selie, but I am asking you to come to Australia with Rafe Acre.”

She kissed him back. “Oh, Rafe Acer isn’t dead because, like Lazarus, he rose to live again. But if that’s what you want, if you want a new start and a new life with a new name then I shall be happy to be there and share it with you.”

“For better or for worse.”

She beamed at him “I think that it really will be for the better. Don’t you think so too, Sheba?”

Sheba began to purr.

**The End**