

# THE YEAR THE FIRE CAME

## a novel by Lori Paige

THE YEAR THE FIRE CAME A novel by Lori Paige Illustrations by  
Cindy Jorgensen

Spin through the endless aeons, Silky orange flame of lust;  
Take passion'd hold of mortals And lay them deep in dust.

- Baron

### PENTAGRAM PWUCfITIONS

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Prologue May 1783...

They trudged through the soggy forest, loaded guns tipped up at the crescent, watching moon, the distant strains of wild, foreign music their guide. The figure walking ahead of the other three stopped and turned, pointing to the soft clouds of smoke gently rising about the dark trees.

"That'll be them," he hissed through yellowed teeth, then smiled. The others looked pleased as well, and one by one the four rifle hammers snapped back.

"We're ready!" someone whispered with anticipation. Zedekiah Martin nodded and slid his finger through the trigger.

"Let's go, then." Without another moment's hesitation, they marched into the brush, purposely breaking every small twig that found its way under their feet, lacking any other method of signalling their approach.

They emerged inside the red phantom thrown by the campfire across the meager clearing. The music abruptly hushed, and the gypsies looked up at them in unison, a mixture of fear and arrogance smeared across each dark face. They were mostly young ones, Zedekiah thought, and there was even a baby squalling in the arms of a mother perched on one wagon step. There seemed about an equal number of each sex, though with their long hair and gaudy clothing, even he had trouble being sure.

There was a long moment of silence, and the wheezing insects in the brambles kept time with the crackling fire. Zedekiah had to grin again.

"Whatsamatter-for once you heathens got nothing to say?"

Someone stepped forward. It was a boy, perhaps twenty, with clenched fists and taut jaw. The fire made his eyes glow orange, but the men from town found his rage only amusing.

"Leave us be," said the gypsy through clenched teeth.

The grins faded after a moment. "No," Martin snarled with derision and brought his rifle to his shoulder. "We were the ones who asked you to be leavin'. . . before the sun set; that was the deal." He rolled his eyes heavenward in demonstration. "Well, heathens-it looks like you ain't done that."

"We don't give in to threats."

"And we don't want your thievin' likes around our town!" The three who stood behind him were growing restless, eager. Someone coughed and spat. He did not look around. "We was reasonable with you at first. But you're pests, all of ya, and by morning you're goin' to be gone. . . one way or the other."

One of the horses sneezed and backed away from the tree to which it was tied, as if sensing the cloud of terror that moved over the clearing.

Zedekiah glanced at it and intended to transfer it to his own stable when all was over and done with.

A woman pushed through the crowd and bent to extract a burning log from the fire. When she had it two inches off the ground, Ennis Stanwood came from behind his half-brother and swung his own firearm into view.

"The second your hand closes around that stick, whore, mine closes around this'un," he sneered with pleasure. She froze and looked up at him with hatred.

"Dagmar," called the woman with the baby, softly. "Come over here-please."

Dagmar dropped the log and retreated. Ennis's gaze followed her. The child continued to scream.

"Enough of all this talk!" Zedekiah ground his teeth and then spat for himself. He tightened his grip around the gun and raised it up to the forehead of the boy who had dared to stand up to them. The young mother tried to suppress a sob. Dagmar and the child's father attempted to comfort her quietly. "You knew how it was goin' to be. We gave you till sundown, which was plenty reasonable, and you ignored us." Chuckling gutturally, he closed one eye and prepared to fire. The boy whispered something that sounded like a frantic, one-word prayer and closed his eyes, swallowing again and again as if he were going to be violently sick. Zedekiah tensed his shoulders so as not to lose control when the gun kicked back. The others were shuffling behind him, cheering him on without a word.

"Wait!"

It was someone else's voice from the shadows to Martin's right. Another pair of boots came crunching through the darkness. Ennis and the others, Matthew and Abraham, looked quickly around, and their friend released the gypsy boy from his deadly attention and turned his gun towards the new intruder.

"Put that down," the voice came again, "or you'll be sorry, Martin."

"Who is it?" Zedekiah whispered to Matthew.

"It's Collins," was the bitter guess. There was a moment of silence, and then he came out into the firelight as well and was staring at the four of them angrily.

"What are you doing on this property?" Jeremiah moved to stand directly in front of the huddled mass of gypsies. Brown eyes watched him from all directions.

"Evenin', Jeremiah," Zedekiah attempted an innocent grin and ran a hand nervously over the prickly beard stubble that darkened his face. "Takin' a walk in the moonlight, are ye?"

"I asked you a question first." The other's expression could have been carved in stone. "And I want an answer, right now."

"Well. . . " the barrel of Martin's gun dropped towards the grass, "we were jest takin' ourselves for a stroll, too. And we came across these parasites, infestin' the grounds of your fine estate. We only wanted to do you a service, by scarin' 'em off for ya. "

"If the Collins family requires your assistance in any way whatsoever, be assured we'll come to you. Now get out of here, the bunch of you, and the next time you set foot on this land you'll be shot. " He reached down and took a pistol from his own belt.

"Unless, of course, you'd like to test my aim here and now. "

Zedekiah's eyes narrowed with rage. "How dare you treat us like we're the criminals in these woods!" He thrust a calloused finger accusingly at the gypsies. "The whole town's talkin' about you up at Collinwood lettin' these heathens stay on your land, stealin' children an' food an' God knows what from the village down there an' bringin' it back here an' havin' you protect 'em for it! We got rights too, even though we ain't got your money, an' that's all we were doin' was exercisin' 'em. " There was a murmur of agreement from his friends.

Jeremiah turned to the gypsy boy who met his gaze uneasily.

"What has been stolen?" he asked.

"Nothing, " said the boy.

"They're lying, " Zedekiah clenched a fist.

"No, " hissed the boy. All the other gypsies remained deathly silent.

"We have proof!" Zedekiah reached out and seized Matthew, who had been cowering near the shadow of the trees ever since Jeremiah's appearance. The older man seemed terrified at suddenly having become the center of attention. "Tell him, Matthew, " Martin ordered, slapping his arm angrily. "Tell Collins what that slut did. " The woman indicated what was the one with the child.

Dagmar was still hovering protectively beside her friend, watching the eyes of the intruders.

Matthew cleared his throat, then blinked and nodded. "She stole bread, " he admitted quietly.

"Louder!" Zedekiah snarled.

"She stole bread! Two loaves from the bakery on the corner. I saw her do it-I was there, an' I saw her do it with my own eyes. "

"You saw her face plainly?" Jeremiah prodded.

"Yes-yes I did. Ran like the devil, but it was her all right. "

"Well, what do you say to that, Collins? Think we should turn our heads an' look the other way while these animals strip our whole town bare? An' then sit here an' lie about it. Liars and thieves, the whole bunch. And you dare to stand there so high an' mighty an' protect 'em!"

The mother's eyes widened. Jeremiah began to look doubtful, and the boy standing beside him swallowed again. Finally there was a rustle at the side of the wagon, and Dagmar was on her feet again, pushing her long black hair from her face, glare meeting Jeremiah's fiercely.

"I'm not a liar, " she announced boldly. "She did take it. "

"Dagmar!" the woman's husband hissed and then told her to shut up in a foreign language. Dagmar tipped up her chin arrogantly.

"She did take it, " she repeated. "But she did it for the child. What do you expect it to live on? She had the money-the storekeeper saw it, because she held it out to him. But this one was in the store-" she pointed directly at Matthew, who cringed, "and the both of them refused to sell to her. "

There was another stretch of silence, and the crickets and the baby continued to make noise. Finally Jeremiah raised his pistol again and eyed Zedekiah coldly.

"All right, " he said, "it's time for you to go. All of you. "

"We'll not be going unless they do, too. " Zedekiah stubbornly lifted his gun again so that the barrel was vaguely pointing at Jeremiah's feet. "We gave 'em till tonight. "

"This is part of the Collins estate. Is your name Collins? No-and I say they stay. " Calmly he moved his own gun to the same angle as Martirfe.

"Ye're an insolent boy, aren't ya, Collins?" Then Zedekiah's finger closed on the trigger.

There were two bursts of smoke, one from his gun and one from Jeremiah's. However, while no more than dust sprang up beside Jeremiah's boots, from Zedekiah's there came a spurt of blood, and he dropped the rifle at once and fell back against his friends with a yowl of agony. When the smoke cleared everyone stared with horror at the toe of his right shoe, torn open and fast turning crimson. Ennis's face went savage, and he aimed his own weapon a second time. The others backed away like cowering mongrels driven from the trash heap. Jeremiah dropped the first pistol and tugged a second from behind the other flap of his coat.

"This one is loaded, too, " he informed them unpleasantly. "Do you want to be the next, Ennis?"

"Ennis!" Zedekiah gasped from behind. "Forget him-he's mine!" Ennis thought a moment, then obeyed; and the four retreated, dragging their wounded leader off into the darkness. "I won't forget this, Collins!" Martin was still snarling as the bushes closed around him and he disappeared from view. "Things'll be different one day, an' you'll wish I had-but I won't forget ever!"

The fire flickered and died down. Jeremiah remained where he was, looking out at the sea of dark faces watching his. No one said anything.

One of the men to the far side of one of the wagons picked up a carved wooden flute of some kind and blew a long, shrilled note from it. There was a pause, and then some of the others took up their own instruments and followed suit, and presently the beginnings of yet another exotic melody, this time one of triumph, swam through the warm evening. People got up again, and someone began to talk and laugh, and before long they all were, and it was as it had been before, Zedekiah and his ugly threats happily forgotten.

Jeremiah smiled slightly, caught up in the romance of the moment; then, knowing that he had stayed long enough, he turned to walk back to Collinwood. Before he could go very far, however, he felt a hand on his shoulder and paused. Dagmar was there in front of him with a shimmering goblet in her hands.

"Did you mean it, " she asked carefully, "when you said that we could stay?"

"Yes, " he nodded, "for as long as you like. "

She smiled and held the cup closer to his face. "Here-drink. "

"Thank you. " He took a brief guzzle and wiped his mouth. He could not place the flavor, but he liked it-honestly. "It's good. "

"You didn't believe what they said then. "

"Zedekiah Martin is nothing but an ignorant brute-and ignorance is something I have never been able to abide. "

"I have been told by the others to thank you. Have more if you want. "

He drank some more. "That isn't necessary," he said. He was dimly aware that the music had grown louder. A little headache had begun near the back of his head.

"I say it is. They would have killed us, you know. " She slid her arms around his neck and gazed long and hard into his eyes. "I have never done what the others asked me if I did not want to do it for myself. "

The music grew louder still, intoxicating. He went to take another drink from the goblet and found with some surprise that it was empty. The flute shrilled again, rushing into his ears and filling his mind and senses like a fresh green sea wave.

"Two is all you need," she told him. She took something from around her neck and held it up to his face. He saw that it was a pendant, beautiful in its simplicity, a somewhat crude configuration of leather and shining coral beads. "Tonight you will be one of us. And while you are possessed of this, you are one of us-and are free, and different as we are proud to be. "

"Thank you," he stammered, the music nearly drowning out his words. She slipped it over his head, then pulled him up the steps to one of the empty wagons. When they were alone in the darkness, she closed the door, and put her mouth on his until the night became a whirl of color and music and enchanted drink.

BOOK I-ARRIVAL, April 1784

Many things I thought of then, Battle, and the loves of men, Cities entered, oceans crossed, Knowledge gained and virtue lost  
Careless folly done and said, And the lovely way that led To the slimepit and the mire, And the everlasting fire.

-Houseman

It was a beautiful day, the first truly warm one since the new year had begun. Birds sang from both sides of the road, their small sounds welcome after the deathly silence of the winter; greenery was bursting from every spare patch of ground, and the sun was brighter than before and put a comfortable sweat upon his brow. Barnabas steered his horse towards town at a moderate but not completely lethargic pace and drank in the life all around him with appreciation.

The rattle of another traveler approaching from behind gave him pause to turn and equine over his shoulder. He saw a small carriage drawn by a single horse rumbling up the dirt road, a woman at the reins. He tugged his own mount towards the grassy banking to allow her to pass. For a moment it seemed as if she would without incident, but then as the vehicle drew near, it inexplicably began to pick up speed, and when it was but a few yards behind him, the carriage-horse let out an ungodly whinny and lurched ahead at a thundering pace, the reins falling to the ground to drag and tangle beneath the dizzily spinning wheels.

The woman began to shout, perhaps at him, perhaps at her horse, but immediately he took off in pursuit.

The mare he had chosen that morning, Jezebel, was by coincidence considered a rather powerful runner, but at first proved no match for her crazed counterpart. The carriage sped far ahead of him in a swirling cloud of dust, and more than once it seemed as if the wailing driver would be thrown from her seat with deadly violence. But somehow she hung on by wrapping both arms around the back of the bench. Her eyes, wide and imploring, were fastened on his, and when the sun hit them at a particular angle, the light rushed oddly into them and made them glow fire-red.

After several moments that seemed longer, he caught up to the wild horse and then overtook it, reaching out to grab a handful of its woolly mane as he did so. The two animals swung off the road together and shuddered to a halt some distance into the adjacent, empty field.

He slid from the saddle and ran over to assist her. She was panting with fright and exhaustion; and he was too, though to a somewhat lesser degree. Her bonnet had fallen off and left her shiny hair in a fitful condition, and he noticed then that his own three-cornered hat had also been lost in the chase and was lying in the middle of the road, flattened by the horses' feet.

"Here," he took her by both hands as she staggered across the grass to get as far away from the still jittery animals as possible. She clutched at the shoulders of her dress, which had slid down in all the confusion, and he was deeply embarrassed for her.

"Let me help you. "

"Thank you," she sputtered, not looking around.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes-quite so, thank goodness, but rather shaken up. "

He looked around for a rock or tree stump on which to offer her a seat but could find nothing.

"I can well imagine. "

Abruptly she stopped walking and whirled on him.

"I ought to slap your face," she announced, and he was instantly taken aback.

"I beg your pardon!"

"If it hadn't been for your foolish horse cutting in front of mine, nothing at all would have happened. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? If not, you certainly should be!"

"I'm afraid that wasn't how it was at all," he protested. "I steered aside to let you pass. It was only when you had-and safely-that-"

"Well, I'm safe now, so I suppose that part of it is academic anyway-and I suppose you did save my life, whether you were the one to put it in danger or not. So thank you. Sincerely. "

"You are quite welcome," he replied, a bit overwhelmed by her attitude. Then she was marching away. "Where are you going now?"

"Back to my carriage, of course-I have no desire to stand around in this ugly field all day when I have far more important things to do in town. "

"Please let me help you. " He ran to catch up, but she stomped back up into the wagon without his assistance. He saw that the reins were wound unpleasantly around the spokes of the wheel nearest him, and spent several minutes untangling and dusting them off.

"Thank you," she said as he handed them back to her. "And now shall I say good day to you as well, Mr. Collins, or shall you prove yourself a gentleman after all and offer to drive me back into the village?"

He paused, surprised. "You know my name?" he asked.

She smiled down at him in a very odd way, and at once he felt a distinct heat come over his face.

"Everyone knows the name Collins around here-even I. Now-are you going to apologize by driving me into town, or not?"

He went to the road, leading both horses, and paused to retrieve his hat, which now was quite misshapen and dulled of color. He brushed it off unhappily.

"I think perhaps it was your animal who did this." He set it precariously back on his head and tied his horse to the back of the carriage.

"Yes, I think perhaps it was." She did not seem in the least sorry. She moved over on the bench to make room for him but not much. As he climbed up, her hip brushed against his, and an unexpected tingle went through him. He spotted a new suitcase in the back as they started off again.

"I knew I had not seen you about before," he remarked. "Are you new in town-or merely passing through?"

"I have just arrived," she told him, "but plan to take up permanent residence in Collinsport beginning today."

"I see." He was going to ask her again how she knew who he was but then decided that he did not care to know.

"This is beautiful country side," she looked around curiously. "I like it very much here already."

"You... have let a room in town?" She began to stare at him again as soon as he spoke. He tried to focus his attention only on the road, but it became increasingly difficult to do so when he saw the way her hand lingered just beside his knee and noticed that she was adjusting the front of her dress again as discreetly as was possible.

"Yes," she was answering him, and he was ashamed that he had almost forgotten about the subject of the room, "but actually it's a lease. For a small little thing of some kind-they arranged it for me in Boston."

"I see." Had he said that already? He cleared his throat.

There was another stretch of silence. Laura examined his face and thought how he had changed. The next was going to be a Collins-she had decided that some time ago. And she had managed to find this one so easily-surely it was a sign of some kind?

"It seems almost like summer today, don't you think?" he attempted once again to find a properly dull subject on which to converse. "The warm weather may set in even earlier than we expected."

"Indeed it may," she smiled to herself, "but I suppose we'll just have to wait... and see."

Jeremiah scratched his signature on yet another boring document he had not actually taken the time to read and was about to dip his worn quill back into the ink when the door to his office opened and his nephew was there, smiling at the other's frustrated expression.

"A little impatient today, uncle? Don't forget, it's only morning-and far too early to be wearing such a grim face."

"Morning, noon, night-they're usually the same. All filled with ships, ships and more ships. Sometimes I think the oceans themselves were a poor invention." He returned the grin after a fashion and then noticed the flush of red in Barnabas's cheeks and the unusual brightness in his eyes.

"Well now-you look rather enthusiastic to get to work. Been out riding?"

"Yes," he nodded, "I just arrived here. Is... my father about?"

"Down with the workmen, I think. He should be back in a moment or two."

"I see." Barnabas turned to go, but Jeremiah stopped him with a good-natured laugh.

"If I were you, Barnabas, I'd wipe the blush off my face before I did see him. I find it quite amusing-but he might not."

"Blush?" Barnabas touched his chin with embarrassment. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, it's noticeable, all right. And I know what it means-I've felt it myself, once or twice. Who is she?"

"It's the heat, nothing more."

"I'm not a fool, Barnabas."

"I think perhaps you are. I'm not quite sure what you're thinking-but whatever it is, Jeremiah, you're entirely wrong." He cleared his throat self-consciously. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I really must get to work before my father comes back." Almost too quickly, he slipped through the door and headed for his own desk.

Jeremiah leaned back and watched after him, struggling to keep from laughing out loud. Solemn, stable Barnabas had finally met his match-The door opened again, and hurriedly he slid forward and attempted to look as if he had been mulling over some pertinent company information with pen in hand. He saw by his brother's eyes that Joshua was not fooled, however.

"Be careful not to immerse yourself in that too completely, Jeremiah-we wouldn't want you to develop eye strain by any means."

"No, I wouldn't, either." Jeremiah was not concerned at being found loafing. "If you're looking for Barnabas, he just arrived-I think he's in your office right now."

"I wasn't looking for Barnabas-I came to speak to you." Scowling, he held up a letter. "I

have something for you to do tonight."

"Oh? And what is that, Joshua?"

"One of our former business associates is arriving by sea tonight. I should like you to go and meet him at the docks, escort him to the Inn, if he wishes, or wherever else he had made plans."

"A former business associate?" He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Why does he merit such special treatment if he's only a former?"

Joshua handed him the letter. "Read this, and see for yourself."

Jeremiah did so, and a grimace immediately fell across his face. "Lothaire Bocquet," he uttered with disgust. "I had hoped my hunch was wrong."

"I know your feelings towards the man-but I am not in the least interested in them! As you can see, he is strongly hinting in that letter that he presently has access to a great amount of capital- capital he is willing to reinvest in our business. I insist you think of those possibilities and not your own foolish emotions."

Jeremiah gritted his teeth with annoyance and turned to look out the single window located behind his desk. Several elegantly dressed couples were moving slowly around the pier outside, arm in arm and pointing out to one another various things which caught their fancy. He returned his attention to Joshua.

"You win as usual, Joshua," he muttered unhappily. "I'll be there, as you ask."

"Well, I'm glad to see you've recovered what little business sense you are possessed of!"

"What little-yes."

"I'll leave you to the rest of your work, then- I trust you are not getting too far behind." He opened the door with a somewhat disgruntled sigh.

Jeremiah got up. "Joshua?"

"Yes?"

"Do you... do you happen to know where Barnabas went before he came here this morning?"

"What do you mean, do I know where he went? As far as I know, he came straight from home- where do you think he went?"

"I just wondered if you'd sent him on an errand somewhere first."

"You are in a strange mood today, Jeremiah! If you spent half as much time pondering practical matters as you do nonsense, this entire business would be much better off! Now, good morning-I have quite a bit of paperwork waiting for me at my own desk

and, unlike some people I know, plan to get it done within a reasonable span of time. "

The door banged shut, trapping Jeremiah once again within the confines of the familiar, hated walls.

He stared at the surface of his desk and the papers stacked there for a long while. He disliked the sight of them-wanted to open the window and toss them all out into the bright green water sloshing below the docks on which the office sat. Sometimes he felt as if he could not stand being a Collins another day-sometimes it was not so bad. But whatever his last name, he was certain there was more, somewhere else-a brighter shoreline, perhaps, a pier for him to walk along and watch for ships Joshua had not built, a female arm to slide through his.

He returned to the window and leaned on the sill, gazing for a long time at the laughing people still wandering outside. A man in an ugly powdered wig had thrown his head back carelessly and was exclaiming something to his wife-perhaps he had noticed a particularly beautiful configuration of clouds, perhaps a rare seabird wheeling freely above.

For some reason, he suddenly remembered the leather cord around his neck, and with a slight smile he drew the pendant out and gazed into its simple, enchanting pattern once again. He had kept it for almost a full year now, despite the fact that the gypsies had left the woods the very night they had given it to him. He had not forgotten the girl either, or what else she had given him, and sometimes just the memory was enough to calm him when he found himself enraged at nothing in particular, or taint his dreams with some nebulous image of hope, or fill his wondering mind with vague assurance that the next day might, in fact, bring him something truly unusual after all.

Laura trod the streets, looking at the fresh new buildings and the older, now decrepit ones with equal interest. The wood they had been built with did not last long in the salty sea air-the years peeled away the paint steadily, left warps and unsightly rot.

She felt fortunate that she was not prone to the same earthly misfortune.

People passed by on either side of her, and some recognized her as a stranger and judged her with their curious eyes. She wondered how she seemed to them and wondered how it was not to have the knowledge of centuries at one's command.

The docks spread out before her, the ocean hissing and rolling beneath. Sometimes she thought of the sea as a companion of sorts-it was the only other thing on the earth that could match her years.

There were too many people on them-she had no desire to mingle, so she turned and began walking back to her own apartment.

The noon hour had arrived, and grubby-looking sailors were piling into The Bell, the only tavern nearby, anxious to fasten their crude mouths around a vessel of liquor or the lips of an equally repulsive whore. The place had kept up at least a semblance of respectability when she had last been there- apparently that had changed, though.

As she was about to cross the cobbled street to her own door, someone came out of one of the surrounding shops and smashed into her, a package falling from his arm to the ground.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry, " the scrawny young man apologized and bent to retrieve what he had dropped. "Do forgive me. "

"Of course, " Laura smiled, somewhat disinterestedly. "No harm was done.<sup>1</sup> She was about to continue on her way when he followed her to the curb.

"Pardon me, " he pressed, adjusting his hat with long, thin fingers, "but your face is new to this street. You wouldn't happen to be the lady who has just moved into that room over there?" He pointed at her door.

"Your interest is somewhat uncalled for, " she remarked carefully.

"Oh, I meant no disrespect-but if I have guessed correctly, then I feel it only proper to introduce myself. I am Milo Seabrook, one of your new neighbors. "

"Neighbors? Oh, I see. " She turned to look at him.

"Yes, " he hurried on. "My rooms are right here, directly across the street from yours. And if you will permit me to say so, you are indeed a great improvement over the last tenant. "

"Thank you. " She shook his hand. "It was very nice to meet you-perhaps we shall run into each other again sometime. "

"I'm sure we shall-but in a less. . . literal way, one would hope. "

"Quite so. Good day, then. " Seeing that the road was clear of buggies and horses for the moment, she crossed over and left him standing there alone.

Milo made a brief detour to his apartment and left off what he had bought at the store, then combed his hair and retied his queue and started back to the shipyards where he was employed by his friend Jeremiah as a clerk.

good-he withdrew his investment in our company after all. "

"It appears he's changed his mind, " Jeremiah shook his head. "But that's to be expected from a man with his irreproachable character, of course. "

"Surely he's not going to stay at CoUinwood! There isn't room ! And besides. . " he let it trail off as Joshua directed a sharp glance in his direction.

"Besides what, Barnabas?" he prodded.

"Nothing. "

"What Barnabas means," Jeremiah pushed his chair away, "is that Lothaire has always had a unique talent for making first impressions, and lasting ones at that-everyone who comes into contact with him immediately despises him, without exception. "

"Oh, what nonsense! You two are like a pair of old women! Now be businesslike for a change. Yes, he has a very different way of looking at things than we do, but all the same he is an influential man and must be treated with respect. "

"There are many different ways to relate to people, Joshua, " Jeremiah stood, "but I'm sure I don't have to remind you of that. Now if you'll both excuse me, I'm going out for awhile. I feel the need for some fresh spring air-this musty old place can be quite oppressive at times. "

Joshua watched him stalk from the room, and a second later the front door slammed.

"I don't know what to say to him sometimes!" he complained, more to himself than to his son. "What the devil is bothering him?"

"Everything and nothing, as always, I suppose," Barnabas muttered and wished that just once Jeremiah could sit back and seem truly happy or content.

The day went on much as usual, save for Barnabas's look of distraction throughout much of the afternoon. Joshua noticed Jeremiah staring at his nephew with obvious amusement during supper as well but said nothing.

"So, what time do you plan to go to the docks?" he asked his brother when the plates had been cleared away and the women had left the room.

"If I have to meet the late ship, there's no sense in going before dark. You needn't worry, Joshua-I'll be there when that blamed thing floats in, one way or the other."

Barnabas looked across the table at the two, confusion in his eyes. "What ship are you talking of?" he asked.

"Barnabas," Jeremiah laughed and took a drink of wine, "you are in another world today. Lothaire Bocquet, back from France to share his worldly tales with us."

"Your attitude leaves much to be desired," Joshua commented.

Barnabas scowled. "Lothaire? But I was under the impression that he had left the States for

Jeremiah went out into the growing darkness and gazed out over the rolling green hill that led down one side of the property towards the woods and drew the fresh sharp air into his constricted lungs. He reached up and pulled a handful of green leaves from the first tree he came to and crushed them absentmindedly in his fist. Everything around him, within his sight, was his for the taking-and yet it seemed he had practically nothing, not even one hopeless, dreamer's goal to strive for and admirably lose. There was no torment in his heart, not really, but neither was there any joy; and his chest seemed an empty shell, not even cursed with any noble pain to make him feel alive.

He looked down and saw that he had utterly destroyed the young leaves in his hand, and the sticky green juices were unpleasantly smearing his palm. With some irritation, he brushed the bite away and wiped the stain onto the breast of his jacket. Then he stormed across the wide, scented lawn to the stables, and swung up onto his horse to ride now here.

Laura stood out in the night, the cold night, watching the shadows of ships moving slowly across the horizon. It was a fairly human action, almost akin to daydreaming, but somehow she could not be too disturbed with herself for indulging in it.

A human action. . .she was not certain of the accuracy of the label, for she was not completely sure what it was to actually be human. Was there pain, hope, certain joys surpassing those brought by the flame? She was not sure, and actually it did not matter. She was content with what she was and the way in which she existed and would continue.

She was not sure how long she stood there, alone and looking down on the network of pier below, for the hours flew by as they always did and were but minutes to her. But presently she realized that one of the ships she had been watching was larger and almost ready to dock now, and Raw was gone, and the docks and water had become an eerie blue.

People were hurrying towards the arriving ship, a moonlit wave of meager humanity, and soon she could discern the French flag rustling in the soft breeze and the passengers and sailors were piling out, along with boxes and barrels of cargo. It was almost interesting, a harmless and transparent little scenario, and she was about to smile and turn away when the sensation came.

She saw him all at once, a solemn little figure standing alone and still beside the fishing shack, and it was as if one of the puny mortals below had crept up behind her with a club and dealt her a crude and stinging blow to the back of her head. Confused, she gripped a pole that had been set before her for hitching horses and leaned against it dizzily. It was a signal-it had come as always before. She had found the next. She had been wrong-it would not be Barnabas at all.

"But a Collins," she hissed through clenched teeth, amazed. "I thought it would be a Collins..."

There was no way, no thought of resisting. Her new life had begun in earnest on that moment, and as soon as her senses had cleared and she had released the pole, she picked up her skirt a little and went to him, whoever he was, and whatever else was already waiting for her.

Jeremiah watched the face of each person coming off the French gangplank with growing impatience. Several women stepped off and tottered across the boardwalk towards the carriages waiting to be loaded with luggage and driven to the Inn; then a few men, chattering in their own language, followed them, and finally a group<sup>^</sup> of sailors walked by to help with the unloading of goods.

Lothaire was not in any of the groups.

An officer strolled by, carrying a notebook and repeatedly looking down to read something from it. Jeremiah called out to him, and he paused.

Laura came up behind them and paused as they talked. The one chosen for her was very young this time-not like the doddering Charles Stockbridge, who had been an unbearable bore- and was probably handsome as well, although his back was to her and she could not see his face clearly. She hid in the shadow of one of the nearby warehouses and waited, beginning to plan the weeks ahead even as she did so.

Jeremiah turned from the sailor who was apologizing for being of no help to him and started back across the dock after bidding him goodnight.

At first he was furious but then merely annoyed. He decided then and there that his own association

with Lothaire was over----his brother's favorite

Frenchman could make his own plans as far as he was concerned. Perhaps he had missed the only ship, and his arrival would be delayed indefinitely. He was rather pleased by that thought and hoped it was true, for it was obvious that there was no such passenger among those now stepping gingerly onto the American shore.

Scratching thoughtfully at his right whisker, he started back towards his office further down the pier, where he had left his horse.

He felt almost unreasonably tired and even more bored, he realized as he walked along, staring down over the edge of the dock.

The greenish-black water, defiled with bits of wood and other rubbish cast off the ships, bobbed rhythmically below, and his distorted reflection followed him along.

His collar began to feel tight; he reached up to loosen it a little and turned his head to uncramp his stiffening neck.

Suddenly he realized that his was not the only image floating on the choppy water. There was another.

He turned and saw her standing perfectly motionless behind him, and for some reason a jolt of adrenalin tore through him.

Laura reached out with her eyes and caught him, and he did not struggle. He was handsome, she thought, and even after all the years she recognized him. She had not been wrong, after all-it would be a Collins. It would be easy this time-she knew it just by looking at him. Easy, and it would take no more than days. . .

Smiling, she took a short step towards him, and he felt the heat surge in his chest. A strange feeling was rushing all through him-was he dying? It almost seemed so. And yet it was not exactly as he had always imagined death, for the feeling was pleasurable, enticing.

Her eyes blazed again as if reflecting the rays of a sun he could not see. He stumbled forward, reminded somehow of the night in the gypsy camp-but the pull was stronger now, much more intense.

Laura drew him into the space between the fishing shacks and slid her arms around his neck.

"Who are you?" he managed to ask as she tipped her face up to his.

"I have come to watch the ships as well," she whispered back, and the kiss was like nothing he had known before. The world became nothing but an image of her and was surrounded by flame the color of her hair, and then they went crashing into his office, clinging to each other, though he was scarcely aware that they had moved from the niche of the warped old warehouses. Once they were inside, she tore away and backed across the room, hissing with need.

"Come back," he held out his arms to her.

"Build me a fire," she ordered, and though the night was by no means cold enough for that, he fell to his knees and pulled away the screen in front of the long unused hearth. There was some wood inside, only a few sticks, and covering them was a large heap of black, dead ashes. He took the matches from the mantelpiece and dropped the box twice before he was finally able to strike one. She was hovering over him, fingernails digging into his shoulders, and when he tossed the single match into the fireplace, it burst into flames and seemed to breathe life into her once again.

She slid onto the furry rug in front of his desk, drawing him along with her. The heat from the fireplace soon became intense, and sweat burst on his forehead. The humidity seemed to steal his breath, but even that did not matter. Nothing did, save for the feel of her lips against his ear, and the pulse of her body twisting beneath his for the remainder of the night. It was with that union that her future was sealed, and she knew it.

"Over there my father hopes to build a new set of stables," Barnabas pointed as he and Laura crossed the bridge to the edge of the property, her arm lying properly across his. "He doesn't care for the condition of the present one."

"How interesting," she said.

"Yes, but over here is the most important part of the estate-or so I'm told." Smiling, he took her hand and pulled her through the trees towards the cliffs. There was a small clearing of sorts on the point of the highest ledge, overgrown with sharp crabgrass, and it was fenced in with ugly, gnarled trees permanently bent from the harsh sea-winds. Such a breeze was tearing past them now, shaking the grass and sending a shriek of cold through her. Barnabas nodded at the rugged scene, apparently the only part of the Collins ground that was not groomed or otherwise cared for regularly. "Well-what do you think?"

Laura squinted, wondering how he could possibly be pleased by such a sight.

"It... doesn't seem like much," she commented dryly.

"This is my uncle Jeremiah's favorite place. I can't for the life of me figure out why-I rather hoped you could."

Suddenly she became much more interested. "Really! Rather an odd place to want to spend time-it's actually rather chilly and not exactly scenic."

"That is quite true-but I'm sure that to Jeremiah's eyes, it is the picture of romance. He's always been that way, you see-everything is different, better to him. He calls this his corner of the world-and even mentioned building a house here someday."

"Another house? You'll forgive me for saying so, Barnabas, but that does seem just a bit wasteful. After all, the one you have now is rather large, and I find it rather elegant besides."

"Jeremiah thinks perhaps there are too many relatives all under one roof at the present time- and I am inclined to agree with him on occasion. Besides, one of us is bound to be married within the next few years-once that happens, a second home would become practically a must."

"Is he considering a marriage very soon-or are you?"

"I could not speak for Jeremiah-he is very good at concealing his feelings when he wants to. However, I am in no rush to relinquish my freedom."

Laura smiled. He was young, more so than his uncle, though she remembered that they had been born within days of each other. She had questioned the wisdom of accepting his offer to tour the grounds, but his company was refreshing in a way. Her arm was over his, and he was happy. It had been a long time since anything had been so simple.

"It's rather cold here," she told him and turned. "Why don't we go back to where we were before in the sunlight."

"Of course." He followed her back out into the neat green section of lawn. With her eyes on the sun, she strode across it and towards a thin little brook that ran almost down the center, created to drain the heavy water left each year by the melting snow back into the stronger brook that rushed beneath the bridge. She sat down by the edge of the frothy little stream and eyed him as he joined her there.

"Marriage does not appeal to you in the slightest, then?" she asked abruptly.

"No," he said almost too emphatically. "Not in the slightest."

"You shouldn't go around telling people that, or you shall be quite embarrassed when you do change your mind."

"I said I was not ready to relinquish my

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freedom just yet." His gaze grew heavy, and she looked subtly away. "I did not say I was unwilling to fall in love."

"And what," she inquired softly, "is that supposed to mean?"

"I have met many girls," he told her, "friends of my mother's, or daughters of my father's business associates. I have found almost all of them foolish and... giggly. They can talk of nothing but clothes and parties-and a great many of them are not pleasing to look at, either. For a short while I was convinced that there was no other kind of female-and then I met you. You are quite different from all of them, Laura Stockbridge."

"I think that is probably very true."

He misinterpreted her slight smile and impatiently moved closer.

"Do you think me indecent because I am younger than you?"

"No-that has never been of any concern to me, I can assure you. However, I do know that most men your age fall in love several times before they finally realize what it means-and when I look on it that way, I am not sure if I should be flattered or insulted that I am the current target for your affections."

"Please be neither----only accept it." Somewhat

clumsily, he touched the back of her hand. She stared at him for a long moment, and he backed down a bit.

"You are yet untried-aren't you, Barnabas?"

"What do you mean?" he frowned. "I'm afraid I don't." Then he realized what she had said, and his face grew bright red. "Of

course I'm not!" he insisted, but she knew the truth. "That is. . .hardly a proper thing to say, Miss Stockbridge. "

"I prefer to make conversation on my own rules-what society expects me to talk about are subjects that have no direct bearing on my life, so what good are they?"

Stunned, his throat pulsing with hurt and shame, he turned to stare deliberately past her and into the trees beyond and swallowed several times.

"I cannot toe your first, " she said. "I will not. I hope you can understand that. "

"Perhaps we should find something else to talk of. " He suggested this but could not think of anything. Silence fell upon them and lasted for a long time. Then carefully she reached out and replaced his hand on hers. She knew that he thought her innocent and would not press. It had indeed been ages since anyone had actually seemed sensitive to her own thoughts, and the feeling was unique.

"Barnabas, " she attempted to get him to face her again.

"Yes?"

"You may kiss me, " she said quietly, "but it must go no further than that. "

"Do forgive me if I have upset you, " he whispered. Then he did as she had said, and it did not.

Joshua came into the study and was surprised to see his brother standing motionless in front of one of the end tables, gaze locked straight ahead. At first it seemed as if he were staring out the window there, but as Joshua moved closer, he saw that it was a candle that had captured Jeremiah's attention, the tiny golden flame fluttering with the rhythm of the other's breath.

"Jeremiah ! " he said, a bit louder than was necessary. Jeremiah gave a start and whirled.

"Dear God, Joshua, you almost scared the life out of me! What is it-is something wrong?"

"Something is, indeed! I don't suppose you'd care to tell me where you were last night, and I\_ don't care to tell you what\_ ^ thought when neither you nor Lothaire showed up!"

"I-I was at the yards, " his brother replied with forced nonchalance. "I slept in my office. "

"In your office. I see. And what of Lothaire- I suppose you put him up in mine?"

"Lothaire did not arrive. "

"What? Do you mean to say you missed him when I sent you there specifically to-"

— "No-I mean he did not arrive. I waited until

every last passenger was off that ship, and then I checked the register with one of the sailors. Lothaire did not board in France-or if he did, under an assumed name, he fell out somewhere from there to the harbor. "

"Are you telling me the truth?" Joshua scowled and gripped the back of a nearby chair.

"How dare you ask me that, Joshua?"

There was a moment of silence.

"Well, " he lowered his voice and stared at the floor, "that's damned odd. "

"He must have changed his mind at the last minute. Are you sure he hasn't sent word of any kind-a letter perhaps, or. . .?"

"No, there's been nothing. "

"Well, I wouldn't concern myself with it too deeply. " Jeremiah's eyes slowly drifted back towards the candle, and a foolish smile spread across his mouth. Even the tiny speck of heat overwhelmed him, made him think of her and the night before.

"I suppose you're right-probably his French ways interfering again. If he hadn't been born into money, I daresay he never would have become a businessman of any sort. And speaking of poor business sense, where is Barnabas? He doesn't seem to be anywhere in the house. "

"It's Saturday, Joshua-give him a little time to himself at least. He has other things on his mind right now -they take precedence over the shipyards, and rightfully so. "

"~~He~~ doesn't seem to be the only one. And stop staring into that confounded candle-it's broad daylight outside!"

"I'm sorry. " Jeremiah tried to avert his gaze but found that he could not. It was there, luring him. . .calling him in her voice towards another night like the last, and another, and many

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more afterwards. . .

His thoughts fizzled like the flame, as Joshua presumptuously stabbed a finger over the wick. Jeremiah straightened, eyes widening.

"Why did you do that?" he demanded, and the other was astounded at the urgency in his voice.

"Are you ill, Jeremiah?" he asked suspiciously, "or drunk?"

Jeremiah stared at him for a moment, and then his face fell. He touched his forehead with growing confusion. Had he dreamed all that had transpired the night before? It did not seem impossible-the experience already seemed an eternity away and somehow unreal, unearthly.

"Yes, " he muttered unhappily and rushed out of the room. "Yes, perhaps that's it-I am ill. "

Joshua stared after him in disbelief. First he shook his head and then stopped in dread. He hoped it was not true, but it almost seemed that Jeremiah was wound up in one of his recurrent fits of fancy again, as when he had wanted to join the army, as when he had run off to defend the gypsy camp a year ago. . .as when Joshua had suggested they plow and reshape the wretched place above Widow's Hill.

Naomi took down the full decanter of liquor, examined it a moment, then quickly replaced it on the shelf as someone else entered the room. With great relief, however, she saw that it was not Joshua or Abigail, but only Evan, the manservant.

"Guest here to see you, Mrs. Collins, " he nodded respectfully, and the young man came into the room.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Collins," Milo bowed slightly.

"Milo, how nice to see you again. It has been some time since we've seen you at Collinwood- you're doing well, I hope?"

"Oh, quite so-and as for my negligence in paying my respects, I do heartily apologize. It's been work that's taken so much of my time, that and simple village living. "

"Yes, I can well imagine. Will you sit down for a few minutes? Before you see Jeremiah, there are a few things I should like to ask you. Evan, you are excused. "

"I should be delighted to answer anything at all. " Milo followed her over to a chair and leaned forward politely as she spoke to him. "I came right over when I got your message-so poor Jeremiah has taken ill, has he? Rather a surprise, as he certainly seemed healthy enough when I last saw him. "

"I don't think it's anything serious-we had a doctor over yesterday, and Jeremiah locked his door and refused to see him. He's only tired, he says-and I tend to agree with that. "

"Perhaps he's only been working too hard. I realize it's not my place to say, ma'am, but he does put in quite a few hours a day at the yards, and the air down there does have an adverse effect on a person now and again. "

"My thoughts exactly. But Mr. Seabrook. . . might I ask you a more prying question?"

"Yes, Mrs. Collins, of course. "

"Tell me, if you would. . .how do Jeremiah and my husband. . .get along during business hours?" When Milo reddened slightly, she narrowed her eyes.

"Please, Milo-I am only inquiring for the good of the both of them, and I promise that anything you might say to me will be kept in the strictest of confidence. "

"Well, Mrs. Collins, " he shook his head uncertainly, "it's quite difficult to generalize. Both Jeremiah and Mr. Collins have very . . . distinct personalities, and. . . "

"That's what I suspected all along. " Naomi got up and paced the length of the room. " "hey've been arguing again, and Jeremiah is bearing the emotions on both sides because Joshua will not. "

Milo followed her to the fireplace. "Mrs. Collins, I did not mean to imply anything like that, and certainly bear no ill will towards either one of them. I am only a clerk-what transpires inside each office is not, with all due respect to you, ma'am, my affair. "

"You needn't fear for your position, Milo, certainly not. You are a fine young man and have certainly said nothing wrong. But you see, I don't need much information to formulate ideas concerning any of the men in this house-I've lived here too long not to know what goes on even behind those doors which are closed to me. . . inside those hearts that I can no longer reach. " Her eyes strayed towards the bottle on the shelf again, and Milo stared at the rug, his own chest suddenly feeling quite heavy.

"I am. . .truly sorry, Mrs. Collins, " he muttered and wished it were his place to say more. "

Naomi smiled, a little displeased with herself for inflicting her own troubles on him.

"Go up and see your friend now, " she patted him on the arm in a motherly way. "I'm certain he's eager to talk to someone besides Barnabas or Abigail or the maids. . .and I'm sure whatever is plaguing him will be gone in a few days-certainly it isn't contagious. Go ahead. "

"Very well, " he nodded slowly and backed towards the stairs. "Good day, Mrs. Collins-it certainly was nice to see you again. "

She smiled until he was gone again and she was alone. Then she took a glass from the cabinet and filled it with wine, disgusted at her lack of shame even on a Sunday. But she was growing more and more used to the sour taste, and it was becoming steadily easier to forget her problems with the aid of the shimmering red liquid, if only for a few long hours at a time.

Even before Milo reached the top of the stairs, he saw Jeremiah pacing around through the slightly

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open door. When he knocked, Jeremiah answered immediately and grinned weakly when he saw who it was.

"Milo-what are you doing here?"

"Come to see how close to death's door you really are-I'm pleased to see that they were wrong in town. "

"Already building me a box, are they? Damned gossips-I thought as much. Come in, anyway; I promise not to contaminate you. "

"I'm not worried. " Milo accepted the offer, and Jeremiah leaned against the wall, jabbing his fists into the pockets of his expensive dressing-gown. "So how are you feeling, really?"

"Rather well, I suppose-if a bit. . drained. "

"Your face is a bit whiter than usual. " Milo saw that the curtains were thrown wide and sunlight was streaming into the room.

"This light can't be any good for your eyes. "

"It doesn't matter. " He started as Milo reached up to close them. "Leave them be-I need to have some reminder of the outside world while I sit cooped up in here like an invalid or a madman, don't I?"

Milo paused and turned, still considering Naomi's words.

"Jeremiah, " he said carefully, "what is truly wrong? And can I do anything to help you?"

His childhood friend laughed. "I have a cold, Milo-nothing more dreadful than that. "

"It doesn't seem like a cold, Jeremiah. In fact, your sister-in-law seems to think that it... well, that it has something to do with the shipyards. "

"For a moment I thought you were going to say the tavern. But the shipyards? Joshua, you mean. " He shook his head. "I would hope I've outgrown temper tantrums. They never did any good with him, anyway. " He happened to glance up at the window again, and Laura rushed back into his aching mind. She was as chains, binding him-or a madness, driving him to wild, unfathomable thoughts. But if she were a dream, what then? He brought a fist to his face and examined it with growing frustration. "Milo..."

"Yes?" Milo frowned.

"Milo, where does one search for. . .an angel?"

"An angel?" the other laughed a little, not fully understanding. "Why in heaven, of course. "

"And a demon-where would a demon be found?"

"I would suppose in Hell. "

"Or in someone's mind. " His gaze grew faraway, uncertain.

"Now what's all this nonsense about? Are you turning religious in your old age, Jeremiah?"

"Not religious. . .but desperate. And if I cannot find her in one place, then she is surely in the other.

"That does not make any sense at all. "

"No. I suppose it doesn't. " Brightening, Jeremiah dropped into a chair. "Tell me, have you seen Barnabas today?"

"He didn't seem to be about when I came in, no. "

"That's because he's seldom about at all now a-

days-spends all his time walking in the fields. He was here a few hours ago, trying to play cards, and it was all he could do to keep still long enough to lose once!"

"Oh? I don't suppose he has been stricken with the same illness you have?"

"He doesn't consider it an illness. The fact is, Milo, my nephew has been indulging in the foibles of the heart-he's actually fallen in love."

Milo almost fell down. "Really! Solemn Barnabas? That is amusing! And who is this enchantress who's stolen his pride-do you know her?"

"No, he hasn't even admitted that she exists. But she does-I'd stake a fortune on it, and one way or the other, I'm going to find out. "

"Well, best of luck. I doubt you'll hear it from his mouth, though-he hasn't mentioned a word to me. "

"There are other ways of finding out-I understand him too well not to. " Suddenly the vigor disappeared from his face, and his breath all but vanished from his lungs. He slumped forward in the chair, coughing, and Milo rushed to his side.

"Jeremiah! Dear God, what's happening?"

"Another spell, " the other managed to gasp. "I get them. . .every few minutes. It's like the strength. . is being drained from me. "

"I'll go and find one of the servants, " he offered. "Should I move you over there? I-"

"No-I'll be all right in a moment. " Carefully he took several deep breaths, and his condition seemed to stabilize. The blood slowly

crept back into his face. "There...that's better. You'd better go now, Milo-I want to be alone. "

Milo scowled. "Are you sure, Jeremiah?"

"Yes-I'm just overtired. I'll send for the doctor again later if it doesn't get any better- somehow I think it will, though-it's already going away. " He stood and went to the window. The sun was going down in a blaze of red. "I need some sleep, perhaps a little whiskey-I'll recover, believe me. "

After watching him a moment, Milo was forced to comply. "Very well, I'll go. But do try and take care of yourself, and don't come to work tomorrow if you don't feel up to it. "

"I won't-Joshua wouldn't want me to anyhow. It looks bad for the business. "

The other nodded grimly and soon was gone. Jeremiah leaned against the door and locked it. Then he went back to the window and clung to the curtains until the last blaze of sunlight disappeared from the sky. As it did so, he fancied that he had been in her arms, rolling like an infant against her soft skin, and had only now been torn away brutally.

He could not stand it any longer. He needed her. He closed his eyes and shook his head with slow defiance.

"Be it heaven or hell, I will find you again, " he vowed. "Oh, Laura-I can't live another night

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without you. "

The letter came on Monday afternoon, and as Joshua slit the envelope, an exotic French scent escaped from the paper and made him wrinkle his nose.

"Is it from Lothaire?" Barnabas asked from the door.

"Yes, " his father muttered, skimming the contents. "Apparently he had to stop off in Boston before coming here and has not been able to tear himself away. "

"There is still no definite date of arrival?"

"No-I suppose I'll have to write something back and have it sent by messenger. " He took out some of his own stationery and uncapped the ink. "Well, what are you standing there watching me for? I don't suppose that ledger has been added yet?"

"No. . .it hasn't. " Barnabas left the room and returned to Jeremiah's empty office. He opened the ledger and stared down at the neatly entered figures with a complete lack of interest. The day was beating on the window pane from the other side, longing to be let in-or welcome him into it. A sudden, shaming thought struck him. His father would not look up from his own letter for at least a half hour, and Milo was out on an errand. There would be absolutely no one to notice if he. . .

He took his hat down from the peg and slipped out of the building and onto the docks. Another batch of travelers was there, mostly off the newly arrived French ship, along with the usual mix of sailors and fishermen. He watched them and smiled as he trod the length of the pier twice, pretending to be one of them, the office, the ledger, and his father forgotten.

Suddenly he saw the woman, making her way down the other side of the street on foot. He could scarcely believe his good fortune. It had been an entire day and a half since he had last seen her, and the time had crept. Clamping down his hat, he ran all the way over to her and stopped in front.

"Laura?" he asked anxiously. She looked up, and his heart froze. It was not she. "Oh, excuse me" he stammered. "I'm terribly sorry. " He backed and darted between two buildings to hide there in the shade. It was not fair. The whole world-even a day as enticing as the one before him-was trying to keep him from her.

But he would see her again-he intended to see to that. Somewhat unhappily he went back to Jeremiah's office and began to write his own letter.

Jeremiah tumbled from his horse and tied it to the hitching post by the deserted strip of pier as best he could. He could see the office in the distance.

His forehead felt damp, and the feeling that he had been bled persisted as he staggered down the few half-rotted steps and crossed the long stretch of wood that led to the water. He was not completely sure why he had come-the fever seemed to have a voice of its own, and it had found the grounds at Collinwood not sufficient to give him peace this time. Naomi and Abigail would be furious if they found out he had left the house, he was certain.

There was a small bench on the other end of the wharf. Once it had been a private structure built to house another shipping company like Joshua's, but it had unfortunately been owned by a Tory and had soon gone out of business, and the dock itself had fallen into ruin. He was not even sure that it was completely safe to walk on.

He began to lose his breath again-even the minor exertion had proved too much. His legs began to weaken, and he almost fell down and over the edge. He wrapped both arms around one of the rope-encircled poles and sagged there, trying to regain his balance. He let his head roll against one shoulder-the sun seemed too bright for his eyes. But suddenly he found he could not close them- something was ahead, something he knew he had to see. Finally he did look up, and his heart stabbed his chest so brutally he thought he might die then and there. Someone had been on the bench all along, someone he had not noticed before. It was Laura, and now her face was towards him and smiling, her golden hair billowing around it like a hat of shimmering flame.

"Laura, " he whispered and let go of the pole. He went to his knees, but she did not move to help him. He gritted his teeth and the strength seemed to pour back into his limbs, and soon he found himself up and running to her.

She stood, and a second later he was crushing her against him, kissing her desperately while the salty wind enveloped them and tore the fevered sweat from his brow.

"Laura, my love-angel, demon, whatever you are, I must have you! Stay beside me for the rest of my days, and take my life as yours if that's the way it must be. Only never leave me, never!"

"Yes, Jeremiah, I am yours. " She smiled into the shoulder of his jacket. "You have me, and I you. I was always meant to be your wife-always. "

Barnabas held his breath nervously as he tucked the envelope discreetly into the crack in Laura's door. He knew she would meet him, and anything she wanted him to say he would as soon as night fell over the old bridge they had walked across on Saturday.

Supper was eaten with typical pomp and formality. Joshua frowning down at everyone from the head of the table, knives and forks clicking busily, two maids carting food back and forth. Jeremiah seemed much recovered and was chewing and swallowing with almost curious fervor. Barnabas, however, was noticeably on edge and was intently watching the window out of the corner of his eye.

Joshua slammed down his coffee cup and cleared his throat.

"You seemed possessed of a rather good appetite for a man who was on his deathbed only last night, Jeremiah. " His brother looked up. "I was never on my deathbed," he asserted calmly. "I'm afraid the ladies blew the whole thing out of proportion. "

"Well, you managed to get out of one day's work at the office, didn't you?"

"A man's entitled to feel a bit run down now and again, Joshua. Excepting you, of course. "

Another moment of silence passed. Joshua grew more impatient.

"Why do I seem to be the only one with anything to say?" No one made any attempt to answer him, which only bothered him more. "It's almost dark outside, you know, Barnabas."

"Yes, I know," Barnabas replied distantly.

"You seem quite interested in the window all of a sudden-is there a storm brewing, or perhaps a speck on the curtains?"

"I'm sorry. "

"Then turn around and be polite!"

"Listen to your father," Abigail advised confidently. "Poor table manners are a sign of ignorance. "

"I have always found your manners excellent, Abigail. " Naomi commented with veiled annoyance.

"I should hope so," her sister-in-law nodded primly, while Jeremiah and Barnabas attempted to keep straight faces. Joshua sniffed but did not comment.

The sun finally disappeared, and Barnabas squirmed slightly and pushed his plate away.

"Might I be excused now?"

"Excused? Whatever for? You're hardly finished!"

"Joshua," Naomi cut in again, "let him go. " She looked up and was happy for the brightness in her son's eyes. "Yes, Barnabas, you may leave. Don't stay out too late, though. "

"Thank you, mother. Good evening, everyone. " He shoved his chair hastily away and almost ran from the room. Joshua stared after him with some astonishment. "Naomi, why did you let him do that?"

"Because I want to leave this table almost as much as he does. I have... a headache. "

"Headache, indeed," Abigail spat.

Ignoring her, Joshua set down his own fork. "His manners leave much to be desired. " Then he turned to Jeremiah, who was watching the candle in the center of the table with great interest. "As do yours! You haven't said one word of relevance all evening!"

"I'm sorry," he echoed his nephew. "I was only... thinking. "

"Thinking! Daydreaming, more likely!"

"Perhaps so. "

"If I've told you once, I have a dozen times, Jeremiah-such ridiculous fantasizing will get you absolutely nowhere. It's time you came down to reality-concentrate on your future and business dealings, and you will get a lot further in this world, believe me!" Resentment flashed in the other's eyes then. "I think in this case it's forgivable, Joshua-even... natural, I daresay. "

"And what do you mean by that, if I may ask?"

"I didn't mean anything. " He stood. I hope you ladies will excuse me if I... "

"The ladies will not excuse you!" His brother got up as well. "You've started something, Jeremiah-now finish it right now! I am not in the mood for those games of yours!"

One of the maids who had been about to enter the room backed away and scurried back towards the kitchen. Jeremiah watched her do so with some amusement.

"Very well, I will. The fact is, Joshua-and everyone else-I have finally taken the big step. I have gotten myself engaged, only this afternoon. " He examined the astonished reactions and smiled with pleasure. "There-I thought that would quiet you down a while. "

"Engaged!" Joshua was the first to recover his voice. "So that's what all this foolishness has been about! Why the devil didn't you say something before!"

"Because there was nothing to say before. Now it's all settled, though, and I hope you'll congratulate me. "

"And did Barnabas's rushing out of here that way have something to do with this as well?"

"No-Barnabas doesn't know. " Suddenly he had an inspiration. "And I'd rather none of you told him-until I can do so in my own way. "

"I become suspicious when there's so much secrecy involved! " Abigail leaned forward intently. "And to think, we haven't even met this girl-have we?"

"Ah, but she's not a girl-she's a woman. A beautiful, fine woman-from a very good family. And you needn't worry, Abigail-if she is practicing witchcraft, she hasn't let me see her doing so yet. "

"Stop joking!" she retorted. "This is your life, Jeremiah-can't you take anything seriously?"

"I am taking it seriously-it's you and Joshua who aren't. Stop treating me as if I'm some juvenile indulging in a whim-I'm twenty-one years old and perfectly capable of living in my own way. "

"I think I shall go into the study and give this

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**this a little more thought. " Joshua turned to leave the room.**

"There's nothing more to **think** about, because the decision is made and will stand. I love Laura Stockbridge and will not be kept from her!"

"Love," his brother sniffed as he stalked away, "is one of the lesser reasons for founding a marriage. " When he was gone, the same maid's face reappeared at the kitchen door.

"When is this... wedding to be?" Abigail asked after a moment.

"In a month-perhaps less. We've not decided. **But we will...** soon. "

"I've got to get upstairs. " His sister stood as well. "I've left one of those idiot maids in the study alone, and there's no telling what a wreck she's making of it. I'd hate for Joshua to walk in and see such incompetence in his own house. " In the doorway, she paused. "You will forgive me, Jeremiah, if I hold my congratulations for you until after

I've met this. . . woman. "

"Of course. " Jeremiah made a face, then sank dejectedly back into his chair. The cowering maid, seeing that everyone but he and Naomi had departed, finally crept forth and began to silently clear away the plates. "Well, sister-in-law, " he smiled sadly, "somehow I expected you to be the only one happy for me. "

"I am, Jeremiah-if you honestly love her and were not just saying that for Joshua's sake, then I am. "

"No, I wasn't just saying it. " The maid picked up the candle and carried it to another shelf to make room for the collected dishes. "I think of her every minute, Naomi-I suppose I've never felt like this- for anyone-before in my life. " Barnabas reached the bridge with heart pounding, having run all the way from the front door of the house. He looked furiously about in the warm darkness and threw his hat on the ground to wipe his forehead with a sleeve. She was not there.

"Laura?" he whispered, edging out onto the bridge. When there was no answer, he raised his voice. "Laura! Where are you-you must be here. "

But she was not, and it became more and more obvious as the minutes ticked by that she was not going to show up at all.

He walked back and forth around the yard and through the forest, first on his side of the bridge, then on hers. Only the insects chirped, and the brook reached out endlessly to the north and south of him. "Damn her, " he said aloud, fastening his hands around the fraying ropes strung up as a rail. But then as he stood there, he realized that it was not her fault. After all, who was he to demand the attentions of so divine a creature, an older woman so much more perfect than himself? He ran a hand along his own face and drew back on himself with disgust. His own features were bony and plain-no

**doubt** she **knew** it and had been too polite to say anything. Even his beard grew too soft, and the rest of him seemed awkward, boyish. Laura did not want those things.. . now when she had so much else to choose from. She had a man in town. That was it-he was certain. She had found one she preferred to him, closer to her own age and handsome, a rugged sailor with wild blond hair like hers and a carefree, lusty gleam in his worldly eyes. She was with him now, the devil, the swine, running her hands over his stubbly tanned face, the soft lace of her dress brushing lightly across his coarse stained shirt, her delicate red mouth poised just below his lips, which reeked of liquor. Perhaps they were in the tavern, stashed away in a dim corner where the whores would not disturb them; perhaps they were on a deserted stretch of beach, where the sailor could keep one arm about her waist while pointing to his ship with the other, telling her captivating tales of his journeys and adventures, and her mind would go to those lands and far away from. . . his stomach contracted then. Perhaps they were even in her room, arms about each other and silky pillows beneath, the sailor knowing what to do and Laura never having to ask the terrible, biting question she had asked him that ugly day.

The words echoed in his mind-he tried not to hear but in vain. 'You are yet untried, Barnabas,' she called in a haunting tone. 'Untried, untried. . .'

"Yes!" he shouted, and the ropes scratched the palms of his soft hands. He felt the bridge, somewhat unsteadily, rattle beneath him, but at that moment he did not care if he swept into and drowned in the raging current below.

"Yes, Laura, I am as you accused me and hate myself for it! Hate myself because it makes me less a man-less a man than you shall ever want!"

There was a sound at the other end of the bridge, and then, for all his rage and distorted senses, he heard her voice and whirled.

"It has been a long time since my virtue has been wept over, " she was saying very quietly. Barnabas's mouth dropped open, and he backed into the shadows so that she could not see his face. Laura only smiled and shook her head.

"There is no need to be ashamed of your tears-it was because of them I came at all. " Carefully she held out a hand.

"If you would cross this bridge, knowing it will not be forever, I will hold you. But remember what I said-I cannot be your first, for it was not meant to be. "

His humiliation vanished, and all at once he was drunk with the sight of her. His first true love, his only love.

"Laura," he swallowed, "I would run to you no matter what the conditions or the consequences. And I would listen to any words at all, so long as they tumble from your mouth. "

"Then do so, " she said, "and we may pretend just this once. "

He rushed across the wobbly bridge and grabbed

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her around the waist. She caught him up and kissed him as if she were a pitiful mortal again and he a bearded sailor who had seen the world.

On the path that led through the woods towards the white-pillared house, Milo jerked his horse to a sudden stop and stared at what he saw with astonishment. From atop the hill, he could see the bridge in the distance, and by the moonlight he had no difficulty recognizing the people beside it. . It was Barnabas, without doubt-and the secret love Jeremiah had told him about had turned out to be none other than his mysterious new neighbor, Laura.

Jeremiah came immediately out of the study when the rapping on the door began and waved off the maid who had appeared to answer it.

"Well! Just the person I wanted to see, " he beamed when he saw that it was Milo on the front step.

Milo was surprised. "Why Jeremiah, what a surprising recovery you've made!"

"And here you were dropping by to see what I was going to leave you in my will! Sorry, not this time, and don't expect your luck to improve for- oh, say a hundred years, at the very least. "

"The cold has entirely disappeared, then?"

"Quite so. The demon inside me. . .has disappeared. But enough of all this nonsense-come into the study and have some wine."

"So that's it," the other smiled as Jeremiah went into the next room and kicked the door shut. "You're drunk."

"Not yet, but as for later I can't make any promises." He grabbed a bottle out of the cabinet and tossed one of the better crystal glasses at Milo. Fortunately he was able to catch it.

"You're in quite a different world than you were yesterday," he remarked as the wine missed the glass and soaked the tablecloth through.

"A better one, though, to be sure." He sat down, a battered deck of playing cards in hand, and impatiently dealt some out. "I have important news, Milo."

"And I have some for you as well."

"Not yet. We must have the toast first." He drew two cards, stared at them a moment, then raised his glass.

"It merits a toast?"

"It does indeed. I've decided to change my image-the carefree bachelor you knew yesterday is gone now, and I hope forever."

"And what does that mean?" Milo exchanged two more cards without looking down.

"It means I've decided to take a wife at long last. And better still, she has not been hand-picked by my brother."

At first Milo's face froze, and then his smile nearly took in his ears. "A what? This is a shock!"

And you talk about Barnabas? I hardly even suspected-"

"Are you going to drink to it or not?"

"Of course-as soon as I catch my breath, that is." Milo brought his glass up and Jeremiah bashed his against it, drank, and then leaned back with a dreamy expression growing on his face.

"She's the loveliest woman I've ever seen. It seemed to happen all at once. I love her, Milo, and can't wait to be with her. And what's more, I understand she lives quite close to you. Perhaps

you've even met her-Miss Laura Stockbridge, the

one I shall spend the rest of my life with."

Milo paused in mid-guzzle, and his eyes bugged out towards the ceiling. He finished swallowing the mouthful of sour wine and almost choked in the process.

"No, Jeremiah," he half-whispered, smile gone. "It can't be she!"

"What?" Jeremiah's brows sank at once. "What do you mean by that?"

He was about to blurt it out, then stopped. He knew beyond a doubt what would happen if the words left his mouth. He saw it in Jeremiah's eyes. He would kill him. Or Barnabas, or perhaps both of them together. Next to love, friendship meant nothing.

"What's the matter?" his friend prodded. "You look as though you'd been poisoned."

"I. . . only meant to say that the whole town is talking of her," Milo improvised quickly. "Her worldliness, her beauty."

Jeremiah brightened again, and it made the other's stomach tighten. "And I'm the lucky one who gets her!" he decided proudly.

"Milo- you're not jealous, are you now? I mean-she is your neighbor."

"Perhaps," he lied, nodding. "Perhaps, just a little. You never cease to surprise me, Jeremiah. . .but congratulations nonetheless. I truly hope you will be happy." He forced himself to meet his friend's eyes, and Jeremiah was none the wiser for the rest of the evening.

Laura wrapped a dressing-gown around herself and closed the door to her bedroom. The sound of someone knocking from outside persisted, so she parted the curtains slightly and was surprised to see that it was Joshua, impatiently waiting on the doorstep.

Suppressing an amused smile, she opened the door on the grim visitor and nodded politely. He bridled somewhat upon seeing her state of undress, but nothing indecent was showing, and besides it was her home. Joshua had not changed a bit in the twenty years since she had last seen him.

"Mr. Collins," she surmised, clutching the front of the robe. "I wasn't expecting you. I thought it was old Mrs. Clement from next door,

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come to borrow something."

"You are Miss Stockbridge," he surmised bluntly.

"Yes-indeed I am."

"The I apologize to you for the inconvenience of the hour. Perhaps I should return at a later time."

"I am not an early riser, I fear." She purposely lowered her eyes. "Is. . .your brother with you?"

"No-he is not. Only I came in, in order to speak to you; but under the circumstances I think I had better make other plans. Shall we say- noontime, at my office?"

"I'm afraid that wouldn't do," she told him quickly. "I have. . .shopping that must be done. Did anyone see you come here?"

"No."

"Then you might as well come in now, before someone does get the wrong impression. If you stay only for a few minutes, it should be all right. We are going to be brother and sister-in-law, after all."

"Well. . ." he considered a moment, "very well. I shall keep my eyes focused elsewhere."

"That would be fine." He came in and faced the opposite wall. She shut the door. "What did you wish to see me about, then? Surely-surely nothing has happened to Jeremiah?"

"No, no, of course not, there's no need to worry yourself! I merely thought we should. . . speak, on his welfare. I think now that coming here was not such a good idea, but I did not realize that at the time." He fidgeted uncomfortably but resisted the urge to glance at her out of the corner of his eye.

"I'm sure. And it doesn't take much to guess at why you are here-it's about the marriage, isn't it?"

"The supposed marriage. I have not given my consent one way or the other as of yet."

"I realize that. You are concerned that I shall not make your brother a suitable wife, is that it?"

"The possibility exists."

"Yes, of course it does. However, there is really no need for anyone to be concerned-I find Jeremiah a fascinating man, and we are going to be very happy, he and I. You do believe that, I hope."

"So he tells me. But I admit to having my doubts. After all. . . not every marriage, especially one as sudden as this, is a smashing success. And I want the best for Collinwood-I'm sure you can appreciate that. "

Laura tipped her face up, pleased. "Indeed I can. And I admire that, greatly. But you see, Mr. Collins, I would be what is best for Collinwood, in many ways. "

He almost turned around but caught himself. "And how do you know that, Miss Stockbridge? You've not even been to the house. . . have you?"

"No, " she admitted, "but I was not referring to the house itself. I was talking about what I could do for the image of your family-and for that of your brother. You yourself have only one son, is that not so?"

"It is. But I do not see what that----"

"Then you must wonder, now and then, what would become of all that you have worked so hard to gain if something should happen to him, when you are too old to have any more children. Not a pleasant thought, I admit, but certainly a practical one. "

"Yes-quite practical. And I have considered it, I will admit-but only in passing, because for the most part, Barnabas is very healthy. "

"Well, one never knows. Now if Jeremiah were to have a son, everything would be different- he would be. . . insurance, in a way, to see that the Collins name is carried on and the family fortune with it. You cannot say it is a bad idea. " He did not reply.

"And then there is Jeremiah himself. Obviously I am very fond of your brother, and am confident that he will make a good husband, but still, he does have a predilection for dreaming that tends to interfere with his getting ahead in business and other such affairs. I feel that marriage would do much to change that-the added responsibility would encourage him to work harder at the shipyards and concentrate on reality much more than he has in the past. And surely the townspeople would be forced to think well of such a family oriented image for the people after whom their town is named, don't you agree? There, Mr. Collins-that is the way I see it. Perhaps you see some wisdom in it-perhaps you do not. The choice is yours as to whether or not Jeremiah and I shall wed-all I ask is that you consider what I have said; and once you do, I will be content to abide by any decision you are given to. "

He was silent for a long time, looking the wall up and down. Finally he sighed and shook his head but a little.

"I must admit, Miss Stockbridge, I am somewhat surprised by your business sense, as my own wife is considerably lacking in same. "

"Then thank you-coming from you, I shall take that as a compliment. "

"Please do. I would go so far as to say I am impressed. . .but that is not what I came here to discuss. "

"Will you consider what I have suggested?"

"I shall do better than that-I shall comment on it here and now. Before I came here, I was rather convinced that Jeremiah is not ready to be married-as you yourself mentioned, he is seldom of any use to me in business. However, I think you are quite right in supposing that marriage will change all of that-added responsibilities do tend to build character in a man. And now that I have met you, I am sure that no woman could. . . straighten him out better than you. I remember your parents, who lived in the Weeding House, not terribly distant from our own. Your father was a hard worker-rather well off, too, before the. . .tragedy. "

"So I've heard. As I'm sure Jeremiah has

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told you, I was being educated in Europe at the time-and perhaps that accounts for my sensibility, for I had to learn to manage my own affairs from a very young age onwards. "

"I am sure that is so. And you seem to have made a reasonably good job of it, if I may say so. "

"Thank you. "

"Well, enough of all this idle chatter-I have arranged for you to come to Collinwood tonight so that we may have some sort of formal presentation. I shall have my clerk, Seabrook, deliver you onto the premises at dusk. I trust you shall be ready. "

"Does that mean you are going to tell us then whether you are going to condone our marriage or not?"

"My dear lady, if I had not already made up my mind, I would not have invited you at all. Now I really must get back to my own office, if you will excuse me. Shall I show myself out?"

"Oh yes, certainly, Mr. Collins. And thank you-thank you sincerely, for both Jeremiah's sake and my own. "

"You are welcome. Jeremiah has done a great many foolish things in the past-I am pleased to say that he may already be changing for the better, after all. " He opened the door and went out into the street. She went back to the window and watched him walk away.

That was one of the advantages of re-encountering people the way she always did-- there was no need to waste valuable time wondering what to say to win them over.

That problem solved, she went back into the bedroom. Lothaire was waiting, sprawled carelessly out beneath the covers.

"Is he gone?" he asked with a smile.

"Yes, the stuffy old fool. " He held out his arms, and she returned to them with pleasure. That was the second advantage of being able to return again, although unlike Joshua, she had thought Lothaire lost to her for good.

"It was all I could do to stop myself from laughing, " he told her between lecherous kisses. "Charles Stockbridge, hard-working and well off! The idiot-while he was out toiling in the fields, he never once guessed what your mother and I were doing inside the house. " He took her chin in his hand and shook his head. "God, but you do look like her, Laura the second-and are like her, in many other ways a gentleman does not discuss. "

"Yes, " she closed her eyes, comforted by the needed heat he gave her. "I must admit that all of that is true. "

Out on the grounds below the ragged place where a second Collinwood would someday stand, Jeremiah spotted his nephew on horseback and pulled his own mount to a halt.

"Doing a little thinking, Barnabas?" he shouted pleasantly. Barnabas turned, waved, and smiled.

"Yes, just a little! The day is ready to be enjoyed!"

"That it is!" Jeremiah kicked his horse and joined the other in the center of the sweet-scented field.

"I was not aware that you were skipping work today as well, " Barnabas said as his uncle approached.

"Oh, Joshua had best be used to my doing that by now. After all, who can bear to sit in that musty old office while such a beautiful spring unfolds all around us?"

"Only Milo, it seems. "

"Shall we race?" As if on cue, Jeremiah's horse spun around and tossed its head defiantly. "It seems that Star is more than ready to trounce your old nag. "

"I sincerely doubt that. "

"Then let us give her a try. From here to the stream?"

"Very well. " The horses, used to many such contests, aligned themselves perfectly with only the slightest of bidding.

"On ten?"

"You may count. "

"Just so. " Both tensed, and finally the last second was gone. Both animals roared across the clearing and towards the given finish line, fresh green grass and clods of earth flying behind the thundering hooves. Teeth clenched in determination, Barnabas leaned as close to Jezebel's neck as was possible, and soon he began to move ahead of the other. The stream grew larger and larger, and before long he could make out the furry little tips of the stalky plants growing all around it and the outline of the barrier of little rocks behind which frogs customarily hid. Even the rush of the shallow water became distinct to his ears, and he longed to look back to be sure that he was winning.

As it turned out, he did not have to-for a second later he heard Star's labored breathing deepen, and before the other saddle could brush his in passing, he was over the brook and landed safely on the other side. Jeremiah finished a second later and let out a yell of defeat as Barnabas let his horse slow and finally wheel around.

"Now, uncle, what was that I heard about an old nag?" he smiled triumphantly.

"All right, very well, I take it back. " Jeremiah was laughing. "You're the winner this time, for a change, but I shall get you back. "

"And how do you propose to do that? With another race? I think perhaps Star is getting a bit too old for such competition-look at her; she can hardly catch her breath. "

"Yes, I think you're right, the poor old thing. " He patted the mare's silky head. "But that's all right, because that was not what I had in mind. "

"What then?"

"Oh, I don't know-but after tonight I think you'll be well satisfied that I can not be bested in the long run. "

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"Tonight?" Barnabas frowned. "What are you planning for tonight?"

"Well, I suppose you'll just have to wait and see. " Laughing again, he turned his horse around and kicked it gently. "Now come, Star, while we still have the last word with him. "

Barnabas scowled after the other for a long time after he had slipped between the trees and was out of sight. Jeremiah was often impossible to figure out, but today he did not even wish to try. The trees were steadily gaining more leaves, the flowers were still sprouting, and the sun was staring down from overhead and reminding him of Laura.

The day finally came to an end, and Milo returned from work to his usual empty room. He peered out the window at Laura's door across the quiet street and felt a distinct pang of shame. He had to find some way to let Jeremiah know what he had seen-he would be as dishonest and shameful as she if he did not. Perhaps at the party-or afterwards. He wondered if he had the courage. If only the third party that night had not been Barnabas. . .

He changed his clothes and went outside to hitch up the wagon in which he would take Laura to Collinwood. He happened to glance up as he was doing so and saw her there, looking at him from her own window. Snidely he recalled the first time they had met and how he had experienced a brief moment of desire for her as well. Was it a burden to her, he wondered, that she could so effortlessly inspire every man she came into contact with? Somehow he was more given to believing that she enjoyed it. She came across the sidewalk and was standing beside him. He straightened his cravat uncomfortably.

"Good evening, Miss Stockbridge, " he said grimly. "Are you ready to go to Jeremiah now?"

"Yes, Milo, quite so. " She examined the carriage somewhat disparagingly. "Is this what we will be going in?"

"Yes, " he nodded. She made as if to board, then-but before she could, he clapped a hand over her arm and held her back. Her gaze then turned ice cold.

"How dare you grab hold of me in such a manner?" She tugged free at once. He did not seem at all moved by her protest and only continued to stare at her with growing rage.

"You think yourself quite the princess tonight, don't you? You have your own coachman and all. "

"Are you inebriated?" she demanded pointedly. "I didn't think Joshua Collins would allow that in his employees. "

"I said I would drive you tonight because Jeremiah asked me to. He trusts me-we are friends. "

"How nice. "

"But I wonder what arrangements he might have made if I had refused. I wonder how he would have asked to escort you then. I wonder if he would have chosen his nephew, Barnabas. "

Laura had been about to say something else; but at the mention of Barnabas, her expression changed for the worse.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, " she said carefully.

"And I'm not sure I know what is inside your mind, " he snapped. "What do you think of Barnabas? He's going to be your nephew too. Do you find his naivete charming or merely amusing? How do you think he'll react once he learns that you are going to marry his uncle, who is also his best friend? Will you smile at his hurt then, laugh at the shock on his face? I sincerely hope you are not that cruel, Laura-but if you are, Jeremiah will find out before long, and your marriage plans may be sorely altered, let me warn you. "

She turned away. "I have never tried to hurt Barnabas, " she said slowly. Milo frowned. "And what I have told him was always the truth. Do not hold me to blame for what feelings he has-I have done all that I could to discourage him. And whatever he may think, things will not change between Jeremiah and me. Barnabas will just have to accept that. "

"But you shouldn't have set him up that way!"

"There is nothing that can be done about it now ! It is a sorry situation; I acknowledge that- but that is just the way it is. I have seen men ache and grieve before, Milo-and I am sure I will see it again. The world-and our lives-are like that, and we must try to accept, or when there is nothing else, we must turn our heads and walk along. Perhaps I saw in Barnabas something that was lost to me quite some time ago-perhaps I wanted that . . .something without even realizing it. But I cannot have it, you see-and

therefore I have not deceived him. " After a moment she looked at him again, and he was surprised to see genuine sorrow in her eyes. "Goto Collinwood alone, Milo-tell Jeremiah I have been beset with a headache and cannot see him until tomorrow. But you will not tell him of this conversation-do you understand that?"

"He won't believe that-"

"Yes he will. He loves me-he'll believe anything I say. Now go. I have nothing more to say. " She picked up her skirt and was gone, walking stiffly across the street to vanish inside her room once again.

"Do you think the arrangement is suitable?" Naomi asked Jeremiah as one of the servant girls cringed nearby, awaiting judgment on her floral decoration for the drawing-room table. Jeremiah rubbed his chin with pleasure.

"I daresay it's perfect, " he decided with a smile. Both women looked relieved, especially

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the maid. "But you needn't go to so much trouble. Laura doesn't go for such extravagance. "

"Well, if you're right, that will be a tremendous help in getting to know her. She and Joshua just may get along after all. "

"Laura gets along with everyone. "

"She's certainly captivated you. " Naomi dismissed the maid, and they were left alone in the room. She went and took a bottle from the hearth to pour herself a drink. Frowning determinedly, Jeremiah followed her and put his hand over the top of the glass.

"Not that, Naomi-please. This is a time to be happy-things are going to get better around here; you'll see. "

"I'm sorry. . .but you're right. " Sighing, she set the wine aside. Jeremiah smiled.

"There, that's better. "

There was a knock at the door.

"I'll get that, " he offered and went to do so. When he opened it to the solemn figure almost entirely dressed in black, however, he drew back with shock. " Lothaire!"

"Hello, Jeremiah, " Lothaire grinned through faultless white teeth. "You're looking well. "

"Please come in. " Jeremiah indicated the drawing room. The Frenchman did so and upon seeing Naomi dropped into a courtly bow.

"Mrs. Collins, " he said politely. "It has been years, but you have not changed a bit since I last saw you. And how fortunate that is. "

"Thank you. We've been expecting you for days, Monsieur----my husband received your letter, but all the same we feared something had happened to you. "

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry to have caused you any distress-that was not my intention, at all. But the nights were so lovely in Boston, and several matters required my immediate attention, so I could not get away before now. "

"There is no need to apologize, " she said. "Joshua will be so pleased that you're here. "

"Would you like some wine, Lothaire?" Jeremiah asked, reaching for the decanter.

"Yes, please, seeing that you have some out already. " He noticed the flowers on the table. "And what a lovely arrangement you have here, as well. I daresay I'm intruding on a party. "

"Not really. We're expecting. . .a guest. "

"And you shall stay to meet her, of course, " Joshua came into the room even as Lothaire sipped at his drink. Everyone looked up. "It's almost a surprise to see you at last, Lothaire-we were beginning to think you would never arrive. "

"I have already explained my unfortunate circumstances to your wife, Joshua. " Lothaire bowed slightly. "But in any case, it is a pleasure to see you again after all these years-you're looking well. "

"And I must admit that you are, too. " Joshua eyed him uncertainly. It was true; Lothaire did not have a single wrinkle. In fact, though Joshua

knew him to be at least forty, he had not changed a bit or gained a single grey hair since they had first met in 1766. "We have much to discuss, you and I. "

"You needn't remind me of that-the shipping business has grown considerably since I was last here during the war. I am much impressed with the progress your company has made. "

"That is the result of many years of long and hard work, my dear sir. " He turned to look at Jeremiah as if to make a point. His brother purposely rolled his eyes. "I saw your friend Sea-brook just before I left town, Jeremiah, " he said. "He should be here at any minute. "

"Then I shall go out and wait for him. Is Barnabas with you?"

"Yes, he's coming. "

"I trust he knows nothing of the. . . gathering here tonight. "

Joshua sniffed. "I haven't told him. "

"Good. I'll go out then. Will you excuse me, Lothaire?"

"Of course. " Lothaire bowed again as Jeremiah left the room. When he opened the front door, he found Barnabas just reaching for the knob from the other side.

"Well! Where are you off to in such a rush?" his nephew asked as soon as he saw the mischief in Jeremiah's eyes.

Jeremiah jerked his head towards the next room. "Joshua would like to see you in there, " he said, sotto voice. "It seems we have some company. "

Barnabas listened a moment and heard the unpleasantly familiar voice.

"Lothaire, " he surmised with a grimace.

"The one and only. And it's your job to help entertain him. So get in there and make yourself amiable. "

"You will need to wish me luck for that. "

"And I do. " Jeremiah slapped him on the arm as he went reluctantly inside. Then he walked out to the carriage-path alone and craned his neck for some sign of Milo. The sky was grey with oncoming evening, and he contented himself for a few minutes with the cool, fresh breeze and the sounds of the songbirds, newly returned from their winter havens. It was as going to be a beautiful summer.

He heard the rattle of Milo's wagon approaching and started towards the sound. But as soon as the other came into view, a wave of disappointment rushed over him. Milo was alone.

Jeremiah reached up and caught the single horse by the reins. Milo looked down at him with uncertainty. "Where is she?" his friend demanded wound-edly. "Have you forgotten her? What's happened to Laura?" "I'm sorry to tell you that she could not come tonight, " Milo said. "She asked me to give you the message. " "Couldn't come?" Jeremiah's eyes widened.

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"What does **that** mean?"

"It means she was stricken with a headache at the last minute. She says she will see you tomorrow instead and sends apologies to your family ----"

"Laura's ill?" He jumped up onto the seat. "Then I've got to go and see her-"

Milo grabbed the reins back. "No, Jeremiah, I don't think that's necessary. "

"But of course it is ! What's the matter with you, Milo? Is there something you're not telling me?"

"A headache is nothing to worry about. All women get them. They ----"

"Are you joking? It does worry me-it should! Drive me there, Milo, please-I've got to see that she's all right. "

"No, Jeremiah," Milo persisted. "Please don't go there. She doesn't want you to. "

Jeremiah's face darkened. He jumped down from the carriage once again, pulling Milo out after him by the collar.

"There is something more! Tell me, Milo, damn it! Tell me ! " He began to shake the smaller man. Milo tried to get away but found that he could not.

"Jeremiah, please-let go!"

"Not until you tell me the truth ! "

Milo began to lose his breath at the other's insistent shaking. He saw the wild look in his friend's eyes and knew that there was no way to avoid the truth any longer.

"All right! " he gasped. "It's not a headache! " It's Barnabas. He-he loves her, too! She was the one-all along, she was the one he-"

"No!" Jeremiah's hands abruptly grew numb, and he dropped Milo with disbelief. "That isn't true!"

"I...saw them. On the bridge-the same night you told me. That was why I... I wanted to tell you but I couldn't. I... "

"Oh, my God. " Jeremiah backed away, more horrified than angry. He could almost see what was happening in the house at that very moment.

Barnabas was there, and Lothaire and Naomi- Joshua could not possibly keep still for very long-

"He doesn't know!" he cried and ran for the door.

He stumbled into the room. They were all there, still standing in the same spots he had left them, and all turned to look at him.

"Back so soon?" Joshua asked. "Are they here?"

"There's been-a problem. " Jeremiah said **quickly**. "The-the guest will not be coming after all. Ill-she-"

"Oh?" His brother frowned. "Well then, we'll just have to get along without her. Women and their problems!"

"Guest?" Barnabas looked confused.

"But in any case, you're lucky you arranged this visit when you did, Lothaire. You will have the chance to attend a wedding. We're going to have one, right here in this house. "

"A wedding?" Lothaire looked pleased. "Why how interesting! And who are the lucky souls?"

Joshua looked over at Jeremiah, who was desperately shaking his head. Barnabas was staring at them both, perplexed.

"My wayward brother has decided to take a wife. She's just moved to Collinsport-lives quite near the yards, as a matter of fact. Her name-"

"No, " Jeremiah tried to stop him-

"is Laura Stockbridge, " Joshua finished with pride. "Perhaps you have met her. "

The glass of wine Barnabas had been holding crashed to the floor and spattered the carpet. The redness started on his cheeks and spread all across his face, turning it crimson with rage.

"Barnabas!" Naomi ventured, stepping forward. "What is \_ the matter?"

"Let me explain, " Jeremiah started to say, and then his nephew lunged at him and sent a numbing blow across his jaw. He fell backwards, and Lothaire and Joshua each caught him by one arm.

"Barnabas!" Joshua bellowed. "Have you lost your mind?"

Barnabas glared at all of them for a moment or two. Then, teeth bared, he whirled and stomped out of the room, and the house, and out into the just arrived darkness.

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## II-REAP

"I saw pale kings and princes, too, Pale warriors, death-pale were they all; Who cried, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci Hath thee in thrall!' I saw their starved lips in the gleam With horrid warning gaped wide, And I awoke and found me here, On the cold hill's side. "

Morning threw a damp grey blanket over his shoulders, and he watched the steam begin to rise off the brook with face unchanged.

He heard boots then, crunching along through the wet grass and brush. He turned and saw that it was his father approaching with his typically stern gait and an expression to match. Their eyes met, and Joshua paused to stare down at his son for a long time.

"I am deeply ashamed of you, " he said. Barnabas neither moved nor answered. "I've spent half the night searching for you!"

"I'm sure you have. "

"Then why didn't you come back to the house?"

"I couldn't!" His son jumped to his feet. "Not with Jeremiah there. "

"Jeremiah ! " Joshua spat the name. "How can you be so infantile?"

"Infantile! " He climbed angrily to his feet. "On the contrary! My concerns-"

"Your concerns, nonsense! And don't attempt to tell me you're jealous-you barely know this... woman. "

"I know her well enough. " Pain rushed up into his throat. He remembered that Laura had once mentioned marriage to him, and he had dismissed the idea. She had been testing him. And he had failed. Just the thought of it made him burn with humiliation, wanting to go back and change it all. "I love her. "

"Love her! Such drive! It's a waste of time to even listen to this ! "

"I'm sure it is, " came the unusually defiant answer, "to you. "

"How dare you speak that way to me? You are out of your mind. Now I forbid you to *speak* on the subject ever again. Is that understood?"

Barnabas looked at the ground.

"I take that to mean yes, " Joshua went on. "Now go back to the house and go to bed. I'll expect you at the yards tomorrow at the usual hour. You may apologize to Lothaire then-and Jeremiah is waiting for you at the house. "

"I will not apologize. I'm not sorry!"

Joshua clenched a fist but did not strike him. "I told you I had had enough of this ! Your foolishness is disgraceful. You've even

endangered my position. "

-John Keats

"I doubt that. "

"Oh, do you? And do you think Lothaire perceived our business, when you made it clear to him that we cannot even keep order and harmony in our own home? I had thought you were too old to be beaten, Barnabas-but I can assure you, if you do not obey my orders this minute, I just may change my mind. "

Barnabas met the older man's livid eyes and gritted his teeth.

"Very well, " he hissed, "it will be as you say. It always is in the end, so what is the difference. " He looked up at the bridge, straightened his coat, and then stalked off into the woods.

Joshua watched him go, satisfied to have had the upper hand, then looked down at the stream rushing past at his feet. The water eddied, bubbled, and the sun began to rise, turning its surface a brilliant purple and then red; and the plants that grew up around it felt the warmth and lifted their small heads up into the coming day. A frog climbed up on one of the rocks, spied Joshua, then slipped back down into the shallows once again.

The master of Collinwood scowled. "Nonsense, " he muttered again and turned away.

He went into the house and spotted Jeremiah in a chair by the cold fireplace, a wet cloth partially covering the swollen bruise on his chin. When his uncle saw him in turn, he got to his feet, taking away the rag. The wound was not serious.

"Barnabas, " Jeremiah said quietly, "I think we should talk. "

"I think perhaps you are right. " Barnabas did not flinch. "Is. . . my father waiting in the other room?"

"I told him I wanted to see you alone. "

"I see. He expects me to apologize, you know. "

"You don't have to. " Hurt rose in the other's eyes. "Barnabas-I didn't know. "

"Are you certain of that?" Barnabas's brows sank with disbelief.

"Yes-completely! I swear Laura never mentioned your name-I didn't even know you'd

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met!"

"We had."

"I realize that now. And I'm sorry-sorry it had to turn out this way. I would never have wanted it to. "

"And do you believe that I. . . love her?"

"Yes... I suppose I do. "

"Then will you set her free?"

Jeremiah was taken aback. Slowly his own expression tightened into a frown.

"No, " he said after a moment of thought. "No, I will not. "

Barnabas's nostrils flared once again. "Then I think you a liar and a cheat. I am sorry as well, Jeremiah-I have nothing more to say to you and will have nothing more as long as she is yours. " He turned to go, but his uncle rushed after him.

"Barnabas, please! At least try to understand! You know I would do anything for you, but this is too much to ask! We'll be very happy together, I swear to you! I love her too, more than you can imagine! And it's more than that! I-need her!"

"I would prefer that you not mention her to me again. " Barnabas went up the stairs and paused on the middle step. Jeremiah clung to the railing, pained. "We will continue to live in the same house, of necessity. But it will not be as it was before. She means so much to you-" he sneered-"then that is the price you must pay to keep her. " Joshua appeared on the landing above. Barnabas glanced at him, then again at Jeremiah, then swept off to his room without another word.

Jeremiah looked down at his boots. Joshua came down into the foyer.

"He wouldn't listen, " the younger man said dejectedly.

"I thought not, from what I just witnessed. "

"What am I going to do?"

Joshua's face hardened. "Nothing, " he said. "The marriage will take place as announced. The girl has chosen you-there is nothing more to be said. You cannot give up everything for the sake of my son's temper. He's young yet and will get over it. " There was a long silence.

"I don't think you should make him go to the yards for a while. "

"What? And why not? Any added leisure time will only give him the opportunity to indulge in more of this. . .misguided self-pity, and who knows what other, equally distasteful, thoughts. "

"Joshua, please. Listen to me-just this once, do as I ask. If I didn't think it would help, I wouldn't be suggesting it now. Give him some time to himself-please. "

Joshua sighed derisively.

"I hope marriage does change this. . .soft attitude of yours. " He started upstairs. "Sometimes I wonder how you and Barnabas came to have the last name Collins at all. "

Barnabas stayed in bed until noon, surprised that no one woke him to go to the yards. There was, however, quite a clatter going on in the hall, and he heard a thump and then cursing, as if someone had dropped a trunk or torn a door from its hinges. He threw on a dressing-gown and opened his door cautiously.

Evan and Ennis Stanwood were there, trying to maneuver a rather large bureau through a considerably more narrow doorway. The corner of the mirror had crashed against the threshold, and the two men turned to look at him with some embarrassment, a reprimand frozen on Evan's lips, and an obscenity on Ennis's.

"Evan!" Barnabas called and came out into the hall. "Where are you going with that-is someone changing rooms?"

"Good morning, Mister Barnabas, " the servant nodded politely, ignoring the question tactfully, "or shall I say good afternoon? I hope we didn't ruin your sleep with all this clatter. Mr. Joshua said you were to have the day off from the yards. " When Barnabas didn't answer, Evan diverted his attention to Ennis again. "Now come on, Stanwood, and get this right! Move over that way a little bit. "

Ennis complied, and the struggle resumed. Seeing that they had no intention of saying anything more to him, Barnabas went back into his room and dressed. He thought he heard his mother's voice coming up the stairs, and others as well, and saw that he was right when he went to the landing and leaned over the rail.

"Good morning," he interrupted coldly, and the conversation by the door ceased. Laura, his mother, and the ever-smirking Lothaire looked up at him.

"Hello, Barnabas," Naomi said, somewhat uncomfortably. "I hope all this commotion didn't wake you."

"No-not at all. Tell me-what is going on? The house seems rather full."

No one else seemed to want to answer, so Lothaire took it upon himself to break the ice.

"Your future aunt is moving in," he told the other man with a slight bow. "Your father decided this morning."

"I see." He caught Laura's eyes. She looked distantly apologetic, or at least he thought so, but she said nothing. "Do you require my assistance in any way, then, Miss Stockbridge?"

"Thank you, Barnabas... but no. Evan and M. Pocquet's servants are handling it all quite nicely."

"Ennis Stanwood is your servant?" He turned his attention back to Lothaire.

"As of today, yes."

"Hardly one of the more reputable people in town. Jeremiah would be quite displeased if he knew he were in this house."

"My servants need no past," Lothaire replied quickly. "And your uncle need have no contact with Ennis at all."

"No-I suppose he needn't. This house is very large. Avoiding someone is quite easy when one puts his mind to it." His gaze bored down on Laura again. She turned back to Lothaire.

"They're sure to have that old bureau moved in by now," she told him. "I think we should go back for the rest at once. Did you not have to have your things out of the Inn by twelve?"

"Yes, that I did. Mrs. Collins-might I go up and see how those two are progressing?"

"Of course," Naomi said.

"You won't have to do that, sir." Evan came up behind Barnabas. Ennis was now here to be seen. "Everything's in there, just like you said."

"Fine," Lothaire presumptuously replied before Naomi did. "Tell Ennis to go back to the wagon now-we're going for my own luggage. You may drop us off and then take Miss Stockbridge back here. And be quick about it, both of you-we haven't all day."

"Yes, sir." Evan disappeared again.

"Is your presence required to help Miss Stockbridge relocate her things?" Barnabas glared at Lothaire. "I must say, monsieur, your talents are certainly many and varied."

"It isn't that, exactly," Laura put in. "Of course I'd had no idea I'd be moving in here so suddenly, and the lease on my room won't run out for three months. Unfortunately I couldn't break it-so, rather than force me to pay the extra, Lothaire has decided to move in."

"How very convenient. I take it the Inn was not to your satisfaction."

"I have decided to stay on longer than I had originally planned." Lothaire smirked again.

"I'm sure my father is pleased to hear that."

Evan and Ennis went down the stairs. Laura turned to follow them.

"We shall be back as soon as possible, Mrs. Collins," she said to Naomi in passing.

"Yes, all right. And we hope to see you here again sometime, as well, monsieur."

"That, dear lady," Lothaire said as he kissed her hand, "will present no problem."

When they had gone, Barnabas wrinkled his nose. "I daresay you had better wash that hand, Mother."

"Barnabas," she looked up at him with sympathy, "are you all right?"

"Yes," he said as he turned away. "Everything is all right."

"I want to see you again before the wedding," Lothaire said quietly as he walked Laura back to the carriage. The servants were unpacking his own clothing inside her apartment.

"I doubt that will be possible," she told him calmly, staying two steps ahead of him and not looking around. "Besides-trying to seduce the bride, shame on you."

"I will no doubt have many women in there before the time does come that we are together," he smiled again, "but in the darkness I shall see each of them as you."

"Do not insult me by comparing me to those pieces of baggage." She got up onto the wagon-bench. He held her hand as she did so.

"I meant no insult." Evan came out of the house, and Lothaire grimaced at being interrupted. "You will no doubt find Collinwood very much to your comfort," he hurried on in an even lower voice, "but should you ever tire of it, your old rooms stand open to you always. Remember that."

"I shall," she muttered vaguely as Evan climbed up beside her.

"Will you be wanting anything else before we go back to the house?" the servant inquired politely.

"No," Laura watched her old apartment fall behind the now-moving wagon. "I have absolutely everything I require."

Lothaire waved at them as they pulled away, but Laura did not look back a second time. Shrugging, he crossed the street and went towards the pub. A group of sailors tumbled out as he opened the door and almost crashed into him. He stepped aside and they reeled away, braying with drunken laughter.

"Common rabble," he said under his breath and examined each of the passing barmaids as they stomped by with trays held aloft.

"For common sluts."

He squinted into the dim room and smiled in surprise. Milo Seabrook was there, with a plate of beef and an ale on the table in front of him. He was quietly casting his eyes downward when one of the less virtuous waitresses came bouncing past.

Lothaire went up to the younger man and knocked on the bench to get his attention. Milo looked up.

"On your break from the yards, Seabrook?" He had to raise his voice to be heard above the clink of mugs and the roar of conversation.

"Yes," Milo nodded. "Would you care to join me?"

"Indeed I would." Lothaire took the other seat. A smaller woman came over to take his order. He saw by her eyes that she was not like most of the others and was intrigued. "I shall have the same as my friend Milo here."

"Very well," she nodded and lifted her dark face just a little. She seemed European to him, or perhaps even part Indian or slave. In either case he was not worried. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a tiny smile cross Milo's lips. "And will you be needing anything else, Master Seabrook?"

"No, thank you," Milo said politely. She left to fill the order. Milo turned back to Lothaire. "I see we're going to be neighbors

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from now on-you're taking Laura's place."

"Yes-but she's getting the better deal. Would that I could get an invitation to move into a place like Collinwood."

"Surely that's not such a futile dream-I was under the impression you could have anything you wanted, Lothaire."

"True enough, but what need has a single man for such a house? Now if I could fill it with women..." his eyes settled back on the waitress, walking away, "well, that would be different."

Milo blushed slightly, stirred his food with a fork. "What sort of lodgings did you keep in Europe?" he asked in an effort to right the conversation.

"Nothing overwhelming, I shouldn't think. I sold one of my homes before I left-didn't get so high a price for it, I must admit."

"Really. You're not planning on returning for some time, then."

"Laura's lease will keep me here six more months," he exaggerated calmly. "After that, we shall see. I've rather had my fill of the idle life the rich live over there-I find the States much more charming, and this area in particular."

"I suppose it is quite different." Milo broke up a piece of bread.

The woman returned with Lothaire's food.

"I thought perhaps you gentlemen would like some extra rolls," she smiled primly, setting the basket especially close to Milo.

"Indeed we would," he replied at once. "Thank you-very much."

"You're most welcome. Have a pleasant lunch." She left them alone again, but Lothaire was amused to see that Milo's gaze followed her all the way across the room.

"Jeremiah," Naomi came out of the drawing room eagerly, as if she had been counting off the minutes until he got home. He hung his hat on the rack and smiled down at her. "I'm so glad you're back. Tell me quickly-is Joshua with you?"

"He went to the stables for a minute-says his horse is losing a shoe. I'm sure he'll be right along."

"Good-as long as we have a little time. Come with me right now." She hurried back into the next room, and he followed her uncertainly. "Naomi! What is this all about?" "Close your eyes until I say to open them." "Close my eyes! Why, what on earth for?" "Just do as I say," she hurried on, "or you won't get your surprise."

"Oh, very well," he laughed, "but I can assure you, I will feel quite foolish if anyone suddenly walks in and sees me."

"Never mind that." When he had done so, Naomi opened the other door and silently ushered Laura inside. "All right, now you may look."

He complied and then drew back with shocked pleasure.

"It's about time you came home, Jeremiah," she said.

"Laura-what are you doing here?"

"What do you mean by that? I live here now. It was your brother's idea-I moved in this morning."

"Well, I can hardly-Naomi, you do know how to surprise a man."

"I think I'll go up to the study now," his sister-in-law smiled knowingly. "I'm sure you'll both excuse me."

When she had gone, Jeremiah took Laura into his arms and kissed her.

"Why didn't you tell me Joshua had asked you to move in?"

"Because he hadn't until today. He sent Evan over with the wagon and told me to get my things together at once."

"I see." He sank onto the divan, and she went with him. "Well, you can be sure he didn't do it to satisfy my impatience."

"Who cares what his motives are? They work to our advantage, and that is what's important."

"He asked you to move in because of Barnabas. I'm almost sure of it."

She grew solemn. "Barnabas...yes."

He stared at her. "I didn't want to ask you this before, Laura-I almost didn't want to know the answer. But I have to. Please...tell me what it was between the two of you."

"It was nothing-ever. I saw him once or twice-in town, in the most innocent of circumstances, I can assure you. How could I know what was going on inside his head? I'm sure you know that I would have discouraged him had I had any idea..."

"Yes...I believe you. I can't figure him out myself sometimes. I couldn't expect you to." He took her face in his hands. He loved her. And, unlike all the other things he had wanted in the past, she would not get away. "I only wish there were something I could say to him."

"Well, there's no help for it. We are going to be married, and he'll just have to accept it. He'll find another. I'm sure of it."

"I suppose he will...in time. And time is something we have more than enough of. The rest of my life is yours, Laura." She did not reply, so he kissed her again. After a moment, he straightened with a sudden thought. "So tell me-have you seen all of the estate yet?"

"No-Evan and Naomi offered, but of course I wouldn't hear of it. I wanted to wait for you."

"I am honored. And I would start right now, with the upstairs, if there weren't other people in the house."

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"You are fortunate that the walls are deaf," she teased. "We would be in trouble otherwise."

"I think you're right," he smiled and blushed. "Perhaps we should talk about the wedding itself,

then. You've never mentioned if you have some guests of your own to invite. Come to think of it, you've never mentioned any of your friends to me."

"Oh, there's no one important enough to invite. As for my relatives, all of them either live in Europe or would refuse to come."

"There's no one? That's rather a shame-are you disappointed?"

"No-not in the least. You invite whomever you want, Jeremiah-I'm sure there will be enough to fill the house, one way or the other."

"Yes, Joshua will see to that. In fact, he already has one guest picked out for us."

"Really? Who?"

Jeremiah got up and wandered to the window. "Lothaire," he said unhappily.

"Well, of course-that's to be expected. I'm sure he'll be no trouble. What's one more person at a wedding, after all?"

"It isn't that. It's only well, I've never liked him. I think him pompous and...odd. I don't trust him. And I don't like his interfering in the shipping company, no matter what Joshua may say. And I particularly resent his hanging about this house all the time and becoming involved in matters of this family-in matters of the two of us."

"Oh, you needn't worry about that." She settled back on the sofa and smiled. "Lothaire will change nothing between us."

Lothaire signed the last of his business letters and sealed each of them up to mail the next day. He leaned back from his new desk and looked around the room with satisfaction. Laura's ex-quarters were even more comfortable than he had expected- certainly better than the stuffy rooms to be found at the inn. He had everything-furniture in excellent shape, a big maple wardrobe, even a few pictures on the walls. About the only thing missing, in fact, was a woman waiting in the next room.

He opened the front door and gazed up at the grey sky. It was time to go out. There was some time left, but not much. He took down his hat and cloak and went out into the cool evening.

He liked the feel of the wooden walkway creaking beneath his feet, the smell of the salty air, the patterns thrown down by the shadows of surrounding buildings. He could hardly wait to experience it the other way.

A movement on the other side of the street caught his attention, and he saw that it was a girl, walking home alone. She was wearing a thick, hooded mantle, and he could not see her identity because of it. He hid in the darkness when she turned to cross over, then followed her discreetly, watching her slim waist toss from side to side. There was no one else about.

The sky continued to dim, little by little. The dim outline of the moon soon became visible in the distance. It would be full.

The woman paused a moment and went into one of the shops that lined the street. Lothaire leaned against the house beside it and waited for her to come out. Presently his palms began to itch. So did his face, for that matter, and then the insides of his mouth. Still she did not come out, but he was not impatient. The feeling swelled, filled him, excited him.

A bell at the top of the shop-door jingled, and at last she appeared again, a basket over her arm. Lothaire smiled, feeling almost drunk, and staggered out after her. He was breathing loudly, quickly, and she heard him gain.

She whirled, saw his twisted figure emerging from the shadows behind her, and screamed. The hood fell back, and he saw that it was Milo's girlfriend from the tavern. He grabbed for her, but she wasted no time. He felt the side of the basket sting his cheek and then her foot in a rather unpleasant place. In his temporarily unstable condition, it was all the worse. His knees buckled, and he fell onto the sidewalk, howling. She turned and ran up the street and away from him, yelling. Lothaire managed to pick himself up and ran in the other direction, towards the docks. Some people appeared on the street with her, but before they could see him he was gone.

He ducked behind a leaning warehouse and tore off his cravat and shirt. Hair, thick and black, shimmered all over his chest, his arms, his throat. The pain began to come in earnest, and though he usually did not mind, this time it seemed a nuisance.

Distantly, he heard footsteps-belonging to several people-and they were coming closer.

The front paws were forming. He could not move. He was vulnerable, and someone was coming. One of the beats was a little slower than the rest.

"The fools," he managed to gasp, "the fools!"

Three people turned the corner and were looking down at him. The half-transformed Lothaire looked up, eyes flashing.

"Dear God," Zedekiah remarked to Ennis and Matthew, "what's he doing out here?"

Lothaire sank back, sighing with relief. The odd sound had been Martin's limp, all along. He should have realized.

"You idiots!" his voice shook and changed even as he tried to utter the words. "You're late!"

Zedekiah touched the growing fur on his own cheek and looked apologetic.

"We're sorry, Lothaire," he said. "It's slower with us. We tried to find you but..."

"But we are ready," Ennis finished eagerly. "We are your servants and will follow you this night."

Jeremiah leaned back in his chair and put his feet on the desk.

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"Come in, Milo," he encouraged the clerk, "and sit down."

"Did you want to dictate a letter?"

"No-actually I want to talk to you about a far more interesting subject."

"The wedding," Milo surmised with a groan.

"Why, Milo! You're clairvoyant!"

"Not at all. But what else do you talk of lately?"

Jeremiah laughed. "Do I bore you? I hope you'll forgive me if so."

"Oh, that's all right-I quite understand." The tone of his voice made Jeremiah instantly suspicious. Sensing it, Milo hurried on.

"Anyway, I suppose all of your family is anxious. Your sisters in particular."

"Naomi, yes-Abigail, no. As for Joshua, his mind is solely on the business repercussions, such as they may be. He's invited all his investors, half of whom I don't even know."

"Ah, well, you'll have a full house in any case. And... Barnabas? What has he said?"

A sigh. "That was what I wanted to talk to you about. Of course you realize that I can't ask him to be the best man. He'd certainly take it the wrong way."

"I'm sure."

"Therefore, Milo, I am in need of someone else. That is why you are here. I should like you to take on the burden."

"Me?" Milo seemed genuinely surprised. "Of course I would be honored, Jeremiah, but surely your brother."

"No. The choice is mine, and I choose you. Milo-will you indulge me and do me the favor?"

After a moment of consideration, Milo grinned.

"If Laura has no objections."

Jeremiah leaned forward and shook the other's hand.

"Then you're bound to it," he said. "One week."

"I shall be ready."

There was some commotion on the docks outside, and a distinctive and offensive laugh came through the open window.

Jeremiah glanced out and shook his head with distaste.

"What is all that about?" Milo came around to see.

"Your illustrious neighbor and his new-found entourage."

"Lothaire, do you mean?"

"Yes, damn him." Lothaire turned from Matthew and Ennis and waved.

"Collins!" he cried. "How nice to see you! Why don't you come out of that stuffy office and join us out here for a while? The sun is too lovely to ignore-and so are the other sights, for that matter!" His eyes fell onto an elegantly dressed female traveler who scuttled away with her escort in shame. There was a slut on his own arm as well, and she turned to grin clownishly at the two men in the window. Jeremiah closed it and headed for the door. Milo followed him.

"Standing out there with that rabble as if they own the place," he snapped on his way out. "Joshua's not here, and he knows it."

"

By the time they got out to the place where Lothaire was standing, they found that the other travelers, slighted and no little afraid of the louder newcomers, were giving the four of them a wide berth, and they did not appear at all concerned. Ennis was relating

an obviously bawdy tale to the others in his party and was making certain that the more delicate sensibilities of the strolling aristocrats were spared no shocking detail.

Jeremiah came into the group angrily, and Lothaire's whore turned her cheap, heavy-lidded stare on him. He ignored her, and so did Milo.

"Hello, Lothaire," he said without a smile. "Here to enjoy the smell of the salt water?"

"Among other things, yes. And you, poor Collins, stuck in your dingy little corner all day long. I pity you, truly, but I'm glad to see you've joined us now."

"I see you've made several new friends in the short time you've been in town. How are you, Ennis, Matthew?" His gaze told them they were not welcome.

"We're jest havin' a bit o' fun," Matthew grinned through rotten teeth. "We like to hear about Europe an' France as much as the next guy."

"I had no idea your tastes were so worldly."

"Everyone likes a change now an' then."

"As you can see, my brother ain't here today," Ennis cut in hotly, his story forgotten. "That's a'cause he can't stand here no more, not on hot days like this. The sea air is too strong for him- it makes what's left of his toes hurt something fierce." His pig-like eyes bored into Jeremiah's.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he countered evenly. "But I hope it's taught him to be more careful where he aims his guns."

"Ah, my dear Collins, you don't have to explain to us why you're here," Lothaire shook his head condescendingly. "You're afraid that my friends are a bit out of place here on your fine pier. And I am sorry if I have caused you any embarrassment. Perhaps the tavern would suit us better. What do you say, Shepard, Ennis? Shall we retreat and leave these idle sightseers to their pristine white seacoast?"

"Perhaps that would be a better idea," Jeremiah nodded. The whore started to laugh wildly for no reason at all.

Ennis was still squinting and was about to say something more when a scream from the other end of the dock cut him short.

Everyone turned to see sailors clustering quickly around one of the warehouses, their faces turning green, white, and other pasty colors. Jeremiah and Milo rushed over to see what was happening, while Lothaire and his lackeys followed along at a somewhat more leisurely pace.

Jeremiah made his way through the clump of sailors, who were only too relieved to turn away

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and make a noble exit, and stopped short when he saw the thing lying there on the floor of the warehouse. Milo's eyes grew wide, and a second later he was running for the edge of the pier.

"Oh my God," Jeremiah whispered, stomach knotting in several places. The mutilated body of a woman was spread out before him in several pieces, a bloody reddened mess unrecognizable as a human save for the shreds of clothing clinging to it and the long blonde hair that was stuck to the dock with dried blood.

Barnabas came down the stairs, tugging at his ruffly shirtfront, and paused when he saw that Laura was in one of the drawing-room chairs, paper and envelopes spread out before her. He turned away and opened the front door.

She had seen him. He squared his shoulders even as he felt her gaze fall on them.

"Wait," she said, and he had to comply.

"How are you this afternoon... aunt-to-be?" he asked, voice bitterly pleasant.

"Well enough, thank you."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"You are on your way to town?"

"I was... yes."

"Then if you are in no rush, do come and sit with me awhile. I've scarcely seen you since I moved in. . . I don't believe we've shared more than a few words."

"I thought you wanted it that way." He let the door fall shut. "If you think me impolite, do forgive me."

"I shall. . . if you come here, that is."

He considered it a moment, then went into the room, but merely stood before her and gloated. He looked at the paper she was holding in one hand.

"Is that a guest-list for the wedding?"

"Yes."

He sniffed defiantly. "Then I hope I am not on it."

"Not on it? But of course you are. Surely you don't think your uncle that spiteful. . . or me."

"It has nothing to do with spite. The event holds no interest for me, and so I have decided not to attend. Perhaps I will arrange a short trip somewhere-or perhaps I will merely pace the grounds and stand on the old bridge and watch the water pass beneath me."

"I would prefer that you came."

"You cannot always have everything the way you want it, Laura."

She stood. "Barnabas, you perceive the entire situation incorrectly. There was no other choice to be made. I never told you I was yours."

"I doubt that I would want you. As I told you. I prefer my freedom."

"I was chosen by destiny to be your uncle's wife."

"Of course you were."

"It will make more sense----when you are older."

"Yes-when I am older. Does it ever come round to anything else?" He turned and left the house.

Laura went back to the dull wedding invitations and pushed him from her mind for good. He was only human, after all-what could he, or any of them, understand? She remembered Charles Stockbridge, wallowing and ultimately dying in his foolish grief, never dreaming her glory.

Barnabas was walking down the drive, and she saw him through the window. He fancied that he hurt-but he really did not know how lucky he was that he had not been The Next.

She set the bowl of stew in front of him and waited until he had tasted it. He nodded with appreciation.

"Good?" she asked.

"More than that," Milo beamed. "I am never disappointed in what you serve me, you know."

"And the ale? It's not flat, I should hope?"

"Indeed not. Just right."

"Then I daresay you'll have to pay for it!"

"I thought there'd be a catch to it!" Laughing slightly, he reached into his waistcoat pocket and held out a coin. Her hand brushed against his as she took it. He caught her gently by the wrist. "I would have no other girl serve me, you know."

"Perhaps no other will have to, someday," she smiled and slowly drew her hand back. Then she was gone. He continued to smile after her for a long time and became so enraptured in his own thoughts that he did not notice when Lothaire came up and took the chair beside him, as he had done

the week before. When at last he did turn back to his plate, he was startled to find another person there.

"Hello, Seabrook," Lothaire beamed with pleasure. "I hope I didn't scare you."

"Just a bit, yes!" Milo blinked. "You have a way of sneaking up on a person, Monsieur Boc-quet."

"A trait I am constantly apologizing for, I can assure you."

"Come to have a bit of supper, then?"

"Yes-It's not easy when one has no woman to cook for him or brighten his table, but then you don't have that problem any longer, do you, Milo?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," Milo said with some embarrassment and slurped at his stew. Lothaire decided to let it rest.

"Tell me, have you heard any further news about the murders yet?"

"No-none. Ghastly business."

"I heard that the second body was in even worse condition than the one we had the misfortune to encounter outside Jeremiah's office. You're lucky you weren't there, dear boy,

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because I remember all too well your reaction to the first. Rather a strong one, at that."

"It wasn't the most pleasant of sights, you must admit." Milo became a little defensive.

"And no one has any idea who might be responsible for such brutality. A shame."

"Odd you should say 'who' and not 'what' - as I heard it, it was a pack of wolves, come down from the forest by Collinwood."

"Really!" Lothaire folded a napkin and tucked it into his collar. "An interesting theory. I was told that it was a madman of some sort, given to fits of frenzy and cannibalism."

Milo dropped his spoon and sighed.

"Really. Lothaire."

"I'm sorry-I'm spoiling your appetite."

"It's not exactly an appropriate subject for the table, no." The younger man smiled and drained his ale. He examined the empty mug. "Would you excuse me a moment, Lothaire? I should like to see about getting a refill."

"Have one drawn for me, too, would you please?"

"Yes, of course-I'll be right back." He moved off into the dimly outlined crowd, and Lothaire watched him with eyes that glittered.

"A madman indeed," he smiled to himself. "If that is what the town wishes, then that is what they should have."

Milo waited until she was behind the counter, then ordered the drinks. When she brought them to him, she smiled shyly.

"There, Milo-don't drink too much, though, mind you."

"I shan't," he promised her, then frowned. "But what's this? Are you afraid to meet my eyes all of a sudden?"

She reached into her apron pocket and drew out a bit of cloth. "I had meant to give you this at the table, Milo, but as soon as I got there I found I hadn't the courage."

"The courage for what?"

She gave him the cloth, and he unfolded it and saw that it was a handkerchief with his initials embroidered in the corner.

"What!" he beamed. "Have you gone and made this yourself?"

She nodded with some embarrassment and backed away. "I didn't know your middle name," she shrugged, "but I hope this will be all right. I never saw you with one, so I thought perhaps you were without. Do you think me foolish?"

"Foolish! But it's beautiful!" He ran his fingers along the curling letters. "Words cannot express my gratitude."

"Then words do not have to." Her black eyes shone in the candle light, and then she slipped away.

"Working alone for a change, I see?" Joshua

came into the study, and Jeremiah looked up from the book he had been reading.

"Laura is off with Naomi someplace," he said. "They wouldn't tell me where, but I suspect it has to do with a wedding gift for me."

"Wedding! Wedding! I've been hearing of nothing else for weeks and am about to go mad from the mention of it! The only time I have any respite from all this wide-eyed chatter is when I am with Barnabas."

"That is not a very kind thing to say, Joshua."

Joshua paid no attention. "I suppose you heard there was another murder in town last night," he went on.

"Yes, I did hear that."

"I don't know what this world is coming to-of course, half the women in this town ask for things to happen to them, the way they so shamelessly parade their...wares up and down the wharf after dark. If there is a madman, then they ought to keep their doors locked and behave sensibly for a change."

"A madman, yes." Jeremiah looked thoughtful. "If there is one, I wonder who it might be?"

"Surely not anyone we know."

"Oh, no," his brother returned sarcastically, "surely not."

Joshua poured himself a drink. "Are you implying something, Jeremiah?"

"No-not really."

"I should hope not."

"But you must admit-some of our business associates are rather...strange."

Joshua slammed the decanter down. "Are you starting on Lothaire again?" ^

"I never mentioned his name!"

"You scarcely had to!"

"Oh, let's be honest with each other, shall we, Joshua?" Discarding his book, Jeremiah got up and paced around the room. "Don't you ever wonder about the man? I told you about the incident at the docks last week-now why would a man like Lothaire keep company with the likes of Matthew Shepard and Ennis Stanwood? Something doesn't add up-I wish I knew more about him."

"Whom Lothaire associates with on his own time is not my concern."

"No, I know-it's his money you're interested in. Still if he is involved in something illegal..."

"Oh, nonsense! I almost wish you would talk about the wedding again. That was irritating, but not nearly so much as this."

"Well, you needn't listen to either any longer. I'm going downstairs. The desk is yours, Joshua." He went down the stairs and to the drawing room.

He went in and stopped short. Barnabas was at the writing hutch, an open shipyard's ledger in front of him.

They stared at each other for a long moment, neither daring to move. Then Barnabas set down his pen, slapped the ledger shut, and stalked from the room.

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Jeremiah looked at the vacant desk, then went to it and sat down with a sigh. He opened a drawer and took out his letter-writing materials. As he did so, his hand brushed against something else, and he removed that as well. It was a deck of playing cards, battered but long unused. Buried next to it was a scrap of paper detailing promised payments from games won. There had never been any thought of collection. Barnabas had been ahead by ten dollars.

He dropped the cards, and his entire chest seemed to grow heavy. A tree rattled on the windowpane, propelled by the warm wind, and it was as if fingers from the past were tapping, calling for his attention.

He looked down at the envelope before him and addressed it to Cecile Chenier, another acquaintance in France. Then he propped his head on his hand and scratched out a few congenially vague lines to open the letter. He found, though, that he had extreme difficulty

concentrating and was about to return to the window and break off the offending twigs when there was a clatter in the foyer and the women were back, talking and laughing as they hung up their cloaks and bonnets and other apparel. He heard Naomi say she was going upstairs to see her husband, and when she was gone he stepped out into the threshold where Laura could see him.

"Did you have a good time in town?" he asked and could not keep the unhappiness from his voice.

"Yes, especially your sister-in-law. She's very excited about the wedding, you know. One would almost think it was her own."

"That sounds like her," he smiled a little, but weakly.

"You look as if someone's given you a beating."

"Do I? I'm sorry. I suppose I was thinking... of, of days gone by. I was wondering if they really are gone... if we can ever recapture them."

"What a strange thing to ponder-days before we are to be married." She went to the couch and watched him thoughtfully. "It's Barnabas again, isn't it?"

"He thinks he loves you."

"He may think so-but he doesn't, not really. I was only something different to him, different and forbidden."

"I know. But I thought it would be straightened out by now."

She stood. "You're thinking of calling off the ceremony, aren't you? I can see it in your eyes. Jeremiah, how could you?"

"Not calling it off, no!" He took her by the arms. "But, Laura-would it be so terrible to postpone it, just a bit? He only needs a little more time-it would be better for all of us. Another month, let's say-even three weeks. What difference would it make?"

She tensed in his grip. "We cannot do that." For the first time he saw unbridled rage in her eyes.

"But why not? Everyone would understand,

especially Naomi. Please, Laura, at least think about it! You know I love you, but I do want what's best for everyone----

"That is not what's best for everyone! We cannot postpone the wedding, not by one day."

"I don't understand!" He drew back. "I'll never change my mind about you-you needn't worry about that!"

"That's not what I meant at all."

"Then what is it?"

She pushed him further away and turned, smiling to herself with satisfaction.

"We cannot postpone the ceremony by one day," she repeated calmly this time and waited for his gasp of shock, "because I am already with child."

The wedding came as scheduled, much sooner than he had thought it would.

Laura waited in her room, staring into a full-length mirror, snickering at the image of herself in full bridal regalia. It was so false-so materialistic.

The door opened, and behind the reflection of herself there came the image of Lothaire. He grinned knowingly, folded his arms, and leaned against the wall.

"I thought I saw the last of the maids rush by^^

Laura smiled back without turning. "I told them they could go. There is a lot to be done downstairs."

"Their brows did look rather wet. And your sister-in-law? I'd have thought she'd be up here clinging to you, chattering that womanly nonsense."

"She had something to attend to, as well."

"I see. Ah, but you make a radiant bride, Laura-as beautiful as any I have ever seen, though not nearly so virtuous."

"Take your snide remarks elsewhere," she told him, not altogether seriously. "They are not appropriate tonight."

"You adore my snide ways," he came closer, "and don't try to convince me otherwise." She pretended to ignore him as he kissed her neck roughly.

"Pay attention to where you are," she said vaguely. "Charles Stockbridge is not as blind as he used to be."

"Bah-the present Charles is as big a love-struck fool as the first, never fear."

She stood and walked away. "I daresay Joshua is waiting for you downstairs."

"I imagine he is." Lothaire opened the door, but his lewd smile did not fade. "I wish you the best of luck in your marriage, of course-and I shall stop by from time to time to see that everything is going smoothly."

"You needn't go out of your way."

"I won't. That is not my method, and you know it." He left her and trotted down the stairs

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nonchalantly.

Jeremiah was filling a glass with wine when Joshua came into the downstairs study.

"The musicians are here," his brother informed him curtly. "And what do you think you're doing?"

"Merely calming my nerves." Jeremiah sipped at the liquor and grimaced. "Rotten stuff."

"You had better not be drunk at your own wedding. It is a serious occasion, meriting a clear head at the very least."

"Don't worry; I won't disgrace you. And I'm not drunk-only shaky, as might be expected."

"I see no reason to be ill at ease. You chose the girl yourself; you insisted I bless this foolish scheme; and you've been going on and on of nothing else for nearly a month. Now you act as if you don't want to go through with it!"

"I haven't changed my mind." He slammed down the glass irritably.

"I'm glad to hear that. Now go out and make yourself visible to the guests-there are a few here, you know."

"Yes," Jeremiah had to grimace for all his anticipation, "I thought I saw Lothaire walking up the lawn a minute ago."

"Well at least he is prompt, which is more than I can say for your friend Seabrook."

"You'd have loved it if I had asked Lothaire to be the best man, wouldn't you? It would have done the business so much good. Never mind that his presence alone will cast a damper over the entire evening, much less his participation."

"That wine is making your tongue work in strange ways, Jeremiah-take care that you conduct yourself better out there."

"I told you, you needn't worry!" He put the bottle up on the shelf. Some of it splashed out and onto his sleeve. He rubbed at the stain with annoyance.

"Are you almost ready?"

"Yes." He paused. "Joshua... is Barnabas here?"

"No."

"I see."

"I tried to talk some sense into him, but as you can imagine, it did no good. He is determined to undermine these proceedings in any way he can."

"Perhaps he'll still change his mind."

"He will if I have anything to say about it. "

"No, Joshua-leave him alone. It isn't necessary that he attend if he doesn't want to. "

"All this discord over a woman. Fickle creatures-sometimes I think they were only put on this earth to make trouble for us all. "

"I'm sure Laura would be very interested to hear that-or Naomi, for that matter. "

Joshua muttered an excuse and left the room. Jeremiah looked at his reflection in the wineglass

and wished his eyes could seem brighter. But he was doing the right thing. He knew that.

Joshua was greeting some guests outside the room. He heard his name mentioned. He straightened his collar and went out to see who was there.

And the tree branches continued to tap urgently on the window.

Barnabas came into the flower-bedecked room where the wedding was to be held and looked it up and down with disgust. It seemed quite spacious with all the furniture either moved around or simply removed.

Three white-wigged musicians tiptoed into the chamber and stopped when they saw him standing there. He nodded without pleasantry. The skinniest member of the trio, with a flute tucked under his arm, came up to him and tipped his head politely.

"I trust everything is satisfactory," Barnabas said with forced interest.

"Yes, quite so. You are the brother of the man to be married?"

"No," Barnabas replied, but for some reason the word stuck in his throat. "I'm .the nephew. "

"Oh. Very good, just the same. If you have come to check on things for him, you may tell him that we are rehearsing now and will be ready whenever he wishes. "

"I shall leave you to your practice, then. " As he was about to leave the room, one of the stringed instruments squawked violently. He glanced back, and the three faces went an apologetic crimson. He shook his head and continued out, ignoring their sheepish smiles.

When he took his cape from the rack by the front door, it opened and Milo was there.

"Hello, Barnabas," the clerk said cautiously.

Barnabas surveyed the other's suit. "My, but aren't you the picture of elegance tonight? Do enjoy yourself, Milo. " He stalked past him and into the darkness. Milo stared after him unhappily and started forward and almost ran into Lothaire who was just coming down the stairs.

"Well! If it's not my favorite neighbor!" Lothaire beamed falsely.

"How do you do, Lothaire. " Milo's eyes vaguely darkened. He glanced up the staircase curiously. "Have you been upstairs already? I-I had been told the wedding would be held down here."

"It is. " The warmth went out of Lothaire's smile, and Milo suddenly hated him.

"So I thought. " He brushed past and went to find Jeremiah.

Barnabas walked down over the sloping field as he had so many times before and found that his

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feet had carried him to the bridge once again. He wandered down to the edge of the water and gazed into the depths, which were hazy with current. A school of minnows was covered by his shadow. They broke apart in a flash of silver, and he watched them disappear.

He heard a horse sneeze somewhere behind him, and then another, and a grating human laugh. Barnabas turned and approached the woods with some anger.

"Who is that?" he demanded.

"Only me," Zedekiah Martin's voice came from the darkness. He stumbled forward, leading two horses. Barnabas relaxed visibly.

"What are you doing here?"

Zedekiah chortled. "Just bringin' the mus-hure's horsie down here for a drink, that's all. " He looped the reins over his right arm and brought up a jug.

"And sneakin' off a little for my self in the bargain. " He drank deeply and wiped his nose.

"I see. "

Zedekiah threw himself down on the grass. He let the horses wander off by themselves; and they thrust their black noses into the hissing water, flicking their tails carelessly at the moon above.

"An' you?" Martin rolled his bloodshot eyes back towards the younger man. "Why ain't you up with them others an' their fancy weddin'?"

Barnabas went back to his original spot and finally sat, keeping his eye somewhat suspiciously at the other. He cleared his throat.

"It's of no concern to me. I didn't want to go. "

"Oh ! " Zedekiah noisily took another swig of his liquor and lay flat on the ground. "Well, mebbe you are a little better'n the rest of 'em after all. "

"Maybe so. "

There was a moment of silence. Then Zedekiah brightened and sat up.

"You wanna see something interesting? If you've got the stomach, that is. "

"What?"

Zedekiah inched across the grass and pulled his boot and sock off.

"That! There, have a look. Your own uncle's handiwork. " He set down the jug and pointed at his bare foot with some pride. "Hurts me powerful, of course, an' I don't have to tell you what women say. "

Barnabas' eyes widened slightly. Two of Zedekiah's toes were gone, and those that were left were grotesquely misshapen and twisted.

"Jeremiah did that?" he asked with some surprise.

"Almost a year ago t' the day. " Martin nodded.

"The night you went to the gypsy camp. "

"So, what of it? Don't matter where I was. "

"But you shot at him first. He told me so. You were going to kill the gypsies and he stopped you. "

"I wouldn't listen to a word he says. Damned butcher. " There was a stretch of silence between them. Zedekiah picked up his jug and held it out.

"Here-have some o' this. "

"No thank you," Barnabas replied and tried to divert his gaze.

"Why not? Boy, are ye? Go on-it'll do your insides good. "

"Well. . . " he sighed and somewhat reluctantly took it.

"Go on," Zedekiah urged.

He touched it to his lips. It swelled horrible, like burning whale-oil or worse. He closed his eyes and tipped his head back. It rushed down his throat, stripping it raw as it went, exploding in his nose and ears and leaving them numb. He choked violently and would have spilled the rest if Zedekiah hadn't protectively snatched it back. He began to cough and gasp, and tears of suffocation came to his eyes. Martin was laughing wildly, stupidly.

"So, too strong for you, is it?"

Barnabas shook his head furiously. "I think- I think perhaps I drew it down the wrong-way," he hacked and rubbed his nose with a sleeve, just as Zedekiah had done.

"Aw, I take back what I said. You aren't any better'n them others. Jest as snake-bellied as that uncle of yours an' as dainty an' pitiful as that slut he's gettin' himself married to. "

Barnabas paused in mid-gag, the effects of the whiskey fading all at once.

"What did you say?" he asked with a frown and wiped his nose again.

"Jest what I been sayin' all along. " Zedekiah's face grew cruel with triumph. "You're worthless, whole damn bunch of you. Even Lothaire thinks so. Like your idiot uncle. Couldn't keep a woman if she was tied to 'im with a rope. That's why they had to invite the mushure up to the ceremony-so as he can take over for the other one when the time comes t' take the bride upstairs. "

"I don't care if Lothaire wants you to wait here or not," Barnabas rose, clenching his fists. "Get off this land. "

"Who are you to be givin' me orders, boy?" Hastily Zedekiah pulled his boot back on, but he forgot the sock. "Can't even hold your whiskey, an' you think you're better'n me? Oh, but I know why you're mad. An' I'm sorry. Next time I come down an' you're here, I'll make it a point to bring some of your mother's milk down for you to sip on while I take care of this stuff." He capped the jug and started to tuck it back into his coat as he stood.

Barnabas gritted his teeth and drove his fist into the side of Zedekiah's grubby face. With a drunken grunt, the other went to his knees on the grass, shaking his head dazedly. When at last he was able to look up again, his face was twisted with hatred.

"I ain't goin' to take that from you, boy," he sneered. Then he sprang back up and threw Barnabas to the ground with skull-rattling impact. His hands went around the younger man's throat, and then he was shaking him, beating his head on the

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ground until Barnabas thought he had wrung him in two. He struggled to get his foot onto Zedekiah's chest and finally did so, kicking him backwards with such force that he thought his knee has snapped in the process. Zedekiah crashed to the river-bank and almost toppled in but managed to steady himself awkwardly, cursing foully under his breath.

Barnabas caught him by the collar, brought him up, and gave him a second hearty blow to the jaw. Zedekiah struggled to retaliate, but suddenly there were two opponents and he could not decide which one to strike down first. Something stung his mouth, then again, then the other side, and the taste of blood almost made him sick. Barnabas took a fresh hold on the lapels of his jacket and sent him spilling to the ground with one last terrific push, and before he had even stopped rolling everything and tilted upside down and went black.

Barnabas' knees weakened a bit, and he himself almost fell. But he managed not to, and a moment later his head stopped swimming and he saw Zedekiah sprawled out by the water's edge.

He bent and turned the other man over, a sudden panic tugging at his insides; but although a trickle of blood was running from Martin's squat little nose, he was breathing steadily. Within a few minutes it almost seemed that he was snoring, as if he had merely sat down by the stream and passed out from the whiskey.

Smiling with victory, he straightened his own coat and saw that two of the buttons had flown off in the struggle. One of them he found wedged between two rocks near Zedekiah, but the other was nowhere to be seen.

He loosened his collar and took several deep breaths to slow his thudding heart, and as he did so he realized something, and a rush of heat came over his face.

He realized that as he had been lashing out at Zedekiah, it was not Lothaire's servant he had been seeing before him at all; it was Jeremiah. What blows he had hammered upon Martin were only those that he had wanted to use ever since the announcement of the marriage, and had not.

He went back to Zedekiah and imagined that it was indeed his uncle lying before him, bleeding and beaten into unconsciousness for the sake of his love for Laura, and a queasy feeling rushed into his stomach.

The whiskey jug lay on the ground, and the

fiery liquid that had nearly overwhelmed him was now seeping into the grass, powerless and forgotten. In no more than moments, the grass would draw it in, and it would be gone altogether. No one who would walk upon the spot in the future would ever know that it had been there.

He stood again and cast his eyes out over the stream. The school of minnows had returned, and they were once again reflecting the moon's rays like a shiny silver plate beneath the surface. The rage in him was gone, drained out with the whiskey and Zedekiah's blood, and within minutes he found that he was running up the hill with no intention of ever coming down that path again.

Jeremiah turned his face to Laura's, and everything was different.

"I now present to all of you, Mr. and Mrs. Jeremiah Collins," the short little minister looked up and beamed at the onlookers. "You may kiss the bride."

Jeremiah did so, but in that some moment someone else rushed into the room, and everyone turned to see Barnabas, gasping for breath and looking rather haggard. There was some murmuring, but no time to say anything important. The musicians burst into song, and Laura and Jeremiah were dancing. Barnabas came through the small crowd and advanced onto the floor with them. He waited patiently for the song to end; and when it had, he reached out and disentangled Laura's hand from Jeremiah's. For a moment they both stared at him apprehensively.

"The next dance is mine, aunt," he said, and there was no hostility in his tone.

She accepted him somewhat dubiously, but he took her about the floor gently and most properly, and presently the other guests began to join in.

When it was over, he gave her back to Jeremiah and smiled. "I do not believe I have offered my congratulations as of yet. I do hope you will accept them now-a little late, but sincere nonetheless."

"I don't know what to say," Jeremiah shook his head, stunned.

"Say you accept them, of course," his nephew suggested and held out his hand. Jeremiah had no difficulty doing just that.

III-Forfeit

So fades a summer cloud away;

So sinks the gale when storms are o'er,

So gently shuts the eye of day,

So dies a wave along the shore.

-Mrs. Barbauld

Fall had come; the nights were coming faster and colder, and the leaves were steadily dropping into the swirling winds that raked the forest and the grounds almost constantly. Their brittle skeletons clung to his coat and his hair, and he had to scrape them off with his fingernails when he stomped into the house at the close of the day.

To his left he heard quiet voices: Joshua and Naomi were in the drawing room conversing. He did not want to go in to see them. . . he was tired and had nothing of interest to say. He unwound his cape from his chilled body and hung it on the rack with perhaps a little more care than was necessary. The stairs came closing down to greet him, the staid configuration a challenge. For a moment he hesitated, reconsidering his brother's company after all; then as every night, he gave in and started upwards.

He had expected marriage to change everything both inside his world and out; but after the first somewhat breathless week, his daily existence had gone back to the way he had been before. He was not, in truth, disappointed-only bewildered in a low but progressive degree.

"You should not worry yourself over her," Joshua had stated in his typically convinced fashion. "Every woman goes slightly mad when she is with child. Naomi was the same, and her mother before her, and ours as well."

And he was being patient. He opened the door to their room and peered in. The wind was shaking the window in its frame, and the fireplace was blazing merrily. Other than that there was no sound in the room, for Laura was in her chair and gazing into the flames before her, immobile and enigmatic as always.

"You're home," she muttered without looking. It was almost a sigh of resignation.

"Are you. . . warm enough?" He placed both hands on her shoulders and leaned forward to kiss the side of her face.

"Yes," she replied calmly but still did not move. Jeremiah straightened and coughed slightly, having become used to hiding his uneasiness whenever he was around her.

"How. . . how is he today?" he asked after a moment.

She drew her arms over her rounded stomach as if he were preparing to strike her and she feared the blow.

"Growing."

"I'm glad. I'm sure he'll be born healthy."

"Of course he will. He will be the envy of every mother in the village. They will all admire William. That will be his name, of course: William Collins."

"You've decided on a name already?" He felt a distant pain beneath his ribs because he had not been consulted on the choice at all.

"But Laura—"

"But what?" Finally she did turn on him, and in that instant her voice had grown violent. "I'm to be his mother—I know what he should be named! Have you an objection?"

He backed down. "No, no, I didn't mean that. There's no need for us to argue. I only wish you'd told me about it before now."

"There was no need. You have no occasion to call him by any name yet."

He went around the chair and knelt in front of her, and upon taking her hands he found that they were red hot.

"Please come downstairs with me, Laura. It will do you good to get out of this stuffy room for awhile."

"Why? I'm all right; I'm content."

"Yes, I know you are, but the exercise can't hurt." Against her silent objections, he pulled her to her feet. "Naomi and Joshua are there. I'm sure they'd like to see you. Please, darling."

"I saw them at dinner," she said as he helped her into the hall.

"Eit you didn't even look at them—or at any of us for that matter."

After some struggle they reached the sitting room and found that Abigail had joined the others as well. She threw back her head arrogantly as soon as they came in.

"Well, I do believe we have a stranger in the room! Where have you been, my dear? I've seen practically nothing of you all week!"

"I'm sorry," Laura smiled evasively, "but I found it better to remain in my room."

"Have you been in discomfort?" Naomi asked at once.

"In discomfort!" Abigail cut back in. "I daresay that to be an understatement! I can hardly stand the thought of myself swelled up in such a condition! The Lord put a curse on all of womankind, you know, on account of their sin." Despite sharp glances from Naomi and the two men, she set her mouth into a half smile and was

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proud of the remark. Laura settled into another chair calmly, with her husband's dutiful assistance.

"In all fairness, Abigail, I think you have it a bit mixed up. The curse is not on those who find themselves in my present state; it is almost certainly upon those who never have the opportunity to do so."

Abigail straightened in her own seat, and her ears reddened. For the first time in a long while Jeremiah actually found himself grinning.

"It seems Laura has come up with a name," he changed the topic quickly. "She wants to call our son William Collins."

"William Jeremiah Collins," Laura added for Abigail's benefit.

"You're quite certain it will be a boy?" Naomi raised a brow.

"Yes, quite."

"William?" Joshua thought a moment. "That's not one of our traditional names. We've never had a William in the family as far as I know."

"Jeremiah and I prefer to make our own tradition," Laura smiled up at her husband and patted his ringed hand. Warm pride and happiness rushed through him. Things were not lagging between them after all. It was only a matter of taking her downstairs more often. In that moment, he loved her so passionately he thought he might die.

"So where is Barnabas tonight?" he asked, still smiling.

"Gone to the village for a while," Joshua said. "We could not keep him in the house."

"I wish he wouldn't go out there alone," Naomi said with concern. "It's quite a long ride through the woods."

"Oh, nonsense, Naomi," her husband chided. "He's a grown man now, and there hasn't been an incident in weeks."

"Joshua is right. If it were a couple of stray dogs or wolves, they've moved well on by now."

"I hope that's true," She shifted uncomfortably.

"Yes," Laura agreed with a veiled grin. "Let's."

The first animal took the edge of the woods at a casual speed, and the three others followed. The cabin came into sight within minutes, its dark form partially hidden among the trees. Lothaire paused, and his servants did the same. All of them regarded the humble structure.

The crude curtains were drawn, and a thin grey serpent of smoke was winding up into the frosty air. There was someone inside. Lothaire's tongue began to itch at the thought, and his woolly black tail swished to and fro with anticipation. It had been days since the time had been right, and with his impatience it seemed longer. He was anxious for the sounds of ripping flesh when the kill was as first made, the tang of the sweat, the taste of the blood.

They came together as a cluster of four around the cottage window, frothy saliva running from their teeth onto the frosty ground. Lothaire's blazing eyes gave silent commands. His servants backed respectfully away as he jumped up on his hind legs and aligned his head with the crack in the curtains.

The Collins' servant, Evan, was inside, contentedly stirring some pitiful little meal in a pot before the fire. Lothaire's heart began to beat faster. He loved the feeling of power that came with choosing a victim and the knowledge that the human had no chance against him.

He trotted back a ways, and though the others watched him curiously, they did not dare move into his path. He was racing forward then, muscles rippling, and the cheap, brittle glass of the window shattered around him as he leaped majestically through. He came down perfectly, on all four feet and just in front of Evan, who dropped his stew and leaped up, a poker from the hearth in his hand. He did not swing it, only held it out like some foolish sword. Lothaire's jaws closed around it and bent it to uselessness. Evan gasped and backed away, slamming into a chair in his muddled terror. It crashed over, and Lothaire circled it, a stiff growl making his breath quiver. The human stumbled back to the fireplace. His arm and wrist were numb with fear; for one black moment he thought they would not do his bidding. But he moved towards the fire, closer still—then gritted his teeth and plunged his hand into the flame.

He had to scream because there was a sudden pain even worse than he had expected, but the opportunity was not wasted. His fingers closed around a flaming log and brought it out before the snarling beast.

It startled Lothaire. He had not expected it. The orange comet of fire whizzed past his nose, and forgetting himself he jumped

back in shock. Evan ran for the door, still clutching the torch. He ran across the meager clearing that was his yard and kept on towards Collinwood, leaves fluttering up in a pale cloud behind him. Three other wolves emerged from the brush behind him. One of them ran awkwardly as though crippled, but its companions had no difficulty gaining on him. He veered off into the trees, wishing he had the time to vault up into one. The cold stung his eyes; and his lungs, always weak, were fast emptied of air. A terrific cramp bit at his side; he staggered and almost fell. The hunters thundered closer, teeth bared. He turned and held out the fire, but it did not slow them a second time. Lothaire cut in front of the others, ears flattened against his head, and prepared to jump

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Evan for the last time. All at once, though, he paused, and the hairs on his neck rose unexpectedly. The others heard the sound, too, and backed away in confusion. Evan backed against a tree, torch still licking the sharp air, eyes wide and towards the diversion. It was a horse, galloping straight for them. Barnabas was the rider, and his own face grew white with astonishment as he saw what was happening. Evan shouted something as the wolves had to scatter. Barnabas bent as he rode past his servant, stretched out his hand, and hauled him onto his mount's back as well.

Lothaire knew they were returning to the house, but the others did not stop to consider. Without looking at him, the two half-brothers and Matthew sprinted off in crazed pursuit anew. He barked viciously to get their attention, but it did no good. Anger rose in him, both at having been denied a victim and now being deliberately ignored. As the three tails disappeared into the balding trees, he changed his mind and took off after them. "They're still coming!" Evan cried, head thrown desperately over his shoulder. Barnabas continued to kick Jezebel's sides, but she could go no faster.

"We're almost to the house!" he shouted back, and Collinwood came into view.

Joshua heard the noise outside and was the first to run to the window. Jeremiah and the three women were right behind.

"What is it?" Jeremiah struggled to see.

"It sounds like Barnabas yelling."

Suddenly Joshua's face grew cold. The horse bearing his son and servant dashed past and kept going, followed immediately by two grey wolves and a blond one, then the bigger, silky black fourth.

"Dear God!" he cried. "Isn't the fool armed? I told him!"

"I'll get something," Jeremiah turned and ran for the study. "Naomi, Abigail, get Laura upstairs!"

They did so with little protest. Joshua followed his brother and a moment later both came from the house with rifles, loading them as they ran. An icy fog had swept in from the sea, making visibility on the lawn difficult.

"There!" Jeremiah pointed at last as the horse tore by once again. He raised his musket and fired. Dirt sprayed up between Jezebel and the nearest wolf but changed nothing.

Barnabas saw the wasted shot, then turned the fast tiring horse and kept going. From the rear, Lothaire saw Joshua raise his own gun and knew he would miss. He deliberately fell back from the others and tried to slip into the safety of the mist-

but he was not quick enough. Joshua's bullet tore into his shoulder and redness spattered the grass. Howling, he lunged for the woods. Jeremiah had reloaded his rifle and squeezed off another shot which sent the attackers wheeling around to quickly follow the first.

Jezebel was gone into the greyness for a moment, and then she reappeared, loping exhaustedly towards her rescuers. Barnabas and Evan slid off before she had stopped and collapsed weakly onto the ground. Joshua hurried to pick up his son, while Jeremiah seized the horse and then helped Evan to his feet. The torch lay beside him, cold and smothered by the wind. The hand that had stubbornly held it was blistered and black with burn.

"Are they gone?" Barnabas asked, and Jeremiah squinted into the distance.

"I think so," he said. "Quick-let's get inside."

"The eyes," Evan was sputtering as he was dragged to the safety of the house. "He had eyes like a man's."

"DAMN Joshua Collins," was all Lothaire could wheeze as morning broke and they helped him stagger into his bedroom. Zedekiah was holding him by the wounded arm, and sticky blood flowed down his own dirty hands.

"Here, you're home now." They threw him onto the bed and stood around him looking helpless and guilty. He watched them with contempt, his vision blurred with the agony.

"Well?!" he shouted as loudly as he could. "What are you just standing there for, you idiots? Go-get someone to tend me-" There was a rush of pain in his throat, and he coughed and choked on it.

"But there's no one!" Zedekiah lamented, almost shivering with fright. "Not at this hour! How can we bring a doctor here, when he'd know right off what we been up to?"

Lothaire snagged Martin's sleeve with his good hand.

"Idiot!" he repeated, and for the first time he did not seem at all sure of himself or his fate. "Who said it had to be a doctor?! Just someone-" Nausea swept over him, and his black eyes were bright with tears. "They'll cut it off otherwise- and I won't have it! They mustn't!"

Zedekiah stepped back and slapped Matthew in the belly to get his attention.

"We'll find somebody," Lothaire, he promised hoarsely, nodding. "Matthew and me will."

"I'll stay here and look after him as best I can," Ennis volunteered as they headed for the street. Zedekiah paused and shook a warning finger at him.

"Don't you go doin' anything stupid while we're gone!"

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"Hurry," groaned Lothaire. When they were gone, he stretched out his good hand once again. "Something to kill the pain, Ennis, quickly!"

Ennis rushed to the liquor cabinet and came back with a bottle. He uncapped it and held it to his master's mouth. It clicked against his perfect white teeth as he slurped down three great mouth-fuls and pressed his head back against the pillow, gasping.

"I won't let them cut it off," he kept repeating in near panic. "I'd sooner be dead. They shan't, they shan't. . ."

"Empty!" Matthew wailed, glancing up and down the street. "Not a soul about! What're we to do, Zedekiah, what? He'll be havin' our heads if we don't find something to fix him!"

"Get hold of yourself!" Zedekiah cautioned. "There's got to be someone! By the tavern, maybe-there's always a crowd there."

"Yes, yes, the tavern!" Brightening, the older Matthew took off. With his limp, it was all Zedekiah could do to keep up.

They could hear the noise through the fog, The Bell being in full operation even at the late hour. Matthew whirled about and was going to shout for Zedekiah to hurry when he smashed into someone else full force. There was a female gasp, a muttered excuse; but before she could push on again he had grabbed her and was scowling down at the hood pulled up over her face.

"Let go of me!" she snapped promptly. Zedekiah came up out of the darkness on her other side, and suddenly both were holding her by the arms. "Let me pass!"

"Shut up," Zedekiah said quickly. "We mean you no harm."

"We only wish to speak to you a minute."

"I'm afraid I haven't the time!" She squirmed but in vain.

"A friend of ours is sorely in need of attention in a medical way, and we're even worse off, not knowin' what to do for him. You must

go to him. "

"I have no knowledge of medical matters, " she regarded them suspiciously from inside the hood. "Seek a doctor, if that is what you want. "

"No-that ain't what we want. " Martin reached up and jerked the hood from her face. Her black hair tumbled out over her shoulders and shimmered purple in the dim light. For a moment both men had to frown.

"Hey, " Matthew said, "I seen her before. "

"Yeah. I know you, woman. Where from?"

"The tavern, " she said quickly. "I work there. "

"Yeah-yeah, that musta been it. " But he did not seem at all placated.

"We ain't got the time to stand here talking nonsense!" Matthew dismissed the entire thought. "Lothaire's waiting. "

"Lothaire!" she cried, and they whisked her to his door. "Where are you taking me?!"

"I told you, " Zedekiah growled as they pushed her inside the apartment, "we mean you no harm. "

Ennis was there, and they shoved her inside the bedroom so hard she almost fell. For a moment she suspected the worst, but as she raised her eyes to the bed her expression changed. Lothaire was still there, his position little changed, the blood continuing to soak half the blankets, not to mention the open shirt he had thrown around himself. His face was deathly white.

"Who is it?" he called, not daring to open his eyes. "Ennis-is it them? Are they back yet?"

"Yes, Lothaire, it's us. " Zedekiah came up behind her, blocking the only route of escape. 'We've got someone to help you. " He gave her another brutal push. "Go, then! And be careful about it!"

She self-consciously sat beside him, then clenched her teeth and peeled the shirt back from the wound. Lothaire caught his breath with the pain; but upon recognizing her, he managed a typically offensive smile.

"So it's you. What's become of Milo tonight?"

"How did this happen?" she demanded.

"A gun, " he replied immediately, seeming almost proud of the fact. "Zedekiah and his brainless friends were cleaning a pistol for me, and the fools lost control and pegged me!"

"How dreadful, " she said sarcastically, glancing at Martin, who could only rub his rough face with embarrassment. "You should be more careful when handling weapons. "

The apparent hatred in her tone gave them all pause.

"I don't care what you do to it, " Lothaire finally spoke again, "so long as they don't have to cut it off. "

"I don't think that will be necessary, Lothaire. The bullet's not gone in. You'll recover in time, providing it's cleaned properly. "

"Then do it. "

She took the stained shirt off him and tossed it at the servant.

"Here, " she ordered tautly, "shred this for a bandage. And take care not to get any of that filth from your hands onto it. "

"Do it, " Lothaire echoed. As soon as it was done, she took a piece and poured the liquor Ennis had left over it. When she pressed it to the laceration, tears rushed into his eyes. "I've watched you in the tavern, you know, " he whispered as she continued, "and have tried to invite you here more than once. Now you've finally accepted me but under these pitiful circumstances!"

"I wouldn't have done that if your ape servants had not kidnapped me while I was walking home from work. "

"You will be amply rewarded for your trouble, I assure you of that. In fact, if I do not die of this, I shall take the time to repay you myself... in any way you desire. " His gaze drifted rudely to the dip in her dress. She pretended not to hear.

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Before long it was over, and her patient lay staring up at the ceiling, weak but concealing it. "I trust you will say nothing of this to anyone. It could prove... most humiliating to me. "

"I have no intention of telling anyone that I was in your apartment after midnight, monsieur, whether or not you were incapacitated. " She went towards the door, but Zedekiah stepped into her path again. "Out of my way, fool!" She raised a fist. "I've had more than enough of you for one night. "

He made no attempt to comply, only folded his arms. "Oh, and where do you think you're going?"

"How dare you ! "

"You heard the woman, " Lothaire barked. "Step aside and mind your manners for once, you great hulking clod. "

Martin looked as if he had been struck, and Dagmar seized the opportunity to push past him into the outer room. Ennis and Matthew watched her with smoldering eyes until she was gone.

"Lothaire!" Zedekiah threw up his hands in frustration. "How could you let her get away like that? ! She'll be tellin' the whole town as soon as she turns the corner ! "

"Nonsense. She's no threat to us. There are better things to do with a woman like that than kill her. When I'm well again, I'll be seeing to that. Now leave me, the three of you, and let me get some rest. " Clutching his throbbing arm, he rolled over and smiled wanly.

"And I want each of the following notified that their terms of employment have come to an end... " Joshua paused and smiled several men, while Milo hurriedly scribbled down all that he said, "and then there's that Millard widow. I should like you to go to her house and ask her what's to be done with her late husband's investment. Sometime today, mind you. "

"Yes, sir. " The clerk set down his pen and examined the notes he had taken. "It will be done. "

"Good. You might as well start at once, since it's bound to take a while. "

The front door to the office opened, and laughter filled the chamber. Joshua knew all too well who had arrived and shifted impatiently while tugging at a whisker. Jeremiah and Barnabas stumbled in, bent with hilarity, and by their faces Joshua guessed that they had just been audience (or party) to the telling of a less-than-proper joke among the sailors and equally unrefined dockhands outside.

"Good morning, Milo!" Jeremiah was the first to recover and slapped him on the arm. "Working already ?! Don't tell me you're starting to come here as early as my brother. Let me warn you, it will make you old fast. "

"Some people have to work for a living, " Joshua grumbled. "You two just seem to play at life now and then. "

"Don't be such a troll. " Jeremiah went to the bookshelf and extracted a volume for his own office. "Enjoy the warm weather while it lasts. Winter is almost here. "

"And a new Collins heir as well?" Milo ventured.

"Just so. I have much to be in good spirits about, and I'll be damned if I let anyone ruin today. Why if Joshua has his way, poor William himself will be perched above a desk with a pen in his hand by next spring!"

His brother sniffed and shook his head, and Lothaire and Zedekiah watched him through the window from their place on the docks. Lothaire's still bandaged arm was hidden under his coat, stiff but otherwise intact.

"Have you the packet from the apothecary?" he asked his servant after ascertaining that no passers-by were within earshot.

"Yes, " Zedekiah reached into his own coat and was about to extend the medication when Lothaire clenched his teeth and gave him a sharp elbow in

the ribs.

"Would you hand it to me in front of the entire population of Collinsport? Idiot-have you no sense of discretion? Now give it to me quickly so that no one can see."

Abashed, Zedekiah was more secretive in his next attempt, and Lothaire exchanged the package for a few coins, which he dropped into the other's hand.

"I don't see how many times I have to caution you before you learn to mind yourself. There is no room for carelessness in my household. Try my patience any further and I will have your blood!"

"Aye, mushure, I'll remember."

"Very well. Here-go and fill your brainless head with liquor, and see to it that some company is in my room by two. I trust you have more sense in attending to those matters."

When he was gone, Lothaire went on into Joshua's office. He was pleased to find everyone in the same room and in good spirits.

"What merriment are we making here?" he inquired with an indulgent smirk.

"Pondering the imminent birth of William Collins," Joshua replied drily, obviously wishing the others would leave him alone.

"Well, that is a cause for celebration, I must say."

"There, you see, Joshua?" Jeremiah nodded. "You are definitely in the minority today."

"Perhaps we should even have a toast," Lothaire went on.

"I think that a splendid idea," Jeremiah declared, forgetting his distaste for the other in all the excitement. "The blessed event is only a month and a half away, after all."

"Would that I had brought some wine! But I haven't, so I'm afraid the idea will go to waste

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"No, w ait! I just may have the solution." Grinning, the father-to-be rushed from the room. Everyone stared after him.

"Marriage is doing him some good," Lothaire remarked.

"Not as much as I'd hoped, to be sure."

Barnabas and Milo said nothing. Presently Jeremiah returned, a vessel of red wine in hand.

"I'm sorry to put a damper on your little celebration," Joshua continued as Lothaire found glasses and poured the drinks, "but would it not be more logical to wait until after the monumental occurrence?"

"That is not the way we do it in France. We drink to the new s, to the past, during the wait, and to the future. Consequently, we are too befuddled to be nervous when the actual time does roll around."

"Perhaps I should go out and begin my errands," Milo suggested, uncomfortable at being the only clerk present.

"No! Stay! This is for all of Jeremiah's friends, and I daresay he counts you among that number. As do I, of course."

"Well, thank you," Milo was somewhat surprised at Lothaire's pleasantry. They had hardly spoken in weeks.

"Not at all," the other went on, shaking a bit of scarlet powder out of his sleeve into one of the glasses. "You are one of my favorite neighbors, Milo, a sober young man and a welcome dinner companion. But then again, you scarcely have need of my idle conversation at the bar any more now that you have your barmaid to dote over you."

"Barmaid?" Jeremiah was interested. "What's this all about, Milo?"

"I daresay you have me confused with someone else." Milo straightened his cravat.

"There's no need to be embarrassed, dear boy. We all fall in love now and again. Even I have, though the experience was mercifully short-lived." He handed out the wine and raised his own. "But we're digressing from the purpose of this gathering. To the next Collins born. May he be healthy and handsome and change his father's life forever. Drink!"

There was a general murmur of good will, and then everyone did so.

"Now then," Jeremiah set in anew when he was done, "back to the barmaid."

"There's nothing to tell." Milo retrieved his notes. "If you will excuse me, everybody, several matters await my attention."

"It's that far along, then? Some friend you've turned out to be-you never even dropped a hint!"

Milo paused on his way out, and there was a sharp little pain just below his ear. He blinked as Jeremiah's voice became tinny, annoying.

"Perhaps-perhaps I didn't consider it any of your concern," he said, more harshly than he had meant to. "Can't I have a moment to myself?"

"I'm sorry," his friend relented with some confusion. "I was only joking, Milo."

The discomfort grew more intense, and his cheek began to twitch. He touched it, but it would not stop. The room tilted just a little. He grabbed a chair for support but almost fell anyway. Joshua got to his feet.

"Seabrook!" he bellowed. "What's the matter with you? What are you doing?"

"Milo!" Jeremiah saw the wild look in his friend's eyes and was worried. Milo pressed against the wall and turned to look at him, wincing. When he was halfway across the office, he stopped being Jeremiah and was instead something else, a hideous red creature dripping with slime and groping for Milo's throat with hideous tentacles like rat-tails.

Milo wasted no time. He seized a chair and swung it with all his might, but the thing jumped back a little and he missed.

"Dear God!" someone cried. "Stop him,!"

Sw eat streamed down his face. He ripped open the door and ran as fast as he could out onto the docks. The creature gave chase at once, and its accomplices followed suit. Milo refused to let them catch him. He did not want to ~~die~~-

Someone was in his way, walking slowly across the pier. Milo did not stop, and a second later the elegantly dressed traveller was on his back and crying out in anger. The things continued to pursue him, making horrible guttural noises in anticipation of the kill. Though the streetwards which he ran was filled with people, not a one stepped out to help him. They were afraid, he realized, but did not care. He would not give in. . . .

He began to scream, shouting at them to wake up and fight, but the spineless insects would not listen, only cried out in fear and scattered from his path.

"Milo!" Jeremiah ran ahead of the others, waving his hands. "Stop! Wait! Where are you-"

"He's gotten the fever," Lothaire suggested to Joshua in a properly shocked voice.

"Lies!" Milo shrieked. "Idiots! Fools-can't you see that they're going to enslave you??! Fight-fight, and bring the Devil down-"

Something hit him in the back, and he went onto the wharf face first. Blood spurted from his nose. He scrambled to get up, but something was holding him down. He could imagine the horrible clawed hands waiting to tear him to shreds-

A crowd gathered around him, and hundreds of little pig-eyes bore down. He continued to scream, not words, but the agony in his head was too much to suffer in silence. Tears ran down his cheeks, and he howled until his throat went dry and his voice

was lost altogether.

Barnabas held him flat in the center of the gaping people, and within moments Jeremiah had caught up. Each of them took Milo by an arm and hauled him up. Limp, he did not protest.

"Good Lord, " Jeremiah said, upon seeing the

"He's having an attack. Look at his eyes!"

They were blazing red and so wide it seemed they might pop out. Sensing their attention, Milo threw a sleeve up over his face.

"Not my eyes," he moaned, trying to stand on his own. "Please-not that. "

"Run for a doctor!" Jeremiah ordered no one in particular. Milo thought the words part of a foreign language. "Someone-get help!"

They were ordering his death. He was sure of it. He began to pray fervently but could not make his tongue work in the way he wanted. The words came out garbled, blasphemous.

"The Devil's inside him!" an older woman in the crowd shouted, and there was a loud burst of agreement. "God help us all-"

He could hear the scraping sounds of spears being sharpened. In seconds they would be thrust into him from all directions. He shut his eyes and tried to will the situation away. Terror beat in his chest.

"Let's get him to his apartment. " Jeremiah and Barnabas began to drag him off. It was some time while they were crossing the street that Milo fainted.

The first thing he was aware of was being in his own room, the familiar contour of his own pillow under his head. A homely little doctor with a white pigtail was bending over him so that he could see straight up his twitching, rabbit-like nose. He winced and turned away, and the old man gave a start.

Jeremiah came forward. Milo was confused at his expression. He looked unusually grim. Had he forgotten to get up for work that morning, and had Jeremiah come to fetch him? No-he could vaguely remember mixing the coffee for his breakfast and purposely passing the tavern on his way to. .

"Milo? Can you hear me?"

"Of course!" Milo sat up and realized that he was fully clothed save for his jacket and waistcoat which were draped over the dresser.

"What is all this about?"

"He seems to be himself again, " the doctor remarked, sotto voice, but Milo heard anyway. "But all the same, make no sudden moves. "

"What do you mean, 'myself again'? Who else would I be? And what am I doing here? I-thought I had been in the office. "

"Milo, " Jeremiah cautioned again; and he and the other man regarded him as if they expected him to topple over, or worse. "You've had a. . .spell. Please try to relax so you don't bring it on yourself again. "

"A spell? What nonsense-I've never had a spell in my life. I feel quite well! Flushed with energy, as a matter of fact. As if I want to get up and do something-"

"That won't be possible for a few days, " the

doctor informed him curtly. "I prescribe rest- and confinement to bed. "

"What?! But why? I'm in no pain-I've got to get back to work! Joshua was quite emphatic about having those letters off today!"

"I've talked to Joshua, " Jeremiah said. "He understands. Perhaps that's all it is-overwork. Take some time off. "

There was a long pause.

"What. . .what did I do?"

Jeremiah looked embarrassed. "You. . .tried to tear up the office. "

"No-that isn't so!" He would have flatly disbelieved it if not for the odd light in the other man's eyes.

"You ran out into the street. " A swallow. "You knocked over a traveller. You were screaming at the top of your lungs-but what you were saying didn't make any sense. "

"I don't believe it. "

"I have another appointment, " the doctor remarked stiffly, packing his little bag. Milo looked up at him.

"Don't let me keep you. "

"He seems better now," Jeremiah agreed. "I can send someone from Collinwood to see to him. "

"You will tell me if there is a relapse. "

"Yes, of course. "

"Very good. " A second later he departed, leaving the door open. Milo continued to stare numbly at his chest.

"Tell me this is a jest. "

"No-it isn't. It was all very strange. For a moment it almost seemed as if you were. . . " he reddened and let it trail off.

"As if I were possessed? Taken by the Devil?"

"No, Milo, I didn't mean that. "

"I'm sure. " He punched at his pillow and lay back. There was a clatter below the window. Jeremiah went to look out. The same crowd from the dockside, or at least some of it, had regrouped and were staring up hungrily. Mental illness was always a great conversation piece in town, and this time there had actually been a performance. One bold pair of eyes shot up to meet his.

"Ye've got the monster then, Collins?"

"Get away from here," Jeremiah shouted down. "Haven't you people anything better to do with your time?"

"Ye'd best keep him tied down ! His lust for human flesh won't be satisfied tonight, that's for sure!"

"You heard me-get on with your own business. I'm sure the constable would be pleased to see you standing there in a mob and my brother too for those of you employed at the yards. "

The threat of the constable did not alarm them in the slightest, but the mention of Joshua did. Grumbling, they began to disperse; and Jeremiah snapped the curtains shut again. Milo

made as if he had not heard, but his stubborn countenance gave him away.

"The doctor has asked me to rest, and so I will. Good day, Jeremiah-I will return to work as soon as I am fit. "

"I shall send a maid over to care for you tomorrow. "

"That will not be necessary. "

"I think it will. Good day, Milo. " Then he was gone, and Milo heard him clomping down the few stairs to the street. He stared upwards a long time, chest pumping with rage. He had shouted obscenities and torn up Joshua's office? He remembered nothing of it. Could he possibly be mad? After all, how could one tell if he really were sane? There was no basis for comparison. Had he gone through his entire life seeing and feeling, thinking in a way no one else did?

Loving in a way no one else was supposed to. . that bothered him the most. Only that morning, everything had seemed so perfect-surely she did not see a madman, or a demon, when she gazed at him in those fairly brief intervals at the tavern. Someone was coming towards the door. He could hear feet scuffling lightly across the boards of the passageway. For a moment he tensed and got up on his elbow s--w as it one of the gang from the street? The door came open with a slow creak. Then the guest came into the threshold, and his heart nearly dissolved and killed him then. It was Dagmar.

"I heard, something had happened," she said. "I came as soon as I could sneak away."

"Dear God," the tears slid down his nose, and she came into his arms. "How could I have thought you wouldn't come?"

"Did you think that?" He gripped her tightly, and at last there were kisses, wild and eager and possessive.

"The entire town thinks me mad-and the worst torture I could imagine was that you would think so too."

"Milo!" She put her hand over his mouth and smiled in a way that made him want to kiss her all over again. "What this town thinks would never change my opinion of you. Are you not aware by now that I love you-and what's more, I admire you? I watched you come into the tavern so many times, and each time I would only think how good you were. So good and so honest-I have lain awake at night and trembled that I could not be more like you."

"But why? Has your own life been so terrible?"

"Not terrible; I would ask for no pity, but it has not been as I have wanted it. Milo-I am not a Spaniard or even an Indian. I am a gypsy who has run away."

His eyes widened. "A what?"

"I have lived among lawlessness that would probably make you cringe. But I have left all that behind and hope you will not think less of me because of it. I do love you-and if you would have me, I would be your wife in an instant."

There was a long, static silence. She moved her hand from his lips, but he caught it and pressed it back, closing his eyes until the tears rushed out afresh.

"And here I've been wanting to say the same thing to you but was afraid! I thought surely you would laugh at me-I feared I was nothing but a bore to you or a burden."

"A burden? No, never-I worship you!"

"And I you, always. Dagmar----I have wanted you as well. And I would be your husband if you would have me, fits and all."

"Yes--"

They were kissing again when the door flew open and Zedekiah was there, grinning as if he had seen something truly obscene.

"Martin!" Milo straightened. "What do you want, barging in here like this?"

"I been sent by thamusure," Zedekiah bobbed his shaggy head eagerly. "He wants to know what he can do to put you at yerease, Mister Milo."

"Nothing-I am quite well now. Lothaire's concern is appreciated but fortunately not necessary."

"Might I tell 'im that?" He turned as if to go, and his eyes fell gratefully onto the coat over the bureau. The handkerchief was sticking out of the pocket.

"Yes you may. Now what are you looking at?"

"The least I can do is hang yer best jacket up for you," he decided with a grin and carried it to the wardrobe. "There now, that's better. And you'd best learn how to do the same if you're going to be spending more time around here from now on, lady."

"Good day, Martin," Milo said with forced patience; and with a last lecherous glance at Dagmar, Zedekiah sauntered out. "An odd man," he said when they were alone again. He wrapped his arms back around her, but her mood had changed.

"You must promise me you'll stay away from those people, Milo-always. Promise me you'll not speak to them or work with them or let them in your home ever again."

"They're not as dangerous as they are disgusting. And I cannot help contact with Lothaire- he is involved with the shipyards."

"I don't care how they seem-they are dangerous, never doubt that."

When Jeremiah returned to the office, he was surprised to see two women inside, chatting with Joshua and Barnabas.

"Laura!" he cried, "and Naomi! What are you doing here?"

"Naomi suggested an outing," Laura told him,

"so I went along. The fresh air is doing us both some good." Discreetly she patted her rounded stomach and threw a glance at Naomi, who was now five months big herself.

"Jeremiah," Barnabas broke in concernedly, "how is poor Milo?"

"He seemed more like himself when I left- in fact, he ordered me to leave-but there was a crowd of beggars standing below his window and jeering as soon as he came to."

"Terrible," his nephew cast his eyes downward. "You sent them off, of course."

The women had looked up at the mention of Milo.

"I didn't think I saw him here when I came in," Joshua's wife remarked worriedly. "Barnabas, what has happened?"

"Nothing really," Joshua answered for him, sardonically. "I thought the fellow had lost his mind is all! He was jumping up and down around here, screaming as though he had been stabbed- broke a rather large chunk out of one of my best chairs. Finally he collapsed in the street, and Jeremiah dragged him home. I thought for certain the fool was dead!"

"How dreadful!" Naomi was taken aback. "The poor boy-I always had a great fondness for him."

"Well, I can tell you that I've always had my suspicions," Laura retorted quickly. "Something in his ways disturbs me. I always thought him touched."

"Laura!" Jeremiah was shocked. "It's nothing like that-he's overworked is all. He's quite well now."

"My guess is that it was the beginnings of a flu," Barnabas agreed. "A headache, no doubt, or a sudden change in temperature. A bit of de-lerium is nothing to question a man's character over."

"No, not that alone," Laura went on. "During the daytime it's no cause for alarm, but during the night it's quite a different story, as I'm sure those poor women from the docks would confirm."

"Really!" Jeremiah slapped the edge of his brother's desk with annoyance. "Gossip about Milo in the streets is one thing, but we should know better among ourselves!"

"I'm sorry," Laura threw back her head defiantly, showing that she really was not. "I was only expressing my opinion."

"If you women set out to do some shopping," Joshua interrupted, "then you had best get on with it and not stand here chattering until every merchant in town has shut down for the evening. What is this a town meeting hall? I haven't had a moment to my work all day!"

"Perhaps you're right," Naomi acquiesced, sighing. "Shall we go then, Laura?"

"Did I hear someone mention shopping?" Lothaire came back into the room. "I do hope so- I find it a wonderful pastime. I have wanted to take a local tour of the shops myself, but unfortunately I do not have a woman's sense when it comes to buying. I seldom have any luck with what I do carry home."

Upon seeing him, Laura had brightened, and Jeremiah had not fail to notice.

"Then today you are in luck, monsieur," she said at once. "My sister-in-law and I were just wishing that we had a gentlemanly arm to lean upon, seeing as Evan's is hardly sufficient."

"Why I would be delighted to accept!" Lothaire beamed. "Providing, of course, the other Mrs. Collins does not object."

"No," Naomi smiled with sudden pride. "Why should I? My husband has no interest in such matters-monsieur, consider yourself invited."

"Splendid! Then let us begin by all means. Come-I shall assist you both to the carriage."

"I can walk my own wife," Jeremiah cut in coldly. "I wouldn't want you to go to any trouble."

"No problem, my dear Collins," Lothaire nodded condescendingly. "I can easily manage." Then he left, Laura and Naomi with him. Jeremiah had to sneer. No doubt Lothaire considered himself a remarkable sight with one pregnant woman on either side.

"So you've heard about the misfortune of young Seabrook," Lothaire said as he and Evan helped the women into the carriage.

"Yes, the full lurid tale," Laura nodded. "I suppose my husband is correct in assuming it to be nothing, though."

"I'm certain it was fever," Naomi said. "Milo has worked for Joshua for two years now, and my husband has only good things to say about him. The poor boy-we must do something to aid him in his recovery."

"He is scarcely the type one would think of as a madman," their escort nodded as he settled himself on the bench opposite them. "But then, one can never tell. The most innocuous passerby can have a history startling to tell."

"And then again," Laura blinked directly at him, "he may even have been... given the blame."

"How do you mean?" he tipped his head calmly.

"If there is a man responsible for these... atrocities as of late, and not stray dogs as my husband shot at, chances are he is clever as well as cruel. He does not wish to be caught in his evil-doings and therefore would seek to take suspicion off himself by casting doubt upon another."

"A most interesting theory! Rather improbable, though, you must admit."

"The world turns in strange ways."

"I'm sure we would all agree to that," he smiled, and nothing more was said until Evan dropped them off at the candle-shop at the corner.

The night brought rain, buckets of it. But somehow the white moon managed to hold its own

against the torrent and burned down over the slippery cobblestones as small canine feet splashed through the alleys.

Milo put on his coat and turned up the collar to shield his face from the storm. Then he went out into the darkness, locking his door behind. Silently he crossed the street and trudged towards the docks and the office. There was nothing left of whatever disease had possessed him the day before; he felt sure of that. And after too many hours in his stuffy room, the cold wind and water in his hair felt good.

But the sound of rain was not all that reached his ears. A slight splashing, a viciously low breathing, a sudden, terrible silence and then a scream made him turn abruptly and run. Down the nearest alley he flew, for it seemed that was where the cry had come from. When he reached the shadows the elements unexpectedly turned brutal and unwelcome, the raindrops slashing his face like so many silver needles. Other people up the road had apparently heard the screech as well; for behind him, shutters banged open, and there were voices urgent and questioning.

Milo's feet jammed awkwardly in the cobblestones, and he fell roughly onto the streaming ground. His hand scraped against the side of a building and came up slivered. Cursing, he knelt and looked down at the wound. Then his eyes grew round with shock. His open cape and vest were not only blackened with dirt and water but shone with fresh red blood, and it was not his own. His head snapped up and he saw what lay before him, and nausea so powerful he thought it would kill him charged up his throat. It was another woman, neck torn almost completely off, arms flung out pitifully to either side, life-juices pouring out of her and rushing along with the rain.

Other boots came tramping through the puddles, and in the darkness he saw the men clog the other end of the alley. His stomach churned until he could stand it no longer. He fled away from her and from them and was violently sick behind the first trash-heap he came across.

"Hey!" one of the men shouted, and panic squeezed Milo's insides. "There 'e goes! I seen him!"

"Who was it?" There was a clamor of tongues. "Who?"

Milo stayed in the shadow. No one dared give chase. Then one of the braver souls bent and touched the corpse. It nearly fell apart at even the meager contact. But the small, sopping cloth imprisoned by the stiffening fingers did not go unnoticed.

They pried it out and unbunched it.

"It was him!" A shock ran through the group. "See here-it is the crazy-boy's!"

"What? How do you know?"

"Look-it's got his initials! M.S.-Milo Seabrook!" And the embroidered letters continued to drip red in the downpour, which was but a prelude to the coming snow.

When Jeremiah and Joshua approached the docks on horseback the next morning, they were astonished to see a crowd of people swarming over their office building, shouting and banging on the doors and walls as if they meant to knock it down.

"What is this?!" Joshua cried and leapt from his mount to run to the center of the commotion. His brother followed, dumbfounded.

"What do you peasants think you're doing??!"

A familiar figure clothed in black, with a perpetual grin, came towards them through the press of bodies.

"It's good that you got here when you did, Joshua," Lothaire nodded politely but worriedly. "There was talk of burning the place to the ground."

A hush began to fall over the crowd. All eyes fell upon Joshua and the other two.

"Tell me what all of this is about?"

"It's your friend Seabrook," Lothaire glanced first at him, then at Jeremiah. "You were mistaken in assuming that he was fully recovered from his spell. He was seen fleeing the site of yet another murder last night-the town won't sit still for it any longer. They think he's hiding in there, and they fully intend to drag him out and perform a lynching."

"A lynching-in front of my office!? How do they know he's in there?"

"Someone saw him this morning peeking out of the window. After that there was no way of preventing a scene."

"So naturally you joined in," Jeremiah growled.

"No way of preventing a scene?! Nonsense! Where is the constable! Send him forth!"

"The constable?" someone in the front row of rioters laughed. "Where else would he be during a crisis? In the tavern getting

himself stone drunk!"

"We don't need him!" a wild-haired woman chimed in. "We'll be taking care of this ourselves! We don't mean you no harm, Collins, unless you get in our way that is, so step aside and let us at him!"

Jeremiah was already rushing for the entrance, keys in hand, shoving two tipsy sailors out of his way as he went.

"Don't go in there, Collins," one of them called after him, grinning stupidly. "He'll getcha and tear ya to shreds!"

"Jeremiah!" Joshua shouted, "come back here this minute!" But his words did no good, for a second later his brother had slipped inside and locked the door again.

"Milo!" he shouted as soon as he came into his own office. "Where are you? Come out this minute! Milo!"

There was a noise and Milo emerged from where he had been crouching behind the desk. He had pulled the bookcase in front of the window. His face was white, and he was shaking so badly he could hardly stand up.

"Thank God you've come," he whimpered, and a book splashed onto the floor in his wake.

"Milo," his friend said quietly, "what have you done?"

Milo suddenly became more animated. "Nothing," he cried, "I swear it! I was walking along the street-only walking! Someone found my handkerchief-I-"

"So now you say you're innocent?" Frustrated, Jeremiah snatched him up by the collar and shook his smaller form roughly as he had done months ago during the Laura crisis. "Then what were you doing next to some murdered girl, and what in Hell are you doing here?"

"Hiding!" He pulled free of the other's grip and backed away. "Jeremiah, you must believe me! I was coming back last night to finish those letters for your brother-then I heard something and went to see. I slipped and fell-" He looked down at his still bloody shirt-"Oh God, I was so sick! I couldn't say anything to defend myself- you must help me, Jeremiah! They'll kill me if you don't! And I've done nothing-"

Jeremiah raked a hand through his bangs, shaking his head with consternation.

"I don't know what to believe!"

"Don't be a fool!" Milo begged. "All the years we've known each other-tell me, have I ever given you reason to distrust me, even once?"

"No-no, never. In fact-" he let it trail off, but Milo would not.

"In fact, what?"

"In fact I suspected Lothaire."

"Zedekiah Martin came to my room. He took my handkerchief-he must have, because it was in my coat and he-Jeremiah, Lothaire is guilty, and he's trying to have me killed!"

"There's no proof! There's nothing! We can't do a damned thing until-"

"Help me," he whispered once again and was close to tears. "Please!"

Jeremiah thought a moment, then turned. "Yes, yes, all right, I will. You'll have to hide- come on, they won't think to search the attic."

Milo followed eagerly. "There's something else."

"What?" Jeremiah unlocked the attic hatch and pulled down a small ladder.

"Yesterday-" he swallowed-"yesterday I got engaged."

The other paused and smiled, but more for sorrow than anything else.

"Oh, Milo-how do you get into so much trouble all of a sudden?"

"I suppose I've saved it up till now."

"I suppose so. Well, we'll have to spirit her away to Collinwood too-I'm afraid you'll have to stay here until nightfall at least, but her, I can do something for."

"She works at the tavern," Milo said quickly, "and has long black hair. She's easily the most beautiful woman there-you shouldn't have any trouble finding her."

Finally he had to laugh. "That's hardly a description! Every man thinks his own girl the best-looking!"

"This is different! But in any case, you shouldn't go there yourself-someone is sure to be suspicious. Have Evan go-I'm sure he'll locate her. Just make sure those drunken pigs outside don't get to her first. God-to think Lothaire has put her life in danger as well!"

"Now, Milo, I'm sure it's not as serious as all that. If no one knows you're engaged-"

"Zedekiah does."

"All right, don't worry, I'll take care of her. For now, you get up here, and for crying out loud don't make a sound. We'll come back to fetch you after dark."

"Collins!" Someone was shouting from the next room.

"It's Lothaire," Milo observed and squirmed at once into the attic, taking the ladder with him. Jeremiah closed the entrance and hurried to his own office to shove back the bookcase. Just as he finished doing so, Lothaire and Joshua charged into the room.

"Well?" the Frenchman demanded at once. "Where is he?"

"I don't know. There was no one here when I came in."

"But that's ridiculous!" Lothaire clenched a fist. "They saw him peeking out!"

"Apparently their imaginations went a little wild. And if not, he's surely gone now." He made sure his voice was firm. Joshua tried to catch his eye, but he betrayed nothing, not even in a glance.

"I don't believe that!"

"Are you calling my brother a liar?" Joshua put in.

"No-merely a good friend of the accused."

"If you're not gentleman enough to take my word for it, then you may feel free to search the building. But I warn you now-there is nothing to be found."

Lothaire whirled and ran into the next room, and then another, and then the storeroom. Jeremiah smiled when he returned.

"Well? Are you satisfied?"

"I warn you, for your own sake," Lothaire shook a finger at the other, "if you are hiding a madman and a murderer, then the weight of his crimes is on your back as well. Not only that- but what punishment he is destined to receive may be yours, to be sure!"

"I shall consider myself well advised. Now, if you will excuse my brother and me, we have better things to do than take part in

vigilante mobs  
and spread gossip among the Ignorant. Good day, Lothaire. "  
Lothaire sneered and stalked away.

"And you may carry a message to those idiots out there as well, " he continued, raising his voice. "If they are not cleared off this property within ten minutes, I will have them forcibly removed, drunken constable or not. "

"I will do so, " Lothaire shot back as the door crashed shut between them. As soon as he was alone, he was able to smile again. In truth, he was far from disappointed.

The storm clouds returned in due course later that same morning, but rather than rain this time they spat great hailstones towards the cringing earth. Jeremiah sat in the drawing room and listened to them maliciously striking the roof and walls of Collinwood and thought of Milo, still crouching in the attic, even closer to them than he was, covering his ears and waiting for dusk.

The front door banged open and he got to his feet. Evan was stomping in, shaking the wetness from his hat and coat.

"Well?" Jeremiah asked.

"She's here, sir. I found her, just like Mr. Milo said. "

"Good. " He set down the coffee he had been half-heartedly sipping. "Help her in at once. "

"Yes, sir. " Evan ran back out into the storm and came back with her, shielding her from the hail with his own back. They burst inside together, and Jeremiah went to them curiously. The girl was wrapped in a cloak that covered her eyes and upper face, but that part of her chin that he could see was tanned by the sun. He was vaguely surprised, having expected any love of Milo's to be pale and timid. But her posture alone confirmed that she was indeed neither.

"Come in, " he said with a small bow and gestured to the settee. She did not move; she only stood there and studied him without a word.

"I- I have coffee. Would you like some to warm yourself?"

She nodded once, silently, and at once he was reminded of a phantom and was half convinced that were he to rush forward and jerk the hood back suddenly, all that would be grinning up at him would be a hideous yellow skull. He poured the coffee and held the mug out to her.

"Please-make yourself at home. You will be as part of the family while you are here, so feel free to dispense with formality. "

She took the cup, then tipped her head back and drank and still said nothing. Jeremiah glanced at Evan, and Evan shrugged back at him.

"If you don't need me any more I'll be going, " he offered, as if in a hurry to depart.

"All right, " Jeremiah smiled a little. "Thank you, Evan."

She had drained the mug, and the shadow of her face was upon him again.

"Thank you, " she finally said, "for standing by Milo, especially. "

"You and he are both quite welcome. Would you like to sit? Your cloak must be drenched; here, let me take it. "

"Very well. " As he was reaching out, she pulled the hood back and the black curls tumbled to her shoulders. Jeremiah's breath rushed from him all at once, and sweat lit the length of his spine.

"Dagmar, " he whispered, hand flying to the pendant at his throat.

"Yes. That foolish little necklace has bound us together; I did not expect its power to be so true."

"But why are you here? Surely you left with the others-I was sure you had ! "

"Yes, I left. And I came back. My heart is as restless as yours used to be, Jeremiah-after all, how long could I remain with the same people and not be bored?"

"Not long," he struggled to regain his bearings, "I suppose. "

She said nothing, only stood there smiling at him with a knowing expression.

"And now-you're going to marry Milo. Tell me-what does he know?"

"Only that he loves me-and I him. "

"Milo and I have been friends since we were children. "

"And you are concerned that I will bring him shame because of what I was?"

"I never said that. "

"You did not have to. But you need not fear----

it is different now. Everything is. We are going to be very happy together. "

"I'm glad of that. "

"And you-I understand you are to be a father soon. I've seen your wife in town-she is quite a sight. Nearly all the men are jealous. "

"Yes, " he stared at the rug, "as well they should be. "

"I would not have come here, except for Milo's sake. "

"I'm sure of that. " He managed a smile. "And you needn't worry. As far as I am concerned, we have just met. And I am most impressed with my clerk's choice of a wife. "

"Then I thank you. " She bowed to him unexpectedly. For some reason, all he could see as she did so was some false woman at court or a stiff-backed socialite with powdered hair. "I trust there is a room ready for me. "

"Yes, " he murmured and went to pick up the small bag she had left in the foyer, "there is. "

A ripe, harsh wind rose off the sea and tore at the long grass atop Widow's Hill as Milo and

Dagmar looked out over the grey water and held one another.

"It is a nice view, " he said and pressed his cheek against hers. "I never knew before why Jeremiah liked it so. But now-now it seems very different because you are watching it with me. "

"Let's go closer to the edge, " she tugged on his arm.

"Closer to the edge? But the footing may be dangerous-and that wind is very strong. One of us might slip!"

"I won't," she assured him and went forward on her own. He hurried to catch up.

"Here, wait for me!" He slid his arms around her waist, and she leaned on him, face fixed to the direction of the salty spray.

"I love it, Milo-would that this belonged to us and not Jeremiah, and we could stay here forever ! "

"It's a bit too cold to let me say that. " He smiled and kissed her hair.

"No-it's colder beyond the trees. " Silence descended upon them. "You needn't worry-they won't find us at Collinwood. It's been more than a week, and no one's come banging on Jeremiah's door yet. "

"I know. " But that was not all she had been thinking of, and he sensed it. "Dagmar. . . " "Yes?"

"What was it, to be a gypsy?" "What was it? You act as though I were not one any more. "

"I meant no insult. I only wish . . . to know . What did it feel like, to live any way you pleased and have to answer to practically no one and not be bound by any society?"

"It was different," she sighed at last. "Quite different. It was only freedom-as limitless as the sea."

A tarn wheeled by, dipping first to the surface of the water and then rising again, choking a hapless fish down its throat. Milo cast his eyes to the ground and the battered rocks below.

"After that, managing a house and a husband will be quite unimportant."

She turned and took his face in her hands. "But I love you, Milo-there is no need to consider more than that."

"Perhaps you're right." He smiled but a little weakly, and she kissed him once more. As she did so, however, she had to press her eyelids shut and assure herself twice that it was for him that her heart was pounding and not for the hasty sea-breeze pulling at her side.

"Ah! I win again!" Pleased, Barnabas spread his cards before him and Milo sighed in defeat. His opponent made a tally mark on a piece of paper and laughed. "There, that makes ten-fifty you owe me. Are you ready to give up?"

"I am tempted to say yes; however, I have a strange feeling that luck will be with me in one more hand."

"Very well, one more. But luck or no, be on your best guard-I am still feeling predatory."

"I am duly warned then." The game continued, and presently Barnabas had trounced his friend again.

"This match is finished," he declared and tore the tally-sheet in half. "I am a charitable opponent, Milo, but not everyone else is. You had best remember that you were not born to gamble especially when you are a married man."

"What, do you think me a fool, Barnabas? After I am married, I shall surely have things other than card-playing to occupy my time."

A shadow fell across the table, and both looked up to see Laura standing in the threshold, her stomach bulging almost hideously with the weight of seven months' worth of child-but, as usual, she did not seem inconvenienced in any way by the burden.

"It is good to see you in such high spirits, Milo," she smiled but not warmly, "especially considering all that has befallen you."

Milo stood out of courtesy, and Barnabas with him. "I have no choice but to be in high spirits, Mrs. Collins-if I were not, what would be left?"

"You are quite right. It is a virtue to be able to bear disgrace well, I suppose."

Uncomfortable, Barnabas stacked up the cards.

"Were you looking for Jeremiah?" he asked.

"No," she said blithely and retreated, "not really." They stared after her as she moved on, then went on talking. She made her way upstairs and went into the study. Dagmar was there, in a chair between two bookshelves; but there was no novel in her hands, and she seemed a little perturbed at being intruded upon. Laura was not in the least deterred.

"Well, all alone and not even reading? Seems rather a waste, in a fine library like this."

"I prefer to do my own thinking and do not need the overbearing words of some idle stranger to shape my mind."

"My, such a bitter attitude." She nestled her large form into another seat. "Have you tired of Collinswood already? You haven't been here that long."

"I meant no disrespect to my host. I merely find solitude refreshing."

"My husband did a very generous thing in allowing you to stay here; well you should appreciate it. Half the town suspects that you are here, of course; but who would dare to come and search? It seems to me he has put himself in a somewhat dangerous position, especially considering his . . . family situation."

Dagmar's mouth turned down at the corners. "If you are implying that your child is in any danger, I assure you your fears are totally unfounded."

"Perhaps they are, and perhaps not. I would shudder to think that what happened in town could happen again here."

"Are you accusing Milo?"

"No, of course not. But I sometimes am given to wondering about different things. There are many questions in this world I should like to know the answers to. For instance, the human mind-everyone's mentality is so completely different. What is dreadful or revolting to one man may be perfectly acceptable to another, so how can we define 'madness'? And I wonder also if the person who is mad knows that he is-and should he need shelter or protection, could he effectively control his abnormalities and hide them from everyone around him?" She sighed haughtily. "So many questions-so many possible answers."

Dagmar stood up, eyes flashing. Laura continued to smile up at her, and with distaste the other woman was reminded of Lothaire and his eternal sneer.

"Your questions are highly irregular, Mrs. Collins, and do not think I am not intelligent enough to be offended. You are right in only one assumption-that your husband is a gentleman. Would that you could profit by his example."

She went proudly to the door, and when she opened it, Jeremiah was there. He caught her smoldering expression at once and was puzzled by it.

"Good day," he said uncertainly.

"Quite so," she nodded and brushed past.

"What was that all about?" he asked Laura.

"Oh, nothing really. Milo's little friend is somewhat sensitive, that's all. She is only now beginning to realize what marriage with the likes of him will be like."

Jeremiah scowled a moment, guessing by Laura's face what had happened, then turned around and followed Dagmar into the hall. He caught up to her and impulsively touched her shoulder from behind.

"Wait a moment," he urged.

"Why should I?"

"Please, don't be upset with Laura. She doesn't mean all that she says. She is with child- that's all it is."

"I'm sure."

"Dagmar, please look at me. Are we no longer friends, or weren't we ever?"

She sighed, faced him. "Of course we are friends."

"Your eyes look rather bright."

"Do they?" she pressed her wrist to her cheek and it came away damp. "Do forgive me."

"Of course." He shifted a little, and something brushed between his chest and shirt. An odd look came over him, and he touched his collar.

"Is something wrong?"

From his neck he took the pendant and held it out between them. She seemed surprised to see it again.

"You mean you have kept it after all these years?"

"Yes."

"I was joking when I said it bound us together-but perhaps I was not so far from the truth after all."

He took her by the hand and pressed the thing into her palm.

"Take it back," he suggested quietly, "for all our sakes."

"Yes," she nodded, "I shall." She slipped it over her head almost reverently, and it fell across her lacy dress and seemed crude in comparison.

"I will have to hide it away," she touched the beads on its surface. "It looks rather out of place with the rest of me."

Did everything end in practicality, he wondered unhappily.

"Laura is waiting," he told her and walked away.

A sound, another touch, startled her. She whirled and it was Milo. Panic rushed through her, and guilt. What had he heard?

Nothing, it seemed.

"Hey," he began, spotting the necklace. "Where has that come from? I've never seen it before-" His eyes moved to her own, and he let it trail off.

Her look and the retreating figure of Jeremiah gave him pause and caused his throat to begin beating for no reason at all.

"We're so pleased to have you, monsieur," Abigail was nodding politely as she preceded Lothaire into the drawing room. "You haven't been about for some time."

"Quite true," Lothaire brushed at his coat, "and for that I am sorry, Miss Collins. Actually I've been to Canada to see how my counterparts further north are faring. And it was a pleasure to hear my own language again after all these months, however different the dialect."

"I can well imagine." She settled herself on the divan. "I have always wanted to learn French for myself, but unfortunately it did not work out."

"What a shame!" He took a seat beside her, with her permission. "A second language can be very useful. Surely you haven't given up all hope of acquiring one?"

"I fear I am too set in my ways to begin now, monsieur," she sighed.

"What, a woman with your obvious intelligence?" Upon her blush, he smiled. "Oh, there now, I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"You have not," she placed a hand over her cheek and stood. "And in any case, I am quite certain I have wasted enough of your time. Doubtless you came here on some business with my brother?"

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He strolled with her to the threshold. "Wasted my time? On the contrary, I found all that transpired between us quite refreshing. A man cannot live by ledgers alone. I can only assume that by being gracious in allowing me to take my leave of you, you are hinting at your own anxiety to return to the many important things which have their bearing upon your life, Miss Collins."

"I believe Joshua is in the downstairs study; shall I fetch him?"

"Yes, please. Oh, and Miss Collins?"

"Yes?" Already having started away from him, she peered back over her shoulder cautiously.

"Should you at some future date happen to rediscover your... desire to learn French, I should be more than happy to become your tutor."

"Your courtesy is well appreciated, monsieur, but I would not think of imposing so!"

"I could offer mere courtesy any number of ways. My offer is sincere. But of course, I do not expect an answer now. The offer shall stand; feel free to light upon the subject again at any time you so wish."

"I shall remember that with pleasure," she nodded again and hurried off. Lothaire wandered into the foyer and slung an arm over the banister, laughing to himself. She was appealing in her own crude way and he had never minded a challenge, if Abigail could actually be considered one. There was a rustle at the top of the stairs, and he looked up, expecting to see Naomi or perhaps with luck Laura. The face that did meet his, however, froze upon contact. All at once she had whirled around and was retreating in shock.

"You!" he cried, once he had found his voice, and gave chase. "You are here, the both of you!" She darted down the hall. "Come back here, you little strumpet! Come back here and face me!"

"Lothaire!" the shout struck him from behind. He turned around to see Jeremiah. "What are you doing up here?"

"You were hiding the rabble in here all the while!" Lothaire hissed with pleasure. "Did I not warn you that you would be held as guilty as they? So help me, you will know the meaning of my words as soon as I return to town!"

"You'll do nothing of the kind."

"Are you threatening me?!" Lothaire laughed derisively and started back downstairs. Jeremiah rushed forward and seized him by the coat.

"Milo is not the one," he informed him coolly, "and you know it as well as I."

"I know nothing of the kind! Take your paw off me!"

Jeremiah did not. "What are you doing up here?" he asked again. "Nothing in these rooms should be of interest to you-unless, of course, you were planning to pay an unannounced visit to my wife."

"Come now-what possible reason would I have for doing that?"

"You needn't play word games with me, Lothaire. You always could find some excuse to associated with Laura. Don't think I haven't noticed!"

"I see no harm in giving the lady my regards when the opportunity presents itself."

"Nor do I-and you may send them any time you like, through me."

Lothaire sniffed indignantly. "I see no reason to continue this pointless dialogue with the likes of you." He tugged his jacket free of Jeremiah's grasp. "We shall soon discover which of us is the more sinful...once I alert the rest of this village just what sort of company you are entertaining up here!"

Adrenalin rushed up the back of Jeremiah's neck; and before Lothaire could take another step, he took a fresh hold of him, this time by the shirt front, and jerked him up two steps.

"Then go, if that's the way you want it. You will only be proven the fool, for once anyone arrives, there will be no one here to prove your outrageous claim. And let me warn you-if I ever see you near this house again, you'll need Zedekiah Martin to carry you up these stairs." Then Lothaire was falling, sliding downwards with the tails of his coat tangled around his neck and legs. He hit the foyer floor with a gasp, then crawled to his knees, scarlet with fury. "Now get out," Jeremiah watched him from the top step, "and take care not to track your slime across the front terrace." "I would not let you gain the satisfaction of playing martyr along with your friend Seabrook! Your refugees are so precious to you-keep them! Today I am an investor in your brother's company; by tonight I will not be."

"Go to Hell."

"If I do, then that is where we shall settle the matter, rest assured." Steam of humiliation practically billowing from his ears, he marched out, and he and his horse nearly flew down the drive.

Matthew rolled over in the dirty straw, great belly shuddering with every drunken giggle, feet propped up against the bars of the cell. Lothaire folded his arms where he stood behind the gaoler.

"Is there no way I can get him out?" he continued to press.

"Nope," the gaoler nodded, seeming quite pleased about it. "He's a danger to society drunk like that, that's what the beadle figures."

"Come now, surely you cannot be so unfair and hard-hearted!" Lothaire took out his wallet. "Allow me to give you something for your troubles, and from your bettered position perhaps you will be able to take pity on poor Shepard."

The smaller man's forehead tightened. "I'm afraid I'm not for sale and Matthew Shepard stays where he is. Two nights in the pen-that's the law for disorderly conduct around here."

Lothaire's dark eyes blazed with impatience and perhaps growing panic as well.

"But surely-!" He shook several coins into his palm. "If the fine is paid, then certainly Matthew can be released."

"No fine!" the guard insisted, crossing his arms over his squat chest. "And no bail. He stays here-two nights. I think your visiting time is up."

"I protest this travesty of justice!" he cried as he was pushed forcibly out. "If any man should be gaoled for drunkenness, it should be the beadle himself!" Watching them struggle, Matthew scratched his unshaven jaw and guffawed as if he were mad.

"I'm afraid you'll have to take your complaints to him." He shut the chamber door and barred it. Lothaire went on pounding from the other side but was ignored.

"He's gone then?" the prisoner rolled his bloodshot eyes to his keeper. "Ye've done away wthum?"

"He won't be back in here, you can be sure of that. Rich friends or no, it's just you and me now - you disgusting sot. Today and tonight and then some."

"Laura!" Naomi rushed to hold her sister-in-law up as Laura whitened and slid forward on a chair. "What is it?"

Laura caught her breath and smiled. "It was the pain," she said. "It's beginning!"

"Already? But it shouldn't-you'll have to get up to bed. Come with me." They were struggling to the foyer as Barnabas came into the room.

"Mother, what's wrong?" he stopped short.

"Laura has taken ill. We'll have to get her up to her room."

"Here, let me help you." He took her by the other arm, and together they steered her to the staircase.

"Someone will have to send for Jeremiah."

"I'll go straight away."

"You needn't worry him," Laura gasped as she fell upon her bed. "It's probably nothing-I don't need him."

She was ignored. She thought them fools for their fretting but went along with the extra attention anyhow.

"And bring a doctor back with you," Naomi was saying, "and Mrs. Lee. Hurry-I'll stay herewith her."

"Yes, Mother." Barnabas fled to the front door and ran into Milo and Dagmar downstairs.

"What has happened?" Milo asked.

"My mother thinks Laura's time has come," Barnabas informed him as he tore down a cape and threw it on.

"Already!"

"Yes, and both of you had best hide. I'm going to have to bring a doctor from town."

"We will. Come, Dagmar, we'll go to the servant's quarters for a while." He took her hand. Barnabas opened the door and was startled by what was taking place outside. The sky had turned deep purple and was smeared with ugly charcoal clouds. There was a biting wind hurling itself against the house, and even the grass quivered in dark fright.

"It's going to snow," Dagmar said.

Barnabas pushed outside, holding down his hat. "I'll have to get them back before it starts!"

After he had gone, Milo had to fight the elements to secure the entrance behind him.

"No mild storm, either," he remarked. "I'm almost relieved that I am prevented from going with him!"

Dagmar went to the window in the drawing room and peeled the curtains back. When he caught up to her, she was watching the snapping trees at the edge of the lawn with the same transfixed expression as she had given to the sea once before. He stared out over her shoulder, as then.

"Look at it," she almost whispered, and one of the taller maples curved painfully, flinging its grey arms out in all directions, one with the torn rent. "It seems a puppet, dancing in fire."

"Not a pleasant comparison!" he tried to draw her away. "Come, you heard Barnabas. People will be here from town. They mustn't see us. We'll know well enough when the first flakes arrive."

She tensed in his grip, pushed closer to the rattling window.

"No-not yet! There's still some time-and I want to see if it breaks!"

Lothaire threw open his own shutters and stuck his head out into the shrieking tempest. The heavens rolled overhead, black clouds circling the rooftops ominously, angels of death. Relief spared in him.

"We are safe!" he breathed, and Zedekiah and Ennis came to see.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this storm-there will be no moon. Matthew cannot give himself away-we are safe!"

Zedekiah smiled. Lothaire forced the window shut and leaned against it.

"Yes, your idiot compatriot is safe but not entirely out of danger! When I catch up to him, it will be a different story again! Such disobedience and carelessness! I-" Suddenly he felt a pulling at his throat and winced.

"Lothaire, what's the matter?" His servants were there supporting him.

"I don't know!" he gasped, and then his gaze fell upon the backs of his hands. Fur was erupting all down his arm, and the familiar pain racked his entire body. "No-I couldn't have been wrong!"

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How then-how?" He ran to the door and charged out into the street, head thrown back to search the sky. The moon was there, after all, passing in and out of the shield of the clouds, its bright light a smile mocking him for his confidence of a moment before.

"Impossible!" he cried. "A storm and the moon? I've never seen it so before!"

"You'd better go, Lothaire," Zedekiah grabbed his arm. "Go to the woods while there is still time. You know how it is with us-it takes longer."

"Yes-" Doubled over with the agony, Lothaire staggered towards the horses tied by the house. As he slung his convulsing body over the saddle, he leaned down to take the other by the shirt. "Matthew!" he spat, the name a curse. "He will give us all away! See that he does not."

"We will," Martin vowed then slapped the horse and it sped off into the brewing flurries. Ennis looked questioningly at him.

"Come on," he shouted. "To the gaol before it's too late!"

They ran to the courthouse and hammered on the door.

"Gaoler!" Zedekiah bellowed. "Gaoler, let us in! It's urgent!"

The toad-like guard appeared and opened the door but a crack.

"What do you two want?"

They went to the door that closed the cells off from the outer room.

"We want to see Matthew Shepard. It's important, so let us in."

"Now?" the other asked incredulously. "There's snow coming and a gale too!"

"The weather ain't no cause to deny a man his visitors!" Ennis stated, his hand at his coat lapel.

"Well. . ." The older gaoler was due to relieve him in fifteen minutes, and there was really not much point in risking his disapproval. "I'm afraid you'll have to come back later. It's not that-" There was a quick pain in his side, and he looked down to see that Ennis had moved around his brother and thrust a knife between his ribs. He had not time to cry out, so he merely slid to the floor between the two of them.

"So there," Zedekiah said and kicked him on his way to Matthew's cell.

Their former friend was lolling about in the straw, wisps of it stuck in his greying hair and shabby clothes. Zedekiah gripped the bars and shook them to get his attention.

"Matthew!" he growled, and Matthew got to his feet, blinking.

"Are you here to get me out?" he drawled with sudden excitement. "There, I knew it! Lothaire would never let me rot in here-he never would!"

The pain began deep in Zedekiah's stomach, but he held his face emotionless. Matthew scowled for he was always the last one

to change and did not realize what was happening.

"Why are you just standing there?" he demanded. "Don't you got the keys? Get 'em, dummies, and let me-"

Silver flashed from Ennis' hand to Zedekiah's, and it was not the key.

"No," Matthew managed to gag and tried to back off. "I'll never be drunk again, I swear it! Please-"

Zedekiah grabbed his wrist, preventing his escape, and plunged the blade into the prisoner's fat middle. Blood sprayed the grate and floor.

There was a clatter in the waiting area, and a voice calling out the name of the dead guard. Ennis took his brother's sleeve and pulled him away from his victim. Matthew fell and did not move.

"There's someone out there," he cried unnecessarily, and the hair came pouring onto his face, blond and shaggy. "He'll see us-come on- we've got to-"

Both nearly crippled with the change, they bolted through the outer office, smashing directly into the just-arrived elder gaoler. The knife-blade slashed his arm. He cried out and crashed into a table as they disappeared into the night. Screaming began from inside the cell area, terrified and almost inhuman. Clutching his torn bicep, he ran inside, nearly stumbling over his murdered associate.

"Help me," he moaned. "They've got me, I'm dying!"

The gaoler came closer, and the shadow took on details. He jerked back in horror, unable to believe what he saw. Matthew's shape was evolving even as the blood gushed from his gut, and the teeth in his open mouth were fast growing pointed and canine. His impassioned pleas turned then to a mere lupine wail, and he fell down a second time, clawing the smelly air and kicking like a wild thing until the moment that he died.

"How is she?" Jeremiah grabbed Naomi as she quitted Laura's room. Maids rushed by on either side, excited about the forthcoming event and set scurrying by the crashing storm. "Tell me, for God's sake!"

"It's too soon to know exactly what's happening. But one thing is certain-she's having the child tonight."

"Oh my God!" he began to shake. "My God!" All the time he had spent pondering and preparing for those very words seemed nothing, and he was terrified. "Can I see her? I must! Naomi- please-"

"For a minute or else there'll be no chance of calming you. But Jeremiah-you must stay collected and not upset her! It could be harmful."

"Yes, yes, all right, anything!" he agreed distractedly and tore into the room. Naomi continued downstairs, feeling dreadfully weighted down by her own bulging stomach.

"Mrs. Collins!" someone whispered urgently. She turned to see Milo, peering out from behind a

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door. She went quickly to him and saw that Dagmar was there as well. "Mrs. Collins-what's going on?"

"Jeremiah is with her as well as the others. But what are you doing here? You're supposed to be hiding in the servants' wing!"

"We couldn't stand not knowing! We'll go back at once. Dagmar-"

"The snow," Dagmar cut in at once, "has it begun yet?"

"No. It seems tonight is made of waiting."

"Yes," Milo nodded and said something else to his fiancée. But she was no longer listening to either of them. Her mind stretched out past Col-linwood's walls and into the blackness beyond. She could hear the demanding wind thundering against the woods and the house that dared to stand in its way, and the sound was a part of her, setting the beat of her own pulsing veins.

"Dagmar!" he repeated, louder this time. "Aren't you listening? I said let's go back!"

"Yes, Milo, we must." Impulsively she pressed herself against him and flung her arms around his waist. "Now, before someone sees us!"

Milo said something to Naomi who looked rather surprised at Dagmar's reaction, and then they left her. She clung to him all the way to their hiding-place as if she would be carried away to the sky if she let go. He set her in a chair before the fireplace in the disused servants' room and knelt before her, holding her hands.

"What troubles you, dearest?" he asked gently. "Please tell me."

"Oh, Milo!" she cried and drew his head against her chest. "Don't ever desert me or let us be separated! There is always something to pull lovers apart-swear it will not be us this time!"

He held her, bewildered by her fury. "What would do that to us?"

"Stay with me tonight, all night, and don't even leave me if I beg you to! Bar the door while I throw another log on the fire-quickly, do as I say!"

He got up and did as she asked while she slumped to her knees on the floor and hurled not one piece of wood, but two, onto the flames. Already feeble, it promptly fizzled. Milo ran back and had to wrest the poker from her hands as she beat at the cooling embers passionately.

"That will do no good!" he laughed uneasily. "We'll need another match. Here, I'll do it." He took the box from the mantel and scowled. "Damn, we're all out. I'll have to ask Mrs. Collins for some more. . ."

Dagmar felt the need swelling in her throat. Her nose, her eyes, and the pit of her stomach burned like the storm, and she could stand it no longer. She dug the bolt out of the door and darted back out.

When she reached the foyer, she heard voices coming from above. One of them was Jeremiah's. She picked up her skirts and trod up, to pause just outside Laura's chamber. The door was open a

crack, and she managed to get a glimpse inside.

Laura was on the bed, eyes pressed shut, Dagmar supposed with the pain. The midwife and the doctor were hovering nearby, and the doctor had on a pair of spectacles that reflected the light of the candles. Jeremiah was beside his wife. He was on a chair pulled up alongside the bed, but in his anxiety he had slid forward until he was almost kneeling on the floor. One of Laura's hands was sandwiched in both of his, and his voice was so humble it seemed as if he had been flogged and was begging his oppressor not to repeat the chastisement.

"Please, Laura," he was whispering horribly, "please come through this all right. Only stay calm and you'll be all right. . .please, Laura, please. . ."

Dagmar felt her lungs twist together. The leather pendant popped from her dress and the string hit against her neck as she raced back down. The wind reached an ear-shattering pitch inside her head, and then it sucked her outdoors and she was hurling herself into it full force, letting the flying leaves and twigs and now snowflakes snap at her bare arms, her face.

"I will always be the same, Milo or not!" she screamed, a challenge to the heavens. "No walls will keep me! I am as I was before-and will be forever!"

The wolf within the brush saw her, and his tongue slid between his teeth, dripping. One leap and his jaws had closed around her throat. She fell beneath him onto the frosty ground, beating him frantically with her fists. Her dark eyes caught his and held, and then from Collinwood burst Milo, screaming. Lothaire broke away and dove for the cover of the woods, her dark blood staining his own furry neck and mouth.

"Dagmar!" Milo flung himself down beside her and scooped her up. "God, no-no!"

She tried to lay very still and quiet as they had told her to, and the tears were falling from Milo's eyes as he watched the soft rise and fall of her heavily bandaged throat. His fingers were entwined with hers, and even from the strength of his grip she knew that she would die.

She stirred a little, and his heart beat faster. "Do you need the doctor?" he inquired at once.

"No, " she said and smiled weakly. Her voice was ugly, odd.

A silhouette loomed up in the doorway. She squinted across and discerned it to be Jeremiah. Her hand tightened on Milo's.

"How is Laura?" she croaked.

"The same, " her friend answered hoarsely.

"Milo, " she decided, "I have changed my mind. The pain is worse. Please-go and get the doctor, if he can be taken away. "

"I'll go, "Jeremiah said, half turning. "No I mean-no. Milo must do it. I will trust no one but Milo. "

"But I cannot leave you!" he protested with agony.

"Why-? I will not run away again, I promise you that. "

He kissed her brow and the backs of her hands. "Very well, " he nodded and rushed off. The next thing she knew, Jeremiah had taken the chair.

"How much longer will it be before you have your son?"

"It may be a few minutes-or maybe an hour. That's the way of childbirth-one never knows. " His lashes fluttered, and suddenly he was weeping too. "Dagmar-why did you run outside?!"

The lines in her face grew deeper. "Do you remember the drink you took from me and how while you were taking it every inch of your restrictive world seemed nothing but a burden to you, a chain you longed to cast off and kick aside?" "Yes. "

"Well, .that is how it is for me, not merely for an hour but all the time. "

"So that's the way it must be-nothing can hold you, not even Milo. "

"There's no question of Milo! I would have taken him with me! You see, he would not pull me to my knees the way Laura has with you. " "Laura, " he started.

"Don't act so surprised-you know it to be the truth. And if you consider that what she has done to you is for the better, then we are no longer friends after all, and I shall be nothing more to you in this world. "

There was a long moment of silence. Then, trembling, Jeremiah's hand crept up to his collar. She watched him intently.

"What has happened to it?" he asked. "It's there-on the bureau! Fetch it right now." He jumped up and snatched the pendant from beside the candles. She almost tore it out of his grip and slipped it back around his throat.

"Is it better?" she asked at once, fire returning to her eyes. "Is it?"

"Yes, "he nodded earnestly. "It is as before- I feel it and know how it is with you. "

Milo returned but without the doctor.

"It's Laura, " he said quickly, "she can't be left alone now. "

"I'll have to go. " Jeremiah got to his feet. Dagmar felt a sudden, fresher pain and began to gasp desperately.

"Milo, " she called weakly. "Milo!"

Milo flung himself down beside her and took her by the arms.

"Dearest!" he sobbed. "Hold on, please!"

"I cannot. "

"Then I have failed. I promised you we would not be apart and now I have failed. "

"No, " she whispered, "it was not you. It was him-Lothaire!"

"Jeremiah!" someone shouted from the hall. Milo looked up at the sound and suddenly a change came over his entire countenance. He saw the pendant hanging about his friend's neck, and beside the candles on the table there remained only dust.

Naomi and the midwife were waiting for Jeremiah. He dashed out to meet them.

"Your son, " Naomi said anxiously. "He's here. And Laura is well. "

"Well!" the midwife interrupted. "That's putting it mildly! And you say this was her first? I don't believe it! "

"He's here?!" Jeremiah could not believe it at first.

Dagmar had heard, and she clutched the front of Milo's shirt, the red stain on her bandage growing larger and darker all at once. Milo grabbed her up, terrified.

"I shall yet wait for you, " she said.

"And I will let nothing we have said be forgotten! I shall not let us be separated, ever!"

Her hand fell back against the pillows.

Later that night they brought Jeremiah's child out, and when he gazed upon it for the first time, he saw that it had flame in its great wide eyes.

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### IV. Ashes

Nor shall this peace sleep with her; but as when The bird of wonder dies, the maiden phoenix, Her ashes new-create another heir, As great in admiration as herself.

Jeremiah gently prodded his horse's side, and it carried him to the crest of the snow-covered Eagle Hill. There he paused, eyes searching the bleak land of the dead below, and soon saw the figure he sought.

He went down into the cemetery, still on horseback, and moved to tower over the smaller man who was huddled against the tombstone, holding it in his arms as if it were a living woman.

"Milo, " he said quietly.

Milo did not turn. His mouth was pressed to the carved name, and his eyelashes were coated with frosted tears. But Jeremiah knew he was listening for there was a slight twitch of his shoulders.

"I . . . rather thought you'd be here, " he went on.

"She's cold. " Milo shifted at last but only got closer to the stone. "I have to be here. "

"Yes, I see. "

"What did you want me for?"

"Milo. . .does the sun bother your eyes, or is there a better reason why you will not look at me?"

"There is a better reason. "

There was a long silence. As the icy wind tore through the yard and whistled against them, Jeremiah pinched uncomfortably at the fingertips of his gloves.

"Why don't you come back to the house awhile?"

Finally Milo twisted around and glared up at his former friend. His face was red with cold and was barely shaven. There was an obvious razor cut across his chin, but the whiskers were growing up over it. And Milo's eyes, once bright with life, were now dulled in color and narrow like a rat's. His clothes were wet with snow and dirty from the outdoors.

"I shall not come to your house, " he spat promptly, keeping one ungloved hand on her grave even as he did so.

"Milo, it has been nearly a month. "

"Do you think I am unaware of that? I am the one who must bear it. . . not you. "

"No one expects you not to grieve. But this is not grief. And it's not as she would have wanted it. You must get hold of yourself soon-pick up and try to go on. Trust me-it is the only way. "

Milo staggered to his feet, balance unsteady because his limbs were cramped and bloodless from kneeling so long in the same position.

"Yes, the only way for you-she did not mean much to you, did she? But me-yes, how different it was for me. My life has been ripped from me. -Shakespeare

If I were to lie here, across her grave for a hundred years and *neVer* raise my head once, it still would not be enough. Do not dare to ask me what she would have wanted-she was me, so I may decide. Besides-she deserves it! So leave me to her and don't give me your worthless advice. I will take it from her and no one else!" He squinted and felt hatred course through his every vein. He wished he could rush forward and snatch her pendant from about the other's neck where he assumed it to be, still, and strangle him with it.

"Can I say nothing to change your mind?"

"Nothing. "

Jeremiah sighed resignedly and after a last sorrowful look at Milo wheeled his mount around and bade it gallop back through the woods towards the house. His cape billowed behind him as Star reached the frozen stream he and Barnabas had once raced to, and jumped it. The pendant thudded against his chest with every plunge of the horse's hooves, and before long the trees closed up around him and he was beneath the shadow of Collinwood.

He went inside and upstairs at once, and of course found Laura in her usual chair with William snuggled against her. At first glance Jeremiah thought his son asleep, but soon he realized that William was only watching the fireplace with wild eyes, even as his mother was. The outside world mattered little to them in their places there, as did the third member of their family. He did not shut the door quietly and creep in as he had done too many times before; he slammed it. Laura whirled, and her mouth twitched with some disparagement when she saw him there, and William imitated the sneer perfectly.

"I hope I haven't disturbed you, " Jeremiah said bitterly.

"You mustn't slam doors so, " his wife ordered coolly. "You gave us both a start. "

"I'll not apologize. This is my house-my room-as well as yours. "

"I did not ask you to. "

"Don't turn from me in that snide manner----

I've come up here to see you and talk to you, and that's exactly what I'm going to do. " He moved to stand deliberately in front of the lapping fire, and at once the room became darker.

Laura leaned back with a sniff. "You've found Seabrook, I take it. Nothing else could have put

you in such a mood. Is he still mourning, the little idiot? He ought to realize how lucky he has been-especially since Matthew Shepard took the blame for those crimes rather than he. "

"I saw him in the graveyard. He was by her stone again, as always; he says he is nothing without her. "

"What nonsense! I suppose he sees himself a regular poet, pining away for tenderest love. "

"Perhaps it's not so foolish. Do you know something, Laura? I began to think as I watched him there. I began to wonder if you would weep for me if I should suddenly die. "

"Such talk in front of William! Have you been drinking, Jeremiah? You don't usually babble so, "

"You won't answer me, will you? Because indeed you would not. You have taken me and all I have offered, and you have smiled at me and given me words of comfort, but there was nothing to any of it especially after William came to be. "

She got up, clutching the child, and smiled slightly at him, he supposed suggestively.

"Shall I have Naomi watch over him for a little while?"

"That isn't what I mean!"

"Then what do you want to stand here and fight in front of him?" Sensing her displeasure, William began to bawl.

"No-of course not! I only want to know one thing, Laura-do you love me? Did you when you became my wife?"

Laura's eyes became colder still. "Of course, " she said matter-of-factly. "I did, and do. Now is that the end of this foolishness?"

"The end-yes. I suppose that is the difference between us. . .you use such words only as a dismissal. Very well, you shall have your way this time. But this is a new year, Laura-do remember that, for I will. "

"I have no intention of forgetting, " she promised as he stalked from the room.

The busty waitress hoisted the tray of mugs onto her shoulder and was about to leave the tavern kitchen and re-enter the bustling outer room when two arms slid about her from behind, one locking about her waist, the other about her mouth to stifle a cry of surprise. She gasped, and the full cups splashed ale over the tray and onto the greasy floor. The pressure came away slowly, and she turned her painted face to see the man, much smaller than she, pressed into the corner. His teeth flashed in the dim light when he smiled, and he reached out again, this time to grip her wrist demandinglly.

"I remember you, " he told her in a low voice.

"And I know you!" As she stared at him, her initial rage and even fear faded to mere amusement. "This is the kitchen, Milo Seabrook-no customers allowed. How did you get in?"

"I have no trouble slipping through the shadows, " he snickered, eyes glistening. I have friends among the dead, you see, and they give me power. No one sees me unless I want them to. "

"I wondered before how they could have suspected you a maniac, " she told him, half teasing but half serious as well. "Now I begin to see their point. "

He reaffirmed his grip on her arm, sweaty fingers digging into her wrist. He went on grinning, laughing to himself over the gaudy smear of color on her cheeks, the pastiness of her red, red lips. She had little difficulty in deciding what he wanted.

"Have you some time, then?" he whispered.

"Putting in a special order are you, Sea-brook?"

"Yes, " he nodded eagerly, "I am. "

"Very well. " Losing interest in the spilt ales, she tossed them aside and slipped out a side door of the kitchen, and he followed. Down a hall that smelled overpoweringly of dust, up a flight of creaking wooden stairs, up to her small room they went. She pushed open the cracked door and preceded him in. He closed it behind him, and as he did he noticed a half-eaten sandwich on the paint-peeled dresser. Ants were pooling around it, undaunted by the cold. She saw his disgust and smirked.

"Don't worry, love, " she took his hand and tried to pull him near, "they don't bite. "

He did not yield to her tugging, though. His hand snaked back out and caught her again, this time by the throat, and venom crept into his glare as he pushed her against the wall. She managed to cry out once, seized with terror.

"Shut up!" he snapped and pinched her lips together against her teeth. It hurt. "You've nothing to be afraid of! Do you think I

would waste my time doing anything with the likes of you, even killing you? A sad delusion, I'm afraid. "

"What are you doing here, then?" she whispered fearfully.

After a moment, he stepped away and removed from his pocket a tiny sack. At first she was certain he was going for a knife, but then she heard the jingle of money and inclined her head a little despite herself, eager to see.

"Yes, it's gold," he confirmed her suspicions with a sneer and thrust it under her pointed nose. "More than you've ever seen in your line of work, I'll wager!"

"You're lying," she fairly gasped. "They're copper!"

"Arrogant slut," he said nastily and pitched two of the coins onto the floor. She went down to her knees for them at once. He bent down with her, staring into her eyes. "There are plenty more where those came from. You like them, don't you? You'd do almost anything to have that kind of money-wouldn't you?"

"Like what! Stop those games and tell me

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what you want! "

"Some information and then a promise. Nothing more. "

"If you have a question, ask me; and if you do not, get out. "

"I want to know about Lothaire Bocquet. " They stood together, she clutching the dropped coins. "I've seen you crossing the street to his house. "

"What of it?" She became defensive.

"How many times have you been with him in all? Twice. . .three times perhaps? Does he pay you well? He must. "

"Why do you want to know? What business is it of yours or are you sick?"

"What business!" Abruptly he grew harsher. "Everything that is Lothaire is my business. I must know everything about him, you see. Everything there is to know, and then I may better decide what to take away first. "

"I don't understand you-don't know what you mean at all! "

"Then I shall make it plain to you-this gold for his life. You must go there again-make certain he invites you-and when he is with you and upon you in his lust, you will draw out a knife and plunge it into him. Not deeply at first; let him know what you have done, and let him writh and claw and weep for himself. And then when he has suffered enough and is brought to tears of regret, take the knife in hand only then and press it in a little deeper so that he will die. "

As he spoke, her jaw gradually grew slack, and when he was finished, her eyes bugged out completely.

"And hang for it the next morning? You must be mad!"

"No-you will not hang. I shall see to that. And you shall have the rest of this gold. Is it not worth the risk? I could ask one of your sisters, you know. "

She considered a moment. "Are you sure I'd be safe?"

"Yes!"

"Well then. . .all right! Bring him to me, and you shall have your blood! I've no affection for the louse!"

Smiling, he held the gold just out of her grasp, then returned it to his pocket and backed from the room.

"Keep what you grovelled for----it will give you

a better taste for what you'll have when he's dead. You can be certain you'll get what I have promised. If I have to be strung up in the process, I will live at least long enough to see him put beneath me. I shall be watching from my window -waiting for you to cross the street again. "

She nodded, somewhat numbly; and laughing, he slipped away and ran for the street.

"I thought you would never get here," Laura

whispered as she opened the secret panel to admit Lothaire who stood quietly on the darkened staircase. "Come in quickly. "

He did so, and she pushed the hidden door shut.

"We must be very quiet; Naomi is but a few rooms away and the maid is with William in the nursery."

"They shan't hear me," he took her face in his hands and grinned, "but you shall know that I am here. "

They kissed roughly. Laura slowly drew the ribbon from around his queue.

"It has been too long," he said at last. "You don't know how long I've waited for Jeremiah Collins to be called away on business! And a shame that it is now, two nights before I am forced to leave myself!"

"Two days, two nights; that is time enough. Let my husband and his brother dig for their gold in Boston; we shall make our way in the world here and now, "

"No one puts the sweat upon my brow as you do," he told her as they threw the pillows onto the floor by the raging fireplace and twined together upon them, struggling and loving at once. "Would that you had waited and not married the fool you did! "

"Would you have been the one to wed me then, Lothaire?"

"No, not I-but we could have seen the world and left it trampled beneath our feet. You would have been content with that, I know-say to me you would!"

"If you know, why should I?"

"There are things that tie me to Collinsport," he whispered, "but none are chains you could not break if you so desired. You and William, together-after all, what mother could confine her child to this abyss of propriety and nothingness forever?"

"We think alike," she told him, "and when the day comes, you shall surely know it. If your offer still stands by then, I shall make use of it. But I will do so in my own time, be forewarned; should you become impatient, I will be forced to deny you, and you will have nothing. "

"I do not become impatient; time has served me well on all counts, and I am content to flow with it and no faster. But what's this! Would we waste the night talking of eternity when the sun is waiting?"

"No," Laura wound her arms around his neck, and the fireplace blazed with light.

"I'm. . . looking for a gift to take home to my wife in Collinsport," Jeremiah told the shopkeeper as he browsed around the small store. "I'm not quite sure what she'd prefer. "

"Yes, buying presents for women," the old

man sighed. "Not as easy task, never was. Of course, my courting days are long over, so perhaps I can loan you an objective eye. " "I would certainly appreciate it. " "One of these, perhaps?" He picked up a white figurine and held it up. It was a delicate

sculpture of a woman in a flowing dress with a poodle clutched to her bosom. Jeremiah took it and inspected it casually. "It's quite a fine craft."

"Indeed very nice. It was made here in Boston?"

"Of course-fellow on the east side makes them. Quite breakable, though; will it be a long journey for you?"

"Yes, unfortunately so. Quite long and bumpy." He set it back reluctantly. "Have you something more sturdy?"

"There are metal works over there if you would have a look."

Jeremiah nodded and walked across the store. There were various types of keepsakes there, displayed on a table, including several painted cow bells and a boldly fashioned bronze eagle on which the feet seemed out of proportion.

"Very little that's ladylike here," the merchant laughed. "I suppose you shall have to stick to the figurines."

"I suppose so," his customer agreed cheerfully. As he was about to turn back though, his eye fell on something else-something colorful and shiny in the candlelight. It was a knife with a bejewelled hilt and elegant sheath to match. Interested, he took it up and examined the blade. There was not a spot of rust on it. "Wait," he said as the old man was about to walk away. "How much is this?"

"You're going to give that to your wife? Not that it be my business, sir, but after you do you'd best not get into a spat with her."

"No, not for her," Jeremiah rushed on, ingoring the jest. "I find it rather. . .alluring. And that's odd-I've never had much interest in. . .weapons."

"I shouldn't think you'd have to be to appreciate that. I've admired it myself a few times. I took it on trade from a gentleman come stomping in here for a candlestick. He told me gypsies made it, and them be real stones-not that I believe a word of that tale, but it's an impressive piece all the same."

"I'll take it," Jeremiah decided at once, "that, and the statue."

"Right!" the merchant was pleased. "I'll put the little miss in a crate, so as she won't break before you get home. Shall I tuck the other in with her?"

"That won't be necessary, thank you," Jeremiah clutched the dagger almost protectively to his chest though he had no idea why he was so attracted to it. "I'll carry this."

"As you wish then," the other nodded and happily accepted his money.

Barnabas started morosely into the mug of now-flat ale, purposely ignoring the suggestive glances

of the barmaids flitting merrily around his table and those of the other men in The Bell. He was bored but not so desolate as to pick one of them for companionship.

He took one last sip of the grog, wincing at its warm, stale taste, and pushed his chair back to go. Just then, however, there was a clatter at the door and three more customers squeezed in and towards a table. Immediately he paused and sank back into his own dim corner, not wishing to be recognized by any of them.

Lothaire threw himself into a chair between Zedekiah and Ennis and slapped the table-top obnoxiously.

"Service!" he cried. "Three men sit here dying of thirst, and not a soul steps up to save him! Some pity here if you please, and some rum as well!" Ennis leaned across and said something else, and they exploded in laughter anew. A big-chested waitress hurried over to take their order and purposely brushed against Lothaire's arm in doing so. Barnabas could not hear what was being said, but to judge from the lewd expressions on their faces, he decided he did not wish to. Still he could not leave, for he could hardly imagine a worse fate than being spotted by and forced to take a seat with them.

Soon she brought them the drinks and each of the three lifted his off her tray. Zedekiah was the first to grasp his and guzzled appreciatively for a long while. It ran down both sides of his chin and onto his shirt. Lothaire noticed and slapped him playfully in the gut. Zedekiah coughed and set the mug down.

"You have the manners of a pig, you know! Here, not even a thank-you to the lady! It's a wonder I dare to be seen in public with you, Zedekiah-you're tarnishing my saintly reputation by day!"

"A thank you from him won't brighten my life any," the waitress asserted with a screech of mock derision. Then she grew more sober and bent close to Lothaire. "But from you, mushure- that could indeed make a difference, if you'd care to try."

"Dear woman," Lothaire looked up with a grin, "are you placing yourself at my disposal?"

She narrowed her eyes in what she hoped was an effectively sultry manner, all the while smiling not at him, but at the thought of Milo's gold a short ways down the street.

"I remember you thanks well," she said quickly, taking his rough hand. "I am on fire to receive more of them if you were to see fit."

There was a moment's consideration, and then Lothaire jerked his hand away and half rose to give her a hearty push. She fell against another table, inspiring the three to another fit of hilarity.

"I prefer to pick my own flowers, thank you well enough!" he drank deeply and went on grinning. "And besides that, what sense is there in peeling the petals from the same one more than

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once? They only grow back paler. Bring me some fresh roses, not the same old weeds again and again!"

"The mushure is right," Zedekiah nodded. "Why, you ought to be shamed for yourself, Annie, trying to corrupt the pure likes of us!"

"Well then," the hussy retorted, reddening and straightening with rage, "have your own way then and keep warm with your horse tonight if that's what you please." So saying she turned and stomped off. Barnabas chose that moment to rise and slip quickly into the street, turning up his coat collar and pulling down his hat. None of the three noticed him.

Into the icy town he went, having nowhere in particular to go and not eager to return to solemn ColUnwood. But all that he saw did not change his mood greatly. Most of the windows facing him were darkened with only one or two for every five filled with light. The Christmas decoration had all been taken down, and all that was left was the bleakness of the winter that would last another three dull months.

Feeling the solitude, he paced blithely on and did not realize how far he had gone until he unexpectedly passed Laura's old door, now Lothaire's. He paused only then and without any particular reason went up to it and placed one cold hand on the weather-beaten frame. It was as if he stood there for the first time ever, and with a slight smile he tried to recall how it had been only in April when he had trembled upon that exact spot and begged her to tour ColHnwood's grounds with him. She had regarded him cynically from the threshold and at last conceded. The memory was without bitterness, though, or even the faintest of longings. It provided him with more amusements and was somehow unreal and even less important. After a minute or two he turned to go back, but as he did so he happened to glance across the street and up at Milo's frosty window. No light burned there, and he assumed the other to be out. Then suddenly he saw eyes-feverish, glowing little orbs that watched him from the darkness with overt hatred and malignancy. A brief jolt ran through him, from both shock and fear; but even before it expired they were gone, and only a dingy curtain swung in their place. A moment later he rushed to Milo's door and was knocking urgently.

"Milo?" He tried the knob but was locked out. "Milo, it's Barnabas-are you all right in there? Come, Milo, answer me!"

Milo did not do so, and ceasing to pound Barnabas took out his thin pocket-knife, thrust it into the lock, and twisted it inside until there was a telltale snap. The stained door creaked open to utter darkness which even the moonlight did not pierce.

He rushed inside and tripped at once over what seemed to be a broken piece of furniture; he grabbed for balance and managed to steady himself with the aid of a wall. As soon as he did so, however, a thin and bony arm locked itself around his neck and dragged him backwards.

"You've broken into my house," Milo accused viciously.

"I meant no harm," Barnabas asserted, dropping his knife as soon as he recognized the voice. "I was worried that you might be ill-I saw no light but only your face through the window."

Finally Milo released him cautiously and stepped away. Barnabas coughed a little and turned.

"I cannot see you-it is too dark."

The other snorted, grappled in the shadows for a candle. But when it was lit, Barnabas could only stare around himself with astonishment. The apartment looked as if a hurricane had swept mercilessly through leaving no furniture unbroken or at least unchipped; and empty whiskey bottles littered the ratty, filthy carpet. Milo's clothes, as well, were rumpled and unwashed, and there was a tangled growth of unsightly beard on his otherwise ghost-pale chin.

"Some of us d\_o still need the light to see," he said, "and I can't deny you, I suppose. But I do pity you. Here-so now is it better?"

"Yes..."

"You wondered if I were alive. Well now you see that I am. Will there be any more questions?"

Barnabas slowly recovered himself, only to be taken back again by the tone of Milo's voice.

"Milo... what has become of you? We were friends-have you forgotten that?"

"Need you even ask!" Suddenly violent, Milo seized a small trinket-box from the dresser and hurled it to the floor where it splintered. "And you want to know if I've forgotten you? No, I've forgotten nothing! Every moment I lived in that year that is now passed is upon me-every, every second is alive to me and pressing against my mind. Sometimes I am unsure if I am living then or now-it is all so real, so consuming to me." He stared at the smashed box for a long while and then dug his fingers into his matted back hair until tears sprang to his eyes. "That's why the darkness, you see-when it is like that and it is black and I cannot tell the difference, she is with me and I with her. That was the promise- never parted, she and I, not through time, nor death..."

"Milo," Barnabas swallowed, unsure how to calm him, "she is gone. Nothing shall bring her back, not darkness and not madness."

"You are wrong!"

"No-I am not. What good are you doing yourself and her memory? You left the shipyards and Collinwood when you were more than welcome to stay. How are you to live now or even pay the rent? You will soon have no place to live! Jeremiah said you needed more time-but I do not believe that."

"Jeremiah! That's how you try to make my shattered breast whole again, by mentioning his

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name to me? He's not as innocent, as faultless as you think! If you had seen what I did the very night she was murdered-"

"It was not murder, Milo-you must not dwell on such thoughts! It was only an accident! We had set traps in the woods but apparently..."

Milo returned to the window, tore back the ragged curtain and stared out again at Lothaire's door. He began, then, to laugh wildly.

"An accident, yes! And it will be an accident that avenges her." He pressed his face to the frozen glass and clutched at the front of his coat. "He will not live much longer, you know. And then I shall be content to go to her. Oh, you needn't pale so-I didn't mean your uncle. I meant him-" he struck the pane with a fist. "Lothaire! I've been watching him hour after hour. And still he brings home the wrong companions! Look-there he is now. Where is she? Perhaps he's too drunk? See the way he staggers. But I'd not kill him when he's drunk. No...no spirit in that. So Jeremiah's prognosis is time! Well, he's right-time for me to complete what I've set out to do. And then I shall follow her. Dagmar, my dearest love-I shall yet right my failure!"

A great shudder moved his chest; and, weeping, he sank from the window to the floor and rolled his head weakly against the wall, wracked with vicious sobs.

Eyes wide, Barnabas backed away a step, eager to do nothing but leave, pretend he had seen none of it. "I-I shall give your landlord a month's rent," he promised, and fled. He did not think Milo had noticed him leave, or perhaps he had never even realized his presence. When he reached the sidewalk, the light in Milo's window blinked out again.

Loud noise, however, rolled from Lothaire's. Barnabas saw that Milo had been correct in announcing his neighbor returned. The curtain had been pulled back, and he could see Ennis pacing back and forth, he and Lothaire conversing in voices too vague to eavesdrop on from where Barnabas was.

As he watched, he felt his forehead growing warmer and warmer. Milo had named Lothaire responsible for the girl's death. Milo was unbalanced in his grief, true, but for some reason Barnabas could not dismiss the notion as easily as that. He had never liked Lothaire and had always wondered what secrets were silently expressed in the Frenchman's omniscient little smiles.

He crossed the street again and hid himself in the long shadows beside the window in which Ennis stood. Though what was being said was still muffled by the glass, from his new vantage point he could discern most of it.

"I still say you were too short with that big one, Lothaire," Stanwood was arguing good-naturedly. Lothaire was seated at his desk, quill in hand, writing what appeared to be a letter of some sort. "She wasn't so bad-and you didn't complain after she left here the last time."

"Perhaps you're right. I must learn to control

my tongue. Now if I were to change my mind, she would probably slit my throat. Those women are not to be trusted."

"You needn't worry about that; you pay my brother and me to protect you. If she raises her knife to you, we'll have her arm wrenched out of its socket before she can cry out."

"Ennis, boy, you are far too violent! You are a valet now, not a hired thug-you would do well to remember that." Lothaire chewed the end of his feather-pen. "But in any case, I have no need of another woman just now and especially not one of those tarts. Why should I, when I have a lady, as is my due, of course, waiting for me and thinking of me even now? Speaking of which, I must finish this letter-could you be quiet and let me get on with it before her heart breaks?"

"Don't expect me to take it to Collinwood," Ennis crossed his arms and snorted. Barnabas caught his breath. Abigail?, he wondered with horror.

"Coward! But you needn't worry, I don't want to advertise the fact that it is from me! A plain envelope with an inverted return address will serve me just fine. Laura is no idiot-she'll know straight away what it is. You can go for the night, Ennis-I don't need your help in this matter.

Ennis moved to comply. The front door began to open. Barnabas turned to go and crashed headlong into someone else, and his mind froze when he looked up and saw Zedekiah Martin grinning down at him.

"Well now!" Martin said quietly. "Stopped over for a game of cards, have you?"

Barnabas slipped past the other's bulk and ran. Zedekiah started after him, but the cold had numbed his defective foot and he could only limp a few steps before the pain made him stop. He shouted after the disappearing form of the younger man, and soon Ennis and Lothaire were both beside him.

"What are you bellowing about?" his employer demanded harshly.

"It was Collins!" Zedekiah ground his teeth with hatred. "Caught him standin' at the door an' listening!"

Lothaire's face fell. "Jeremiah?" he asked incredulously.

"No-the other one. Barnabas! The little swine-if only he'd stood still a minute more!"

"What did he hear, do you think?" Ennis asked eagerly. "All about-"

"Shut up!" Lothaire roared and dragged them back into the house. "You, Ennis-you were standing right there! Why did you not see him?"

"I'm sorry!" Ennis wailed, putting up a hand as if he expected to be struck.

"Idiots-incompetents! No doubt he'll run straight home and tell everyone about his aunt and me."

"Let's not jump to any conclusions," Zedekiah tried to calm him. "It may be nothing."

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"Well," the other conceded after a moment, "I suppose it's too late now. What happens, happens. I am all set to leave for New York tomorrow morning-and I will do so as planned. Mrs. Jeremiah Collins will have to fend for herself."

"Lothaire, wait." Zedekiah reached out and grabbed his master's sleeve. "He's gotten away this once, but let's be sure it doesn't happen again.

Wait until the time is right, and let me find him. For the sake of my foot and my pride-I owe him."

"If you hadn't been so drunk that night of the wedding, he never would have beaten you," Lothaire sniffed derisively. "And pride-what do you know if if But very well, Zedekiah, have your fun. And since I will not be here to protect you, take care that you do not behave in your usual manner, need I go further?"

"Yes," Zedekiah ran his hand through his greying hair and snorted. "It'll be different this time, for sure."

Barnabas ran into the foyer and slammed the doors, then leaned against them, gasping. A voice startled him.

"My," Laura remarked with a lifted brow, and William in her arms wore an identical expression. "You look as if someone were chasing you."

He caught his breath and straightened.

"Oh. . . does it seem that way?" Well, I'm quite safe, I assure you." But he could not resist glancing back at the locked doors once more, just to be certain.

"I'm glad to hear that." She turned and went back into the drawing room. He stared after her with growing distaste, Lothaire's lewd comments returning in a rush. "So tell me, how were things in town?"

"Quiet, actually been doing, Laura"

"Waiting around, of course.

And here"<sup>5</sup> What have you

Your mother is still confined to her bed, as you well know, and I won't go into the particulars of why I don't seek Abigail for conversation."

"You're quite unhappy that Jeremiah is away, aren't you?"<sup>3</sup> Stuck here;-with only the child and the rest of us for company."

William crawled up his mother's arm and hooked his chin over his shoulder. He blinked at Barnabas with boiling blue eyes which were not at all appealing.

"Of course I miss Jeremiah," Laura said with confidence. "He is my husband, and I love him."

"I'm sure."

His aunt scowled. "What has put such sarcasm in your voice?"<sup>9</sup> Do you doubt if"

"I'm certain Jeremiah is eager to be in your company again as well. You have always been everything to him, you know-even at the yards, he talks of nothing else. I have felt ashamed of myself because I once tried to stand between the

two of you...how fortunate for all of us that I changed my mind and gave you over to the one of us you truly loved. Your happiness would not have been as great as it is now if you had chosen me, nor would mine, I know."

"You carry on very oddly sometimes. Perhaps that is why I did not marry you-I never know what is turning inside your mind."

"No one is privileged to know that, save for me. I prefer it that way, I am safer." He regarded her critically, then went to the stairs. "I shall go and check on my mother now, if you will excuse me. Good night, Laura."

When she was alone again, she went to a chair and propped William up on her lap. He waved his pudgy little hands at her, and she held him gently by either wrist.

"They are such fools, are they not?"

she asked him quietly. "They think we will stay among them forever and rise to no greater level than they. Why should we live as they expect us to? Soon you will be able to look down on them and understand and laugh at their folly as I do. But we have a little time, and I daresay we will not waste it in these grey walls."

William understood her, and she knew it. He was part of her, more so than many of the others she could clearly remember. He never cried, at least not when he was with her. She ran a hand over his round little face, and his flesh was so perfectly warm it seemed the fire itself beat beneath his skull.

Milo reached out into the greyness of the early morning and knew she was beside him, mist-composed figure wound in his sheet, her slight, warm breath upon his cheek. He could not see her but felt her presence all the same, as he did his own heartbeat in the silence, driving him to life.

"We will ever be together," he whispered without opening his eyes. "They say I cannot bring you back, fools, what do they understand?" I would not pull you down to this fetid earth again. Only wait for me, and I shall rise with you. After he is dead. After. . ."

An empty whiskey bottle, which had not been empty the night before, rolled from beside the pillow and shattered on the floor. The sound made him jump up, and she slipped quickly away. He realized what had happened and stared at the bits of glass on the floor.

The sun was coming up outside, and the reflection of it on the pieces made his eyes hurt, he could almost hear it intruding on the stillness of the withdrawing night, snapping at the darkness with dripping jaws and bitter whip. Phoebus was rushing through the dirty streets even at that moment, and Milo could hear him laughing, and his horses sneezing and pawing the cobblestones. It seemed they were directly at his window, in

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fact, and pausing.

He got out of his bed and stumbled to part the curtains, snagging his feet on the broken bottle as he did so. When he looked out, his heart nearly stopped. It was not Apollo loading a carriage with baggage at all; it was Lothaire, and Ennis was with him feeding the cart-horse. The murderer moved to lock his door, and joking with each other the two men got up into the wagon, and Ennis snapped the reins.

Milo wasted no time. He raced to his own door, tore it open and nearly off the hinges, and reeled out into the snow clad only in a nightgown. Lothaire and Ennis stopped their flight and looked down at him.

"No! You cannot leave! I refuse to trust you- she refuses to let you!" Wheezing with the exertion, he climbed onto the sideboard and clutched at Lothaire's throat. In his drunkenness, however, he seized only the other's shirtfront, and in a moment Ennis had leaned forward and dealt a dizzying blow to the side of his head.

With a howl Milo toppled from the wagon and into the snow on the side of the road. He struggled to get back up, but Ennis jumped down after him and drove a savage blow into his long-empty stomach. Milo gagged, clutching at his injured middle, then cast his blazing eyes up at the patiently seated Lothaire. He screamed an obscenity but the other was unimpressed.

"Once," Lothaire smiled down at him and tipped his hat, "I went out of my way to make this town think you mad. But I had little realized what an actor you were! You have taken the role to heart-how very different you are than I had first perceived you, Milo."

Ennis had stepped away.

"I shall tear that self-righteous grin from your face and grind it to the earth with my heel," Milo spat. "Wait and see!"

"Let us be on our way, Ennis," Lothaire pretended to hear nothing. "Toss this woe-begotten drunkard a coin and leave him to rot."

Chortling, Ennis scraped up a handful of ice and hurled it into Milo's eyes. Then he leaped back aboard the carriage, and soon they were gone.

Jeremiah set his suitcase on the floor by the stairs and went to the drawing room, soon to be followed by Joshua.

"Doesn't seem to be anyone about," his brother remarked impatiently.

"I suppose they're upstairs." Jeremiah strayed to the desk, saw a pile of letters there. Some were for him, and some were for Joshua. He went through them cursorily but paused when an elegant foreign envelope caught his eye. He turned it over and almost smiled with anticipation. It was from Cecile Chenier whom he had written to months ago. He had almost forgotten about it.

"I'm going up to see what's going on," Joshua announced. "Are you coming?"

"No-I want to look through this mail. Go ahead without me-I'll follow you in a moment or two."

"As you wish." Joshua went directly to his wife's room and rapped loudly. Abigail appeared a moment later.

"Joshua!" she cried in surprise. "We weren't expecting you till tomorrow!"

"Well, you can see that I am here now. Where is everyone? Why have I come home to a deserted house? How is Naomi? Confound it, answer me!"

"Come inside, quickly." His sister grabbed his hand and pulled him inside. Naomi was in bed, pregnant middle swelled beneath the blankets, head turning from side to side as if she were caught up in a nightmare.

"She's been that way for an hour," Abigail continued. "I've tried to calm her but cannot. I think her time is coming. But Barnabas has gone out, and I can't find Evan, and that woman has been shut up in her room all day, and I can't get her to move!"

"You mean no one has even sent for a doctor? Why this is an outrage! I'm going to round up every one of those good-for-nothing servants and fire them one by one!"

"I go along with that!"

"Very well, but this matter must be taken care of first. Stay with her as you have done, and I shall go to town. A little ice on the roads does not deter me." He turned and marched away, sputtering. "All these inconveniences! Can a man ever come home to a quiet evening any more?"

Jeremiah took the long-awaited letter to the downstairs study, shredding off the envelope as he went. He lit a candle and threw himself down in a chair to read the neatly penned words from Chenier in Paris.

'Mon cher ami Jeremiah,' it began, 'It was with great pleasure that I received and read your communication of April the twelfth, seventeen hundred eighty-four. Before I say anything else, let me offer my congratulations on you for your marriage. . . ' Jeremiah skipped that paragraph and also a few describing Chenier's most recent thoughts on health, wealth and romance, but just as he began to think that there was nothing of any importance contained, he found what he wanted.

'Regarding your inquiry as to the reputation in this country of one Lothaire Gilles Bocquet, I am sorry to say I can only offer various rumors and speculation picked up at social gatherings, from women's constantly fluttering lips, etc. I met the man only once myself and cannot say I was overly taken with him. They tell me he is wealthy and therefore his ostentatious behavior must be tolerated. I was not surprised when you informed me he had settled there near you. No doubt M. Bocquet assured you that he left his

native country out of boredom or perhaps in the interest of financial gain. The latter is the only excuse with any plausibility at all, though; in fact he never bored himself here but was always involved in one lurid scandal or another. His most recent, I heard, involved a sort of rival of his whom you do not know, M. Vachel. It had to do with Lothaire's continual need to be surrounded by women, of which I'm sure you do know, and Vachel's wife, a delicate young thing much younger than both her husband and Lothaire. Needless to say, though, Lothaire was not deterred. Vachel found out after a fashion, as all wronged husbands do, and presented Lothaire with an ultimatum. Either he could leave quietly and stay away at least ten years or see his fortune slowly destroyed. The thought of that, of course, was unbearable, and so you are graced with his company in the States.'

Jeremiah read a little further, but nothing else was interesting at that moment. He folded the letter up into a tiny square and set it aside. Lothaire was gone for awhile; he had heard it upon passing through town with Joshua, but he was convinced it was only temporary.

He fished about for paper of his own, and when he found it he opened the ink and went about composing his own message to Zedekiah Martin.

'Mr. Martin,' he wrote, gritting his teeth at having to be even that polite, 'I have recently been informed that your current employer L.B. has left Collinsport for a short time (whether for business or pleasure I am unsure and actually uninterested). Since I assume you and no doubt your brother know exactly where he is, I trust you to deliver a message to him. He is no longer connected with our company and is not considered a personal friend to any member of my family. We, therefore, will not expect him at Collinswood in the future. And I will not end there, for I know Lothaire would take great delight in defying me. Therefore let me add this. If for any reason I find him upon Collins grounds in the future. . . '

He paused, stuck for an appropriate threat. Then he shifted a little, and something poked his chest. Suddenly he remembered what he still kept in his inside coat pocket and knew all at once why he had bought it. He took out the bejeweled dagger and laid it on the desk before him. He smiled and dipped his pen into the ink.

"... if for any reason I find him on Collins grounds in the future, I will set aside all thought of my personal welfare and kill him on the spot."

Then he signed and sealed up the letter and went to inform his wife of his return.

"Milo?" Barnabas raised his voice still louder. "Milo, answer me."

"Go away," Milo said from inside the apartment.

"It's Barnabas again. I want to talk to you."

"Come to bring me more of your dirty money for the rent? I don't want it-keep it."

"No-come to talk to you about Lothaire."

There was an uncertain pause. Then there was a snap, and Milo was there scowling. Barnabas was unsure for a moment whether he was to be admitted or attacked.

"Come in."

This time there was some light. Barnabas steered his way through the still growing mess, and Milo offered him one of the chairs that was still reasonably intact. For himself, he climbed onto the rumpled bed and took up another bottle of booze, then rubbed his mangy beard and eyed his guest doubtfully.

"Talk," he snapped.

"I've decided to help you. Lothaire must be driven out of town. I only realized it as I was sitting with my mother this afternoon and she was talking of the future. I will not stand idly by any longer. For my family's sake as well as everyone else's, he must be gotten rid of."

"You have come to your senses! I scarce believed it at first-and look, you've not even been drinking. I have, though." He shook the liquor up and took an eager guzzle. Barnabas saw the purple ring flash under his eye as he tipped his head back. After the drink, he leaned forward intently. "He's gone for a little while, of course. We have time to make plans."

"Very well. What have you considered so far?"

"I had one idea. . .but it fell through. Then I thought of poison-but how would I get it to him? Messy, messy. . . every way seems too messy."

"Milo, no. . .wait. I said we would drive him away-but taking his life is quite another matter. Murder is punishable by hanging. Be reasonable. Is that what you want?"

"Do you think I'm afraid of being caught and that's what held me back till now? Nonsense-I would admit to the crime at once

because I would fall down dead before they could get me to the gaol. My life is already over, you see-I only want the last of it to count for something. That's the way Dagmar says it must be."

He slid off the bed and went to a cabinet. He took a key from his pocket and opened it. "I've been collecting, you know," he said over his shoulder. "Collecting ways for him to die." A length of string and a bottle tumbled to the floor, but he only kicked them aside with a foot and leaned inside. Finally he uttered a sound of triumph and turned. Barnabas nearly dove for cover but restrained himself at the last minute. Milo was holding up a black pistol as long as the lower half of his arm and was grinning proudly.

"This would do for sure," he nodded. "Do you know what I'd load it with, to kill Lothaire?"

"No..."

"Silver! Not just any ordinary kind either, but a fine, expensive sort."

"Milo," Barnabas rose carefully, approached him with the intent of taking the weapon away, but Milo anticipated the gesture and backed away.

"I've wanted to use it-I've opened my window and waited for him to pass by. But I always stopped at the last minute. . . I want the blood on my hands, you see, I want to be there to hear him scream, to twist the knife myself as he did to her. I saw it, don't you know, I saw his teeth at her throat!" At the memory, tears gushed down into his beard, leaving twin streaks in the grime upon his face.

Barnabas took him by the arm because he tottered then and almost fell.

"Let me take you to Collinwood."

"No! She won't know where to find me there, and besides I don't want him to see her. Tried to steal her from me once and damned if I. . ." He realized that Barnabas was helping him back to the chair, and as they passed the bookshelf he reached out and stopped their progress. He took a fresh grip on the pistol and held it out. "Here!" he cried abruptly, "you take it! He'll know you're going to help me-he'll be after you, and Ennis and Martin too. I put the bullets down the barrel- they're still there, see!" He tipped it downwards, and the silver pellets bounced to the floor. "There's powder in the cupboard. Wait, let me load it."

"That really isn't necessary," Barnabas attempted to placate him. "I'll be fine."

"Fool!" Milo shoved him away and returned to the cabinet, scooping up the bullets en route. "You want to help but you don't know how!"

"I think you had best come to the house with me. You know there's room. . ."

The gun was loaded. Milo spun and aimed it squarely at Barnabas' chest.

"Damn you, take it or I'll use it on you! If you think I'm merely ill, take it out of pity; and if you think me mad, take it to humor me. It's for your own good, Barnabas. If one of them jumps you, use it and don't miss. They're out there on nights like tonight. You don't know what I mean, but it's true all the same. On nights like tonight."

He would send a physician the next day. Not Dr. Rodwell but someone more experienced, more knowledgeable. He would send a carriage and forcibly draw poor Milo away-something, to help him. It had gone too far.

"Take it!"

But he could do nothing until daytime. And as long as Milo remained calm until then. . .

"Very well," he said and accepted the gun. "Thank you."

"Go, then. You don't believe she's here-but you'll know differently tomorrow."

"Do try and get some rest."

"Goodnight, Barnabas. And I hope you don't miss."

"I won't-I promise. Goodnight, Milo." He stared at the other a long time with pity he could not completely hide until Milo pushed him outside and locked the door again.

"I've saved him, haven't I, Dagmar?" he wailed from inside. "Haven't I saved his life!"

Sadly Barnabas walked out to where he had tied his horse and prepared to ride home. The town quickly fell back into the night as Jezebel galloped on. Soon he had left the road altogether and was taking the frequented shortcut through the woods, Milo's gun banging painfully against his side with every jolt of the saddle. The wind was cold and rushed by him in a panic, but the moon was full and throwing splashes of aesthetic blue light all over the bare tree limbs and lively pines. The snow on the ground seemed the color of a summer sky, and he could see a good way into the distance.

But there were clouds in the heavens too, and presently one happened to float over the moon, and the light faded. Then everything was dark, black and foreboding, and the horse slowed because it was not able to see.

There was a sound. It was not like the horse's hooves when they struck the frozen ground, but different. A lighter step, a faster step perhaps. At first he supposed it to be a deer or perhaps even a fox, until he realized that the soft beats were heading towards him, not away. Jezebel began to tremble. Barnabas turned his head furiously and saw it even through the dimness. It was a great silver beast, racing bullet-like through the naked remains of the trees and bushes, gaining on him, eager. He kicked the horse and it took off running. A second later the wolf had leapt. Harsh claws plunged into the tender flesh of his mount's back legs, and Jezebel let out a wheeze of pain and bucked. Barnabas grabbed at the reins but to no end; he was sent several feet into the air and came down against the half-exposed root of a tree, viciously striking his head. The world tilted, and blood ran into his eyes. Through the redness he saw the horse sprinting across the upside-down wood in ignorant terror.

He staggered to his feet but slipped on the raw crust of the snow before he had taken a few steps and went down again. The ice scraped his bare hands, numbing them, and sending a terrific agony all the way up to his shoulders.

The wolf had not followed the horse. He heard it growling and finally the cloud passed the moon and he saw it there staring at him, shaking with passion for the kill. Saliva ran freely from between its black lips and drove little holes into the deep snow. It began to advance slowly and deliberately as if it knew that his head was swimming and he was unable to collect himself and rise. There was an oddness in its gait, but it only seemed to add to the horror of the image.

He blinked, struggled to his knees. Then he heard Milo wailing again somewhere in the back of his mind.

On your life, don't miss!

I won't-I promise.

His right hand went for the pistol at his belt. The wolf was growling, grinning, then rushing

towards him with pointed teeth bared. The gun exploded, and the force of it knocked him backwards. Gore and bits of red flesh

flew from the creature's throat. It did a complete flip in mid-air and went down kicking, a back paw only half-formed furiously clawing the air. Then to his surprise, it managed to right itself and sped away, leaving only a trail of blood and a set of deformed footprints in the snow.

His head whirled; and for some reason the last vision he had before falling unconscious was of the night of Jeremiah's wedding. He saw his own fist rising and plunging, rising and plunging again and again between Zedekiah Martin's ugly eyes, and as he pounded with greater desperation the face around them changed and became that of the wolf instead.

He had dropped the gun and had to get it back. A shot of adrenalin rushed through him; he grabbed at his side but came up with only a handful of cloth. A place just above his eye began to throb painfully, and when he reached up he encountered only linen again. Suddenly he heard a gasp and jumped up to see Abigail in a chair at his bedside.

"Abigail!" he exclaimed, forgetting to address her as aunt in all the confusion.

Abigail sprang to her feet and raced for the door.

"Joshua!" she screeched. "Jeremiah! Come quickly! He's awake-Joshua!"

There was a clatter in the hall, and Barnabas was astonished to see his father and uncle come rushing into the room. The back of his head began to feel unutterably heavy, and he sank back onto the pillows blinking.

"Barnabas," Joshua called out, surprisingly concerned. "Can you hear me? How do you feel?"

"Are you back from Boston so soon?" his son asked quietly. "I thought. . . tomorrow. . ."

"He doesn't realize," Jeremiah said, and the brothers exchanged mysterious glances.

"I don't realize what? Why is everyone in my room?"

"The demon is still inside his mind," Abigail suggested fearfully.

"Be quiet, sister." Joshua turned a derisive eye on her. "Now, Barnabas, tell us-is there any pain?"

"My mouth is dry. . . other than that I feel quite well."

"I can remedy that," Jeremiah offered and left the room.

Barnabas touched his forehead again. "Why is there a cloth around my head?"

"You don't remember anything?" Joshua pressed. "Not falling from your horse and striking your head on that tree? Not Silas Rodwell and I riding by and finding you? Not-"

"I haven't fallen from my horse since I was twelve. Then all at once, he fell silent; and it seemed he was not in his room any longer. He was in the woods-there was a cry, not human- a foul dripping pair of jaws- "Wait! I don't remember now. There was a wolf-it attacked Jezebel. I tried to escape-she threw me-yes, I did strike my head. . ." He paled, fell back, and could recall no more.

A wolf, "Joshua repeated carefully. "That's what you saw."

"Just as I said before, but you refused to listen to me!" Abigail put in. "It was a demon tried to steal his soul, not a thief at all!"

"I asked you to be quiet! And you, Barnabas- think on it some more. Are you certain that's what it was?"

"I saw it. It came out of the trees, just as when Evan and I. . ."

Jeremiah returned, a pewter mug in his hand.

"How is he?"

"Addled. He is confusing what happened to him with the incident with Evan last fall. He needs more rest-we should leave him be for a while."

"Rest and a bit of what I've got in this mug, yes. I'll watch over him. But wait-has no one told him of. . . you know?"

"What do you mean?" Barnabas' brows sank. "What has happened that you have not told me?"

"Oh. . . that." Joshua shrugged disinterestedly. "You. . . have a sister, it seems. It was only because I was coming back with the doctor that I found you at all. We have christened her Sarah. And now I must go."

"A sister!" Barnabas was pleased and struggled to sit up. "But I must see her! Is she healthy? Does she look like Mother? Does she-"

"Hold on, wait a moment!" Jeremiah pressed him back down. "Yes to both those questions, but no to seeing her. There'll be time enough for that later. Right now you're going to rest and have some of this grog."

"I shall tell your mother that you are out of danger," Joshua said from the door. "She will be quite pleased that you have recovered from your. . . cold."

"We didn't want to upset her in her delicate condition," Jeremiah explained.

"It's not wise to deceive a demon," Abigail broke in once again. "With every He you speak in its defense, Joshua, you invite Satan's blackened crows to nest on our roof!"

"Oh, come with me," her older brother shook his head and dragged her out. Jeremiah shut the door after them, then took Abigail's former perch and watched Barnabas take a cautious sip of the contents of the mug and wince.

"Good?"

"I think you've burned my insides away."

"Good-that means it's working."

There was a pause. "Jeremiah," his nephew soon grew solemn, "I'm not addled. It was a wolf that attacked me. I saw it-it even seemed to be laughing at me. I shall never forget it."

"Well," the other said uneasily, "You've recovered now, and that's the important thing. By the way, I have more news besides Sarah. You

knew how you are always complaining about the monotony of Collingsport and how you wish you could get away? Well, as soon as you feel up to it, you're going on a trip. What do you think of that?"

Barnabas looked up. "I have been out a long while! Where could I possibly go on such short notice?"

"To India."

"India!"

"Yes, that's right. While Joshua and I were in Boston, he arranged some business for us there. We'll need a representative, and you're elected. I hear it's a fascinating place-I would have gone myself, save for Laura and the baby. You'll like it a lot, I'm sure."

"India," his nephew repeated with disbelief. "But. . . why me?"

"Joshua wants you to get away from here, at least for a few months. It does a man good-they say a day in a foreign port is worth ten with a tutor."

"Yes, yes, I'm sure of that, and I do want to go, but. . . that is not the real reason, is it?"

Jeremiah got up and paced around the room uncertainly.

"No," he admitted at last, resting his hands on the bureau. They watched each other's expressions by way of the mirror. "I can't keep it from you. The fact is, there's going to be a lot of talk about this. . . incident with you, perhaps even a scandal. Joshua does not want to become involved. So if anyone should ask you about it, tell them nothing. Maintain that it was a riding accident and nothing more. Most of all, no matter what anyone may say, you were not carrying a gun. Do you understand that?"

"No! What difference does it make if I had a gun? A wolf attacked me and I shot it-" he saw the entire scene again, the wolf advancing, the bullet tearing into its neck, the flip and the feet pumping in a death quake. . . he gave a start upon recollecting the last. Jeremiah turned at once. "Barnabas, what is it?"

"Nothing really-just something that struck me as odd at the time. "

"What do you mean?"

"^he wolf that attacked me. Jeremiah-it had only half a paw ! "

A look of sickness came over his uncle's features, a look that Barnabas did not think appropriate to the rather minute bit of information. Jeremiah swallowed, toyed with his wedding ring.

"Yes," he nodded slowly, "I suppose it must have. That's why you're going to India. "

"I've had enough of this ! Out with it now ! What are you talking about! "

Finally Jeremiah looked up straight at him. "Zedekiah Martin was found dead last night in his house. He'd crawled there, probably from the woods. He'd been shot in the throat-and, from what we can determine, it was your gun that did it. "

The ship to India was there a week later, and Jeremiah passed the luggage piled in the hall on his way to his own room. He opened his closet and took out a coat.

"Going now?" Laura asked from her chair. The child was clinging to her again, interested in nothing else.

"Yes," Jeremiah answered, slightly unhappy.

"So the last of your friends is going away. You have no one now, save for me and William. No one at all. "

"You're right. No one. "

"Don't sneer at me so. What's the matter- is our company tiring to you already?"

"Your company! If I didn't know better, I'd say you were making a joke. " His face hardened. "But of course you're not. You might make fun of me, but no more than that. "

She ceased to pay attention to him, as she always did when he raised his voice. Instead she took one of William's fat hands and squeezed it as if to impart some secret to the child without speaking. William seemed to understand and turned his mocking gaze up to his father. There was more than the indifference of Laura in them, though-there was almost hatred.

Rage gushed up into his chest. He threw the coat on the floor and charged across the room.

"I can't take this any more, do you hear? You and that child, all day, every day, and never a moment for me ! Damn you, Laura, you're killing us both-making him as much a demon as you are! Give him to me-now ! " He wrenched Laura's hands off the baby and snatched it away. William began to scream. Laura got to her feet, furious.

"How dare you handle him as if he were a sack of potatoes ! Who do you think you are to tell me how to care for my own son? Give him back- don't you see that he doesn't want you?"

"You're right he doesn't, and I have you to thank for that ! But this poisoning of his mind is going to end-I'll have Naomi raise him if that's what it takes!" He turned, William still bellowing, and rushed to the door, picking up his coat en route.

"You can't keep my child from me!" Laura ran after him, scarlet. "Bring him back, this minute!"

Jeremiah grabbed her by the wrist.

"The child is going to the nursery-and you ! You're coming to town with me to see Barnabas off. "

"I will not! You can't make me do anything!"

"We'll see about that!" So saying, he pulled her out into the hall, William and the coat under his other arm. He shouted for a maid, and when one appeared he dumped the child into her custody. Then he wrapped his cloak around L-aurel, and for all her struggling forced her

down stairs and into the waiting carriage outside.

She said nothing on the way to the harbor, only huddled against the side of the coach and glared at the snow drifts passing by.

She caught Jeremiah looking at her out of the corner of his eye once or twice, and each time it seemed that he might relent or apologize, then abruptly he changed his mind and averted his gaze. The coldness of the afternoon only made worse the coldness inside the wagon, and even Barnabas and Joshua felt it and began to look uneasy themselves.

"We must be almost there," Barnabas said after a while.

Joshua opened the hatch on his side and poked his head out.

"Yes," he nodded, "there it is. I can see the mast from here. "

Everyone leaned over to look except Laura.

"Not bad," Jeremiah commented. "Ought to get you there in one piece. "

Evan steered the horse up onto the walkway, and the wheels grated loudly over the planks. Presently they had come to a halt and were climbing out. Evan stood on the driver's bench and slid Barnabas' luggage down from above. Barnabas stared out at the bobbing ship, both curious and apprehensive.

"Naomi says to tell you again to write every day," Jeremiah smiled.

"Assure her I will. And I'll send something for Sarah as well. "

"You'll have a good deal more to do than merely wander the streets and indulge in pleasure," Joshua warned him. "You're certain you have my messages to Carlyle with you? And as I told you, watch out for the natives there. Do not be charitable. The harbors are full of thieves. "

"Yes, I have your messages, and yes, I shall take good care of myself. I think I should prepare to board now ; I would rather not be caught in the rush at the last minute. "

"Very well. Jeremiah and I will walk down with you. Evan, the bags. "

Evan took the luggage on his shoulder and started off with Joshua, who clearly expected the others to follow. They did not, however. They circled round to the carriage window where Laura was leaning out, still sullen.

"Laura," her husband said carefully, "will you not step out and bid Barnabas a safe trip?"

"Whether or not he has one is not dependant on anything I may say," she replied distantly.

"Very well, Laura," Barnabas said, "then I shall wish you health and contentment till my return."

She said nothing, and they turned to go. As they did so, however, Laura straightened and spoke.

"Barnabas," her eyes rose to his, "I should have liked to say we parted friends. But I suppose that is not the truth."

"No, I suppose not."

"Then that is how it shall stand. Goodbye."

He nodded politely. "Until we meet... aunt."

Then they were gone, walking down into the crowd. Laura leaned back, eyes drifting lazily across the street. Then, purely by chance, she saw Ennis there standing alone and watching the bustling docks with vague interest. He did not notice her until she had opened the carriage door, climbed out, and marched directly to his side.

"Good morning, Stanwold," she greeted him in a loud voice, and he turned to her with a start. "How have you been?"

"Mrs. Collins," he greeted uncertainly. "How do you do, these days?"

"Rather well in some respects, and not at all in others. I heard of your brother-I offer my condolences. You were with him at the last?"

"Yes. He fought till the last, you know."

"I see. At least that is some comfort to you, then."

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, but you're here with your husband, are you not?" his strange eyes flicked around the street then.

"I'm not sure he'd approve of us talkin'."

"Do not concern yourself with Jeremiah. He has no right to order me about, and I shall speak to my own acquaintances if I like."

"As you wish then. I guess."

She laughed slightly. "So, Ennis...how fares your master?"

"Still away. Enjoyin' himself, I assume."

"And you're expecting him back soon."

"Now why-why would you be saying that?"

"Oh, Ennis, do you think me a fool? You're watching the ships! He's to be on one of them, isn't he?"

"Maybe I be watching them for another reason," he insisted, becoming flustered.

Still smiling, she folded her arms, and he felt slightly afraid of her.

"It doesn't matter what you say, for I don't need an answer. There is something I would have you tell Lothaire, though, when he does return. Can you do that much for me, if I give you the message now?"

"I guess I could," he squinted with doubt, "depending on the message."

"When next you see Lothaire, tell him that Laura Collins says it is time. Say no more than that, and no less, and he shall know precisely what I mean."

"It is time?" he repeated dubiously.

"Just so. But mind you, Ennis-should you forget or change those words to your own advantage, I shall soon know about it, and then you will be quite a sorry man indeed."

He swallowed. "I... I swear," he said.

"Good. It has been nice talking to you, and do take care of yourself until next we meet. Farewell." Smiling, she returned to the carriage and climbed back inside. Presently she took to

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watching the gallant ship roll upon the wintry sea, masts stabbing at the clouds themselves, and before long she saw the tiny figure with the tricorne hat that was Barnabas walking up the gangplank with luggage in hand.

"You've kept the place in excellent condition," his master said, and Ennis was at once relieved.

"I've done my best," he nodded.

Lothaire ventured further inside and saw the garter lying on the floor beside the fireplace. He picked it up with great amusement.

"Poor Ennis-you have been deep in mourning for your poor brother, I see."

"He was only my half-brother."

"Yes," Lothaire burst into laughter, "he was at that! So we settle into the same dreary routine. It seemed the flesh was sweeter on the other side of the Hudson, you know, but isn't that always the way it is? I should have taken you with me. And Zedekiah too, to be sure."

"He would still be alive if you had," Ennis shrugged.

"Fools and their vengeance! Zedekiah was one of them. A tragedy, of course. But those who are too easily offended are always the first to fall."

"Yes," Ennis sighed and leaned against the wall. "You are right. But I'm not like that, Lothaire... I have survived and will continue to."

"And during that long and illustrious life, will you continue to serve me?"

"No longer than I must. I shall have a coven myself someday-wait and see."

"You remind me of myself in the beginning. Do you realize that?" Lothaire smiled, slapped the back of a chair. "I shall not forbid you to dream of greater things, but mind this-you will get now here if for one moment I question your loyalty! You are the only one left, true-that being the case, you will get further by obeying than by not doing so."

There was a moment of silence. Then, humbled, Ennis nodded once again. "I know, Lothaire."

"So! Now that that is settled, tell me my messages. Where have you hidden my mail?"

"In the desk."

"Get it, then." Lothaire sank into a chair, pulled a coffee-table near and put his feet on it. "I am weary of travelling and should like some diversion."

Ennis went to the writing hutch, opened it, and removed a bundle of letters. Lothaire took them and glanced at the return addresses.

"Nothing too interesting here." He cast one unopened envelope into the cold fireplace. "Is that all?"

"Well...no."

"Oh? What else is there? Out with it!"

"I have something from Laura Collins. "

"What!" Immediately Lothaire became eager.

"From Laura herself?"

"Yes, from her very own lips. She gave me strict orders not to change it or forget it. "

"Sounds most clandestine! When did you see her?"

"At the docks, this morning. Her husband was there but she wasn't with him. "

"Really? That's quite intriguing. So what is this message?"

"She wanted me to tell you. . . 'it is time.' That's all she'd say. It be time, it be time. Made no sense to me. "

To Ennis' surprise, Lothaire not only understood the cryptic phrase, but revelled in it. He jumped to his feet, knocking aside the coffee-table in the process, and began laughing like a madman.

"Time?" he howled. "Truly? Oh Ennis, my luck has turned again, by those simple words! No-do not unpack my bags. Do nothing-only gather everything else I've dumped into this hovel and crate them as well. But wait-a letter first. You must take a letter to Collinwood, to her. There is a way in where no one but Laura will find you. I will explain it to you in a moment-as soon as I find paper. And ink, where is my ink? Get it for me and then go to the landlord and tell him I am leaving. "

Ennis did not understand, but he had promised to obey, and so he did.

Laura knew he would come, and soon he did. She spoke to Ennis quietly in the darkness of the hidden panel, and then closed it behind him, smiling. It would not take much longer. And since hours were nothing to her, she could afford to wait.

Jeremiah had not entered the room since the argument that morning, and she did not expect him to for at least the rest of the night.

William was all the way at the other end of the hall-in the care of virtual strangers. She could imagine his torment and could hear his whimperings and suffered with him.

It would go on no longer. Jeremiah had come to the end of his usefulness. They all had. Did the scrawny nursemaid hired for William and Sarah think she could keep her away? Much she had to learn.

The door to her room was locked from outside; Jeremiah was trying to punish her, and she detested him for it. But she refused to go along with his games another minute. She placed a hand firmly over the brass knob of the door; within minutes the worthless little clasp had melted away and she was free.

She went down the dark hall quickly and quietly until she came to the nursery, also without light. She could hear William fussing, and she could almost see him squirming unhappily in his ugly crib.

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A minute later she was inside. The startled nursemaid whirled in a chair where she had been reading by the light of a single candle, and blinked.

"Mrs. Collins!" she rose uncertainly. "You scared me for a moment. I thought you'd been taken. . . ill. "

"I am recovered," Laura said tautly, "as well you can see. I have come for William. He will stay with me tonight. "

"Begging your pardon, ma'am. . . but your husband says that is not how it is to be. "

"My husband has nothing to do with this. And neither do you for that matter. "

"I have my orders. "

"You do indeed, and they come from me. You idiot girl-how precious is this job to you, that you are rude to me? Fear not-I could have you put out so quickly you would scarce have time to grab your cloak! Step out of my way-give me my son. You've made him cry already-come, William, I am here. "

Shoving the other aside, Laura rushed to the crib. William looked up at her at once and ceased his crying. His mother grabbed him up and stood to go.

"Mrs. Collins, " the nurse tried again, "your husband said-"

Her patience at an end, Laura glared at her, and suddenly she felt a great discomfort in her chest. She clutched at the pain and gasped. Laura brushed disinterestedly past and stalked back to her own room. Once inside, she pulled a chair in front of the door and dropped into it.

"Dearest William, " she said, pressing his warm face against hers, "did I not tell you it would be different. . . more? See, the sun will return soon. When it does, it will protect us. We can be patient until then. Oh easily, for once we are away from here, this night will be less than a memory, and so will all of them. "

He watched the blackness with them and knew what was happening even as he knew his own name.

He had been forgotten; the world was turning callously without Dagmar, and it had lost all need of him too. But he did not mind.

He only watched from the blackness and by the light of the stars and saw Ennis load the wagon with Lothaire's furniture and speed away. Lothaire remained inside. And in watching the night it was as watching him directly.

As he had done for a week or more without interruption, Milo sat before his window and coiled the dry length of string about his hands again and again until they were tingling and bloodless.

"Laura Collins!" Abigail screeched and raced after her sister-in-law. "What do you think you're doing?"

Laura dropped her suitcase and, clutching the basket which contained William, whirled.

"Must you always be so loud?" she asked nastily.

"What's in that bag? Why are you dressed like you're going someplace? Tell me, this instant! "

"I'm going into town with the men to do some shopping. I have a few things to exchange, so I thought I'd take them along. I hope you approve. "

"I do not!" Abigail asserted, crossing her arms. "That is undoubtedly the most blatant lie I have ever heard, you going to town with my brothers. Why Jeremiah will hardly speak to you, much less cart you around Collinsport all morning long!"

"I do not consider my situation with Jeremiah any of your business! Why don't you simply go back to whatever it was you were doing and leave me to manage my own day, thank you. " With a sniff, she took up her suitcase a second time and continued on her way; but Abigail would not be put off and grappled it desperately from behind.

"Put that down! I demand to see what's in it! Put it-"

The bag popped open and clothes showered the hall. Before Laura could do anything, Abigail had drawn back against the wall, gasping as if she had been slapped.

"Baby clothes!" she pointed with horror. "You're going to leave him and steal his child! You're going to desert my brother! "

"Be still!" Laura hissed, advancing. "You don't know what you're talking about!"

Abigail recovered herself and seized the front of Laura's dress.

"Give me my nephew ! Give him here! You may leave if you like, but God strike me down if I let you drag that innocent child from his home-"

William began to laugh wildly, and despite herself Laura found the other's fury amusing as well. Without further ado, she shifted the basket appropriately and locked an arm around her sister-in-law's neck, pinning her and at the same time cutting off her annoying shrieks.

"You screeching old vulture, " she smiled triumphantly; and before Abigail could protest, she had been dragged into Laura's own room. The lock was still burned off, but the secret panel was there; Laura kicked it open and shoved the other inside. Then she set William down and pushed the entire bureau in front of it. Abigail pounded and yelled fervently, but Laura paid no attention. A second later she had gathered up the spilled clothes and run out into the cold morning towards the carriage which was supposed to take Joshua and Jeremiah to the yards. The wheels seemed to strike sparks on the half-bared ground as she snapped the reins and took off, her child screaming with delight all the while.

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"We'd best be going, " Joshua informed his brother and rose from the breakfast table. Jeremiah set down his coffee cup and with a murmur of consent followed him to the front door. Before Joshua could reach out to open it, however, it banged open seemingly of its own accord; and when they stepped back their sister rushed in, covered with snow and furious.

"Abigail! " Joshua took her by the arms. "Where have you come from? Only a moment ago I saw you upstairs-"

"It was she, " Abigail spat, rolling accusing eyes at Jeremiah. "That shameless wife of yours ! "

"What?" Jeremiah demanded with growing dread. "What has Laura done?"

"Attacked me is all-threw me down that panel in her room, and it was all I could do to find my way outside! If I have caught a chill because of this, Jeremiah, I will hold you to blame, because you could not keep that madwoman in line!"

"Where is she?"

"Where do you think? Gone-ran out with a case of dresses and a basket of child! I saw her barreling down the drive even as I came around here to the

front, driving as if the Devil were chasing her----not that I have any doubts that he is. "

"I'll have one of the servants go after her, " Joshua offered grimly, seeing Jeremiah pale. "He can catch her before she gets off the grounds. "

"No, " Jeremiah said, and the loudness of his voice surprised both his siblings. "Everyone else wait here. "

"Are you sure?" Joshua asked.

"The language she used, " recalled Abigail.

Jeremiah turned from them both and ran to the study.

"You'd best hurry if you're to catch her, " his sister pressed, following. Jeremiah tore open the hutch drawer and took out the glittering thing he had bought in Boston.

"Don't worry, " he said as he tucked the knife into his coat and ran out again, "I know exactly where she's going. "

The wagon shuddered to a halt in front of the old bridge which was swaying gently with the winter breeze that tore at it, for it had never been stable. As soon as she stepped out she saw him there watching her from where he stood on the other side, his black suit and hair standing out plainly against the bleach-white woods.

"Have you waited long?" she called across to him calmly. "Were you here early?"

"Only a moment or two. I knew what time we were to meet; it was my letter, was it not?"

"Come then and take my luggage. "

Without a moment's hesitation, Lothaire raced across the shaky structure and took her in his arms to kiss her in his usually demanding way.

"Your husband threatened to take my life if I

walk on his land, " he told her, "but still I came, for if an entire army stood between me and a thing I wanted, I should not turn back; and for a very long time I have wanted you. "

"We think alike, " she said coolly, "in some ways. That is why I chose to ask you here. "

"Ennis has gone ahead to secure us a roof in Providence. We may take our time in getting there, though, and milk the path dry of what pleasure it can offer, as well. "

"I would have you no other way, and well you know it. " She broke away and returned to the carriage. "Now quickly, Lothaire-the suitcases and William. We haven't much time, for Abigail saw me leave. "

"I would not let that braying spinster spoil this day for me, " he spat as he took her luggage from beside William, who watched him with interest from his basket. "I have waited too long for it. "

He went back out on the bridge, but suddenly there was a gust of wind more powerful than the last, and he was nearly thrown off his feet. He dropped the suitcases and grabbed onto the fraying rope rail until the motion had stopped.

"Are you all right?" Laura called after him.

He straightened and retrieved what he had been carrying. "Yes, " he glanced back over his shoulder and smirked, "it will take much more than a bit of wind to hold me back." But as he was looking at her, her face suddenly changed, and in confusion he grimaced. "Laura-what is it?"

"In front of you, " she said and pointed.

Lothaire spun back around and froze. Milo stood at the other end of the bridge, grinning even as Lothaire had been a moment ago. He held both hands out before him, and taut between them was a thick white cord.

"A bit more than the wind?" he asked, his blackened lips cracking as he moved them. "Very well, Lothaire, then that is what you shall have. I have waited for this too, you see, and I daresay even longer than you.

Then he was running straight at Lothaire.

"You maniac!" Lothaire cried, face white. "Don't come out here! You'll collapse the whole thing for certain ! "

Milo's piece of cord fell around his throat, and in a moment he was on his knees on the furiously swaying structure, the life being choked from him.

"I am not afraid of having my skull shattered on that ice below, " Milo laughed as he pulled the rope tighter and tighter, ignoring the elbow Lothaire thrust directly into his ribs, "so long as my hands are about your throat when it happens. Fight, you coward! Fight more, harder, as she did you! You were enough to kill her-now be enough to die for her. "

"Laura!" Lothaire stretched an impassioned hand to her, gagging out her name as if it would be the last breath he could summon. "Help me-"  
Laura wasted no time. Fire sprang up on

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Milo's back, and his wild black hair exploded in flames of red and orange. But he did not even seem to notice. He began dragging his writhing victim backwards, away from Laura, and even as he went on screaming curses at Lothaire his beard caught, and his arms as well.

"Burn!" Laura shouted at him, astonished but enraged as well. "Why will you not be consumed-"

Then suddenly she saw why. Dagmar stood just behind Milo, and it was as her pale flesh that was melting instead of his, her waxen face that was collapsing. Her eyes met Laura's, and she raised her arm and made a sound, a sort of inhuman howl that numbed the other's ears. Something hard and cold gripped Laura by her arms, and a violent pain erupted in her chest. She

began to struggle and flail, and struck back at whatever held her until it finally let go.

"Laura!" Jeremiah cried, clapping a hand to his bloodied nose. Laura turned to him, but even as she did so he jumped up and ran for the bridge, bellowing in horror. "Milo!" he screamed, "Get off! It's going to fall-get off!"

There was no more than a fraction of a second between his warning and the actual snap of rope and squeal of wood. Milo looked up at once, dropping Lothaire, and leaped back to safety even as the battered structure went down, colling to the frozen river like a beheaded serpent. Lothaire fell with it, and before he hit the ice the rushing water broke through its crystalline prison and enveloped him. It seemed that a single howl followed the silhouette that was swept under the river and towards the sea, but William was screaming as well and it was difficult to be sure.

Laura watched for a moment, eyes wide, then suddenly the strength gushed from her and she fell against Jeremiah. He caught her and went to his knees.

"Oh my God," he cried and gaped at the blood on his hands. Laura looked down at herself and saw the jeweled knife hilt protruding from the exact center of her chest. "It can't be-it's impossible!" But her husband opened his coat and his own weapon was gone.

He got to his feet, hoisting her up with him, and ran with her to the wagon. Before he got there, however, Laura reached up in disgust and tore the blade from herself, then hurled it into the snow. It bounced three times and tumbled over the bank and onto the ice. From where he knelt on the opposite side, Milo watched it slip through and swiftly take the same path as Lothaire's body. "William," Laura murmured as Jeremiah dumped her into the carriage and desperately took the reins.

Milo stood as the wagon sped into the forest and down the pathway and cast his eyes again at the broken ice and the smear of bright red blood upon it.

"Oh God," he whispered and sank back to his knees, fingers clutching the hard snow. "You are free now... as I am."

"Yes, Milo," said a voice from behind, and he

looked around to see her standing there smiling down down at him. "And we will know that freedom together."

She knelt also then, and drew his head onto her lap. For some reason, he felt as if he had laid his cheek in the bare snow, but the cold did not bother him.

"It's winter now," he said, tears welling in his eyes, "but it's almost spring... isn't it?"

"Yes," she said and kissed his forehead, "almost."

He closed his eyes and wept with the triumph and quickly contacted the pneumonia from which he was never to recover.

He kept watch by her bed in the meager little room Dr. Rodwell kept for patients who could not be moved, and for two days she would only stare at the ceiling and call for her child, and the wound in her chest did not even begin to heal. Her voice was hollow, dry, and the more she carried on the paler and sicklier her face became. But Jeremiah remained unmoved by her cries; he only sat and stared and refused to bring William.

On the beginning of the third day her first words were the same. She did not look at her husband when she spoke them.

"I want my son," she told him stubbornly, immobile save for the rhythmic blink of her eyes.

"When you are well enough to speak to me, then you shall have him," Jeremiah replied, exactly as he had before. "Not before."

Silas appeared in the doorway and watched the unpleasant tableau for several minutes. Jeremiah glanced up at him, and he beckoned with his eyes. Laura watched disinterestedly as her husband got up and followed the physician from the room.

"She is still asking for her child," the older man said.

"Yes."

"I think you had best give in to her wishes."

Jeremiah's face became hard. "No!" He turned to the wall. "She is not to see the baby. Not until she is willing to listen to me."

"I understand your feelings-"

"You can not possibly."

"-but all the same, you should reconsider."

"Why? Is there a reason today that there was not before?"

"I should think you'd have guessed it yourself. Your wife is dying."

"No," Jeremiah clenched his fists until they tingled, "she is not." It is a scheme like everything else with her. A ploy to gain sympathy, to win over hearts she can later twist to her own advantage.

"With all due respect, it is more than that. I am sorry... but she has lost the will to live. The wound is not getting better. It has not even ceased to bleed. Perhaps seeing the child again

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will do her some good; perhaps it will give her the strength or at least peace. Surely William himself is feeling the absence of his mother?"

"He has... not stopped crying since I brought her here. Everyone else in the house is at their limits."

"Well then... is it our right to keep them apart?"

Jeremiah's eyes filled with water. He tried to say something, but his lungs trembled with frustration and he could not. Instead he left Rodwell's house and walked slowly to the carriage outside. An hour later he returned with his son. Without a word he approached the door that separated him from Laura. Silas touched his arm and he pushed.

"You have done the right thing."

Jeremiah nodded grimly. "Then at least I have that."

He went inside. William seemed to know immediately where he was and began to squirm in his father's arms like a greased piglet. Laura sat up at once, tears of relief springing into her eyes.

"William!" she cried and grabbed him away. "I thought you were lost to me and they would continue to keep us apart..."

"William did not drive the wagon here himself, you know," Jeremiah broke in coldly, and finally she had to look up at him. Contempt shone on her face.

"What do you want, then?"

"Only to tell you one thing and to ask you one more. You have broken my heart, Laura-taken everything from me. How could you have done that to me? I gave you everything I had and everything you wanted; I was patient when I should not have been, and I even went against Barnabas, thinking of you. Then why did you do to me what you did? And with Lothaire..."

She held William closer, and her arms were gentle; but for him, her eyes spat fire.

"You fool," she hissed, "you are selfish to the end. You ask how I could dare to cause you pain? How dare you think that I would be the less without you? Are you so weak that you need my life to make yours whole? Are you so indifferent to the rest of your meager world? What right have you to be so? If you are so weak, so unable to care for yourself and your own future, then you are not deserving of my pity, and indeed you shall not have it."

"I do not want your pity." His voice became strained with fury and hurt. "I want nothing of you. If the fact that I wished you to be part of me, to love me, was a crime, then certainly I have duly paid for it. There, there is your precious child- yours, not mine at all- take him and be happy. Perhaps I do have a few clear nights left to me after all- but when they come you shall not be around to distract me from them."

"You were better than most," she muttered as he turned to go. "I will remember that about you at least."

He did not know what she meant. He did not care. When he left her, he slammed the door.

With only a pang of discomfort, Laura threw back the bedcovers and got up and fastened the door so that no one could get in. Then she lay back down and adjusted William at her side.

"I promised you glory," she said quietly, "and so you shall have it now."

Soon the tiny flames began at her feet. William saw them and began to wriggle but from excitement, not fear. Within moments the divine agony came upon her, and though it had seemed she had been stuck in that place forever, at last the struggle was over and she knew freedom again. The odd burning smell reached the doctor's nostrils before it did Jeremiah's. Silas sniffed loudly at the air and scowled deeply through his wrinkles. "Smells as if something's on fire," he commented. "Do you sense it too, Jeremiah?"

Jeremiah looked around the room.

"Why yes," he said uncertainly. "It must be someone's chimney."

"But it seems as if it's coming from in here!" Rodwell stood and glanced around the room, and then they both saw it. Thick grey smoke was winding into the room, billowing out from under the door of the rear chamber.

"Oh my God!" Jeremiah leaped to his feet. "It's coming from Laura's room!" He ran and threw his shoulder against the door. A jarring pain shot all down his side. "She's locked in- Laura!" He grabbed the knob but it was red hot. "Let me in- Laura!"

Silas ran out into the street screaming for help. Soon a horde of men were there carrying buckets. The door fell open with the stroke of an axe. Jeremiah started forward, but someone held him back.

"You don't want to go in there," the stranger beside him cautioned.

"What?" Jeremiah struggled away. "Of course I do! Laura's in there! I have to- don't you know that I still-"

He burst through the broken door. People were still inside, dashing water over the crumbled furniture, the stained floor. The outer wall had fallen away and he could see the street outside and the wharf. His eyes fell to where the bed had been and horror rushed over him in a great black wave.

"Sorry," someone said.

"No," he muttered in disbelief, and no one dared approach him. "Laura- Laura!"

An icy wind swept through the fallen wall, and his life could have ended then; for like the charred skeleton of the room itself were the rest of his days: choked with ashes and utterly empty. The same wind tore at the ruins and quickly sent the blackened bits of his wife and child towards the sea and the blazing sun above.