



The Dead Forest

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Dedication

To all who helped me make my dreams a reality, thank you – there are so many that I need to thank and one day I hope to help in making your dreams come true too.

‘Love ya work!’

Karen M

Chapter One

"Tell me the truth!" Rebecca screamed as she lifted her hand ready to strike again. Rutherford licked his bottom lip. He tasted blood – his blood. He turned slowly to look at her. For such a frail thing, she could pack a punch when she needed to. Her hand stung as it connected with his right cheek again. His pale skin colored as the blood rose to the surface of her attack. She was too strong for him. She was no longer the meek, reserved Rebecca he fell in love with. She was demonic. The soul he gave her had rejected both of them. He didn't realize this would be the result of his decision, his poorly-timed actions.

"I *demand* that you tell me Rutherford," Rebecca yelled again, looking for something to arm herself and threaten him with. "How did all this begin? You said you made a deal with my father. Well, I demand to know what that deal was!"

In all her hellish glory, a now magnificently powerful Rebecca stalked across the room, sending him scuttling into the corner. "Don't think you can hide from me in here. I am going to treat you the same way you treated me, now talk!" She grabbed one of her framed pictures off the castle wall and smashed it against the cold stone floor. He watched helplessly as she destroyed his treasured painting. Her eyes were wild as she turned and seethed at him. "I will tear this place apart if you don't start talking! What was the deal you made with my father?"

She continued to scream and ramble as she reached for more and more of her paintings and pulled them off the walls as she continued her tirade.

"Alright...alright," Rutherford started, admitting his own defeat. He was left with no option but to tell her the truth. "I will tell you and I swear this is the truth. I met your father just a short while after your mother found out she was pregnant with you. He came to me with grand plans of building up his farm. His ideas were good. Very good. And I, being a businessman, said it was a great opportunity. So we collaborated. Both your mother and father fell on hard times soon after you were born, so he came to me asking for advice and help. I came up with an offer that he should have refused, but he didn't..."

It was the year when everything changed, when life began, or did it? Rebecca had just turned twelve and she and her Papa had arrived in the village to sell their weekly produce and attend church service. She had sensed her father didn't enjoy going to the services but was hesitant to say anything. She knew he was making the effort to raise her the best he could on his own; her mother had died giving birth to her. He used to tell her stories of how she looked just like her mother.

Every Sunday, Papa would tell Rebecca to play with several of the other girls from the village, but secretly she hated them. The other girls would tease her, poke out their tongues and run off to giggle about something.

On that particular day, one girl named Elizabeth MacDougall stared at her all through the church service. She turned her head to look behind her to see if Elizabeth was looking at someone else. So constant was Elizabeth's piercing gaze, she started to think she had something on her face. After the service she had moved to stand at Papa's side while he spoke

with Elizabeth's mother and father.

Elizabeth continued to stare at her as she played with the hem of her apron. Rebecca didn't really have any friends her age and she was curious about what Papa and Elizabeth's parents were talking about.

"It's arranged then. We look forward to seeing Rebecca later," Mrs. MacDougall said. Papa smiled at Rebecca as he reached for her hand.

"Where are we going Papa?" she said as she looked up at him.

"It's not where *we* are going Rebecca. It's where *you* are going." She didn't budge from her spot. "Come on, we have to go and get you ready."

"Papa, I can't leave you alone," she said, appalled. She looked back to find Elizabeth still staring at her as they walked away. Papa stopped abruptly and placed his hand on her shoulder as he looked into her eyes.

"You will have to leave me one day," he said softly.

She looked up at Papa before he finished his sentence. She thought he looked sad. His eyes clouded over as he looked down at her innocent face.

"But I'm never going to leave you Papa." Her avowal brought a smile to his face.

"So where am I going Papa?" She grabbed hold of his hand and started to walk with him towards the cart.

"Well, you're a young girl Rebecca and young girls should have young friends."

"But I have you Papa."

"Yes, but that's not the same," he said in a hurried tone. She clambered into the cart as Papa slapped the reins. Rebecca thought the world of her father. He worked hard to earn his way through life. He had little education, but made smart choices when it came to the comfort of his and hers living environment. He was a strong and proud man. Papa was involved in many village events and was known for many villages around to be one of the most successful farmers during the hard times. Papa had planned each harvest to perfection.

He'd built the cottage they lived in himself. The loft was Papa's quarters while she slept in a small room off the kitchen. He'd built the cottage with two fireplaces. One in the main room and the other in the kitchen. It was the only cottage in the Shire that had two fireplaces. Papa said it was important to keep the winter chills out or they'd both end up being sick with no one to look after the farm.

In Rebecca's eyes he was always strong. He could work on the field non-stop for hours and still have the strength to pick her up and put her into bed. She felt safe and happy. There were other times when she felt lost and scared. Some nights she would hear him crying and call her mother's name. One night she listened to him make his way from the loft and run outside as if he were chasing someone or something.

"Tell me what Momma looked like," she would always ask as he tucked her into her bed.

"Well, she had the same color brown hair as you. She had the most beautiful green eyes—like you. You have her smile. When I look at you I see your mother, Rebecca. It's a constant reminder that she is nearby...watching over you."

Papa's green eyes would always shadow over when he spoke of her mother. Rebecca stopped asking about her when she noticed his night terrors becoming more frequent.

He did his best to provide her with the love and care she needed. He worked hard to

keep his home and land. He would often tell her that one day it would be hers.

As an only child, Rebecca spent most of her time entertaining herself. Every week Papa would try in vain to get her to play with the other young girls from the village when they went to market day, but she always ended up walking away from them. She'd tell him the other girls were mean to her, but every week Papa would force her to play with them again. She much preferred to play on her own. She could then do as she pleased. That's why she liked to paint. It was a solitary pastime.

As a young child, he would often find her making pictures in the dirt as he worked in the field. He would stand over her small body as she swirled her hands and fingers to make intricate patterns. Papa would call her name several times before she would turn her attention to him. It was as if she were in a trance.

Papa saved a little of the money he made from selling their produce from the farm to buy her a pencil and a small amount of paper. Even her squiggles looked like detailed pictures to him.

As they rode along, the reality of where she was going sunk in. She felt sick at the thought of going to that girl's house.

"But I don't want to go Papa," she protested even though she knew his patience would soon be gone if she pushed the point.

"Rebecca, I really think it will be good for you to go and stay the night. It is one night. I am sure they cannot be as horrid as you say."

Rebecca knew she had to give him a reason or she would be forced to go.

After a few minutes, she spoke again. "They look at me funny," she said meekly.

"They what?"

"They look at me funny," she repeated loudly as the cart whizzed past the Dead Forest.

She saw Papa lift his hand to cover his mouth to stifle a snicker. "How do they look at you funny?"

She felt silly for saying it and sick when Papa snickered at her, but she was desperate not to go.

"They make faces at me...and say mean things when I walk past them at the market. They don't have chores to do. I do. I don't want to go. They are spoilt."

"I am sure they don't mean it and besides, Elizabeth is a very nice little girl. You will have a great time. You will do your chores and get cleaned up before I take you over there."

She scowled and turned her attention to the forest as they sped towards home.

Rebecca dawdled through her day in an attempt to get out of attending the sleepover. She took extra long in the paddock while tending to the vegetable patch. She spent more time than was necessary when grooming her horse.

"Come on Rebecca," Papa bellowed from the cottage's front door. "I know what you are trying to do and it's not going to work." She dusted her grubby hands on her apron and started slowly towards the cottage.

When she made her way to her bed she noticed Papa had already folded her nightdress along with a few items for the night. Carefully lying on the bed, she made sure she didn't disturb the clothes.

"I don't feel well Papa," she said, curling into a ball. Papa's footsteps got louder as she

brought her knees in tight to her chest. She watched Papa's shadow on the floor grow larger and the footsteps stop before she squeezed her eyes tight. She could feel him looking at her.

"Very well then. You had better stay here while I eat the chocolate I bought for you to share tonight." He sounded very annoyed with her.

Chocolate was something Rebecca only had on very special occasions. She opened her eyes slowly and uncurled her legs before rolling onto her back. She looked at him grinning at her.

"Since you're sick you won't be able to have any, so I guess it's all for me," he said as he moved to the side of her bed and put his hand on her forehead. Rebecca closed her eyes as he pressed his large palm against her head. "Well, you must be sick if you are willing to turn down chocolate," Papa said worriedly as he retracted his hand.

Rebecca sat up and crawled off her bed. "I don't want to go, but if you want me to go...I'll do it for you Papa." She hugged him around the waist. "Maybe the sickness will pass." She looked up at him and smiled as he cupped her head with his big hands.

"You will have a good time Rebecca," he said in a comforting voice. "Now get washed up. We have to go soon."

She didn't take long to get ready. As they headed off down the track, she realized this would be the first time she would be away from Papa.

She was terrified of leaving him alone and the fact she disliked like this girl didn't help. She took a deep breath as they neared Elizabeth's family home. Mrs. MacDougall held her head high as she came from the cottage. She watched Rebecca jump from the cart and reach up to get her things as Papa lowered them down to her.

"Oh dear. Rebecca, a young lady should never jump from the cart," Elizabeth's mother said in a shrill tone. Rebecca glanced to Papa and rolled her eyes. Papa tried not to snicker and pretended to clear his throat while covering his smile.

"Well, have a good time Rebecca. I will collect you in the morning. I love you."

"Bye Papa," she replied. "I love you too."

She stepped back from the cart and waved at him as he drove away. She waved even though he wasn't watching her.

"Rebecca. A young lady doesn't throw her arm around to bid someone farewell. It's a simple movement of the wrist," Elizabeth's mother said as she moved behind her.

Rebecca winced at her shrill tone and the fact she was being told what to do. "Now, come along. The girls have been waiting for you."

She watched Papa head off down the track. She felt alone. She felt lost. She felt scared. She didn't want to be here. She wanted to be at home. At home only one person told her what to do. Rebecca felt a hand slide over her shoulder.

"I said now. I do not like to be kept waiting Rebecca." Rebecca turned and slowly looked up at Mrs. MacDougall.

"I am sorry. This is the first time that I have ever been away from Papa." She tried to look the elder woman in the eyes.

"Yes...being raised by a man and only spending time with a man is a bad thing. I will have to speak to him regarding that tomorrow. But for now, the girls are inside playing. Come along."

Rebecca followed her into the cottage. She saw Elizabeth sitting with two other girls in

front of the fireplace. The one with brown hair gave her a quick smile while the other girl with red ringlets scowled in her direction. She recognized the girl with the red ringlets but didn't know her name. She had seen her in the village several times but had never spoken to her.

When she moved further into the room, all three girls stopped playing. She released a long silent sigh before pursing her lips as they stared at her.

"Hello," she finally said. Mrs. MacDougall took her nightgown and chocolate from her hands and pushed her towards the girls.

"Well go on, go and play," she said. "You know Elizabeth. This is Clara, Elizabeth's cousin and the girl with the red hair is Patricia."

All three girls sat with their dolls in their laps. Rebecca noticed a discarded doll next to the fireplace and slowly made her way to take her place on the floor. "Hello," Clara said. Patricia shot Clara an awful stare.

"Can I play?" Rebecca asked quietly as she reached for the discarded doll.

"We already are playing," Patricia snapped. She reached over and snatched the doll by the head, yanking it free of Rebecca's hands. "These are my dolls. You didn't ask and no one is allowed to touch them unless I say," she snarled.

"I'm sorry." She looked at the dolls.

"Besides, look at your hands," Patricia spat. "It looks like you have been playing with pigs. I don't want you touching my dolls." At that statement, she turned her back on Rebecca. Rebecca caught Clara looking at her hands. She curled her fingers into a fist and tucked both hands into her lap as she looked at the floor.

"It's been a lovely day today. Why don't you girls go outside and play?" Mrs. MacDougall said as she hunted the girls out the door.

Rebecca followed the girls around the side of the cottage. She could see a field of flowers, a vegetable patch and the Dead Forest off in the distance. She felt so far away from home. The girls broke into a run leaving her alone. She didn't bother chasing them. She knew this was going to happen. They weren't going to change. They were already mean to her, why would tonight be any different? She walked along the edge of the garden patch and over to a grassy hill before sitting in a bed of daisies. She saw the girls making their way to another part of the yard but she wasn't fazed.

Rebecca sat with her legs crossed and inspected each daisy she picked closely before she placed it in her lap. She'd started linking them together to make a chain when a jet-black crow landed a short distance from her. She watched it closely as it eyed her before she continued threading daisies into the chain.

"Hello crow," she said, watching it out of the corner of her eye. It squawked at her as if replying. "I wish I could be like you. Just pick up and fly away. I'd fly home right now if I could. Where do you live crow?"

She threaded the last daisy to make a daisy halo and placed it on her head. "Do you like it?" She cocked her head, showing it off to the crow. The crow bounced towards her. "I don't know why people are afraid of crows. You don't seem to want to do me any harm," she said as she started linking daisies for a necklace. The crow had moved closer and stood at her feet. "Who wants to play with dolls anyway?" she asked the crow before it released an ear-piercing squawk. It spread its wings and flew off. Rebecca turned around and saw Patricia standing a few yards behind her.

"Who are you talking to? I guess the villagers are right. You *are* mad, just like your mother and father," she snarled with a smile.

Rebecca got to her feet. "What?" Patricia may have been taller and older than her, but she wasn't afraid of her.

"Did you make that?" Patricia asked sweetly as she walked towards Rebecca, pointing at the daisy halo.

"It's easy. I can show you." She bent over to pick up the chain end and another daisy to show her. She looked down at the length of the flower chain. It had to be several feet long. She didn't realize it was that long until she stopped. "All you have to do—" she started.

"No, I'll just take this one!" Patricia reached out and snatched the daisy halo from Rebecca's head, taking a fistful of hair with it. Rebecca screamed and clamped her hands on her head. "Besides...it suits me better," she said as she plonked it on her head, trying to make it fit but only succeeded in crumpling the daisies in the process.

Rebecca rubbed her head as Elizabeth's mother called for them to go back inside. Patricia pointed her finger at Rebecca and jabbed it into the air. "You say anything about this and I will tell them you were talking to the crow," she threatened. "Do you know what happens then? They will take you away from your father and chain you up. Everyone knows what crows do."

Rebecca waited for the girls to make their way to the cottage before she set off.

She stared at Patricia's head as the girl skipped along with the now-tattered daisy chain squashed on her head. *Swoop*. Out of nowhere a crow hurtled towards Patricia and nipped the daisy chain off her head, taking a large chunk of her hair. The girls screamed and flung their arms in the air as they set off in a run. Rebecca wondered if it was the same crow.

She knew she shouldn't laugh because she would be seen, so she looked at the ground and grinned. She didn't think there was anything wrong with talking to crows or any animal. But she knew other people did think it was strange, so she never mentioned it.

All through supper the girls continued to ignore Rebecca. Preparing for bed, she got into her nightdress and twisted her hair back into a bun. She looked in her belongings for the chocolate. She looked on the floor. Nothing. She looked again where her nightdress had been placed, but she was still unable to find it. As she returned to the fireplace to rejoin the girls, she saw the chocolate wrapping.

"That was for all of us to share," she said, looking down at the small piece that was left.

"We did share it," Patricia said as she scooped up the last piece and shoveled it into her mouth. Rebecca didn't understand why they were being so mean to her when she didn't even know them. She looked away from Patricia and took her place on the floor with them.

The candles filled the room with a golden glow; each of the girls sat on the floor, wrapped in a blanket and listened to the wind howling. The girls giggled as the candles threw shadows on the walls. They all released a high-pitched squeal when the wind pushed the window boards hard against the cottage wall.

"We should tell ghost stories," Elizabeth suggested.

"What kind of ghost stories?" Rebecca asked.

"Tell us the one about your mother!" Patricia snarled. Rebecca looked at her, not knowing what she meant.

"What story about my mother? She died when I was just a baby."

"That's not the tale we all heard," Patricia said. "We heard your mother went crazy and lives with the Evil One in the Dead Forest."

Rebecca felt she was glued to the floor. "The Evil One?" She had never heard of such a person. She had no idea who they were talking about.

"Yes. My brother copped a beating for mentioning his name at the kitchen table once," Patricia said, turning to the others with glee. "He said he saw a faceless man walking along the edge of the Dead Forest." Clara and Elizabeth cringed at the mention of the Evil One.

"What was he wearing?" Elizabeth asked.

"My brother told me he wears only black, from head to toe. His cloak and hood cover him." Patricia moved closer to the girls and spoke in a hushed tone. She continued to stare at Rebecca as she spoke. "There are so many tales about him, but one of them is that if you see his face, you die because he's so white. He's like the Angel of Death coming to take your soul. That's why there are so many crows in the Dead Forest. They are the souls of people who haven't righted their wrongs, so they are trapped in the body of the crow and feed off other dead things to survive."

Patricia nodded her head as she leaned back and stared at Rebecca. Clara glanced at Rebecca before tugging on her blanket.

"Another tale of the Evil One says that he stole a baby from a woman in the village, but the baby was dead inside her," Clara started, trying to find her voice. "The tale says he was able to breathe life into the baby with his special powers and now the baby works for him. He comes into town and does his work. They say his eyes are as clear as the stream and his skin as white as milk."

"I heard the rumor that Rebecca's mother went crazy and has been lurking in the Dead Forest waiting for her," Patricia said in a harsh tone. All the girls held their breath and waited for Rebecca to speak.

"What did you say?" Rebecca asked calmly but quietly, taking in what she said.

"I said, I've heard people of the village saying your mother went crazy when she found out she was having you and waited until you were born before running away. That she now lives in the Dead Forest with the Evil One, plotting to take more babies from the villagers while they wait for you to go crazy and join them."

Rebecca's cheeks felt like they were on fire and her mind went blank. She lurched forward and swung her hands in front of her. She grabbed hold of Patricia's curls and pulled her head hard towards the floor.

"You lie!" Rebecca screamed over and over again as she thrashed about on the floor, striking and kicking out, hoping to hit Patricia anywhere. Clara and Elizabeth scrambled to their feet and tried to get away as Patricia's hair twisted around Rebecca's fingers. She yanked hard and snaked her fingers around more hair before pulling with all her might again. Patricia's screams matched the howling of the wind as Rebecca swung her hands towards her, hoping to strike her mouth. Although she was smaller in size she knew how to hurt someone. Elizabeth and Clara stood back before trying to grab Rebecca by her ankles.

Rebecca kicked out, pushing Clara across the room before turning her attention back to Patricia who was still screaming as chunks of her hair were being pulled. Tears teemed down Patricia's face as she tried to defend herself, but Rebecca's fists kept knocking her hands out of the way as more hair was grabbed. Patricia tried to get to her feet but Rebecca pushed her

over and climbed over her body, sitting on her belly.

Pathetically, Patricia swung her arms as she continued to scream with all her might. Rebecca's vision was blinded by her hair hanging in her face, but it didn't stop her from swinging her arms.

She brought her hand down and contacted with Patricia's cheek. Her hand smarted so she knew it would have hurt Patricia. Patricia lifted her hand and covered where Rebecca had just slapped. Silence. Everything stopped.

Rebecca puffed as she looked through her hair to see Patricia staring up at her.

"You *are* crazy. Just like your mother," she whispered. Rebecca couldn't stop the rage from taking over her body again as she balled her fists and swung at Patricia again. Patricia managed to grab hold of some of Rebecca's hair and pulled, trying to inflict any amount of pain. Elizabeth's mother joined the four girls' screams and howled at them all to stop.

Elizabeth's mother raced to the water pitcher and tipped it on Rebecca and Patricia. It had little effect. Both girls continued to scream while arms and legs went in all directions. Rebecca balled her fist and brought it down hard, connecting with Patricia's nose.

Rebecca didn't hear the sound through the screams but the feeling of Patricia's nose crunching under her fingers made her stop. She pushed her hair out of her face as she sat up to see blood spurting out of Patricia's nose, running down her face. So much blood from two tiny holes. Patricia howled and clamped her hands over her face as she tried to protect herself. Rebecca slowly inched away from Patricia and looked at her fist. It was covered in blood.

"*Rebecca!*" Mrs. MacDougall screamed.

"She started it!" she shot back.

"This is no way for any young lady to behave. You apologize immediately."

"No," she said indignantly as she balled her fists again.

"Oh look at you, you poor child." Elizabeth's mother turned her attention to a sobbing and stunned Patricia. Rebecca looked at Patricia then at herself. Both were splattered with blood and water. Their nightdresses clung to their bodies as Rebecca felt her rage dying down. She knew she was going to be in huge trouble from her father.

Mrs. MacDougall scolded Patricia to stop screaming as she assisted her to sit up. The girl stifled her cries to a sob as Mrs. MacDougall surveyed the damage.

"I told you she was strange! You said so yourself," Patricia sobbed, shooting Elizabeth's mother a glare. "It won't be long before you will be with your mother again, Rebecca."

Mr. MacDougall appeared from nowhere and lunged at Rebecca. He reached out to grab hold of her arms, but he wasn't quick enough. She hurtled forward and grabbed at Patricia's hair again.

Rebecca did not let go as Mr. MacDougall lifted her forcibly into the air and away from Patricia. Her fists were still clenched around Patricia's hair so she too was lifted off the ground.

Patricia released a blood-curdling scream as her hair was pulled out by the fistful. It was a sight of hands, arms and hair going in all directions as Mrs. MacDougall jumped forward, slapping at Rebecca's hands, trying to make her let go. As clumps of hair tore free from the root, Patricia fell on her behind, squealing in pain as tears streamed down her face.

Rebecca continued to lash out with her legs as she was tucked under the elder man's

strong arm and walked out of the cottage. Patricia howled as Mrs. MacDougall pulled her into the kitchen in an attempt to calm her down.

Elizabeth and Clara sat in silence as they surveyed the floor littered with tufts of red hair, listening as Rebecca's screams and moans get quieter and quieter.

Chapter Two

Rebecca stopped thrashing about when she was thrown into the cart with a thud.

"Sit there!" Mr. MacDougall seethed as he climbed alongside her. She wiped the tears from her cheeks with her bloodied fist and looked up at the night sky. The air was cold on her face. She started to shiver as she pushed her wet hair back and sat up. Her nightdress was soaked. Not a word was spoken between them as they set off.

Rebecca had to duck out of the way to miss being scraped by branches as the horse and cart raced along the track towards her home. She looked towards the Dead Forest for the majority of the time. She tried to focus her eyes as the trees zipped past, but it was all moving too quickly. It caused her head to spin. The track was illuminated next to the consuming blackness of the forest. A shiver coursed its way up her spine as she forced herself to look away. An almost full moon brightened the night. She knew it was late but she was glad to be going home. On the other hand, she knew her father would be disappointed in her.

As they drew nearer to the forest's edge, she knew she was nearly home. Mr. MacDougall pulled hard on the reins to bring the horse to a grinding halt.

"You can walk from here," he grunted. She looked at him, then the roadway and back at him again. Shadows from the clouds crossing the path of the moonlight crossed his face. "I won't go any further when it's dark."

She couldn't believe it. She was a child of twelve and here was a grown man making her walk in the dark because he was afraid of the Dead Forest. Her shivers had turned into shakes from the cold.

"But I can't walk from here." She'd never been traveling at night and certainly never been made to walk past the forest in the middle of the night.

"Should have thought of that before, eh? Go on – git."

She looked at him in disbelief before turning and jumping from the cart. She stood trembling on the side of the track, watching him turn the horse and cart around before cracking the whip and leaving her without saying a word, pausing only long enough to throw her belongings down at her feet.

Rebecca listened to the sounds of the horse's hooves and the wheels of the cart as they became more and more faint. She felt like she was rooted to the ground as she gazed along the track where she had to walk. She was frozen in fear. She held her breath as tears streamed down her face. She was terrified. She didn't believe the tales she'd heard about the Dead Forest, but it was a different situation now she was only meters away from it, and alone.

She had walked this track many times before and knew it would take her a good solid hour of running to get home. The hooting of owls startled her as she snapped her head in the direction of their chatter. Before she even had time to think, she had picked up her belongings and set off running.

She ran a short distance to a boulder on the side of the track where she took refuge. She pushed her back against the boulder and tried to be invisible. She gasped as she tried to catch her breath and think of a plan.

She struggled to think straight. *Should I stay put and wait till the morning, or should I make*

a run for it? Her heart was racing. She felt sick in her stomach. She tasted dirt as she bit at her nubby excuses for fingernails.

Rebecca held her breath and listened. Nothing. Everything had gone quiet except for the light breeze tickling the leaves in the trees. She shook her head. *Stop overreacting.* The sound of a twig breaking broke her train of thought. Her head snapped back to look directly above her. One of the biggest crows she'd ever seen was staring down at her.

Her scream echoed into the darkness as she kicked her legs out and scrambled to her feet. She set off running along the track as fast as she could, throwing glances over her shoulder only to lose her footing. She cried out in pain when the uneven rocky road peeled away flesh from her knees and palms as she stumbled to the ground. Fear was screaming at her to keep moving, but the pain in both her hands and legs kept her immobile. She lay face down on the track as she registered where her body hurt the most. She gasped in pain and cried openly as she gingerly put her hands flat to roll onto her back.

Rebecca looked to the sky and then lifted her head to look towards the boulder before bringing herself up to inspect her knees. She could feel liquid oozing down the sides of her knees. She winced in pain as she lifted her hands to look at them first. Her pale skin reflected the moon's glow as it mixed with a sea of red. She turned her hands slightly to let the blood drip before she looked at her knees. Both her hands and knees were throbbing.

She let out a small scream as she inched her legs out for a clearer view. Her hands trembled as she moved her bloodied fingers slowly towards her knees. She sniffled back her tears as she took several deep breaths in an attempt to calm herself. She didn't know what she was going to do. She reached for her apron and pressed the hard fabric against her delicate wound. She couldn't help but cry as the wounds smarted. She knew she wouldn't be going anywhere and looked around for a place nearby to take refuge. There was nothing. Nothing she could hide behind. There was nothing she could do. She moved as close to the edge of the track as possible and put her dress on over her nightclothes. She prayed she would be safe and prayed for her knees and hands to stop hurting.

Her senses were highly alert. She jumped at every sound. Even the sound of a mosquito buzzing left her panic-stricken and flinching in pain from the slightest movement. Her skin started to crawl and the hairs on her arms and neck prickled. *What was that?* Something in the Dead Forest caught her eye. She strained to see what it was but couldn't see anything past the first row of trees. She tried to drag her legs off the track quickly and quietly, but stopped when the roadway crunched as she moved. Her heart raced as she took short sharp breaths.

An overwhelming urge to move washed over her. She focused all her energy to stand up. She wobbled on her legs as she fought to stay upright. Her legs throbbed as she glanced back to the forest.

Despite all the tales of nothing living in there, she felt she was being watched. She stared as she continued to suck in short sharp breaths. Again something caught her eye. She leaned forward, straining to see it again. She started to think her imagination was playing tricks on her but she couldn't bring herself to look away in case something was following her.

She thought she saw something fly through the trees. Her mind kept racing. She looked both ways on the track as she tried to breathe silently. Her heart felt like it was going to beat free from her chest. Her head was pounding. Her legs almost collapsed with fear but

she couldn't move. *There!* She knew she hadn't imagined anything this time. Something was definitely moving through the trees. *And there!* She held her breath as she watched the two things zip through the dense forest. A small scream escaped her lips as the two things weaved through the tree trunks, moving closer to her. Her eyes widened as she watched a trail of material floating behind them.

Rebecca dropped her bundled clothes and shot off as fast as her legs would carry her. She felt the wounds on her knees split open and blood dribble as she ran. She pumped her arms and ran as fast as she could, yet the creatures were able to keep up with her.

Her throat grew tight as she struggled to keep her breath. She realized she could not outrun them.

She slowed as she glanced to see where they were and what they were doing. They stayed shielded by the trees as they followed her. They were trying to hide from her. She stopped running; they stopped chasing.

Rebecca's chest rose and fell sharply as she tried to catch her breath. She could see two sets of eyes watching her. She stared at them waiting for them to make the first move.

They too returned her stare and continued to hide behind the trees. They watched each other in silence for a few moments.

"Wha...wha...what do you want from me? I have nothing to give you." She tried to stop her voice from quivering. She flinched as the fabric of her nightgown closed around her knees. One of them moved out from behind the tree. She saw it was a woman. A very pretty woman. She had dark hair that hung all the way down her back and she was wearing the most beautiful dark-blue dress. It was long and flowing. Her skin was pale in contrast to the blackness of the Dead Forest and her eyes were bright green. She smiled at Rebecca as she moved clear of the trees. Rebecca watched in awe as she glided towards her. She had never seen such a beautiful dress.

"Dear child, you are bleeding," the woman said in a soft, loving and welcoming tone.

Rebecca looked at her hands. Droplets of blood dripped from her fingertips to the ground. She leaned forward to see her shins streaked with blood from her knees. She'd started to cry by the time she looked back up at the woman.

"Oh no. No tears. We can help you with that." The woman moved towards her but stopped before she was completely clear of the forest. "We can help you but you have to move closer to me dear child. Come on. We can make it all better."

Rebecca didn't know what to do. She'd never seen anything living in the Dead Forest, let alone a woman.

"Come on child. We are not going to hurt you." Her voice soothed Rebecca. Again she felt frozen to the spot. She had to force herself to take the small steps towards the woman. "That's it. A little further and we'll have you fixed right up."

She dragged her feet as she moved towards the stranger. She'd been told never to talk to strangers but this woman put her at ease.

"There you are. Do you have a name child?"

She nodded. "It's Rebecca. I fell over back there." Tears streamed down her cheeks as she inched towards her.

"Well Rebecca, I'm Marguerite. I need you to show me if you are hurt anywhere else."

Rebecca slowly turned her hands to show Marguerite her palms that were now caked

with dried blood.

"Oh, you did have a nasty fall. All right. I need you to close your eyes and think of something you really like. Think of something that makes you really happy Rebecca."

She sniffled and wiped her nose with the back of her dirty hand as she looked at the woman one more time before closing her eyes. She thought of the farm. She thought of Papa. She thought of drawing and showing off her pictures. Within seconds, the pain in her hands had disappeared.

"You can open your eyes now," Marguerite whispered.

She looked at her hands. They were healed. No sign of a scratch let alone an injury. She pulled her hands towards her face for a closer inspection and shook her head in disbelief.

"How —?"

"Now, are you hurt anywhere else?"

Rebecca nodded as she lowered her hands to grasp her skirt and nightdress to expose her knees.

"Oh. That looks very painful. All right, I need you to do exactly the same as before. Think of something that makes you very happy. Keep thinking about it until I say otherwise." Rebecca nodded and closed her eyes. She thought about being at home, tucked in her bed where she felt safe.

The only sound she could hear was the material from Marguerite's dress moving in the light breeze before the woman spoke again. "There you are. All better. How do you feel? You can open your eyes now Rebecca."

Rebecca slowly opened her eyes. Her knees felt fine. She lifted her skirt and nightdress higher before bending forward to look at her knee. All clear. Not a trace of blood, not a scrape.

"How did you do that?" She looked at Marguerite curiously.

"You are the one that did it. You healed yourself. I just guided you a little. See, I told you that you had nothing to be afraid of." Marguerite smiled.

A silhouette behind Marguerite's shoulder caught Rebecca's attention. She saw a second figure peering from behind a tree.

"Hello," she said. Another woman moved slowly from behind the tree. She too had long hair, but it was golden-red and she was wearing a pink dress. She too smiled at Rebecca and Rebecca smiled back.

"Hello," the woman in the pink dress said. "We don't see many children out late at night."

"This is my good friend Arlene," Marguerite said. Both women stopped just before the last row of trees that led to the track and lingered there.

"Are you lost child?" Arlene asked.

Rebecca shook her head. "No, I am on my way home."

"And where do you live?" She too had a soft, comforting voice.

"I live with my Papa." Rebecca pointed along the track as she spoke. "We are the only ones who live out this way."

"Then what are you doing out so late child?"

"I was invited to stay at another girl's home but they didn't want me to stay. They were mean to me."

"Mean to you?" Arlene quipped as she cocked her head.

"Yes. She was saying mean things about me and Mother. So I..." Rebecca watched for their reaction. "So I punched her in the nose."

Rebecca watched Marguerite look to Arlene and then back at her before a smile spread across her face. "I am sure she deserved it," Marguerite said. Both women cackled with laughter.

"But why are you walking home so late at night?" Marguerite asked as her smile faded.

Rebecca looked at Marguerite. "Elizabeth's father made me walk home. He said he wouldn't travel past the Dead Forest at night, so he made me get out of the cart. Thank you for helping me but I really want to go home now." She turned around and set off walking.

"We could walk with you. You would be home in no time," Marguerite said, setting off after Rebecca.

"Of course." Rebecca nodded as she continued walking.

"No child. We mean through here." Arlene moved towards Rebecca and held out her hand. Rebecca stopped and looked at her outstretched hand and then at the forest.

Papa had told her a thousand times never walk through the Dead Forest—even when it was daylight. He would say people who went in there never came out because every inch looked the same. The forest was so dense it would take you days just to walk a few yards.

Rebecca shook her head. "No thank you. I am not allowed to go through the Dead Forest." She turned around and continued along the track.

"But we will be with you," Marguerite said. "Your legs must be tired and sore. You have been out in the cold for a long time."

As Rebecca shook her head she caught a glimpse of a third woman peering from behind a tree. She wondered how many of them there were. She clamped her mouth shut, but not before a short scream had escaped.

"Elser, show yourself to Rebecca," Arlene demanded.

"You don't have to fear us Rebecca," Marguerite said as Elser moved from behind the tree. "We will do you no harm." Rebecca watched the third woman. She had golden hair that glinted in the small amount of moonlight shining between the branches of the trees. She was wearing a purple dress.

"I am not afraid," Rebecca said. "I am surprised there are people living in the forest. I thought only crows lived in there. I was always told that nothing ever grew in there so nothing could survive."

"And who told you those stories? The villagers?" Marguerite jeered as the women laughed together. "The villagers tell lies Rebecca."

"What would they know?" Arlene quipped in.

"The villagers took everything they could from the forest," Marguerite said with a stern tone. "They took everything that was good from it and left it as it is now. Dead. Then they hunted the so-called 'bad' people from the town, forcing them to live here, forever."

"Bad people?"

"Yes. They dumped the bodies of the villagers who were infected with the Black Plague here years ago. The disease spread throughout the forest and the animals that lived within it. It killed practically everything. The people of the village are responsible for this, yet they lay claim that it could not have been them. They also expelled people they thought were bad.

Thieves, scarlet women, people they thought were witches.” Marguerite looked at the other two women. “Any excuse to get rid of the people they didn’t like. Most of the people left before they could be hunted out. But for the few that remained, they were sent here. We have made it our new home. We were forced to. We can show it to you if you like. It really is quite beautiful.”

Rebecca knew what it was like to have the villagers turn their backs on her. She wasn’t so scared of these women now. “Maybe...one day,” she said. Her legs and feet were aching and she knew she’d be walking all night if she didn’t get moving. “I really should be getting home.” She set off again but the women stayed close.

“But Rebecca,” Marguerite implored. “This is such a long way for a young girl to be walking.”

“Come with us and we will get you home quickly,” Arlene urged.

“No thank you,” Rebecca said, never breaking her stride.

“Well, we will keep you company then,” Marguerite said as she continued to follow Rebecca, the two others in tow. “Rebecca, are you cold? The back of your clothes looks wet. We have a dress we can give you.”

Rebecca shook her head. “No thank you. It will be dry by the time I get home.”

“So that man just made you get out of the cart and left you? He wouldn’t take you all the way home?” asked Marguerite.

“He said he wouldn’t travel past the Dark Forest at night,” Rebecca said.

The women scoffed as they continued on.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” Marguerite said. “Look at you. A mere child, walking in the dead of night. Do you have any fears child?”

By now Rebecca felt comfortable with Marguerite’s questions. “Yes,” she said in a small voice. “I fear for my Papa. I fear I will be in trouble for what I did to that girl. I fear they will always treat me like that. For no reason at all, just be mean to me.” She blinked hard to stop her tears as she continued to walk.

Nothing more was said. She glanced at the Dead Forest only to see the three women were still moving along with her. She thought her mind had been playing tricks on her, but she was talking to these women. *They must be real.*

“You still don’t know what to make of us, do you? Do not get upset child,” Marguerite soothed. “We will not harm you. You can feel safe with us. Come with us. We will get you home in the blink of an eye,” Marguerite said as she stretched out her hand invitingly towards Rebecca. It was an elegant hand. Rebecca wiped her eyes and looked at her own hands. She wished she had elegant hands, not the scuffed and grubby looking ones she was staring at.

“Why don’t you rest your legs and sit for a moment child?” Marguerite encouraged.

“Why won’t you walk on the path with me?” Rebecca asked.

“We are not allowed,” Arlene said. Rebecca saw Marguerite give Arlene an evil glance.

“You’re not allowed? Why not?”

Marguerite gave the other two a warning glare before turning her attention back to Rebecca. “We made a choice to live in the forest forever. We’d be happy for you to come and visit any time you like. We haven’t had a child in our midst for a very long time. We promise to get you home safely but we are not permitted to leave the confines of the forest. Besides, we have all we would ever need right here.”

Marguerite skipped in a circle and let her skirt flow out wide. "We wouldn't let anything happen to you Rebecca. We want you to be our friend. You will have the most fun if you come with us Rebecca."

Rebecca stopped fearing them. She did trust them but she didn't want to do the wrong thing, especially since her Papa had told her not to go into the Dead Forest. Papa also thought she should be asleep at Elizabeth's house. She knew it was still a long walk to get home. Rebecca took a small step towards Marguerite as she contemplated the idea.

"But I don't know you. How am I meant to trust someone I have only just met?"

"Do we look like we would hurt you?" Arlene questioned.

"No..." Rebecca looked at her feet before smiling back at Arlene. "But do I look like the kind of girl that punches other girls in the nose?" Rebecca could see the oak tree a short distance away. She felt relieved. She knew she was on the final stretch. Her smile faded when she heard the sound of galloping horse's hooves getting closer and closer. She cocked her head to listen.

Rebecca turned to see the three women retreat into darkness as she frantically thought of what to do. Jump into the forest? Run? Stay and see who it is? Her heart pounded at the same pace of the horse's hooves as they drew closer. She didn't know what to do. She took a small step back towards the forest.

Chapter Three

Rebecca shot off along the track searching for a place to hide. It felt like the horse was bearing down on top of her. She stopped and pressed her back against a large tree from the forest. She could feel the freezing trunk through her clothes. She flinched. The cold tree trunk was a stark contrast to the warm night. She didn't understand how the tree could be so cold.

The horse pulled up as she trembled on the side of the road.

"Git up," a voice said in a hurried tone. It was Mr. MacDougall. "I am sorry. I should never have done that. Let's get you home. Come on. Git up."

He passed Rebecca her bloodstained apron. "I thought something terrible had happened to you when I saw your clothes back there," he said worriedly.

She bit her tongue. She wanted to ask him what he would have done if something did happen. She knew he would come up with a lie. They'd all say she wandered away in the middle of the night. She chose to sit in silence for the remainder of the ride home, running her fingers over her knees as she looked hard for the three women. She and Elizabeth's father were racing past the Dead Forest at such speed she started to feel sick to her stomach.

The cart hadn't even come to a complete stop when Rebecca jumped from it. She ran to the front door of the cottage and pushed it wide open. She could see Papa making his way down the ladder while trying to stop the candle he was holding from going out. His face was filled with worry. "What's wrong? What happened?" She rushed over and hugged him tight as Mr. MacDougall stood in the doorway.

"She asked to come home," he said. Rebecca didn't bother looking at him as she clutched at her father. "She was making the girls uncomfortable so we thought it best to bring her home."

Papa reached behind and took hold of her arms, pulling himself free of her grip. "Is that so?" He looked down at her. "Well, thank you for bringing her home in the middle of the night. I am sorry for any trouble," Papa said as he walked past her and into the kitchen. He returned with a small bottle. She knew it was full of whiskey and she knew he was going to give it to him.

"No Papa." She couldn't let this man have anything for what he'd done. "They were mean to me like I said they would be. He made me walk most of the way home." She raced to get the words out as she moved between Papa and Mr. MacDougall.

Mr. MacDougall scoffed. "Listen to the poor child. She doesn't know what she is saying," he interrupted, trying to drown her out explanation.

"No!" she screamed. "He said he wouldn't go past the forest at night and made me get out and walk. I fell over and hurt myself but it was only when I got to the oak tree that he came back to get me. Don't you give him anything Papa!"

Rebecca stared at her father. She could feel Elizabeth's father staring at her. Papa looked to Rebecca. "I think you had better go," he said.

"But the child lies..."

"She does not lie to me," he said in a harsh tone and placed the whiskey bottle on the

table. Mr. MacDougall glared at Rebecca and she returned it tenfold. He shook his head before turning and walked out into the darkness. She ran over and shut the door behind him. "Is it true? That he made you walk?"

"Yes Papa, but I was not afraid. I wanted to be home," she said.

"You didn't walk through the Dead Forest, did you?"

"No Papa. I stayed on the track." She was about to tell him about the three women when he asked the reason of why she was brought home. "They are mean girls Papa," she said quietly as she sat down.

"What did they say? You said you were hurt. Where are you hurt?"

"Papa, I am very tired from walking. You are not going to be happy with what I have to tell you, so can I tell you in the morning? I'm fine now. I just tripped over. I wasn't watching where I was walking." He eyed her over. "You will have thought of a suitable punishment for me by then Papa."

He broke into a smile. "Oh Rebecca, you are but a child, yet you say things that are beyond your years."

Rebecca smiled back at him before getting up and walking to her bed. She barely had the energy to get under the covers. She couldn't remember her head hitting the pillow.

Rebecca woke to Papa shuffling in the kitchen.

"Get some more sleep," he told her when he looked at her. Her eyes were barely open and her body ached. "You can tell me what happened over lunch. Right now I want you to rest." She didn't argue. She rolled over in her bed and within seconds was asleep again.

Several hours later, the sun shone on her bed and made it impossible to sleep.

She was dreading telling Papa the real reason she came home. She dressed and started to prepare lunch. She walked out to the vegetable patch where Papa was working. "Lunch time already?" he asked as he wiped his hands on his pants. They walked to the cottage together. He took his seat at the table before looking at her. "So let me hear it," he said. Rebecca sighed before starting to speak.

"Well, I know what I did was wrong, but Patricia asked for it. She was saying mean things about me and..." Mentioning her mother was always hard. "And Mother. I'd had enough. She was saying lies—terrible lies. They all were. They were all being mean to me as soon as I got there."

He watched her for a long time. "And then what?"

"And then...I punched her in the nose." She held her breath, waiting for a reaction that never came.

Papa continued to eat his food in silence. Rebecca glanced at him as she continued to push her food around her plate. She thought she could see him thinking of her punishment. When he finished his final mouthful, he wiped his face and pushed his plate away from him. He looked at her.

"Now, when you say you punched her in the nose, do you mean a slap or a closed fist, like this?" He jabbed the air with his fist. She brought her fist up and punched the air just like he was.

"And I slapped her," she said quietly. "But that was before the nose."

He baulked at her. "I think you should go to your room for a while."

Rebecca nodded as she cleared the table of their plates. She sat in the middle of her bed with her back pressed against the wall. She wondered what Papa was going to say to her. He'd only yelled at her two times in her life. Once when she didn't see a snake, and the other time when she didn't like the smell of what was in a glass bottle and poured it out. It turned out to be Papa's whiskey. She knew what she did was wrong, but she just couldn't control herself. It was like someone else was in her head. She knew it was wrong but secretly she was happy she did it. Maybe now they will think twice before they pick on her again.

She started to think about the women in the Dead Forest when Papa made his way towards her small room.

"Well Rebecca, I thought I could take you to Elizabeth's house to make some friends. A young girl needs to have her own friends. But if those girls are going to make fun or bully you, then you don't need them to be around you. I believe Patricia got what she deserved," he said. She felt a wash of relief. "The next time I see Elizabeth's father, he will be lucky to escape from the same treatment for making you walk home."

"That's why I stopped you from giving him the whiskey," Rebecca said with a smile, relieved her father believed her. "I knew once you found out what I had done and what he had done, if I let you give it to him I would be in worse trouble."

"Well, I won't have my child putting up with that kind of treatment. It's a welcome relief to know you are able to look after yourself," he said.

"I can." She smiled at him. "And I can look after you too, Papa."

It was several days before Rebecca saw the girls again. She saw them in the street as she and her father worked to set up the market stall. Patricia didn't have ringlets that day. Her hair was slicked back into a low ponytail. Rebecca stood on the spot and waited for her to turn around. Rebecca's father stopped behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders.

"Come on now," he said as he tried to pull her away. She was determined not to move. Slowly, Patricia turned and faced Rebecca. The girls stared at each other from across the street. Rebecca started to smirk. She'd been able to inflict a nice black eye and Patricia's nose looked twice its size. Patricia glanced away before returning her gaze to Rebecca who smiled broadly now. Papa watched Patricia across the street until he'd had enough.

"Come on Rebecca," he said again as he pulled on her hand.

Papa and Rebecca set off back to the stall but she couldn't help but look over her shoulder at Patricia. Patricia continued to stare as her mother walked to her side.

Her mother looked in Rebecca's direction and gasped before reaching out to Patricia to try and make her move too. Patricia's mother gasped again as Rebecca smiled and poked out her tongue.

Papa tugged on her hand. "Stop that Rebecca," he said without looking down.

"How do you always know what I'm doing when you aren't even looking at me Papa?"

"Because I know what you are like."

For days Rebecca fought the temptation to tell Papa about the three women from the Dead Forest. He'd catch her looking in the direction of the forest but when questioned she would tell him she was daydreaming.

"All this daydreaming...I don't know how you are going to get all this work done," he said to her several times.

In the hope of seeing them again, she took her time at the stream that separated the farm from the forest collecting water. She thought she saw something but it had disappeared when she looked harder. When Papa said he was taking his horse for a ride to the village, she knew she should seize the moment. She watched him ride down the track to the oak tree before he disappeared out of sight.

Rebecca collected the bucket and ran towards the stream. She stretched her arms out to keep her balance as she walked across the log bridge. She and Papa used the log bridge to get access to the mushrooms and flowers that grew on the other side of the stream. She set the bucket down slowly and looked back at the cottage. She turned and faced the forest.

"Hello?" she called, glancing back to the cottage in case Papa had returned for some reason. "Hello?" She took several steps forward. Her heart beat faster with every step. She could feel it beating in her throat. Maybe she had imagined the whole thing. She jumped and took a step back when Marguerite came into view. She was able to prevent a short scream from escaping, but couldn't stop her mouth from gaping open.

"Hello again Rebecca," Marguerite said with a smile.

"Hello." She breathed a sigh of relief; her mind wasn't playing tricks on her after all. "I was wondering if I was ever going to see you again."

"Of course dear. We will be here any time you need us. How are you feeling? I'm sorry we left you so abruptly the other night when we saw that man come back and collect you. We did watch you all the way to ensure you got home safely. It's best if we are not seen. Do you understand Rebecca?"

Rebecca nodded. She thought she did understand. These women hid in the Dead Forest and if anyone knew they were there, the villagers would come to kill them. Rebecca reassured her that her secret was safe with her.

"Thank you. So what can we do for you today?" Rebecca saw Arlene and Elser move away from behind a tree.

"Nothing. I was hoping to make sure you were alright," Rebecca said, taking a small step towards them and at the same time throwing another glance back to the cottage.

"You're fine dear. He's almost to the village," Marguerite said.

Rebecca eyed her over. "How do you know where Papa is?"

"We just can dear. Now...are you going to come and see our home? We'd love to show you."

"No...I can't...but I would like to one day. I just needed to make sure..." She looked away in embarrassment as she stumbled with her sentence.

"You needed to make sure we were real?" Marguerite finished. Rebecca nodded. "Well, we are dear. Look." Marguerite extended her hand and arm towards Rebecca. Since she'd seen Marguerite's hand, Rebecca had stopped chewing her fingernails. She stepped closer as Marguerite's pale arm extended from the cold darkness into the warm sunlight. Her fingers trembled as she inched her hand towards Marguerite's. She shivered as her fingertips grazed over Marguerite's fingers to take her hand. It felt surprisingly warm.

"There. That wasn't so bad was it?" Marguerite said as she slowly coiled her fingers around to hold onto Rebecca's hand. Rebecca shook her head and took another step forward as Marguerite pulled gently on her hand.

"No," Rebecca said, trying to brace her feet on the ground to stop moving towards the

forest. Marguerite held tightly onto her hand as Rebecca tried to pull back.

"We are not going to hurt you Rebecca. Come with us. We can play games and have lots of fun," she said, giving the hand another gentle but firm tug.

"No I mustn't," Rebecca said, pulling her hand free of Marguerite's and taking several steps back. Marguerite didn't try to hide the disappointment on her face as she stared at Rebecca.

"Of course dear," Arlene said, turning Marguerite by the shoulder and gently pushing her back into the forest. "We understand. We are not going to force you. You will come and visit with us when you feel more comfortable."

"I have to get the water and go back to the cottage now. Have a good day." Rebecca walked backwards for several steps while she watched the women retreat further into the forest. When they had disappeared from sight she quickly collected the bucket and made her way across the log bridge, running back to the cottage.

Papa looked around the shop front as he tied the reins to a post. He made sure he didn't see anyone he knew before quickly entering the shop.

"Oh Phillip, good to see you again. Right on time. How's Rebecca?" the man asked. He was a short man. Much shorter than Papa. The top of his head barely came level with Papa's shoulders. His dark hair was slicked back and his gaunt face looked sickeningly thin. The man didn't seem to walk; it was more of a gliding motion. His small dark eyes darted over Papa as he took off his hat. "This way then," the man spoke with a hiss.

The man motioned Papa through a long corridor to the second room on the right. Papa threw down a small bag that made a clinking sound as it hit the table.

"Here's this month's installment Rutherford," he said.

"Very good. And how is Rebecca?" Rutherford asked again as he slid behind his desk, taking the small sack. "Have you heard about the man?"

"MacDougall? How he made Rebecca walk...yes?"

"Yes, but have you heard what happened to him since then? Oh yes, apparently he had run into a bit of strife on the way home that night. It would seem someone, or something, frightened the life almost right out of him. I hear he's in a right state."

Papa eyed Rutherford. "What did you do to him?"

"What makes you think it was me? There are other things that live in the Dead Forest. Besides, I have a vested interest in making sure Rebecca is kept safe and away from harm." Rutherford licked his thin lips and smiled.

"Yes. We will see about that. I have been making some plans and I will be able to make double repayments during the winter months. I am going to be doing some work at another village. The debt will be wiped clean before her sixteenth birthday, Rutherford."

Rutherford stared back at Papa. "We will see Phillip. But as for the MacDougall man, my sources tell me three women waited for him to return from your farm. Somehow they got him to stop and he got a little too close to the Dead Forest. I hear he's nothing more than a gibbering mess now. Has been housebound ever since. Naturally, the talk links you and Rebecca to the situation because that is where he was returning from...just thought you should be aware, that's all. It would seem someone is on your side...or at the very least, Rebecca's." Papa nodded as he waited for Rutherford to finish. "I will see you in a month then Phillip."

Rebecca rubbed her arms to keep them warm. The night air was starting to turn chilly. Rebecca laid extra blankets on both their beds as Papa worked on harvesting the last of the season crops. They'd had a good harvest, better than other farmers. Papa had told Rebecca of his plans to get more work during the winter period at the next village.

"You can either stay here or you can go to Mrs. Gwenllian's," he said as she cleared the table.

"Here. Here Papa, I would prefer to stay here," Rebecca said without hesitation. "I can keep an eye on things here then. I will be fine."

Rebecca had known Mrs. Gwenllian for as long as she could remember. She was a little person, but what she lacked in height she made up for in determination. Nothing was going to stop her from doing what she wanted to do. She could be described as overbearing. She and Papa would go to her when they were sick. She would always have a brew of some awful description to cure anything. She liked Mrs. Gwenllian, but only in small doses. Rebecca preferred to stay in familiar surroundings.

Rebecca washed the dishes and packed away the kitchen table when Papa came down from the loft. She pulled out her needlepoint and made herself comfortable in front of the fire.

"I am going into the Tavern tonight Rebecca. I will be home later," he said as he put on his jacket. Papa would mark the final days of harvest with the other farmers.

"Yes Papa." She smiled. "Have a good time."

"I have a present for you Rebecca," he said, reaching into his pocket. She looked at the rolled up material bag as he handed it to her.

"A present for me?"

"Yes. We had a busy harvest and you did very well." Rebecca unrolled the bag.

She gasped as she looked at the fine paintbrushes. She gently tickled the bristles with her fingers.

"Tomorrow we will get you some paint."

"Oh thank you Papa." She rushed to hug him. She knew they were expensive. She'd eyed them in the shop front while at the markets one day. She hadn't realized Papa was watching her though.

"I could paint and sell them at the markets next year Papa." She smiled again.

"Ah, but the first one must be for my walls," he said. She waved him goodbye from the door before returning to the fireplace.

She pictured herself painting the cold nights away. Images of what she wanted to paint flashed before her eyes. It took her a long time to put the brushes down and pick up her needlework again.

The crackling of the fire kept her awake as she listened to the wind pick up outside. She snuggled closer and held her hands towards the flames before packing her needlework carefully into the basket. She rolled up her brushes for the last time that night and placed them in the basket next to her bed before getting changed into her nightdress. She could still hear the fire crackling as she wriggled down in to her bed.

Sleep evaded her. She tossed and turned. She put her arm over her eyes. She beat the pillow in an attempt to get comfortable. As she placed her head on the pillow once again, she could hear the branches straining against the wind. Then the wind died down and caused

only the leaves to move. It was somewhat calming to her. It was the still nights that seemed to play on her mind the most. She closed her eyes again and let out a heavy sigh. Finally, she could feel herself starting to slip away into slumber.

Rebecca didn't know if she was dreaming when she heard her name being called through the wind.

"Rebeeeeeeeeeeecca."

She blinked several times to ensure she was awake and pushed the blanket off her legs before climbing out of bed. She moved slowly to the window. From the light of the moon she could see the countryside clearly. She looked to the crop patch and tried to listen harder to the wind. It definitely sounded as if her name was being called. She unclipped the window lock and pushed it open. The wind whipped her long hair. Her name was called again. She definitely heard it that time. She leaned forward and braced herself on the windowsill as she poked her head out the window and into the night air. The cold air was a jolt to her body. In an instant she was wide-awake as she shivered.

She heard it again. She looked toward the Dead Forest. Although it was light, she had to strain her eyes to see that far. Something caught her attention through the tree trunks just above the ground. She could see something zipping between the trees. Then another. And another. It was the women.

Rebecca pulled herself back inside and closed the window. She checked several times to make sure it was locked but the calling became louder and louder. The draft of wind made her nightgown dance against her skin and continued sending her hair in different directions. She looked away from the forest as the calling became clearer and clearer.

She turned around and saw the front door was wide open. She reached for the candlestick but knocked it over, sending it crashing to the floor. She ran and slammed the door shut. She pressed her back against the door as she looked around to see if anyone was inside. She caught a glimpse of the forest through the kitchen window. She pushed off the door with both hands and ran towards the window. The shadows and women had moved. She could see the women in the trees. She could hear them laughing and calling her name.

She called out to Papa but there was no answer. *He mustn't be home yet.*

She was so transfixed by the activity happening in the distance she didn't notice a black crow sitting on the kitchen window ledge. It was staring at her. Rebecca caught sight of it as it tilted its head. She screamed as she scrambled backwards.

It had the strangest eyes she'd ever seen for a crow. Instead of red eyes, they were green. She clambered past the table and over to the fireplace where she reefed the gun from its usual hanging place. Her screams silenced the women calling her name. She looked back to the window but the crow was gone. She waited till her heart stopped pounding before replacing the gun above the fireplace. The fire was nearly out. She lugged another large piece of wood and threw it onto the dying flames.

She tried to stay in the shadows as she crept around the corner of the kitchen. She looked to see if the women were still there. She couldn't see them. Again she thought she was imagining things. She didn't mind the women, but the crow unsettled her. It caught her by surprise. She stood and stared at the forest for a long time hoping they would come back, but she gave up when she yawned for the third time.

She crawled back into bed but as soon as she pulled the blanket tight around her chin,

the calling started again. She rolled over to look out the window. The sky was clear and the moon shone bright. This time she could see them as clearly as she heard them. It was like they were singing her name.

"Rebecca, come out and play Rebecca." She recognized Marguerite's voice.

Rebecca put on her shoes and wrapped a blanket around her shoulders. She closed the door behind her and shuffled across the yard. She made her way towards the log bridge, balancing herself as she always did by stretching her arms out as she made her way across. She heard the women clap as she approached. "Hello Rebecca. We have been waiting for you to come and play," Marguerite said.

"You frightened me before but that crow really scared me," Rebecca said, looking back at the cottage as she pulled the blanket tight around her shoulders.

"There's no need to be afraid of us Rebecca. We are your friends," Marguerite said.

"We brought you a present," Arlene said as she held out something for her to take. Rebecca warily inched towards her. She did not want to get too close to the forest. She didn't want to get into trouble with Papa. If she had not stopped her, she thought Marguerite would have pulled her in the last time. What would she say to Papa if he came home now and caught her?

"Don't you want your present?" Arlene asked. They all watched her, waiting for her to make a move.

"We have made the most tasty treats for us to eat while we play. You do want to play, don't you?" Marguerite asked.

"I do..."

"If you are worried about your father, he's having a great time at the Tavern. He won't be home for hours," Marguerite said.

"You will be back in bed before he returns and he will never know," Arlene said.

"But I don't lie to Papa." They continued to watch her as she walked past the trees. She placed her hand on the trunk of one. It felt cold. Frozen. She could see her breath as she exhaled. She pulled back. The women kept smiling at her, encouraging her to come with them. Marguerite glided towards her. "Come with us Rebecca. You will love it," she cajoled. "We will teach you lots of new things." Marguerite put her hand out invitingly towards Rebecca. Her arm reached beyond the bounds of the Dead Forest. Her milky-white skin lit up the tree trunks as she extended it. It was a grave contrast to the darkness of the forest.

Rebecca looked at Marguerite and then quickly glanced back at the cottage.

"We won't tell your father. The only way you'll get into trouble is if you told him yourself," Marguerite said. "Don't you want to be friends?"

Rebecca nodded her head. "Oh, I do. I just fear what is in there." She pointed to the forest as she spoke.

"Well, there is only way to find out. We promise if you want to go home we will bring you straight back." Marguerite pushed her hand forward more. Again, Rebecca placed her hand on the tree and stepped towards the forest. The ground was as cold as the tree. She slowly reached out and took Marguerite's hand. "Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?" Marguerite asked as she gently guided Rebecca further into the forest.

"No." Rebecca glanced again at the cottage but felt compelled to continue with Marguerite.

“This way Rebecca,” Arlene called as she took hold of her other hand.

Chapter Four

Rebecca could feel the cool earth through the soles of her shoes. She held onto Marguerite and Arlene's hands tightly as she walked further into the forest. She stumbled several times on the uneven ground and clambered over dense roots.

Her vision was hampered by the lack of light. She glanced over her shoulder to where she had walked in. It felt like the forest was closing in around her. She looked at the trees. There was something not right about them. They looked different to the trees outside the forest. They looked smooth and seemed to be covered in a slimy film. Rebecca took a deep breath and almost choked on the stagnant air. It had a strong smell despite the strong breeze blowing, moving the air through the trees. She couldn't help but screw up her nose at the strange musty smell.

"The forest is so thick," she said as she looked closely to where she should place her feet. "And it's so cold." Her shoes slipped on the damp earth and squelched as she moved. The weight of her skirt had started to slow her down as it dragged through the mud.

"My skirt's dragging." She tried to pull her hand free of Arlene's to lift her skirt. As she looked down at her feet she gasped. She wasn't even touching the ground.

"No need to be afraid, Rebecca," Arlene said. "We will take good care of you."

"But how are we...?" Rebecca's voice quivered as she stared at the ground zipping past.

"We have powers Rebecca," Marguerite said as she continued to look ahead. "We can teach them to you. The forest gives us special powers but you must never speak of them. Do you understand?"

Rebecca watched the ground whiz past as they weaved between the trees. She struggled to remember how to get out.

"Where are you going?"

"We are going home," Arlene said. "We have prepared a feast for your visit."

The shadows were playing tricks with Rebecca's eyes. She strained to look but she was moving too fast to see anything twice. She could only hear the low whistle of the wind as it blew her hair out so it trailed behind her.

Looking ahead, she could see an orange glow. "What's that?" She motioned her head in front of her. "That's home," Arlene said.

Rebecca watched the ground in awe as they slowly lowered down. She squeezed both hands tight as she tried to touch the ground without tripping. She stumbled slightly as her shoe caught the only small tree root in the clearing.

Both Marguerite and Arlene held her hands tight and stopped her from falling forward. The earth squished under her weight. As she got used to standing again, she noticed the ground still felt cool through her shoes. She quickly looked around her. Everything was dark except for a path that was lit with small fires. She looked over her shoulder, straining to see anything other than trees. She couldn't help but stare at the trees. The trees on the edge of the forest were smooth, these ones were definitely not. They looked as if they were growing into each other. The nooks looked faintly like faces. She squinted and edged her face forward to

get a better look as Marguerite pulled on her hand.

"What are you looking at Rebecca?"

"Those trees. I have never seen trees like them before," she said as her gaze followed the trunk of the tree to its branches. There was something very odd about them. She thought the forest looked to be choking itself it was so dense.

"Quickly. You mustn't stay near those sorts of trees Rebecca. Only a short distance to go and we will be there. This way," Marguerite said as she watched Rebecca looking the opposite way.

The three of them made their way along the path. Rebecca only heard one set of footsteps. Hers. She looked at their feet and could only see the hem of their dresses drifting along the path.

Arlene let go of her hand and moved ahead quickly while Marguerite continued with Rebecca. "Where's the other lady?" She was desperately trying not to stare at the fact Marguerite was not walking like her.

"Oh, she has been with us. You just didn't see her. Come on Elser," Marguerite said as she looked behind her.

Rebecca looked over her shoulder to see a white form move clear from the dense forest. Rebecca thought Elser did well to hide given she was so light and the forest was so dark.

"She's coming now Rebecca," Marguerite said, giving her a light tug on her hand to bring her attention back to what was in front of them. Rebecca slowly turned to look in front of her. There was a small cottage at the end of the path. It looked like it was made out of thatch, mud and tree branches. It didn't look very sturdy to her. The cottage looked damp and cold. Actually, it blended in quite well with the forest surroundings.

Marguerite stopped and pulled on Rebecca's hand. "Welcome to our home," she said as they looked towards the small cottage. "The only thing we ask is that you take off your shoes."

Arlene held the door open for Rebecca as she slipped her shoes off. Marguerite let go of Rebecca's hand as they all encouraged her to enter. Rebecca smiled as she poked her head through the door.

The air was warm. Candles glowed in each corner. Although a large fire crackled loudly at one end of the room, it was hard not to look past the table in the center of the room. It was piled high with food. The inside of the cottage was a complete contradiction to its outside. It had a very homely, welcoming feeling that put Rebecca at ease. There were several paintings on the walls, three chairs, three rugs and three pillows.

The floor was covered with the softest rugs she'd ever felt. She wiggled her toes against the plush rug. Her feet felt instantly warm. Rebecca turned and smiled at the women as Elser closed the door behind her. A number of large pots lined the benches in the kitchen and a collection of pans hung from the ceiling. There was a ladder in the corner that led to the loft.

The aromas of all the foods mixed together, making her stomach grumble. Plate after plate after plate covered the large table. Rebecca stared at a large bowl of candy that sat on the edge. She had not seen so many sweets in the one place, even in a store.

"Don't you like it?" Arlene asked as she moved to the food table. "Aren't you hungry?"

"No, your cottage is very beautiful," Rebecca said. "Papa says it is rude to eat when you haven't been asked to."

Arlene looked at Marguerite. "Well, that rule doesn't apply here," Arlene said. "You can do whatever you like." Rebecca watched Arlene walk over to the table and pick up a small cake. Her own mouth watered as she watched Arlene tuck in. Rebecca walked to the table and picked up a small cake, the same as Arlene's. She looked at it before taking a small bite. It was the best cake she'd ever had. It melted in her mouth as she took another bite. Papa would only buy her a cake on her mother's birthday. A special treat to remember a special woman, he would say. Her fingers slipped in the icing as she struggled to stuff the last of the cake into her mouth. She looked to Arlene who'd done the same and giggled.

"They are delicious but hard to hold," Arlene said as she opened her mouth wide, shoving the remainder of the cake in. She grinned as Rebecca copied her. All four laughed as they licked their fingers clean before deciding on another treat.

The three women took their seats at the table and served themselves. Rebecca took her seat opposite Marguerite, grinning as she piled her plate high. They were right; she was having a great time already.

Papa wrapped his scarf tight around his head to keep the chilly wind off his face and ears for the ride home. His cheeks displayed a rosy glow from the whiskey he'd had at the Tavern. He smiled when he saw the glow of the fire coming from the cottage's kitchen window as he uncoupled the horse. He quietly opened the door, hoping he wouldn't disturb his sleeping child. His rough hands made a scratching noise as he rubbed them together while he walked to the fireplace. He stood in front of the fire for several minutes before quietly making his way to the kitchen to check on Rebecca. He could see the blanket had been taken from her bed and she wasn't to be found. He turned and made his way to the loft.

Sometimes when he came home late he would find her snuggled in his bed. The ladder creaked under his weight as he tried to ascend quietly. The moonlight streaming through the window gave the loft an eerie glow. He quietly made his way to his bedside but stood bolt upright when he found his bed empty too.

He slowly circled the room, hoping he'd just not seen her. His mind was racing. Where could she be? He called her name. No answer. He called her name again, louder this time. Still no answer. He practically jumped from the ladder and ran back to her bed. Nothing. He clasped both hands on his head and pulled on his hair.

"Rebecca!" Nothing. He turned and set off outside where he called her name again. Still no reply. His chest felt tight as he again and again called her name. His heart beat in his throat as he started to sweat in fear. He turned in circles thinking of where she could have gone.

Rebecca giggled as the four of them ate and ate and ate. She had never eaten so much to the point where she thought she was going to be sick. Regardless, she spooned an extra large portion of something that was white and fluffy. She thought it tasted delicious even though she had no idea what it was.

"Here, you have to try this Rebecca," Marguerite said as she placed a slice of something on Rebecca's plate.

"What is it?" She eyed the huge slice curiously.

"It doesn't matter what it is, what's important is how good it tastes." Marguerite

giggled, cutting herself a slice. Rebecca picked up her fork and wiggled it through the sticky-looking cake. She could see Marguerite watching her as she lifted the fork and popped the food into her mouth. She had never tasted anything like it before. She loved it.

"Ohh, this is very good," Rebecca said, digging her fork in again and shoving more in.

"Good. I'm glad you like it," Marguerite said as she filled her mouth. "Do you want to play a game?"

"Hmm." Rebecca nodded with her mouth full.

"What would you like to play?" Marguerite asked as she finished her cake.

"I don't know. Do you have any dolls?" She put her fork down gently on the table, covering her mouth as she let out a small burp. Silence. The three women looked at each other and then at Rebecca. "I am sorry. I don't normally do that. I know it is very unladylike and...I am sorry," she said, feeling her cheeks get hot.

The three women laughed and looked back at Rebecca.

"It is alright Rebecca," Marguerite said with a wide smile. "It is usually Arlene that cannot control herself." Marguerite could barely finish her sentence before Arlene opened her mouth and let out a loud burp that sent giggles around the table.

"So, do you have any dolls?" Rebecca asked again, trying not to look and laugh at Arlene.

"Well, we do have a present for you. Perhaps you would like to open that first?" Arlene suggested as she pushed a package in Rebecca's direction.

"Thank you," Rebecca said, taking the package. She looked at the wrapping, wondering what was the best way to open it.

"Just rip the wrapping off," Arlene encouraged, leaning towards her.

Rebecca smiled as she pulled on the wrapping to reveal a doll. She couldn't believe how beautiful the doll looked. It had milky-white skin and dark hair, just like her. It had dark-blue painted eyes and bright red lips. She held it up as if it were a child.

"She's beautiful. Thank you." She silently wondered what she did to deserve such a beautiful gift.

"The only request we make...it must stay here," Marguerite said. "We will look after it while you are at home and it will be here when you next come to play with us.

Rebecca placed the doll in her lap. "You said before...you said you had powers." She spoke quietly without lifting her eyes from the doll. "Does the doll have powers...is that why I can't take it with me?"

Rebecca glanced up and caught the three women looking at each other. She lifted her head and eyed them over, starting with Marguerite as she waited for an answer.

"We do have special powers. You know now we can fly," Marguerite said. Rebecca's mind started to race. Were the tales of the three witches in the Dead Forest true?

"So you are the witches?" She placed the doll carefully on the table.

"Witches?" Arlene chuckled.

"Yes," she said quietly. "You said you have special powers. Are you able to change?"

The three of them looked at each other before Marguerite lowered her head with a sigh.

"Well? Are you?"

"We will show you how the people outside the forest see us," Marguerite said as she pushed her chair out to stand. "It might be a little scary for you, but remember we are not

going to hurt you.”

Rebecca swallowed hard. Her fingers clutched around her apron that lay in her lap as she watched Marguerite move slowly away from the table. A short gasp escaped her as she watched Marguerite float above her chair and change before her very eyes. Marguerite’s once pale skin had taken on a gray tone while her eyes turned black.

Rebecca squirmed in her chair as Marguerite’s long dark hair transformed into tentacles, writhing down her back and dancing around her head. Marguerite stared at Rebecca who looked frozen in fear.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of Rebecca,” she said, but it was too late. Rebecca threw her head back and released a scream that was enough to make anyone’s blood curdle. She kicked her legs out and pushed back on her chair to get away from the table.

Arlene leaned towards Rebecca and grabbed hold of her wrist. Her scream went up another octave when she came face to face with the new Arlene.

Like Marguerite, Arlene’s skin had also taken on the grayish tone, but her teeth, lips and gums had turned black. Rebecca screamed again as she lashed out, trying to break free of Arlene’s grip. She winced as she scratched herself against Arlene’s talon fingernails. Through all the commotion, Rebecca noticed Elser was the only one who hadn’t changed her form though she hovered above her chair. She screamed with all her might and scrambled to her feet before running to the door.

“No Rebecca! We didn’t mean to scare you,” Marguerite said. “We just wanted to show you the truth.” Rebecca didn’t care. She wanted to get away from there, from them. She ran on the spot as she clawed at the doorknob, trying to get her fingers to grip around it. She screamed as she looked back at the table to see them advancing towards her slowly. In all the chaos she finally managed to grip the handle, but the door wouldn’t budge.

She hurriedly turned and pressed her back against the door as she watched Marguerite and Arlene glide towards her. Her eyes were wide and her whole body trembled.

“I want to go home now!” she bellowed, trying to sound strong. She brought her arms up to cover her face. “You said you would take me home at any time I wanted and I want to go home now!” Her head snapped to and fro as she looked around the room in desperation for another exit.

“But wouldn’t you rather stay here with us?” Marguerite asked.

“I want to be with Papa!” She was trying very hard not to cry.

“Your Papa? Your Papa? He can’t keep you safe. We can keep you safe,” Marguerite said as she glided towards Rebecca.

“Marguerite,” Elser said in a warning tone. It was the first time Rebecca heard Elser speak. As Rebecca continued looking from left to right to find a way out, she saw in the periphery of her vision Elser wave her hand and the door flew open. Rebecca didn’t bother looking back as she dashed towards the door. She scooped her shoes and took off along the path towards the way she thought was home. She heard Marguerite scream. Before she was aware of it, she was no longer on the path. She could barely see a few yards in front of her. It was cold and so dark. She had no idea where she was running but she was going to get away.

She could hear Marguerite calling after her but she didn’t stop. She moved as fast as she could with her arms stretched out in front of her.

“Oh Rebecca, we told you it might be scary. Stop running. You are going to get lost.

Come back and we will talk about it. We don't have time to play now," Marguerite called.

Rebecca ducked and weaved and jumped through the dense darkness. She pressed her hands against the trees to steady herself as she moved through the dense forest. She yelped as her body scraped against trees and branches. She burst into tears as she passed one branch that opened the skin on her forearm, crying out in pain.

She glanced back and could see through her tears that Marguerite was floating effortlessly behind her.

"The cat always catches the mouse Rebecca, it is nature's way," she taunted. Rebecca felt the earth squish under her feet. The forest floor was a bog, slowing her down. Marguerite floated around her and stopped in front. She had transformed back to her normal state. Rebecca looked to either side of her, trying to see another way of escape.

"Now Rebecca, you can't run off like that," Marguerite said in a soothing tone. "You will hurt yourself. The forest is not safe when you don't know the way. Quickly. We must get you back."

Rebecca looked at her one last time before taking off to her left.

She could feel Marguerite bearing down on her. She ran as quickly as she could but was slowed by the boggy and uneven ground. She winced every time her legs hit against the raised tree roots while her thoughts raced out of control as she became more frantic. She could feel Marguerite breathing down her neck as she pushed herself through the trees.

Rebecca jumped over another tree root before stopping dead in her tracks. Marguerite stopped short behind her as Rebecca released another ear-piercing scream. She'd come face to face with the crow that had watched her earlier that night. She stood frozen and stared at its green eyes as it squawked at Marguerite.

"Rebecca. Come to me child," she urged. "Quickly. That crow is dangerous."

Rebecca didn't know what to do. Her instincts told her to run. She didn't want to be near either of them. The second squawk from the crow made her shoot off in the opposite direction.

"Rebecca...no!" Marguerite's words and the crows squawk were the last things Rebecca heard. Her foot caught in the bog and she fell forward, and everything turned black.

Marguerite and the crow both heard the thud of Rebecca's head hitting the tree stump as she fell forward.

As they both lunged towards the child, the crow transformed into human form while Marguerite changed into her evil self. Her hair moved wildly as she lunged at the man.

"No Rutherford. You can't," Marguerite hissed as she swung at him, grabbing hold of his arm, pulling him back.

Rutherford turned and glared at Marguerite with his clear emerald-green eyes. His black clothing made his pale face appear to glow. Of medium height, his frame was slight but solid. They fought to get to Rebecca first. Marguerite knew she was going to lose but she wasn't going to give in easily. She stared at him with her black eyes and thrust her hand out to cast a spell.

As she opened her mouth to speak her fingers curled backwards. She narrowed her eyes to focus harder but Rutherford simply stared at her. His eyes had changed to blood-red and were practically glowing. She knew if she finished the spell with her fingers pointing

back at herself, the spell would cast over her and not Rutherford. A grin spread across his face as he moved towards her. She transformed back into the beautiful Marguerite as he got closer.

"Nice try Marguerite," he hissed. "Your beauty only fools yourself." She winced in pain and tried to catch her breath as he drew closer. She dropped to her knees near Rebecca. She tried to reach out to the unconscious girl with her other hand.

"Don't!" he commanded, towering over her. "You know you are not allowed to be near her."

"I had to," she said, fighting back tears. "I had to know what she looked like. When that man made her walk, I had to know she was safe." She struggled to breathe. She cried out in pain as her fingers continued to curl backwards. "I'm sorry Rutherford!" she cried out. Her fingers relaxed as he looked away from her.

His attention was now focused on Rebecca. The child was lying with her head against the tree stump. He leaned forward and scooped her up in his arms. The girl's nightdress and hair were covered in mud. A small amount of blood had trickled down her face from her head wound.

"What were you doing, bringing her into the forest you foolish woman?" he seethed as he looked around. "Look...they are gathering." Marguerite looked around at the creatures surrounding her as Rutherford held onto Rebecca tightly. He began to move past her.

"No! She needs to live with me," she pleaded. "I need to know she is being looked after. Please...don't take her from me. I couldn't bear to lose my child again."

"Marguerite, you made your choice. You know how this is going to end," he said as he turned his back on her.

She pointed her fingers at him again.

"I wouldn't if you want to see her again," he said in a low tone, not bothering to look back at her.

She lowered her hand and sobbed. "I just want to spend time with her. I want to get to know her. She was taken from me so very young."

Rutherford looked down into Rebecca's face and gently pushed her hair back off her forehead, inspecting the wound before replying. "You made your choice Marguerite. There will be consequences for this. Big consequences," he hissed. "You have ruined all chance of us having a relationship with Rebecca. She will be banished from the forest." The look he bestowed on the child was a loving one. He walked effortlessly through the forest as though she were weightless in his arms, leaving Marguerite in the bog, sobbing. "I will return her to her father," he said. "She will not remember any of this."

Chapter Twelve

Papa searched every inch of the farm and cottage for three days and nights without finding a skerrick of his daughter, or where she could have been. He had very little sleep and even less to eat as he continued looking for Rebecca. He rode the length of the forest edge over and over without success. He looked for possible tracks to show she had been there but there was no sign. He rode to town and asked the villagers if they'd seen her. Several of the farmers came out to the farm and helped him look.

"You don't think she would have gone into the Dead Forest?" one of the farmers asked. Papa shook his head. He didn't know where to begin. He didn't know who to ask for help.

At night he'd sit in his chair, trying to think of where she could possibly be. He'd sit in silence, listening to the wind. He would drift in and out of sleep before waking with a start at the tiniest noise.

He was petrified for her. He cursed himself for going to the Tavern and leaving her alone. He stared at the forest for hours, thinking the worst. He even got down on his knees and prayed for her safe return.

Before the sun came up on the fourth day, he'd saddled the horse and rode out with a plan to check along the forest's edge again. As daylight broke across the sky, he rode slowly along the forest's perimeter, straining to look into its darkness. He couldn't see anything beyond the thick line of trees. He'd spent most of the morning circling the Dead Forest before turning back into the final stretch, heading for the cottage.

His shoulders were slumped under the weight of hopelessness and defeat, and from exhaustion. His head felt light as he shielded his eyes from the blazing sun. He breathed a long sigh of frustration and shook his head. He kicked his horse in the ribs as something in the distance caught his attention. It looked as if something was lying on the ground.

He kicked the horse hard and rode fast to see what it was. As he drew near he could see the outline of a person lying on their side. He pulled the horse up sharply and dismounted. His hands shook; he instinctively knew it was Rebecca. He was relieved and terrified at the same time. He fell onto his knees and rolled her body onto her back. Although he called her name over and over again, she didn't open her eyes. He struggled to contain his tears as he pushed her muddy hair out of her face. She looked pale and as he scooped her up onto his lap, felt how cold she was, her wet nightdress clinging to her body. She looked tiny and frail. He tilted her head back to look at her face. Her lips were blue. Shaking fingers traced over the large bruise on her forehead as he checked over her body. There wasn't any sign of blood or broken bones.

He placed his ear close to her face. A shallow, raspy breath made its way into her lungs. He pulled her close to his chest and briefly hugged her tight before he got to his feet, carrying his precious load. He laid her across the horse as he mounted and carefully turned her towards him. He looked down at her face again. She still hadn't opened her eyes. He urged the horse to run as fast as it could. He needed to get her home.

He looked at her lying on the rug before the fireplace as he stoked the fire. He returned from the kitchen with a washcloth and wiped it gently over her face to remove the mud.

"Why did you go in there?" He thought of the forest. "Have I not told you over and over again, never *ever* go into the Dead Forest?"

He placed a bowl of water near the fire to warm it and dipped the washcloth in it. He tried to warm her. Her hair was hard with mud. He pulled another blanket from her bed and wrapped it around her. He sat on the floor next to her and cradled her head. He pushed her hair from her face and looked at the lump. He couldn't see any kind of wound, just a very large, sore-looking bruise.

He wondered if she hit her head, or did something or someone hit her?

He wiped her face for hours. He could see the color slowly coming back into her skin. The only time he moved from her side was to get more water and to stoke the fire. He watched her intently as she moved her arm.

"Rebecca," he said, rushing to her side. "You're safe now. You are home. Are you hurt?"

She shook her head but didn't open her eyes. She opened her mouth to speak but she couldn't utter a sound.

"What is it?"

She reached her hand out from under the blanket. He wrapped his large hands around hers.

"Just lie here and get some rest. Can I get you anything?"

She shook her head before going limp.

It was several more hours before she woke again. She blinked her eyes open, looking directly at the fire. It was roaring and her skin was prickling from its heat. She rolled her head away and looked for Papa. He was sleeping in his chair across the room. He looked so tired even though he was sleeping. Rebecca rolled her body towards him to sit up. The blanket covering her dropped to the floor and exposed her slightly damp nightdress. She rubbed her hands together as she stood, closing her eyes and reopening them slowly as she tried to remember how she got home. She felt unsteady on her feet as she looked around the cottage. Her fingers traced around the bruise on her forehead as she tried to remember how she injured herself. Papa stirred from his chair and looked at her. It took him a few seconds to register that she was awake and standing.

"How are you feeling?" he said, rushing to her with open arms. "Are you hurt? Can you tell me what happened?" Rebecca shook her head and started to cry. He hugged her tight. "We will find out. Just sit down and try to get your strength back. Have a drink of water. I bet you haven't had anything to eat for the entire time you have been gone. I still cannot quite believe you were gone for four days. Four days..."

She stared at Papa. She'd been missing for four days? She vaguely remembered going into the forest with the three women, but everything after that was a haze. Her mind raced as she tried to fill in the missing time. She took hold of the cup with trembling hands. She sipped the cool liquid as she sat down in his chair. Papa placed the blanket around her shoulders.

"The important thing is you are back and safe," he said huskily. She nodded mutely. She couldn't believe she'd been gone for that long.

"Rebecca, you must tell me everything you can remember." She shook her head. "You

can't remember or you won't tell me?" She nodded then shook her head before breaking down. She was crying because she honestly didn't know. She shook as she clamped her eyes shut.

"Alright. We will talk about it another time." He gently cupped his hand to her cheek. "I just need to know you are not injured."

She shook her head as she raised her hand to her forehead. Again her fingers traced over the bruise. She tried hard to remember what had happened but her mind was foggy.

She sipped again from the cup and tried to run her fingers through her hair. She winced as her fingers snagged in the myriad of knots and pulled them free, grabbing the dirty strands to look at them.

"It's full of mud," Papa said as she looked at the ends. "Try to forget about it for now. We can wash it out in the morning." She shook her head and jumped to her feet. She was determined to wash any evidence of being near the forest off her. She scrambled for the bucket and dunked her head in. Papa set off to fetch more as the water became thick and murky.

Rebecca tugged and scrubbed at her hair, desperate to get it clean. Three buckets of water later and she was satisfied. She sat again in front of the fire to help it dry.

"I think we both need to get some rest," Papa said as she brushed her hair. Rebecca nodded. "I think it's best if you slept in the loft from now on. I will sleep in the kitchen." Rebecca shook her head. She didn't want to take his space away from him. "No. This is what I want you to do, so go." She didn't have the strength to argue with him. She lit a candle and made her way to the ladder.

"Goodnight Rebecca." She hugged him quickly and tightly before making her way to the loft. She put the candle next to the bed and looked around. Her basket of needlepoint waiting there for her. She changed into her dress and got into bed; she would wash the nightdress tomorrow. Her head nestled into the pillow and she gazed out the window.

All she could see was the night sky. The stars twinkled as her eyes lowered. She was at peace. She was home.

Rebecca sat bolt upright in bed. Her clothes clung to her body from perspiration. She clawed and kicked out in front of her but there was nothing there. She had dreamt three witches had transformed into evil beings and then transformed into a huge crow. The crow was soaring above her as she ran through the field towards the cottage. As she looked up to see where it was, it swooped down and knocked her to the ground. It was clawing at her clothes until they were nothing but shreds. Its claws scored the skin on her back as she tried to get to her feet and run. She could feel her blood running from deep wounds. She didn't know why it was attacking her, she just knew she had done something wrong and was desperate to get away.

She waved her arms furiously to try and fight the bird off, but the more she fought the harder it hurt her. When she stopped and put her arms down, the crow stopped attacking and looked her deep in the eyes. Its green eyes seemed familiar to her but she couldn't place why.

She woke herself up when she reached out to protect herself. She looked around the room. She was alone. Her ears strained to hear anything out of the ordinary, but all she could hear was the pounding of her heart and Papa's low snore. She wiped her brow. She was a

mess. Tears were streaming down her face when she didn't even know she had been crying. Although she lay down again, she tried to avoid sleep. Plagued by nightmares, she decided not to let them terrify her again. She could see the stars fading in the night sky as it became brighter.

Rebecca looked over and saw her needlepoint in her basket. Something stuck up in between all her cottons so she reached in and pulled out a material bag. She turned it over in her hands as she looked at it blankly, trying to draw a memory. She remembered Papa placing a bag in her hands, smiling. She opened it and saw the paintbrushes Papa had gifted her with, remembering the joy she felt at receiving them. Then she remembered Papa had left for the night and someone called her name. She closed her eyes and struggled to remember what happened after that.

She pushed the blanket clear of her legs and made her way down from the loft. Papa's feet were hanging over the edge of her bed and she felt bad he wanted to swap beds with her. She walked to the kitchen window as she tried to retrace her steps. She looked at the shotgun above the fireplace and then back at the Dead Forest. She didn't notice Papa watching her from the bed.

"What is it? What's wrong?" She didn't hear his questions or the rising concern in his voice. She stared at the Dead Forest from where the witches called her name. She turned and walked to the front door.

"Rebecca, no!" Papa called. She didn't notice him scrabbling to get his boots on as followed her close behind. She was determined to find out what happened to her. Papa grabbed hold of her hand and walked with her as she walked to the stream and made her way across the log bridge.

"Is this the way you came the other night?" Rebecca didn't reply; she just kept walking. She walked to where she spoke to Marguerite and stopped. She looked at Papa before placing her hand on the same tree. She looked into the forest and took a step forward.

"No Rebecca!" Papa grabbed her around the waist and pulled her back, almost knocking both of them to the ground.

She pushed back at him trying to break free. She struggled and tried to scream. The only sound to come from her lungs was the sound of her breath being forcefully exhaled. She pointed at the ground where she had tried to walk. Papa looked at where she was pointing.

He loosened his grip on her. "What is that?" She looked at it. She recognized it. "Do you know what that is?" Rebecca recalled seeing the doll before but her mind clouded the more she tried to remember. In her eyes the doll was perfect. It was the most perfect doll she had ever seen. It had a full head of dark hair and a milky-white face.

"What is that?" Papa asked, looking at the broken remains of a doll. "It's missing half its head and it looks very unhappy." He wrinkled his nose in revulsion at its disheveled and soiled dress as he picked it up.

Rebecca held out her hands while looking at Papa to give it to her.

"How did you know this was here?" He looked with distaste at the doll before looking at his daughter for a reply.

She shrugged her shoulders. She honestly didn't know it was there. She was just...drawn to it.

"Well, if you can't tell me how you knew it was there, then it has to stay there," he said

as he tossed the doll back into the forest. "You are never to set foot near this forest again. Do you understand me?"

He looked as frightened as she felt. Rebecca nodded as she looked back into the darkness. She didn't know why she felt compelled to go back to the forest but she knew she had to stay away. She felt Papa grab hold of her hand and pull her away.

"Come now Rebecca," he said as she tried to keep up with him. After they made it to the cottage side of the stream Papa stopped walking.

"Is that where you went in?" Worried eyes searched hers.

When she nodded, he set off again towards the cottage. "We have work to do," he said as he guided her towards the cottage door. He took one last look at where Rebecca had taken him before turning his back.

"But first we best get to the village and buy those paints I promised you. Do you think you are up for it?"

His relief was palpable when she grinned at him. As they rode closer to town, Papa told Rebecca he would buy her paints first.

"Then we shall see Mrs. Gwenllian."

Rebecca hated visiting Mrs. Gwenllian. Every time she was sick, Papa would take her to see Mrs. Gwenllian for a miracle cure. Rebecca hated it because she would be poked and examined. Any other time, she spoke to Rebecca like a normal person.

"If you are unable to talk we have to find out why."

Rebecca opened her mouth to speak but still nothing came out. Papa put his arm around her. "We will find out how to make you well again."

Rebecca eyed the pots of paint. She went straight for the black ink. Papa had told her she could have another color and then choose some canvases. She held up the tiny pots to look at the colors in the light. She liked the way the light glinted through the ink. Finally deciding on a pot of red, she carried the two pots as if they were precious jewels. She couldn't wait to get home and start painting for real.

"And how are you today dear? I see someone is going to be doing a spot of painting," the shopkeeper said.

Rebecca looked to Papa and smiled before smiling at the shopkeeper.

"Rebecca's not feeling too well; we are on our way to see Mrs. Gwenllian."

"Oh yes, I did hear about...well...what happened. At least she is safe now," the shopkeeper said, being mindful of his words.

"Yes. Come on Rebecca, we mustn't keep her waiting."

One butterfly in her stomach had turned into hundreds as they walked to Mrs. Gwenllian's home. It was one street back from the main track in the village. She had a wide range of plants growing in the front and in pots. So many pots. They looked like they were pushed and piled up on each other, and then overrun by weed-looking plants.

Papa pushed Rebecca through the door and told her to sit down. Rebecca clutched at her art supplies as she scanned the sick faces of people in pain waiting in the room.

She looked at Papa with wide eyes; she was frightened of what Mrs. Gwenllian would say. She watched the people whose names were called. They shuffled towards a small room where the door was shut quickly behind them. She knew her name was going to be called

soon. Her breathing became hard and fast. Her hands were clammy and she thought she was going to vomit.

"Rebecca?" a short, dumpy lady called.

Papa got to his feet and reached out to take her hand. She looked up at him in desperation and tugged on his shirt towards the door.

"No," he said as he pulled her towards the small room. The door was open but Rebecca couldn't see anyone in there. Papa pushed her in and the door slammed shut behind them. There stood Mrs. Gwenllian. She was one of the shortest women Rebecca had ever met.

She had forgotten how short Mrs. Gwenllian actually was since her last visit. She had been struck down with the measles and was delirious from the virus. She thought she had imagined a dwarf looking over her while she lay in bed. But the dwarf was Mrs. Gwenllian.

"Oh Rebecca. My, you have grown," she said while rubbing her hands together, motioning for her to sit on the table. "What are your symptoms? How did you get that bruise on your head, dear?" She looked expectantly at Rebecca for a reply. Papa cleared his throat.

"She cannot speak."

"Oh, a sore throat...well...let's have a look then." Mrs. Gwenllian clamped her hands around Rebecca's jaw and poked her fat fingers into her flesh.

"No. She can not speak," Papa repeated. "You may have heard Rebecca had been missing for four days in the Dead Forest. Since then she has not uttered a word." He spoke quietly, his words laced with pain.

"Oh my. Are you hurt anywhere child? What on earth were you doing in the Dead Forest?" Mrs. Gwenllian seemed extra concerned. She held out Rebecca's arms and looked at them. She ran her fat fingers over Rebecca's hands looking for any hint of an ailment.

"What happened Rebecca?" She eyed her closely.

Rebecca looked at Papa who was looking at his shoes. She shrugged. Mrs. Gwenllian grabbed hold of Rebecca's chin and pulled down to open her mouth.

"Seems to me, Rebecca's voice has been frightened away," she said as she moved her head from left to right to peer down Rebecca's throat.

Papa looked up from his shoes.

"Yes. In extreme cases where one is frightened so badly, it is the last thing that flees the body before the soul," Mrs. Gwenllian said. "How did you get out of the forest?"

Papa explained how Rebecca was found unconscious on the forest's edge. Mrs. Gwenllian shook her head.

"You are a miracle child. I have seen full-grown men go into that forest and never see the light of day again. Yet you...you—a child. You come out with nothing more than scratches and a lost voice. You are very, very lucky." Mrs. Gwenllian shook her head in disbelief.

"What can you do for her?" Papa wanted her to be healthy and happy again.

"All you can do is wait. When the soul is settled...that's when her voice will return." Mrs. Gwenllian smiled at Rebecca and grasped her hands in her own. "You must fill you life with happiness. You must get out in the sunshine and play in the fields. Do things that bring a smile to your face and to others." Mrs. Gwenllian looked at Papa. "You will know when the soul is settled. It will be a great day for all."

Rebecca wriggled off the table and headed for the door. Papa told her to wait outside

while he spoke with Mrs. Gwenllian.

Mrs. Gwenllian slammed the door shut as Rebecca left the room. She waddled to Papa and stood near his feet.

"Are you sure that is all that happened?" She eyed him critically.

"I do not know." He shook his head.

"Well something has frightened her good," Mrs. Gwenllian said as she shoved her hands on her hips. "She is a strong child with a very good nature. What on earth was she doing in the Dead Forest?" Papa shook his head again. "If you found her in that state, it means someone was watching over her. She could not have made it out of the forest by herself. She is very, very lucky. You must keep an eye on her. Make sure she is not drawn in there again. We both know the fate of Marguerite." Mrs. Gwenllian stepped back as Papa raised his head. His eyes looked like they were filled with rage.

"Marguerite is dead," he said in a stern, low voice.

"Yes, but her soul is not," Mrs. Gwenllian said. "I know it is very hard for you, but you must work hard to prevent Rebecca from receiving the same fate. If you ever need help...you know I am always here for you."

Mrs. Gwenllian stepped back and opened the door for Papa.

Rebecca resisted the temptation to pick the herbs growing in the front yard of Mrs. Gwenllian's home. She was curious to see what they smelled like but she feared getting caught. She clutched her painting supplies again as she waited for Papa. A door slammed shut and knew Papa would be outside with her soon.

She smiled at Papa as he walked towards her. He smiled back at her. "Let us go home."

Chapter Six

The sun felt good on their backs but the chill in the wind kept them from being warm. Papa tried to make small talk until they neared the Dead Forest. He continued the remainder of the journey in silence. Rebecca stalwartly stared straight ahead; she wouldn't allow herself to look at the forest. When they had returned to the cottage, Papa finally spoke again, telling Rebecca he wanted her to work inside while he tended to the horses.

Rebecca prepared a meal for them, but Papa kept working. She walked to the stables. He didn't even realize she was there until she tapped him on the back. He nearly fell over.

Papa said, "Oh. You frightened me." He dropped the handful of straw he held as he tried to calm himself. "What are you doing outside?" Rebecca made a gesture of spooning food into her mouth. "Oh. Give me a moment."

Rebecca tried to look past him. She could see a pair of Papa's old pants that he'd poorly sewn together. He was stuffing the pants full of straw.

"It's for the garden. Too many crows are getting into our crops." He dusted his hands on his pants and walked towards her. "I'll be in soon. I just need to finish this."

He gently grabbed Rebecca by the shoulders, turned her around and pushed her towards the cottage before turning his attention back to his project.

He wriggled the pants to tuck over the shirt that was also stuffed. She watched him roll the straw man over and work a pole up the back of its shirt. She turned away and walked towards the cottage just as silently as she had walked to Papa's work shed.

She watched from the kitchen window as he carried the straw man to the edge of their property. He had faced it towards the Dead Forest; its arms were strung out wide. Rebecca didn't like it. It looked like a man had been strung to the cross. She shuddered at the thought and turned her back.

"It is called a scarecrow," Papa said as he spooned his food in. "It's like the farmer never leaves the field. He is always there to keep an eye on his crops and stops the birds from eating everything." Rebecca nodded. She still didn't like it. "Can you work inside while I work on our crops?" Again she nodded. She knew she would not be allowed to work outside for a long time.

"You can start some of your paintings." She smiled. She was keen to start painting but wasn't sure what to start with. He left to continue working with his scarecrow as she cleared away the remnants of their meal.

"I have another present for you." Papa smiled as he reached into his pocket and pulled out three bottles of ink, placing them on the table. "I don't know what you were going to paint with only red and black."

She smiled broadly as she picked up the pot of green ink, followed by the yellow and then the blue. "Now you can start painting your masterpieces. But remember, the first one is for me."

She nodded feverishly as she clutched the paints. She ran around the table and hugged Papa tightly before running to get her brushes and returning. She waited for Papa to finish

eating their afternoon tea before clearing the table and laying out her supplies.

She thought she was the luckiest girl in the world as she looked intently at each brush before placing them on the table. She had three brushes, the paints and canvases to work with.

She watched Papa make his way out of the cottage. She wanted to make a special painting for him.

She dipped the brush in the pot and stared at the blank canvas. She let the paintbrush glide as she watched the paint bleed across the page. She swiped the brush again. She felt calm as she watched the picture form before her eyes. She didn't know what she was going to paint; she wanted to let the picture come to her. She looked at the swirls and could see the stream that passed through their property. She changed brushes and dipped it into the blue paint. She would stop and ponder what she could add to the painting, but within minutes she had a picture she was happy with. She laid it down to dry and then busied herself by cleaning the brushes.

She stood from the table to collect a small container and glanced outside the kitchen window. She didn't realize how dark it had become. Icy-gray clouds filled the sky. She watched Papa pick the last of the crop. She had worked hard to preserve as much food as possible. It was going to be a good winter. They'd stored enough to get them through the cold months and well into spring.

She turned and reached for the candle on the kitchen table and placed the tip into the fire. She brought her hand around to cover the small flame as she replaced it on the table to prepare dinner. Something about the flame mesmerized her. She couldn't pull her attention away. Her eyes glazed over as she focused on the flame, not really aware that it had grown. Rebecca forced herself to blink and the flame died down. She looked out the window before turning her attention back to the flame of the candle. The small flicker grew into a mighty fire as she stared at it. The only thing to pull her attention away was her father calling her.

"What is going on in here Rebecca?" He reached for a cup of water to douse the flame. Smoke plumed and the crackle of hot wax and flame being flicked with water snapped her out of her trance. "How did this happen? What were you doing?" Papa walked around the table to her side. "What happened?" She simply shrugged. She honestly didn't know.

It would be three years before Rebecca spoke again. While visiting Mrs. Gwenllian, the woman presented her with a bound book and encouraged her to keep a journal. She would paint and draw pictures in the journal alongside her thoughts. Over time Papa felt she could do more activities outside the house, but he watched over her constantly.

Rebecca had started to blossom into a beautiful young woman. Her body was strong from working on the farm while her hair hung down near her waist. Her blue-green eyes glinted against her skin, which had a healthy glow from fresh air, fruit and vegetables. Mrs. Gwenllian had made weekly visits to check on her. She smiled as Mrs. Gwenllian got out of her cart. It was specially made for her size and looked to be a quarter the size of a normal cart. She would smile and wave her arms as she waddled towards her patient.

"Hello dear. How are you feeling today?" She asked the same question every time.

Rebecca could only smile and nod. She would walk with Mrs. Gwenllian to the cottage where the woman would sit and talk with both her and Papa.

"Rebecca, are these your latest paintings?" she asked as she looked through her

collection. Nodding, Rebecca reached over to pour her a cup of tea. "Have you been adding to your journal like I told you dear?" she asked quietly before seeing Papa.

"Hello Mrs. Gwenllian. Welcome," Papa said as he entered the cottage, his broad shoulders almost filling the doorway.

"Always a pleasure to see you, Phillip." Mrs. Gwenllian smiled.

"Rebecca, why don't you go and paint while we talk," Papa said as Mrs. Gwenllian took her seat.

Rebecca knew they would be talking about her but she didn't protest. She'd gladly get away from their endless chatter. She scooped up her brushes and headed for the door. Papa watched her from the kitchen window.

"How is she really?" Mrs. Gwenllian asked as settled herself at the table.

"I don't know," Papa said with a sigh. "She sits outside and would paint well into the night if I didn't go out and get her. Rebecca's in her own world when she paints. At times I find her staring at the Dead Forest. She looks like she's looking off into nothing but something in there has still got her full attention. She still hasn't spoken."

"Does she do anything on her own?" Mrs. Gwenllian asked as reached for her cup of tea.

"No. She can go outside like this when I am near, but I keep watch over her." Papa took a sip from his cup as he looked over the rim, keeping an eye on Rebecca.

"You can't protect her forever. She needs to be around others," Mrs. Gwenllian said as Papa pulled himself away from the window. "Her soul has been unsettled for a very long time. We need to get the old Rebecca back. We both know she's in there somewhere. We need to find that part of her and overcome whatever happened to her on that night. We must remain positive."

"Do you suggest I tell her about Marguerite?" Papa said in a low voice.

Mrs. Gwenllian put her cup down. "No. You have to remain positive. Telling her about Marguerite might seal the end. Rebecca is a young woman now. She has come this far without her mother."

"Yes, but she is going to find out the truth eventually. I'd rather she hear it from me when it happens." Papa moved back to the window.

"When what happens, Phillip?" Mrs. Gwenllian peered at him over her cup.

Mrs. Gwenllian didn't say goodbye. Rebecca looked up from her painting to see Mrs. Gwenllian bustling into her cart. Normally she would wave her goodbye but she seemed in a hurry. Papa came out and waved Rebecca back to the cottage. Rebecca carried her brushes and painting carefully with her.

"Rebecca. I need to talk to you." She slowed down. She knew it was bad news from his tone.

"I need you to run the stall at the market on Sunday," he said. "I have to go to the next town to look at some crops. I'm thinking we might plant wheat next year. This is the only day the farmer is free. Do you think you can do it?"

She wasn't sure. She'd seen these people every week and they knew she didn't speak, but if Papa was asking her to do something on her own, she felt she should at least try. She nodded slowly. She wasn't sure if he was telling her the truth, but she knew she could handle

the market stand by herself. He'd left her alone many times while he bought their supplies for the week.

"Great. Mrs. Gwenllian said to say goodbye. She had an appointment to attend to."

Papa looked away from her. "Tomorrow I have to ride out. I'm staying at the Tavern in Crolston, and when I finish discussing the matter with the farmer I will be back, but not in time for the market. Will you be able to load up the cart by yourself?"

Rebecca nodded. She'd done it many times before.

"Well...I will go and do as much as I can for you today and then I will have to get myself ready to go," Papa said, putting his cup down.

She nodded as she too started to prepare her paintings to be sold.

She waved Papa off. The darkness of night prevented her from seeing him for long. She still had several hours before she needed to be in town for the market. She returned to the fire and continued painting while she waited for time to pass.

As the sky began to lighten, Rebecca loaded her paintings in the back of the cart and carefully secured them. She'd worked too hard, desperately needing the money for more supplies, to have them damaged.

Her paintings had proved to be quite popular with many villagers coming to see her latest works, but they never turned into customers. Money had always been tight. It was the richer people passing through who purchased her paintings. They paid enough to allow her to purchase more supplies and a few items for Papa. She'd hoped both the produce and her crafts would sell well today. She stepped up into the cart and took hold of the reins. She slapped the reins several times and glanced back at the cottage. She wondered how the villagers were going to treat her. She didn't care. They were going to be the way they always were. It would give them something else to gossip about, she concluded. She'd turned the bend in the road near the oak tree when a man walked out from the forest and directly into her path. She yanked hard on the reins as the cart continued to hurtle forward.

She didn't have time to brace her feet on the kickboard; the cart continued to move as the horse stopped. The man looked up as the cart started to jackknife and lift off the ground. Rebecca stood as she tried to balance her weight at the back of the cart to bring it back down while struggling to hold onto the reins. The cart hit the ground with a heavy thud and sent produce flying in all directions. Rebecca bounced around on the seat. She knew if the horse and cart were to hit him, he would be killed.

Everything happened so fast and was now at a stand still. Her legs shook as she climbed down from the cart and looked at the man. He was the strangest looking man she'd seen. The horse tried to take off but Rebecca held the reins tight.

Rebecca tried to speak but again, nothing came from her mouth. She couldn't help but look into his eyes. They were the most amazing eyes she'd ever seen. She felt she'd seen them before too, but not in a scary way. He was dressed from head to toe in black and looked only several years older than her. He was much taller than her but had a slight frame. She couldn't help but notice how pale his skin was as he looked back at her.

"I am sorry," the young man said. "Are you alright?"

Rebecca nodded as she looked him over. She struggled to keep hold of the reins as she moved to try and calm the horse. She was frightened the strange man could have been

injured.

"Oh, your produce has come from your cart. I am so sorry," he said as he started collecting the produce from the ground.

Rebecca looked at the produce scattered along the trackside. She secured the reins quickly before she ran to the back of the cart to check her paintings. They were lying flat in the cart. She lifted them gently. Not a mark. She jumped when the young man moved behind her.

"Did you paint those?" Rebecca nodded. "Don't you speak?"

She turned to face him and shook her head. She didn't feel embarrassed about admitting she couldn't talk. Some days she was glad she couldn't talk.

"I wish I didn't have to speak some days," he said as he started again to pick up the produce. "I am very sorry about this. I will pay you for any damaged stock. My father is a very wealthy man and he would love your paintings."

He placed the collected produce in the cart and moved towards the paintings. "You really did paint these yourself?" Rebecca nodded again. The horse stomped the ground with his hoof and tried to move away.

"Please let me help you and then you can go on your way."

Rebecca and the young man collected most of the produce from the trackside. A large portion of it had been damaged and was not saleable.

"Are you sure you are all right?" he asked again as she got into the cart. Rebecca nodded and pointed to him.

"Yes. I am fine. My thoughts run away with my mind sometimes and I forget to look where I am going. I was a million miles away when I walked onto the track."

Rebecca understood exactly where he was coming from. She pointed to him again and then towards the town.

"Oh no. I will head back to the house and get our cart," he said. "But I do feel awful for causing you this trouble. Hold onto those paintings. I will be in town by the time you set up and buy them from you."

True to his word, by the time Rebecca had set up her stall the young man was handing over the money.

"These truly are lovely. You have a great talent," he said. "I was telling my father about your work and he would like to know if you are willing to paint for him. He would like to buy at least one of your paintings each week if you are able to keep up with the demand. He will pay you handsomely for it."

Rebecca looked him over. She was delighted. She nodded her head with enthusiasm and smiled.

"Now as for the damaged produce," he said as he dug his hand into his pocket again.

He removed a small bag and looked around before passing it to her.

"You'd want to be careful carrying that sort of money on you when you are traveling alone. I insist on traveling back with you."

Rebecca took the small bag and waved her hands at him to say his chaperoning was not necessary.

"No. I insist," he said as Rebecca stuffed the small bag of coins into her apron.

Although the remaining produce sold quickly, Rebecca couldn't wait to go to the art

and craft supply store. As she loaded the baskets into the cart, she carefully concealed the small bag before opening it. It was full of gold and silver coins. She'd never seen so many coins, let alone had them in her possession. She took five of the gold coins and a handful of the silver ones and placed them in her apron before packing the bag away safely. She rode to craft shop and bought the canvases and paper she needed.

"Someone's had a good day at market," the shopkeeper said, bundling her purchases. Rebecca felt elated. She'd sold all her paintings, much to the disgust of the villagers who missed out on having a look at them. "You're not using all the money from today's market, are you?" the shopkeeper asked as his smile faded. "Your Papa won't come in and try to take all this back, will he?" Rebecca smiled and shook her head. Her smile widened when she put the coins on the counter. Picking up her parcel, she made her way to the door. She'd never felt so happy. "So you will be returning next week, Rebecca?" the shopkeeper called out to her before she left the shop.

Already at the door, she turned around and nodded emphatically before turning again and leaving. True to his word once again, the young man was waiting by her cart as she placed the art supplies in the back.

"Buying for next week?" he asked as he helped her load her supplies into the cart.

She smiled again and nodded.

"In all the excitement of this morning, I didn't even tell you my name. I'm Cedric." He reached out for her hand.

Rebecca was always hesitant to give out her hand. They were never clean. If it wasn't dirt that stained them, it was ink. She tentatively reached out her hand and nodded towards him.

"I saw your signature on your paintings. May I say it's been a real pleasure to meet you Rebecca," he said as he shook her hand.

She felt her cheeks burn. "You are very talented. Where do you get your inspiration?" She looked at him shyly. "Oh, I'm sorry. That was very thoughtless of me." He didn't know where to look.

She worked up the courage to smile and reached out to get his attention. She splayed her hand out and pointed to all around. She pointed to the sky. She pointed to the horse. She pointed to the town. She pointed to her head. "Ahh, you take your inspiration from everywhere? That's amazing." He was grinning now.

She smiled again and climbed into the cart.

"Would you like me to accompany you?"

She shook her head. "It is no trouble," he persisted as she unraveled the reins. "It's on the way home for me too. My horse and cart are just on the edge of town. We are going that way anything. It would be greatly appreciated."

Rebecca looked at him. She didn't know of any homes or people living near where she'd met him. She moved over and patted the seat. Cedric smirked as he placed his paintings on the back of the cart and climbed up next to her. She could see villagers stop mid-step to watch her as she rode through town. She held her head high. She didn't care what they thought.

"When I spoke to my father he said he'd be happy to buy whatever you paint, so now you can paint whatever you feel like painting."

She nodded; she knew what she wanted to paint already. She wanted to paint a picture of Cedric. She wanted to capture his eyes.

A short time later Cedric directed her to drop him off just ahead. "I'd like to walk the rest of the way home. The horse and cart are just over that small rise there," he said as they passed where they met earlier that day. "Well, it was very nice to meet you Rebecca. Remember, paint what you want to paint and I will see you next week."

Rebecca looked back to see him watching her as she headed towards the farm.

She was so excited about her new inks that she raced them inside and stoked the fire before unloading the baskets and tending to the horse.

She couldn't stop smiling as she sat down with her inks in front of the fireplace. She counted out the money from the small sack and divided it into three mounds. She hid one in her room, one in the kitchen and put the money from the produce in another container for Papa.

She didn't notice the sun had set or that she hadn't eaten all day. The only thing that drew her back from her paintings was the sound of Papa's horse. She hadn't prepared dinner she was so preoccupied with her art. She pushed her paintings to one side as she raced to prepare something to eat for Papa.

"Hello my darling child," he said with his arms out wide for a hug. "How did you go?"

Rebecca poked her head from around the corner. She jiggled the small container for him before running into his arms. The clinking of the coins made him smile.

"Well done. How much do we have left over?" She held her hands out. "Really? Well done. What about your paintings?"

She couldn't fight the smile from taking over her face. It did more than convey the good news to Papa.

"Well, well, well. This is reason to celebrate. What are we having for supper?" She watched Papa kick his boots off at the door before she looked down at the floor. "You've been painting again, haven't you?" She nodded. Once she'd started painting, she forgot about everything else. "That's alright. You paint and I'll make our dinner," he said as he rubbed his hands together.

She pointed to him, indicating her curiosity of how he went. "Oh, the farmer seems very interested, but it is a lot of work for just two people Rebecca," he said as he walked to the kitchen. "I will think about it some more, but if we did decide to produce wheat, it would only be on a small scale."

Rebecca nodded. It would be another thing for them to pour their time into and take her away from her painting.

Although she wanted to paint and indeed, Papa had encouraged her to do so, she still felt bad about forgetting to prepare dinner and decided to help him.

"I'm very proud of what you have done today," he said as they worked together. "You did that all by yourself and sold everything. That's never happened to me before. I'm so proud of you."

After dinner she continued working on her paintings long into the night before she'd reached the point where if she carried on she would ruin her work. She'd been able to convince Papa to let her sleep back in her room so she could work on her paintings and space them out without the worry of waking him. She knew she would have to work on the

painting of Cedric in secret. She didn't want to be questioned by Papa. She carefully covered the painting after she added the final touches for the night and placed it under her bed.

She went to sleep thinking of the paintings she would like to create for her new buyer. She didn't tell Papa about the extra money because he would ask too many questions. Besides, what could it hurt having a little money in reserve for emergencies? For the first time in a long, long time, Rebecca went to sleep with a smile on her face.

Chapter Seven

"Since you did so well at the market, would you like me to help you next week or do you think you can handle it on your own?" Rebecca pointed to herself and nodded with a smile. "Well, if you come back every week with nothing left to sell, then I'm more than happy to let you run the stall," he said before setting off to work in the vegetable patch.

Rebecca watched him walk away from the cottage before going to her bed to pull out her painting of Cedric. She looked at it critically. She was very impressed with only an hour's worth of work.

The painting showed him walking along the track of where they met. He was facing towards her; his eyes could be seen clearly even though he was in the distance. He was wearing his dark clothes. The more she looked at the painting, the more he seemed to be a shadow of himself. Everything around him was green and lush; he stood out but faded into the background at the same time.

She didn't know how she was going to fix it. She replaced the painting under her bed and went outside to start working on a painting of the farm for Papa. She painted the cottage in the foreground. She painted the vegetable patch and the corral. She painted a wheat paddock so it blocked out most of the Dead Forest. She only painted the tops of the trees in the forest before adding in her blue sky. Again, in only an hour, she had created another masterpiece.

Her skill for painting had increased so much she could have a picture painted in a few brushstrokes. As she painted she thought hard about the Cedric painting. How could she improve it? What was missing? She didn't realize Papa had walked behind her until he spoke to her after she had lifted her brush from the canvas.

"My, that is beautiful," he said as his eyes widened in awe and appreciation. "Your talent never ceases to amaze me. Well, I'm going to finish working in the vegetable patch. I came only to get a drink and to have a small rest. The soil needs to be turned before it freezes."

Rebecca knew it was a big job to sod the soil, so she packed away her paintings and went to help him.

She picked up the hoe and jammed it down into the ground. Working with the horse was a skill. Being able to control the beast as well as the metal fork that spiked into the ground took more strength than she had. She watched her father working hard in the field as she stabbed at the ground. She reached over and pulled out a few weeds before noticing a crow sitting on the fence post. It was watching her intently as she worked. She slowly straightened her back as Papa turned the horse and started to make his way back through the patch. She stood there mesmerized and only looked away when she heard her father yelling. She turned to see him running towards her.

"Shoo! Shoo!" Rebecca jerked when she heard Papa yelling and watched the crow take off. "Why weren't you shooing it away? If you let them sit there, they will get comfortable and then when we have our crops in they will eat them." Papa was almost out of breath as he grabbed hold of her shoulders. He gasped for air as his eyes bulged. She grabbed hold of his

hands as he fell to his knees in the dirt. He clutched his stomach and lurched forward, bracing his arms in front of him and coughed. She didn't know what to do. She knelt with him to look at his face. He was sweating and his skin was flushed. She wiped his brow as he continued to gasp for air.

"I am alright," he said as she helped him to his feet.

She wrapped his arm around her shoulder as she helped him across the farm. He flopped into his chair once inside the cottage. He made a raspy noise as he desperately tried to suck air into his lungs.

"It just caught me by surprise. I hate those damned crows," he puffed. "They are the bearers of awful news. They only hang around to take the last piece of you. If you see a crow around here Rebecca, you have my permission to shoot it."

She knew she wasn't going to shoot any crows but she nodded anyway. She collected a cup of water for him. She headed back to the door to go and get the horse.

"Remember. No crows on this farm," he said again with a stern voice.

Rebecca couldn't help but look at the Dead Forest as she walked back to the field to fetch the horse. She calmed the horse first before walking alongside it to gather the reins. The horse looked back at her as she stepped behind the hoe. She thought she'd give it a go. She half feared she would end up impaled on the hoe. She gave the horse a gentle slap with the reins. The horse started up and nearly pulled the reins from her hands, but she dug her feet into the ground and held on. The hoe moved a little into the earth. She slapped again. This time it lunged through the dirt.

To finish what Papa had started didn't take her long at all. She uncoupled the hoe and walked towards the horse. As she ran her hand along its back, its ears pricked up and pointed back. It reared its head and stomped the ground. Rebecca couldn't let go of the reins. The horse reared up, pulling her from the ground. She landed hard as she struggled to control the horse. She looked around and tried to see what was spooking it. She saw another crow on the fence post. The horse didn't rear the last time; it clearly didn't like this crow. Rebecca let go of the reins and ran towards the crow. She waved her arms but the bird would not budge. She reached to the ground and picked up a clump of dirt. She missed it so fired another clump. It hopped out of the way to miss being hit but wouldn't fly away. Rebecca stopped throwing the clumps of dirt. She simply walked towards it. She stared at the crow. Only when she was a short distance away did the crow fly away.

She watched it fly into the Dead Forest as the horse made its way back to her. She led the horse back into its yard before heading back to the cottage. She found Papa still in the chair. He looked like he was sleeping. She thought everything was fine until the small rug squelched when she walked on it. She looked to see Papa's water cup had fallen from his grip and spilled on the floor. She reached out and touched his arm. It was cold. She ran her hands along his arms to his head. She cupped his head in her hands and tilted his head up towards her. He felt cold. She grabbed his shoulders and shook him hard. His mouth dropped open as he struggled to open his eyes. Rebecca pressed her head against his chest to listen for his heart. She could only hear him struggling to breath.

She frantically pushed his head back as he struggled to lift his arm. Once again, she didn't know what to do. She ran to the corral, grabbed the tackle and quickly saddled the horse before she set off to fetch Mrs. Gwenllian. Rebecca kicked the horse hard as she

clenched her thighs to stay on. She pushed the horse to run at a full gallop. Everything was a blur. She had to get to Mrs. Gwenllian and bring her back to Papa.

Papa opened his eyes. Before him stood a man dressed in black. He struggled to speak.

"I knew you were near. I have felt you drawing nearer by the day Rutherford," Papa said, trying to focus.

"Yes Phillip. How are you feeling? You feel tense through the chest, yes?" Rutherford glided towards Papa, stopping inches from his face. Papa struggled to sit up in his chair as his chest tightened again.

"Sit. Relax. Today is not the day you fear Phillip," Rutherford said. "I have heard a rumor that you are thinking of moving. Moving to the next town. That wouldn't be true now, would it? You wouldn't be thinking of going back on our deal, would you? You do know the consequences of that, or do I need to remind you?"

Papa stared at Rutherford who was now running his fingers over Rebecca's paintings. "She has an amazing talent, doesn't she?" he said, turning back to Papa.

"Don't you touch her things," Papa spat. "I went to see a man about wheat. If you sent your spies to watch over me, make sure they report back to you with the correct information Rutherford. And keep your crows off my land."

"*Our* land," Rutherford corrected as he turned his back to Phillip. "You seem to forget this land is being lent to you. It's quite a profitable patch of land. I am here purely to make sure my investments are coming along well. Just a neighborly visit if you like."

Papa tried to sit up in his chair but his arms and legs felt weighted.

"Well, you sent your spies. That should be enough," Papa said. "Everything is still in order – now leave."

Rutherford turned to look at him. "You know I would be within my rights to ask for my payment now." Papa flinched at the thought of his words coming true. "But I won't," Rutherford seethed. "For her sake." He tilted his head to listen to something that Papa could not hear. "Remember our deal Phillip. Not a word to her. You know what the consequences are."

Papa watched Rutherford leave the cottage as the sound of horses grew louder. He could hear two horses. Rebecca reappeared at the door followed shortly by Mrs. Gwenllian. Papa looked at his beloved daughter. She had tears streaming down her face as she took hold of his hand. He smiled at her, trying to reassure her he was okay.

Mrs. Gwenllian bustled her way to his side.

"Can you hear me Phillip?" she asked. "What happened? The poor dear practically carried me to my cart to get me to come here," she said as she pulled his eyes open wide. She grabbed hold of his jaw to look into his mouth and throat. "You are running a temperature. Can you squeeze my hands?" His hands enveloped her tiny podgy hands and squeezed them tight. She pressed her head to his chest and told him to breathe in.

"Well, there's nothing wrong with your heart now. You might have had a bit of a scare but you seem to be fine now. Can you tell me what happened? Rebecca, can you get me some more water?"

Mrs. Gwenllian watched Rebecca set off to collect the water before turning her attention back to Papa.

"Tell me what happened Phillip." Papa looked at the ground before taking a deep breath. "He was here, wasn't he? I can feel it." She looked around the room as if his presence was still there.

"Quickly, you must tell me before Rebecca comes back."

"He said he was here to check up on things," Papa said in a low voice. "I saw the crow sitting on the fence post and Rebecca just stared at it. I ran to get it to go away. I got so scared. I thought today was going to be the end. The day I have feared for so long is looming closer and there's nothing I can do about it."

Mrs. Gwenllian was about to ask another question when Rebecca reappeared with a bucket of water. She placed it down as she looked at Papa.

"I'm sorry Rebecca. I didn't mean to scare you," he said, reaching out to her. Rebecca burst into tears.

Mrs. Gwenllian walked over to her and hugged her. "Come now dear. He's fine," she said. "He's just doing a little too much in the field. You're not a strapping young man any more Phillip. Your heart is not as strong as it used to be." Mrs. Gwenllian looked at him hard. "I think you should come and see me tomorrow and I can check you over properly," she said. He knew she wanted to speak more about what had happened with Rutherford.

"Yes. Tomorrow. Tomorrow I will come and see you. I am just so tired now," Papa said, giving Rebecca's hand a squeeze.

"Alright then. I will see you early in the morning please. Rebecca? Are you all right? Is there anything else I can help with?"

Rebecca shook her head before running to her bed.

Rebecca sought to find a gold coin before walking Mrs. Gwenllian to her cart.

"Oh Rebecca. It must have been such a fright for you," she said as she stepped into her cart. "I would like for you to come and see me too. We can just sit and spend some time together. You can show me how you do your painting. I do admire your work." Rebecca reached out and pushed the gold coin into her hand. "Oh no." She tried to push the coin back into Rebecca's hands. "Knowing that both of you are well is payment enough for me today. But please, I would like to spend time with you. Please come and see me."

Rebecca nodded. Her mind was clouded with the many things she wanted to do for her father to make sure he was comfortable.

She sobbed as she walked back to the cottage, but she wiped her tears away before entering. She didn't want him to worry about her. She walked over to him and hugged him.

"I am fine. I am more worried about you," he said. "You must have ridden like the wind to get Mrs. Gwenllian to move her big bottom." He chuckled as she held onto him tightly. "Maybe some of the things she says are true. We can't keep doing the things we have been and take on a new crop. I think we should continue with just what we have. Your paintings are selling well. We have to think hard about what we are going to do from now on."

His voice was cold to Rebecca. She could tell he was distracted by something.

"I'm going to leave that field; I will finish it off tomorrow. I think I'll just go to bed now," he said.

Rebecca was reluctant to let go of him. She watched him slowly climb to his loft before

she went out to put the horse in its yard again.

She was relieved nothing serious had happened to him. To calm her mind she set herself the task of cleaning her brushes and continuing on with her painting. It gave her time to think about what Papa had said about the farm. Both she and Papa had worked hard for what they had.

She knew they could make anything work if they put their minds to it. A few hours later, she too crawled into bed but was unable to sleep. She couldn't get the image of him gasping for breath out of her mind. She rolled on her side to try and block the flashing images.

Rebecca rose early and prepared breakfast for Papa. She went out and prepared his horse while she waited for him to rise then worked on getting the last of the vegetable patch turned. Papa walked over to her working in the patch.

"I was going to do that today," he said as he leaned on the fence. "You are too good to me Rebecca. What am I going to do without you?"

She looked at him. He had a puzzled look on his face. He looked at the Dead Forest before saying he was going to see Mrs. Gwenllian.

Rebecca nodded as she watched him walk to the corral; she couldn't help but notice the four crows soaring in the sky over the cottage. She watched Papa trot down the track towards the village. She'd have to work fast. She wanted to finish the vegetable patch before he returned, and she wanted to put the final touches on her paintings and package them for sale.

She wanted to have all the chores done so Papa could take it easy when he returned. She wondered what Papa and Mrs. Gwenllian were going to talk about.

"So you're sure Rebecca knows nothing about any of this?" Mrs. Gwenllian shook her head, trying to make sense of what Papa had just told her.

"Not that I am aware of," Papa said. "I think she might have come close to him when she went missing in the forest. I know he had something to do with it but he would never admit it. I can never find him when I need to speak to him. He always finds me though. I could feel his presence on the farm yesterday it was so strong. I don't know how Rebecca is going to escape it." His voice quavered as he spoke. "It's going to be the end of her. Once she finds out the truth, she will never forgive me."

"She's a very strong girl." Mrs. Gwenllian shuffled papers on her desk, uncomfortable with what she was about to say. "She dreams of him. She showed me her journal and a picture she drew. She named him 'the faceless man' because in her dreams he is faceless. I am telling you this so you know what is going on, but you must never admit that you know or tell Rutherford."

Papa looked at her. "She dreams of him?"

"Sometimes he drifts into her dreams like he's watching over her and at other times he frightens her." Mrs. Gwenllian nodded. "She doesn't know what her dreams mean, but she is aware of this person. She is strong; she has come through every challenge that has been thrown at her. She will be able to fight him if he tries anything. We need to be positive and make sure she has the tools to work her way through this impending doom. We will both have to keep an eye on her. Now. You don't know this and you certainly never heard it from me, but some villagers say they saw Rebecca riding with a very strange-looking man. Only a

few have seen him around. They say he claims to live on the northern side of town. Have you heard anything?"

Papa shook his head. "I didn't know about this new man in town; I haven't heard anything. My daughter won't speak. What if Rutherford comes for her or me? How is she supposed to defend herself? It's best if I don't mention it to her, but I can't keep watch over her all the time. I just have to figure out a way."

"We will think of a solution."

"I find myself thinking more and more about it everyday," Papa said. "We just need to think harder and better than Rutherford."

Chapter Eight

Rebecca was wrapping the last of her paintings as Papa returned. She'd completed four pictures and had started on another three. Her body was weary from her morning chores. She'd done them as quickly as she could and had already started preparing the next two meals. She bundled up a painting she had started to take to Mrs. Gwenllian. She wanted to have her lunch and then head to town to meet her.

"Ride carefully," Papa called. "And don't be too late getting home. I want you back before mid-afternoon."

Rebecca didn't get a chance to tie her horse up before Mrs. Gwenllian was by her side.

"Hello again dear. Are you feeling better today? An awful, awful shock to see your father like you did dear," she said as she hustled Rebecca into her house. "Come, come and have a cup of tea."

"So, you have been dreaming of him again?" Mrs. Gwenllian peered over her teacup. Rebecca nodded.

"Has he been frightening you in those dreams dear?" She nodded and shook her head. "Both?" She nodded again.

"Are you able to wake yourself from these dreams?" She nodded and then pointed to her paintings.

"Ahh, so you paint your dreams." Mrs. Gwenllian nodded as she moved towards them. "Well, I used to believe that what happens in your dreams is a sign of what is meant to come in your life, but I don't believe that anymore. You make things happen in your life. The mind is just trying to sort things out. Don't you worry about those dreams."

Rebecca eyed her skeptically. This was a woman who believed in everything. "You just keep doing your painting and looking after your father," she said. "You'd better be off home then. Give this to your Papa as soon as you get home."

She looked at the small bottle of clear liquid Mrs. Gwenllian thrust into her hands as she was herded to the door. She returned to the cart and carefully lifted the painting for Mrs. Gwenllian.

"Oh, is this for me my dear? Well, thank you. I want you to explain it to me the next time you visit. I would like to see you in the next couple of days." Mrs. Gwenllian smiled as she grabbed hold of the painting.

Rebecca nodded and smiled at her holding the paintings.

"I will see you next time dear," she said as she waved Rebecca off.

She continued waving when Rebecca was long in the distance before she stopped smiling and spoke. "You can show yourself now." She turned as she heard the rustle of clothes to see Rutherford move from the cover of the shadows.

"How long have you been waiting there?" She turned and returned to her house with Rutherford in tow.

"Oh, not long. Long enough to hear some things though," he said with a smile. "I must

admit you did make me smile when you said you no longer believed in what dreams represent."

"You are getting too close Rutherford. Too close to the pair of them. Phillip is planning something. He was in a right state following your last visit." She turned and blocked the doorway. "He hasn't told me what he's going to do, but I know he's constantly thinking of you and Rebecca. He's not going to let her go without a fight."

Rutherford's mouth broke into a wide, thin grin, exposing his small teeth. "He has no choice. He's the one that made the deal, remember?"

Market day had come around quickly for them. Rebecca slowed the horse as she neared the point of where she met Cedric just a week before. She was anxious to see if he would keep his word about her paintings as she rode to town. Her gaze searched along the dirt streets as she made her way to the market. Her stomach sank as she set up her stall with still no sign of him. She'd made these paintings specifically for him and his father. She knew finding other buyers interested in those particular paintings might prove hard.

The regular villagers made their purchases as she looked past them, hoping Cedric would appear. As Rebecca turned her attention back to her produce, a dark shadow caught her eye. There stood Cedric. He was grinning at her. He waited until she finished serving her last customer before moving towards her.

"I hope you've had a successful morning," he said with a smirk that brightened his face.

She waved her hand, indicating he should follow her to the cart. She unwrapped two of the paintings she had bundled for him, deliberately overlooking the one of him. He nodded approvingly.

"Father is going to love these just as much as the first batch of paintings," Cedric said as he looked over the next one. "Are you able to cope with our demand? He has a lot of walls he wants to cover and he is insisting that you fill the demand."

Rebecca nodded as she took hold of another small sack Cedric was offering her. She looked in the bag and it was the same amount as last week. She shook her head, pulling out a handful of coins as she tried to hand them back. "No Rebecca. You have earned every piece. We will not take it back."

She smiled and handed him the last wrapped painting, feeling nervous as she did so. What would she do if he didn't like it?

"What is this?" Rebecca pointed to him. "For me?"

Rebecca nodded as he tore open the wrapping and held it at arm's length. Rebecca waited for a reaction. He shook his head and placed the painting down.

"I do not know what to say." He glanced between her and the painting. "This is the most thoughtful thing anyone has done for me. Thank you."

Rebecca smiled and curtsied. She was glad he liked it.

"Eat with me. I have bought our produce for the week and would like to have lunch with you...as a thank you for the painting." Rebecca moved away from the cart and back to her stall. She wanted to learn more about him and his father. Where they came from and why they moved to the area.

"I understand if you are busy, but I would be forever grateful if you would accept," Cedric said, following her back to the stall.

Rebecca did accept. She nodded just as Mrs. Gwenllian presented herself in front of them. She barely cleared the baskets that were stocked with their produce.

"Good morning Rebecca," she said, smiling at her before looking Cedric up and down. "'tis a beautiful day. I haven't seen you for days. When you have finished here, I insist that you come and see me."

Rebecca looked at Cedric and then to Mrs. Gwenllian.

"I will not take no for an answer. I requested your company a week ago," Mrs. Gwenllian said. "I expect to see you soon."

As she waddled off Rebecca looked at Cedric.

"I understand. She's very forceful, isn't she? Since you have a prior engagement, we will lunch together another day."

Rebecca watched Cedric's shoulders fall as he lowered his head. She felt bad. She wanted to spend time with him, but if she didn't go and see Mrs. Gwenllian, she knew she would tell Papa and that would cause enough problems in itself.

She reached out and gently touched his shoulder. When he looked at her, she indicated she still wanted to have lunch with him.

"I was thinking along the stream bank," Cedric said as he watched Mrs. Gwenllian walk along the street.

She nodded. She grabbed her paintbrush and wrote she would see Mrs. Gwenllian first, then tell her she had to get to the art supply shop and head home. That way, everyone is happy. Cedric smiled at her.

"It sounds like a great plan, but I do not wish to cause you any trouble."

She shook her head; she knew how to handle Mrs. Gwenllian. Cedric collected his paintings and produce before leaving her.

"I will see you in a little while then Rebecca," he said with a smile.

She sold the remainder of her produce and packed up the stall as quickly as she could.

"Oh Rebecca. It is so good to see you." Mrs. Gwenllian held her arms wide, waiting for Rebecca to lean over and give her a hug. "You know, I only ever buy my potatoes from you and your father," she babbled. "They are the best of the lot. Not like those Brown's potatoes. You could hardly call them potatoes. Little balls of dirt are what they are." Rebecca smiled as she placed her painting supplies down. "Now, let's have a cup of tea then, shall we? How are you feeling? Have you been sleeping well?" Mrs. Gwenllian continued firing off questions at her.

She nodded. She hadn't been sleeping well at all, that's why she got so much painting done. She would get frustrated at the dreams that invaded her sleep, so she would paint the hours away.

"Have you been dreaming of the faceless man again?" Rebecca felt uneasy under the intense gaze of Mrs. Gwenllian. So intrusive was the look, she shifted her gaze and merely nodded. She was unsure of the reaction she would get if she admitted that she had dreamt of the faceless man again.

"I want to talk to you about the painting you gave me," Mrs. Gwenllian said as she pulled it out to show her. It was a painting of a doll. The doll she went to the forest to get and Papa had thrown it back. One side of its face was how Rebecca saw it while the other was the

way Papa had described it before tossing it back.

"What's this of Rebecca? Is this another vision from your dream?" Mrs. Gwenllian asked as she showed the painting to Rebecca.

She nodded and tried to speak.

"Yes dear. Take your time. I think you have found your voice in your painting and that's why you have lost yours in this world. When you find what you are looking for in the real world, your voice will come back." Rebecca smiled. There was so much she wanted to say about the doll. She never let Papa know she had gone back there one day to look for it. As she drew closer to the forest, her hands became clammy and her heart raced as she struggled to keep control of her breathing. Her head pounded and the world seemed to spin wildly with each step she took as she neared the Dead Forest.

"Now let us talk more about that young man who was with you at the stall. I haven't seen him before." She put the painting down and looked at Rebecca. "Does your father know about him?"

Rebecca had difficulties keeping up with the questions being fired at her. She shook her head. She was hesitant to let Papa know about him when she knew so little about him herself.

"So you met him at the market?"

Rebecca nodded. She looked at her paint supplies. She showed Mrs. Gwenllian the empty pot of blue ink.

"Oh you can get that after lunch," Mrs. Gwenllian said with disappointment. Rebecca shook her head and indicated she had work to do. She would come and spend time with her on another day. She got to her feet quickly before Mrs. Gwenllian could begin to argue.

She headed to the art store and bought more ink and canvases as she needed. She set off in the direction to head home before making a detour at the last turn. It was a short ride to find the clearing Cedric had spoken about. For the years Rebecca had lived in this area, she'd not seen much of it. The clearing had the lushest, greenest grass that buffered against a line of weeping willows drinking from the stream.

She looked around and couldn't see him. She was the only one there. She pulled the horse up and walked towards the stream's rocky edge. She looked from left to right for any sign of him. He was nowhere to be seen. She braced her hand on a tree as she continued looking for him. She turned to head back to the cart when she came face to face with him. She jumped back and put her hands up. Her mouth opened to scream in a natural reaction.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," Cedric said, leaning forward to take her hand. "I called out to you but clearly you didn't hear me." His hands were clammy and cold against hers. She smiled and pulled her hand out of his hold. She wondered how he got behind her without her hearing anything.

"I have a blanket for you to sit on over here," he said, pointing the way. He had laid out a small selection of foods on the blanket. She felt very out of place with so many pretty things. "I know I said it before, but I am very, very pleased with that painting. I am honored that you did it for me. It is already very special to me. Does this area inspire you?"

She nodded as she looked around. She was drawn to the weeping willows, the way they branched out and over then fell into the water. They looked like an extension of the water. A tree waterfall.

"Did your friend ask you many questions?" Rebecca nodded and rolled her eyes. "I

am used to questions. I bet you are wondering how my father and I came to live in this town." Again she nodded and then looked at the ground. "Well. I don't really remember much of my childhood," he said as she looked at the weeping willows. "I never met my mother."

She quickly turned her attention back to him. He was looking at the ground. She knew exactly how he felt.

"Since I can remember we have always moved. I have always felt unsettled, but I do not mind moving from place to place. It makes me feel free and I meet so many new people."

Cedric continued to tell her that although he had a strong educational background, he did not make friends easily because of the constant moving. "One of the downsides," he said. Rebecca knew all too well what he was talking about. His pale skin was taking on a rosy glow as they sat in the sun and ate. He picked at his food, hardly eating anything. She, on the other hand, was ravenous. She tried to eat slowly but her stomach grumbled, stopping the conversation.

"Please eat up. I'm not really hungry. I enjoy your company Rebecca. I hope we can do this often."

Rebecca popped another piece of bread in her mouth before nodding enthusiastically at him.

"You might even do some painting here? Does your father let you leave the farm much?"

She shrugged her shoulders. She could ask to go and paint at various locations. He shouldn't have any problem with it, especially if she were to make money from it.

"I hope you do not mind my asking, but do you choose not to speak, or is it that you can't?"

She opened her mouth and tried to speak. Her lips moved in motion of saying something, but nothing more than a soft squeak passed her lips. She thought hard of a way to let him know how it happened, but it was just too hard.

"I find when you don't speak your other senses become more in tune," Cedric said as he picked at another piece of food.

Rebecca nodded. "Close your eyes and hold out your hand."

She gave him a surprised look.

"Go on." She nodded her head and then closed her eyes, tentatively holding out her hand. "Do I sound louder?"

She nodded. She flinched slightly as she felt him place something in her hand. It felt very light.

"Okay. You can open your eyes now."

She looked down at her hand. It was a daisy halo. She hadn't made a daisy chain in years. Visions of Patricia flooded her mind as well as the feeling of her nose crunching under her fist. She smiled as she held it up.

"I wanted to make you something special since you did for me," Cedric said, taking it out of her hands and placing it on her head. "There."

Rebecca looked up at his face.

"Well, it is getting late. I don't wish to get you into trouble. Thank you again for the painting, it was very thoughtful of you. My father is the only person who has ever given me a gift."

She was pleased she'd made him happy as she helped him pack away the blanket.

"I can do that. You should be on your way," he said, walking her to the cart. "I will see you next week."

Rebecca waved to Cedric as she made her way back to the farm. She smiled at the thoughtful gesture of the daisy chain. The ride back to the farm seemed to race by in no time.

"Why have you been so long?" Papa asked.

She lowered her hand to her knee and moved her hand to make the talking gesture.

"Ahh, and how is Mrs. Gwenllian today?" Papa helped her carry her art supplies into the cottage. "What's in your hair?" She drew her fingers to her head; she was still wearing the daisy halo. "Did you stop on the way home from town? You know I don't like you doing that. It's not safe when you have the takings from the market. What if someone tried to rob you? It's not as if you could scream for help."

His words stung like a slap on the face. She returned to the cart to unload the baskets and saw a scarecrow lying on the ground.

"I found another crow hanging around. If you let one stay..." His voice trailed off. "I have a plan Rebecca. I think you should go and see Mrs. Gwenllian every Sunday and spend time with her," he said. "She seems good for you. We need a woman's influence for you now. You are coming of age." He wouldn't look at her while he told her his plans.

They worked on their separate projects for the remainder of the afternoon. Rebecca retreated to her room early instead of painting. She'd become so consumed by her dreams lately, she didn't know if she was dreaming or painting. She'd noticed that her paintings had become darker. She didn't realize she painted such frightening images until she'd finished them.

Many times she painted over the canvases in black to conceal the hideous visions she had cast. On several occasions she returned to the canvases and wondered how the images got there. She couldn't remember painting on the new canvases and thought she must have done it in her sleep. The canvases held her hopes and fears. She painted what she thought was real and unreal. She'd often incorporate the loss of her voice into her paintings. She'd had enough for one day. Her mind was too clouded to paint. Within moments of putting her head down, she was asleep.

It wasn't long before the dreams again invaded her sleep. She dreamt she was working at the market when she came face to face with a dark-haired man who was new in town. She was sitting at the place where Cedric had taken her and was painting the weeping willows. Each reed was a dainty silvery-green thread dripping into the water. Her skin felt warm from the sunlight. She was painting when the new man in town approached her. He was tall and his hair brushed his shoulders. He had blue eyes that reminded her of the sky. She thought he was very attractive. She looked up at him and smiled. He returned the smile as he knelt next to her. He reached forward and took the paintbrush from her hand and placed it on the ground. He cupped her face with his hand as he drew her in for a kiss. As he kissed her he held her tight. She felt tingles from her neck running down her spine. She leaned in, wrapped her arms around his neck and opened her mouth to deepen the kiss. She could feel his tongue dance over hers. She kissed him hard and as she opened her eyes, she saw him reach out his fingers and drag his nails over the paint, causing deep scores in the canvas.

She tried to pull away from his grip but he held her in close. She managed to get to her

feet and beat him with her hands while screaming 'no' over and over again. He turned towards her and knocked her hands out of his way before grabbing hold of her throat.

He lifted her off the ground as she swung her hands down at him, trying to get him to release his grip. He smiled at her as he caused her pain. She struggled to break free. She could feel the grip tightening and her head becoming lighter. She looked beyond him and saw Patricia standing nearby, cackling. Patricia threw her head back and laughed as Rebecca continued to struggle to breathe. She felt hands on her shoulders.

"Rebecca. Rebecca," a voice was calling. Her eyes rolled in her head as she struggled to breathe. She tried to see where the voice was coming from, but the world was growing darker as she glanced to see her smiling murderer.

"Rebecca, wake up!" Papa was shaking her by the shoulders. "You are having a dream." She opened her eyes and flinched away from his grip by moving across the bed. "It was a bad dream but I heard you screaming. You were screaming." She didn't realize she was able to speak in her sleep. "You were screaming 'no' to someone. What was the dream about?" He held the candle to the side as he questioned her.

Rebecca took a few moments to collect her thoughts. She felt like she was still trapped in her dream. She could still feel the man's hands around her neck.

"Speak to me Rebecca."

"He was trying to kill me," she said in a croaky voice, a voice that had not been used for a long time. They both looked at each other in surprise when the words came from her mouth.

Papa sat on the bed and set the candlestick down on the side table before hugging her tight. She ran her fingers over her neck. It felt like there were still hands were around her throat.

"Rebecca, you are talking. You're talking," he said with delight. "Now who was trying to kill you?"

"A man."

"What did he look like?" Rebecca closed her eyes to remember the image clearly.

"I've never seen him before. He's a new man to my dreams." As soon as the words left her mouth she knew she had said too much. "He was hurting me Papa. But it's not real. I will be fine. I cannot believe my voice is back." She continued to rub her throat.

"Well, don't stop talking now. Talk to me." He hugged her tighter. Rebecca smiled as her heart stopped racing although her mind didn't.

"What would you like me to say?"

"It has been too long since I've heard your voice Rebecca." Papa started crying. He reached for her cup of water and handed it to her. "Say all the things you have been waiting to say. Keep talking; we don't want your voice to go away again. Something from your dream has given you the strength to speak again. What are we going to do about these dreams where people are trying to hurt you?"

Although she felt exhausted she stayed up talking to Papa about what she thought they should do with the farm.

"I think we can handle the wheat crop Papa," she said as she sipped from her cup. "Plus, it will mean more income for us. The work is only going to be at the beginning and end of the harvest." Papa nodded in agreement.

Unbeknownst to Rebecca, Papa secretly had another plan for the wheat.

Chapter Nine

Rebecca couldn't stop smiling as she rode to Mrs. Gwenllian's house the next day. She couldn't wait to see her face when she replied to her questions.

"Hello dear. Back so soon? How's your Papa?" Mrs. Gwenllian stood with her hands on her hips waiting for Rebecca to sign her answer.

"He's doing very well," she said with a wide grin.

Mrs. Gwenllian shook her head and stared at her in disbelief.

"Oh dear child." Her hands clasped over her mouth. "I have to stop drinking so much Root Tea. It starts to meddle with the mind when you have too much. I could have sworn I heard you speak just now."

"I did," Rebecca said. "I have my voice back."

"Oh dear child." Mrs. Gwenllian threw her hands up in the air. "It is a miracle." She stretched her arms wide to Rebecca. Rebecca thought for someone who deals with medicines and potions, Mrs. Gwenllian believed an awful lot in miracles. Her voice was still croaky but she didn't care. She could finally speak. "Well come in dear. Tell me how your voice came back," Mrs. Gwenllian cried as she ushered Rebecca into her house.

"Do you see this man often?" Mrs. Gwenllian placed her teacup down on the table as she looked questioningly at Rebecca.

"No. This is the first time he has appeared in my dreams. What do you think it means?" Rebecca sipped from her teacup again, returning the look directed at her evenly.

"So you were painting by the river. Have you been to the river in your waking life?" Rebecca nodded. "Were you alone?" She looked into her teacup as she shook her head. "Who were you there with dear?" The tone in Mrs. Gwenllian's voice was unsettling. "Did you go to the river with that new man in town? The one the villagers are all talking about? I have a feeling about him Rebecca."

"This is the reason why I would not tell Papa," Rebecca said. "You are worse than he is."

"You listen to me Rebecca." Mrs. Gwenllian lifted her finger and pointed it at her. "I have a feeling about him. Something about him that has not yet been revealed. You must keep yourself guarded from him. We do not want to see you hurt. Now, cast your mind back to when you lost your voice. Tell me what you remember."

Rebecca had enough of the battering from Mrs. Gwenllian for one day. She sighed. "I don't remember much—that's the concern. The only thing I do remember is the doll." She pointed to the painting she gave Mrs. Gwenllian that now hung on the wall. "The one in the painting. I thought it was the most beautiful doll I had ever seen, but when Papa saw it, he saw something terrible and broken. I honestly don't remember anything else. Just a terrible feeling of being constantly watched."

"Watched?" Mrs. Gwenllian pressed.

"Yes. Sometimes I still have that feeling. I can never see anyone who is actually watching me but I have that sense. In my dreams I am always being watched by the faceless

man."

"Yes, tell me more about the faceless man." Mrs. Gwenllian leaned towards Rebecca.

Rebecca was poured another cup of tea. She knew she was not going to be able to leave for a long time to come.

"Well, he's just...there. He's just there. He doesn't speak to me. Usually Papa is in the dream too but when the faceless man appears, Papa is gone or moving away from me. Sometimes some of the villagers are passing through my dreams but so is the faceless man. He doesn't do anything to me. He is just there. Not like the man in my dream from last night. He was attacking me."

She looked at Mrs. Gwenllian and leaned forward.

"There is something else," she said.

In a low tone Mrs. Gwenllian encouraged her to speak her mind.

"Just before he grabbed me, he kissed me." Rebecca could feel her cheeks flush. "He kissed me as he was ruining my painting and then he attacked me. That awful Patricia was there, laughing. You know, after all this time I can still feel her nose cracking under my fist. What do you think that means?" She waited for a response.

After taking another sip of her tea, Mrs. Gwenllian carefully put down her teacup before speaking.

"I believe you were dreaming of your true loves. You love your painting, but this man in your dream is also your true love. Perhaps ruining the painting comes from jealousy. This man wants you all to himself. You must devote yourself to one of your loves or you will lose both."

Rebecca was mortified. "But the man I love should love the work I do." She shook her head. "Why must I choose? If the man will not permit me to paint, then I shall not have him."

"Rebecca dear, it is not a case of you choosing him. He will have to choose you."

She had heard enough. "I beg you to keep this conversation private," she said as she got to her feet. "If you wish me to return then you shall say nothing to Papa."

Rebecca hated being threatened or making threats, but she knew Papa had too much on his mind as it was.

"Of course dear. I just want what is best for you. I am truly happy. With your voice returning, our prayers have been answered."

Within minutes of her returning to the farm, Papa announced he was going to visit the farmer in the other town again, to discuss buying some wheat to start their own crop.

"I will be gone for three days. I would prefer it if you were to stay with Mrs. Gwenllian, but I know you will protest and insist on staying to look after things here," Papa said as she started to open her mouth. "Do you promise to stay here and only look after the farm? We are not expecting any visitors so you know where the gun is if necessary. If you don't want me to go...I can stay."

Rebecca lifted her hands and shook her head.

"No Papa. I will be fine. If I don't feel comfortable staying here, I will go into town and stay with Mrs. Gwenllian. But you are right. Who will look after the vegetable patch and the horses? It's best I stay."

"So you can handle the vegetable patch while I am gone?" Rebecca nodded. She

wanted to do it. She wanted to show Papa she was as strong as ever and that the wheat crop was a good idea.

She had a number of new paintings she had to finish before the next market day, but instead made herself busy by preparing a nice meal before Papa went away. She had decided not to tell him about the painting arrangement she made with Cedric for fear he would quash the idea.

"I will leave the gun loaded Rebecca, so should anything happen, all you have to do is take it off the wall and then...well, you know what to do," he said as he spooned the last of his meal into his mouth.

"Yes Papa, though I don't think I will have any reason to use it." She noticed another scarecrow in the farmyard as she placed her empty plate on the kitchen bench.

"I know, but I need you to be aware. I need you to pay attention Rebecca," he said with a stern voice.

Rebecca turned to look at him. "Be aware of what Papa?"

His eyes looked cold to her. "Just be ready for anything."

Rebecca rose early to prepare a knapsack of food for Papa's journey. She watched him prepare the horse before she handed him the knapsack.

"Now then. Don't work too hard and have a great day at market. Things have never been selling better now you are running the stall on your own. I want to know what your secret is," he said with a wide grin. His words snapped at Rebecca. Did he know about Cedric? How did he know she had a secret? "Oh well. I had better be on my way," he said as he walked towards her with open arms. "I love you very much and I know you will be fine. I will see you in three days."

She nodded. "Three days. I can't wait."

She walked alongside Papa and his horse to the fence line before waving him off. Papa kicked his horse and trotted along the track, waving until he reached the bend.

Rebecca stood leaning against the fence watching his wake even though he was long gone. The sun warmed her face and the air was fresh. She knew she had chores to do but wanted to enjoy the sense of being alone for a little while longer. She didn't feel lost or alone in the sense she had no one around her. She had asked to be left alone. She wanted Papa to learn more about the wheat. She raced back to the house and collected her paintings and supplies, deciding not to waste the time that was on offer to her.

She wanted to work in the sunshine. She rolled up her sleeves and dipped in the paintbrush. She disciplined herself to finish the three paintings for market day before starting any more. The warm air-dried the ink quickly, allowing her to work faster.

She stood back from her final painting and cocked her head. She was happy with the painting; it was the perspective of the village from the cottage. She had painted visions from her dreams—dark looming clouds with the sun's rays trying to peek through. Sick people, bad people, villagers wandering the streets. They were tiny figures but she knew what they represented.

Rebecca leaned the paintings against the cottage as she packed away her inks and brushes to start her chores. She looked to the cloudless sky as she walked to the corral and started to muck the stalls. She hated mucking the stalls but knew it had to be done. She

wanted to have it done before Papa returned to save him from doing it. She gave her horse a quick brush over before handing him a carrot. Rebecca pushed her way past her horse as she reached for the hoe.

As she unlatched the small gate at the vegetable patch, she noticed a line of ten crows sitting along the fence. Without taking her eyes off them, Rebecca gripped the handle of the hoe and swung it towards them. Some of them flinched their heads to look at her, but they remained steadfast.

She swung again and yelled at them to leave. Again they did not move.

Rebecca looked at the one closest. It had bright red eyes while the smaller crow next to it had green ones. Rebecca walked around the edge of the patch and wielded the hoe towards them again. This time all of them flew away. They flew in one line into the Dead Forest. A shiver ran down her spine.

She continued to look at the forest, trying desperately to see if she could indeed see anything. She finally turned her attention back to the garden for a little longer.

She gathered a few vegetables for her dinner before returning to the cottage to wash her hands. She collected her paintings that had since dried and leaned them carefully against the wall of the cottage before closing the door. As she placed her paintings down, she looked along the line of the wall and saw her needlepoint basket had been shoved in the corner behind Papa's chair. She pulled the heavy chair out of the way and reached for the basket. She looked at the half completed needlepoint and ran her hands gently over the threads. She hadn't done any needlepoint since she got her brushes. Rebecca decided then and there, after dinner she would complete as much of the needlepoint as possible. She looked at the space on the wall that had been especially reserved for it. She wondered why Papa hadn't reminded her to complete it.

Her mind wandered to Papa and his current state of mind. Why was he asking her to be so aware of her surroundings? What did he mean? She stopped herself from dwelling too much on the situation. *He's just being protective of me.* On that thought she busied herself with making lunch.

Rebecca nibbled at the bread before dusting her hands on her skirt and picking up her needle. She didn't feel right sitting inside on such a glorious day. She rolled the needlepoint and collected the threads she needed before heading out to the corral. Within minutes she was trotting along the track towards the town.

The air smelled like flowers as she let her horse break into a gallop. Her hair bounced behind her as she leaned into the saddle. She loved the sound of the horse's hooves clapping the ground. She didn't know where she was going, she didn't really mind where she ended up. She pulled the horse up when it came to a grassy knoll near the stream. It was a different place to where Cedric met her for lunch, but it had many similar aspects. Rebecca dismounted and pulled a carrot from her apron. She let the reins drop to the ground as she fed her horse its reward.

The grass came up to her ankles and was dotted with daisies. There was a sound of insects and bees swarming combined with the soft splash of a nearby stream. The grass bowed as Rebecca made her way to one of the large trees near the stream's bank. Looking at the tree's base to ensure it was free of ants or bugs, she finally took her place and unraveled her needlepoint. She was deeply engrossed in the task at hand when she heard someone clear

their throat. The tip of the needle pierced her flesh as she jumped at the sound.

"I have a nasty habit of making you jump, don't I?" Cedric stood smiling a short distance away from her. Rebecca quickly pulled the needle from her finger as she raised it to her lips. She felt the blood seep over her tongue, not minding the taste of it.

"I'm sorry. Did you hurt yourself? Show me." He rushed to her side and pulled her hand from her mouth to see the spot oozing with a small amount of blood.

"It's fine. I was just too involved with my needlepoint and didn't notice you. It's fine really," she said as she felt his cold hands press against hers.

Cedric looked down at her with surprise. "You can talk."

Rebecca nodded, realizing she ruined the surprise she'd been planning.

"Yes. My voice finally came back to me. I was going to surprise you on Sunday but I guess now is a good time to say hello...hello."

"Well, that is very good news Rebecca. How do you feel? Are you sure your finger is okay?" He continued to fuss over her as she tried to get her hand free of him.

"Yes, I'm fine thank you. What are you doing out here? I thought it was such a beautiful day." She tried to occupy both her hands with the needlework to prevent him from holding onto her again.

"Me too. I wanted to get some fresh air, clear my head, spend some time in the sun," he said. Rebecca looked at him. She knew from the pallor of his skin he spent very little time in the sun. "Would you like some company?"

Cedric didn't wait for Rebecca to answer as he took a seat on the ground next to her.

"Oh Cedric. You can't get your fine clothes dirty." She started making a fuss over him.

"It is fine Rebecca. Besides, if something happens to them, it's not as if I can't get more."

She wanted to ask him why he dressed in black from head to toe but felt it might have been an inappropriate question to ask.

"So you can paint and sew," Cedric said as she resumed her stitching. "You are a woman of many talents Rebecca. What else can you do since I know you are very handy on the farm with all your produce?"

Rebecca giggled. "I can look after myself if that's what you are asking. Tell me, what do you do Cedric?"

"No, you are the one with the new voice, I want to hear you talk," he argued. "What are you looking for in a husband?"

Rebecca scoffed. "I have to look after myself, Papa and the farm. I do not have time for a husband. Besides, I have looked after those three things for a very long time and I don't see how a husband is going to improve things. He would be another thing that becomes my responsibility and I don't need that right now."

She was pleased with her answer. It was an honest answer. In truth, she hadn't really thought of a husband. She knew she was nearing the age where most girls from the town would be courting men they intended to marry, but not her.

"Fair enough." He looked slightly taken aback. "So how are the paintings going? Getting many done?"

"Oh yes. I think your father is going to be very happy with the next three. It is somewhat difficult to know what to paint and if it is to your father's liking, but he has not

complained or made comment about the other paintings he has bought, so until that time...I guess I will just keep painting what I paint."

Cedric nodded. "That is exactly what he wants you to do."

"Can I ask what your father does Cedric?" She was slightly apprehensive about asking the question, not knowing whether her curiosity would be rebuffed.

"Of course you can ask. My father is a businessman. He travels a lot and needs me to keep track of things that happen here," Cedric said, staring at the space in front of him. "He's a very busy man so I don't always get to see much of him, but the time we do spend together is great fun. He deals in land and produce, much like your father, but on a much bigger scale."

Rebecca nodded. Finally she'd learned something about him.

She unfolded her legs from under her body. "I have pins and needles in my feet. I need to get up and walk around." She winced in pain as she got to her feet.

Cedric jumped to his feet and took hold of her arm.

"Thank you. I am fine," she said but he didn't let go of her arm.

"Rebecca, I would like to invite you to my house, but father is a very private man and it would be considered rude if I invited you without asking him. I would hate for our friendship to become complicated," he said, moving to make Rebecca look at him.

She waved her hand up and dismissed him.

"It is a lovely thought but I completely understand. I know exactly the situation you are in." She smiled at him as the blood flowed back to her feet. "Cedric, it's been lovely to finally be able to talk to you, but I really have to get back to the cottage and start working for market day."

"Well, I could give you a hand if you like. I'd hate for you to do all that work on your own."

Rebecca stopped rolling her needlepoint. She never said she was at the cottage on her own.

"No, it's fine. Papa is going to help me," she said, looking away. She was never good at lying.

"Oh, alright then. If you don't need my help..."

"No, but I thank you for the offer." She made a move for her horse. "I will see you on Sunday, yes?"

"Of course," he said with a smile.

"Great. Say hello to your father and I will see you then." She waved him off as she kicked her horse hard. She felt bad for lying to him, but Papa had told her to keep her guard up. Although she liked Cedric, something about him unsettled her.

She completed as many chores as she could before retiring to the cottage. She didn't have the energy to start any new paintings so headed to bed early. She prayed for a peaceful night's sleep, for the bad dreams to stay away, but her prayers went unanswered.

She had a vivid dream about Cedric. She dreamt he was banging on the cottage door, demanding to let him in. She made her way out of her room and opened the door slightly before he kicked it wide open. He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her hard while screaming that she lied to him.

She tried to punch him to get herself free, but he continued with a barrage of abuse

about her lies and why he couldn't trust her. His cold fingers pressed hard into her shoulders, causing her to cry out in pain.

He shook her so hard she could see stars before her eyes. It was a noise from outside that stopped him cold and released his fingers from her body. Tears marked her face as she looked to see where the noise had come from. Cedric didn't bother to look at her again as he raced through the door and off towards the track. Rebecca collected her thoughts quickly and slammed the door shut behind him. Her neck ached from his shaking attack. She ran her fingers over her arms where he grabbed hold of her. Her skin was cold from his touch.

In her dream, she slowly walked through the kitchen and climbed back into bed. Soon after Rebecca woke as the sun streamed in through the window. She sat up thinking she overslept as she was usually up before the sun. She kicked off the blankets and grabbed her clothes.

Lifting her nightdress, pain shot through her shoulders. She turned her head to look at the distinct marks on her left shoulder. She was bruised. She quickly turned her head to look at the other shoulder. It too had been bruised. Her hand moved to her mouth as she tried to remember her dream. *It had to be a dream. There's no way that could have happened.* She ran her fingers over the bruises and looked at them again. *Maybe I did it in my sleep.* She pulled on her dress before making her way into the kitchen.

She knew she had a full day of work ahead of her before the market tomorrow, but all she could think about was the dream about Cedric. She even thought of how she would react when she saw him next at the markets. She realized her hands fidgeted as she worked. She was nervous. She couldn't believe how real the dream was or understand how she got those marks on her body. She checked her shoulders in broad daylight to ensure her eyes were not playing tricks on her. They were definitely there.

Chapter Ten

Rebecca worked hard to try and free her mind from the dream that haunted her waking hours. The sun brightened her day but not her thoughts. She jumped at every little noise and gasped at each shadow as she ran herself ragged. Periodically throughout the day she checked her shoulders to ensure herself the bruises were truly there. She stoked the fire once more before finally crawling into bed. She glanced at the window, the familiar feeling of someone watching her hung oppressively in the air. She moved around in her bed, pretending to get comfortable, while she continued to look at the window in the hope of seeing what she sensed was there.

All she could see were branches of trees that stood nearby the cottage. She told herself there was nothing there before putting her head down. She watched the flames throw shadows on the walls and tried to remember the images for future paintings. Within minutes she was asleep.

It seemed the new man in the area was the talk of the village. Every villager that came to her stall did nothing but talk about this man. Rebecca didn't particularly care for small town gossip, she'd seen plenty of people come and go, but she was curious just the same. Why was this man any different? She just wanted to continue with her business for the day so she could get home and paint. She wanted to get her meeting with Cedric over and done with. She wanted the market to be over. She continued to sell her plentiful stock to the villagers when she saw a group of girls her age walking in a group. She recognized Patricia's red curls in an instant and looked for Elizabeth, who usually followed close behind. She had not spoken to them since the sleepover incident, often staring past them when they came near, which wasn't very often. They stood in the street looking towards the high end of the village.

They were huddled together and covered their mouths when they spoke. Rebecca busied herself and continued serving customers when she heard a male voice bidding good day. She looked up and gazed at the dark-haired man. She stared at his clear blue eyes. Her heart jumped into her throat and her mouth gaped open. She had seen him before. It was the man from her dreams. She quickly looked at the ground hoping he would leave.

"Good day," he repeated.

Rebecca could hear low murmurs coming from the group as they had all spread out, hoping to be seen by the new man.

"Hello," she replied meekly, lifting her head.

"Is all this produce from your own land?" He looked at the vast selection of produce laid out in front of him.

"Yes. We have great land. We live near the edge of the village. We can grow just about anything. We have great land." She tried to stop herself from babbling as she stared at him.

"Yes, you already said you have great land, and clearly you can grow just about anything. Well, I'd better make my purchases before anyone else does." He smiled with a gentle but genuine laugh.

He had nice straight teeth. And dimples. Dimples on both cheeks. She noticed that he threw his head back when he laughed and his shoulders moved up and down. She liked the

look of his shoulders. They looked strong.

Rebecca could see Patricia and her group as they stood back and watched in awe. She decided to take her time to make him stay as long as possible. She could see them trying to listen in on what she and the new man were saying, but she couldn't make out their whispers. She leaned in and placed the vegetables in his knapsack. Her feeling of power faded as more villagers joined in their stares. She suddenly wanted him to go away. The hairs on her neck were standing on end and she shuddered as he spoke. She tried to pull herself together. She knew she had dreamt of this man, but never expected him to materialize.

"Looks like you have created great interest." Rebecca summoned the courage to speak to him. "Are you passing through the village?"

"No, I am here for what I hope to be a long time." He held the knapsack for her as she packed his purchases. He glanced around at the group of women who were preening themselves. "Besides..." He turned his attention back to Rebecca. "I prefer a woman who can get her hands dirty." He smirked at Rebecca. She could feel her cheeks flush and she couldn't help but smile back. She didn't know what to make of him. He paid her slightly extra for her produce before throwing the knapsack over his shoulder.

"Are you here every week?"

"Every week." She nodded.

"Might I have your name?" Rebecca stared blankly at him. She'd forgotten her own name.

"Well, I am Johannes. I will see you in a week...if not before." He tipped his head before going to the next stall, a smile gracing his lips as he passed the group of women who were scowling at Rebecca.

She was used to their stares and whispers. Although she continued to make sure her produce was on show and served other villagers, she sneakily watched him walk down the street.

"Hello Rebecca," Cedric said in his usual style of appearing from nowhere and causing her to jump. He was standing behind the stall next to her.

"Oh, hello Cedric." She hated how he would appear from nowhere. Visions from her dream flooded her mind as she tried to focus on the man before her. "You're still sneaking up on me." Her hand instinctively moved across her shoulder and to her neck. Her throat felt constricted as she tried to calm her nerves.

She turned to the cart and lifted the three paintings.

"Only three this week?" Cedric said in disappointment.

Rebecca nodded. "Once you see the detail you will understand why." She unwrapped one to show him. The painting had three layers. She felt her shoulders relax slightly. She kept reminding herself it was only a dream.

The top layer of the painting had flecks of gold and silver while the other layers had been used to bring the painting to life, making it look three-dimensional. "My goodness, look at this," he exclaimed as he ran his fingers over the painting. "I can see the life you have captured. You out do yourself every week Rebecca. I can't wait to show Father these. How many more do you think you could like this?"

"I have painted many paintings for your father, yet I have never met him," Rebecca said shrugging her shoulders.

Cedric put the painting down. "Would you like to meet him?"

Curiosity got the better of her. "Yes I would. I would like to see what he has done with my paintings. I hope he gets as much enjoyment out of looking at them as I did creating them."

"Oh, he gets great pleasure from them. I could arrange a meeting with him if you like?"

"I could come to your house. The way you speak of it fascinates me. I can't picture what it looks like in my head. I guess that's why there are so many castles in my paintings. I'm trying to paint the picture you have created in my head from your stories."

"I'm sure Father would prefer to get out of the castle and come to town. I will speak with him. You will meet him."

"He's never asked to meet me?" Rebecca was surprised.

"Oh he has, yes, but he is a very busy man. He has business to attend to."

"I would very much like to meet him, even if it were only for a few moments. It feels strange knowing I have not met the man whose purchases allow me to keep going with my passion."

Cedric nodded. "I shall endeavor to make your wish happen."

Rebecca smiled as calmness returned to her. She knew deep down Cedric would never hurt her. She must have somehow caused the injuries herself.

By the time the remainder of the produce was sold, Rebecca was keen to get to the art supply shop again. She was told her new brush would be in the store waiting for her. She planned to buy many more canvases too. She wanted to paint smaller versions of her bigger paintings in the hope the villagers would also buy from her. She pushed through the heavy doors, taking a deep, appreciative breath of the store. She loved the way it smelled.

"Ahh Rebecca. It has arrived. I knew you would hurry to get here." She rushed to the counter and held out her hands.

"Oh, I have been waiting for this day to come," she said as she took it in her hands. It felt so natural. Like the brush had been made for her hand.

"Is there anything else dear?"

Rebecca nodded. "Give me a moment," she said as she set off around the store, gathering the things she wanted. She was about to turn back to the counter when she backed into something. Turning quickly, she thought she would send art supplies in all directions.

"Oh, I am very sorry," she said, turning to face the person she had walked into. It was him. Johannes.

"Well, at least I now know your name is Rebecca." He smiled down at her.

"Hello again."

"Johannes," he repeated for her benefit.

She smiled and nodded. "Yes, I remember your name."

He looked at the supplies she held in her hands. "You're a painter too," he said as he showed her his hands full with supplies.

"Yes. I have been painting for years." Rebecca saw the shopkeeper leaning over the counter, trying to listen into their conversation.

"Oh John. I would also like to purchase two of your newly stretched canvases," she called to him. He pulled himself back over the counter and nodded. She could see the disappointment on his face of having to go out the back.

"What do you paint?"

Rebecca couldn't stop staring at his dimples. "P-p-paint?" she stammered, trying to focus on answering his question. "Everything. Landscapes. Portraits. I usually paint what I see in my head."

"Yes, I am the same. I see something I like and I paint it, but I also add my own element. Sometimes, if I think there is something missing from the countryside, I will add it in," he said. "Some of the villagers have spoken of your artistic talents."

She liked how he spoke so easily to her about painting. She completely understood what he was saying. "And who would be saying that?"

"Just people in general. You sound like you know more about painting than I do. You might be able to assist me then. I am undecided about which of these two inks to buy."

Rebecca looked at the choices in his outstretched hands.

"That one." She pointed to her choice. "I found this one was too runny. It will bleed into the other colors and you end up with a mess." He placed the other pot of ink back on the shelf as Rebecca collected another palette.

"Thank you for your help. Maybe we could have a painting session? An afternoon where we just paint?" Johannes asked as Rebecca set off in the opposite direction.

"That would be lovely, but I must assist Papa on the farm. There is only the two of us and I wouldn't feel right about taking an afternoon off just to paint. I do my painting at night when all the chores are done. I just wouldn't feel right."

"I understand," he said in a sympathetic tone.

"Here you go Rebecca." John sounded rushed. He must have run to fetch the canvases. He looked disappointed when the conversation appeared to be over. Rebecca placed her items on the counter and smiled at John.

"Is that all for today?" he said in a disappointed tone. Rebecca smiled to her herself. It was obvious he thought he'd missed out on a prime piece of village gossip.

"It certainly is." She paid for her purchases and said goodbye to the shop keeper.

"Goodbye Johannes. Thank you for being so understanding." She glanced back at John who had tiptoed to watch them near the door.

"Yes. Perhaps you could see if your father would change his mind?"

Rebecca nodded and left for her cart. She had no intention of asking Papa for time off. It didn't feel right to ask for an afternoon off and leave him with everything to be done. She pulled the cart away as Johannes left the shop. He waved to her but she pretended she didn't see him.

By the time she had returned, Papa was back and working in the field. He smiled as she unloaded all the empty baskets.

The next day Papa asked her to visit Mrs. Gwenllian and buy more tonic.

"She was also saying how she wanted you to meet more people." Papa shrugged at his comment. "But don't be too late. She knows you have things to do here."

Rebecca looked hard at Papa. He appeared to have aged over the past three days, he looked much older. She didn't argue with him and simply nodded. She rode for part of the way before deciding she wanted to stretch her legs for a while. As she walked the winding track, she could hear the screeching of birds coming from behind her. The noise became so

loud, the horse spooked and tried to rear up on her.

She pulled hard at the reins and jumped in close to the horse. She hugged its neck trying to calm it. A flock of crows made their way overhead. The horse pulled away from her and tried to bolt. She pulled with all her might on the reins but they slipped from her grip. It felt like wet reeds were pulled across her palms as they sliced through her skin, compelling her to let go. She began to run after the horse until she lost sight of it at the corner. Inexplicably the screeching stopped. The feeling left behind in the silence was so eerie she took off at a run in the horse's wake. She rounded the corner and came to an abrupt halt when she was met by another rearing horse.

"Whoa," a male voice said. "We have got to stop meeting like this."

Rebecca looked at Johannes high on his horse. He was holding the reins of her mount. He'd been able to catch it and calm it down.

"Is this your horse? Are you hurt? Were you thrown?"

Rebecca shook her head as she walked to her horse, trying to catch her breath. She reached out her hand for it to sniff. It nuzzled against her as she collected the reins. Her hands were smarting from the wounds it had inflicted.

"Yes, it's mine, but no, I wasn't thrown. Those crows spooked it...bolted," she said, gasping for breath. "Thank you very much."

She tried to calm her breathing, sucking in huge pockets of air as she tried to hide her hands.

"Do you need to sit for a moment? Catch your breath? You have a fine horse. It looked beautiful in full stride."

Rebecca mounted her horse. "No, I am fine. Thank you."

"What happened to your hands? You are hurt," he said as he quickly dismounted and rushed towards her.

"It's nothing really," she protested, trying to keep her hands out of sight, but it was too late. Johannes had pulled on her arm. She gave little resistance as he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it against her palm.

"Show me the other one," he instructed.

She looked away as she held up her other palm. "Here, press your hands together. Are you hurt anywhere else?"

She shook her head. "No, I just didn't let go of the reins quick enough."

"Are you headed into the village?"

"You ask a lot of questions," Rebecca said, giving him a sideways glance.

They both laughed as she waited for Johannes to mount his horse and head towards the village.

"I am interested in everything," Johannes continued. "I guess that's why I ask so many questions. What did your father say about the painting afternoon?"

Rebecca looked into the forest. "I haven't asked him yet. The timing was just not right and as I said, I don't feel right about asking for an afternoon off from my chores when he'll be lumped with everything. He's supposed to be taking it easy."

Johannes nodded. She watched his hair bob as they walked. It was long and shiny. She wanted to paint his hair.

"May I ask why you are going to town?" She looked away again.

"A family friend insists I be more sociable. She's a doctor of sorts in town, too. She's lovely but a bit of a fusspot. You might know her, Mrs. Gwenllian. She's not very tall but has the heart of no one I know. Papa thinks I should spend more time with her, become more of a lady." Sarcasm rang through her voice. "Get invited to all the social events in town."

Rebecca tried to stop herself from rambling, but she couldn't help herself. "I couldn't think of anything worse than being stuck in a small room with all the drunken gits and girls who think they are better than everyone else...sorry. I shouldn't speak like that...it's not very ladylike, is it?"

Johannes shook his head. "No it is not, but I enjoy the company of people who speak their mind. This Mrs. Gwenllian sounds a bit harsh."

"Oh, deep down she means well. It's just that she pushes and pushes and pushes until you cave in and do as she says. It is easier to go along with what she says in the first place."

They continued walking along in silence. She felt she had said too much.

"May I ask about your painting? How long have you been doing it?" She watched him think about his response.

"I was trained by one of the finest painters around but I didn't appreciate it." It was Johannes' turn to stare off into the forest. "I would go against everything he tried to teach me. Of course now I regret it, it's why I struggle with it. What about you?"

"A woman in the village sat down with me one day when I was very young. She didn't have any children of her own and she showed me how to make shapes into pictures. I never saw her again. It was very strange. I have never been trained professionally. Somehow what I see in my head makes its way down on to the canvas."

"I admire people who can do that. I have to sit for hours and strain over it. I rarely get a painting finished before I get frustrated with it. I would like to see your paintings if that would be possible."

"I sell all my paintings. I have a small collection at home that I painted for Papa."

"You must be very talented if you have a constant buyer. You must teach me. I can pay you," he said.

"Oh no. I wouldn't take any money." She shook her head.

"But if it is the only way your father will let you paint in the afternoons, I am willing to pay you."

Rebecca pondered the prospect. Surely Papa could let her have one afternoon a week off. She would ensure she worked doubly hard on the other days.

"I will ask him," she said as they reached the edge of village. "Where are you going?"

"I just wanted to go for a ride, but I will accompany you to where you have to go if you will permit?"

They continued to talk about painting as they made their way to Mrs. Gwenllian's home, who met them at the door.

"Hello Rebecca," she said, looking at Johannes.

"Hello Mrs. Gwenllian. You are looking lovely in that color," she said as she tied up her horse.

"Thank you dear."

"This is..." Rebecca began as Johannes walked towards Mrs. Gwenllian.

"Yes dear, this is Johannes." Rebecca watched him walk with his arms outstretched.

"Hello Auntie Beatrice." Her stomach dropped.

"Put me down Johannes. I don't want the neighbors to see. Well, my plan was to introduce you two over tea but it looks like another plan of mine has failed." She set off into the house.

Rebecca stared at Johannes who gave her a cheeky grin. He held his arm out, encouraging her to walk through the cottage door first.

"Auntie?" Rebecca said, feeling very embarrassed as she felt her cheeks flush.

"Yes," he chuckled. "But don't worry. I agree with everything you said." She felt awful.

"Sit. Sit. Now tell me how you two met before I had a chance to introduce you properly." Mrs. Gwenllian busied herself pouring tea.

"Well, I was buying produce yesterday Auntie and Rebecca's stall had the best potatoes."

"Oh you do, don't you dear? Rebecca, I can tell you that Johannes is quite the painter, too."

"Yes, he was telling me about his painting," Rebecca said, not wanting to look at him.

"I am trying to encourage Rebecca to do some painting with me. She doesn't think her Papa would approve." She shot Johannes a glaring look.

"You get your Papa to speak to me Rebecca. We will sort him out. How is he dear?"

"He is well. He wanted me to pick up another batch of tonic."

Mrs. Gwenllian placed down her teacup. "I shall put it near the door now so we don't forget." She waddled off to her kitchen.

Rebecca turned to face Johannes. "Please don't encourage her to get involved. I told you I would ask Papa," she said in a serious tone.

"Of course. I didn't mean to be the cause any offence."

"Well you have," she shot back. She sipped her tea as she looked around the room. On the far wall in the corner hung her painting of the doll. She got to her feet, aware of Johannes watching her.

"This is one of mine," she said in a low voice. She'd forgotten all about the painting and the doll. Johannes walked up behind her and looked at the painting.

"I like it. The colors are so strong and the imagery...what was your inspiration?"

"Just a dream," she said quietly, trying to make her way past him. Mrs. Gwenllian bustled her way back into the room and sat down with a thud.

"There. My mind gets away from me sometimes. I have become so forgetful lately. Ahh, yes. That's one of Rebecca's works." Mrs. Gwenllian looked at the teapot as she wriggled in her seat.

"You didn't tell me you were going to hang it."

"Well..." Mrs. Gwenllian hedged. "You left it here and I thought I'd hang it until you wanted it back."

Rebecca knew she wouldn't take the painting home—couldn't. Papa would take one look at it and smash it into pieces. They never spoke of that day.

"So, I am thinking of holding a dinner party and I would like you to attend Rebecca," Mrs. Gwenllian announced.

Rebecca could feel Johannes looking at her.

"Yes, you must come," he chimed in.

"What kind of dinner party?" She was instantly hesitant.

"Just a few people dear." Mrs. Gwenllian waved her hand around as if to dismiss any possible arguments Rebecca may have. "It is more of a get together than a party and I will not take no for an answer. You need to come out of your shell Rebecca."

She felt she was out of her shell enough.

"We need to talk about what you are going to wear. It will be formal, but not too formal, and we will have to do something with your hair..."

"Yes Aunt, I think Rebecca gets the picture," Johannes interrupted as he saw Rebecca becoming distressed. "I'm sure you will give her plenty of advice before the event."

Mrs. Gwenllian continued to mutter about the party as she cleared the teacups away.

"Do you need me to accompany you home?"

"No thank you. I am meeting a friend," she said and immediately wished she hadn't said anything. Mrs. Gwenllian had stopped cleaning and was looking at her.

"I think it is a wonderful idea Johannes escorts you home Rebecca," she said. "I'm sure your father would like to meet him."

"Yes, but I have another engagement to tend to." She was desperate to get away.

"Well, I insist that Johannes goes with you."

Johannes looked at each of them. He was trapped.

"I do not think it is appropriate he accompany me when there are so many people watching him to see where he goes and to whom he speaks to. Thank you kindly for the tonic and the tea. I really should be going. Good day."

Rebecca scooped the tonic as she made her way to the door. She mounted her horse and left them both standing in the front garden as she rode away. By the time she reached the high end of the village she had stopped feeling angry. She looked around to see if either of them had followed her. When she saw Johannes following her home she just shook her head. Cedric was waiting for her. She shot off along another track that would take her to Cedric. She urged her horse to outrun Johannes'. The wind had gathered behind her as if to help her along. She'd promised to meet Cedric for a bite to eat.

She did enjoy Cedric's company. He was so mysterious. He looked at the world in a different way. She'd spent a lot of time with him yet still didn't really know that much about him. She could be herself around him. She felt at peace when Cedric was around. She would catch glimpses of him staring at her. They would tell tales of how they thought the world out there was. She'd listen to his endless tales of where he grew up and what he saw. She felt he was like a brother to her. She knew Cedric would watch out for her and she would do the same for him. She liked seeing him happy and he always seemed happy around her.

Her horse galloped along the track as Rebecca tried to see through the thick forest. Watching the clearing ahead, she held back and waited to see if Johannes was there. After waiting for what felt like an hour, he finally rode past. She watched his hair move and how he sat on the horse. He held his head high. She couldn't take her eyes off him. There was something about him she liked while there were many things that infuriated her, even though she'd only just met him.

He looked elegant and strong on his horse. She watched him until he was out of the clearing before encouraging her horse to move on.

"Hello Rebecca."

She jumped forward before turning towards Cedric. "Will you please stop doing that!" She lifted her finger and pointed it at him. "You are going to spook the horse and I will be thrown one day."

"Sorry. You know I like to see the surprise on your face. Who was that?" He moved forward out of the trees and looked to where Johannes had ridden to.

"Oh, just someone I met in town the other day," she said. Her hands instinctively ran over her shoulders where there was still bruising. She didn't know whether to tell him about her dream; she wasn't sure if it was a dream. "He's a painter also. You might like to buy some of his paintings."

"I don't think so. You are able to keep up with our demand, aren't you? Why would we need to buy from anyone else?" Cedric snapped at her.

Rebecca shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I just thought I'd suggest it."

"Well, the answer is no," he said, cutting her short with a sharp tone. "Now. Lunch is ready for us." He didn't look back at her; he just walked through the clearing. "Father said he would be interested in meeting you next Sunday at the market," he said as he sat on the blanket. His tone was still sharp.

"Alright." She sat opposite him.

"Rebecca, are you thinking of seeing more of that man?"

She stared at Cedric. She didn't know what to say. His face was stern and his eyes were cold. He looked resolutely over her shoulder as he fired his questions at her. "Well, are you?"

"I'm not seeing anyone Cedric. I told you I only met him this week. I don't really know anything about him and to be truthful, I don't think I want to get to know him any better. Besides..." Cedric finally looked at her, waiting for her to finish her sentence. "Besides...I have too much work to do with the farm and painting your paintings."

The hardness of Cedric's face softened slightly. "That's right. We would hate to see the quality of your paintings fall." He held out a small plate of sandwiches and she shook her head.

"I'm sorry I used that tone with you Rebecca," he said, putting the plate down. "That man will only bring you heartache."

For the first time in a long while Rebecca felt uncomfortable with Cedric's words. "I don't want to see you get hurt. Besides, you already have someone who loves you very much," he said in a quiet but very clear voice.

Rebecca's skin crawled. She didn't want Cedric to speak anymore. He held out the sandwiches again and she looked at him. His eyes looked sunken in his pale skin and for the first time she saw his teeth. They were tiny. More like raised bumps pushing against his gums.

"I'm sorry Cedric, but I have to go. I left Papa with all my chores to do and I should really be home helping him. Thank you for a lovely lunch but I really must go." She got to her feet and ran to her horse.

"Rebecca, don't go," he called. "I'm sorry. Rebecca...Rebecca."

"Tell your father I look forward to meeting him next week."

She shuddered at the thought of Cedric as anything but a brother. She felt sick to her

stomach as she again urged her horse to go as fast as it could. She felt dirty. She wanted to get the image of Cedric smiling out of her head. Those tiny teeth made her cringe. She ducked and weaved her way towards the track again when she could hear more horse's hooves.

She slowly moved towards the track when she saw Johannes ride past again. She kicked her horse and steered him onto the track. She was gaining on him. She kicked her horse again and again to chase him down.

Johannes turned around to see her gaining on him. He smiled at her as he kicked his own horse. The two rode side by side along the track at great speed. Rebecca's hair flowed long behind her as she hit the front. She looked over her shoulder to see Johannes lean forward, trying to get his horse to go faster.

She rounded the corner first before kicking again at her horse. She looked at him and smiled before she pulled her horse up. Johannes went racing past her and she pulled her horse back in the other direction. She laughed as she waited for him to turn around and come back.

"I would have had you if we were going to the next corner," he said, coming to her side.

"Ha. I don't think so. What are you doing out here anyway? I told you not to follow me."

"Yes, but it was a choice between having you or my Aunty yell at me. She won." Rebecca smiled as she shook her head. "So I am here to accompany you home," he said.

"Fine." Rebecca trotted her horse.

"You are very mysterious Rebecca," he said with a smile. She didn't know what to say to him. She gave him a puzzled look. "You are a very strong-willed girl, yet you do things you don't want to do to make others happy. When Aunty announced she was going to have this party, you looked like you had seen a ghost. You looked extremely uncomfortable yet you said you would attend because you know it means a lot to my Aunty."

"As you said before, there's no point in arguing with your Aunty. You are only going to lose."

"Yes." He smiled. "But also with your painting. You keep that very guarded."

"No I don't," she argued. "If you are trying to find out more about me, you are going about it the wrong way." She could feel her patience dwindling. "What about you? You come into the village and no one knows what you do. If you want to have a girl that sits down all day and drinks tea, then I am sure your Aunty will have the names of many girls." She kicked her horse and tried to leave him behind. He kicked his horse and caught up to her easily. He reached over and grabbed hold of the reins.

"Rebecca...please, that was not what I was saying. Besides, who said anything about wanting a girl?"

"Isn't that what you are here for? To find yourself a wife?" Her tone was sharp. She could see the oak tree; she wasn't too far from home now. "That's the turn to the farm. You can go and report to your Aunt that I have arrived home safely."

"Oh no. I am here to meet your Papa," he said as he raced ahead. Rebecca didn't want him to go to the farm. She set off after him. They rounded the corner with her giving chase. She tried to get his attention but he refused to look back. She desperately wanted to get to the farm first. She was concerned about what Papa would say if she simply returned with this man. She pushed her horse to its limits, but it struggled to catch his this time. She saw him pulling up allowing her to catch up before he lengthened the gap between them again.

Chapter Eleven

Johannes' horse galloped past the farm's fence post first. Rebecca chased in close pursuit. She could see Papa opening the front door. He looked at her and then at the stranger his daughter was chasing. In an instant she was home.

"Hello Papa," she said as she jumped clear from her horse. "Come and meet Mrs. Gwenllian's nephew. She sent him to ensure I got home safely. You know how she is."

Papa nodded and smiled as he walked over to Johannes who had dismounted his horse.

"Hello Sir, I am Johannes. It is a pleasure to meet you." Papa returned the handshake while he looked him over. Rebecca stood close to Papa.

"What a beautiful farm you have here. Is that a stream?" He pointed in the direction of the Dead Forest. "I'm sorry if my unannounced arrival has caused you any inconvenience, but my Auntie was adamant I ensure Rebecca's safe return." Papa continued to look him over.

"You have yet to learn how resourceful my daughter is," he said with a laugh. "Please, come in." Papa gestured towards the cottage and pushed Rebecca out of the way.

"Did you get my tonic Rebecca?"

"Yes Papa." She shot him a glare.

"You are another admirer of my daughter's talent," Papa said as he watched Johannes eye the collection of paintings on the walls.

"Yes, Rebecca is very talented. She underestimates her ability," Johannes said, turning towards Papa before glancing at Rebecca who was preparing tea. "I would like to ask your permission for Rebecca to teach me to be a better artist." Papa continued to scrutinize him. "I am willing to pay. I was thinking after market day. I am prepared to come out here and paint with her."

Papa looked at Rebecca who was busying herself by packing her painting supplies away all the while listening to the conversation and shooting glances every now and again.

"Well, the decision must come from Rebecca," he said.

"But Papa, you need all the help you can get for the farm. By me taking the time to teach Johannes how to paint, I am taking time away from what needs to be done around here," she said. "Paying or not. Time is not a luxury we have."

"I would be prepared to help you with the farm chores on the weekend. I do get sick of sitting in a chair poring over papers. It would be good to work in the sun. I could dedicate two hours a day. What if that was part of the payment?" Rebecca glanced at her father. She knew she was going to lose the battle.

"See you next Sunday Johannes," Papa called as he waved Johannes off.

"I can't believe you said yes to him Papa." Rebecca scowled as she returned to the cottage.

"He seems like a decent chap and we could use his strength in the wheat field," Papa defended his decision.

"I can help you in the wheat field Papa. We do not need him."

"Why are you so against this man, you have only just met him?"

"Because...he asks too many questions Papa. He makes me feel uncomfortable." She caught Papa smiling. "What are you smiling at?"

"Nothing...nothing." He started to laugh.

"Tell me," she demanded.

"I think you like him."

"I do not Papa. He has an air of arrogance about him that I can't stand." Papa was laughing heartily now. "Stop laughing Papa!" She scowled again and walked outside, stomping her way to the stable to tend to her horse.

When she returned to the cottage, she washed her hands in the bucket refusing to look at Papa.

"Oh come on. It was funny," he said as he put his arm around her. "I'm sorry if it upset you. You don't have to paint with him. Just tell him I changed my mind and we really can't spare the time."

"No Papa. If you think he is a decent person, then I will do as you wish."

"But only if you want to," he said as he turned away from her.

She knew he was having another go at her about him, but she tried not to let it bother her too much. Her mind wandered back to her dream. Mrs. Gwenllian said he was the love of her life.

True to his word, Johannes returned to the farm the following Sunday. She looked at the small bag he carried, knowing it contained his paintbrushes.

"I'm very much looking forward to today."

"I'm sure you are," she said, pointing to where Papa was. "Papa is waiting for you in the field. I have the washing to do." She didn't give him a chance to say anything as she turned her back. She couldn't help the feeling she got when she looked at him.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts and tried to focus on her chores. She collected their clothes in a basket and headed to the stream.

"I'll be a while," she said as she walked past Papa working in the vegetable patch. He nodded as he looked up to the sky and watched two crows circling high above. Rebecca shook her head at her father's obsession with the crows while she walked to the stream.

She kicked her shoes off before walking in up to her knees with the basket. She waded her way to the rocks and nestled the basket between them. The water was a welcome relief for such a hot day. She pulled her nightdress from the basket and dipped it into the water. The sound of the running water helped her relax as she scrubbed her clothes.

Rebecca took a break when her hands started to ache. She let the hard material slip through her fingers as she placed the clothes back in the basket. She used her hands to push her to the deeper part of the stream, bringing her legs up and letting her head fall under the water. She tilted her neck back and brought her face to the surface, floating on her back. A heavy sigh escaped her as she watched the clouds drift by.

She wriggled her fingers under the water, causing bubbles to rise to the surface. She lost track of all space and time as a group of butterflies danced across the water and lingered above her head.

She watched the cluster fight against the gentle breeze that pushed them closer to her face. She kicked herself away as she continued to watch them, smiling as the colors on their

wings reflected in the light. She lifted a hand clear of the water and moved it towards the cluster. Two of them landed on her hand as she continued to kick gently through the water.

A giggle escaped her lips as they tickled her hand. She felt at peace. Just as she turned herself around in the water, a crow swooped from nowhere and snatched one of the butterflies off her hand. She screamed as she felt a rush of air blow past her. The crow's wings narrowly missed her head while its claws scratched the skin on the back of her hand.

Caught by surprise she pulled her head under the water to get away from it. Water flooded into her mouth and up her nose. It splashed everywhere as she kicked to regain her footing. She spluttered trying to catch her breath and push her hair out of her face. She looked for the crow as she continued to cough water out of her lungs.

The back of her throat ached as the water stung her lungs. She gasped as she dragged in huge pockets of air to fill her lungs and swam towards the rocks. She retrieved the basket of wet clothes; the crow had spooked her. As she waded back to the stream's edge, she saw Johannes and Papa running towards her. She put the basket on the grassy edge and tried to get out before they reached her. She put one foot on the bank and as she tried to pull herself out, she slipped. She tried again and failed as she slipped on the wet grass.

"What are you doing?" she heard Papa call. "What happened? Why did you scream?"

"Nothing." She made another attempt to get out of the stream. She waded her way along the bank to find a lower spot. Johannes reached for her by the time she tried to get out again. She pushed his hand out of the way and hauled herself out. She stood dripping before him and Papa.

"Good grief Rebecca. Go to the cottage and get changed immediately," Papa said.

"Well, I didn't know I was going to have an audience," she said, looking at Johannes. Picking up her basket, she set off towards the cottage.

"Here...let me help you," Johannes said, trying to take the basket from her. She pulled it away from him and placed it on her hip before continuing on her way. She saw them walking back towards the cottage as she put the basket down and went to her small cupboard. She stripped off her wet clothes and quickly got into dry ones before the cottage door opened again. She had pulled her wet hair into a bun before Johannes saw her again.

"I am ready to paint," he said as he produced his paintbrushes.

"Well it looks like I have to be ready too," she said as she pushed past him. "But I have washing that needs to be done."

"I can do that," Papa said as he took the basket from her. She glared at him as he smiled. "Now, you two go and paint. I want to see the masterpieces."

"Well, shall we paint?" Johannes asked, trying to get her to smile.

"Fine. Where is your canvas?"

"I thought I'd watch you for the first lesson. I want to see you in action, but I brought my brushes with me just in case."

Rebecca shook her head. "And what do you hope to learn? If anything, I should be watching your technique." Rebecca collected one of the paintings she had been working on along with her brushes and paints.

"Is it important to paint outside?"

"No. You paint wherever you can. Surroundings do not dictate what you put on your canvas." She was already getting annoyed with his questions. She was used to painting on

her own and having an onlooker unsettled her. "Can you please sit and watch. You are distracting me," she said as she looked at him. She got a good look at his eyes. They were crystal blue.

"What is it?" he said as he wiped his top lip and nose. It was the first time she had seen him uncomfortable.

"Nothing. You should let me paint your eyes one day." She turned and gave her full attention to her painting. He sat behind her and watched over her shoulder as she wove her magic.

"How did you do that?"

"I hold the brush like this and let it run down the canvas." She repeated the stroke to show him.

"Can you show me how you hold your brush?" Rebecca turned around to show him. She looked at her hand as it grasped the brush. He ran his hand over hers to take hold of the brush. She shivered from his touch, shied away from him and turned back to her painting.

"Please continue," he said. He sounded closer. She swirled the brush in the small ink jar. As she lifted the brush she felt his lips on the nape of her neck. Caught by surprise she sat up straight and pulled away from him.

"I am sorry. I don't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"You caught me by surprise," she said as she tried to focus on the painting and then looked around.

"I saw him walk to the stream," Johannes said, sensing she was looking for Papa. She turned to look at him. He looked just as he did in her dream. He leaned forward and placed a kiss on her lips. She looked at him while he kissed her. She saw he had his eyes closed and followed his lead. The kiss was soft and wet. When he pulled back slightly she slowly opened her eyes to see he wasn't far from her lips. She shut her eyes again and leaned forward to kiss him back. A wave of warmth washed over her. She couldn't hear anything; she was completely lost to him. It was a great new feeling. A feeling of surprise, desire and risk.

She opened her mouth slightly and pushed onto his mouth harder, then pulled away from him and turned. She didn't want to feel embarrassed. She didn't know what to say to him. She felt his hand on the back of her neck and turned to look at him.

"I enjoy spending time with you Rebecca," he said. She couldn't look into his eyes, she wanted the feeling to last. His hand gently cupped the side of her face as he tilted her face to his. "And I would like to spend more time with you. Would you be opposed if I came out to the farm everyday?" Rebecca's mind had gone blank, she didn't respond. She liked the way his hand felt on her skin. Her hand reached over the top of his and held onto it.

"I think we need to take things slow," Rebecca forced herself to say. He lowered his hand and pulled away from her.

"Of course." He looked at her and reached his fingers towards her painting. Her dream flashed before her eyes. She reached out and grabbed his hand.

"No Johannes," she said as she jumped to her feet. He looked up at her in surprise before getting to his feet.

"What is it? I was only going to ask you about this part here," he said, picking the painting up. Her heart pounded as he walked towards her.

"I think we have done enough painting for today," she said as she took the painting

from him. She snatched her supplies and set off back to the cottage, leaving Johannes behind.

"Rebecca! Rebecca!" he called, but she did not stop. She didn't see Johannes leave soon after. She didn't know what to do. She turned away and said she wanted to lie down when Papa asked how their painting session went.

That night she dreamt of Marguerite. It was the first time in a long while she'd even thought of the woman. In her dream Marguerite was standing at the edge of the Dead Forest calling for her. When she got close enough, she could see Marguerite had aged terribly. Her dress was shredded along the bottom while her face looked sad and sallow.

"You can't go to the market Rebecca," Marguerite pleaded. "Promise me that you won't go."

"But I have to go. We need the money and I have to sell my paintings. I have to go." She turned to return to the cottage.

"No, you can't go. You will be in grave danger if you do. Please don't go. I'm begging you not to."

As she walked away, she could still hear Marguerite calling her to stay away from the market. When she woke, she stared at the forest for the longest time, wondering what the message in the dream was about and why she shouldn't go to the market.

During the next week, Rebecca spoke with Mrs. Gwenllian about the impending party. Mrs. Gwenllian fussed over her, instructing her to wear her hair up but then in the next conversation would say how lovely it was and that it should be worn down. Rebecca didn't mind Mrs. Gwenllian's ramblings. She'd often had to pull herself away from recalling the kiss she and Johannes had shared. She could still feel him on her lips, still taste him. She wanted to touch him, feel his skin. Run her fingers over his body.

"What are you daydreaming about dear?" Mrs. Gwenllian asked as she peered over the rim of her teacup.

"Oh nothing," she lied.

"You have that look again."

She turned away and said, "I don't have any look."

"Yes you do. You have the look of a girl who doesn't know what she wants. You know what you want Rebecca. You just have to go out there and get it."

Johannes kept his word about helping on the farm but at the same time kept his distance from her. The sun was beating down as he and Papa worked in the field. Rebecca took them mugs of water so they could continue working.

The first mugs she took she dropped when she saw Johannes working without his shirt on. She had come around the corner of the corral to see Papa and Johannes sawing a tree. She stopped in her tracks and became mesmerized as she watched him working in a smooth rhythm. His upper body glistened with sweat. His damp hair hung around his face and stuck to his neck. She couldn't help but release a small gasp as she delighted in what she saw. She bit down on her lower lip as she watched his muscles flex. She felt relaxed but her hardening nipples indicated a strong attraction.

She was hypnotized by his movements, which stopped abruptly when Papa noticed she was standing there, staring at Johannes and holding the two cups.

Papa startled her when he called her name. It was like his voice woke her from

sleepwalking. She jumped, dropping both cups as she blinked her eyes and tried to look away. Johannes laughed as she scrambled to collect the cups and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. Rebecca smirked as she returned to the cottage to collect more water for them both. She felt her cheeks flush but she didn't care. She was reveling in this new sensation. It felt like her body had been asleep for many years and had just awoken with an abundance of energy. Much to her disappointment, when she returned with two new cups of water, he had covered himself with his shirt.

Rebecca decided to distract herself and worked on her paintings outside to allow them to dry quickly. She often found herself looking at him, her mind having wandered away from her painting.

With Mrs. Gwenllian ordering Rebecca about and her usual chores, the week passed by quickly. It was a good thing Johannes came to the farm and helped with a few chores or she wouldn't have got the paintings finished in time. She was finally getting to meet her buyer.

On the day of the market she hadn't seen Cedric all day. She hoped nothing had happened to him. Johannes spent most of the morning with her helping her sell the produce, much to the disgust of Patricia and her friends. Some of Johannes' followers purchased products from Rebecca while the others criticized her.

"Do you think it is acceptable to sell rotten vegetables?" Patricia asked. Rebecca looked at her holding a tomato in her hand.

"We don't have rotten vegetables. You must have brought that from your own garden," Rebecca snapped back. Johannes stared at Patricia.

"I don't believe we have anything here to sell you," Johannes said to her. Patricia's smile faded as Johannes comments sunk in. "I must go and visit Auntie," he said to Rebecca. "She was very impressed with what you have done for the party."

He leaned forward and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Rebecca's cheeks flushed as she shyly looked around. She saw Patricia's smirk fade as Johannes kissed her. Patricia pursed her lips and threw the piece of rotten fruit to the ground, storming off with the group of girls in tow.

Rebecca smiled as she waved Johannes off. As she looked back to her produce, she saw Cedric standing before her. She jumped and smiled at him, the smile rapidly fading when he didn't return it. He stared at her with a face like stone and bleak eyes.

"What are you doing?" he snapped. "I told you my father wanted to meet you and you keep him waiting."

She didn't realize she had to go and meet him. "I'm sorry, I thought he was going to come here," she said, looking at the stall.

"My father is a very busy man. He doesn't need to be held up by the likes of you," he sneered at her. His words were cold, matching the expression on his face.

"Cedric," a voice came from behind him. Rebecca hadn't noticed the man standing behind him. "That's no way to speak to a lady." He curled his fingers over Cedric's shoulder and gently pushed him out of his way. "Hello Rebecca. Finally we meet. I am Cedric's father, Rutherford."

He reached out his hand while his words hissed. Rebecca tried to smile despite feeling extremely uncomfortable. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end as he slowly moved

towards her. He was dressed from head to toe in black, the same as Cedric. Her heart started to race as he inched closer. His presence didn't sit well with her. She had to fight her instincts to run away from him. She didn't understand why she felt this way, especially when she'd only just laid eyes on him. His fingers gently touched her palm as she reached out to shake his hand. His hands felt cold and clammy. She shuddered slightly as he gripped her hand.

"Oh, the pleasure is all mine. It's lovely to finally meet you." She felt his eyes piercing into hers. His eyes were like Cedric's. Cold and clear, yet something kept her looking.

"Well, I do have other visits to make, so perhaps I should collect this week's paintings and we shall be on our way," he said before leaning towards Cedric and whispering something to him.

Cedric kept staring at Rebecca and then broke into a smile, nodding at his father's whisper. He nodded again before walking away.

"Goodbye Cedric," Rebecca called as she watched him walk to where Johannes had been moments before.

"I must say I admire your stamina to work so hard in the field and then paint through the night," Rutherford said as he moved around the stall. Rebecca felt cold as he advanced on her.

"It is what I love to do," she said, trying to move to the cart.

"Yes. We should all do what we love to do. You have to follow your passion everywhere," he hissed. Rebecca worked quickly to get the paintings out for him. "There's no need to be so hasty."

Rebecca turned and held the paintings between them. "There you are," she said as she forced a bright smile as she tried not to look at him.

"Thank you dear. Cedric told me that you paint from your dreams." Rutherford stepped in closer to her. She nodded.

"But my dreams have been changing. They have become lighter," she said. She felt naked talking so openly about her dreams to strangers. She wished she'd kept her mouth shut.

"Your dreams intrigue me. Your paintings are so full of life and despair. It's a shame for me, though, that your dreams have become lighter. Cedric had said how you wanted to see the paintings at my house. This, unfortunately, is impossible...for now." Rebecca was relieved. After meeting Rutherford she didn't want to be anywhere near him. "I do appreciate you are my son's friend. He has never been one to make a friend easily, let alone keep one. He does enjoy your company, but if you are wishing to pursue anything more than a friendship..." Rebecca shuddered again. "I am afraid that would be impossible." He leaned in close and breathed in deeply as she thought about his words.

"Cedric," she said, looking past Rutherford to see him return. She moved away from Rutherford and handed Cedric the paintings. She could see the villagers had gathered together as onlookers.

"Well, it was a great pleasure to meet you," she said as she moved around him and stood next to Cedric. Rutherford looked her over and smiled.

"Oh no, the pleasure was all mine. I do get great enjoyment from your paintings. I want to make a new arrangement, strike a new deal. I want you to paint for me and only me. I am a businessman and I know a great deal when I see one. I want you to paint me at least

three paintings a week. I must say I enjoyed your earlier works more, the darker paintings. They seemed to have more life in them than the ones you are painting now."

Rebecca nodded. "That's the time in my life I was going through, when I had no voice. I felt like I had nothing."

"But now you feel like you have something to live for?" he asked. It felt like he could see straight through her. "Good. Very good." He put his hat on and refused to look away from her. Rebecca looked at Cedric who was also staring at her. She smiled and said goodbye to them both.

"Perhaps we could meet for lunch," Cedric said as he looked at his father and nodded. He returned his gaze to her, waiting for her response to his invitation.

"I don't know if I have the time today," she said. His face turned to stone as he stared at her. "Your father had just put in another order of paintings and I have a lot of chores to do at home. I'm sorry."

"'tis fine. You will make it up to me another time," he said as he turned. She felt bad but she was very uncomfortable with his father about.

"Yes Cedric. We must go. Come now." Cedric reluctantly followed in his father's shadow while continuing to stare at Rebecca. He didn't take his eyes off her. She felt frozen on the spot until the cart was out of their sight.

Rebecca didn't tell Papa she had met Rutherford. He had looked very tired when she returned to the farm. He dismissed her questions of how he felt and continued on with his work. She heard a constant mumble coming from him. He was distracted. She tried to get him to talk about what was on his mind, but failed.

"I'm fine." He became more agitated when she asked again. "I just have things to do Rebecca. And so do you."

For the next week, she worked hard in the fields and stayed up late into the night to finish her artworks for Mr. Rutherford. The constant nagging from Mrs. Gwenllian about the party was beginning to test her nerves. The party was only a day away and she still didn't feel she was ready.

Chapter Twelve

Rebecca had given the seamstress explicit directions on how she wanted the dress to look. She had painted a picture of what she wanted. It looked like the dress Marguerite wore. It was long, the bodice hugging her torso tight until it reached her waist before flowing out behind her. Rebecca had never seen colors used like they were on a dress. The top of the dress started out the faintest of blues before progressively turning to a deeper, bolder hue as it progressed towards the floor. Mrs. Gwenllian had scowled at the picture, saying the dress was too flamboyant for the kind of party she was hoping to hold, but conversely smiled and clapped when Rebecca arrived for a fitting.

"Well, this is probably the only party I will ever attend, so if you don't like the dress then the situation is easily solved," Rebecca snipped.

"Fine. Wear the dress, all I'm just saying is it might be a little too revealing," Mrs. Gwenllian said. "You are going to wear your hair up aren't you?"

"I haven't decided." Rebecca twirled on the spot making the skirt flow out. The dress was exactly how she wanted. She felt like a princess.

"The guests will begin arriving at about seven. Dinner will be half after eight. Oh, I am very excited about this party Rebecca. You will have such a lovely time and you will get to see Johannes in a suit. He is such a fine young man, don't you agree? You know the young women in town are fighting to get his attention?" she said none-too-subtly as she watched Rebecca's face.

Rebecca simply shrugged her shoulders. "I can't help it. He's the one that came to me."

"And what exactly is going on there dear?" Mrs. Gwenllian asked without looking at her this time. "Hmm?"

"I have been wondering the same thing," she said as she moved behind the screen to get changed. "Are you sure I can get ready for the party here?"

Mrs. Gwenllian nodded. "Of course dear, of course."

Mrs. Gwenllian brushed Rebecca's hair till it gleamed. It hung beautifully over her shoulders and down to her waist.

"Stay here dear. I have something for you," Mrs. Gwenllian said as she stepped down from a stool. Rebecca turned to watch her walk to a side table and remove the lid from a small container. "I have been saving these for a special occasion and I think tonight is that night. I never had a chance to wear them and I think they would look beautiful in your hair." She returned to Rebecca's side with two jeweled hairclips.

"They are lovely," Rebecca gasped as she looked at them.

Mrs. Gwenllian shifted back to the stool and ran the brush through Rebecca's hair once again. "Let's get them in shall we?"

Rebecca felt butterflies dancing in the pit of her stomach as nighttime drew near. She stood before the mirror and looked at herself, starting from her hair and working her way down. She held a mask to cover her face. The bold colors of the mask matched beautifully with her dress. The clips sparkled against her dark hair. She heard Mrs. Gwenllian gasp

before she turned to her.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing my dear. I was just thinking of how much you look like your mother. I don't mean to upset you but if I didn't know better, I would have said it was your mother standing before me now and not you."

"Really?" Rebecca smiled before turning back to the mirror. "I often wonder what she would have looked like at my age."

"You are the image of her," Mrs. Gwenllian said in a soft tone. "Well, I'd better start my finishing touches. You must stay in here until it's time."

Rebecca nodded as she watched Mrs. Gwenllian in the mirror to see her reflection waddle off. Now that she was alone, the butterflies seemed to multiply. She paced the room trying to calm her nerves. She looked at the mask when she heard the door open. It was Johannes.

He pushed the door shut before he stopped to look at her. "What's wrong?" she said when he stood on the spot staring at her. "Johannes?"

"Ah, ah, not a thing...you look...beautiful," he said. Rebecca lowered her head in embarrassment. "Why do you do that?" he asked as he walked towards her.

"Do what?" She pressed her palms against her stomach in an attempt to stop it from churning.

"You look away every time I give you a compliment. Are you embarrassed by my words?"

She shifted on her feet. "Well...yes, I am embarrassed by your words, but only because I doubt they are true," she said quietly.

Johannes reached for her face and tilted her head towards his. "I am not the kind of man who says things that are untrue. You are going to be the belle of the ball. If anyone has something to worry about, it shall be me when everyone is looking at you." He laughed.

Rebecca smiled at him. She liked the way his laugh put her at ease.

"You are too beautiful for words," he said as he leaned in and kissed her. The butterflies in the stomach died. Her head swam as he wrapped his arms around her body and pulled her in tight. She instinctively circled her arms around his waist and held onto him with the same amount of pressure. She parted her lips and let his tongue move into her mouth. His kiss left her body feeling weak and desperate for more. She dug her fingers into his back as he kissed her over and over again. She wanted him to kiss her like that forever. Her body felt warm and she noticed the same wetness between her legs as when he first kissed her.

She pulled his body against hers as he snaked his hand up to the nape of her neck and held her there. Her lips throbbed as he clamped his mouth hard over hers. She didn't care that it hurt; she wanted him to kiss her like that everywhere.

"Oh Rebecca, we mustn't. We can't. Not like this," he said as he kissed her again.

"I know. We have to stop. Your Aunty," she replied, not stopping either.

They both stepped out of each other's embrace but kept kissing. Rebecca rolled her face away from his mouth as he continued to kiss her cheek before moving to her neck.

"I thought you said we had to stop." She giggled while he continued nuzzling her.

"I am stopping. This is me stopping," he said as he continued to kiss her.

Rebecca rolled her head back to catch his lips. She leaned forward to kiss him again but

did not move her hands from behind her back.

This game continued until they heard the rattle of the door handle. They pulled away from each other just as the door opened. Rebecca turned her back to the door and quickly wiped her mouth.

"Oh Johannes...what are you doing in here?" she heard Mrs. Gwenllian say.

"Just making sure Rebecca is comfortable with the party, that's all Aunty. She looks stunning, doesn't she," he said as she turned around to face her.

Mrs. Gwenllian looked from Johannes to Rebecca and then back to Johannes before breaking into a wide smile.

"Well, as long as you both are comfortable, we can get on with the party. Some of the guests have arrived and I need to go and socialize. Johannes, I think you ought to come with me and let Rebecca fix herself up before making her way," she said with a grin.

"If you don't mind Aunty, I would like to accompany Rebecca. She is a little nervous and I would like to be there with her when she makes her grand entrance," he said, taking hold of her hand.

"Of course," Mrs. Gwenllian conceded. The light in his eyes indicated he would not brook any argument. She smiled at the two of them before reaching for the door handle. "Well, don't be too long," she said before closing the door behind her.

Johannes gave her hand a little shake before they both laughed after the door shut.

"That was very close." She looked at him and gasped when she saw her lipstick on Johannes mouth, reaching out her hand to clean it off. "So much for hiding the evidence," she giggled.

"Oh, I have spoken to Aunty about my feelings for you. She says she's very happy for us," he said as he leaned in for another kiss.

"No Johannes. You heard your Aunt, we can't be long. Besides, I have to clean your face up now." He laughed as she sat before the mirror.

As she dabbed the makeup on her face, Johannes stood behind her and stooped to kiss her neck. She let her head roll as he clamped his mouth onto her neck.

"I do like it when you kiss me there," she said, trying to open her eyes.

"And I like kissing you there," he said as he pulled away. "Come now. If I get carried away, we will never leave this room."

Rebecca quickly fixed the last touches to her makeup before standing and correcting her dress.

"Shall we?" Johannes asked as he extended his elbow.

"We shall." Rebecca smiled back at him and looped her arm with his.

Her dress floated along silently as they made their way along the hallway to the grand room. Johannes kept his eyes on her the whole way there.

"What are you looking at?" she said as she adjusted her clips.

"You. I can't take my eyes off you," he said with a wide smile.

"Well, you have to."

"Alright. How do you feel?"

"Nervous," she said, looking straight ahead.

"Well, there's nothing to be nervous about. You look beautiful. Everyone is going to love you." He squeezed her hand as he opened the door.

Johannes stepped back from the door and motioned her through. Candles dotted along the ground and in the trees to fill the night with light.

Rebecca held her mask close to her face as she strained to recognize others.

"Dear," she heard Mrs. Gwenllian call. "Over here. Over here." She waved for Rebecca and Johannes to come over. "There are some people I would like you to meet. This is my nephew Johannes and I'm sure you know Rebecca. She is Phillip's daughter. Doesn't she look simply stunning?" Mrs. Gwenllian's voice faded in her ears as she continued to look around the room.

There was a group of people huddled near the bonfire. Rebecca didn't think she recognized anyone there. Her gaze continued to roam around the room before looking back at Mrs. Gwenllian.

"Don't you think so Rebecca?" the elder woman said.

Rebecca didn't know what she had been asked. She could feel them all looking at her, waiting for her response.

"I'm sorry. I was a million miles away," she said apologetically, feeling Johannes squeeze her hand.

"I'm sure Rebecca has no interest in that Aunt," Johannes said with a laugh. "Shall we get something to eat?" He led Rebecca to the small table laden with food before Mrs. Gwenllian could intervene.

"I'm sorry. I was so interested in the masks the people have. I have become too good at tuning out your Aunt. I know it's an awful thing to say, but sometimes I just can't help it," Rebecca said.

"No need to apologize. She was only babbling on, nothing of real importance," Johannes said. "Something to drink?"

"Yes please." She lowered her mask to the table before taking a cup from his hands.

She turned towards the crowd, looking over the rim of her cup as she watched people interact with each other. Rebecca thought the women wore lovely dresses; she'd never seen jewels like the ones that were dripping from the many heads, ears, necks and wrists.

She couldn't help but look at the woman hiding behind a peacock mask. Her bright red curly hair was a dead giveaway. It was Patricia and she couldn't look away. She wondered what she was doing at the party, if she was going to try to make a scene.

"What are you looking at?" Johannes asked, moving closer to her.

"The jewels. So beautiful," she lied quietly.

"You are the one that is beautiful," he said as he pressed his lips to her cheek. Rebecca grinned and looked up at him before looking around the room again. A dark figure standing in the doorway caught her eye. Her smile faded as she reached to put down her drink and collect her mask.

"Ah, this is the person I want you to meet Rebecca. Rutherford! Rutherford!" Johannes released her hand and called out to the dark clad man. Rebecca pulled the mask closer to her face as the butterflies returned to her stomach.

Johannes reclaimed his position at her side with Rutherford in tow. "Rebecca, this important man is someone you should meet. He is my employer. Rebecca, this is Rutherford. Rutherford, Rebecca."

Rutherford licked his lips before speaking. "Ah, yes, I am aware who this beautiful girl

is. I have many of her fine artworks in my home. So very good to see you again Rebecca," he hissed.

Rebecca nodded and tried to force a smile. "Yes, it's good to see you too Mr. Rutherford. How is Cedric?"

Rutherford dismissed her question with a wave of his hand.

"Johannes...Johannes," Mrs. Gwenllian called from across the garden.

"Excuse me for just a moment while I tend to my Aunt's whim," Johannes said as he smiled at Rebecca.

"What a glorious setting for a masquerade party," Rutherford said without taking his eyes off Rebecca. "There's nothing like being outside in the middle of the night. Something truly romantic about it, don't you think?"

She couldn't pull her eyes away from his stare.

"Why are you hiding behind a mask?"

"Because it is the theme of the party," she said, trying to think of a reason to excuse herself to get some distance between them.

"Yes. And what a wonderful theme it is. I insist that we dance," he said, reaching out for her hand.

"Oh...I promised Johannes he would have the first dance," Rebecca said, searching for the young man.

"Well I'm sure he wouldn't mind you having a dance with his employer...besides, it will give us a chance to get to know each other better," he said, taking hold of her hand. She cringed and shuddered at his touch. His skin seemed cold and slimy against hers. She tried to move her hand away but he had already taken a solid hold. "Come. I insist," he hissed as he pulled her in close.

Her instincts were to run. Every inch of her body and mind screamed at her to get away from him. She flinched forward as he pressed his cold, bony hand against the small of her back and held her tight. The closer she got to him, the more she could smell him. He smelled like wet leaves. Slightly taller than her, she could see his hair was thinning in the front. Up close his skin looked even more sallow and gray. He broke into a wide smile as he felt her body against his. She stared at his teeth. They were tiny, just like Cedric's. His tongue darted out and licked his lips as Rebecca turned her head to look away. "I have waited so very long to hold you in my arms," he said quietly.

"I beg your pardon?" She hoped she had misheard him. She saw Patricia watching her, inching her way closer.

"Oh nothing. I was just saying there is no way a beautiful young girl would ever fall for my charms," he said, looking deep into her eyes.

"There might be someone," she said, keeping an eye on Patricia.

"But not the someone I want." He curled his hand around her hand, securing it firmly in his grip.

Rebecca smiled and tried to pull back when she saw Johannes across the garden. She didn't realize how tightly Rutherford held her when she couldn't move her hand or her body. She let her mask drop to the ground as she used her free hand to try and free herself. She wriggled against his clutches but he still held her tight.

"Mr. Rutherford. Please let me go." She looked at Johannes who was making his way

towards her.

She looked back at Rutherford, who now had his eyes closed and looked to be in a trance. "I can't let you go," he hissed, standing still against her wriggles. She looked away from Rutherford's face as she started to feel light-headed. "I could never let go of you Rebecca," he hissed.

Her stomach started to churn as she felt the world spin faster and faster around her. She used the hanging candle above their heads as a point of focus. She stared at it as the flame began to glow brighter and the sensation of bile rising up her throat grew. She attempted again to pull her hand away, but his grip was too tight. He pinned her body closer the more she tried to pull away.

"Rutherford...you...are hurting...you are hurting me," she said as she yanked her hand free. The flame above them shot up and caught the neighboring leaves. The loud crackle of the foliage catching alight covered Rebecca's yelp to get some distance from Rutherford. She was able to step back as Mrs. Gwenllian ran towards the tree with a bucket of water. Her plan wasn't thought out so well. She threw the water up into the tree only to scramble on her little legs to avoid being soaked.

Guests snickered and moved away from the problem area as Rebecca took the opportunity to move away permanently from Rutherford. She prayed no one saw what she had done to the flame. She walked quickly along the path as Johannes took her by the arm.

"Rebecca," Johannes said, as he got closer. "I thought you said I would have the first dance."

She stepped back and rubbed her hand where Rutherford had hold of her. She saw him look at Johannes before returning his stare to her. She was relieved when he turned on his heel and walked through the garden to the house.

Johannes turned to Rebecca. "What happened here?"

"Nothing. He asked me for a dance. I tried to explain that the first dance was for you, but he wouldn't hear of it. He was just holding on a little too tight, that's all. It's fine now," she said, collecting her mask from the ground.

"How strange." He touched her arm gently. "Would you like to sit for a moment?" She nodded and followed Johannes as he led them to the edge of the garden. Making sure no one was watching them, especially his Aunt, he grabbed hold of her hand and pulled her into the shadows. Her dress floated behind her as she walked into the darkness. They both muffled their laughter as they peered back at the party from behind a huge tree trunk.

"This is much better." She looked up at the sky through the trees, enjoying the relative quiet and privacy. "I love the night sky. It looks so peaceful. You have to wonder what is up there."

Rutherford stalked his way through the cottage, almost knocking Mrs. Gwenllian to the ground in the process. Cedric was waiting in the street with the horse and carriage as Rutherford stormed towards him.

"You! You stay here and keep an eye on them. I don't trust either of them at the moment," he seethed. "I have to pay a visit to a very important business partner of mine. I will meet you back at the house."

Cedric moved away from the cart as Rutherford climbed aboard. He was about to close the door when Patricia appeared.

"Might I have a word with you Sir?"

"Concerning...?"

"Rebecca." Rutherford stared at his son before flicking his wrist, motioning her into the cart. Cedric waited outside the carriage as Patricia and his father discussed Rebecca.

"Come and see me tomorrow...at my office. We can further discuss your concerns then." Cedric held out his arm to help Patricia down from the carriage as his father commanded an audience with the young woman.

Before leaving for his next destination, Rutherford watched as his son made his way around the house without being noticed and within moments the street was quiet again.

Papa choked on the last piece of his dinner as it became lodged in his throat. His eyes bulged and he tried to cough. He leaned forward hoping to dislodge the offending piece of food, to no avail. He beat his chest with his fist as he tried not to panic.

"Phillip!" Rutherford seethed, moving from behind him. Papa hadn't even noticed him entering the cottage.

Summoning the strength to cough one last time, the ball of food came to rest in his mouth and he spat it back on to his plate. He got to his feet in anger.

"What are you doing in my house? Get out," he said, looking towards the door.

"No. I will not leave until you tell me about this man. This man who appears to be very much in my future wife's life," he seethed as he stalked towards Papa, causing him to instinctively recoil. "Don't act coy. You know the man of whom I speak. Tell me. What is going on between them?"

"He works for you. Why don't you ask him yourself?" Papa said breathlessly.

"I am not in the mood to play games with you Phillip. Yes, he works for me, but he does not speak of his personal life. Now *speak!*"

"He loves her. I see it every time he looks at her." Papa mentally prepared himself for an onslaught. "And I believe that she loves him."

Rebecca could feel Johannes' hands resting on her shoulders before they ran gently down her arms. Her skin tingled and prickled from his light touch. She turned to look at him. He looked even more handsome in the moonlight.

"This way," Johannes said. She had hoped he was going to kiss her. "I have something for you over here." Rebecca took hold of his hand and let him lead the way.

"What is it?"

"If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise," he teased.

"Well, I have something for you too," Rebecca said in a smart tone.

"Oh do you now. Well, what is it?"

"It's a surprise," she teased back. She was planning to kiss him the next time he turned around to look at her.

"Well I won't take you another step forward until you tell me what it is," he said, stopping short in his tracks and turning completely to her.

Rebecca smiled as she opened her arms wide to wrap around him and pulled him in for

a kiss. She snaked her tongue in between his lips as she deepened the kiss. He responded in kind, passion for passion. She decided she was not going to be the one that pulled away first. She kept kissing him with the same force as he gave her. Her lips felt like they were being mashed, but she didn't care. Her mind and body felt too good in other places to worry about her lips.

"Stop," he said before kissing her again. "We will ruin your surprise."

She ignored his command and continued to kiss him. She didn't care about any surprise. She wanted him. She wanted to taste him, smell him and feel him all over her body.

"Rebecca," he said, pulling away from her. "You are too much for me sometimes. Quickly. We have to go now or we will miss the surprise."

Rebecca felt slightly hurt Johannes wanted to stop kissing her and persist with her surprise. She liked the way he made her tingle all over. He made her feel completely at ease.

They continued along a small track. She could hear the sound of water splashing growing louder as they hurried along.

"I do hope you like it," Johannes said as he squeezed her hand tight.

"I'm sure I will." She was desperate to kiss him again.

Johannes stopped walking and crouched down, pulling Rebecca down with him. "There. Can you see it?" She looked to where he pointed.

Dragonflies danced above the stream. Their wings twinkled in the moonlight, looking like jewels lying on velvet.

"Oh, it's so beautiful," she breathed, moving to get a better view. "How did you know they were here?"

"When I saw the clips in your hair, I remembered when I was younger I once visited my Aunt and came here when I couldn't sleep. I thought they might still be here and here they are. I thought you'd like it."

"I do...very much." She looked at him, her eyes bright with joy.

He leaned over and kissed her gently. It was a different kind of kiss. Not like any other they had shared. It was slow and loving. He wrapped his arms around her waist and held her tight to lift her off the ground.

"I have a blanket over there for us to sit on," he said, pointing closer to the stream.

Rebecca nodded as he lowered her to the ground. She linked her hand through his as they moved to the blanket where Rebecca took off her shoes. They kissed again as they sat down, kissing for what seemed like an eternity. She could feel the heat rising between her legs and they instinctively parted when the heat became too much. She shifted her body closer to his. The night air smelled sweet and fresh.

"Rebecca, I fear I may have had dishonorable intentions in bringing you here," Johannes said as he pulled away from her.

"What do you mean?" She was concerned about what he was trying to say.

"You look so...desirable tonight. All I can think about is being with you. Having you...tonight...now."

Rebecca looked the dragonflies near the stream; they seemed to have disappeared. She looked back at him.

"So do I," she said as she leaned in to kiss him. She took hold of his hand and moved it to her waist. "I have dreamt of you and your touch."

She slowly pulled him towards her as she lay on her back. He felt heavy on her chest but she didn't mind. She wanted to feel him close to her. His large hand snaked from her neck, down her body, and along her thigh before he flicked the material up with his fingers. They kissed feverishly as she worked at undoing his shirt. He moved on top of her while she spread her legs to allow him room to kneel. He continued to pull at her dress and ran his hands gently across her thighs.

She wriggled away from his touch. His hands didn't look like they would be rough, but they were different against her delicate skin. She was so wet she didn't want him to think she'd wet herself. She pulled his hand free and placed it on her breast. He squeezed it through the material and moved his lips along the line of her neck.

"I want to feel you," he said breathlessly as he pulled his hand from her breast back down to her thighs. His fingertips gave her skin goose bumps. She took a deep breath and nodded as she reached forward to kiss him again.

She felt his fingers move over her wetness before he sighed.

"You are ready," he said as he slowly eased a finger into her. Rebecca's eyes opened wide as he invaded her. She liked the way he moved when he was inside her. She wriggled her hips forward, telling him it was what she wanted.

"Are you sure?" he asked, hesitating. "I don't think I can stop if we go any further."

Rebecca nodded as she kissed his neck. "Yes. Oh God yes." Her mind was swimming. She felt his fingers slipping in and out through her wetness. She started to laugh as his touch tickled her. She'd never let anyone touch her down there.

"Just relax," he said as he sat up to undo his belt.

She wriggled her hips, wanting his hand to return. She too sat up and helped him with his trousers. Her fingertips glided over a bulge. She looked at him as she caressed him, applying more pressure.

"That's what you do to me Rebecca," he said as he let her take his trousers down.

Rebecca didn't know what to do. Should she apologize? She looked down as his trousers lowered and gasped. She quickly looked back up at him in surprise, making Johannes laugh. He leaned forward and kissed her. She pulled her head away from his kiss. She couldn't help but look at his strong-looking member. She reached out and wrapped her hand around the tip. Although he gasped at her touch, she let her hand roam. Her fingers slipped through the clear liquid that had seeped from the head and her hand moved along his shaft towards the base. She pressed her palm against his balls, curling her fingers around them as she fondled gently.

He grasped hold of her shoulders and pushed her back to make her look at him. She let go thinking she had done something wrong.

"No, you don't have to stop," he said reassuringly. "I just have to have you now. It will be all right. Just relax," he said as he pushed her to back.

He kissed her lips and then made his way down to her breasts. Her skin prickled all over in excitement and anticipation. He pulled her dress free from her shoulders, down to expose her breasts. As his hand cupped the underside of her breast, his tongue circled her nipple while he clamped his mouth down. Her legs instinctively opened wide as she tried to relax at his touch. He rained kisses back up to her mouth as he positioned his hips between her legs. She could feel his erect manhood pressing against her. He snaked his arm around

her neck as he pressed his hips against her again. This time she could feel his erection press hard against her opening. She lifted her leg and braced her foot against the blanket. Again he pushed against her and this time she felt him slide inside. She gasped at its intrusion.

"Are you alright?" He looked into her eyes for assurance as he paused what he was doing.

Rebecca nodded as she held her breath and pulled him close. She slowly released her breath as she began rocking her hips and kissed him. He returned her kisses as he pushed his hips towards her. Although he slipped in easily it felt tight. Her nails dug into his back when she felt she couldn't take any more of him. Her hips lifted off the blanket as he pushed further into her. She pulled her nails free when he moved to pull himself out.

"No, don't." She thought he was going to pull out completely.

"No, no, no," he said as he slid back in. "Trust me."

He flexed his hips slowly back and forth and she felt her body relax and tense at the same time. She spread her legs wider as his pace increased. He pulled free of her kiss and moved his weight to his arms as he knelt over her. He looked down into her eyes as she ran her fingers along his back. He pushed into her again. She grabbed hold of his buttocks and pushed him in further with each thrust. She winced only a couple of times, but the more he did it the more she liked it. She could feel herself relaxing more as he moved in and out of her. Her head roll back as his pace quickened.

He had changed from long slow thrusts to short and quick. His breath came faster as did hers. He snaked his arm around her neck again as he leaned forward and kissed her hard. He lifted his head as he braced himself against her shoulder and shuddered. He pushed further into her, holding her there. He held her tight giving her little room to move. His mouth dropped open as he gasped for air and thrust into her. She felt an extra warmth inside her mixing with her own. He shuddered again and cried out. She held onto him as his thrusts slowed before he pulled out. He blinked his eyes slowly before looking down at her.

"Oh Rebecca," he said, still gasping for breath. "You are so beautiful. Are you alright?" She nodded as he moved off her. As she moved to help him lie on his back, she could feel liquid starting to make its way out of her opening and along her folds. She leaned over and reached to close his shirt. He was still exposed. She knew she shouldn't stare but she couldn't look away as that part of his anatomy slowly shrunk.

"It's normal," he said, his breathing still erratic. "Come here." He adjusted his trousers before he pulled her arm, moving her into the nook of his arm as she lay down next to him. She rested her cheek against his chest and could hear his heartbeat racing. She saw the dragonflies had returned to the water. As she heard his breath return to normal she rolled her head to look up at the sky. She closed her eyes and breathed out slowly. She wanted to have that feeling again. Hoping to get a clear view of the stars, she slowly opened her eyes, only to look directly into the eyes of a crow.

Rebecca didn't realize she was screaming until Johannes had jumped up and grabbed hold of her. She clawed at her dress, desperate to cover herself and get to her feet as the crow flew away.

"What is it? What is it?" Johannes yelled as he reached for her.

"A crow...it was watching us," she screamed as she pointed to the now empty branch.

Johannes reached for her hand and hugged her close. "It's alright. It was just a crow."

Better they watch us than try to take our souls," he said as he stroked her hair.

As she trembled in his arms she felt liquid running down her leg.

"I need to get cleaned up Johannes." She held her dress to avoid getting anything on it. "This is rather embarrassing."

"Sure. You can use the blanket. I guess we had better get back to the party before too many questions are asked," he said, holding out the blanket. "I could clean you if you like?"

Rebecca collected the bottom folds of her dress and held it up high for Johannes to gain access. "You don't have to, but if you are offering..." She smiled mischievously. As he got to his knees she looked up at the trees. She couldn't see any evidence of the crow. She looked down to see Johannes smiling up at her. He inched the blanket corner towards her and asked her to lift her leg. She held on to his shoulder and giggled as she struggled to maintain her balance. His face inched towards her. She watched his head disappear under her dress and felt his mouth clamp down over her opening. Although she was reveling in his touch she couldn't shake the image of the crow from her mind.

She gasped again when she felt his fingers slide inside her. She wriggled against them. Rebecca smiled as he made slurping noises and pushed further into her. The tingle grew inside her until she couldn't control it. Her skin felt like it was crawling as a shiver of delight ran down her back. Her insides waved against his tongue. Her fingers ran through his hair and held him in close.

Her head rolled towards the stream. Her eyes were barely open but she could see the dragonflies dancing nearby. Her breath became short and raspy as she encouraged him to caress her deeper. She liked how his fingers felt inside her, the way his tongue rolled over her folds. She let out a small sigh as he worked her faster and faster. She'd never felt so good. She could feel her juices making its way slowly down to the top of her inner thigh. She moved against his fingers until she could take no more. A swelling feeling inside her forced her to grab hold of both his shoulders and steady herself as she felt her soul lift through her body. She threw her head back and delighted in the sensation.

"Stop...stop Johannes," she gasped quietly. She lowered her leg and stumbled back slightly.

"There. I think you are done. Do you think you are done?" He looked up at her, a smug look on his face.

Rebecca wiggled on the spot before looking down at him. "I think so. Just give me a minute."

"Good," he said, getting to his feet. He leaned in and kissed her tenderly. She could taste herself. "Shall we?" he asked, holding his arm out.

"Certainly." She linked her arm through his. She felt like she had to walk slowly or risk tripping over her own feet. "That was wonderful. How are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling great. Here...we'd better fix your hair."

They looked each other over and adjusted their clothes accordingly so not to arouse suspicion before returning to the party. As they made their way through the garden, they were instantly bailed up by Mrs. Gwenllian. "Where have you two been?"

"I wanted to show Rebecca the dragonflies. You remember, the ones that I saw when I was a child," Johannes said, trying to pass her.

"Well, this was not the time Johannes," she said, eyeing Rebecca suspiciously. "Most of

the guests left a short time ago. You two have been missing for hours."

Neither Rebecca nor Johannes had been aware of how long they were away.

"Then let me give you a hand in cleaning up," Rebecca offered, turning away from both of them to start collecting dishes.

"No, don't you worry about it dear. You can either stay here or return home. I think you should stay here. It is very late," Mrs. Gwenllian said. "You can sleep in the guest room. Johannes, you can sleep in the room next to mine. I will deal with the party aftermath tomorrow."

They followed Mrs. Gwenllian into the house to retire to their beds. There wasn't an opportunity to kiss goodnight before they were pulled in opposite directions.

Sleep evaded her as she thought of their moments together. The same wetness washed over her as she felt his touch against her skin. She opened her eyes in hope he had snuck into her room, but he hadn't. She was imagining his touch. She eventually went to sleep with a smile on her face and dreamed of the next time they would be intimate.

"Time to get up Rebecca," she heard Mrs. Gwenllian call from outside her door.

"Yes Mrs. Gwenllian. I'm coming," she called as she pulled her mind back into the waking world. She let her fingers roam to where Johannes had touched her so intimately just hours before. She was still wet. She ran her fingertips on the outside of her opening, pulling her hand away to look at the residue. They were covered in blood. She didn't realize she was screaming until Mrs. Gwenllian burst into the room.

Rebecca had thrown back the covers and leaned forward to look between her legs. The blood had soaked through her nightdress and onto the sheets. She pulled the sheets back over her legs to hide the scene from Mrs. Gwenllian but it was too late.

"Oh Rebecca," she gasped, her eyes wide. She moved towards her holding her arms out. "You are a woman now. I was wondering when it was going to happen. All I can say is I'm glad it happened here and not out on the farm. Men don't know what to do in this situation."

"What do you mean?" Rebecca couldn't stop staring at her hand, she was too afraid to move.

"Now, there's nothing to be worried about. From now on, every month this will happen. It just means you are a woman." Mrs. Gwenllian hugged her tight. "Come. I will show you what you have to do. It's a bit of a messy thing but there's nothing that can be done about that. Come on. You are not dying Rebecca."

Rebecca nodded to say she understood what Mrs. Gwenllian had said when the woman left her alone to get dressed. She let out a long sigh, thinking about what happened to her. She dressed quickly and bound from the room to the garden. The warm sun felt good against her skin as she surveyed the party remains. She looked around for Johannes.

"I don't know where he is dear. I thought he must have told you he was going into the office or something," Mrs. Gwenllian said. "I certainly haven't seen him. Not to worry dear, I'm sure he'll be back."

Rebecca nodded as she looked for more plates to clear away.

"You know Johannes loves you dear," Mrs. Gwenllian piped up out of the blue.

Rebecca nodded, wondering where the conversation was going. "He loves you very much and would do anything for you. But you must be aware his family expects him to wed someone in his home town." Rebecca continued to nod as the smile faded from her face. "As I said, he is in love with you. He will do what he can to be with you but the fight will come from his family. You must remain strong. I think they are mad if they do not accept you; I just wanted to make you aware. I think that's enough cleaning for you today. You'd best be on your way home to your father."

Patricia was waiting for Rutherford when he arrived at his office.

"Be quick with what you have to say. I have no time for petty village gossip," he said as he walked straight past her.

"Clearly you have an interest in Rebecca; that was evident last night." Patricia eyed him up and down with a smirk on her face. "And I have an interest in Johannes. However, he doesn't seem to notice anyone or anything when that girl is about," she spat as she followed close behind Rutherford.

"Be careful what you say to me. What are you proposing?"

Patricia twirled her finger around a stray curl. "I thought that was obvious. I want Johannes and you want Rebecca, and I know how to make that happen."

Chapter Thirteen

Rebecca rode closer to the farm and saw the cottage door was wide open. She smiled and called to Papa. Her smile faded as she walked into the cottage. Every piece of furniture had been overturned. As she walked through to the kitchen, her shoes crunched on glass jars that had been smashed, the shards mingling with the splattered preserves.

"Papa?" she called again, wandering through the rooms looking for him.

"Rebecca."

"Papa...what happened?" She made her way up the ladder to the loft from where Papa called. She found him lying on his bed, his hand clutched to his chest. He was gasping for air. "Papa!" She fell to her knees next to him. She leaned over him and took hold of his hand.

"I'm fine Rebecca. I just need to catch my breath," he said as he squeezed her hand.

"What happened here Papa?" He shut his eyes and wouldn't respond. "Papa...Papa. Talk to me." Frantically she tapped him on the cheek, albeit gently. "Wake up Papa." She watched his chest move up then fall down before she moved off the bed, reassured he was breathing comfortably now. She left him to rest as she made her way down the ladder to start cleaning. She looked around the room trying to find a point to start. She looked at the floor and shook her head. "How could this happen?" she said out loud.

She started straightening and cleaning the cottage, beginning at the door and working her way to the kitchen. She looked at the floor covered with wasted preserves they had saved for the coming winter. She returned to the stream a number of times to collect fresh water. Rebecca worked on her knees for hours to get the cottage back to some sense of normality. None of the furniture was damaged; it was like they had been tossed around. She checked to make sure her paintings and supplies were undamaged.

She found them exactly where she left them. They had been untouched. It took her all day to tidy the cottage. She checked on Papa throughout the day, but let him continue to sleep. She pushed her hair behind her shoulders as she emptied the final bucket of dirty water and returned to the cottage for the night.

She scolded herself for not working more on the paintings before the party. She knew she had to get her paintings done tonight, time was running out. She set one of her paintings to the side to dry and picked up the final piece. She rubbed her eyes and moved the candle closer, she was struggling to see her work clearly.

She fought off sleep and pushed herself to get the last of her paintings done. She kept promising herself if she got those done she could get a good night's sleep the next night. As she breathed a heavy sigh, she shivered.

The hairs on the back of her neck started to prickle as the familiar feeling of being watched washed over her, making her shiver again. She looked around to the kitchen window but couldn't see anything in the dark night. She shifted back in her seat to sit tall and straight. She looked down at her half-finished painting of Johannes. She had three paintings for Rutherford but wanted to give this special one to Johannes.

The paintings for Rutherford were from her dreams. Ever since she'd met him, the crows and faceless man had reappeared, haunting her dreams. She wasn't happy with their return, invading the sleep she desperately needed.

She was worried about Papa. Worried about Cedric and why he'd become so distant to her lately. Worried about having her paintings and the chores on the farm done on time. She was worried about Johannes. She smiled as she let her mind drift, thinking about him.

She could feel his touch on her arm. She shivered again from the remembered sensation. Her mind started to swim. She longed for his touch again. She ached for another kiss. She could smell him. Her shoulders began to relax and dropped down. Her head rolled back as she let the paintbrush drop from her hand. Her mouth started to water as she thought about kissing him again. She let her legs fall open from the heat.

She could feel the same wetness as when he kissed her. Her hands fell to her thighs, and she pulled her nightgown up over her knees. The warm air from the fire was a warm invitation to her wetness. She ran her fingertips over her stomach towards her breasts before circling her nipple over the material.

A sigh escaped from her lips as she curled her hand underneath the folds of her nightdress. She ached for his hands to where hers were. She craved for him to touch the spot inside her that had started to throb. She ran her fingers over her stomach towards her entrance when she heard a creaking noise. She froze. She listened hard and heard another creak.

She grabbed hold of the bottom of her nightdress and cast it to the floor. She grabbed the paintbrushes and threw them into the material bag. Her mind raced and her heart pounded. She managed to stow them under her mattress when Papa appeared from around the corner. He scanned the room and stopped at the artworks on the table. She cursed herself for not blowing out the candle. Even though the fire was going, she should have made the room slightly darker.

"What are you doing Rebecca? What are these?" He reached out and picked up one of the paintings gently.

"Papa you are up. How are you feeling?" she asked, trying to distract him.

His large fingers wrapped around the painting as he absorbed its content. Rebecca stood silently, waiting for his reaction.

"What are these?" he stared at the stark images and waited for her reply.

"They are just paintings Papa."

"But what are they of?"

"They are things from my dreams Papa." Nervously, she watched his reaction.

"You dream of crows?" His fingers were now white from clenching the painting. He looked down at the table and picked up another painting of a crow.

"Do you dream of crows?" His booming voice startled her.

"Until recently, yes Papa," she said quietly.

"What else do you dream about?" He collected the last painting for Rutherford and the half finished painting of Johannes.

"I have been dreaming of a specific man for many years but now I have dreams about Johannes." She watched as her father became more and more agitated.

"What other man? The man with the crows?" His voice was starting to shake.

"He's no one Papa. He's not real. He's just someone I saw fly into my dreams. He sits and talks to me and then flies away again." She knew he could tell she was lying, but she couldn't bear to tell him the truth.

"And you paint them? What do you do with them?" She wished he hadn't asked that

question. "How long have you been doing this?" he demanded. "Painting him? Since I gave you the paint brushes?" Rebecca kept nodding despite knowing he already knew the answers.

"And then what do you do with them?" he repeated.

She looked down at the floor before looking back up to meet his gaze. "I sell them Papa."

He looked at her, a hard expression on his face. "You sell them? To whom?" He threw the paintings down on the table, sending them in different directions. She didn't want to look at him, but he was coming towards her. "Who do you sell them to?" He grabbed hold of her shoulders and shook her hard when she didn't answer immediately. Her eyes rolled as he shook.

"I only met him the other day. His name is Rutherford."

Papa's eyes widened at the mention of Rutherford's name. Rebecca had never before seen the wild look on his face. He was struggling to find words. Her mind raced as she watched panic wash over him.

"But Papa, the money he pays allows me to buy more supplies and for the little things for you. I am doing it to help you." She knew she had said too much. Her father's eyes looked like they were on fire. She knew it was going to end badly.

"Well he won't be getting any more," he spat. "You will stop it now!" He released her from his clutches and turned to the kitchen table, scooping up the paintings. She knew he was going to throw them in the fire.

"No Papa!" She jumped into his path and beat his chest.

It was useless. He pushed her to the side like a rag doll, determined to dispose of the paintings. She couldn't bear to watch as he shoved them into the fire. Tears were streaming down her face as the fire built up quickly.

"Where are your brushes Rebecca?" he asked in a low tone. He wouldn't look away from the fire.

"No Papa," she whispered as she shook her head hard at the thought of losing her brushes.

"Where are they Rebecca?" He turned around and stared at her.

"No Papa, please. I won't paint my dreams anymore Papa. Please Papa," she begged.

"Give them to me!" he roared as he lurched forward, grabbing hold of her wrists. He pulled her forward off the bed in one movement. She screamed out in fright and pain.

"Where are they?" he yelled. "The only way to stop this is to burn them too."

Rebecca shook as he screamed in her face. She was terrified. Terrified of the things that drove her to paint in the first place and now she was terrified for painting what she did.

He released her arms, dropping her to the ground. In a rage he turned the kitchen upside down as he hunted for her paintbrushes. She ducked and moved to avoid being hit by flying objects as he searched. She could see he was in a trance; he would not stop until he found them. She sobbed as she slowly knelt on the floor. She reached under her bed and grasped the material bag.

She sat on the floor and placed the bag in her lap. The sound of the fire crackling and her father panting was the only sound in the room. She cried silently as her father pushed past and snatched the brushes from her. He knelt before the fire and placed the rolled bag in the center of the fire.

She curled into a ball and wailed. "Why did you have to do that?" she screamed again and again. It seemed like an eternity before Papa answered.

"I had to. No good can come of it." When the brushes were well alight he got to his feet and looked down at Rebecca. "We will not speak of this again. I never want to see another painting of a crow in this house, do you understand me? You will go to the markets tomorrow and tell this man you will no longer be doing any more paintings."

His tone was clear and stern. Rebecca was so wracked with sobs, she couldn't even reply. She didn't understand. He walked from the room, leaving her there in her misery.

She couldn't believe what had happened. By the time the fire had died down her tears had stopped flowing. She looked around the kitchen. Everything was out of place. Slowly picking herself off the floor, she quietly tidied up the kitchen. She felt so tired. Drained. By the time she finished tidying the kitchen it was only a matter of hours before she had to be up again. She crawled under the covers of her bed.

"All that work and now I have nothing," she whispered as she nestled into her pillow. She listened to the crackling of the fire as she buried into her bed, pulling the blanket tight to her chin. She cried herself to sleep and continued crying in her dream. She could see herself lying in her bed, sobbing. She could feel fingers brush over her hair as she tried to wipe her tears. It was Cedric. He hovered over her as he stroked her hair. She turned back to the pillow and cried harder.

"There, there. We will get you some new brushes," he said in a warm tone. She hadn't heard him speak that way to her in weeks. Not since he met Johannes. He knelt next to her bed while he continued to brush her hair from her face. "There's no need to cry Rebecca," he said as she looked up at him. "When I see you cry I feel like my heart is breaking." He leaned forward and kissed her. His lips felt cold and hard against hers, not warm and inviting like Johannes. She tried to pull away from him but his hand had entwined her hair, holding her firm. She tried to turn her head but his hold was too tight. As she tried to scream he jammed his tongue into her mouth. She brought her hands up to push him off her.

She struggled against him and his strength. She dug her nails into his chest to try and repel him. He pulled away from her, taking a clump of her hair with his hand. She stared at him. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and smiled at her. "I have been waiting to kiss you your whole life," he said, backing into the shadows. "You'll never kiss Johannes again." Rebecca blinked as his words sunk in. She strained her eyes to see where he'd gone. Sitting in her bed, looking at the shadows, she traced her fingertips over lips that were throbbing from the pressure of his kiss.

She asked herself if it was a dream or real. She felt sick to her stomach, invaded and violated. She got out of bed, keeping her eyes on the moving shadows. As she walked towards a shadow in the corner, she saw there was nothing there. Her dream was so vivid. She could have sworn Cedric was still in the room, that he'd kissed her. She climbed back into bed and stared at the shadows again. The light from the fire had moved and still she saw nothing there. She lay down and closed her eyes. She prayed she wouldn't dream again that night. Her mind faded to blackness as she struggled to recollect what was real and what was dreamed.

Rebecca heard Papa shuffling in the kitchen. She opened her eyes but sleep pulled her

back into darkness. Her eyes stung. She had been crying in her sleep.

"Rebecca...Rebecca," Papa called to her, but she couldn't find him in the darkness. "It's time to go to the market Rebecca. I will load up the cart while you get dressed. Come on girl. Get up." She blinked her eyes, struggling to keep them open.

Her mind was foggy and felt as if she'd left her body behind. She sat up in bed and rubbed her eyes. She heard Papa's footsteps and the click of the front door. She hoped it had all been a bad dream. Then she looked at the fire.

The embers were still red, but it was mainly ash. Towards the back of the fireplace was half the painting of Johannes. She could feel her eyes well up again.

She dressed quickly. She was dreading the new day. She pulled the front door closed behind her and made her way to the cart. She didn't speak to Papa and he didn't speak to her. She climbed onto the cart and took hold of the reins. She drove away from her father and still nothing was said. She could feel his eyes watching her until she was further down the track.

Too many thoughts raced through her mind. The sun was beating down. It was so hot she was feeling faint. She put it down to being tired and upset.

She started to feel more nervous when she found a spot at the market and lifted the baskets of produce off the cart. She looked around, waiting for Cedric to appear, but she didn't see him.

Most of her produce sold quickly so she kept a small basket of goods separate for him.

She hadn't seen any sign of Johannes since the party. She wondered where he could have gone, why he hadn't tried to see her for the last couple of days. She made it her mission to finish at the market as soon as possible and pay a visit to Mrs. Gwenllian for answers.

She turned over the potatoes to show the best sides when she felt him watching her. She could always sense when Cedric watched her. Her skin would crawl. He looked sad as he looked at her. A pang of guilt washed over her although she didn't understand why.

"Oh Cedric," she said. His stony eyes were trained on her face as he dispassionately watched her try not to break down in tears. "I'm so sorry."

His face softened at the tears rolling down her cheeks. He rushed to her side.

"What is wrong?" He reached out to take her arm.

"I'm sorry Cedric, I don't have any paintings for you this week. They were all destroyed. I hope this isn't going to be too much of a problem. I would have gone to see your father in person but I don't know where you live." Her voice shook as she tried to control herself.

"It is alright. Please stop crying," Cedric said soothingly.

He pulled her to the other side of the cart. He tried to console her but she didn't want him to touch her.

"You can replace the paintings. My father will understand." Rebecca lifted her head to look at him.

"That's not all," she said as she sniffled.

Cedric's face fell. "I don't understand."

"I know. Neither do I." She sniffled.

"How could he do that? He threw them into the fire because you were painting for my father?"

Rebecca nodded. "I'm sorry Cedric."

"It's not your fault."

"He's been distracted by something lately and I don't know how to help him."

"But that's no excuse to burn your brushes. What if my father went and spoke to him?"

She shook her head furiously and put her hands up. "No. No. I was sent here today to tell you I cannot paint for your father any more. I don't know what he will do if I go against his wishes. I must do as he says." Her hands shook as Cedric tried to hold on to them.

"I can't apologize enough Cedric. I hope you understand. I have to go home now." She threw the remaining baskets into the cart before beginning her journey home.

As she set off through the village, she rounded the corner only to see Johannes walking with Patricia. She had her arm linked around his as his head was held back in laughter. Rebecca couldn't believe her eyes. She pulled hard on the reins as she passed them. Staring at Patricia, she jumped down from the cart.

"Hello Rebecca. Johannes was just telling me about the party," she said in her familiar snide tone.

"Hello Rebecca," Johannes said, unlinking his arm from Patricia as he moved towards her. She took a step back as she brought her stare from Patricia to him.

"What are you doing?" she whispered disbelievingly but didn't wait for his answer. She turned on her heel before he reached her and clambered back into the cart. She snapped the reins hard to get away quickly.

She held back her tears until she had reached the outskirts of the village and then sobbed openly as she rode along the dirt track. She didn't bother to hide her tears when she heard another horse following close behind.

She had no idea of the truth.

As they watched Rebecca ride away, Johannes transformed into Rutherford as Patricia held onto his arm.

"I am thrilled you approached me with this idea Patricia," he said without taking his eyes off Rebecca.

"Yes. Your talents amaze me Rutherford," Patricia said, staring at him in awe of his transformation.

He didn't trust Patricia at all. She was a spiteful wretch, although she had proven herself to be very useful in the attainment of his desire. Now she had seen his unique ability for masquerade, he had to ensure her silence...and he knew just how to do that.

Chapter Fourteen

Johannes twitched as fought to lift his head off the cold ground. He was groggy. The chink of chains forced him to open his eyes. He had no idea where he was. His dark surroundings made it even more difficult to see anything. He blinked. He saw his arm had been chained at the wrist. The rattling of his chains disturbed something nearby. Through his blurry vision, he saw a shoe-clad foot come down hard and pin his arm to the ground.

He winced as Cedric pushed his weight onto his foot.

"Don't you groan," Cedric spat as he balanced on one foot. "You know nothing about pain." Johannes yelped when Cedric pushed down hard again before walking towards the shadows. He tried to look into the shadows but could see nothing. He could barely make out the trees. He struggled to lift his head as the sound of someone breathing echoed in his ears.

"Who's there?" His head pounded as he struggled to his knees. He crouched on all fours, trying to support his weight and at the same time prevent himself from collapsing. Bile raced its way to the back of his throat and the world spun quickly. The reaction caught him by surprise as it flowed from him. The air filled with the stench of vomit as Johannes lowered his head and tried to calm his breathing.

"Where am I?" he whispered. He cocked his head towards a shuffling noise to the right of him. "Who's there? Show yourself." He could barely summon the strength to voice his demand. His head swung towards to his left when he heard the sound of rushing footsteps. Then all was silent. He could hear nothing but the sound of his own breath passing his lips.

Cedric appeared out of nowhere and pinned Johannes' face down in the sloppy earth. Mud flooded into his mouth as he tried to yell. Cedric unleashed a fury of lashes across his back with what felt like claws. He didn't have time to scream as he felt the skin on his back open. Small scratches progressed to bigger ones. He felt Cedric's rage grow as chunks of skin and flesh were flayed from his back. The wounds inflicted felt like they were coming from a bird of prey.

He roared in agony and tried to shake Cedric off his back, but to no avail. Almost delirious from pain, he gasped for breath as he sobbed. A small part of his consciousness registered the fact that Cedric had stopped his torture and had moved to the side. From the periphery of his vision, he saw the unholy smile, the pleasure Cedric had taken from his pain. He felt the blood setting on his open wounds.

"Roll over. I want to see your face." Cedric viciously booted him in the ribs, encouraging him to move faster. Johannes' cry of pain echoed in the shadows as he instinctively tried to huddle into a ball. "I said I want to see you, now move!" Cedric screamed as he reached forward and grabbed a handful of muddy hair. He moved within an inch of Johannes' face. Johannes tried to move away when he saw Cedric's red eyes, filled with hatred.

"Who are you?" he gasped. "Why are you doing this to me?" He held his hands in front of his face in an attempt to provide a small amount of protection. The chains limited his every move.

"I am the man Rebecca should be with," Cedric whispered. His eyes changed back to

green in an instant as he cocked his head away from Johannes. Something had attracted his attention.

"Cedric...you started without me," a voice said.

"I was only playing father," Cedric said, letting go of Johannes' hair. "I thought you would have been here sooner."

Rutherford was silent as he glided towards Cedric and Johannes. He forced Cedric away with a push on his chest. Johannes blinked to look at him. His eyes were glazed from the pain.

"Rutherford? Is that you?" Johannes rasped, his throat raw from vomit and screams of pain, doubting his own eyes. "Rutherford...what's going on? Why am I here? I don't understand."

He struggled to keep his eyes on Rutherford as he circled him.

"It's a pity things had to work out like this," Rutherford began. Cedric had crept backwards into the shadows. "You were a brilliant protégé. It's such a shame you had to move into my territory. For that you must be punished."

"Your territory? I don't understand."

"Rebecca, you ignorant fool!" Rutherford spat. Johannes reeled back as he tried to get away but fell when the chain pulled against him. "She was destined to be mine and you had to get your filthy hands on her. She *will* be mine, even if I have to take you out of the picture."

"Don't do anything to Rebecca...please, I beg you. I love her."

"We all do," Cedric whispered.

"Yes, you love her, but it is too late. You will never see her again. You will never again see the light of day Johannes."

"Let me do it father," Cedric said, advancing towards them.

"I don't know Cedric. You and I differ about how things ought to be done. I prefer swiftness. You, on the other hand, like to prolong the inevitable. Shall we make a compromise? When he begs you to put him out of his misery, do it. Do you hear me? When he says he wishes he were dead, I want you to kill him." Cedric nodded at his father's wishes. "Alright. Now we have that settled. Johannes, it's a shame it's ended up like this but you are the person standing between mine and my future wife's happiness." Cedric quickly looked at his father. *If only you knew.* "Do what you must do Cedric. Goodbye Johannes."

Cedric nodded again as Rutherford fixed his jacket and walked away. He saw a smile spread across his father's face as Johannes' gasp rang out when he pushed him over.

Johannes yelled out to Rutherford only twice before his cries changed to Rebecca's name.

Rebecca looked behind her when she heard Johannes calling her name. She pulled on the reins and waited for him to catch up.

"Where are you going? I thought we were going to have lunch?" he said before getting a good look at her. "What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"You know what is wrong. Why were you with her?"

Johannes stared at her blankly. "What are you talking about? I wasn't with anyone." Rebecca returned his blank stare. Her mind raced. Had she imagined him with her? It didn't

make sense.

"I saw you at the market and then I went to visit Aunty. I came back to the stall but I saw you heading off through the village. What is going on?"

"Nothing. I'm all right. I just had a bad night with Papa last night. Things are not well. I'm sorry I forgot about lunch. Papa told me to return straight home after the market."

"Well, let me come with you. I have some news that I have to tell you."

Rebecca blinked through her tears. She could tell just from looking at him he had something important to tell her.

"Where did you want to go for lunch? I guess Papa wouldn't mind if I was with you." She wiped the tears from her cheeks.

Johannes rode alongside her to the riverbank. It was where Cedric had taken her the first time he took her for lunch.

"Don't you think this is the most beautiful spot?" he asked as he helped her from the cart.

Rebecca smiled and nodded. "It is very beautiful here. I love the weeping willows."

"They are my favorite too." He took hold of her hand and led her to a place under the huge tree.

"Now," Johannes began, looking at Rebecca.

The sun shone through the leaves of the branches and gave Rebecca's face a golden glow. Her eyes glinted from the rays.

"Actually, I think the weeping willows are my second favorite thing here. You are my first," he said with a smile.

Rebecca smiled and lowered her head. She still felt uneasy when he made comments like that.

"What is this news you have to tell me?" she asked, trying to keep track of why they were there.

"I feared you were not going to like it, so I have come up with a solution. I have heard that my father's health has taken a turn. I am not sure of how severe it is but I must return home to my family," he said quietly.

Rebecca felt her stomach rise and fall. He was leaving.

"But, I would like you to come with me. You can meet my family and my friends. They are all going to love you...possibly just as much as I love you."

She sat silently. She didn't know what to say or do.

"So what do you think? Would you like to come with me?" Johannes leaned towards her, waiting for her response.

"I honestly don't know. How long would we be gone for?" She shook her head. "What about Papa? I can't leave him to look after the farm all on his own. When will you be back? I just don't know Johannes."

"I don't know Rebecca. I do not know of the current state my father is in. I could be back in a week, or it may be months. I really do not know, but I will be back for you Rebecca." She smiled and leaned forward to kiss him. His lips felt cold, not at all as she expected. She pulled back quickly and looked hard at him.

"What's the matter?" he asked in surprise.

"Nothing," she said, moving her fingers to her mouth. "I should really get back to the

farm."

"Do you have to? You said yourself your father would be fine as long as he knew you were with me."

"Yes, but he doesn't know I'm with you. I really have to go. Let me think about your offer. Can I meet you at your office tomorrow?"

"Better yet. I will come with you now and see your father."

She started to protest, but Johannes was more determined than she was prepared to fight. She'd had enough with fighting.

She took her time returning to the farm. She wasn't keen to see Papa. As they rode closer she could see Papa working in the field. He had made more scarecrows. Rebecca tied the horse up before she walked over to him.

"Do you need help?" He didn't look up from his work.

"Hello Phillip," Johannes said. Papa stopped working and stared at him. He picked up the hoe and turned it towards the younger man.

Looking at Rebecca he asked, "Did you do what you were told?"

"Yes Papa," she said, quietly looking at the ground. She looked up to see Papa flinch from Johannes.

"Papa, are you alright?" She rushed to his side.

"Yes. Good. Now go inside. I need you to be inside."

She didn't understand why Papa was acting the way he was. She looked at Papa who was still staring at Johannes.

"Go now Rebecca. And you. You stay right there," he said, staring at Johannes.

Rebecca slowly stepped backwards, alternating her gaze between Johannes and Papa.

She eyed the new scarecrows as she passed them. They were different in size and frightening to look at. Rebecca returned to the cottage and made her way to the kitchen window to look at Papa and Johannes. She could see Papa talking but couldn't hear what he was saying.

"How did you do that?" Papa raised the hoe to defend himself. "I ought to kill you on the spot."

"Oh, come now Phillip. You know I would do nothing to hurt Rebecca." His face had transformed into Rutherford but his physique and voice stayed as Johannes. "Besides, she thinks I'm that fool Johannes. Ha! Little does she realize it but he's already gone," he hissed. "Besides, she won't know the difference...not when I look like him. I won't have him getting in the way of mine and Rebecca's happiness."

"You might be able to trick me but you won't be able to fool Rebecca," Papa said, trying to swipe at Rutherford with the hoe.

"Now stop that Phillip; she thinks you are talking to Johannes. Now the quick and easy way to sort out the mess you created is to say yes. She is going to ask you to let her go and visit Johannes' ill father. She will go with me, we will get married and that will be the end of it. It's the easiest way Phillip. Don't cause your daughter any more pain than is necessary."

Rebecca wished she could hear what they were saying, but when she saw Papa lift the hoe and try to strike Johannes, she knew she had to get back out there.

"What is going on?" she screamed.

Papa screamed as he lunged forward with the hoe again. "Never! You will not take my daughter!" Rutherford had changed back to Johannes.

"Get inside Rebecca," Rutherford yelled.

"No Papa. Stop! What are you doing?" Papa continued to lunge forward.

Papa screamed over and over again, "You can not take my daughter. You will not take my daughter from me."

Rebecca looked on as she saw Papa strike at who she believed was Johannes.

"I told you this was a bad suggestion," she yelled. "Papa, I won't go. I won't leave you."

Rutherford stopped weaving and looked at her. "You won't come with me?"

"No Johannes. Look. He's too upset. I can't leave him like this."

"Get off my land," Papa screamed as he connected the hoe with Rutherford's arm.

She covered her mouth with her hand as her scream mingled with Rutherford's. Papa staggered backwards, looking at the wound he'd inflicted. Blood flowed down Rutherford's sleeve and dripped from his fingers. Rebecca rushed towards him but Papa prevented her from reaching him. Papa struggled to hold her back as Rutherford looked from his wound to Papa.

"Get off my land," Papa yelled again, holding onto Rebecca with all his might.

Rutherford turned and staggered towards his horse, holding onto his arm. He cried out in pain as he tried to pull himself up on to the horse with one hand. He pulled on the reins, turning the horse to Rebecca and Papa. He pointed at them with his bloodied hand.

"Both your days will come," he seethed, not trying to disguise his voice.

Papa let go of Rebecca as Rutherford turned and rode from the farm. She scrambled forward after him.

"Rebecca, no. He's not who you think he is," Papa yelled. "Please forgive me child."

She ran to the fence and watched him make his way along the track. She didn't know why Papa reacted the way he did, but she was going to make sure he told her.

"What were you doing? What was that about?" she demanded.

Papa had fallen to his knees and was begging for Rebecca to forgive him.

"What have you done that I have to forgive you Papa?" She didn't understand what he was talking about. "What's the matter? Why are you acting like this? You like Johannes."

"That was not Johannes, my darling daughter. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me," he rambled. "Please go inside so I can finish my work. I have to know you are safe. You cannot go to town any more. I need to know you are safe. Please go inside."

A line of blood trickled from Johannes' mouth as Cedric connected again. "Come on...say it and it will all be over," he taunted.

"Never," Johannes gasped. The constant chink of the chain was starting to grate on Cedric's nerves.

"This is really a bit unfair, isn't it? How about I let you free and let the others deal with you? Would you like that?" Cedric reached over and pulled free the peg that held the chain to the ground. "Stand up. Come on...I'm giving you a shot for free Johannes." Johannes tried to scramble to his feet. "Come on. Don't waste my time. Stand up so I can finish you off."

"Cedric?" He didn't realize his father was standing behind him. "I have been gone for some time. Why haven't you killed him yet? What did I tell you to do?"

Cedric spun around to see his father's eyes were bright red. He was holding his arm as he stood there, seething. "Why haven't you killed him?" Johannes collapsed to the ground while Rutherford waited for an answer. "What is going on with you?"

Rutherford walked towards Johannes. As he passed Cedric, he slapped his face.

"Johannes. I am going to let this end for you now. You don't have to worry any more." He helped him to his feet. "Now, if you relax, it will be over for you quickly."

"Please Rutherford," Johannes begged. "I love Rebecca. I need to know she will be safe."

"She will be safe...with me."

"She won't be safe...not while he is around," Johannes whispered, nodding in Cedric's direction.

"What do you mean?"

"Guess you'll find out for yourself." Johannes tried to laugh, but exhaustion and pain prevented him as his blood drained from his wounds.

Rutherford turned to give Cedric a quick glance before turning back to Johannes. "I will deal with it, but first I must deal with you."

Rebecca stood at the kitchen window. She was staring at a man she didn't recognize. A mad man. Papa's eyes were wild, his skin flushed. As she prepared dinner she continued to watch him. He was talking to himself as he put yet another scarecrow together. He threw his head back in a fit of laughter as he erected it alongside all the others and then return to his mumbling state. His eyes were cold and lifeless when he retired to the cottage. He took his plate and sat in his chair. Rebecca started to ask him a question but was told to be quiet because he was thinking.

"Now if I could just make the farm safer," he muttered. Rebecca moved to sit at his feet.

"Why do we need to make the farm safer Papa? There's no one to hurt us." He looked down at her but it seemed he was looking right through her.

"I need to make it safer so Rebecca will be safe," he said.

"But I am safe Papa." She took hold of his hand until he recognized her.

"No, you are not. You painting those pictures made us unsafe. You selling them to that man was not safe. The things I have done...the things I have done..." He rubbed his eyes and shook his head. "I need to think." He pushed past Rebecca and paced the floor. "Think..." he repeated.

"I have to go to the village one last time. I have to see Johannes. He's going home to be with his ill father."

"I will not allow it," Papa said without looking at her.

"You must Papa. I need to say goodbye," she pleaded as she felt her tears beginning to well.

"We will discuss it in the morning. I have to think."

Rebecca fell asleep listening to his ramblings only to be woken by his ranting of how he needed to protect her. She rose and met him near the fireplace. Her morning greeting was

met with a grumble before he announced he was going to see Mrs. Gwenllian. He left the cottage with nothing more to say. She knew it might be her only chance to say goodbye to Johannes. She set out to work on her chores before heading to the village to meet with Johannes. She saddled her horse and set off along the track. She let her horse go into a gentle trot as she looked towards the town. It had taken on a gray tinge in her eyes.

She looked back at the farm only to see it too had darkened. The sky wasn't as bright now that she didn't feel like painting. The smell of the air was no longer crisp and fresh. It had taken on a stagnant smell. She continued along the track before turning off, crossing the creek. She rarely went to the edge of the Dead Forest. It was a peaceful place. It was lush and green on one side of the creek before turning into the forest. She always imagined that was what the farm looked like before the cottage was built.

Rebecca let her horse roam a short distance while she took her shoes off and walked on the soft grass. It was cool on her feet. After a short while it turned too cold for her to stand. As she leaned forward to put her shoes back on, she could hear the faint sound of someone crying.

She listened intently, slowly walking towards the sobs.

"Hello?" she quietly called as she brushed a branch out of her way and walked towards the live forest. Leaves crunched under her shoes before she stopped and listened for the sounds again. The sobs had stopped. "Is anyone there?"

Something cracked to her left and she swung her head towards the sound.

"Hello. I can hear you." She moved towards the sound. She looked behind her to see her horse happily grazing. She turned her attention back to finding the source of crying. She tried to look through the dense foliage as she pulled her way through. The ground was soggy and she slipped as she moved. "Hello?"

She was starting to think her mind was playing tricks when she heard more rustling of leaves and branches breaking. A shadow moving through the trees caught her by surprise. She gasped and crouched to avoid being seen. She looked for the shadow but it was gone. She snaked her hands along the tree trunk to steady herself as she stood. She peered around the tree to see a dark shadow moving further into the forest. "Please stop," she called as she started after the figure. Pushing hard against branches, ducking and weaving to catch up, she was desperate to see what it was.

As she moved behind it, she could see it was a person hunched over. "Hello?" She tried to get a look at the person's face. The person was groaning and trying to muffle their sobs. "Are you hurt?" She reached out and wrapped her arm around their waist. She immediately recognized the hair. "Cedric?"

He turned to look at her. His usually pale skin was now puffy, red and different shades of purple. His eyes were dark and barely open slits that wept. His lips were caked with dry blood. His hair was mussed and pointing in all directions. He continued to lurch forward as Rebecca tried to steady him. "Oh my...Cedric what happened? Please sit down." She held onto him as she lowered herself onto the ground next to him. The spongy ground cushioned some of his weight as he sat down hard. He hunched over again, grasping his stomach and chest. Rebecca looked back at the clearing. She could just make out her horse. Mrs. Gwenllian instantly popped into her head.

"Cedric what happened?" She looked at his face as he continued to cry. She could see

his little teeth were covered in blood. "Who did this to you?" Rebecca looked at the bruising on his face. The markings continued down his neck. "Try to sit back," she said as he controlled his sobs. "Please Cedric, I must have a look." She undid the first button on his shirt. More bruising. She stopped at the fourth button. She knew he'd been beaten all over. "Are you hurt all over Cedric? Are you bleeding? Do you have an open wound?" He shook his head. He gasped for air between wincing and clutching his stomach. "What happened to you?"

Rebecca reached out and pushed his hair back, trying to be careful of his face. She could feel herself starting to cry. She'd never seen anyone beaten so badly. "Oh Cedric. Look at you. Who could have done this?" She sobbed at the sight of him. She didn't know what to do. She couldn't take him to her house. She couldn't take him to Mrs. Gwenllian. She couldn't leave him.

"Don't cry Rebecca." He reached out to her with a bloody and swollen hand. "I will be fine."

"Who did this to you? You are my friend Cedric. I want to help you."

"You are helping me. Just by being near me is helping me."

She sat silently with him for a few moments. "You must get going Rebecca. I don't want to get you into trouble for being out so long."

"No. I'm not leaving you like this." She looked him over again. "Are you sure you are not hurt anywhere worse?" He shook his head. "Who did this to you Cedric?"

He closed his eyes and started sobbing again. "Don't cry Cedric." She moved closer. "You will only make it hurt more. Please Cedric." She chose her words carefully. She wanted him to feel at ease. She sensed that this was the kind of attention he needed to get from her. "You have to tell me what happened, Cedric." She moved closer and tried to look into his eyes. "Who did this to you?" She looked at his bruises as she waited for his response.

"It was Father. Father did this to me when I told him you couldn't paint anymore."

Rebecca felt like she had been kicked in the stomach. She was shocked. She looked at Cedric's bruises again.

"What?"

"He was in a foul mood when I returned from the market. He hit me because I didn't have any paintings for him and then, when I told him your message...his mood turned worse. It's not your fault though," he said, looking at her face.

She was mortified. How could anyone do such a thing to a gentle-natured person like Cedric?

"But it's not your fault I can't paint for him anymore." Her mind was reeling as she stared at his face. His cherub face had taken the worst of the beating. Rebecca sobbed openly as she tried to look away from him.

"I am so sorry Cedric. This is all my fault. What can I do to make it up to you? How can I make you better?" She looked for a place to take hold of him that wouldn't cause him any more pain. He reached out and took hold of her hand.

"No...don't touch me." He pulled away. "It will only make it worse. I don't want you to get into more trouble for letting me see you in such a way. Oh Cedric what am I going to do?"

She thought frantically about the best course of action before telling him to stay there.

"Please don't move. You might injure yourself more. Please stay here. I will be back soon, I promise."

"I have nowhere to go Rebecca," he whispered.

She pushed her way through the forest back to her horse before setting off. She returned a short time later with the cart.

"Cedric?" she called as she rushed back to find him. "Cedric?" She looked around to see if she'd come to the right spot. "Can you hear me Cedric?" She heard a faint voice calling to her. "I'm coming Cedric." She set off again, looking for him. She found him lying on his back looking upwards at the sky.

"Talk to me Cedric." She took hold of his hand. It was as cold as the ground. "Come on. You have to help me get you up off the ground. I have a cart for you." His eyes were dazed as he stared upwards. "Cedric!" He blinked and looked at her. He squeezed her hand.

"Come on. I have to get you to Mrs. Gwenllian. She will help you." He winced and gasped as she helped him sit up. "Do you think you can stand?" Cedric looked at her and shook his head. "Well, we have to get you up. Hold onto me and I will pull you up." She wrapped his arms around her neck. "You'll have to bring your legs up Cedric." They both slipped in the mud as she tried to get him to his feet. He screeched in pain as she struggled against his dead weight. "A little further Cedric. You can do it." He lurched forward in pain and almost toppled them both. Rebecca pushed against him to brace herself. He was on his feet. Just.

"Now, I'm going to help you get to the cart. It's as close as I could get it. This way." She knew touching him was causing him more pain, but she couldn't just leave him there. She helped him out of the forest and to the cart. He fell awkwardly into it and hard, crying out again in pain. "I need you to move up a little further Cedric. I don't want you to fall out."

She tried to help him move further but realized she was wasting time. She climbed on top of the cart and cracked the reins. She looked back to see Cedric clutching his stomach and writhing in pain.

Chapter Fifteen

The rocky track didn't slow her down. Tears streamed down her face at the thought of Cedric being beaten. They'd had their differences, but Cedric was the only one that made the effort to be her friend when she couldn't speak. He'd been her only real friend for a long time. He accepted her as she was and she did the same in return. She'd told and shown him things she never thought she'd ever reveal to another soul. Although she was concerned for Cedric, her blood began to boil at the thought of his father. She inched slowly around the corner to Mrs. Gwenllian's house, looking for any sign of her father. On seeing nothing, she slapped the reins hard again.

Mrs. Gwenllian opened her door after Rebecca beat on it furiously. "What is it dear?"

Rebecca was almost hysterical. "You have to help my friend. You have to help him."

"Yes, of course dear. Where is he?" Rebecca was already pulling her towards the cart. She climbed into the back of the cart and caressed Cedric's hair.

"Cedric? Cedric can you hear me? We are here. You'll be all better now. Cedric? Talk to me."

Mrs. Gwenllian tip-toed to look into the cart. "Who is it dear?"

"Cedric. Cedric?" Rebecca reached for his hand. It was cold. She screamed his name and she saw his eyes flutter slightly.

"Cedric? We are here. I need you to be strong for a little longer."

He nodded faintly before he went limp in her arms.

"Quickly Mrs. Gwenllian, you have to help him," she said, climbing towards the end of the cart. She grabbed hold of Cedric's ankles and yanked him hard towards the edge.

"Cedric wake up. I need you to help me. Cedric." She pulled on his hands to bring him forward. He looked at her through his slit eyes. "I need you to help me. It's not far now Cedric." She draped his arm over her shoulders and pulled him from the cart. He hurtled to the ground as Mrs. Gwenllian rushed to get underneath him and help hold him up.

"Quickly dear." Mrs. Gwenllian led the way into her house.

Rebecca practically dragged Cedric into the room, nearly tripping over herself in her haste.

"Cedric. Talk to me. Tell me you are alright." A gurgle was all he sounded.

"Leave us dear," Mrs. Gwenllian said, trying to get Rebecca out of the room.

"No. I'm not leaving. I want to help. Tell me how I can help." She stubbornly knelt next to him.

Mrs. Gwenllian nodded her head. "Fine. I need you to help me get his shirt off. I don't think it is appropriate that you see it, but if you insist."

Rebecca shifted on her knees and grabbed hold of each side of his shirt before pulling it apart. She gasped as his shirt gaped open. His chest was covered with large bruises. Mrs. Gwenllian ran her hands over his stomach. His eyes flew open as he screamed in pain.

"Yes, yes, yes, I know it hurts. I need you to take this," she said as she dabbed a handkerchief with a small bottle, placing it over his mouth and nose. Rebecca watched Cedric take several deep breaths before his eyes rolled back.

"What did you give him?" Rebecca asked

"Something for the pain dear. My own special secret. He looks to have taken a serious beating. See how his stomach is sitting out like that? It means he's bleeding inside. We have to get the blood out. I need you to hold him here." Mrs. Gwenllian took hold of Rebecca's hands and placed them firmly where she needed them.

Rebecca watched until Mrs. Gwenllian brought out a large needle. She concentrated on Cedric's face as Mrs. Gwenllian worked.

"There. That should be enough." Rebecca looked down at the container filling with blood. Her hands started to shake as she looked down at them. They were covered with his blood.

"Be calm dear. It's only blood. You may have saved his life by bringing him here." Rebecca crawled along the floor to his head and bent down to his face.

"Cedric? I told you I had to bring you here. Did you hear that? You're going to be fine." Mrs. Gwenllian silently handed her a towel to wipe her hands. When she finished, she again stroked his hair.

"Come with me dear." Rebecca looked up at Mrs. Gwenllian, who was now standing with her hands on her hips.

"Can we leave him?" She didn't want to leave his side until he was talking to her again.

"Yes. I need to talk to you."

"Talk to me here," she said, returning her attention back to Cedric.

"Very well dear. What are you doing with this man? I told you he was bad news."

"He is not bad news. He is my friend."

"Do you even know what happened to him?"

"What does it matter? I found him like this and I needed to help him. I will pay you if that is what you are concerned about."

"Oh Rebecca. I am not worried about payment. I am worried about you."

"What's to worry about?" Rebecca got to her feet and stalked towards the other woman. "If you want to worry about something, help my father. Your tonic seems to do nothing but make his ramblings worse." She pointed her finger at Mrs. Gwenllian's face. "You haven't been to the farm in a long while. Did he tell you what he fills his days with? He's not worried about the crops or how the farm is going to survive the next harvest. He is worried about creating scarecrows. He is what I have to worry about. Cedric is my friend and I was not going to leave him in the state he was in. I resent any implication that I should have done otherwise."

Mrs. Gwenllian nodded her head. She had learned long ago not to argue when Rebecca was in the state she was in.

"Are you hurt?"

"No. No I'm not," she said as she sat next to Cedric.

"Why was he beaten?"

"Because of me. I was coming to see Johannes off and that's when I found him."

Mrs. Gwenllian gave her a puzzled look. "You came to see Johannes off? Where did he go? He didn't tell me he was going anywhere." She looked confused and maybe a little frightened.

"He came to the farm yesterday. He and Papa had a fight. I thought he would have

been home to tell you about it," Rebecca said. She, too, looked puzzled.

"Something doesn't seem right to me dear. Not right at all." Mrs. Gwenllian looked away from Rebecca. "You must stay here. I must go and see someone about Johannes."

"Where are you going? I wish to go with you." Mrs. Gwenllian raised her hand.

"No. You must stay here with your friend. I will be back as soon as I can."

Rebecca didn't have time to argue as Mrs. Gwenllian quickly left her house. She watched her from the street until she couldn't see her anymore. She was headed in the direction of the farm. She wondered if she was going to see Papa.

"Rutherford! I demand you show yourself at once!" Mrs. Gwenllian's voice echoed throughout the Dead Forest. "Rutherford!"

"Hello Aunty." Johannes was watching her from a branch.

"Oh Johannes! Where have you been? Why are you here?" She struggled to see him clearly. "Come down so I can get you out of here." Johannes just stared at her as he moved along the branch. She stepped back when she saw how effortlessly he moved. She couldn't fight the fear prickling her body. She screamed as Johannes jumped off the branch and flew towards her.

"What's the matter Aunty? Aren't you glad to see me?" Johannes' eyes were bleak and had sunken into his skull. His skin was pale and blotchy. His lips were dark red and his long hair looked lank and dirty. She gasped as he moved closer to her.

"Where's Rutherford? I know he is the one responsible for this. What did he do to you?" Mrs. Gwenllian brought her hands up to in an attempt to protect herself.

"So you knew what Rutherford was all along, did you Aunty? Why didn't you tell me? I could have better protected myself and Rebecca. Who's going to make sure Rebecca is safe now?" Mrs. Gwenllian froze on the spot. "I met some lovely ladies who told me all about Rutherford and what his plan is for Rebecca."

Marguerite, Elser and Arlene moved into the clearing and circled Mrs. Gwenllian. She couldn't move her hand quick enough to stifle a scream as Marguerite moved in closer.

"Hello Beatrice. It has been too long," she sneered as she loomed over Mrs. Gwenllian.

"B-b-but you're dead!"

"No Beatrice. I've been very much alive. Alive while you have been spending much time with my daughter. Much time with my husband. I explained to your nephew the plans that man has for my child, how you've know all along and not done a damned thing to help either of them."

"It was not my place. It was not my place to do anything," Mrs. Gwenllian quivered. The four of them had moved in so closely she was backed against a tree.

"It never is your place. You push to know everyone's business in the town. Push to find out information, but you don't do anything to help anyone.

"Why would you let Rutherford do this to your nephew?" Arlene demanded, shaking her head.

Rebecca wiped a cloth over Cedric's face. She smiled as she watched a small amount of color come back to his cheeks. He looked even paler, if it were possible.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, half not expecting an answer. Cedric mumbled a

response. "Cedric, it's getting late. I have to go home but I don't know where Mrs. Gwenllian is. I can't leave you here alone."

Cedric opened his small eyes and she could see he was having difficulties focusing on her face. "I'm fine...really. You have done more than enough for me. You'd better go. Your father will be sick with worry. I'll be fine. It's not as if I can go far like this anyway."

Rebecca smiled at his joking nature. She still felt uneasy as she pulled on her jacket. She was furious at Mrs. Gwenllian for leaving forcing her to leave Cedric alone.

Mrs. Gwenllian's screams sang through the air. Johannes, Marguerite, Elser and Arlene all bore down on her as she fumbled for an explanation.

"You don't understand. He has ways and means of getting what he wants," she sobbed.

Johannes had heard enough and lifted his hand to make her stop. "Clearly he has the ways and the means Aunty. I am living – well...almost living proof of that! I think the best thing for you is to come with us while we sort something out."

Mrs. Gwenllian shook her head furiously and tried to voice her resistance, but the four of them had other ideas.

"Where have you been?" Papa screamed as he pulled Rebecca from the cart. His force knocked her to the ground. He towered over her as she tried to get away from him and get to her feet.

"Where have you been?" Papa had never screamed at her until recently.

"I was with Mrs. Gwenllian!" she screamed in pain. "I thought as I hadn't seen her in a while that I'd better pay her a visit."

He reached forward and grabbed hold of her arm. She screamed in pain as he brought her to her feet and pulled her towards the cottage.

"I told you to stay inside." Rebecca was hurtled into the cottage. Even through all the turmoil, she saw Papa had moved to making the scarecrows inside.

"Papa, what is going on? What's happened to you?" Her questions fell on deaf ears. His muttering drowned out her words.

"I have to go back to Mrs. Gwenllian. I have to go back Papa. I have to go back."

"You'll be going nowhere. You have to stay here. Stay where I can keep an eye on you. Keep you safe. If I'm here with you...he won't come and get you."

Rebecca ran at Papa. "Who won't come and get me? *Who?*"

Papa stopped mid-step and looked at Rebecca. Her hands were still stained with blood.

"What happened to your hands?" For the first time in a long while, his voice sounded like the Papa she knew.

"It's not my blood. I had to help Mrs. Gwenllian. That's why I have to go back. I have to go back there now Papa."

"I can't let you go out this late. It's what he wants," he said in a quiet voice.

"Who Papa? It's what who wants? Who is going to get me?"

Papa's eyes filled with tears. He broke down in her arms. "I will tell you when the time is right Rebecca, but until then I need to know you are safe."

"I am safe Papa. I am safe." She knew there was no going back to Mrs. Gwenllian's

that night. She spent most of her night trying to console her father who sobbed as he worked on the scarecrows. She went to sleep crying. Crying for everything that had gone wrong that day, crying for a better tomorrow.

Elser and Arlene dragged Mrs. Gwenllian by the ankles through the Dead Forest. Her screams would have woken the dead.

"You will have to control that scream of your's Beatrice, can't you see you are attracting attention...and not the good kind?" Marguerite snickered. Johannes looked back at her and smiled. His gums had receded and his face was more gaunt.

They were almost through a clearing when Marguerite raised her hand. Everyone stopped still. She cocked her head, listening intently as she turned her gaze to the treetops.

She drew a breath quickly and spun around, thrusting her hands out to release a ball of fire, lighting a small section of the Dead Forest.

The sound of the fireball whizzing through the air captured everyone's attention. Elser, Arlene and Johannes prepared themselves for the worst.

"Ha! Knew you were following us Rutherford," Marguerite yelled as she prepared to release another ball of fire. Both Arlene and Elser dropped Mrs. Gwenllian to the ground. The sound of her scrambling through the soggy earth was the only noise to be heard. Arlene and Elser moved to Marguerite's side and held their hands out, ready to follow her lead.

"Ahh Beatrice, I see you have been in contact with your nephew." Rutherford smiled, staring at Johannes.

Mrs. Gwenllian stopped instantly and looked at Rutherford. She couldn't help but tremble on the spot. She looked at Rutherford then back at Johannes and the witches. She screamed as she ducked out of the way of another fireball, scrambling to hide behind one of the trees. She tried to calm her breathing and focus on the commotion around her.

Crack after louder crack echoed through the forest as Marguerite rained fireball after fireball at Rutherford. He did well to defend himself when Arlene and Elser joined in. Marguerite's form changed as she floated forward and held out both hands. Her teeth gnarled as she pursued him.

Her hair moved wildly behind her. She threw her head back and screamed as her hands shook. She was strong, but she wasn't strong enough to take on Rutherford. She motioned towards him as she tried to concentrate. Her face had become old and wrinkled. She drained most of her energy to fend him off. Mrs. Gwenllian peeked around the tree to see Rutherford hold both his hands out to protect himself from both the fireballs and Marguerite's spell. She couldn't hear the words Marguerite was saying but she knew she only had a small amount of time to make her escape.

Mrs. Gwenllian gasped when she saw Marguerite look at Johannes to give him the signal. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small bottle of blue-green liquid.

"Now Johannes, *now!*" Marguerite screamed. Johannes looked at it and smiled before pitching it at Rutherford. A flash of white blue light lit up the forest. Marguerite crossed her arms to cover her eyes. She wasted no time in searching for Rutherford. Mrs. Gwenllian set off running through the forest. She ran as fast as her short legs would carry her. She heard Marguerite screaming.

"Where is he?" she screamed. "Where did he go?"

She felt her heart beating a rapid tattoo in her throat as she heard Elser say, "She's gone too."

Chapter Sixteen

Papa held tight onto the reins of Rebecca's horse as they returned to the farm. He waited for Rebecca to get off her horse before taking her inside.

"You want to know why I can't let you out of my sight?" Rebecca tried to shy away from his screams. "Do you?"

"Yes," she said quietly, terrified of what he might do next.

"If I let you out of my sight you are going to die."

Rebecca stared at his cold eyes. "How am I going to die Papa?" He stared at her before more tears rolled down his face.

"I don't think I can tell you. I have done an awful, awful thing." Papa broke down in tears as he spoke. Rebecca took him in her arms and led him into the kitchen where he continued to cry uncontrollably. His hands shook as he tried to grip the mug of tonic. Rebecca helped guide the mug to his lips as he took a long drink. "Thank you," he said without looking at her.

Rebecca couldn't believe Papa hadn't come down from his loft for three days.

"Papa, I am going to pull vegetables for our dinner," she called. As she reached the vegetable patch, she turned to see him looking from his window. He'd poked the barrel of the gun through the window and watched her work. She carried the basket back to the corral and ensured the horses were groomed and fed. It became the routine that Rebecca would take Papa his dinner and eat hers alone. He was unshaven and had been in the same clothes. He didn't even bother changing into his nightclothes.

Rebecca would climb to the top of the ladder to the loft, place his food and tonic on the floor, then return to her bed. Papa was keeping her at arms length.

"Papa, we are in desperate need of more supplies," she said, placing his dinner on the loft floor. "I'm going to have to go to town."

"No Rebecca." It was the first time he'd spoken to her in days.

"But Papa, we have nothing in the cupboard. You won't let me outside long enough to plant more crops. I promise I will ride to town and return. I will not go anywhere else. You are in no condition to ride. Please let me go Papa."

She tired of waiting for a response and stepped down from the ladder. The cottage had become stark. It had not been filled with laughter or song for so long. It felt cold and hard. He would simply say 'no' to end conversations.

She retreated to her bed and thought about Johannes. She prayed the next day would be the day she would see him again. She wondered where Cedric had gone, too. She wondered how she was going to help Papa. She wondered when Mrs. Gwenllian would come to check on them. She wondered how she was going to get to the village for more supplies. She fell asleep with a hundred questions swimming in her head.

For the next two days she asked Papa if she could go to town. Each time he said no and told her to stay put. It seemed within no time they ran out of fresh water.

"Papa, we have to get more water from the stream," Rebecca called up to the loft.

She didn't expect to see him come down with the shotgun over his shoulder. "Get the bucket then," he said as he walked to the door. Rebecca scooped up the bucket and walked close behind him. He pointed the gun out the door before poking his head out to ensure the coast was clear. Rebecca stayed close behind him, trying to see what he was looking for.

"Quickly," he said. They set off to the stream, weaving their way through the maze of scarecrows. Rebecca had to run to keep up with him. He kept watch to the left and to the right of him and told Rebecca to keep an eye behind them. Rebecca couldn't see anything as she chased him to the stream.

"Be careful," he said as he pushed her towards the edge of the stream, keeping a close watch on the Dead Forest. "Quickly."

Rebecca knelt down and braced herself before she dropped the bucket into the water. Papa swung the gun around towards the sound of water splashing. Rebecca quickly pulled the bucket out and put it on the embankment.

"Come on," Papa said, reaching down and pulling her to her feet. She had just enough time to grab the handle of the bucket before they set off towards the cottage. Water splashed out of the bucket as Papa dragged her along.

"Papa, I have to go to the village and buy some food for us," she said. She asked repeatedly for him to let her go until finally he agreed.

"But you must go there and come straight back, no talking to anyone, no stopping. I expect you back as soon as possible," he said. Rebecca nodded as she gathered the knapsack and prepared to head to the village. "You do understand, don't you Rebecca?"

"Yes Papa. Straight there and straight back." She leaned in to hug him. "I promise." She set off as fast as her horse would take her. The wind felt good against her face as her hair streamed out behind her. She pushed her horse to its limits. She didn't want Papa to come to the village toting his gun, looking for the man that might kidnap her. She'd made her way to the village in record time. Her horse foamed at the mouth and puffed hard as she galloped across the bridge. She made her way to the market stalls before tying up her horse.

"Good morning Rebecca. Haven't seen you in the village for quite some time," one villager said as she grabbed supplies.

"Yes, we have been very busy," she smiled sweetly as she stuffed her knapsack.

"How's your Papa?"

"He's been busy at work on the farm," Rebecca said without stopping, thrusting a gold coin at the villager. "Thank you."

Rebecca wanted to buy Papa a small bottle of whiskey, thinking it might calm him and help settle his mind. She pulled on her hood to hide her face as she made her way to the Tavern. She kept a look out for anyone who might have been following her as she made her way through the village. She dismounted her horse slowly as she looked around before walking to the side door. The barman looked up from the glass he was wiping and nodded at her.

"A bottle of whiskey please," she said quietly, trying not to attract unwanted attention.

The barman didn't say anything. Just reached for a small bottle and placed it on the bar, pushing it towards her. Rebecca dug into her apron and pulled out two gold coins. She flipped them onto the counter before swiping the bottle and spinning on her heel for the door.

She returned to her horse to discover the side knapsack was bulging. She looked around. There was no one to be seen. She lifted the flap and saw several paintbrushes poking through. Underneath she saw pots of ink and a small book. Leafing through the pages of the book, she read the inscription.

Dearest Rebecca,

I can never adequately put into words the appreciation I feel for your friendship and your kind actions. Our worlds have been filled with pain and while painting brightens your world, mine is lifted when I see you paint. Do not let your talent go. Cherish this gift as I cherish your friendship.

I will see you again soon, Cedric.

Rebecca looked around the street hoping Cedric would appear. She replaced the book in the knapsack and rode back to the farm. Dismounting her horse prior to reaching the farm, she unloaded the paint supplies. She snuck the supplies into the cottage knowing she would have to wait for the right time to unpack them. She'd tucked the small book under the vegetables. She was glad she'd put most of the money she made from her paintings aside. She found Papa sleeping in his chair, nursing the shotgun. She crept past him and quietly put the basket on the kitchen table.

She reached in and pulled out the book before glancing over her shoulder at Papa and tucking it under her bed. As she returned to the basket and lifted the vegetables out, Papa jumped to his feet. Rebecca looked down the barrel of the gun as she dropped the produce.

"Papa." Her voice was shaking. "Papa, it's me. Rebecca." She could see his hands shaking as he, too, stared down the barrel at her. "Put down the gun Papa. It's only me. I have returned from town like I said I would." Moments went by, each holding their breath, afraid to be the one who made the first move.

"Papa," she pleaded, trying to look into his eyes. They were glazed over, not focused on her. "Papa. It's me." As she continued to speak to him she could see the clouds moving from his eyes. He blinked and shifted the gun slightly. He could finally see her. "Papa. Put the gun down." It was like he had woken from a dream. His eyes were clear and he moved the gun away. He looked at the gun as he lowered it. "Papa. Say you know it is me."

"I can see you now Rebecca. But you weren't you before."

"Papa?"

"You were...you were someone else. I saw you sneak into the cottage and go to your bed and then back to the table. I could have sworn it was..." His voice trailed off.

"No Papa. I am the only one here. There is no one else. Your hands are shaking. Do you want more tonic?" He shook his head and she could see he was trying to shake the images free. "No. No more tonic. No more lies. No more anything."

He continued to mutter as he paced the room. He shook his head and refused to eat the dinner Rebecca prepared.

"I'm going to lie down," he announced as he set off towards the loft.

Rebecca tidied the kitchen area while she strained to hear him. The sound of raindrops hitting the windows disturbed her thoughts only for a moment. She took the opportunity given to her and pulled out her new book, opening it to the first page. She dipped the quill

into the inkpot before starting her journal to Cedric.

Dear Cedric,

I am using this book you gave me as a way to talk to you. I had to leave you suddenly and I don't know how to reach you. I feel if I write to you, you will in some way still be talking with me. I hope you are doing well and that you are keeping in touch with Mrs. Gwenllian. Although she is a very strong woman, she is also kind, who will do her best to keep her friends happy. I am forever grateful for what she did for you. I believe she saved your life. As for life on the farm, it seems madness has taken another piece of Papa. He's being pulled further and further into a dark place where he can't hear anyone. I don't know what to do to help him. I don't think he can help himself. The only thing he does know is scarecrows. So many scarecrows. One turned into two. Two turned into four. Our land looks like it is harvesting scarecrows rather than produce. I fall asleep to the sound of him wailing and calling for me. When I go to him he tells me not to come near him. Many times I have woken and found him sitting at the foot of my bed. He's asleep and resting his head on the shotgun. He hasn't eaten in days. He must be struggling to keep his strength. Madness gives him the strength to carry on. His body is growing weak too, but not as quickly as his mind. I am so tired and the faceless man continues to plague my dreams.

Hearing Papa shuffling up above, Rebecca quickly tucked her book under her bed and rushed to dunk her hands in the bucket of water. Through the raindrops she could hear the sound of the ladder struggling under his weight.

"Are you hungry Papa? What can I make you?" His reply came in the form of a grunt. The shotgun had become an extension of his arm. He paced to the kitchen window. He was always at the kitchen window. They both were. He was looking at something and Rebecca was struggling to see what he saw. He was staring at something Rebecca could not see.

"Papa. Do you want to get washed up while I get you something to eat?" He hadn't eaten much at the last sitting.

"No. There's no time for eating. I need to make one more. One more for there." He pointed at the entrance to the Dead Forest. "One so big it will protect us," he said in a hushed tone.

Rebecca feared to ask what they needed protection from. She didn't want him to lose his temper again.

"How can I help you Papa?" she said as she moved to his side.

"You can help me by staying here. I need to know you're safe." He finally looked at her. His eyes were wild. His face was covered with grime and soil. His hair had gone from a light blond shade to white in the matter of nights.

She didn't recognize the man staring back at her. Before she was able to speak, he was off, heading outside again. She stood at the kitchen window watching him pull at random branches. He was trying to snap them off. The rain didn't seem to slow him down. Within moments his clothes were drenched and stuck to his skin. It was such a pitiful sight. She had to turn away. She sat on her bed. Confused. Lost. Desperate for answers.

She didn't know how to help him. She lay down and stared at the ceiling.

A million thoughts raced through her mind but none of them were any kind of solution. She closed her eyes and whispered a prayer for help. She hadn't seen nor heard from any of

the townsfolk. She rolled on her side and faced the wall. Closing her eyes, she hoped she would wake from this nightmare.

Chapter Seventeen

The report of a shotgun had her sitting bolt upright. She could hear Papa cackling as she raced to the kitchen window. She peered out and saw him struggling to erect another scarecrow. This one was bigger than all the others and faced the Dead Forest. She strained to see what the head was made out of. It was out of proportion to the rest of the body. The body was huge but the head was tiny. Papa slipped to the ground as he struggled to hold the scarecrow in place.

Rebecca didn't bother putting her shoes on as she ran out of the cottage. The ground felt cold on the soles of her feet. The grass and earth squished under her weight as she ran to her father's side.

"Papa," she had twice called by the time she reached him.

"Oh Rebecca, you shouldn't be outside." He stopped laughing but kept looking at the forest. "Quickly, get back inside," he said as he pushed her towards the cottage.

Rebecca looked at the head of the scarecrow. It was a crow. Her father shot the crow and staked it on top.

"But Papa. Another scarecrow? Look around you...don't we have enough?" She pulled on his arm in an attempt to divert his attention away from the forest. "You have filled the whole field with scarecrows but still they come."

She couldn't help but scream as she threw her arms out, trying to make him look at her. Finally he did. He looked down into eyes that were filled with fear for him. He placed his hands on her shoulders and took a long look around. She could feel his fingers grip her tighter. She watched him start to crumble. His breath rasped as he fought to contain himself. He sucked in air quickly. She started to shake as his fingers trembled.

"Papa," she said, but he was already in hysterics. She had never seen him cry like this. Tears streamed down his face as he looked from one scarecrow to the next and then he slowly looked at her. He looked at her as if she wasn't even there. He looked so lost.

"Papa," she said as she held him in her arms. She didn't know what to do. She thought if she held him, he would know that both he and she were safe.

As she gripped her arms firmly around his waist he became uncontrollable. He threw his head back and screamed. Rebecca trembled as she held onto him tightly. He screamed again and pushed her back. She lost her footing and fell backwards, hitting the ground hard. She scrambled to her feet, frightened to stay and frightened to leave. Papa fell to his knees and reached out to her.

"Forgive me...forgive me dear child of mine," he said. His voice was strained and faltered as he struggled to control himself. "Forgive me. I have failed you. I love you. It's my duty to keep you safe and protected but I have failed you. Please forgive me."

Rebecca stood her ground and looked at his outstretched hand. "How have you failed me father? You have given me everything I have wanted." Her eyes were beginning to sting as tears welled in her eyes.

He reached forward and hugged her, resting his head on her stomach.

"No, no I haven't. I can't keep you safe anymore. Please forgive me."

She looked around to the fence. Wing to wing, there must have been two hundred crows sitting there staring at the two of them. She hadn't heard them move around them. She didn't realize she was being watched.

"Forgive me...forgive me...forgive me," her father babbled while holding her tight. She pulled her focus from the crows back to her father.

"I do. I do forgive you father." She knew something dire was about to happen as more crows landed on the property grounds. They started to screech in unison.

The noise was so loud her father's sobs were drowned out. Fear coursed through her veins as she struggled to pull her father up.

"Get up Papa." She heaved on his shirt. "Get up Papa...*get up.*" She pulled at his hands to free herself. "Please get up Papa."

More crows came and landed near them. She freed herself and stepped backwards, surveying the crows. Papa seemed to see reason. Both of them looked around as more crows came.

"Rebecca, get inside now." His voice was clear and stern.

"Not without you Papa."

"Please forgive me, but you have to get inside. I love you and I'm sorry." He started to sob again.

"I do forgive you father, but I'm not going inside without you." Rebecca looked around her and slowly reached for her father's hand. "Come on, we can make it from here. Take my hand Papa."

He stopped sobbing and slowly got to his feet. He reached out and took her hand. The instant they made contact, the crows fell silent. The silence was deafening. Rebecca could only hear the wind in the distance.

"*Run!*" She pulled hard on Papa's hand, almost pulling him over.

The crows released an ear-piercing scream. She thought her head was going to explode as they shot off across the yard. The crows were going berserk although they didn't fly any higher than a few feet in the air.

Rebecca took the lead, covering the front of her face with her free hand as she held tight to Papa.

The collective scream of the crows resonated through the air; she winced as the sound pierced her ears. She pulled on Papa's hand to make him move quickly. She was desperate to make it back to the cottage. For the pair of them to make it. She pushed her father through the doorway first before slamming the door behind her. Rebecca took time to catch her breath as Papa peered through the kitchen window. She rushed to his side.

"Father, what is going on? Why is this happening?" She couldn't drag her gaze away from the sight before her.

Papa again cried uncontrollably. Rebecca asked him to sit as she continued to watch the chaos outside the cottage. One solitary crow sat on the post, not moving. It was sitting in the eye of the storm. She turned and knelt at her father's side.

"I need you to stay here Papa."

"No Rebecca. You mustn't go outside. That's what they want." Despite his pleas for her to remain with him, she got to her feet. She needed to protect him just as much as he had tried to protect her.

"Who father? I don't need to go outside but I do have to use your gun." She walked around the kitchen table to the fireplace.

"Rebecca, I can't let you."

"We can't stay here like this." She cocked the shotgun to ensure it was loaded. "I promise I will not go outside if you promise to stay here." She walked around the corner of the table and looked back at him. "Do we have a deal?" He nodded and broke down into sobs yet again. She put the gun under her arm and made her way to the loft, crouching down low as she moved to the window. The screeching was making her head pound. She clicked the shotgun into place and slowly eased the window open, inching the barrel over the ledge. She carefully stood up, pushing the barrel downwards as she rose.

She took a deep breath as she looked down and lined up the one crow that still hadn't moved. Her finger curled around the trigger as she lined up the shot again and again to ensure it rang true. She braced herself and gripped the gun firmly as her hands began to sweat. She pulled the trigger, but just as the trigger clicked the crow looked directly at her and spread its wings wide. The shot rang out and the noise from the crows hurt more than the kick back from the shotgun.

Rebecca pushed the window wide and peered out. She couldn't see a single thing other than a sea of black. The crows were flying into each other, completely disorientated. She searched, straining to find that one crow to see if she hit it.

"Rebecca!" Papa screamed.

"I'm alright Papa." She pulled the window closed and returned to her father. She found him peering through the door. She put the shotgun down and pushed the door shut when she got to his side.

"Please Papa, you need to sit and tell me what is going on."

"I can't. I am sorry. I made a promise to never tell you the terrible thing I have done." He paced the room.

"You have always told me everything Papa. What is it you say you have done? It can't be as bad as you say. I will help you fix it."

Rebecca hadn't noticed until she stopped speaking. There was silence. She looked out the window, not a bird in sight. She opened the door and peered out. She closed the door and ran back to the kitchen window.

Nothing. It was as if it never happened.

"Stay here. I am going to go check something." She rushed through the room and retrieved the gun, cocking and reloading it quickly.

"No. You mustn't." He stood in the doorway to stop her from leaving. She tried to push him out of the way but he wouldn't move. She stood back and pointed the shotgun at him.

"Get out of the way Papa. I need to check something. I promise I will only be a matter of seconds. I have to check this." She pleaded for him to move. "All the crows have gone."

"No, they will be back. There will be more of them."

"That's why I have to see this now. Move Papa. I have to check this out now," she screamed. Papa shook his head as he stepped to the side, allowing her to leave. He opened the door and followed after her.

"Stay there," she instructed. "I don't want to shoot you by mistake."

At the end of the cottage she looked around to make sure there were no birds in sight. She could hear a rumbling of squawks coming from the Dead Forest as she scurried around the corner. She had to see if she hit that crow. She didn't know why but he was the one to aim for because the masses revolved around him. The sound from the forest was not going to distract her. She was focused on getting to where the crow was. She heard crackling from close behind her. She spun around and pointed the gun. Nothing. She looked around slowly. Her heart was racing. She ran to where the crow was. Blood. There was a trail of blood. She cursed herself. She thought she killed it for sure. She followed the trail for a few feet and knelt down.

She ran her fingers through it. It was still warm. She had shot it. As she rolled the blood over her fingers, a roar of screaming birds came from the forest. She scrambled to her feet and scooped up the shotgun as she saw a wall of crows shoot into the sky. Her eyes opened wide as she fired a shot in their direction. It made little impact.

She could hear Papa screaming at her as she turned to run back to the cottage. She ran as fast as her legs would carry her. She didn't even try to look back. Papa kept screaming her name and telling her to run. She rounded the corner and got back inside just as the first crows surrounded the cottage.

They filled the windows, screeching louder when they saw her. She could hear them scratching the roof. She dropped the shotgun on the floor and doubled over to catch her breath.

"What is going on Papa?" she screamed breathlessly. He just stood staring out the kitchen window. He wasn't ignoring her. He didn't know she was there. His gaze was transfixed on the forest. The crows were going berserk. Rebecca pulled the curtains closed in the lounge room and raced to grab handfuls of fat from the cooking pot, smothering it over the glass in the windows.

When each panel was covered she pushed past her father and grabbed handfuls of ash from the fireplace to blacken the windows. If the crows couldn't see them they would leave her alone. She threw ash at the window trying to make it stick to the fat. Ash was going everywhere. As she patched up the final glass panel, silence fell again. She leaned forward and shook her head. She couldn't stop the tears from flowing. She threw more wood on the fire to keep it burning.

"We are safe now Papa," she said breathlessly as she started to sob. She wiped her brow with the back of her hand. Her face felt clammy. She worked hard to control herself. "What is coming Papa? You said something was coming. What is it?" Papa stood from his chair and wiped his face.

"You don't have to worry about it. No one is coming for you. I will take care of it." In three strides he walked over and picked up the gun. Rebecca dashed around the table to try and get there first, but he was too fast. He pushed her back causing her to fall over. He yelled at her to stay there.

"No!" she screamed as she clambered to her feet. She raced after him but he was already out the door. The crows circled above screeching in unison. She watched the crows circling above. She watched her father running across the paddock. Instincts kicked in as she took off after him.

Muddy water splashed up her legs as she watched him go across the stream. As she

reached the stream Papa had made his way into the forest. She pushed through the icy water and called for Papa to stop. She couldn't see him when she had crawled out the other side.

"Papa!" She could barely hear herself with all the screeching. She continued following him into the forest where he had been moments before. The forest was thick and dark; it was difficult to see anything. She could hear her father's screams as she searched for him. "Papa!" she called again as she headed in the direction of his screams. "Papa!" she called. She ducked and weaved past branches and headed deeper into the forest. She came to a clearing and turned around, listening for her father. She heard nothing. The fact she couldn't hear anything wasn't the only thing that frightened her. She didn't know where she was. Nothing looked familiar. She hadn't realized how deep she had gone. "*Papa!*" Silence.

Nothing moved. She couldn't even hear the crows. All she could hear was her heart beating and her lungs gasping for air. She set off to her left and continued calling for him. Her lungs felt like they were ready to burst. Her dress clung to her like a second skin. She brushed past branch after branch, the spikes scoring her skin. She cringed as the spikes sliced along her arm. She put her palm over the wound to stem the bleeding as she pushed on. "Papa!" She spun in a circle looking for him. Her feet slipped on the muddy ground.

She stopped short when she noticed a shoe poking out from behind a tree. As she staggered forward, she could see it was a person. She started to run. As she drew closer, she recognized who it was.

Chapter Eighteen

"Cedric?"

He was gazing up at the treetops and struggling to breathe. His complexion was ghostly white and his hands were clamped over his stomach. Rebecca dropped to her knees as she pushed his wet hair back from his forehead. "Cedric...what happened to you?"

He gasped for air as he slowly rolled his head to look at her. His eyes were crystal clear and more striking than ever. The vision was all too familiar.

"You're bleeding. Let me help you." She tried to look at his wound. "Cedric...have you seen my father?" She tried to maintain his focus as she ripped the bottom of her skirt off. "I need your help. Have you seen my father?" She pulled him forward gently to take a look at the other side of his body. He cried out in pain as she moved him. "You have to help me Cedric. How did this happen?" She moved him gently so he lay back against the tree trunk.

"It's nothing," he said, gasping for air.

"Hardly," she scoffed while continuing to look around for any sign of her father. "Did you fall off your horse or something? Where have you been? Did your father do this to you?" Rebecca pushed the strips of material under his hands. "How did this happen? If we can find my father, he can help us get you to the cottage. I can go to town for Mrs. Gwennllian again."

She heard her father scream. She looked around while trying to tend to Cedric. She strained to hear which direction it came from.

"I'm here Papa!" she screamed as she looked back at Cedric. His eyes were starting to cloud over and his breathing was sparse. "Cedric...Cedric...you must tell me who did this to you. I need to help my father."

"It's too late now," he gasped. "It's too late. You can't save him."

Rebecca's hands stopped moving over the wound. She looked at him in disbelief.

"Why is it too late? I have to find him."

"It's too late," he repeated. "Your Papa is going to die tonight. It's the way it's meant to happen."

She scrambled to her feet and looked down at him. She didn't know what to do. If she left Cedric he would die, but she had to look for her father. "It's too late for him," he repeated again. "You're the reason he is the way he is. He knew this day was coming for a very long time."

Rebecca spun around in a circle, looking through the branches for her father.

"Knew what was coming? Tell me Cedric."

"The day you will meet your master." Rebecca stopped circling and looked down at Cedric.

"Who?"

"Your father made a deal when you only a couple of hours old. He agreed you would be the master's and live with him for eternity." She was stunned. "Why do you think you have the best crops to sell to the other villagers?" he questioned. "Who do you think has been watching you your whole life? Who do you think has been buying your paintings? Who do you think is in the paintings you believe you dream about?"

Cedric smiled at her and reached out his hand. She looked down at his outstretched hand. "Who do you think sent me to watch over you? All those times you looked around, thinking someone was watching you. Someone was. It was me. You've had my heart from the first time I saw you."

Rebecca shook her head. She felt helpless. Cedric's hand shook in an effort to keep it up for Rebecca to take. "Please..." She dropped to her knees and took his hand. "What do you mean you were sent to watch over me?" She heard her father scream again. It sounded close. Her head was racing.

"I was sent by the master to make sure you were safe at all times. He's the one that made Johannes go away. You belong to the master. He didn't want to risk losing you to anyone else."

Her head was racing. She dropped Cedric's hand. She felt like she'd been bludgeoned. She felt sick. She thought Johannes was tied up with family affairs. She didn't know he was never coming back for her. She wanted to die. She wanted Cedric to die. She thought he was her friend, not a spy. Tears welled in her eyes as she stared down at him.

"Papa," she screamed. She stepped back from Cedric. He started to cry as she backed away.

"No. Don't leave me. I love you. You will never find anyone who loves you more than me," he begged her to stay.

"You weren't my friend at all," she seethed. "You were sent to find out information about me."

"No. You are my only friend Rebecca." He struggled to breathe. "I watched you work. I watched you sleep. I watched you the night your brushes were burned. I have watched you cry. I watched you with Johannes by the stream that night at the party, but my love for you is stronger. Now I know my time is drawing to an end, I must tell you how much I love you and will always love you."

She couldn't move. He had lied to her about everything.

"I have to find my father," Rebecca said in a strained monotone.

"There's no time for him. He's already lost. You have to get out of here. You have to save yourself."

"That's enough now Cedric," a voice from over Rebecca's shoulder told him. She hadn't realized someone else was so close by. She turned quickly to come face-to-face with Rutherford. She jumped as he leaned in close to her. She started to walk backwards as he glided towards her.

"Finally, we meet again," he hissed as he advanced on her. "I have waited a very long time for this moment."

She turned to run only to be cut off by him as they were once again face-to-face. His quickness caught her by surprise. She took off around the tree and he followed close behind. She tripped over forest debris and Cedric. Cedric raised a bloodied hand towards her but Rutherford slapped it away. She heard her father screaming again.

"I said that's enough Cedric." Rutherford didn't even look at his son. Rebecca glanced in the direction of her father screams. "He's not far away now," Rutherford said with a toothless grin. "Poor fool. He thinks if he keeps screaming I will go to him and not you." Rutherford slid effortlessly over to her, placing his finger on her chin to turn her attention back

to him.

"My father is not a fool." She pulled her head back to get away from his cold touch.

"Oh no? You're right. He's not a fool. He makes a very good deal. He made the deal of a lifetime using his only daughter," he sneered.

Rebecca looked past him to Cedric, who was struggling to stand up.

"I know of no deal involving me. I'm not yours." The words were like poison in her mouth. She practically spat on him. She turned her back to search for her father and fought the urge to call out to him.

Again Rutherford moved in front of her. She walked backwards, trying to get some distance between them. He was like an older version of Cedric.

"Cedric's hurt," she said, trying to distract him.

"Yes, I can see that."

"Well, we have to help him." She turned to face Cedric. She didn't feel safe exposing her back to Rutherford.

"But we will be together from this moment on. I have no need for him anymore."

Cedric looked how she felt. She could see the fear and loss in his face. She felt a pang of sorrow for him but she couldn't forgive his lies. She'd often dreamt of this man. She had never said anything to anyone about him other than Mrs. Gwenllian. He was dressed all in black and his dark hair hung around his face. His striking eyes pierced into hers. They made her feel naked, like he could see right into her thoughts. It was as if he had free access to her soul and all she held dear.

"I love that you are not afraid of me," he hissed. She tried desperately to look away. She inched backwards. "Cedric no!" Rutherford yelled.

The next thing Rebecca knew was she hurtling towards the ground. She felt a dead weight on her back. She screamed and struggled to get out from under him. She clawed at the ground to break free. She could hear her father call her name.

"*Papa!*" she screamed as she struggled to get loose.

"Yes, call him over so he can witness it," Rutherford said as he took a seat on a fallen tree trunk. Cedric wiggled above her and tried to keep her pinned down. "Yes Cedric. Let's keep her here until her darling father arrives," he encouraged.

Rebecca was able to free her torso from his grip but had twisted onto her back. Cedric let his weight bear down on her. She craned her head back to see Rutherford grinning down at them.

"Cedric always spoke fondly of his playmate. He did so enjoy his time with you."

"No *Papa*, go the other way," she screamed with the last of her voice.

Cedric was pushing the air from her lungs. He managed to pin her arms under her. She tried to scream but she had no air left to give voice. Her head was starting to spin. Her father's voice was ringing in her ears as she struggled to breathe.

"I can hear your heart beating," Cedric whispered, staring down at her.

"Play nicely Cedric," Rutherford said in a calm voice.

Rebecca continued to struggle to breathe. This man thought they were playing? Cedric lay on top of her. She couldn't even squirm. She felt cold. The mud squished under their weight and burped out. Her hair felt heavy. She could feel Cedric's blood running over her stomach. She lay there looking up at him. He stared down at her. His eyes had turned black.

She gasped for air as he stared bleakly into her eyes.

Tears welled and she cried silently. They slid down her cheeks as she felt him slipping away. He felt cold pressed against her.

"Tell Rebecca how you hurt yourself Cedric," Rutherford instructed.

Cedric blinked and his eyes were normal again. She blinked back her tears, summoning the strength to free one of her hands. She brought it up quickly but Cedric grabbed hold of it and slammed it down hard above her head. She cried out in pain.

"You shot me Rebecca," Cedric seethed. "I love you and you shot me."

Rebecca couldn't believe what she heard. "How could I have shot you Cedric? I would never shoot you." Pain shot through her arm as she tried to move.

"You shot me when I was sitting on the fence. I was waiting for you to come. I would have taken you away from all of this, but you shot me. I don't hate you. I could never hate you. I love you. You didn't know it was me."

"Awww, isn't that sweet. I didn't know you had a crush on my love Cedric." Rutherford got to his feet. "You have been keeping secrets from me all this time. Well, we can't have that, now can we?"

"Rebecca!" Papa's voice boomed through the forest. She looked up and saw her father standing tall, pointing the shotgun at Rutherford.

"Get off my daughter." No one moved. "Get him off my daughter!"

Rutherford smirked and crossed his arms. "I don't believe she's yours anymore."

"She will always be mine," Papa yelled.

Cedric stopped moving and released her arms. She could feel him weakening as she pushed him off her.

She slipped in the mud as she tried to get to her feet. The weight of mud in her hair and on her dress made it hard for her to move easily. She looked at Rutherford then to Papa. They continued to stare each other down.

"Go home Rebecca," Papa said in a clear voice.

"She is home Phillip," Rutherford shot back. "You call that shack of a cottage a home? I pitied her everyday for living in such shambles. Cedric, take her home."

Rebecca glanced at Cedric. He was holding onto his stomach.

"Doesn't look like he's going anywhere," Papa said without moving his eyes from Rutherford.

"Well, as I said, I have no use for him anymore." Rutherford stared at Rebecca. "I have all I need now. My world is complete. Now put that gun down, you knew this day was coming." Rebecca looked at Papa. "Oh yes dear. You are going to love your new home. It has everything you will ever need."

"You are not taking my daughter!" Papa screamed as he let his finger dance over the trigger.

"Don't raise your voice in front of my wife," Rutherford said in a calm voice. "I have already asked you to put that gun down. If you stay true to your word I might let her visit you once in a while."

"I am not going to be your wife," Rebecca seethed. She still didn't understand what was happening. She could hear Cedric feebly trying to call out to her and she turned slowly to look at him. His eyes looked drained as he tried to reach for her. Blood stained most of his

pants as he struggled to get a lungful of air.

"Please. I don't want to die like this Rebecca." At his plea she slowly moved back to his side.

"Shall we let them have a moment while she says her final goodbyes?" Rutherford asked in a patronizing tone.

The sound of shotgun fire pounded her ears. She screamed and fell to Cedric's side as she looked for Papa. The smoke from the gun cleared as Cedric took hold of her arm.

"Papa," Rebecca cried.

"I'm fine. Stay here...he's flown away but he won't have gone far," he said, pointing the gun at the branches and ducking down low to get a good look at their surroundings. It was so dark she could barely make out their shadows.

She turned to Cedric after Papa stalked off, looking in all directions.

"Oh Cedric."

"I love you Rebecca. I know in the next life I will meet you again. Be strong and don't let him win. For years he told me the tale of a beautiful girl who was the love of his life. Not once did he mention if he was the love of hers." Cedric's voice faded with every word. She held onto his hand tightly.

"I love you too Cedric. You will never be far from my heart."

"That's the sweetest thing I have ever heard," Rutherford said as he swooped down to her side.

Rebecca screamed as she let go of Cedric's hand. Her hands pushed against the mud as she scrambled to find her feet.

"He's here Papa," she screamed.

"Foolish girl." Rutherford lunged forward and coiled his fingers around her neck. She screamed as she tried to get away from him. His fingers were cold as they wrapped tight around her throat. As he stepped forward he lifted her off the ground. She struggled against him, clawing at his hand and trying to kick him, but he lifted her higher and held her tighter. She cried to Papa over and over as he continued to squeeze the breath out of her.

Papa's screams could be heard as her eyes rolled in her head. Her head felt light and dizzy. Rutherford let her go and she dropped to the ground. She rolled to her back and gasped for air. She could hear her father calling but couldn't see him.

"Try and call for your father now Rebecca," Rutherford teased. "Excuse me dear, I must tend to your father. He's making this much, much worse for himself."

Rebecca felt as if her soul had left her body. She had no energy left. She barely managed to roll onto her side.

"Rutherford!" Papa called. His voice echoed through the dead trees as he rushed in circles to find him. "Show yourself Rutherford."

Papa ducked behind trees and looked up into the branches, searching for him everywhere. "I will find you Rutherford."

He continued deeper into the forest in a desperate attempt to find him. He wiped the sweat out of his eyes as he struggled to see through the dense foliage. A shadow drew his attention to his left. He snapped the gun in that direction. Another shadow pulled his attention back to where he was just looking. His breath was short and sharp as he tried to find

the movement again. He licked his lips and readied himself with his gun.

He held his breath as he tentatively leaned forward. Nothing. He exhaled as he moved back behind the tree. He attempted to collect his thoughts. He wiped at his brow again.

"Hello Phillip," a cheerful and familiar voice called. Papa screamed in fright and pulled on the trigger.

He quickly opened his eyes and pointed the gun in the direction of the person smiling at him. Her blue eyes were familiar, as was her long hair. "Don't be afraid Phillip," she said.

"M-M-Marguerite?" Papa struggled to believe what his eyes were seeing.

"Yes Phillip, it is I." Papa slowly stretched out his hand and reached to touch her face. "Don't be afraid. I am here."

She met his hand and held onto it. She soothed him by holding on tight.

"But you're not..."

"Not what my darling?"

"You're not real. I saw you die."

Papa tried to pull his hand away from her and she tightened her grip. "No, I'm not dead my darling. I will never die. I will be with you always. You and Rebecca."

Papa shook his head and stared at her. "No. I saw you leave."

She released his hand and stared down at him. "I had to leave," she spat. "Because of you." She towered over him and put her hand out to keep him down. "How dare you say this is my fault? I did what I could to protect our child, but you...you..."

"I did what I thought was right."

"How could promising that man our daughter ever be right?" Her hair flapped wildly despite the lack of breeze. Papa stared up at his wife. "Spare me your tears Phillip. Your tears are not going to fix the situation. You should have let me take her with me when I had the chance."

"What? You're the one who took Rebecca?"

"I had to. I tried to stop what you started." She leaned forward and inched towards his face. "I have to clean up your mess again Phillip, but this time you are going to pay."

Her evil face flickered before his eyes. She looked up and saw Rutherford looking down at both of them. She moved between Phillip and Rutherford.

"Aww, my day has been filled with love. First Cedric claims his love for my future wife and now her happy parents are going to give their blessing."

Marguerite smiled at Rutherford. "I will give you no such thing Rutherford. She is my daughter and he was the one that made the deal with you. Take him!" Rutherford sneered and leaned towards her and over Papa.

"But I don't want him," he said. Papa pulled the trigger again. Marguerite reeled towards Rutherford from the loud crack of the shotgun and hovered in the air while she waited for the smoke to clear. Papa was on his feet as Rutherford struggled to stay on his. He staggered forward as blood trickled through his shirt. Marguerite stared at Rutherford as she hovered closer to Papa.

Marguerite smiled at him. "Well Rutherford. Looks like your day of happiness will end in our happiness." He looked at the gaping hole in his body before turning his head to listen to Marguerite.

"This day will be mine," he seethed as he held out his hand towards her. She could feel

him pulling her in. She hovered towards him but struggled to break free. "Come to me Marguerite. You should have done this years ago. My life would have been free if you were dead, but soon you will be."

Her eyes rolled in her head as she continued towards him. Papa watched his chest as the blood stopped flowing. As Marguerite got closer, his injury seemed to get smaller. Papa dug deep into his pockets and pulled out two more bullets and tried to load them. He cocked the gun as Marguerite's physique changed to her evil side. Her hair swirled wildly as she opened her mouth to scream. Both Marguerite and Rutherford knew she was strong enough to fend him off on her own.

"How I love to hear you scream Marguerite," Rutherford said on a strong voice. "Your soul is strong and will rebuild me."

Marguerite changed between her two bodies as her soul was being pulled from her body. As she hovered towards him, blood started to flow from her nose. Another bang sounded through the air and Marguerite's eyes opened wide.

Her arms flung out as she hovered on the spot. Rutherford looked down and watched blood stain her dress. Marguerite looked at Rutherford before falling on the ground in a heap.

"No. No. I haven't finished," he screamed, looking over her crumpled body at Phillip. Another bang rang through the air. Rutherford was able to dodge the bullet as he flew towards Phillip, knocking the gun from his hands. "I'm going to enjoy watching you die now," Rutherford seethed as he grasped Papa's throat. Papa fell to his knees at Rutherford's touch. He leaned over him and looked deep into his eyes. "This could have been easy Phillip," he hissed. "You have made this much worse not only for yourself and your wife, but for the daughter you tried so hard to protect."

"She will never love you. She will never trust you."

"She has no choice. She has no one else. I will return to her side and tell her you shot yourself after you shot your long-lost wife. You have been acting very strangely towards her. She will believe whatever I tell her."

"She knows I love her and will always love her. She knows I was trying to protect her. She will know I died trying to protect her."

"Hmm. Enough talking now. I need you to keep your strength so I can take it."

Papa was not going to go without a fight. Rutherford continued to squeeze tighter until Papa's eyes started to roll back in his head.

"Just relax and let me take you. If you fight, it is only going to hurt more," Rutherford said, maintaining his grip.

Papa struggled and tried to fight, but Rutherford was too strong. Papa's life flashed before his eyes as Rutherford stared into them. He saw the horse he rode when he was a child. He saw Marguerite as the young girl who lived near his family. He saw his parents and siblings. He saw the farm when he bought it. He saw Marguerite on their wedding day. He saw Rebecca when she was born. He saw Rebecca at various stages of her life.

"You have had a full life and now it's time for me to live mine," Rutherford said as he continued to suck Papa's soul from him. "No wonder Rebecca is so strong. Both you and Marguerite have strong souls. They will grow long and strong within me."

Rutherford threw his head back as he snatched the last of Papa's soul from his body. He let him go. Papa's lifeless body slumped to the ground as Rutherford stretched out his

arms. He breathed in deeply and let his body adjust to two more souls. He looked at the two slumped bodies before smiling and making his way to Rebecca.

Chapter Nineteen

Rebecca cowered as she heard another gunshot. Her eyes opened wide as she summoned all her energy to sit up. She looked around as she climbed to her knees. She clamped her hands to her chest and tried to force air into her lungs. Her throat rasped as she sucked air in. She saw Cedric lying on his back a short distance away. She struggled to get to her feet. Her head swam as she tried to see which way would lead her out of the forest.

She staggered away from Cedric, pushing her way through the mud and over many fallen trees. She didn't have the energy to cry. The thought of meeting Rutherford again filled her with a terror that drove her forward. She staggered from tree to tree, trying to stay on her feet. The trees all looked the same in the poor light. She didn't know which way would get her out.

Her mind was frantic and clouded as she struggled to get her body to keep up the frantic pace. Her limbs ached and she felt so cold. She fought the urge to sit and catch her breath. She knew she couldn't stop until she got out of the forest. She forced herself to keep moving forward. She ran in one direction, deciding she was not going to veer off her chosen path until she got out of the forest. The forest seemed to get darker as she struggled through it. Her breath was fogging as she exhaled hard. The air was heavy in her lungs. She lurched forward as her every breath felt like she was being punched in the chest. Her fingers and toes felt numb from the cold. Instinctively she knew she had to get out of the forest before nightfall.

"Why are you running Rebecca?"

Rebecca squealed and lifted her head. Rutherford was sitting on a branch above her head. Every noise seemed to be louder than it should be. She set off at a run again. She jumped over logs and ducked under branches as fast as she could. Her gaze didn't stray from what was right in front of her.

"There's no point in running." He followed her effortlessly through the branches. "You don't even know which way you are going. Please stop. You are wasting your strength." He made no effort to catch her. "I can get you out of here...you just have to come with me." Rebecca puffed and panted as she struggled to keep up the pace she had set herself. She kept her eyes straight ahead.

"Enough of this game," Rutherford said as he swooped from behind her. She screamed as he landed in front of her. "There's no need to scream my dear. I will protect you." She fumbled as she tried to stop herself from running into him.

She eyed the obstructions to her left and then to her right. She darted to the left only to have Rutherford glide in one motion to block her. She darted to the right and he blocked her again. He shook his head and tutted at her. "I said enough of this." He raised his hand.

"What have you done with Papa? Where is he?" She struggled to keep her voice strong.

"Oh my dear. I didn't do anything. He did it all to himself. The same goes for your mother."

Rebecca narrowed her eyes as he spoke. "What does my mother have to do with this?"

She's dead."

"She is now," Rutherford said as he rubbed his stomach.

"Where is my father?"

He licked his lips as he looked at her face. "He's with your mother." She turned around and retraced her ground. She was more than desperate to get away from him. "Stop it," he yelled after her. "Your father is dead Rebecca. There's no one left to love you other than me."

She kept running. Branches scratched at her skin as she ran. Her feet slipped on the mud but still she kept running. The mud felt like slime over her body as she moved.

"Cedric. Come here Cedric," Rutherford called. Cedric swooped down from another branch to stop Rebecca. She turned but was blocked by Rutherford. She tried to sidestep him but was obstructed by both of them.

"There's nowhere left to run Rebecca," Rutherford said as he reached out for her. She gasped in surprise at how swift Cedric could move given he was so badly injured.

Cedric pleaded to her. "No Rebecca. Come with me." She looked to him.

"Cedric. You know Rebecca has never loved you as anything more than a brother. She's never going to love you any other way. You have to come to realize this," he seethed, waiting for Rebecca to take his hand.

"At least I have some of her love. She will never love you. You have destroyed her real love. You have destroyed her family. You killed her mother and father. She is never going to love you."

Rutherford hit Cedric's face hard.

"That's enough. How dare you speak to me like that! I am your father. Show some respect."

Rebecca eyed Rutherford. "He is right though. I will never love you," she said. "I will loathe you for the rest of eternity. Not only will I hate you for the rest of my lifetime, but I will hate you for every lifetime after this one. How could you love someone who hates you so much?"

The same hand that slapped Cedric's face landed on Rebecca's.

"Don't you ever talk to me that way! You love me and you will love me forever. Now say goodbye to Cedric."

Rebecca's cheek stung from his slap. She reached out and took Cedric's hand, holding it close to her chest.

"This is not the end Rebecca," Cedric said as he stepped in to hug her. She looked up at him and could see Rutherford's rage building as he watched them closely.

Cedric looked down at her before pressing his lips against hers. Rutherford screamed at the sight of his precious being touched so intimately by another.

He grabbed Cedric by the back of his head and tried to pull him away from her. As Cedric moved away, Rebecca could see his eyes glowing.

"I have kissed you many times before, but I had to kiss you one last time. If I can't have you, he can't." He lurched forward and grabbed hold of Rebecca with both hands. He pulled her in close to him and buried his mouth into her shoulder.

She screamed with all her might as he wrapped his arms around her tight and sunk his teeth into her flesh. As he ripped a piece of her flesh from her body, Rutherford swooped

down and with one swipe knocked Cedric reeling. He knelt down next to Rebecca as she clamped her hand over her bleeding wound.

Pain shot through her arm to where she had been mauled.

"My darling, show me where he hurt you." Rutherford motioned her forward without touching her. She sat up and tried to look at her wound. She looked at her hand covered in blood. "Let me see." He moved between her and Cedric. "Oh, it's just a little scratch. His beak has never fully formed. I can fix that for you."

With a wave of his hand, the wound stopped bleeding and started to heal. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. She was frozen on the spot.

"What are you?"

"I'm your worst nightmare and best dream all rolled into one," he sneered.

He twitched his head to the side in time to see Cedric launch himself at him. Rebecca scrambled to her feet to get away from them as they fought. Rutherford tried to get Cedric off his back but Cedric held on relentlessly.

"Go. That way!" Cedric yelled at her.

She watched the two of them tumble to the ground before racing off in the direction Cedric had indicated without looking back.

Rebecca clamped her hands over her ears as the unholy screeches rent the air. She was frantic to get out of the forest. She told herself if she ran fast enough, if she could get to the cottage, she would be safe.

Her legs throbbed in pain as they buckled under her. She fell with her arms outstretched, trying to catch herself. She looked forward and squinted. She could see a clearing. She was nearly out of the forest. She pushed hard off the ground and ran towards the clearing. She could feel things sticking into the soles of her feet but she knew she would feel more pain if she stopped running. She gasped for air as her heart pounded. Only a few more yards and she would be free.

Sweat ran into her eyes and mixed with her tears as she reached the clearing. The sun shone bright and almost blinded her as she ran clear of the forever-dark Dead Forest.

She continued to run as she searched which way would lead her back to the cottage. She renewed her efforts to get away as far as possible from the forest.

Rutherford watched as Rebecca raced off; Cedric, a dead weight, held him down as he struggled. Once Rebecca was out of his sight, he screamed as he found the energy to fight back. He twisted and turned, trying to flip Cedric off him.

Cedric scratched and bit at his neck and body, trying to inflict any sort of pain. He clawed at Rutherford's face and neck, peeling away tracks of skin. With each scream Rutherford let loose, the more Cedric attacked. His hands moved quickly, peeling layer upon layer of skin.

Rutherford reached behind him and pulled Cedric's hair. He yelped in pain as he broke free of his hold. Rutherford managed to shake him off his back, knocking him to the ground. Cedric quickly got to his feet and grabbed for him again. Rutherford jumped forward at the same time and tried to fend him off. The two continued to bite, claw and strike at each other.

Rutherford struck out wildly and hit Cedric in the eye. The blow sent him reeling

backwards. He clutched his face as blood dripped from the wound. Rutherford lashed out wildly again, this time striking him in the mouth. The third blow connected with his chest. He howled in agony as his flesh opened like a zipper.

Blood splattered across Rutherford's face but it did nothing to stop the onslaught. Cedric ducked around and lashed out pitifully. Rutherford hissed as he swung at Cedric again. His eyes were wide and full of spite as he lashed out at him again and again.

Cedric fell backwards and gasped for breath. Blood flowed down his face and dripped from his chin. Rutherford reached out and took hold of his arm. With one flick of his wrist, Cedric's arm turned and snapped at the elbow. Screaming in pain, Cedric fell to his knees and grabbed his arm, but Rutherford refused to let go. "Oh, you foolish boy. Did you think you can win against me?" He pulled his arm higher, smiling at the screams coming from his son.

"My dear boy, I have loved you. Tried to give you the life I have always wanted. I gave you a life, which by rights nature would not have permitted you to have. You, my son, have turned on me. I cannot trust you as you do not trust me. I love you but you will never have the woman I love. It is the only way you will ever find peace."

Rutherford leaned forward and kissed Cedric on the forehead. His hand snaked around Cedric's neck while he released his arm. Cedric cried in pain as he tried to catch his limp arm.

Rutherford brought his other hand to Cedric's throat and slowly curled his fingers.

"Goodbye my son," he said before pressing his lips against his forehead again. Slowly his fingers squeezed as Cedric's eyes began to bulge. Rutherford felt Cedric struggle against his hold as his life was slowly choked away from him. He could see him struggling to breathe when he clamped his arm around Cedric's head and twisted. His neck audibly snapped as it broke.

Rutherford held onto his son's lifeless body, hugging it tight before slowly lying him down. Cedric's crystal clear eyes stared blindly into space. "Rest now my son," he said as he stood over his body. "Rest my son. Soon, I will be back with my bride."

Rebecca stumbled as she pressed forward. Her chest felt like it was going to explode. She glanced over her shoulder to see if anything was following her. Every sound solidified her fear, which in turn made her more determined to return to the cottage as fast as possible. Her feet were covered in tiny cuts and smarted in pain. She reached the top of a small rise and saw the cottage's chimney. She burst into tears with relief. She staggered forward, leaning on a nearby tree for support. As she continued more of the cottage and farm came into view.

She stopped dead in her tracks. She crouched to get a good look. Things on the farm seemed still. Too still. She shivered as she moved forward on all fours. The earth felt cool on her palms. She squinted to see anything moving. She couldn't see anything; there was not a single bird to be seen. Rebecca held her breath and listened. Nothing. Not even a gentle breeze to move the leaves in the trees or push the grass.

She continued to hold her breath and slowly looked around. Nothing. There was no movement at all. *Crack.* The sound of a twig breaking under her palm had her scrambling forward on her hands and feet, trying to break into a run. She pulled at her dress to move it free from her legs as she ran towards the cottage. She had to cross the stream before she could truly be free of the forest. She saw the sky turn from clear blue to purple and pink as the sun

started to set. As she ran through the stream, the sky filled with clouds and turned gray. The icy water stung her skin but she was not going to let it slow her down.

The water started to thicken as she tried to drag her hands through. It felt tight around her legs as she bobbed through the water, trying to get to the other side as quickly as possible. She looked at the sky again, noticing it continued to get darker before she looked back over her shoulder.

She looked down at the stream around her. It had always been a clear blue color but as she pushed her way through it, it had turned a dark green. The more she pushed through the stream, the darker it became. She struggled to see the stream floor.

Her breath was heavy as the water restricted her movements. She pulled her arms free of the water and grabbed at the tufts of long grass growing along the edge. She hauled her body forward to the embankment and tried to pull her legs clear. Each kick took a huge amount of energy but eventually she was free. She looked back at the stream. It had turned to a thick caramel consistency.

It didn't gurgle along anymore; it seemed to ooze, its color dark and lifeless. She looked down at her dress. It felt heavy.

Rebecca got to her feet and set off again. The scarecrows passed in a blur as she made her way around the corner of the cottage. She stopped in the open doorway and held her breath as she looked inside. Only the sound of the fire crackling could be heard. She shut the door behind her, barricading it. She pushed Papa's heavy chair against it. After placing another log on the fire she made her way to the kitchen. She didn't know what to do next. She didn't know what she was going to do but at least she was safe for the time being.

She stripped off her heavy clothes and pulled on fresh clean ones. She crouched near the fire to inspect her old clothes. They were covered in a thick slimy substance that stuck to her fingers when she touched it. Why had the stream changed? How?

She wiped her hands clean before throwing the garments into the fire. She looked above the fireplace to the empty space. Papa had taken his gun with him into the forest. She went to the kitchen to find a knife. Armed, she ensured the windows were still blocked before returning to the fireplace. She sat with her knees to her chest and thought. She needed a plan. Her eyes lighted on the large torch leaning against the fireplace.

Slowly, she got to her feet and collected the torch in her right hand. She jammed it into the fire and she watched the sparks fly. Within seconds it, too, was burning brightly and she pushed Papa's chair away from the door. She advanced on the scarecrows.

The sky was swirling in a sea of dark blue, gray and black as she ran towards the nearest scarecrow. She let the flames lick its legs before stepping back to watch the fire take hold. She ran to the next one while she continued to look around. She set another alight. And another. And another. The more she burnt the more she smiled. She delighted in watching them burn. She threw her head back and screamed, "I would rather burn in hell than be with you Rutherford."

As the scarecrows burned around her, she turned to see the final one yet to be set alight. It was the one facing the entrance of the Dead Forest. The one Papa had been working on. She stared at the dead crow pitched on its shoulders as she slowly walked towards it. The many fires warmed the cool air coming from the clouded sky. She stared at the scarecrow as she moved the torch towards it.

She held it close to where its heart would have been if it were alive. She watched the flames dance across the scarecrow's clothes before taking hold. Pieces of straw twisted from the flame's heat before it was engulfed. The building heat forced her to lower her torch and step back. She wanted to stand close and watch it burn. She turned to survey her destruction.

The yard seemed like one big bonfire. Flames reached high in the air as Rebecca's skin prickled from the heat. The farm was burning bright while the sky and surrounding area grew darker. Rebecca smiled as she watched the scarecrows burn off their perches. Her smile slowly faded as the hairs on the back of her neck shot up. She could feel fingers snaking around her neck. She shuddered as she spun around, holding the torch away from her body. She continued to spin around holding the torch in front of her, hoping against hope her imagination was running away from her again.

"Hello my darling." She screamed as she spun around wildly, thrusting the torch towards him. Her hands shook as she struggled to keep herself together.

"There is no need to scream my darling. There is nothing to be scared of. Everything is going to be fine now."

"Keep your distance from me, whatever you are," she screamed, waving the torch at him.

He stared at her before his thin lips curled at the ends. "I've been keeping my distance from you all your life. That was part of the deal. But now I get to have my part of the deal. Now, you will be mine forever."

"I am not yours. I never have been and never will be." Rebecca looked at the deep scratches on his neck. "Where's Cedric? What have you done to him?"

"Don't you worry about him anymore. Oh my darling. Our paths were destined to meet. Our paths have been laid for many years now. Your destiny is to be by my side." She continued to poke her torch in his general direction. "There is no point in trying to think of escaping me Rebecca. I will find you. Wherever you run, I will find you."

She looked at him curiously. "Why me?" She refused to lower the torch. She wanted to keep him at a distance.

"Why not you? There is so much to tell you my darling. Come with me and I will tell you all."

Rutherford extended his hand to her. Instead, she renewed her hold of the torch with both hands and steadied herself.

"Don't come near me. I am not going anywhere with you."

"You couldn't possibly want to stay here. There is nothing here for you. Besides, who do you think gave you the best land to produce the best harvest? Your father and I made a lot of deals when you were merely a baby Rebecca. If I take that back, you will have nothing. Nothing for even you to survive on."

Rebecca looked at him skeptically. "You can't control the land."

"I can control a lot of things my darling," he said. As she stepped back he followed her lead and stepped forward. She stopped and swung the torch.

"Stay where you are!" She found her ground and stood firm.

"Come now Rebecca. I can't understand why you are being like this. I can give you everything."

"Then give me my father."

For a brief moment Rutherford looked shocked. "Your father made his choice. Come now."

She refused to move. "Get off my land."

Rutherford smiled again. "Don't you mean my land? I told you this land belongs to me. Your father only leased it. Everything on this land in one way or another belongs to me. The things you bought with the money you made from your paintings...that was all because of me. Come now."

His tone became more forceful as he stepped towards her. She swung the torch close to his head. He didn't flinch.

"I've had worse than a torch thrown at me. I will ask you nicely one more time. Let us get going."

Time seemed to stand still as they stood staring at each other. "I will buy the land off you. I have been able to save a small amount of money."

Rutherford didn't try to hide his laugh. "My dear. You would never be able to afford it and besides, I would ensure nothing ever grew on this land again for eternity. You have no option."

"But if I did go with you, what would happen to the farm? This is where I grew up. I thought I would live here forever. I can't leave it."

Rutherford looked at her. She could see he was thinking about what she said.

"I don't want to see you unhappy. I'm sure we could work something out. But for now, we have to be somewhere."

"Where?"

"Well my dear. You and I have a wedding to attend."

Her stomach dropped. She felt like she had been punched in the stomach. "I can't marry you." She fought the tears welling in her eyes. "I won't marry you."

"My darling. You have no choice." Rebecca's hands shook as everything finally sunk in. She'd lost Papa. She had no place to live. She had nothing. And she was being forced to marry a man she would like to see dead. The fear that shook her hands turned to hate as she swung out hard towards Rutherford, lunging at him in blind fury.

She swung the torch with all her might as she tried to hit him. He screamed when it connected with his body. She pushed it hard against him before dropping it and taking off. She ran through the flames dancing off the scarecrows, trying to get to the cottage. Flames licked against her skin. She tried to look behind her to see where he was but everything was blurred. As she had her head turned to look behind her, she ran into something solid.

She stumbled backwards, looking at what stopped her. It was Rutherford. She didn't know how he got in front of her. He caught her arms at the wrists as she brought them up to protect herself.

She screamed at his touch. "Don't touch me!" She tried to break free. His hands were cold against her skin as he held onto her tight.

"I have asked you nicely," he seethed, his thin lips curled as he pulled her close. His eyes were intense and clear as he stared at her. Rebecca opened her mouth to scream but stopped, horrified at what she was seeing. His face seemed to change. His skin took on a gray hue and his eyes turned blood red. He was squeezing and twisting her arms so hard she fell to her knees. She winced as he continued to stand over her. She refused to let loose the scream

building up inside her.

"You're hurting me," she said softly, wincing in pain.

"What's that my love?" He moved his head forward as he looked down at her. His tongue snaked out, running across his thin lips. He was going to kiss her. She pursed her lips and turned her head. She felt his dry lips press against her neck. She tried to squeeze her shoulder up to her neck to move him away.

She cringed at his touch while her wrists throbbed in pain. She screamed as he pushed his mouth harder against her neck. She struggled to break free. She kicked out at him, hitting him hard. He reeled backwards as he clutched his side. Free of his grip at last, she got to her feet and ran. Rutherford reached out and grabbed a fistful of her hair. She screamed as her hair pulled from the root. She didn't know where to run but this time she didn't look back. She didn't want to run into him again. She ran clear of the scarecrows and headed off down the track towards town. She saw flickers of light...and then darkness.

Chapter Twenty

The soft sound of rain hitting the roof roused her from her slumber. Her eyelids felt heavy as she struggled to open them. She tried to lift her head, but it was just too painful. She blinked to focus her eyes on anything, to find her bearings, but could only make out distant blurs. She tried wiggling her fingers as she looked around the room.

Rebecca tried to lick her lips but her tongue was dry. Her throat felt tight and pained when she swallowed. As she woke more, she felt her whole body ache. She gasped for air as she struggled to sit up. Her head swum as the room spun. She blinked, trying to see clearly what she was sitting on. Visions of her running through the forest ran through her mind. She gasped as she remembered Rutherford jumping from behind the trees in front of her. She could feel her tears welling at the remembered sight of Cedric lying in a pool of blood, looking towards the sky with blank eyes. Blurry overlapping visions raced through her head as she struggled to make sense of where she was and how she got there.

She ran her hands over what she thought was a bedspread while she tried to brace herself in an attempt to sit up. Her head continued to swim as she tried to think back to the last thing she could remember. She didn't know where she was. She could feel the heat of a fire against her back as she looked down at her clothes. She was wearing a new dress. She let her fingers flow over the beaded bodice and down to the long skirt. She fought the fog in her head as she tried to get off the bed. She braced herself while her head swirled. She found her feet awkwardly and willed herself to stand.

The room spun again as she looked down at her dress. It was white and so long it dragged on the floor as she moved from the bed. She flinched as her soles pressed against the cold stone floor. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and felt her hair. Her hair had been washed and brushed. Her arms felt weighted as she let them drop to her sides and fought to keep her eyes open. She looked around the room looking for anything familiar. She recognized nothing. She moved to the fireplace and tried to focus on the painting. It was one of her paintings. It was of the farm. She struggled to lift her arm as she fingered the painting. The lumps on the canvas felt familiar. She leaned against the fireplace as she took in the room. Her head was still foggy but her eyes were slowly returning to normal.

The walls were made of dark stone and felt cold as she brushed her hand over them. The floor looked grimy and dark and the room was stark. The bed and the painting were the only items in the room. The only light source came from the fire. Her heart pounded in time with her head as she failed to recognize any of her surroundings.

She looked at the door and used all her strength to make her way slowly to it. The iron handle was cool as she wrapped her fingers around it and pulled. She was met by a stark hallway with small wall fires lighting the way. The walls and floor in the hallway looked dark and grubby too. She poked her head through the doorway before slowly making her way along the corridor. She kept pushing herself off the wall with her hand to keep herself steady and moving.

Her feet felt like they were frozen as she continued walking. The shivers she felt turned into shakes as the cold seeped through her body. Her dress flowed behind her as she searched

for another door in the long corridor. She came to a wooden door and pressed her ear against it. She couldn't hear anything.

She looked to her left and right before pushing the heavy door wide open. Darkness. She strained her eyes to see anything but her head began to pound, causing her to retreat. She turned her back on the dark room and continued along the corridor. Her legs seemed to be slowing her down. She willed them to go faster as she pressed on.

She came to another door and again listened by pressing her ear against it. She heard low shuffles and murmurs. She saw the corridor turned a corner only a short distance from where she was standing. She looked back at the door before deciding to head further along the corridor.

The more she walked, the clearer her mind became, but she was still trying to remember how she came to be there. She peered around the corner of the corridor. The same thing. Another long corridor.

When she saw that it was empty, she continued along it. She came to another door and listened again. Hearing nothing, she opened it quietly. As she slowly pushed the door open, she could see the glow of a fire in the room. She let her weight fall on the door to push it wide open and took a small step inside. This room was nearly three times bigger than the room she woke up in.

She could see the walls were lined with paintings. Her paintings. She looked at each painting with its own frame. They hung beautifully on the walls. As she turned slowly to see the paintings, she could see her life unfolding before her.

Her earlier paintings: the faceless man; the farm; Johannes; back to the faceless man; and then her later works. She felt incredibly uncomfortable and confused as she retreated towards the door. "Ah, you are awake," a voice came from behind her. Rebecca screamed as she turned and came face-to-face with Rutherford. Her arms flew up to cover her face. She lashed out at him as she stumbled backwards. She managed to stay on her feet as she screamed, looking for another way out of the room.

"Now, now Rebecca," Rutherford said soothingly as he followed her around the room. "There's no need to be afraid."

She became frantic in her need to get away from him. She screamed with all her might, trying to repel him. She darted for the door and made it into the corridor. She fought off her grogginess as she ran. Where to she didn't know. She continued to scream as she tried to get away from him. Rutherford called to her but she didn't stop. She pushed herself along the walls trying to look behind her. She could see him following close behind. She felt like a rabbit being followed by a fox. She was panic-stricken. Her heart raced as her mind frantically searched for a way to escape. She held her arms out in front of her, keeping the momentum as she ran. Her long dress flowed behind her gracefully. The hallway began to spin as she saw him following her. Her stomach churned as she staggered along the corridor. She had stopped screaming only to try and catch her breath as she ran.

Amongst the spinning floor and walls, she could see the corridor led to another room. At the end of the corridor and through the last room, she saw another heavy door. This one didn't look like the others she passed. She willed herself to reach it. She tripped on her skirt but managed to stay on her feet by stumbling forward. She made it into the end room that had a big table and lunged towards the door. As her hands reached for the handle, she felt herself

being pulled away.

"No you don't," Rutherford said as he grabbed hold of her skirt, reeling her in.

Rebecca screamed as she struggled against him, clawing at the air as she tried to inch towards the handle. Her mind filled with terror as she heard Rutherford laugh. His laughter matched her screams as she struggled against him.

"Why are you so afraid of me my love?" She pulled away from him and reached for the door handle. "There is nothing to be hysterical about Rebecca. You will only end up hurting yourself."

She could feel her strength draining from her limbs as she struggled. Rutherford reached forward and grabbed hold of her arms, holding them close to her body. She screamed at his touch. His body pressed against her.

"I do love the sound of your scream though Rebecca," he hissed in her ear.

She screamed, finding the energy to kick out at him. His laughter stopped as he cried out in pain, releasing his hold. She reeled forward and grabbed hold of the door handle, twisting it as she tried to pull it open. Rutherford's shoulder landed heavily against the door, slamming it shut. Rebecca screamed grabbed wildly for the door handle again.

"I told you, no...you...don't." He was seething in anger. His eyes had turned red and she slowly backed away from him. "I don't understand why you keep running from me Rebecca."

She couldn't take her eyes off him as she inched along the wall away from him. Her whole body shook in fright and her chin wobbled. She felt nauseous in the pit of her stomach. Her body trembled in fear of what was to come.

"Because I know you are going to kill me." She struggled to speak as she stared at him. "Because you've killed everyone I have loved."

He stared at her as he glided towards her. "I am not going to kill you. But if you continue to play these games, like trying to run away, I will have no choice but to lock you in your room. Is that what you want?"

Tears streamed down her face as she shook her head. "No...but I don't want to be here. Please let me go. Please. Please let me go," she begged as she continued to inch away from him.

"You I cannot let you go Rebecca. There is simply just no way. As for killing the others...well, lets just say...their time had come," he said lovingly. The sight of his tiny teeth made her skin crawl. She couldn't believe what he had just said. She looked over his shoulder at the door.

"Don't even think about it," he said without taking his eyes off her. She looked back at him before lunging for the door again. The last thing she remembered was her hand holding the door handle, then oblivion.

The sound of a fire crackling once again brought her back to waking life. She shuddered, blinking her eyes open and slowly turning her head to look around the room. She recognized it. It was the same room she was in before.

"Don't try to struggle Rebecca, you will only make it worse for yourself." Rutherford was at the end of her bed.

She gasped in fright. She sensed he was close but didn't realize he was that close.

"How do you feel?" He shifted along the bed towards her.

"What did you do to me?" She had difficulties moving her arms.

"You were quite hysterical my darling. I gave you something to calm you down. You were going to give yourself an injury with the way you were behaving. The grogginess you are experiencing will soon leave you."

"Where are we?"

"We are home."

"Where are we?" she repeated.

"We are home." He moved closer to her while she waited for him to answer her.

"Are we at your castle? In the Dead Forest?"

"It is now your castle too," he hissed with his all too familiar lisp.

Her head felt heavy as she nodded. Her arms were heavy as were her legs. She tried to summon the strength to wiggle her toes and fingers as Rutherford slowly took hold of her hand. She could see he was wearing a fine jacket and his hair had been slicked back.

She felt her dress and asked, "What am I wearing?"

"It's your wedding dress. I made us suitable for our wedding." He took his time looking at her.

Her head swam. "I'm not marrying you Rutherford," she said as she tried to process all the things that was said. The room started to spin again as he tried to pull her hand from his.

"Too late." A vision of a gold band on her finger flashed into her head as she grabbed for the door. She raised her hand and tried to lift her head to see if it was real, or if she had imagined it. The glint of a gold ring on her finger caught her eye. She stared for what seemed like an eternity at the ring.

"I want to sit up," she said, looking away as she dropped her arm back to her side.

"Of course my dear. Let me help you." He scooped his arm under her shoulders and pulled her forward. He took advantage of the opportunity to nuzzle in close to her neck, taking in a deep breath of her scent.

"Please don't." The smell of wet leaves flooded her nose. She felt sick as her stomach churned again. Rutherford pulled her body back towards the top of the bed, plumping the pillows behind her.

"How's that?" he asked as he fussed over her. Rebecca summoned the energy to lift her hands and clawed at her ring finger.

"Now there's no need to get upset. You are a beautiful bride," he hissed as he inched closer and tried to kiss her.

She yanked the ring off her finger and threw it across the room. It clinked as it hit the stony floor. "Why are you doing this to me? I don't want to be your wife! I don't even want to be near you!" She tried to catch her breath, but whatever Rutherford had given her was beginning to take effect again.

"What have you given me? I don't feel right." Her stomach churned as she once again was engulfed in darkness.

Rebecca fought the fog in her mind to come back to waking life. It felt like her mind didn't match her body. Her mind was racing but her body was limp and heavy. She focused her eyes on the ceiling before rolling her head to the side. She could see her paintings on the

closest wall. She knew where she was.

"Ah, you are awake my love," Rutherford said, coming to her side. She tried to wriggle away from him but her body denied her desire to move. She flinched at his cold hands touching her as he helped her sit up. She moved her hand to her forehead, her head pounded.

"My head hurts," she whispered.

"I know it does, but in time it will get better," he hissed. "I thought if I moved you in here, you would be happier in familiar surroundings." She strained to look around the room. He had moved her in the room that was full of her paintings. She couldn't stop her head rolling on her shoulders as she shivered from the cold floor and Rutherford's touch.

"Come. Have something to eat. You will feel better," he said, trying to help her stand. She pushed his hands away before getting on all fours. Her legs wobbled as she straightened them, pushing her body up with her hands.

"Let me help you." He moved to help her.

"No. I can do it myself," she said defiantly. She didn't care if she fell. She didn't want him touching her again.

The only way she was going to get stronger was to fight whatever he had injected into her body. She held her arms out, not only to steady herself but to also keep Rutherford at a distance.

"You are such a strong person Rebecca. It's one of the things I love about you. Come. Let us enjoy our first dinner together," he hissed, his smile looking extremely creepy. She again looked at the paintings. Every one of them spoke of a time in her life. She recognized one she hadn't noticed the first time she was in the room. She shuffled towards the far corner to get a closer look. It was the one of the doll. She blinked as she looked at it, not sure she was seeing what she was seeing. The last time she saw this picture it had been on Mrs. Gwenllian's wall.

"How did this painting get here?" Silence. "Rutherford? How did this painting get to be here?" She reached out and ran her fingers over the broken doll's face. It was how she felt. Dark, cold and broken.

"I know that painting has a special meaning for you. I have all your paintings Rebecca. I hope you will continue to add to your collection." Rutherford had moved close behind her.

"But how did you get this from Mrs. Gwenllian?"

"Mrs. Gwenllian and I have an interesting past. We have known each other for years. But enough of that. Now we must eat. It will make you feel better."

He placed his arm around her waist and guided her away from the paintings. Rebecca strained her neck to look back at the painting as she was led out of the room.

He led her along the corridor as she struggled to stay on her feet. It was a blur of stone as they moved. Her skin was starting to warm as they continued. They passed another closed door.

"How many rooms does this castle have?" She tried to remember which way they were traveling.

"As many as we need"

"Who else lives here?" She slowed to a dawdle.

"No one. Just you and me now."

She watched his face as he turned to look at her. "The room next to the one you first

put me in...that was Cedric's, wasn't it? The one that's bare."

Rutherford looked at her with a piercing stare. "I don't want to have any memories of Cedric. He turned on me. I never want to speak of him again."

He grabbed hold of her wrist and pulled her firmly along the corridor, almost yanking her off her feet. They had passed another three doors before Rutherford stopped and opened the door for her to walk through. She walked slowly into the room to see a huge table set with the finest plates and cutlery. Only two chairs had been placed at the table along with two table settings. Plate after plate of food filled the huge table. Candlelight added to the ambience of the room. Burning candles lined the walls, dripping wax onto the cold stone floor where it set.

Rutherford walked past Rebecca and pulled out a chair. She shivered as he moved behind her.

"Here you are my love," he smiled, motioning her towards the seat.

"Who prepared all this food if you and I are the only ones that live here?" She hesitantly took her seat at the table.

"I do like your inquisitive mind Rebecca." He pushed her chair in and glided to his chair at the opposite end of the table. "Please...eat."

He reclined in his chair and watched as she slowly reached out and picked up a silver spoon from one of the dishes. Her hand quivered under the small weight of food. She scooped a small portion onto her plate before looking at him.

"Aren't you going to eat?" she said as she replaced the spoon.

"I might eat a little in a while. I want to watch you enjoy your meal," he hissed as he leaned forward. She looked at the food piled high on the many plates as she slowly picked up her fork. She could feel him watching her intently as she loaded her fork and took a small bite. Although the food was delicious, his stare unsettled her.

"What are you looking at?" She put her fork down and swallowed.

"You don't know how long I have dreamed of you sitting here at this table with me. I have waited most of my lifetime and all of yours for this moment."

She shifted in her chair as she tried not to look at him. She pushed her plate away and moved her chair away from the table. The candles flickered at her movement.

"I don't mean for my words to upset you Rebecca. I am saying what my heart is telling me to say." He continued to watch her. "I don't wish for you to be uncomfortable in your own home."

Her eyes darted to his. "This is not my home. No matter how many times you say it is so, it's not," she snapped.

"I've had enough for one night thank you. It is night? This castle is so dark—there are no windows—I wouldn't know what time of the day it is. I would like to be on my own, thank you, and when I rise I would like to be taken back to the cottage. To my real home." She got to her feet. She was desperate to appear in control despite the lingering unsteadiness.

"That is impossible my darling," he said calmly. "You cannot leave the forest again without my permission. In time, when you come to love this as your own home, you will see its real beauty."

She made her way from the table to the door as he spoke. "Don't follow me."

The further she walked along the corridor, the more tired she became. Every step seemed to take more and more energy from her. Her feet slapped against the cold floor and

her head pounded. She looked behind her to see if Rutherford was following, but her vision had gone blurry. She ran her hands along the walls to guide her as she felt her body shutting down. Her legs felt like they were setting to stone. Her arms were heavy and she tried desperately to keep them against the walls. Losing the battle, her eyes rolled back into her head and she fell forward.

Chapter Twenty-One

"Rebecca...Rebecca my love...you have to open your eyes and drink some of this tea."

She heard Rutherford's voice from a distance. She didn't want to open her eyes but she needed to see where he was. When he was near her she could watch his every move. It was when he wasn't near that caused the most concern.

Slowly and awkwardly she raised her hand to her head. She felt a lump, flinching when her fingers touched it.

"Yes, you have a nasty bump. You fell and hit your head on the floor," he said kindly, lovingly. It was unnatural hearing it come from him.

"Come now my darling. Have a sip of this." She could feel his hand snake behind her neck, gently pulling her forward to sit up. She opened her eyes to see a cup of dark liquid being inched to her mouth. He held the cup to her lips and encouraged her to drink. The small amount of liquid she let pass her lips was thick and tasted like dirt. She pursed her lips and tried to push his hands away. She shook her head as she forced herself to swallow the small amount.

"What is that? It's awful." She moved her hands to cover her mouth. Her throat quivered as she fought the urge to vomit.

"It's my own recipe. You will be up and feeling much better about things tomorrow. You have been giving me enough frights for one day. It's time you rested. You need to get your strength back. Tomorrow, you might have a change of heart about things and I can show you more of the castle." He helped her lie down on the bed.

"Please tell me we are not married." She stared at the ceiling, waiting for his answer.

"It would be an untruth if I told you that." Rutherford sat next to her on the bed.

"But I don't remember any of it. How can this be?" Desperately she tried to remember anything that happened between the times she ran out of the Dead Forest and woke up in Rutherford's home.

"As I said my dear, you need to calm down. We were married right here in our home." He took hold of her hand.

Rebecca pulled away from his touch. "I don't believe you."

She stared at him for the longest time. "I would never marry you—not after what you did to my family. How am I supposed to trust you?" Tears streamed down her face. She barely had the energy to roll her body away from him as she sobbed. Getting away from him was going to be the hard part.

"I am sorry if you don't feel comfortable around me," he said as he got to his feet. "Hopefully that will change in time. Good night my love. Dream of me." She continued to sob as she heard him walk out of the room and close the door behind him.

When she stopped crying she rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. She held her breath and listened to the sound of the crackling fire. Was he going to return? After a few moments of waiting, she looked at the walls again. Slowly rising to her elbows, she fought the dizziness that still assailed her as she looked down at her dress and then around the room. She was still in her wedding dress. She didn't know where her other clothes were, or even if

she had more.

She inched her body towards the edge of the bed and placed her feet on the floor. She closed her eyes in an effort to make the room stop spinning before taking a deep breath and moving to stand. She quickly sat back down before she fell. She waited a few more minutes before summoning the strength to try again.

With her head held high she rose to her feet, focusing on the wall in front of her. She reached out her arms to the wall opposite the door, dragging her feet as she moved. A sigh of relief escaped her as she pressed her head against the cool stone. She ran her fingers over the wall searching for any kind of flaw but found nothing.

She looked around her again. Just a bed, fireplace and her paintings. Her hands started to throb and she rubbed them together. The ring was back on her finger. She stopped rubbing her hands the second she felt it. Slowly, she raised her hand and looked at the ring. It was a simple gold band. Her stomach dropped as she looked at it. She wished Johannes had been the one to put it on her finger. She wanted to cry but didn't. She'd cried enough. Crying wouldn't change anything. She told herself to be strong and think of a way to get herself back to the cottage.

She didn't understand a lot of the things Rutherford had said at the dinner table. Her mind was still foggy as she pulled the blanket from her bed, wrapped it around herself and sat in front of the fire. She had to think of a way to get free. The last thing she wanted to do was dream of him.

It was a few moments before Rebecca opened her eyes. Her body ached all over, her legs and back hurting the most. The fire had burned out during the night, the cold stone floor had been her bed, chilling her bones. She rubbed her neck as she rolled to stand. The blanket dropped from her as she rolled her shoulders to get her blood flowing again. She rubbed her arms and looked at the embers in fireplace. She searched the room for firewood. Finding none, she opened the door and went in search of firewood, or Rutherford. Either one. She preferred finding the firewood first, avoiding Cedric's room as she went.

"Good morning Rebecca." She let out a quick short scream as she turned around to see him standing behind her. Rutherford had caught her off guard.

"You startled me! I didn't know you were there." Her heart raced as she tried to pull herself together.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you my dear. Did you sleep well? Do you feel better today?"

She nodded her head as she stepped back from him. "Yes...no...I didn't have a good sleep. I still feel a bit off. I'm looking for firewood. I couldn't find any in my room."

He walked with her along the corridor, gently leading. "Of course. I will get you some, but in the meantime why don't you come with me. I have a surprise for you."

She didn't bother fighting him when he took hold of her upper arm and led her into a different room. An easel had been set up, along with a table full of inks and brushes.

"Do you like it?"

He let go of her arm and she walked over to the table. She counted at least fifteen pots. "I know how much you love to paint and would like you to continue doing what you love. You have the perfect place to show your talent. Your own studio," he said, moving behind

her.

Rebecca moved away from him and smiled. "Thank you," she said as she walked to the easel. "I don't know if I feel like painting though. My head is still cloudy."

"Paint what is clouding your head." He continued to follow her around the room.

"Everything that has happened is clouding my head. I don't know what to make of it all. I keep thinking it's all a bad dream and I can't wake myself. I don't understand half the things you say to me. I just want to go home and do my own thing."

Rutherford sighed and dropped his head to his chest. "I know you must have a lot of questions Rebecca, and they will be answered in due time, but as I have already told you, you can't go home. I have explained why last night. This is your new home. You have seen some very disturbing things and the resulting upheaval was never going to be easy, but you can rest now. Everything is going to be perfect from now on. You can rest, relax, enjoy your time and enjoy your painting."

Rebecca cringed at the thought of spending all her time in the one room. All her life she had never been confined to one room. Reluctantly she nodded, fighting the urge to fight him as she moved back, spying a collection of blank canvases waiting for her imagination to color them.

"I would really like to get some fresh air," she said as she walked towards the door. "Perhaps you could show me the rest of the castle?"

"Are you sure you are feeling up to it?" He moved quickly to walk by her side.

"I do feel a bit funny but I would like to see the rest of your—ah...the castle." She remembered four doors along was the dining room, but she had no idea what was in the other rooms or how many there were.

"Of course," Rutherford said obligingly. "Let me show you the way around."

He walked out the door first and proffered his hand, but she simply looked towards the corridor.

"I built this castle many years ago. I followed my heart to the village and the moment I saw it, I knew I was home. It was a piece of paradise. It still is to me. It was in the heart of the forest. Lush, spacious and a place where I could be me.

"The forest started to change with the world around it. It put up a mighty fight to stay alive but the plague was too strong, killing everything in it. I can burn every fireplace in this castle but it would still be cold. The walls absorb the deadness of the forest but it protects me, and it will protect you." He looked at her strangely.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" She was concerned he may have realized she was trying to memorize where each room was, and maybe an exit. Although he appeared to be talking in riddles and she couldn't understand what exactly he was referring to, she was desperate to see more of the castle. So desperate she was willing to put up with his company. She wanted to know where she was. She wanted to know how to get away.

"I am surprised you don't remember it here. You have been here before. Many, many years ago—but here is the kitchen." He opened the door to allow her to look in before closing it and setting off again. "Behind that door is our room. But I understand you want to have your own space for now."

Rebecca stopped in the corridor. "I have been here before?"

"Yes. Many, many years ago," he said without stopping. "Let's keep going."

She was led along the corridor which merged into a large open space. She recognized the room. It was where she had nearly made it to the outside. She looked at the door again before Rutherford moved to block her view.

"Tell me about when I was here. I don't recall." She thought hard, trying to remember.

"It will come back to you eventually. It's best not push these sorts of things. The castle only has one main wing now," he said, changing the subject back to the castle. "This is the main entrance."

"So it's not a castle at all?"

"It was a castle...once. The main area we have just come from is the most important. It has everything we need."

"What do you mean it was a castle once?" She refused to move until he answered her question.

He looked down at the floor, taking his time before answering. "Most of it is gone now. Two of the wings were lost when the forest perished. The other one I have been slowly rebuilding, but I have had...distractions."

She looked around the large entry space. There was nothing there. The only feature in the room was the door.

"Why is it there are no windows?"

"It's so dark in the forest you don't need windows," he said as he walked towards her.

"Well, I need some fresh air." She started walking towards the door.

"Rebecca, I must warn you." Rutherford jumped between her and the door. "You will get a bit of a shock when you see what is outside. Things are not the same here in the forest as they are in the world you knew. You mustn't go beyond the boundary around the yard. I need you to promise me you will not leave the yard," he hissed.

"Why? What's out there?" She was slightly frightened at his words of warning, but she was willing to take her chances with the forest when the time was right.

"It's the Dead Forest. Everything that is cruel and hurtful in the world lives here. Souls of people who have wronged live trapped in the bodies of crows, while they dwell in the spirit world and haunt the forest. Sick children, all the way through to murderers dwell here. That's why I had to stop you. If you went outside you would have run straight into your own death. I wasn't trying to keep anything from you, but you need to know. If you go beyond the boundary, they will trap you and feed off your fresh and happy spirit." He looked genuinely concerned for her wellbeing. "Promise me. Don't give anything a chance to hurt you my love. You are safe while you are within the boundary of the yard. Anything beyond that...I can't bear to think about it."

Rebecca looked at him before taking a deep breath and nodded. For the first time she believed him. She believed he wanted her to be safe. "I won't go beyond the yard," she said quietly as she braced herself to have her first look outside.

Rutherford turned and opened the door slowly. The cold air hit her hard. Her skin felt like it was drying out as it was exposed to the air. She gasped, trying to catch her breath while she stared hard into the dark. She looked to the sky for a glimpse of light. Nothing. The yard stretched only a small distance, a small fence the only thing between them and the forest.

The air had a strong smell of death about it. She clamped her hand over her mouth and nose to try and stop the stench from lingering in her lungs. She braced herself on the

doorframe as Rutherford watched her every move. She strained hard to look at what she thought were trees. She stared at the twisted trunks and limbs. The outlines of what she thought were shadows were people. The nooks in the trunks were the tortured faces of people whose souls had been ripped from their bodies. The forest floor was covered with the remains of more bodies. Adults through to small children, she could see bodies overlapping other bodies.

Crows lined the body branches. Some were sharpening their beaks as they stared at her. Most of them were picking at the remains on the ground. Never in a thousand lifetimes could she have imagined something so vile. The crows squawked as Rebecca coughed on the pungent stench of rotting flesh.

"Good God!" She looked at the ground in the yard.

It was a sloppy mess with nothing growing in it bar a few thick vines. She looked back at the body trees. She couldn't stop staring at the expressions of pure agony on their faces. She had seen many of these faces in her dreams but never ever had she thought she would be seeing them for real. So many faces. They all merged into one face as she turned to Rutherford.

"How can you live here? This is not paradise. This is a nightmare. A hell," she said, staring back at the trees.

"This is why you had to promise me you would never go out there without me. You will become one of the faces on the trees if you do. Now come back inside, to me." He gently pulled on her arm.

As she stepped backwards she continued to stare at the forest until Rutherford closed the door.

"I can't live here knowing what is outside." She felt sick in the stomach.

"There's nothing to worry about as long as you stay within the boundaries." Her hands were shaking and Rutherford reached out and took them in his.

"Why are your hands always cold?"

"They always have been. No matter how close I hold them to a fire, they are always the same." He rubbed them over hers. "Now then. Do you feel all right? I didn't want to upset you, but you had to see for yourself to know what is out there."

"I will be fine. How big is the forest?"

"Anyone who enters the forest would be an extremely unlucky person. They would be lucky to see the world they left again."

"There were hundreds of faces in the trees though," she said in horror.

"The plague killed a lot of people, but then there were those who were dumped in the Dead Forest for misdoings and the like." He set off along the corridor with Rebecca following.

"Is that how you came here?" He stopped dead at her question, compelling her to stop. He didn't answer. He just strode off, leaving her alone in the corridor.

She didn't see where he went. As she made her way along the corridor, she stopped at the first door she came to. It was another room dressed bare. She reached the kitchen and closed the door behind her. She was beginning to get used to walking into rooms where a fire was burning. Pots and pans were hanging from the ceiling. A large pot was hanging in the fireplace while a plate of bread was sitting on the island bench next to a knife block. Rebecca reached out and snatched a small piece of bread and popped it into her mouth. She continued

to look around the kitchen and saw jars full of preserves lining the shelves. She knew they were made from the fruits and vegetables from her farm. A dark shadow, caught in the flicker of the fire, attracted her eye.

She turned quickly to see nothing. She went to where she thought she saw the shadow move to, but again found nothing. She ran around the island bench as the door swung open and Rutherford stepped into the room.

"What are you doing?" He gave her an odd look.

"I thought I saw..." As soon as the words were out of her mouth she wished she hadn't said anything.

"You thought you saw what?"

"A mouse," she lied.

"I haven't seen a mouse in the Dead Forest let alone this house for many years. It must have been your imagination." He continued looking at her, an odd expression on his face.

"Perhaps it was. I don't feel like myself." She glared at him. "Do I have a change of clothes?" She deliberately wiped her hands on her dress. He looked aghast at her seemingly disregard for her wedding gown.

"Yes. I put a change of clothes in your room." He held the door open for her.

"Thank you," she said and then made her way quickly back to her room. She knew she had seen something and was curious to know what it was.

She closed the door behind her, looking for some way to ensure it stayed closed as she changed, unable to find a key for the lock to guarantee her privacy. Rutherford had filled a bowl of water for her to bathe with and placed it near the fireplace. As she lowered her dress to her waist she prayed fervently Rutherford would not enter unexpectedly. She splashed the heated water over her torso and quickly followed with the soap and cloth. She breathed a sigh of relief as she pulled on fresh clothes, letting her wedding gown drop to the floor. Scooping up the garment she looked at it. Thoughts of throwing it into the fire crossed her mind when she heard a knock on the door.

"Just a moment please." She bounded to the door, making sure her dress sat properly before she opened it to a crack.

"Is everything fine?"

"Yes." She held the gown behind her back.

"I was hoping you would do a painting for me," he hissed with a grin that made her shudder.

"Of course. Let me finish in here first and I will meet you in the room."

"Of course." He smiled widely before setting off. She closed the door and threw the hateful dress on the bed. Quickly putting on a pair of shoes she had found near the fireplace, she went to meet Rutherford. She had been startled by his smile. He was the type of person who was better off not smiling, he looked possessed when he did.

Arriving at the room, she noticed he had moved one of the dining chairs into the room and placed it next to the easel.

"I hope it doesn't put you off if I sit here and watch."

"It shouldn't, but if it does I will tell you." She walked to the table of inks.

"Of course. I won't be offended if you tell me to leave, though I would dearly love to watch you work."

She tried not to look at his smile, but there was something about it that stopped her from looking away. Forcing herself to turn her back to him, she focused on setting up her inks.

"What do you think you will paint today my dear?"

Rebecca tried to focus her mind on the painting. "I'm not sure. Whatever comes out," she said without looking at him.

"You must have some inspiration though?"

"Yes, but I like to let the brush make its own way across the canvas." She positioned herself behind the easel. Rutherford leaned forward as she inched the brush towards the canvas, stopping just before the brush touched the canvas.

"What is it?" He was clearly disappointed.

"I don't think I can paint with you watching so intensely."

He looked hurt. "I understand." He stood and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him. She was relieved to be alone.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The brush moved effortlessly over the canvas as she started to paint. She didn't see or hear from Rutherford for the majority of the day. By the time he did show himself again, she had already started three paintings and was working on the fourth. They were all of the dead people trees. She knew those images would haunt her dreams if she didn't get them out of her head and onto the canvas.

"You must be hungry. You haven't eaten all day." He placed a silver tray on the table.

"I lose track of time when I paint," she said quietly, looking at the tray.

"Well, you must have something to eat." He lifted the cover off a plate and carried it to her. It smelled good and her stomach grumbled.

She took the plate from him. "Where's your meal?"

"I had something before. How are the works coming?" He walked past her and inspected the paintings resting against the wall.

"What is this one?" He pointed to the first painting she had worked on.

"It's supposed to be part of the Dead Forest. What I saw when you first opened the door for me to see." Without looking at him, she placed her plate down on the tray and returned to the easel.

"Come now Rebecca. You must eat." He returned to the tray and picked up her plate again.

"Why is it that I don't see you eat Rutherford?" His expression changed at her question.

"I do eat. I prefer to eat when no one is watching me," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. He returned the plate to the tray before looking at her.

"How can I make you happy Rebecca?"

"You know how." She lowered her brush.

"And you know that it is out of the question," he said returned.

"Then I guess we have nothing more to say to each other for today." Ignoring him, she resumed her painting, not noticing the shake of his head as he left the room, leaving the tray of food behind.

Rebecca finished the first painting before retiring to her room for what she thought was the night. She thought about going to say goodnight to Rutherford, purely to know where he was, but decided against it.

When she returned to her room, she saw her wedding gown hanging from a hook on the wall. It was clean. Although it was a beautiful dress she hated everything it represented. She'd started to feel ill again not long after she ate the food Rutherford had brought in for her. She rubbed her stomach in an attempt to bring some relief but it made it churn more.

The room spun as she pawed her way onto the bed. As she lay on the bed she prayed sleep would come quickly. Her head swirled as she clutched the pillow. She shut her eyes tight and brought her knees to her stomach as she gasped in pain. Panting until the pain subsided, she shakily wiped the sweat from her forehead before slumber took hold. Dreams

invaded her sleep instantly.

She was back in the kitchen wearing her wedding dress, searching for what it was that caught her eye earlier in the day. When the shadow made its way through the door, she set off after it, wanting to see what it was. It made its way along the corridor and she had to run fast to keep up. She noticed a small lantern near the end of the corridor as she ran towards the foyer. The front door was ajar.

She grabbed hold of the lantern and pulled the door wide open. She ran in to the yard and looked around. Dead person tree after dead person tree was all she saw. The lantern gave off a lot of light given its size. She could see where part of the castle had fallen down, its remains lying across the boundary fence. The ground squished under her feet as she searched for the shadow. Vines that had grown over the castle ruin had started to uncoil and move towards her as she searched. She ran along the boundary fence as the faces in the trees she passed changed and watched her every move. She stopped short of the gate at the boundary and leaned forward.

She hadn't noticed the smell of death in the air. The air was sweet and warm. She looked behind her, back at the castle entry and noticed the door had shut.

A rustling of the trees made her turn quickly as she tried to catch a glimpse of what was making the noise. She thrust the lantern out in front of her. She could hear a whimper.

"Hello?" Quietly the vines continued to unravel in her direction. "Hello? There's nothing to be afraid of. I'm not going to hurt you."

She moved along the fence to try to see better but was hindered by the lack of light. She moved a few feet farther along the fence and saw a small figure pressed against one of the dead people trees.

"Hello. I can see you. There's nothing to be worried about. There's no reason to cry. Can I help you with anything?" She tried to coax the person to come in the clear.

The whimpering became louder as Rebecca leaned over the fence to get closer. She braced herself with one hand on the fence and leaned as far forward as she could. Her head and torso were well over as she called again, holding the lantern out as far as she could reach.

"Please don't be afraid of me. I'm trying to help you." Her voice sounded different to her in her dream.

The air became cold against her cheeks as she spoke. The branches and trunks of the dead people trees slowly moved and pulled away from each other as she focused on the person. Figures slithered over each other and moved silently as they watched Rebecca strain carelessly into their world.

"Hello? Quickly, please come here." She stretched out one hand. The people from the trees watched her as she leaned farther into the forest, waiting for their moment to strike.

"Please stop crying and take my hand. You are not going to be in any trouble for being in the kitchen. Please let me help you."

The small being stopped whimpering as it moved clear of the tree while one of the soulless people moved free from a small group and eyed Rebecca. She couldn't see it clearly as it was standing in the shadows. Johannes gasped as he realized it was her. He looked to see who Rebecca was calling out to. He hovered just above the ground and kept a watchful eye over her.

"You can't even save yourself. How do you expect to save me?" Rebecca saw it move clear of the shadow. It was Mrs. Gwenllian. Her hair was messy and free of its bun. It stuck out in all directions. Her dress looked like it was covered in dirt and grime.

"Mrs. Gwenllian? What are you doing here?" Rebecca asked.

Johannes swung his head in his Aunt's direction.

"What's wrong? Why are you running from me?" Rebecca continued with her questions.

"I have to run away from you. The only way you will be safe is if you run away too."

Rebecca stopped straining and slowly brought her arm back over the fence.

Johannes took stock of the movement around him. As soon as the soulless people realized Rebecca was retreating, they saw their opportunity for fresh fodder slipping away.

Rebecca was so transfixed on the small being she didn't notice them breaking free and plotting their attack. She had no idea he was so close.

Five soulless beings set off towards her. Moving effortlessly through the air, he was swift to knock three of them off their course for his beloved.

Rebecca gasped as she saw them whizzing past her. She stumbled backwards as she looked to see who it was. She thought she recognized the long hair. Scrambling to her feet, she pulled the long skirt of her dress up and ran along the fence line.

It couldn't be, could it?

Two soulless beings swooped at Rebecca's arm, sending her reeling backwards.

"No!" Rutherford screamed from behind as he pulled her to the ground. The lantern flew from her hand and landed in the mud above her head.

"What are you doing?" He looked around for the soulless beings and then back at her arms. "Are you hurt? Did they get you?"

She shook her head and she blinked her eyes.

"What are you doing out here?" he said as he helped her to her feet. "What do you think you are doing Rebecca? I told you what would happen if you went into the Dead Forest and you almost did!"

She blinked as she looked around her, trying to catch her breath. Her dress was covered in mud from the yard and she turned to see the vine coiling back into itself.

Rebecca could see the soulless bodies continuing to swirl around the gates as they gnashed their teeth. She was grateful they'd left their attack too late. She searched for Johannes and saw him retreat behind a tree.

"How did I get out here? I'm dreaming. At least I thought I was dreaming." Confused, she continued to look around her, trying to get her bearings.

Rutherford also looked around, keeping an eye on the soulless bodies as they hovered near the gate.

"Quickly, get inside...now! Quickly," Rutherford yelled in an undertone at her, pushing her towards the castle.

She slipped in the mud as she looked for where she thought she had seen Johannes. She couldn't see anything and Rutherford continued to yell at her to move. As she set off, the soulless bodies let out howls of outrage. She looked back as she ran to see Rutherford get to his feet. He held his hands up to attract the attention of the soulless bodies. The howls

stopped. Stopping at the doorway, she once again looked back, trying to catch sight of Mrs. Gwennlian again.

Rutherford arched his back and with a flourish of his hands, the soulless bodies disintegrated mid-air. She gasped, stepping back into the safety of the castle as she watched their limbs were stripped from their bodies.

Rebecca cringed, quickly praying that if was indeed Johannes she saw, that he was safe. The on-looking bodies flinched when they saw the others disposed of.

Rutherford slowly turned to Rebecca. His eyes were bloodshot and his face was stony. She stumbled back into the castle as he glided towards her. She took her eyes off him only long enough to see the soulless bodies transform back into their tree-like state. As Rutherford passed through the door, he slammed shut. She jumped at the loud bang it made.

"You promised me," he began, his eyes were wild.

"Rutherford, I'm sorry. I don't remember going out there. I swear to you. I remember getting into bed and feeling sick. I fell asleep. That's all I remember; please believe me." She retreated in the face of his advance, terrified of what he would do to her.

"You were wide awake. I could hear you talking to someone." He grabbed her by her shoulders.

"I told you...I thought I was dreaming. I don't want to go outside let alone go into the forest. I'm sorry. I remember why I went out there in the first place. I thought I dreamed I was back in the kitchen chasing after that—" she stopped abruptly before continuing on "—that mouse, and then I chased it out of the house. I honestly thought I was dreaming."

Rutherford looked at her skeptically. "There's something you're not telling me. You were calling out to help someone. Who did you see Rebecca?"

She didn't want to look away from him because she sensed he already knew she was lying about the mouse.

"I thought I saw a person out there. It might have been one of those...things from the trees. Maybe it tricked me," she ventured. "Thank you for pulling me back. I was so preoccupied with that person I didn't see them change."

"I'm just glad I heard you talking." He ran his cold fingers along her arm. "They got close. Very close."

"What would they do if they did get me?" Her mind was reeling. She wanted to go back and search for either of them. She had to know if it was them.

He looked into her eyes. "They will kill you slowly and painfully. Your soul will be stripped from your body." His eyes were cold and steely. "They will devour your flesh after they peeled it from your bones. You will beg them to kill you quickly but they won't. They will feed off your words—it makes them grow strong. Your pleas will bring more of them. One being is made to go a long way in the Dead Forest. You are safe as long as you stay within the boundary."

"What about those vines? They made their way in to the boundary."

"Yes. When that wing of the castle fell, the vine was able to make its way within the yard. I will go and deal with it just as soon as I know you are alright."

Rebecca nodded and hugged her arms to her body. "I'm fine," she said. "Thank you again." She felt sick having to thank the man she despised. Her plans to make a run for it through the forest had now been quashed.

"Are you sure you are alright?"

"You said I had been here before. When was I here?" Nausea swept over her as she tried to remember.

Rutherford reached out a hand and smoothed her hair over her shoulders before speaking. "Do you remember when you were a child you came into the Dead Forest with the help of three so-called friends? Well, you had fallen and hit your head by the time I had arrived. I saved you from those women. Those women would have fed off your goodness and left you for dead."

She shook her head. "I thought they were my friends."

"They were not your friends Rebecca." He continued to smooth her hair.

"It seems no one was my true friend. Everyone lied to me. Right from the very beginning." She couldn't help thinking about Papa. Had he just been truthful to her, she would have figured something out and all this could have been avoided.

"I am your friend Rebecca. I am the only one who has been truthful to you." She shut her eyes tightly in the face of his declaration.

"Keep talking." She needed to make sense of what had just happened.

"As I said, by the time I arrived you had fallen and hit your head. I picked you up off the ground and brought you here. You may not have much memory of it, but you were here for several days. I had to make sure your injuries were not extensive. You lapsed in and out of consciousness many times and you did speak to me. You asked where you were and you did exactly the same thing as you tried before. You tried to run out of the castle. You actually made it past the boundary."

She opened her eyes in surprise and looked at him. He was smiling at her. "You have become slower in your age," he joked. "You went beyond the boundary into the Dead Forest. The soulless people from the Dead People Trees set upon you. I got to you just in time. They had taken part of your soul, that's why you couldn't speak. They took so much from you. I almost killed you getting you free from them. You are a miracle because you survived. I had visions of you repeating history. I had to stop you even though you were terrified of me at the time." She nodded to indicate she now understood.

"Are you sure you are not hurt?" He slowly led her down the corridor.

"Yes, I am fine." Her mind was racing. She had to think of a way to get back to Johannes or Mrs. Gwennlian.

"I'm glad you were not injured or lost to them. I think it's time you went back to bed Rebecca."

She stopped walking and turned around to face him. "How did you kill them? How were you able to do that? What are you?"

Rutherford looked straight ahead. "I ask myself that very question everyday. When I know the answer I will tell you. When I think of something hurting someone I love, things I can't explain begin to happen. It's taken me a long time to control it. One day I will tell you the story of my life and how I became to be the way I am, but now is not that time."

He left Rebecca to make her own way back to her room as he headed off to deal with the vines. She closed the door behind before pulling off her muddy nightdress. She washed the soil off her body with cold water before getting into a change of clothes, climbing back into her bed for the second time that night. She was glad she hadn't mentioned anything about

Johannes or Mrs. Gwenllian.

Her mind must have been playing tricks; she couldn't believe that it was either of them out there. She laid her head on the pillow thinking about Johannes and what had happened to him. More questions filled her head about Mrs. Gwenllian and what had happened to her too. How can they be in the Dead Forest and not be attacked? It was only a matter of time before she would find the answers.

Chapter Twenty-Three

A loud crack from the fire woke Rebecca. She rolled onto her side to see the fire still burning brightly. She stretched out her arms and legs before sitting up, letting her legs dangle over the edge of the bed. Instantly she thought of Johannes and Mrs. Gwenllian as she rolled her shoulders and rubbed her hands together. She wondered if she should broach the subject with Rutherford. Walking towards the door she tried to open it but it wouldn't budge. She jiggled the handle but it still wouldn't open. She had been locked in. She beat on the door, frantic for it to open. She looked for another way out but found nothing. She was trapped. She screamed for Rutherford to open the door. She beat on the door until her knuckles were bruised and nearly bleeding.

Her throat was scratchy from her screams by the time he finally came. The sound of the lock clicking had her scrabbling for the handle again. She was relieved when the door opened but furious as the same time.

"Why did you lock me in?" Thoughts of Mrs. Gwenllian disappeared from her mind as she angrily pushed past him into the corridor.

"I did it for your own safety Rebecca. I couldn't bear the thought of you sleepwalking outside again."

"Don't ever do that to me again, ever," she seethed as she headed for the kitchen.

"Where are you going? I have your breakfast ready for you with your paintings." He followed her close behind.

"I'd like to make my own breakfast if that's alright," she spat over her shoulder without stopping.

Rutherford grabbed her hand, forcing her to stop. "But I have prepared a special breakfast for you. Please."

Rebecca looked at him, pulling her hand free. "Fine." She set off for her studio.

"When can we go outside? I need to see sunlight. I think that's why I've been feeling ill." Silently she prayed he would say yes.

"When the time is right," he said noncommittally. "But first breakfast."

Rutherford had set a plate of fresh fruit next to her brushes.

"I have been wanting fresh fruit for days." She smiled in delight. As she watched his face, she realized it was the first time she smiled in months and the first time ever she smiled at him. Her smile faded as she brought her hand up to cover her mouth. Turning around, she muttered a quick "Thank you" before picking up a piece of fruit. She quickly ate all the fruit on the plate.

Reluctantly she started to believe him when he said he wanted to look after her. He had done many thoughtful things for her and she was starting to feel comfortable about his presence. She decided to wait for the right time to raise the subject of Mrs. Gwenllian.

"Would you like to be alone while you paint?"

"Yes." She began to focus on her canvas. "I just prefer it."

"I understand." After he left the room she quickly looked around her before turning her attention back to her paintings.

Another day of painting had passed by the time she retired to her room. For the first night in many months she did not dream. She woke refreshed and full of energy, not tired and withdrawn as she was when she dreamt.

She looked at the door and slowly made her way to it. For just a fraction she hesitated before she grasped the handle and turned it, pulling it towards her. It didn't budge. She'd been locked in again.

She screamed and beat her fists against the door. Rutherford called out to her, notifying her of his presence before he unlocked it. She wrenched the door open and grabbed hold of his shirt.

"I told you not to do that to me again!" she screamed. "Give me the key!"

He stood unfazed. "I cannot give you the key Rebecca," he said calmly. "I cannot risk you leaving the castle again like you did the night before. I'm sorry, but it has to be this way. There is one other way if you are truly unhappy about this current arrangement."

She knew what the other option was. He wanted her to stay in his room.

The same routine continued for many weeks. She would wait in her room before Rutherford unlocked her door. She would then go to her paintings and return to her room at the end of the day. She had tried many times to stay awake to hear him lock the door, but she could never stay awake long enough.

She'd dreamed of him leaning over her while she slept but would wake to nothing. On many occasions headaches would leave her bedridden. At those times he would sit on the end of her bed and watch over her as she slept. She noticed she didn't dream when he was around. She had no need to dream of him when he was there.

Other times she would feign a headache just to stay in her room and be alone. She had nowhere to be. Going from helping to run a farm to doing nothing left her feeling useless. She had no drive to paint. She hadn't felt the sun shine on her skin in what felt like months. She had no idea how many days had passed since her arrival. She didn't know if she was sleeping through the day or if she would see daylight ever again. She would look at her arms every time she got up and notice her skin had become paler.

She craved fresh fruit and vegetables, which Rutherford provided. She would walk slowly behind Rutherford as he led her to her studio. Although her body felt alive for the first time since her arrival at Rutherford's castle, her mind felt as if it were detached.

She didn't notice Rutherford standing close to her as she squeezed past him and through the doorway. She dragged her feet as she walked to the table to collect her palette and brush.

"Is something the matter my love?"

"I need to be outside Rutherford. Look at me!" She thrust her pale, thin arms out towards him. "I have no energy. I feel like I'm fading away in here. All I do is paint. I have no inspiration. I get locked in my room. I don't see anyone. I hate it here."

She crossed her arms over her chest when she saw him move towards her with arms outstretched. Her mind was racing. She didn't pay attention to the words that came out of her mouth.

"You never did tell me what your relationship with Mrs. Gwenllian was. She was

someone my father confided in, but I'm beginning to believe she was someone you used to trick him. She said to me the other day – when I ran outside – she said she had to run away from here was because she wasn't safe. She said the only way I would be safe was for me to run away too. Why do you think I dream of running away Rutherford? You can't keep me here like this. I would rather be dead!"

He stared at her. "I will see what I can do my darling," he said, stopping in front of her. "I will see what I can do but for now, this is the way it has to be."

He turned on his heel and left her alone. Again. She was always alone. She felt better now she'd said what she wanted to say. She wondered what his next move would be. She looked at the paintings she'd half completed before looking at the walls at her other paintings.

She'd noticed a trend. Her earlier paintings were dark, but when Johannes came into her life, she'd chosen bright colors. Colors that reflected her mood. Then the darker paintings slowly crept back into her life as Papa's health deteriorated, in a time where things that were apparent now had started to unravel. The last three paintings were painted entirely in black.

She pulled the painting off the easel and laid it on the floor, replacing it with a fresh canvas. She cleaned her brush and dipped it into the pot of blue ink, painting a glorious blue sky. Something she craved to see again. She painted the cottage in the foreground with its lush hills and plentiful vegetable patches.

"I must say your enthusiasm for painting has returned," Rutherford remarked as he looked over yet another painting with a blue sky. "Might I ask why are you painting so many pictures of the cottage and farm? I had thought you would paint something new and different. Something for your new home?"

Rebecca ignored his questions and continued to paint in bright colors the things she missed from her daily life.

She even started a small painting of her and Johannes, something she kept hidden from Rutherford's ever-watchful eye. He would breeze into the room, make a comment about how he preferred her darker paintings and then leave. Their conversations hardly ever seemed to extend beyond pleasantries.

She would dawdle through the routine of him opening the door for her. She would go to the studio and paint for several hours before returning to her room. She grew weary of his empty promises to take her outside. She refused his attempts to stimulate conversation. She just continued painting the things she desired and yearned for while Rutherford maintained her supplies.

When Rutherford opened the door at the beginning of their daily ritual, she asked again about leaving the castle.

"When things are right Rebecca."

"What do you mean 'when things are right'? When are things going to be right? You are hoping for something that shall never be Rutherford." Her words were a verbal slap to his face. He immediately retreated from the room, closing the door behind him and locked it.

She couldn't believe what he had just done as she flew to the door in rage. She beat her fists against the door and screamed his name, all to no avail. She screamed until she was hoarse and then sat with her back pressed against the door. She rolled her head back so she was looking at the ceiling. She waited, hoping to hear the lock click. When she began to get cold, she moved to the fireplace to keep warm, adding another piece of wood. She paced the

room, waiting for his return.

To ride out the time she returned to her bed. Every time the fire crackled she hoped it was him unlocking the door. The familiar click didn't come. She stared at the ceiling for most of the time, getting off her bed only to add another log to the fire. She jerked herself awake; she hadn't realized she slept. She rolled over to the face the door. It was still closed. Clambering out of the bed she tiptoed across the room and squatted to look through the lock. There was a red eye staring back at her. She reeled backwards, screaming as she fell to the floor.

"Rutherford! Open the door!" She crawled back towards the door to look through the keyhole again. She could see straight through. He'd gone. She slammed her palm against the door before taking another look. She ran to her wedding gown and ripped a swatch of material from the skirt, hanging it over the door handle to block the keyhole.

She looked around the room again. She had no food and the only water to be had was in her washbowl. The woodpile was getting low. She didn't know how long she was going to be held prisoner and had no idea of how she was going to survive with nothing. She called out to Rutherford again but wasn't surprised he didn't come. She climbed back into bed and stared at the door.

Forced to sip from the washbowl when her head started to pound from lack of food, Rebecca could barely keep her eyes open. The air became chilly as the fire died down. She went to the firewood, debating whether to add to the fire or let it burn down some more and run the risk of losing it completely. She shrugged as she placed the wood on the fire and poked at the coals. Stabbing the poker into the coals made her feel better as she watched the smoke wisp towards the chimney. "Grow," she whispered weakly. "Grow." She focused all her energy on the red embers. The more she stared at it, the more the soft orange glow transformed into a bright red dancing flame. Transfixed, she willed the flame to take over the wood log. Something compelled her to reach her fingers towards the log as the fire intensified.

"Bigger," she called to the flames as she let her fingers tickle the top of the flames. The heat warmed her hands as she pushed them further into the fireplace. She turned her hands, palms up. She stared at the new flames dancing in the center of her palms. She squatted back on her heels as she became more and more mesmerized by the flames.

She smiled. "I can do it." She flicked one hand to extinguish its fire and focused on the remaining flame in her other hand. The log in the fireplace was well ablaze by now and her skin took on a healthy warm glow. Wriggling her fingers, the flame got bigger and bigger before she cast her other hand over it to push the flame smaller. She could only feel a gentle warmth on her skin. As she cupped her hands together she kept a small opening and raised it to her lips. She blew gently into her hands and opened them to let the smoke escape.

"I did it." With a flick of her wrist the flame returned. She smiled as she clapped her hands together. The flame was out but the room was warm once again.

Her stomach grumbled as she again sipped from the washbowl. She pulled the blanket off the bed and lay on the floor in front of the fire. Her head pounded as she went to sleep. The water only lasted two days while the firewood was gone within another day. Occasionally she would call out to Rutherford in the hope he would return. Every time she looked around the room the wedding gown would snag her attention.

She angrily pulled it off the wall, clutching it in her hands. She dragged it across the

floor as she returned to the fire. The click of the lock was the only thing that stopped her from throwing the dress into the fire. Her heart beat in her throat as the door opened.

Rutherford stalked into the room and she felt the full force of his icy glare as he stared at her. "What are you doing with that dress? Don't you dare throw it into the fire." He was incensed.

Rebecca ran for the door. He quickly moved in front of her and held her by the shoulders. He roughly pushed against her causing her to trip backwards. He followed her to the floor with a thud. Her head connected with the stone floor, the impact echoing off the walls. Rutherford straddled her, using all his weight to hold her down.

She desperately fought against him, trying to hit or kick him in any way she could.

"Get off me!" She was frantically trying to get her newly controlled power to work, but he held her wrists so tightly he prevented her from flicking herself a protective flame.

"No. I've had enough of your childish games Rebecca. I can't trust you therefore you will remain in this room. Why don't you love me Rebecca? Why don't you love me?"

Rebecca turned her head to the side as he inched his face forward for a kiss. He roughly pinned her wrists to the floor as he lay down on top of her.

"No!" She felt his tongue roll over her skin. He moved his kiss to her neck as she thrashed her head from side to side. He lathed his tongue over her collarbone and nipped her chest. She fought hard against him but he was so strong.

"Rutherford! No!" She screamed as he took her breast in his mouth. He let go of her wrist and grabbed the material covering her breast, tearing the bodice open.

"No!" She screamed again as she tried to cover herself with her free hand.

"Hmm, you taste so good. For too many years I have wanted to taste your flesh and feel your blood pulse through your body," he said between his kisses.

Rebecca squirmed and pushed her body against his to try and lift him, but he continued to press her down. "Don't fight me my love," he said calmly. "I want to savor your pureness. Let me love you."

She felt his hand move down her side to her thigh and grip it tight. "No!" She screamed again.

"Yes." He pushed himself up so he could look directly into her eyes. "I must have you. I must savor you. Give yourself to me."

Rebecca stared blankly into his eyes before she stopped her struggles. "You are too late. I have already given myself to another."

Rutherford froze at the quietly spoken words. He stared into her eyes, looking for a flicker of a lie.

"I don't believe you," he hissed.

"It is true." She rolled her head to the side, looking away from him.

"Johannes?"

She rolled her head back to look up at him. "Yes," she said with a wide smile. She watched him grimace at her declaration.

He knelt over her body as he sat up, keeping her pinned to the floor as he looked at her in disgust and confusion.

"Why do you keep lying to me Rebecca?"

"I'm not lying Rutherford. I have never lied to you," she said quietly. "I'm sure, now

that I know what you are, it was one of your spies that was watching over us by the stream."

Rutherford looked furious. "The night of the party? Was it before or after I danced with you?"

"After." She gasped as she tried to move away from him.

"Cedric...I sent Cedric to watch over you. The little bastard said nothing to me about this. You are lying to me!" He grabbed her throat with both hands.

Rebecca's mind reeled. She felt sick. Rutherford spat in her face as he pushed her hand out of the way, clamping his icy fingers around her neck, slowly squeezing. She gasped for air. She beat her hands ineffectually against his face, neck and chest.

"My wife's a dirty whore. You belong in the Dead Forest. I ought to feed you to them, piece by piece. Dangle your legs over the fence and let them take you bone by bone. I want to hear your pain because it will never match the same pain I am feeling now," he screamed.

She wheezed as she tried to drag in a lungful of air, fighting the ligature of his hands as he squeezed even more. Tiny black dots danced in her vision.

"Why do you lie to me Rebecca!" He spat in her face again as he pushed down on her throat. "I curse you as you have cursed me. Your father cursed me with a tainted wife. Everything you touch will die. Everything you love will fade to black. Everything you want to do will fail.

"You want to return to the cottage? You will return to nothing and nothing will ever grow there again. I banish you to the cottage where you will wither into old age, alone. You will be old and alone. Alone. Alone like me. You will be alone until you beg me. Beg me to take you back. And believe me, you will beg!" His screams were almost incoherent as she fought to find the air and voice to beg him to stop.

His fingers were so tight around her throat. Her heart and head pounded as she fought for air. She watched him watching her claw at his face before her eyes rolled back into her head and her arms fell to the floor.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Although she could feel the warmth of the sun, the cold air combined with the cold earth caused her skin to prickle and shiver. She was lying in sludge. She wiped the cold mud from her arms as she sat up. Her hair lifted in the breeze. She had been lying stomach down in the mud. She didn't want to believe her eyes when she saw the cottage in the distance. She looked around the field and saw the tattered remains of burnt scarecrows as she got to her feet.

Rebecca rubbed her muddy arms for warmth as she looked for Rutherford. Her hands flew to her throat, which ached and felt tender. She spun wildly on the spot looking for him. She couldn't see any sign of him as she ran towards the cottage. The ground felt hard against her feet, not lush as she remembered it. The stables were empty, the vegetable garden overrun with weeds.

The door to the cottage was ajar and she pushed it open slowly. She peeked inside expecting to see Rutherford. He wasn't there. The cottage was just as she had left it. It smelled musky and cold. Dirt blown in from outside covered the floor. She looked at Papa's chair before looking at the space above the fireplace. The gun had been long gone.

She walked slowly to the kitchen. The windows were still smudged with the fat and ash she used to cover them. It was still in a disheveled state as she moved a few items out of her way. She looked at her bed in the corner and fought hard to stop the memories from flooding back. She had returned. She was home.

She picked up a bucket and headed out to the stream. The water was still thick as she lowered the bucket to collect some. She tipped it out and looked into the stream. It had turned black.

She looked at the Dead Forest and farther along the stream before dunking the bucket again. It was still thick and dark. She looked at the forest again, searching for any sign of Rutherford or her father, or Johannes. She had convinced herself she must have imagined him there.

She headed back to the cottage with the thick water. She looked at the vegetable patch full of weeds and knew it would take a long time and hard work to correct it. She placed the bucket on the floor in the kitchen before doubling back to move Papa's heavy chair to barricade the door. She stacked the fireplace in the kitchen with wood before trying to light it. She sat back on the floor and stared at the fireplace. Even with the muck on the windows she knew nightfall was close. She again attempted to light the fire before a small spark started it off.

She sat on the floor and leaned against her bed before she remembered the small amount of money she stashed away for when times got tough. She shoved her hand under her bed, frantically searching for the small sack. Her fingers grasped the small string tie as she yanked the sack out into the open. The bag was gratifyingly heavy as she fumbled to open it. Coins tipped onto the floor and she counted the gold and silver.

Placing them back in the bag she began to tidy the kitchen. She worked most of the night, getting the cottage back to the way it was when she and Papa lived there. Finished sweeping the floor, she climbed the ladder to the loft. She stood staring at Papa's bed and then

moved to the window from where she shot Cedric. Moonlight streamed through the window, lighting the room and she looked outside.

She saw again the weeds in the vegetable patch, the scarecrows that dotted their farm. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she thought of the future. It was not going to be easy. Rutherford's dire words echoed in her head, what he would do to the farm if she remained there. Anger welled inside her. She was desperate to prove him wrong.

She made plans to head to the village the next day and purchase seeds to get the vegetable patch thriving again. She was determined to make a go of it. Praying for a better tomorrow, she crawled into Papa's bed and laid her head on the pillow.

Sleep had been elusive. The familiar yet unfamiliar surroundings kept her tossing and turning throughout the remainder of the night. Every time she woke, she thought she was still locked in her room at the castle. She thought Rutherford still watched her.

The sky outside was getting lighter and she bounded out of bed. She was keen to start work on the vegetable patch. Thirsty, she dunked a cup into the water bucket and brought it to her lips. A foul smell assailed her nostrils as she prepared to drink it. She pulled it away from her face and looked into the cup. Normally she could see the bottom of the cup but not any more. She tipped the water out on to table where it spread like thick goo.

She pushed her fingers through it. It felt icy cold and it clung to her fingers. She flicked her wrist in an attempt to get the sticky substance off her.

"Well, looks like the dishes will have to stay dirty until it rains," she said to herself as she wiped her fingers on her skirt.

She pushed Papa's chair away from the doorway and headed to the stables. Quickly grabbing a hoe and shovel, she made her way to the vegetable patch. She climbed the fence and looked at the weeds. They looked like the same weeds that hung over the ruins of the castle.

Rebecca brought the shovel down, slicing through a cluster of weeds. She looked at it carefully before touching it. Not seeing any spines she reached out slowly and picked it up. She pulled on it to break it free from the other weeds and threw it in the corner. She continued hacking away at the weeds for a good hour before taking some time to check her progress. She had only made her way through a small portion of the field but it didn't matter. She was happy to be working in the sunshine again.

Once a long strip had been cleared, she thought about setting off to the village for supplies. She looked to the sky for any indication of rain clouds but could only see a clear glorious blue. As she set off on foot she wondered what happened to the horses. Coins jingled merrily as she walked towards the boundary fence. It was long after she went beyond the farm's boundary that her every step pained her. Only the thought of getting the farm up and running, proving Rutherford wrong, kept her going.

She pulled the hood of her cloak high over her head as she trudged on. She became hunched as she walked and the air seemed thick as it entered her lungs. She avoided looking into the forest as she pushed herself forward.

The walk seemed shorter than what she remembered as she reached the outskirts of the village. Villagers stopped and stared at her as she made her way to the market. She tried to ignore their whispers but the murmurs became increasingly unguarded.

"Who's that?" she heard one of them say. Shrinking farther into her cloak, she wanted desperately to make her purchases and return home. She had decided on a number of seeds of various vegetables to get her started, as well as some fresh fruit and vegetables. She gazed longingly at the paint store from across the road but knew she had to sacrifice her painting for her survival on the farm.

She caught sight of her reflection in the shop window. She was a hooded dark figure. She stepped hesitantly closer to look at her face. She didn't want to look under the hood but she knew she had to. Something inside her was urging her to do it. She breathed deeply as she slowly inched the hood back. She stopped, horrified, as a shadow started to break through from under the hood.

Her skin was ghostly white and her eyes were sunken and dark. It looked like she didn't have any eyes at all—just dark holes. Her lips appeared aged and cracked. She gasped as she looked at the lines on her face and dark teeth, tracing her fingers disbelievingly over her face. She looked like an old woman. She couldn't see any resemblance to how she should look. She let go of the hood and looked at the back of her hands. They, too, had become wrinkled and aged. She closed her eyes and opened them again, hoping it was all a dream. Everything was the same.

Hand over her mouth, she backed away from the window and her morbid reflection. She had to go to Mrs. Gwenllian's house. She had to see her; she would know what to do. She hobbled along the street towards Mrs. Gwenllian's home as fast as she could. By the time she got there, she could only manage short, sharp breaths as she pushed open the door and stepped inside.

The room fell silent as all eyes fell on her. She glanced out from under the hood for a place to sit and catch her breath when Mrs. Gwenllian's door opened and a name was called. Rebecca lurched forward and pushed the young girl who had been called out of the way. She stumbled into the room and clawed her old haggard hand around the door to slam it shut.

"I'm sorry, I didn't call you."

"No, you didn't."

"Who are you?" Mrs. Gwenllian looked at suspiciously.

"I should be asking you that question," she snarled as she slowly lifted her hands to push back the hood of her cloak. Mrs. Gwenllian gasped at the sight of her.

Rebecca looked around the room and found a silver bowl. She stumbled over to the table and snatched the bowl up, holding it up to her face. She'd aged more. Her skin looked like it was barely holding onto her bones. Most of her teeth had disappeared and her eyes had faded even more, if that was at all possible. Her hair was nothing more than a few strands clinging to her scalp. She let go of the bowl sending it crashing to the floor. "You don't recognize me...do you?" She struggled to catch her breath. "I'm Rebecca...Rebecca."

Mrs. Gwenllian shook her head. "No. No. Rebecca died with her father in the Dead Forest many years ago. Who are you? I demand you leave at once."

She shook her head and held her bony hands out towards Mrs. Gwenllian. "No. I'm Rebecca. I was normal this morning. He's put a curse on me. You have to help me."

Mrs. Gwenllian stepped back and continued shaking her head in denial. "No. Rebecca is dead. She is dead." Mrs. Gwenllian screamed as she lifted her hands to cover her face. She'd backed herself into a corner and cowered at the decrepit form that lingered before her.

"No Mrs. Gwenllian, I am not. Look at me." She caught sight of her own hands. They were pale and her fingers had curled into claws. No matter how much she could argue her identity, she reluctantly came to the conclusion that Mrs. Gwenllian was not going to believe her.

In the face of Mrs. Gwenllian's terror, she nodded as she pulled her hood low over her face. "You once told me you couldn't be around me because I wasn't safe. You also said I wouldn't escape, but I did!" She left Mrs. Gwenllian cowering in the corner.

She packed her purchases into her bag and set off home. The closer she got to the farm, the easier she found it to breathe. She even began to walk straighter. Again she looked at the sky hoping for clouds but was disappointed. She made good time getting home given how sick she had started to feel.

She passed the boundary fence to the farm and looked at her hands. They had nearly returned to normal.

"Hello Rebecca."

She dropped her hands in fright as she looked towards the cottage. Rutherford was standing in front of the door.

"Get away from me!" she screamed. She felt like her soul was going to leave her body from fright. "What did you do to me? Why do I look the way I look?"

"Because you came from the world inside the Dead Forest, you look like a dead person to them. Or at least someone who ought to be dead. Someone who is desperately holding onto life and their dreams in the hope that it will all come true, but when you give it up it will all be better." He moved towards her. "Have you had enough of this nonsense? Are you coming home with me?"

Rebecca looked at him as if he were a simpleton. "I am home," she said as she looked at her hands again.

"So be it. Every time you set foot beyond the boundary of this land, you will age five years and it will not be reversible. Not only will your beauty fade but your health will too. If anyone comes to visit you, they will see the aged you."

She shook her head. "I don't believe in spells. Only fools believe in spells."

"Oh really? Hold your hand past the boundary line then if you don't believe me," he challenged, moving towards her in his effortless way. She moved away from him, shaking her head.

"Hmm...you won't do it because you know it's true?"

She didn't stop shaking her head. "No!" she screamed, fearing he would attack again. "It's because I don't have time for this Rutherford, now get off this land."

"Hmm. Well, you will see if the curse is true or not. I think you believe me because you saw your own reflection before, but you just don't want to admit you've made a mistake. That's what is in store for you in the long run if you don't return to me."

She stopped backing away from him and stood her ground. "You will never hear me say those words." She lifted her head defiantly.

Rutherford looked her up and down, an amused expression on his face. "Well, I guess I will have to wait and see."

She watched him walk away, all the way across the farm to where he disappeared into the forest. His words rang ominously in her head as she turned around and walked into the

cottage.

“‘Age five years every time I set foot off the farm’.” She didn’t really mind about her looks, it was her health that concerned her the most. How was she going to deal with all the chores and look after the farm?

She laid her purchases on the table and counted her coins. She hid the money sack under her bed again before sorting out the seeds. She kept a small pile of seeds aside as a back up.

As she continued to work in the vegetable patch, she tried to shake Rutherford’s words of doom and gloom from her mind. The sun had started to set and she wanted to get the fire going again before it was too dark. Her hands ached as she carried the hoe and shovel back to the corral, but it didn’t detract from her satisfaction of working for herself. While nibbling on a small dinner she decided she would rise before the sun the next day so she could get a full day’s work in the field done.

The low grumbling of her stomach roused her from her slumber. She sat up and looked out the window. The sky was still dark but the moon’s glow had given it a false sense of day. She rubbed her stomach as she made her way down to the kitchen. Even though she was thirsty, she couldn’t bear the thought of drinking the vile water from the stream.

She spread the remains of the coals in the fireplace as she ate a piece of fruit for her breakfast. It tasted sour. As she looked at it she watched the flesh turn black. The juice smelled strong and tangy. She spat the piece she was chewing out into her hand. It too had turned black and disintegrated in her hand. She threw the remaining pieces into the bucket of water before picking up another piece of fruit.

She watched it as she moved it towards her mouth. She held the nectarine only inches from her mouth and stared at the flesh. Areas under the membrane poked up and she could see something writhing just under the surface. She lowered the fruit as she continued to stare at it.

Within seconds the entire membrane was being pushed up by something. Fascinated, she was still holding onto it when the membrane ruptured and a sea of maggots spewed over her hand and onto the floor. She screamed as she threw the nectarine in the bucket and reached for something to hit the maggots with.

Utensils and crockery went spilling onto the floor as she reached for a cup and hammered the floor until the maggots were beaten into a fine paste. She shuddered at the thought of maggots touching her. She cringed as she scraped up the mess, often jerking in fright as she thought a rogue maggot had landed on her.

Desperate to get out of the cottage and get started in the vegetable garden, she packed the seeds in her apron and headed out. The sun broke over the hillside and warmed her face as she made her way out into the garden. The smile she wore faded as she looked at the vegetable garden. Weeds had grown over the area she worked on yesterday. They had multiplied and spread overnight. Jumping the fence, she grasped the handle of the shovel firmly as she violently attacked weeds, her hands vibrating at the impact. She swung wildly at the weeds happy to strike anywhere.

Within minutes she was sweating and breathing heavily as she continued to hack at the weeds. She kept going until her hands couldn’t hold onto the shovel any longer. It slipped

from her hands as she looked at her bleeding palms. She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand and looked at the weeds. She'd made her way into the middle of the patch without realizing it. She had tried to see where the main root was but could only see a sea of tentacles as it spread. Blood dripped from her fingertips as she scuffed the ground, trying to think of a way to get rid of the weed once and for all. She walked back to where she started and got on her knees.

Gently she reached in to her apron and pulled out some of the seeds. She pushed the soil to make a hole, planted the seed and then covered it. She did this until she ran out of seeds. Her hands stung as they became covered in dirt.

She looked at the cottage then back to the patch as she waited to catch her breath. She bent to pick up the shovel and flinched in pain as she tried to take hold of it. Her hands refused grip the handle and it fell back to the ground. She knew she wouldn't be able to do anymore.

She held out her hands in front of her as she walked towards the cottage. She tried not to look at them, but they throbbed. She kicked the door closed behind her as she looked around her. With the absence of water to wash her hands, she had no choice except to rub them against her apron. The dirt seemed to brush off okay but the action made her hands bleed more. She didn't realize how tired she actually was until she had sat down. She sighed as she gingerly climbed into her own bed and tried to keep warm by the fire. She swallowed hard thinking of how much she wanted a drink. She lay on her back with her palms up. Tears of pain rolled down her face as she thought about her crop.

When sleep eluded her she would sit near the window and stare at the Dead Forest, wondering when, or if, Rutherford would come back for her. She replayed the night she thought she saw Johannes and Mrs. Gwenllian over and over again.

The next thing she knew it was day, the cawing of birds awakening her. She had fallen asleep. The pain in her hands flooded back to her, wincing as she got out of bed. She looked towards the kitchen window, trying to look outside, but she couldn't see anything for the smears. She raced to the door and gingerly opened it.

She could see a number of crows digging and scratching where she planted her seeds. She screamed and waved her hands in the air as she ran towards them.

"Get out of it!" She stopped dead at the fence line, shocked by what she saw. Although the crows had flown away it was the weeds that commanded her attention. They had taken over the garden again. She forced herself to look as where she planted the seeds. The crows had dug them up and eaten them.

She wept as she climbed the fence and jumped onto the weed-infested garden. She knelt down where the seeds should have been and brushed the soil with her fingers. She searched for any seed the crows might have left but there was not a single one. She sobbed as she looked up at the sky. At the sight of clouds she stopped crying. They were dark clouds. Rain clouds. Rain would not be far away. She got to her feet and climbed out of the vegetable patch. Without looking back she returned to the cottage. She didn't leave the safe confines for three days and three nights.

Rebecca stayed in bed not only to let her hands heal, but to give her some thinking time

too. She'd hoped to hear the sound of raindrops. Instead, the dark clouds taunted her for something she desperately needed, but it never came. The healing of her hands progressed with each day, but at the same time the farm was becoming more and more overrun. She knew it was all Rutherford's doing and she was determined not to let him win. She would listen to the sounds of the crows cawing, knowing they were there to spy on her.

She had a plan. She planted her remaining seeds in large bowls from the kitchen. She had placed them on the floor in the loft where the air was warmer and the seeds would be in the morning sun. She had quickly dug up dirt near her front door as she kept a wary eye out for Rutherford's spies. Her hands ached as she worked but she refused let herself stop until it was done. She stared at the dirt in the pots for hours. Hoping to see something. Willing the seedlings to grow.

She prayed for rain more than ever. She needed it to get the plants started. Skimming a small amount of the sludgy stream water to see if it settled in the unplanted soil, she was forced to tip it all out in the front yard. She had no water. She shook her head. She was not going to be defeated. Her mind raced to think of an alternative plan. She had no choice. She was going to have to beat Rutherford alone. She just needed to have a plan.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Rebecca dragged her body around the cottage. She was paranoid about being watched. She hadn't eaten a decent meal in weeks. Of the food she did eat, she would pick at it before it had a chance to spoil. It had rained a little in the past three days. She put as many containers as she could find to collect the small amount of water she would end up rationing, using it mainly on her seeds. She crawled from her bed and stooped down to give them a daily inspection.

"Come on little ones. You can do it. Don't let him stop you from growing."

She spent hours staring out the windows, watching the crows make their way easily on land her father tried so hard to keep crow free. The view from the loft window gave a better overview of the farm. She would stare at the forest thinking about how she would never ask Rutherford for help. She would make her way down from the loft and continue her watch from the kitchen. The weeds in the vegetable patch were spreading, slowly making their way towards the cottage.

Her hair was a knotted mass. She'd gone months without brushing it. She hadn't changed from her nightdress in weeks. It was grimy and torn in places but she didn't care. It was not as though she was going to entertain guests, let alone have visitors.

She rose early one morning and began the daily ritual of inspecting the pots. Small seedlings poked through the soil. She smiled as she knelt and laughed. She moved closer for a better look before throwing her head back in laughter. A victory. A small one but an achievement nevertheless. She clapped her hands together as she bent down again to look at the seedlings. "That's the way. Keep going. We'll beat him yet."

She felt light-headed as she made her way down to the kitchen. She gripped onto the railing as the room spun, crying out in pain as she felt the skin on her palm split open. She instinctively let go, falling to the floor with a heavy thud.

She awoke to a cold breeze blowing into the cottage from underneath the door and caressing her face. She opened her eyes, momentarily disoriented. Pain flooded her arm as she tried to move. She had broken her arm. She cradled her arm as she held her breath. It even hurt to breathe.

Struggling to get to her feet she thought she would pass out from pain. She heard the crows cawing as she sobbed. She didn't know what to do. Every breath she took was painful, moving hurt more. She sat in her Papa's chair and tried to think through the pain. She knew she couldn't stay there but where would she go? She had no one to help her.

The cawing of the crows became screeches as she concentrated on regulating her breathing. Pain clouded her mind as she called for Papa. She winced as the chair rocked slowly. Her breaths were short and sharp; it seemed to hurt less than deep long breaths. Her eyes were starting to close as she heard footsteps. She tried to open her eyes but the pain was just too much for her. She heard the door open and through slitted eyes saw a dark form move into the room.

"Papa?"

"Rebecca."

"Rutherford?" She tried to move but the pain was too much. "Don't come near me."

Get out of my cottage."

"I am here to help you." He knelt before her.

"I don't want your help." She winced and tried to breathe.

Rebecca could still feel the pain in her arm but it had changed from a sharp stabbing pain to a dull ache.

"How are you feeling?"

She tried to sit up as Rutherford shifted from the end of the bed to her side. "No. No, you must rest. You don't need to sit up. Would you like some water?" He turned to fill her cup from the bucket.

"I don't want that water," she said, thinking it was the foul stuff.

"But you must." He held the cup up to her face. She could see the water was clear. She tentatively sniffed. Nothing. She nodded as she allowed him to hold the cup for her. She gulped it down.

"How did you know I was injured?" She rested her head back on the pillow.

"I could feel your pain. You have been in pain since you came back here," he said as he took his seat next to her.

Rebecca covered her broken arm with the blanket before pulling her free hand back to her body. "I'm fine. I didn't feel well after your crows destroyed my harvest."

"No, no, no Rebecca. I didn't send them to do that." He reached for her hand. "I told you it was going to be hard if you came back here. Now you have a choice. You can stay and live like you have been for the rest of your life, or you can come back with me where I can take care of you." She looked at him blankly.

He smiled as he shifted on the bed. "You are my wife Rebecca. We should not be living like this."

"Your wife?" she exclaimed. "You killed my family. You took away the men I loved! You drug me and then tell me we are married! You lock me in your castle in the middle of the Dead Forest and tell me I can never leave! You attack me and then dump me in the middle of a paddock because you didn't get your way! That is no way to treat a wife." She didn't care how much pain her arm was giving her, it could never match the pain she had suffered since knowing Rutherford.

"Fine. I am sick of this Rebecca." He got to his feet. "I have tried and tried and tried to come to your way of thinking. I had originally come to collect something that was promised to me. If your father tried to take matters into his own hands, that is not my fault. He tried to kill me. He had no problem in trying to search me out several times to try and kill me, but it's not all right to defend myself? I have given you your space. I have given you everything you could have wanted to make your life very comfortable. Yet you choose to live like this! Believe me, your life is not going to get any better. It's all down hill from here. I have given you opportunity after opportunity in the hope you would come to your senses, but clearly you are as mad as your parents. This is the last time I will come to help you Rebecca. What you do to yourself from now on you will have to deal with by yourself. I cannot keep holding on to something in the hope it will be returned."

Rebecca looked him up and down, scorn coloring her features. "But you can't let me go Rutherford. You said yourself you have been waiting all your life for me. No one said

anything about me waiting all my life for you. You are not in a position to let me go and you never will. There will always be that tiny slither of hope there could be some love between us. I think you should leave."

Rutherford stared at her for several moments before storming out of the cottage. She had no remorse for speaking her mind. She wanted him to understand and she knew deep down he would have agreed with her.

Rebecca's walk had become lopsided as she tried to compensate for her broken arm. It hadn't mended properly. It throbbed every time she tried to straighten it. She decided against using the loft anymore as she feared another fall. It took her several attempts to collect the seedlings and bring them to the lower level. She continually mumbled about keeping her small crop growing, about how she wanted to work in the field but the weeds were too much for her. She grew to hate silence. She had to keep muttering to herself to keep her mind going, always trying to think of another way to make her life that little bit easier.

Her skin had taken on a dull, sallow tone as she shuffled around the cottage. Many times she brought herself to drink the foul stream water, nearly vomiting in the process. It felt like a slug slipping down her throat before it stuck to the lining of her stomach. She coughed and spluttered as she fought her body as it tried to reject it. She braced her arms on the table as she dry retched.

Her clothes were stained with dirt and the mucky water as she carried on with her daily chores. Carrying the water from the stream made her body scream in agony. Everyday her hopes were disappointed as the water stayed in its filthy state. She would hobble back to the cottage keeping her eyes to the ground. She couldn't bring herself to look at the state the farm deteriorated into. Weeds that occupied the vegetable patch were now thick vines that spilled onto the general farmland. Some vine tentacles were making its way along the cottage walls. The stables were beginning to fall down and the remains of the scarecrows still littered the farm.

Her dress snagged on one of the logs used to hold a scarecrow high in the air. She sidestepped trying to pull free. She was still snagged. Lowering the bucket to the ground she grabbed hold of her skirt with her good hand and tugged hard. As the material ripped she stumbled forward. She didn't bother looking at the damage done to her skirt. She simply picked up the bucket and continued on her way back to the cottage. From the periphery of her vision she saw a number of crows sitting on the edge of the fence as she hobbled past.

She sat in the kitchen nibbling on preserves as she looked at the jars. They were getting fewer and fewer. She promised herself she would not eat unless she absolutely had to, but her supplies were beginning to run out.

It would take her hours to chop a small amount of wood. Her body ached every time she swung the axe, every time it shuddered as it got caught in the wood. Awkwardly, she would pick up as many pieces as she could carry and hobble back to the cottage. She would stare at the fire until her eyes stung from exhaustion all the while knowing Rutherford was keeping an eye on her.

Her time was almost up. She wasn't living, she was existing—and barely at that. She didn't have any alternative. To live with Rutherford would be too much to bear. She knew what she had to do. She had made her choice. As she lay down on her bed she prayed for

strength to get her through the night. Tomorrow was going to be her last day of being alone.

Rebecca thought about her decision as she lay in bed looking at the ceiling. Although she knew she was making the right choice, she couldn't quite believe it had come to this. She dragged her aching body from her bed and shuffled towards the window. She stood there for hours just watching the day go by. Her chest rose as she took a deep breath and sighed.

At the realization of her fate, she beat her fist against the windowsill for the lies Rutherford told her. She cried for the love she lost, for the love she would never see again. She cried for her life coming to this point. She cried for the rage she felt towards Rutherford and headed for the bucket. She dipped the cup in and gulped the gluggy water down.

She coughed as she dunked the cup again. She drank another cupful and had to fight to keep it down. She clutched her stomach as the cup dropped to the floor. She lurched forward as hot vomit burned along her throat. She opened her mouth to expel the contents of her stomach but nothing came out. She could feel the rush of vomit sitting at the back of her throat. Her body heaved again and this time a rush of bile flew out across the table. It was a thick mass mixed with blood. She sobbed as she wiped her mouth. She looked at the back of her hand covered in the thick mixture. With great difficulty she pulled herself up as she walked outside and looked at the forest. She looked back at the cottage once more before she started to walk away from it.

The wind had picked up and tried to push her back. She staggered forward as her body expelled more of the foul water. The sloppy mess soaked what was left of her dress. She looked at the sky filling with dark clouds and forced herself to keep moving. She looked at the stables and sobbed. Her steps were ragged, resembling a drunkard as she drew closer to the stream. She looked back over her shoulder to see a line of crows watching her. Her stomach churned as the poisoned water ate at her insides. She slowly turned back to see Rutherford standing at the edge of the forest.

"Come to me my love." He was holding out his hand to her.

She stood on the edge of the stream and looked at him through the tears in her eyes. She could see hundreds of crows surrounding him, lining the branches of the trees in the forest. All eyes were on her.

"You have made the right choice my love. Come to me and let us go home." He took a step towards her. "I can help you. I can make you feel better."

She looked down into the stream that divided them. It had started to run clear. She could see her reflection. Her face had become old and soulless. Her skin was white and sagged, papery thin. She had no muscle definition, she was just skin and bone—skeletal. Her dress was tattered and torn. Her hair, what was left of it, was limp and hung lank around her face. Blood stained cracked lips as pieces of her intestines made their way out her mouth with violent force.

"Things will only get better if you come with me now my love. Or you can stay and things will remain the same and never improve."

Rebecca looked at him, the intensity of her gaze increasing. She didn't know if she should believe her eyes. She felt like she was in a trance. Was the man standing before her Johannes, or was it another one of *his* tricks?

"Johannes?" She blinked her eyes and saw Rutherford once again. "What did you do

to him? I know he wouldn't have left me...you must have done something to him. I saw him you know. That night..."

"No my love. Johannes is dead. You must have imagined it." He smiled, amusement twinkling in his eyes.

"Either way I don't believe you. I have made my choice Rutherford, and it does not involve you."

The smile quickly faded from his face as he stared at her. "Rebecca...I am begging you. Come with me. I can give you anything and everything you want. Look at you! You *are* a shadow of your former self. I will not ask you again Rebecca."

She summoned her strength to look back at the cottage one last time. It was gray and cold. She had many good memories of growing up there. She looked at the farm and saw nothing but weeds. She looked back at the stream, which had bubbled back to a filthy muck and then Rutherford. His chest puffed in and out as he stared at her, waiting for her next move. The crows behind her remained steadfast.

Her head swum as her body tensed in another shudder. She lurched forward and braced her hands on the ground as her body responded to the stream water. She shuddered again before falling into the stream. The water was hot. Her skin prickled as she moved further into the stream.

"No!" Rutherford screamed, his bellow drowned in the sudden cacophony of sound as the crows screeched and squawked and cawed.

The thick water molded around her body and made it hard for her to move. She felt extremely heavy in contrast to her skeletal frame. She didn't have the strength to fight against the flow as blood poured from her mouth. She stared at Rutherford running towards her and falling to his knees as the water dragged her under. He had screamed at her to take his hand.

She felt the water swirl freely around her feet as it splashed over her face. She coughed and spluttered as it found its way into her mouth. Rutherford splashed at the side of the stream, narrowly missing her hand as the current pulled her under. She opened her eyes under the water and saw it had become clear. Her head rose above the water and she saw it looked like the muck.

Rutherford's voice was drowned out as she plunged under the water again. She moved her arms out in front of her; she could see them clearly. There was no pain in her arm as it moved freely. Her dress was whole and white again—not a mark in sight. Her hair, a whole mass of it, swirled behind her as she moved underneath the water. Her head felt light as her lungs pounded.

She looked up to see Rutherford screaming. He looked like he was in the water but couldn't reach down and grab hold of her. The sky and surroundings were dark and cold looking.

The water was a stark contrast. It was warm and welcoming and she felt at ease. Rocks and other objects hit her body as she was pushed along the stream with the flow of the current. She looked up to see Rutherford running along the embankment yelling at her. Water flowing into her lungs stung, catching her by surprise. She gasped for air as she tried to bring her head above the water but the current was too strong. She watched Rutherford run out of her view as she moved along quickly with the stream. Her insides felt like they were turning to liquid as the current carried her away.

She saw the sky change from gray to blue as she felt her life break free from her body. She tried to kick but it was as if the water had frozen her limbs. She knew the farm boundary wasn't far. She saw the familiar reeds nestled along the bank as she floated past them. She took one last look at the trees that belonged in the forest, only to see crows. She watched them watch her body roll under the water.

The sky had darkened as the sun set, casting pink and purple clouds. Brilliant colors she loved to paint. Colors that filled her with lingering thoughts of happiness. She felt her soul being torn from her lifeless body as she continued beyond the boundary of the farm. The water suddenly became icy and she felt her blood begin to freeze. Her heart beat a tattoo in her head as her lungs screamed for air. Her fingers and toes became numb as she traveled with the current. She floated to the surface, rolling her head only to see the sky had grown darker. She tried to breathe, to take short gasps of air, but couldn't. Her white gown shone through the water as she got closer to the village.

Her face froze in the cool air and from the absence of air being drawn into her body. The farther along she traveled, the more life left her. Her eyes, cold and steely, set open. Her skin was cold and pale. Her dress clung to her body and floated underneath her, snagging on logs and other debris, slowing her final journey. Her arms floated wide from her body as her soul left in a peaceful transition. The last thing she saw was the stars twinkling merrily in the night sky.

Rutherford continued to scream in unison with the crows that were waiting to feast. "No! Rebecca you can't leave me...not like this." Every time he touched the water it turned to its gluggy form. He was desperate to get it off his skin. He didn't know how to get her out of there. He watched her fade under the water. Tears streamed down his face as he struggled to think of how to help her before he stopped dead in his tracks. The crows continued to fly over her as the distance between Rebecca and he grew.

A villager fishing from the stream for that day's market was sleeping as something floated into his lines. He woke with a start and grabbed the line, grinning as he thought he'd caught a huge fish he could sell for a great price. He looked at the end of the line and rubbed his eyes. He couldn't believe what he saw. He looked again, realizing it was a body. He set off to the village to get some help.

By the time he had returned with aide, a man he'd never seen before was by the body's side. Tears had scored his face. He was trembling as he lifted the limp body in his arms.

"Why did you do that Rebecca? Things could have been better," the man sobbed. He was looking down at the expressionless face, wiping hair out of cold eyes.

"Come my love. Let me get you home. I will make it all better." The stranger rose to leave.

"Where are you taking her?" one of the villagers asked.

There was no reply. Within moments both the stranger and his burden had disappeared from their sight into the thick of the Dead Forest.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Rutherford laid his bride gently on the cool table. He brushed her damp hair off her face and stared at her lips. They were blue with barely a tinge of pink. He reached out and took hold of her wrists, pulling her arms across her body as he straightened out her dress.

He continued to stare at her as he walked around the table, watching, waiting for life to move her body again. His fingertips slid across the tabletop as he walked towards her head. Again, he looked closely at her lips. There was no change. He leaned in and positioned his mouth only inches away from hers. His legs lifted off the ground as he hovered above her head.

He slowly moved his hand towards her chin and pulled her mouth open. She felt cold to his touch. So cold. He stared at her as he took a deep breath in. Her mouth stayed open when he moved his hand away.

With the back of his knuckles he gently caressed her cheek before returning his hand to his side. He closed his eyes as he took a deep breath. He had to keep his mind on the task at hand. He had to get her soul back to her, but it had to be at the right time. As he breathed out, he let his mouth slit open. A fine white mist passed through his lips and drifted towards Rebecca's mouth. His eyes opened. They were bright red.

He hovered over her body as the mist continued to flow into Rebecca. As he took his second deep breath, the color in her lips lost their blue hue and became pinker. As the transfer continued, Rebecca's eyes fluttered before opening wide. He had to move quickly to hold her arms down by her wrists. He lowered himself to better hold her down until the transfer was complete. Her mouth opened wide as a trickle of water made its way from her lungs. The small trickle down the side of her mouth turned into a violent gush.

He watched her soul reclaim her body as she returned his stare. She wriggled and writhed, thrashing against him as her soul fought the body it was supposed to inhabit. Her back arched off the table as her head moved from side to side. Her movements had started voluntarily, but the more Rutherford continued to breathe her soul back into her, the more she lost control of her body. The white mist started to weaken as its transition from Rutherford to Rebecca was almost complete. Her body stopped thrashing and lay lifeless on the table.

He lowered his body and knelt over her. "Rebecca." He smoothed back her hair again and cupped her face with both hands. "Rebecca. Rebecca. Open your eyes. You are safe now. Please, open your eyes and let me know you are alright."

Rebecca slowly moved her head from side to side and swallowed hard. The color had come back to her face but it had quickly faded to a sallow gray tone. She grimaced and scowled at him. "Tell me how you feel," he pleaded as he continued to fuss over her.

"Get off me," she growled. The voice came from her but it wasn't her voice. It was gruff, angry and cold. Her body felt cold through his clothes, chilling him.

"How do you feel Rebecca? I'm sorry, but I can't let you leave me. I will never let you leave me."

"Get off me." She bucked against him sending him off the table. She sat up and glared around the room. Although she had never been in his room, recognition lit her eyes as she

realized she had been brought back to his castle.

"Why did you bring me back here? Why can't you accept that I do not want to be with you?" She placed her hands flat on the table and moved her body around. Her legs swung down the side of the table as she moved to stand on the floor.

"I told you I never wanted to come back here or be with you! You are going to pay for this." Her dress stuck to her back as she moved towards him. "What have you done to me?"

She glared at Rutherford. Her once beautiful clear sky-blue eyes had turned to a dark shadowy green. When he looked into her eyes, he was afraid. He must have left his moment too late. He stared at her and flinched as she moved closer. It was his turn to be afraid.

"I am sorry. I couldn't let you die like that. You would have just become another one of those things that terrified you in your dreams. The things that live in the Dead Forest... You would have joined them and I couldn't let that happen."

He couldn't take his eyes off her, couldn't help but return her stare. Her piercing gaze stared straight through him. He didn't exactly know how she would react once her soul had returned to her, but he knew violence was a possibility.

She slowly looked at her surroundings before stalking towards the door. She wrenched it open and moved out into the corridor. She looked to her right but headed off in the opposite direction. She coughed several times as if to clear her lungs, shaking her head. He followed her in close pursuit, worried about the state she was in.

"Where are you going Rebecca?"

"I don't know where I'm going," she replied without stopping. "I will know when I get there. What exactly did you do to me Rutherford?"

"I gave you your soul back. I had to. If you would just let me look you over...I need to make sure that you are fine."

"I am fine. I have always been fine...until you came along and started to meddle."

The corridor seemed to be never ending. "I want to be outside Rutherford. Take me outside."

"You must let me look at you first. Then I will take you outside. I promise."

"You have promised me many things before and never delivered. Tell me how to get outside. I have to see the Dead Forest for myself." She stopped and wiggled her fingers, the palms of her hands felt water-logged. She shook her hands and stared at her palm. She flicked her hand again.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She continued to flick her hand for a little while longer. "Outside. Now."

He led her to the front foyer. It seemed lighter than she remembered it to be. The brightness hurt her eyes. She squinted as she made her way to the door. The handle felt warm against her hand. She looked at the back of her hand. Her skin looked gray.

She released the door handle and looked at her fingers as she splayed them before her. Her fingers seemed bonier and longer. Her nails were definitely longer. She looked back to see Rutherford lurking closely behind her.

"Please let me look you over Rebecca. You mustn't have much strength. You need to sit and collect your thoughts. The next few days could be very traumatic for you. Your soul has been free and is restless. You need to be calm and let it settle. Please."

"Silence! You are the one who did this to me so you will be the one to suffer any consequences. I died inside the moment you brought me here the first time. I died again when I saw Johannes that night. I do not care what you say, I know I saw him. My soul has already left me. I am nothing but a shell. I feel as if I'm dead inside. I have nothing but hate for you and what you have done to me."

She turned her attention back to the door handle before pulling it open. The rush of air pushed her long hair out behind her as she squinted again to get a clear view. She looked at the castle's boundary. The Dead Forest had always been dark to her but now it was light. She could see the dead people trees clearly. They were no longer the disfigured, dark and terrifying things she had encountered. They were gliding effortlessly through the light. Their actions didn't appear to be scary although their faces were still locked in their expressions of agony.

"They have been locked in the light for many years. Some for decades," Rutherford said as he moved from behind her. "They are forever trapped in the light. They are unable to escape to the darkness they crave. They trawl the Dead Forest waiting. Waiting for a soul to come their way. Waiting to be taken to the next world. Waiting for the end of their existence they yearn to come."

"They stay in the light forever?" She watched them move around as she walked along the footpath towards the castle boundary. Memories of the last time she was there flashed through her mind. Her heart raced as she looked to the side of the castle. The vine looked strong, growing over the ruins. Her memory wandered back to the vine that had taken over the farm. Visions of her final moments flashed before her eyes.

She turned towards Rutherford. "Am I to stay in the light forever?"

He looked into her cold and piercing eyes before nodding slowly. "Yes, you are one of them now. The soul I gave you will slowly make its way out of you. I tried. I tried to save you but I failed."

She moved towards the boundary fence, watching closely as five of the soulless people turned their attention to her. Her gaze grew hazier the closer she got to them.

The small group made their way to her. There was no attempt from Rutherford to stop either party from getting too close. A woman who looked about Rebecca's age moved to the front of the group, hovering near the gate. Rebecca watched her carefully as the woman slowly lifted her arm. She couldn't help but stare at the large red welts that marked her sallow-looking skin. Stopping short of the woman's outstretched arm, she tried to get a closer look.

"What are those?" She returned her gaze to the woman as she waited for a response.

"They are light burns Rebecca," Rutherford said as he moved to her side. "These beings can't escape the light. For your own protection, you must either remain inside or cover up completely. Look at your skin; it's starting to change now."

She slowly lifted her arms in front of her. Her gray skin had taken on a blotchy rosy glow. The blotches grew in size before her eyes. She winced as they started to itch and spread. She looked up to see the woman inching a hand towards her. Rebecca dropped her arms to her sides and stepped back.

"Do you want to go back inside?" Rutherford stepped between her and the woman from the Dead Forest.

"Yes. I want to get a change of clothes." She tried to protect her arms from the light.

"Come then. Let's get you inside." He guided her towards the door. She looked back over her shoulder to see the woman receding back into the forest as she walked away.

"Am I able to go in to the Dead Forest now...since I am one of them?"

"Well, technically you still have a soul. It is still unsettled so you should be careful about getting too close. Why do you want to leave the Dead Forest and the castle?"

"We have been through this before Rutherford. I don't belong here. I don't feel right within myself. I feel like part of me has been left behind while the other part is just lingering in limbo, waiting to see what happens."

She looked at the vine again. She felt angry. She despised Rutherford for the many things he had done but this was the last time he would interfere with her. She looked back at him only to see him smile at her. A resounding crack echoed in her ears as she looked at him in surprise. She didn't even know she was going to slap him until the deed was done.

Her hand stung as she lifted it to strike him again. He reeled back as she struck him again with more force. Her long nails scored his skin, leaving red furrows as she hit him again and again. He lashed out at her, kicking wildly as he tried to escape her onslaught. She gasped as his foot connected with her waist on her side. A fine white mist escaped from her mouth as she bore the brunt of his force. She lurched forward to strike him again, but he managed to grab hold of her wrist, effectively calling a halt to her attack.

"I hate you," she screamed over and over again. "I don't want to be anywhere near you." Wriggling free of his grip, she struck him again. His small mouth split open. Blood spurted from the open wound and dribbled from his chin to the floor. Adrenalin surged through her as she wrestled him to the floor. Blood continued to flow from Rutherford's mouth as she threw her punches. She was wild with anger. Unsettled with fear. The more she fought him, the more white wispy fog escaped her body. She ripped at his clothes and pulled on his slicked hair.

She brought down her fist hard for the final time before Rutherford's eyes rolled back into his head and his arms went limp. She had knocked him out. She leaned over him as she caught her breath, looking down at his bloodied mouth. She could hear him breathing. She clambered to her feet and grabbed hold of his hands. Her cold eyes scoured the corridor in search of a place to take him. She tightened her grip around his wrists and set her feet against the cold floor. She pulled with all her might, dragging his heavy body towards the first room she saw.

Rebecca stopped and let Rutherford's arms drop to the floor with a heavy thud. Her hair hung in her face. She straightened her back and wiped under her nose with the back of her hand. She looked at the back of it to see a trail of blood. It was bright red against her gray skin.

"That's another reason I hate you Rutherford. You made me bleed." She spat on him as she wiped her nose again before letting the blood flow into her mouth. She had tasted her own blood before but this was the first time she liked it. She bent over and gathered Rutherford's arms again before setting off along the corridor once more. The first room she came to was the kitchen. She had remembered where it was. She let go of his arms again and went in search for a knife.

She returned to find Rutherford on his side. He had come to. She stood over his body

and holding the knife in one hand, hit him again with a closed fist. She smiled when he let escape a small gasp of pain and fell to the floor again. She could feel herself getting stronger as he grew weaker.

She continued along the corridor searching for his room, dragging him in her wake. She had passed another two doors before she found it. She moved to the door on the right. She turned the key to unlock it and pushed the door open. It was dark and cold. There was no fire burning in that room. She lifted her head and sniffed the dank foul-smelling air. Dragging him in there, she kicked him in the ribs for good measure as she stepped over his body. She slammed the door behind her and turned the key swiftly, pulling on the door to ensure it was locked.

She turned on her heel and reached for the doorknob on the opposite wall. It was her studio. It was exactly as she'd left it when Rutherford dumped her at the cottage. She turned her stony, cold eyes to the wall where her wedding dress had been hung. She stalked across the room towards it. She ran her fingers over the delicate material before she reefed it off the wall. She spread it over the easel and reached for the black inkpot.

She felt more and more of her soul pulling free by the time she'd got her newly colored wedding dress on. She felt as if she was being choked and coughed several times to clear her throat. Doubled over in pain she clutched her chest and screamed in agony as the last thread of her soul broke free. She gasped air into her lungs and collapsed to the ground. She lay there, panting, praying for the blinding pain to subside. Faint sounds of Rutherford screaming for her echoed down the corridor as she lay still. She stared into space as she focused on the pain in her chest, waiting for it to fade away as she took in short, sharp breaths.

She blinked her dark eyes as the last of the pain died away. She took a deep breath and sat up. She felt light headed. She looked around her surroundings as she absently listened to Rutherford call her name.

She hitched the skirt free of her legs and stomped out of the room, heading for the front door. Stopping short of the boundary fence and threw her head back. "*Johannes!*" She moved farther along the fence line and yelled again. The nearby soulless beings turned and stared at her. She smiled sweetly at them before she spoke.

"Do any of you know of a man named Johannes?"

"We don't have names in here," one finally spoke.

She nodded as one of the soulless beings moved free from the crowd. "Johannes?" She couldn't quite believe her eyes. "Is it really you? What happened to you?"

She rushed along the fence line towards him. Johannes rushed towards her but was repelled, thrown back through the air when he neared the boundary.

"What happened? Damn you Rutherford! He must have put a spell or something on the boundary. None of us can get close." Johannes cursed as he picked himself up and cautiously re-approached the boundary. "I cannot believe it's you after all this time. Rebecca? What happened to you? Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head. "No...no...I knew something terrible had happened to you. I can't believe any of the things that have happened are true." She reached out her hand towards Johannes.

A smile broke out on Johannes' face. His face was no longer the masculine, healthy face

she had grown to love but nevertheless she knew it was him. Her fingertips danced over the palm of his hand as she reached for him. She shivered as he grasped her hand and pulled her forward. She pressed her body against the fence, aching to hold him in her arms.

"I cannot come any closer." Johannes winced as if something was biting his flesh. Without a moment's thought, she broke free of his grip and walked towards the gate. She didn't take her eyes off him once as she walked through the gate and bravely towards him. "Rebecca...no."

"I'm just like you now my love," she said calmly when she saw the surprise on his face. "Nothing in here can hurt me now. Rutherford tried to give me another soul, but when it died I knew I had to come looking for you. It was you who saved me from the other soulless beings before, wasn't it?"

Johannes nodded. "I can't believe I am seeing you again...that I can touch you. You are more beautiful than I remember. I thought I would never see you again."

"I was always yours Johannes, and I always will be."

Johannes' smile showed his darkened teeth and gums as she moved closer to him, but she didn't care. She was with the man she loved again. "Now let us sort out this mess and put things right once again."

She reached forward and snaked her arm around his neck, pulling him in close for a quick but deep kiss. A long-lost feeling of warmth washed over her as he responded in kind.

"I have an idea...come with me."

"Good morning darling." Rebecca smiled as she pressed the knife into his skin. Rutherford's eyes shot open. She was sitting on his chest. Her legs pinned his arms to the floor as she forced his mouth open with her free hand. As she threw the knife across the room she reached for the cup. Rutherford's screams drowned in the strong solution she found in the kitchen. She clamped her hand over his mouth as he tried to spit it out, struggling to stay on top of him. Her desire for revenge made her strong.

"Drink it! Drink it! It can't be all that bad if you made me drink it!"

He struggled against her as she threw the empty cup across the floor. Her eyes were wild as she brought her hand down and struck his face. The struggle stopped as Rutherford's body went limp.

"Ahh, you decided to wake."

Rutherford blinked his eyes open. He tried moving his arms only to discover he had been restrained. Panicking, he tried to look behind him.

"Easy does it Rutherford. I had to tie you up to keep you from trying your magic or voodoo or whatever it is you do. What are you looking at?"

"You have a fine punch," he said, trying to smile.

"Don't smile at me Rutherford. Don't ever smile at me." She felt strong. She felt like she was in control. She could feel Rutherford becoming weaker.

"How did you...?" Rutherford's voice shook. "How did you make your wedding dress black Rebecca?"

She moved forward and held a knife close to his throat. She thought she could feel the pulse of his blood coursing along the blade. She wondered if he would flinch if she just nicked

him. She wanted to keep him on his toes.

"Now...I want to know everything." She stared at him, waiting for him to do as she bade. She pushed the knife against his throat, forcing him to move back.

"Well, start talking Rutherford!" She was seething anger and impatience. "Do not make me keep asking you."

"Someone else is here," he said quietly.

"No, there is not." She didn't want him to know she was able to get Johannes in the castle. "Talk fast. I might just slit that throat of yours if you don't hurry up."

Rutherford closed his mouth, silently calling her bluff.

"Talk!"

Rutherford took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

Rebecca's nostrils flared. She couldn't believe he was willingly putting himself in this situation. She put the point of the knife against his skin and pushed. Just enough to break the skin. She saw him wince. "Speak Rutherford...or the last words you speak will be the name of your killer."

She continued to stare at Rutherford as she slowly raised her hand. "Don't even think about doing anything silly now. Your options are extremely limited."

"Your mother tried the same thing once before." He was smirking when he saw her holding out her hand. "She was a marvel at spells. I would only assume you can do the same."

Rebecca returned his smirk as she snapped her fingers to form a ball of fire in the palm of her hand. "Wrong again, Rutherford. I don't do spells."

She thrust out her hand and set the flame ball in his direction. His smile switched to shock as the ball zipped past his head.

"I wasn't trying to hit you with that one. Be warned. It will be the only time I miss." She snapped her fingers on both hands to create two flame balls. She wriggled her fingers to make the flames grow.

"This is how it's going to be between us now. You think you know everything about me but you don't, and that's the way it's going to stay." She cast another ball in his direction, hitting the edge of his sleeve before slamming into the wall. He rocked his body back and forth in an attempt to rid himself of the flames as she sent another flame ball to catch him off his guard. His scream sounded like a squawk as he awkwardly got to his feet. "So do we have an agreement?"

"I promise I will tell you everything, just not like this," Rutherford said, closing his eyes.

"I don't trust your promises Rutherford. I am going to spare your life until you tell me. I don't mind if you waste my time, I have all the time in the world now. It just gives me more time to torture you...the way you tortured me. Now talk! I want you to start from the beginning," she demanded. "Start with what you are. I want to know about my mother. I want to know about the alleged deal you made with my father. I want to know about the three 'witches' in the Dead Forest and I want to know the truth about Johannes. Why you sent Cedric only to have him betray me. So it would seem you have a lot to tell me."

Rutherford lifted his head and looked at her. "I will tell you everything, but you must know the majority of what I am about to tell you, you will not believe. It will go against

everything the people you thought were looking after you have told you. You must believe me when I say that I am speaking the truth."

She bent forward and grabbed hold of his hair. "I also want to know how I can get out of the Dead Forest."

She could feel Rutherford shaking. The more he shook, the stronger she felt. She pushed her arm harder against him. She liked seeing him wince in pain.

"Why should I tell you anything? You are only going to try and leave me again," he gasped.

Rebecca released her grip and stepped back from him. She rolled the knife over and over in her hand. She walked behind him and leaned in close to whisper in his ear. "If you tell me what I want...I might give you what you want." Her skin crawled as she forced herself to kiss his neck. She closed her eyes and imagined it was Johannes' neck. She opened her mouth and tasted his flesh. She pulled away quickly when she heard him gasp, shuddering at the thought of giving him such pleasure.

"Now talk!"

Rutherford lowered his head and nodded. "I will tell you everything that you want to know when you are ready."

Rebecca lashed out and winced when her hand connected with the right side of Rutherford's face. She licked her lips as blood spread across his.

"Tell me the truth!" Rebecca screamed as she lifted her hand ready to strike again.