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Audrey Godwin

CRADLE OF
Lust

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CRADLE OF LUST

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

CRADLE OF LUST

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DEDICATION

I would like to thank the people of Scarlet, Georgia, for allowing me to use their town as a setting for my book, *Cradle of Lust*. I might point out that although Scarlet is not on the coast, the notorious Scarlet Bay Inn from which it takes its name is. Strangely enough, during my research I stumbled upon the information regarding the bones on the beach, the wind howling through the chanter marks, and the incredible sunrise, by accident, but I didn't find it in Georgia, I found it on a lonely coast in Italy. They say it is the only place in the world where this actually happens. As a writer, I simply took this incredible information and transferred it to Georgia.

CRADLE OF LUST

AUDREY GODWIN

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Chapter One

Running footsteps thundered down the dark alleyway. He was close. Close enough to smell the bastard's sweat mingling with the putrid smells of rotting garbage. He splashed through neon-reflected puddles that resembled pools of blood and felt the hot metal from an exploding gun whizzing past him. But he kept going, knocking over metal trash cans and darting through the dappled shadows of the humid night. All at once, he heard the clinking sound of a cyclone fence and could see the dark silhouette hoisting himself up over the top. *A foot.* He saw a foot and lunged at it before it disappeared out of sight. His fingers gripped like cords of steel, digging into a bony ankle while it kicked and struggled. Sweat rolled down his face, and the palms of his hands were slick and wet. When he felt the boy slipping, a flash of panic rose and clawed at his stomach. He made another wild grab for the boy's leg, but suddenly the frantic youth wheeled around and pointed the gun, his nervous finger on the trigger.

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

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

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

“Let him go, Madison. Let the son of a bitch go!”

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

“He’s gone, man, long gone.”

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

“No, you wouldn’t, you asshole. You would’ve been dead. Besides, he’s faster than you, and he haunts these back streets night and day. He knows where to hide, Madison. There’s no way in hell we’ll get him tonight.”

Shadoe buried his face in his hands. “Shit! Shit! Shit!” He whirled around and grabbed the fence like a caged animal, peering into the dark shadows beyond. With his anger seething, he kicked the fence with a ferocity that made the last strands of his badly tousled, blue-black hair pull free of the strip of buckskin that held it at the nape of his neck.

* * * *

Max Parenti, Shadoe’s partner for the night, watched him as he paced with his hands resting on his gun belt. He stalked back and forth like an animal, ready to pounce on anything that moved. He knew that Shadoe’s nerves were stretched to the limit. He couldn’t relax. His heightened alertness caused his eyes to dart. His lips, normally grinning and full of wise-assed quips, was almost thinned to a straight line, moving slightly as he ground his teeth. Sweat poured off him, and he was irritable and angry.

Max knew the signs, and they were all there.

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

“Come on, man,” Max said, applying a gentle pressure on his shoulder. “Let’s get back to the precinct.”

* * * *

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

He slumped in the car, his eyes darting around at the dark silhouettes that stalked the nighttime streets. He hated every one of them. When he couldn't hold it in any longer, he hung himself out the window and yelled at each and every passing goon.

"You dirty, rotten bastards, I'll get you, every one of you! If I have to go to prison for the rest of my fuckin' life, I'll gun you down like the garbage you are!"

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

Shadoe jerked himself back in and glared at his partner. "You heard what I said, and I meant every word." He quickly lunged toward the window on Max's side and again yelled at every nameless, faceless silhouette on the street. "I'll kill the goddamned motherfuckers, every one of them!"

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

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

"Don't worry, pal, we'll get 'em just like you said, but first we need to get back to the station and give the captain our report. Okay?"

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

When they finally arrived at the station, the anger Shadoe felt became a shield around him, and he wouldn't let his partner touch him. He staggered into the station like a drunk man, not realizing that Max hurried into the captain's office and stayed in there for twenty minutes.

* * * *

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

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

"I'll handle it." The captain turned away from the window. "Call him in here."

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

"You did the right thing, Parenti."

"I hope so," Max said, then turned to walk out. As he made his way through the crowded desks, he tried to deal with his sudden resemblance to a stoolie and began defending himself in his own mind.

Hell, why should I feel guilty about trying to help the bum? Sure, I squealed, but Madison's coming apart before my very eyes. I had to say something. It's for the bum's own good.

When he arrived at the desk he watched while Shadoe tried to cram a sheet of paper into a typewriter. "Hey, man, you don't have to do that. I'll make out the report. That's my job, remember?"

"Whatever," Shadoe snarled, yanking the paper out so hard it ripped.

"Better change your attitude. The captain wants to see you."

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

"Shadoe, I—"

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

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

Shadoe stepped in and slammed the door behind him.

"So," the captain began while putting away the file he'd been working on, "how long has it been since you've been with a woman?"

"You brought me in here to ask me about my fuckin' love life?"

“Yeah. Anybody you’re seein’ right now? What about that little señorita? Let’s see, what was her name?”

“She’s yesterday’s news.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“All right, so I went a little crazy. I was close, Captain, so fuckin’ close I could smell him. His sweat, his fear, his stinking feet! I had him right here!” Shadoe shouted while holding out the palm of a claw-like hand. “With him that close how could I give up? You can count on one thing, Captain. I’ll get that little son of a bitch, and when I do,” his voice dropped to a soft threat, “I’ll bring his head to you on a platter!”

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

Shadoe jumped up. “What the fuck?”

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

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

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

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

"You'd be dead," the captain finished for him. "I'm telling you right now that if you don't get out of here and get some rest, I'm gonna lock you up where you won't have anything to do but sleep and jerk off." He grimaced when Shadoe's wound began to bleed. "God, Shadoe, you're bleeding all over my office. Get to the men's room and get washed up, and then get out of here."

Shadoe jumped up and began pacing, his agitation chewing at him while he rubbed the back of his neck. "Come on, Captain, you're getting excited over nothing. I feel fine. I'm jus—"

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

Shadoe shrugged, a frown etching his face. "What the hell will I do? I'll go crazy."

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

"This is crazy. I can't leave now. I've got a desk piled—"

Tired of his arguments, the captain rose immediately, flung the door open, and put his head through it. "Hey!" he yelled into the bull pit. "Somebody get me a pair of cuffs!"

Shadoe arched an eyebrow. "Hey, what the hell is going on?"

Just then twin circles of clinking metal came flying through the air, and the captain smoothly lifted one hand and caught them. He turned toward Shadoe with a threatening look on his face. "When I give you an order, I expect it to be carried out one way or another."

Just about that time Shadoe saw several more of his officer buddies enter slowly, Max one of them, and take their place on each side of the captain. Small barbs of discomfort prickled down his spine. He stepped back and smiled vaguely, unsure of the crowd around him. "Hey, guys, you're not really gonna do this, are you?" When the officers kept coming, he looked at each one, seeing a fierce determination in their stride. "Is this fair?" he

yelled, looking from one to the other. “You’re ganging up on me for God’s sake.”

“Madison,” the captain growled, a hint of exasperation in his voice, “why in hell is it that every time we want you to take some time off we go through this same song and dance? We’re just thinking of you, you bastard.” He lifted the cuffs. “I can either use these, or you can take a little vacation. When you get back we want you to bore us silly with a lot of pictures and lies about the big fish you caught. Think you can do that?”

Finally giving up, Shadoe quickly strode toward them, brutally pushing at the hard bodies that resembled a human wall. “Get the hell out of my way,” he growled. “I’m not staying anywhere I’m not wanted.” Finally getting beyond the circle, he stopped and whirled on the men. “A man tries to do his fuckin’ job and what does he get? Heartaches!”

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

“Wisecracks! That’s all I ever hear outta you jerks.” He pointed at his captain. “You just remember this. You threw me out, and it’ll be a cold day in hell before you see me walkin’ back through that door.”

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

“You’re kicking me out on my butt, you mean!” With that, he turned and stalked down the hall to the front door. He flung it open, then passed through it, leaving the captain and his men to stare after him.

* * * *

“Well,” the captain said as he turned and slumped down in his chair with a loud groan, “crisis over. Thanks, guys.”

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

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

The recruit chuckled. “Why? I mean, what the hell’s his problem?”

The captain angled a look at him while lighting a cigarette. After taking a long, much-needed draw, he squinted his eyes toward the rookie, his next words accompanied by escaping smoke. “Shadoe Madison is one of the best

and smartest police officers I've ever known. If you follow his example, you'll make a damn good cop. I'll admit he has his moments of madness, but he handles a lot of cases. You know, undercover shit. Sees a lot. After a time it gets to him. Hell, when you look at bloody photographs day in and day out of young girls, children..." a flicker of pain shadowed the captain's eyes, "it's bound to do something to you."

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

The recruit turned and shuffled out leaving the captain sitting beneath a circle of smoke, quietly thinking about Shadoe and wondering why they weren't all stark raving mad. But Shadoe's job was harder. He went undercover, became one of them. Got down on their level and learned how they lived, went with them into their holes and sat still while they bragged about the raping and killing of women and children. If Shadoe went a little crazy once in a while, he could certainly understand why. He always threatened never to come back, but he always did. And then it would start all over again, the time fast approaching when he would have to pull away or go crazy.

He stared into the gloom of a dusky office and whispered, "Get it all out of your system, you stubborn asshole. Then hurry back for more of the same." A deep sigh escaped his throat as he looked thoughtfully at the burning ashes on the tip of his cigarette, the smoldering ashes reminding him of the hell that existed just beyond the precinct door.

* * * *

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

legend surrounding the inn. He became intrigued, so he decided to talk to one of the travel agents to learn a little more about it.

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

All right, so he was the same old Shadoe. Overly suspicious maybe, but he couldn't help it, he was a cop for God's sake. After spending years on the force, it covered him like moss on a tree. And it wasn't easy to take it off at the drop of a hat. Over the years he'd learned that everybody had an angle, and he would bet a dollar to a donut that the attractive travel agent had one as well. When she learned he wasn't going to spend a dime there, she would probably toss him off like so much garbage.

Gently slapping the stiff paper against his palm, he hesitantly approached her and asked his questions.

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

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

She smiled, clearly expecting his reaction. "Of course not, but since it's part of the legend I have to include it. You understand."

"So, is that it?"

"Not even close," she said, grinning. "The rocks have marks that have been dug out by the wind and saltwater. One is a perfect horned moon. The geologists call them chanter marks. On a very windy night you can hear a

tune being played through those marks. It's very..." she rubbed her arms as if she felt a chill, "eerie."

"What about the sunrises? I see here—"

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

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

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

By the time he heard everything, Shadoe admitted that he'd underestimated her. Instead of tossing him off, she took time, telling him all about the spooky old legends and making him feel guilty about not spending any money there. With the brochure burning his palm, he thanked her, went home and packed a few belongings, then struck out, heading down south toward a little dot on the map called Scarlet, Georgia.

Home of the notorious Scarlet Bay Inn.

Chapter Two

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

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

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

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

* * * *

The stranger was Shadoe Madison. He had the look of a real Texas wrangler, and was as sexy as sin. His dark hair was long and flowed

down his back like a dark river. He stood well over six feet, and his identity hovered somewhere between Texas cowboy and Cherokee Indian. He stood out in a crowd dressed in western boots, jeans, fringed shirt, and a furry coonskin jacket. A cowboy hat with a curled brim sat on his head in a cocky manner. Even though Shadoe was also considered extremely handsome, now, after looking death square in the face day after day, his handsome features had the troubles of the world tattooed upon them.

Shadoe was an undercover detective, not a nine-to-five cop. He uncovered drug rings, led stings, arrested whole parties of criminals, drug lords, pimps, and prostitutes. None of the small stuff for him, he went in with his guns blasting and didn't stop until he brought down whole cartels.

He and his Cherokee mother lived with his father until he died in a plane crash when Shadoe was only three. Not knowing what else to do, she bundled Shadoe up and took him back to the reservation where he lived under Indian rule until he was fifteen. A lot of his mother's ancestry flowed through his veins, but his father, who had been a Chicago cop, had given him his green eyes and his natural love for law enforcement. His mother called him Shadoe because he had been born in the shadow of the moon, making him the Son of the Moon.

When his mother died, the only thing she left him was a jade jewel. It became his most precious possession and he had it embedded on his cheek bone, just beneath his left eye. Someone not familiar with the Indian way of life might have had it made into a ring or a necklace, but according to the beliefs of his tribe, having it embedded into his skin would honor his mother, and her spirit would become part of him, guiding him through life.

He'd been happy as an Indian child, but as he grew up, he came to realize he belonged in his father's world, a world he was anxious to explore. City life was new to him, but he managed to fit in. Daily, he walked down the city streets with his long hair flying out behind him and the mysterious jade glittering in reflected light. His appearance was that of a young man in keeping with the wild decorations people put on themselves these days, so it was rarely questioned.

Now as he leaned into his trunk, he reached past the holster and picked up his camera. "Okay, Captain, you win," he muttered to himself while

pulling the leather strap down over his head. “I’ll spend a few days here with my trusty camera, go back with a pocketful of snapshots and you’ll...” Shadoe’s words faded when he turned and caught a look at the looming stature of the inn.

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

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

He had to admire the stately magnolias that dotted the grounds, the lush foliage that thrived this late in the year, and a collection of statues placed here and there to lend the landscape appeal. His eyes fell on an angel with a harp, the breeze causing the strings that were actually wind chimes to tinkle sweetly in the moving current.

When he finally went in, a welcoming warmth greeted him. Wondering where everyone was, he set his luggage down and lifted his voice into the emptiness.

“Anyone here?”

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

His eyes widened when he saw a hideous face. “You there!” he shouted, but she quickly turned and ran down a long, shadowy hallway toward the back of the mansion. Only the hollow sound of her running footsteps could be heard.

* * * *

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

* * * *

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

"I asked if I might help you."

With an anxious stride, Shadoe hurried to the counter. "That girl..."

"I'm sorry, sir, did she bother you?"

"No, I was just wondering. The mask." He indicated to his face with his hand. "I've never seen anything like it. Why—"

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

"But she looks like something out of the middle ages. There are doctors, procedures—"

The woman smiled indulgently, but only with her lips. "Please, sir, may I give you a room?"

His eyes darted around curiously, searching the shadows for the elusive creature, but saw nothing but an empty hallway. Turning back, he mumbled, "Yes, of course." When he finally faced her, he saw her closely for the first time. The woman's face was distressingly thin. Her lips were pinched and she had black eyes that were flat, hard, and passionless, as if everything inside were dead. He didn't want to just stand there and stare, so he began to

speak. "It's so late in the year I figured you wouldn't have many guests, yet the parking area seems to be full. I haven't come too late, have I?"

"No, we have a couple of vacancies left."

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

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

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

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

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

Shadoe frowned, noticing the hesitancy in her words. *Maybe his death was recent.* "Has it been long? Since the death of your father, I mean."

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

"You must have been close."

"Yes," she said, clearly trying to stay tolerant of the stranger's persistence. Then taking a deep breath, she said, "I'm sorry, but—"

"Please forgive me, I didn't mean to pry." Shadoe looked at her suspiciously. He could feel his cop radar coming out and lifted his guarded gaze to look around. "Actually, I've been by this old place many times,

always meaning to stop in. I'm a photographer for a web-based operation, and would like to take some pictures if that's okay."

Now, why in hell did I say that?

"You mentioned the woods earlier. I'm looking for streams, rocks, waterfalls. And just about now the leaves will be starting to turn."

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

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

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

"I'm not sure yet. I travel a lot, and the firm is paying for my trip, so I'm not in any hurry."

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

"No problem. Right now I'm a little more interested in the inn itself. What—?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It is *not* haunted.” She uttered each word carefully through tightly clenched teeth.

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

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

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

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

“Only when it pays, right?”

She gasped.

Shadoe could tell it was the time to stop, and backed off. “Sorry,” he said, grabbing up his key. “They say curiosity killed the—”

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

Feeling a chill creep down his spine, he flippantly threw the key in the air, then caught it in a tight clasp. “Thanks.” He turned and grabbed his luggage, then hurried up the steps. Halfway up, he looked back and saw her looking at him with those dead eyes. He could have sworn he saw something there—something alive—something evil. Maybe that was why

he'd done it. Maybe that was why he'd fired question after question at her until she cracked. To shake her. Maybe the captain was right, maybe he was cracking up. It was clear he'd been in too many interrogation rooms with too many killers with eyes just like hers. Well, he'd have to soft-pedal it from here on. He certainly didn't want to be thought of as a nuisance and have the witch ordering him off the place.

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

Chapter Three

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

"What are you doing out of the attic?"

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

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

"But I only wanted—"

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

* * * *

Something intense and hot swirled inside Julita. She didn't know where these new feelings came from, but they felt like hot barbs pressing against her. She was tired of being pushed around by this tyrant, told what to do, where to go, as if she were still a child. She knew she should let it pass, but the feeling was too big, too powerful, and the words on the edge of her lips caused them to tremble. Her teeth snagged her bottom lip, trying to keep the words inside her, but the pressure continued to build, and before she knew

what was happening her small quivering voice spoke, her anger fanning the flames in her eyes. “You can’t tell me what to do! Not anymore!” Julita dared to say to Lucretia. “As...as of today I’m...I’m a woman...I’m grown. I can do—”

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

Julita hesitated, wanting to say more, but she knew that Lucretia wouldn’t hesitate to beat her within an inch of her life if she continued.

It isn’t fair.

She pressed her full lips together, then bit them when she felt another retort rolling forward. She swallowed the words and forced herself to quell the sullen anger that spread through her. While keeping her eyes on her sister, she slowly crept from behind an ornate statue that stood at the entrance to the library and ran toward the kitchen, out of Lucretia’s hellish sight.

* * * *

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

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

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

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

So far she'd managed to keep the girl under her control, but because of scenes just like the one only a moment ago, she lived in fear that one day Julita would rise up and rebel. She'd started Julita young, and along with learning what drugs to use on her, Lucretia had become an expert at mind play. Over the years she'd been able to bend Julita's will to her own, making her believe what she wanted her to believe. But this rebellion was something new, and Lucretia wasn't sure how to deal with it. So far she'd managed to keep her suppressed, but Lucretia knew that somewhere behind the mesmerized state Julita lived in, she was bright, and showed signs of being strong—strong enough to one day escape Lucretia's control. If that day ever came, Lucretia would be forced to—

No! She wouldn't say it, she wouldn't even think it. It won't happen. It couldn't possibly happen! But if it did—if the time ever came, could she do it? Could she ever *kill* her beloved Julita?

* * * *

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

He quickly punched the blinking button that had the room number inscribed on it, then grabbed the receiver off the hanger.

“Room Service,” he barked into the mouthpiece, then nodded his head. “Right away, sir.”

After hanging up, he turned and reached for a clean pot and began filling it with coffee. When he had everything positioned on the tray just right, he called Julita over. “Number twenty-four,” he ordered, “on the double.”

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

“She’s comin’ in late today. You’ll have to do a few deliveries until she gets here.”

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

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

“But I can’t,” she rasped, fear causing her to breathe harder. “She doesn’t like me making deliveries.”

“Julita, I wouldn’t ask, but we’re in a bind here. You’ll be using the back steps anyway, so she’ll never know. Hell, that’s what they’re there for. Otherwise we’d be parading through the foyer day and night.” He paused, casting her an irritated glance. “Get a move on, huh?”

She wrung her hands while her eyes darted around the room. She was hesitant, trying to make up her mind, but remembered that she did have explicit orders from Lucretia to help in the kitchen. It was still early, she reasoned. A lot of the guests wouldn’t even be up yet. She didn’t see how it would hurt to just take the tray up the back stairs, place it outside the door, and leave. She wouldn’t see anyone, so Lucretia would never know.

“Well...okay,” she finally said, her hands trembling as she took the clinking tray in her hands. She decided that she would just have to be extra careful, knowing how her sister felt about her coming in direct contact with the guests.

After climbing the narrow stairway, she turned down the corridor that would take her to room twenty-four. She was rushing along when she saw a couple at the end of the hall coming toward her.

“Oh, no!” she breathed, then frantically turned her head, looking for a place to hide. She saw a room she knew was vacant and quickly set the tray down on a nearby table. Turning quickly, she darted across the wide hallway, resembling a floating spirit and seemed to disappear into the room.

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

“Kathryn, don’t start that again.”

“I know what I saw! A ghost just flitted across the corridor and disappeared into that room.”

Julita could see the couple through the peephole, and hear them arguing. She held her breath when the woman grabbed the doorknob, but her husband caught up with her and grabbed her hand.

“Kathryn, please! You can’t just barge into someone else’s room. Whatever it was, it’s gone now, and I’m starving for God’s sake. Let’s just hurry and get down to the dining room and eat our breakfast.”

“But I saw it go in there, Willard. Do you suppose—”

“It was probably nothing. Just early morning shadows. Now, please, we’re late as it is.”

“All right,” she relented, “but isn’t this place delicious? I tell you, Willard, I really love it. You never know...”

Julita stood quietly, waiting for them to pass. When their voices became garbled and far away, she knew it was safe. She was about to open the door to leave when she heard a voice behind her.

“Well, hello.”

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

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

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

“I’m sorry,” Shadoe said. I didn’t mean to startle you.” Seeing an anxious look in her eyes, he moved slowly indicating toward the center of his room. “Come in if you like, I’ll...” He didn’t know how to finish the sentence, so he just stood there gaping at her, as surprised to see her as she was to see him.

Julita had never seen anything quite like him. He seemed to fill her eyes, and she found herself staring. The only men she saw other than the ones that worked here were those who came year after year to the inn. Most of them were old, but this one was awesome with his long dark hair, white teeth, and something green that glittered near his left eye. She could smell him, even from here. It was a clean smell, like soap.

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

He smiled easily. "I guess it doesn't matter. My name is Shadoe Madison." When she didn't respond an awkward silence stretched between them. Finally he said, "And you are, I believe the lady at the counter said...Julita? Right?"

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

"Yes. Your sister told me." He smiled. "It's a beautiful name, by the way." A few moments of strained silence stretched between them. "I was just wondering...why are you here? Did you need something?"

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

"Yes, that's this room."

She frowned. "No...it's down—"

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

Suddenly her fear turned to the familiar stab of rebellion. "Yes, I can read," she spat, then turned and picked up his tray from the table in the hall, brought it in, and set it down loudly on the credenza in the entryway.

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

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

“That’s probably because I just arrived this morning.” When he reached out to touch her she recoiled, but he caught her hand. “You don’t have to be frightened.”

Seeing her hand in his, her eyes lifted and met his. Their green glow was breathtaking. She didn’t know what a swoon felt like, but believed the weak feeling in her knees must be close.

He’s so big and strong. What would it be like to...

She was ashamed of the pictures that formed in her mind. “I have to go,” she whispered, and began backing away, then turned and reached for the doorknob.

“Wait!”

She stopped dead still and turned around slowly. She kept her head lowered, her frightened gaze angling up at him.

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

She looked at it, smelled it, then folded it gently.

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * *

He rushed to the door and saw her streak down the hall. “Nice going, Shadoe,” he muttered, then slammed the door angrily, the sound echoing through the upstairs corridor. He paced for a while, raking his hands through his hair. He might understand why she wore the mask if he knew what was under there, but why in God’s name was she wearing those dresses? For that matter, what was she doing bound up like that? Was it true that she’d been mangled?

He pictured her once again standing there with her breasts hanging out, and suddenly felt something hot and damp swirling in his groin. He was ashamed of his feelings, but one thought led to another, and a picture of her long, shapely legs caused a sweat to break out along his neck. Before this moment he’d seen her as only a child, but apparently she was a grown woman. Why hadn’t he seen it before?

Maybe because I’m stupid!

Finally he stalked to the dresser and combed his wet head. As he stared at himself in the mirror he couldn’t get her out of his mind. He kept seeing the dingy little mask and those incredible violet eyes. Finally he threw down the comb and wandered over to the tray and poured himself some coffee. Whatever was under that mask surely couldn’t be so bad. After all, what kind of monster would have eyes like that?

* * * *

Finding the familiar narrow steps that led to the attic in the tower, Julita ran up them loudly, stumbling in her haste until she reached the door. She burst in, quickly climbed into her bed and crunched up into a fetal position. She was visibly shaking, and pulling down on the mask as if afraid someone was going to tear it off.

“I c-can’t! I...I can’t! I’m ugly...ugly!”

She stayed in her room all day, cringing in the corner of her bed. She didn’t want to face Lucretia, because Lucretia would know she’d been bad. She didn’t know how her sister found out about these things, but she always

did. Finally, when the sun dipped low in the sky and shadowy creatures filled up her room, she knew it wouldn't be long.

* * * *

That night when the last of the guests retired to their rooms, Lucretia walked silently through the shadowy corridors, her anger seething, and her eyes shooting fire. She finally came to the attic steps, and paused, looked up, then began to climb through the narrow tunnel of darkness to Julita's door. She opened it slowly and walked in while she pulled a hypodermic needle from her pocket. As she stalked toward Julia, she held it up threateningly.

"You were in his room," she whispered.

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

"Admit it." Lucretia reached out and gripped her arm tightly. "You were in there, weren't you?"

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

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

Julita fought Lucretia's bruising grasp, and in the midst of the struggle a bill floated down in front of Lucretia's eyes. She looked at the bill, then up at Julita.

"He gave you money?" Her face screwed up. "For what?" She looked down and saw Julita's breasts bouncing. "Where is your binding?"

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

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

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

“Did you let him touch you?”

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

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

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

“No. I ran. Really, I did. I came back h-here.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As she was that night.

She could still see that dark room and Julita in her crib. She could still feel how badly she’d wanted to stroke her, take care of her, play with her, but her papa wouldn’t let her.

“Well,” she whispered, “look at me now, Papa.” She gently fingered the pink ribbons in Julita’s hair, the short baby doll pajamas, and cute little dog ears. “She’s mine now, Papa. For fifteen years she’s been mine. I’ve taken care of her, played with her, and you haven’t been able to say one word about it.” Her voice became a low hiss. “You paid for keeping her from me, Papa, just like I said you would. But you didn’t believe me. Now you both depend on me. Yes, Papa, you depend on me. Ugly, hideous, Lucretia.”

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

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

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

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

brother, dad and mother, too. Pretty baby of mine, all mine. Pretty baby of mine.

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

Chapter Four

The friggin' sky is actually bleeding!

Shadoe snapped picture after picture of the crimson ball that shot bloody arrows into the sky.

He sensed an eerie hush, and chills ran rampant along his arms. No seagulls, no squawking birds heading south, and no planes with their low, faraway drone. For only a few moments every morning, this portion of the coast was bathed in the most spectacular sight he'd ever seen.

What caused it?

The legend about the warrior bleeding into the ocean was for mindless fools. But he did agree that this magnificent, surreal beauty had to be seen to be believed. He crouched down and ran his fingers through the sand. The grains were fine, like red sugar, and what looked like blood washed upon the shore. He reached out and immersed one hand in the water and then withdrew it. Was he crazy, or did it even have a certain sticky feel to it?

Just then, as if to punctuate his fear, he heard a high scream. His head jerked around, and he saw an incredible stand of giant bones, some lying down, some standing, some leaning against the wall of the precipice. He knew then what the sound had been. It was the wind whistling through the chanter marks, lifting to a crescendo, then dying in a morbid tune. The death-like serenade continued, ending only when the sun began rising higher in the sky, causing the scarlet color to slowly pale and give way to a normal sunrise.

As he stood, looking out at the crashing waves, he felt restless and didn't want to go in just yet. For two days he watched for Julita. It seemed to him that she was noticeably missing. He'd walked through the halls, around the grounds, and even considered going into parts of the inn he knew he wasn't allowed, but she was nowhere to be found. If he didn't see her

soon, his concern would turn to worry. He could only imagine what that witch might do to her.

Glancing down at his watch, he knew there was still time before breakfast. He looked over at the thick grove of trees, wondering if he would find her in there. He hesitated to go too far since the woods were unfamiliar territory to him, but it was the only place he hadn't looked.

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

Without thinking, he brought his camera up and began snapping pictures at different angles. All at once through the camera lens he spotted something moving, a shadow, looking down at him from a high window. He brought the camera down quickly, but by then it had disappeared, if it had been there at all.

"Why didn't I snap it?" he growled at himself. "Why in hell didn't I snap it?"

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

The mist seemed to thicken. It coiled around the roots of the trees and the base of the church, making it seem as if it were floating. He watched the

mist move toward him slowly as if it were alive. Winding around his feet, it slithered up the legs of his trousers like a wet, slimy snake. He looked around, smelling death in the mist. Death, decay, and—

Ashes to ashes and dust to dust.

Why were those words emblazoned on his mind?

Because there's something dead inside, he thought, answering his own question.

Slowly, he began backing up from the church. He wanted to leave, had to leave. Just as he turned, he heard something rustling in the brush and looked toward the sound. He squinted into the foliage and saw a squirrel skittering up a tree. Feeling relieved, he began running toward the path he knew would take him back to the inn.

* * * *

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

"Mr. Madison, are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm...I'm fine. Been running, that's all."

"I would've thought you were in better shape than that."

"Well, it wasn't just...nevermind." He didn't know how to tell her he'd been spooked, so he said, "I took some pictures today and was wondering where would be the best place to get them developed."

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

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

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

She looked up, surprised. “A church?”

“Yes. In a clearing in the woods.”

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

“It wasn’t a church like you might see on a corner in town. It was an old building. You know, broken steps, broken windows, badly in need of paint.”

“But that’s impossible.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Not since I was a child,” she said curtly. “But there was no church then, and there’s no church now.”

“Then how do you explain what I saw?”

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

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

"My father—" Her words stopped abruptly. She took a deep breath, as if she were trying to find the patience to deal with him, and started again. "Mr. Madison, since the first day you checked in, you've been asking questions that are clearly none of your business."

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

"Who?"

"You know who. The girl in the mask. I want to see her, talk to her."

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

He looked at her, waiting for the rest of the warning. "You'll what?" When she didn't answer, he answered for her. "Spit in my face, throw me out..." He hesitated, and then said ominously, "Kill me? Is that it, Ms. Van Dare? You want to *kill* me?"

"You are not only being ridiculous, you are trying my patience, sir."

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

When Lucretia heard him refer to the basement, she stiffened. "What a terrible thing to say."

Shadoe saw her reaction. "Maybe I'll check it out."

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

"Yeah? What's down there?"

"Filled wine racks mostly. We use it as a storage area for unused furniture, old guest rosters, bro-broken things," she said nervously. "I don't know why I'm telling you any of this. It's certainly none of your business."

"Do you have an attic?"

“Don’t you dare go near the attic. If I catch you snooping anywhere in this inn, I will have you physically removed. Is that clear, Mr. Madison?”

There it was, Shadoe thought. The stopping point.

He knew it would come to this if he asked too many questions. Time to shut his mouth and find out anything he wanted to know on his own.

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

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

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

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

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

“Ms. Van Dare,” he said, lowering his voice, “are you willing to take the chance that I won’t ruin the reputation of this inn?” He saw something glitter in her dark eyes, and heard her sharp intake of air.

Good. I got her attention.

“A lot of people know about your incredible sunrise, but most come here because of the legend...the stories they’ve heard. They say several big stars stayed here in their day.” He chuckled. “After all, who could stay away from a place that Marilyn Monroe haunts, or see the suite that she occupied?” He hesitated, watching her closely. “It is all true, isn’t it? None of it fake or made up to attract guests? You see, I’m a reporter doing a story on this inn, that’s why I ask so many questions.”

My God, how easily a lie flows from my lips. Can’t I tell the truth...ever?

“Now, my pen can either make you or break you. If you send me away, I can’t promise that my...” He paused, speaking the next three words clearly and pointedly, “*front page article* will be complimentary. In fact, it might be downright ugly.”

She hesitated, a look of dread spreading across her face. "Of course it's all true," she insisted, defending the inn. "In its day this inn was magnificent!"

"Don't you understand? It doesn't matter if it's true or not. I can write anything I want. People will believe me."

* * * *

Lucretia struggled. She didn't know what to do. She couldn't afford for the inn to get bad publicity. For years the sunrise, the legend, even the stories of their celebrated guests, brought people here. But now the inn was getting a questionable reputation. Too many murders, suicides, accidents. She only did what was necessary to protect the inn. But after a while, a pall began to hang over the inn. Some regular guests didn't come back, others only came to see the inn whose reputation had become as bloody as the sunrise.

Her eyes stole up into the domed ceiling where a darkness seemed to gather. Possibly because she knew it was there, she could see the cracked and broken plaster that had never been repaired. It had been a New Year's Eve party. Suddenly, for no reason, the chandelier pulled away from the ceiling and came crashing down, killing several people. The blood, the screams, the horror, were awful. At the time she thought it would ruin her, but it hadn't. It had simply been added to the stories that circulated. Back then, no one really believed those stories anyway. It was like a scary movie to them, fabricated for their benefit. But through the years...funny how things changed.

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

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

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

"A reporter can't reveal his true identity. Whenever someone finds out who I am, they start acting funny and I can't get a true picture of the

situation. That's the reason for the lies about being a photographer for a web-based operation. I hope you'll forgive me."

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

"Oh?" He looked at her with his eyebrows raised inquiringly.

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

Shadoe was silent, wondering what that remark meant. The sister? Is she homicidal? Crazy? Dangerous?

"Agreed," he finally replied and breathed a sigh of relief when she hadn't asked for his press ID.

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

Chapter Five

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

* * * *

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

His eyes shifted when he heard her shuffling steps and knew she would be pushing the door open at any minute.

If only she'd trip and fall. If only she'd crack her ugly skull wide open, I'd jump up out of this chair and rejoice.

His gaze stayed fixed on the door until it finally opened and his oldest daughter walked in. He chilled as her blank, soulless eyes looked down her ugly nose at him. She looked like a walking corpse. Her face had a

cadaver's thinness to it, and her eyes were dark and haunting. Her crisp dress, smooth chignon, and cold, imperial bearing looked misplaced in the midst of the basement's deterioration. Her dark blue dress with white collar and cuffs seemed to be starched stiff, but maybe it was just the stiffness of her spine that made it seem so. Her thick heels were black, and her hose were dark.

Lucretia was only thirty-two, but she had the looks and demeanor of an old woman. She reminded him of an old-maid school teacher, a strict governess, someone so prim and proper that sex and men were taboo. The old man knew what a struggle Lucretia must have had with her sexuality. Constantly having the golden loveliness of Julita around day after day hadn't been easy for her. Seeing the ugly truth every day in the mirror left her only one choice. She naturally put up a defense, conveying a message in her dress and attitude that she didn't need men, didn't want them. In this way she could reject them before they rejected her.

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

"Because you love me, Lucretia." His voice dripped with sarcasm. "You love your old papa, don't you dear?"

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

That's your problem, you ugly nitwit. You don't have any sense and never did.

He looked at her through nail-sharp eyes. "What did you bring me tonight, darling?" he questioned, his voice sugary sweet.

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

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

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

"If you haven't killed me by now, I doubt you will. What's the matter, you ugly scarecrow? You afraid I'll come back and haunt you? If I did, I guarantee you I'd give you a taste of hell you'd never forget."

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

"Fine language for—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

In anger she banged the tray down on a mobile table and pushed it across the floor to where he was sitting. "I should have you committed, old man. You're beginning to hallucinate, growing cynical, imagining things."

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

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

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

The color drained from Lucretia's face. "No...it's the other rooms you're hearing, not...not mine."

“You think I don’t know your voice? I even hear the tinkle of that little music box I bought for Julita when she was still an infant. I never thought that song...” A sob caught in his throat as he tried to get the words out. “You’ve even desecrated my memories of *her*.”

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

“You dirty, sloppy bitch, I—”

“You’ll what? You can’t do anything, you bastard!” She tapped her bony chest with her finger. “I own you now, and I decide what happens to you.”

The old man's anger suddenly exploded. Before he knew what he was doing he lifted the tray and heaved it at her back.

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

“So what? You give me just enough food to barely keep me alive. If I had decent meals, I might gain the strength to fight back. Isn’t that it, Lucretia? What are you doing to Julita to keep her under your control, huh? Well, it won’t last forever, you filthy bag of bones. Someday it’ll all come back to you.”

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

He felt as if she had hit him in the gut. “Oh, God,” he sobbed. “You didn’t. Tell me you didn’t, Lucretia. You wouldn’t kill her just because she was beautiful, surely.”

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

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

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

exquisite, and he was a handsome devil himself. They had money, and took trips around the world, ending their jaunt on the Riviera every year.

And then everything went wrong.

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

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

And then something happened, an accident, and Greta began bleeding. She was in such intense pain. She struggled, cried, pleaded for him to get someone to help, but it was too late. The child was coming. Ignoring her pleading, he opened her legs and the child literally fell into his hands. He remembered the feeling of joy he experienced when he saw the child for the first time, all pink and golden. She was a beauty. He looked and saw Greta straining forward, her hair stringy, and her body all used up, and felt repulsed. Ignoring her, he cleaned the child and found a nurse for her. Greta died within minutes, her last words berating him for keeping her daughter away from her. It didn't take long for his beautiful Julita to become the most important thing in his life. It was a love that grew, first becoming overly protective, and then obsessive.

Knowing Lucretia's love for small things, he was haunted by nightmarish images of Lucretia torturing Julita and maybe killing her. It slowly drove him crazy. He hired and fired nurse after nurse, trying to keep Julita safe. Everyone thought he was being overly cautious. No one but him

knew what Lucretia was capable of. He went through many a sleepless night before he finally realized he couldn't keep up such a pace, so he made a decision. He would send Lucretia away. He knew it was the only way he could protect Julita, and he would have protected her with his life.

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

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

* * * *

Later on that night, Shadoe tossed and turned. When he got so tired of being in bed he couldn't stand it another minute, he finally got up and lit a cigarette. He paced, looking out windows and watching the clock.

Will the damned night never end?

He looked around for something to read, but there wasn't anything, not even a magazine. He thought of the library and all the books he'd seen on the shelves, but knew it was restricted after certain hours. The door would most likely be closed and locked, but he decided to find out anyway. He slipped into his jeans and a shirt without bothering to button it. He quietly stepped out of his room and walked quietly to the stairway and descended the steps. When he got down to the foyer, his eye caught movement down by the Hall of History. He quickly crossed to the opposite wall, and hid in a shadow. He could see the arched entrance from there, so he knew it wouldn't be closed off. Being careful not to make any noise, he crept quietly down the short corridor, then turned to go inside. As he expected, it was a long room full of historic relics including portraits of grim-looking ancestors hanging on the walls. Each of the portraits had a small light from the ceiling

trained on them, and except for the glass cases that had light illuminating them from inside, the rest of the room was draped in shadows. The glass cases were lined against the walls and were filled with memorabilia such as old registries with famous names on them, letters, a chipped china cup with Marilyn Monroe's lip print on it, and silverware that dated back before the Civil War. Photographs of the Van Dare family hung on the wall, and brochures telling the history of the inn lay in a stack for the casual visitor to take and read.

He heard something and whirled around. His eyes tried to penetrate the shadows, but he saw nothing. Suddenly he detected movement from out of the corner of his eye and quickly turned his head. He was surprised to find Julita hiding beneath one of the long glass cases.

* * * *

She looked up at him, his towering presence breathtaking.

Her first inclination was to turn and run, but she realized she wasn't afraid even though it was late and dark, and they were in the room alone. So many new sensations had become a part of her and now a brazen boldness had been added. She stared shamelessly, gaping at the glittering jewel below his eye, then slid her eyes along his broad, hairy chest to the tight jeans he wore. She felt a stirring, a burning sensation that coiled forbiddingly in her groin. Her gaze lifted from his physical charms and grazed along his rugged face. "You are a flashy beast, aren't you?" she whispered.

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

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

"What in hell are you doing in here?" He glanced down at his watch. "It must be past midnight."

"I don't g-get out much. M-Mostly at night." When she saw him come near, she began backing away.

"No, please don't go. I'd like to talk to you."

"Why?" she said, mesmerized by his hair. Curious, she reached out and grabbed a portion of his hair and looked at it. She fingered it as if it were a

foreign substance, and then played with it, allowing the blue-black thickness to twine around her fingers.

He smiled. "It's only hair, just like yours."

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

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

Saying nothing, her glowing gaze moved upward to his face and across to the jewel that seemed to match the green fire she saw in his eyes. Like a blind person, her delicate fingers stroked his face, touched the jewel, then came down and lingered on his full lips.

He reached up and took her hands and kissed them.

Her eyes shifted, met his, and locked.

"A flashy beast, am I?" he whispered, smiling. "Is that good?"

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

"Talk to me, Julita, won't you?"

"I've never seen anyone so..." She hesitated.

"So, what?"

"So..." she flushed, becoming red-cheeked, "so beautiful."

"Neither have I."

Her eyes widened, and her hands went up to her mask. "But I...I'm not—"

"Let me see if you are. Let's take off the mask." Before he could stop her he reached out and snatched it off her head.

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

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

* * * *

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

kiss. After a few seconds, the struggle died away and she melted in his arms. Finally Shadoe pulled back and opened his eyes. What he saw made him gasp. It looked as if someone had taken a marker and drawn scratches on her face, disfiguring it with blue, purple, and red ink. He hesitantly touched the macabre sketch made to look like heinous scars on a beautiful face.

From out of the darkness, Shadoe could see the glow of her innocent violet eyes staring fearfully at him. He looked at her, speechless. “My God, why?” he whispered, frowning at her in disbelief.

“Why? I don’t understand.”

“Why, Julita? Why did you do this to yourself?”

Tears pooled in her eyes. “What? I don’t know what you mean. Do what?”

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

* * * *

She reached up and touched her face lightly. It felt so strange to be without her mask. She felt naked without it, and to have someone see her without it was torture.

Especially him.

She peered at him from within her darkness. “I’m sorry, I know I’m...” Without finishing, she grabbed the mask and started to put it on, but Shadoe caught her arm.

“Don’t,” he said, then asked, “How old are you, Julita?”

“Eighteen,” she answered timidly.

“Who told you about your scars?”

“Lucretia. She said an animal got into my cradle when I was a baby, and did it. She explained it all to me.”

“You poor baby,” he whispered as he reached out and pulled her toward him, and lay her head against his chest. “If I told you that you were beautiful, would you believe me?”

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

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

She smiled, her eyes shifting toward his lips. “Will you do that again?”

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

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

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

“Do they know how to make love, too?”

The smile dropped from Shadoe’s face, and he gulped. “To make love?” Suddenly a sultry heat began gathering in his groin. “Well, first...” He looked down at her full lips and could feel his tongue thrust forward naturally, in anticipation.

“Is it hard to learn?”

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

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

“Well, first, open your mouth,” he whispered, watching while the sexiest lips he’d ever seen opened at his command. “Now,” he continued, “when I...” All at once he felt her jutting breasts push against him as her arms came stealing up around his neck. “Oh God, Julita,” he moaned. “You don’t make it very easy for a guy.”

With everything in him telling him to stop, he gathered her in his arms and kissed her as he laid her back, the palms of his hands burning as they touched her. With his mind telling his hands to behave themselves, they still moved slowly, lifting her loose dress to feel the flare of her firm little butt, and squeezed. He loved the feel of her and couldn’t seem to stop.

“I can feel something,” she whispered. “Oh, it’s...oh, God, I want some more, please give me some more.”

She began to writhe, pushing against his engorged cock that was almost bursting out of his jeans. “Julita, please understand that we can’t—”

“Yes, please,” she begged. “Give me more. I’ve never felt anything like it.”

“Are you sure? You have to be sure.”

“Yes,” she hissed into his mouth as he kissed her.

With slow movements he opened his pants and released his cock. He wanted so much to bury himself inside her immediately, but had to hold himself back. He didn't want to frighten her or hurt her since he knew she would be tight. He entered her slowly, his cock rubbing her clit so intimately that she began moving her hips against his. Suddenly she was like a wild woman. She clung to him, kissing his chest, and biting his nipples as she drew his manly elixir into her soul.

Shadoe pushed himself in slowly until he at last felt her maidenhead tear away. He could feel the depth of her cunt rising to meet him and could hold himself back no longer. He plunged over and over, in and out, while she clung to him, her legs lifting almost to his shoulders. His passion was out of control. His strong hands grabbed her breasts and with tongue and teeth, he bit and chewed, sucked and drew on her stiffened nipples. Her neck was soft, her ear lobes delicious, and her body fit into his like it belonged there.

With their hips pushing against each other, Shadoe could feel her maidenly juices lubricate him as his full cock pushed in and out, tweaking her clit, filling up her cunt until he felt he might explode at any minute. He could hear Julita whimpering her satisfaction and finally felt her wilt in his arms.

"Oh, God, Julita, what have I done?" he asked as he buried his face in the soft curve of her neck.

She took his face in her hands and kissed his lips. "You've made me very happy. Now I know what it feels like to be loved." She cuddled in his arms until she was asleep, and she and Shadoe spent the night beneath a table full of Scarlet Bay souvenirs.

Chapter Six

“Can’t I come in with you?” she pleaded as they stood at Shadoe’s door.

Shadoe hesitated. It would be so easy. And, God, how he wanted her with him, to feel her soft, sweet body writhing beneath him all night long, and to feel her curvaceous legs wrapped around him. He had already broken so many rules he set for himself, and to do more just wasn’t right. But how could he have refused? What man could resist when something so pure and lovely was offered to him? He gazed down at the ugly marks drawn on her face to look like scars and wanted to take her inside and wash it clean and love her all night long.

But he couldn’t.

“No, Julita,” he whispered. “I’ve already broken every rule I’ve set for myself. We’ll be together again, but not now. Right now I have to think, figure some things out. Do you understand?”

“Lucretia wouldn’t know,” she breathed. “I won’t tell her what we did.”

Oh, God, why is this so hard?

He looked at her. “I know you won’t, but that’s not the issue. I have to make sure of a few things first.”

She dropped her lashes quickly as if to hide her hurt.

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

“If you say so, but when can we do it again?”

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

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

Shadoe closed his eyes, feeling his arousal growing by the second. “Julita, please,” he moaned, “I can’t take much more of this.” He clutched

her shoulders firmly and pushed her away from him. “Good night,” he rasped, hating the words.

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

Shadoe just had time to take his clothes off before stumbling into bed and falling into an exhausted sleep. A few hours later he began tossing and turning, hearing a voice from far away.

“Shadoe, come to the church! Danger is near! Come to me! Please come to me now!”

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

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

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

It all seemed to be carved into his memory.

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

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

Without wasting another minute he pushed himself up off the bed, grabbed his jeans and shirt, and pulled them on. Hopping around on one foot, he struggled to put his boots on with one hand while he grabbed his furry coon-skinned jacket with the other. Finally, with his shirt hanging open he barged through the door and darted into the hall.

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

He stayed completely still, his breathing heavy and his throat closing with fear.

God, what is wrong with me?

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

At last the sound stopped and he pushed himself away from the wall. Poised at the head of the stairs he looked around for a moment, but didn’t see or hear anything. When he walked down only three steps he heard movement. The moonlight coming through floor-to-ceiling windows cast a looming grotesque shadow on the lofty wall of the foyer, yet he couldn’t tell what it was. As the shadow moved, he could hear a scraping sound that made the hair on the back of his neck rise. While watching it, the shadow became larger and more and more frightening until he managed to make out

the skinny shape of Lucretia Van Dare. She must have entered from the dining room, and was now walking across the wide floor, her grotesque shadow stretched out along the floor and up the walls.

What in hell is she up to at this time of night?

Then Shadoe saw something in her hand. When he looked closer, he found she carried a hatchet and wore a butcher's apron stained with dark, faded blood, topped with something that was horrifyingly bright and fresh. The silver blade of the ax, glinting in the moonlight, was covered with dripping blood.

He watched her for a moment as she made her way across the foyer. She seemed tired, and he could hear her wheezing breath as she lumbered along until she came to the door behind the front desk. When she went in he heard a lot of thumping, and moving around. Only moments passed until she finally came back out, the butcher's apron and hatchet gone. She had a wet rag in her hand that looked stained and dirty. She managed to wipe up the stains from the marble floor, then disappeared into the dining room again. He stared curiously at the door behind the desk. He remembered seeing her go in and out of it many times, never wondering what she might have stored there. Now he knew. A bloody apron, a hatchet—and death.

He waited a few seconds before he stepped out of the shadow. Then without a sound, he quickly sneaked down the stairs, gingerly stepped toward the front door, then out. His next thoughts were of Julita. If his hunch was right, she was apparently the victim of Lucretia's insanity. One would only have to look at Lucretia to know she was jealous of her sister's beauty and wanted to hide it. That must be the reason for the marks on her face, the mask, even the binding and the shapeless dresses. But that wasn't the whole story—there was more, and he had to find the answers. Even if Lucretia was a tyrant, that wouldn't make Julita obey her without question. She was bright, old enough to make her own decisions. Why didn't she? What was behind it all? Where did it start?

And why did Julita think she was ugly? All she had to do was look in a mirror to see...Oh, God, it couldn't be. Was Lucretia dabbling in hypnotism? Mind play? He was a cop, so he'd seen it a million times, but it was usually done by professionals—evil professionals. Power-hungry individuals who for whatever reason wanted to control someone else's mind. It was dangerous to fool around with something like that if you didn't know

what you were doing. If Lucretia was into this, she could damage Julita's mind, and like a mad dog who turns on his master, it was very possible that one day Julita would turn on her. If that day ever came, she could kill her sister, and her mind would be forever lost.

The more he learned about the Van Dare family, the more he realized that he had fallen into something too horrible for words. He had to get to the bottom of it, no matter what he would find, but for now he had to learn what role the old church played in this twisted up tale of horror.

The woods were even darker than he had imagined. He picked up a stick and used it as a machete, knocking back low-hanging branches and shrubs. He splashed through shallow creeks, climbed low hills and slipped down muddy ravines until he finally came to the clearing. Pushing aside the veil of limbs and vines, he saw the church just as it had been before, except now it seemed to be spotlighted by the moon. It was as if something didn't want him to miss it—as if he was being coerced, invited, even commanded to enter. Churches were supposed to be serene, holy, and a picture of safety in a world of turmoil, but the circle of light revealed the church as a crouching, ashen monster—something nightmares were made of. The bell's he'd heard in his sleep must have been the old grandfather clock, because as he looked at the crumbling old tower thrusting itself into an unfriendly night sky, the bell was gone, the steeple empty. It reminded him of a corpse—a dead thing—a shell that had given up its spirit.

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

"Shadoe, come to me."

Shadoe whirled around, his green eyes darting from one place to another until he felt something sinister coming from the tangled shadows of the woods.

If some dirty bastard is playing a joke on me, I'll have him for lunch.

His eyes shifted toward the black sky where the moon hung silver and cold. How could sound effects be rigged out here? It's crazy. His eyes slid down, anchoring on the hellish blackness just beyond the door. It had come from there—inside.

Just go along with it for now. Find out for sure what's happening, and then bust their sorry butts!

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

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

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

He had found a church with no people.

A pulpit with no preacher.

A choir with no singers.
And an organ with no master.
And yet he could hear them—feel their presence.
All at once a whispery voice called, as if from another world.
“Shadoe, I’m here.”

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

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

Standing in the same spot that he’d just occupied, was a woman. Her face was a hideous mask of dark, weathered, skeletal remains, black holes for eyes, and a perfect set of teeth that stretched into a hideous smile. A thatch of blonde hair flowed down to the shoulders of her wedding dress. She was a floating, shadowlike apparition, unlike anything he’d ever seen. Her arms stretched toward him.

“Please help me,” she whispered. “*She’s in danger. My baby is in danger. Take her away, far away from them. Please believe me. She’s in danger! Her life is in danger. Take her away, far away!*”

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

Before the echo of his last word had stilled, he was no longer in the church, but in a room, a dark room where a woman lay writhing in a large

bed. A tall, lean man with dark, curly hair crouched at the foot of the bed. He made a sound of surprise, leaned forward, and snatched a baby from between the woman's legs. As her scream died down, he lifted the bloody bundle, slapped it, and the child's healthy wail seemed to fill him with joy.

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

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

Chapter Seven

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I believe you already tried that.”

“If only you had died that night,” she said, her misery showing. “You were a miserable tyrant with everyone but Julita. Her, you spoiled rotten.”

* * * *

Lucretia glared at him, feeling hot tears as they invaded her eyes, threatening to spill down her cheeks. She waited, but no words of denial passed the lips that were closed and pressing into a guilty line. Hating the sight of him, she finally whirled away and started for the door. "I'm sick of looking at you, old man." She looked down at his food. "Eat that sorry-tasting oatmeal or do without!"

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

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

"Lying bitch," Garret mumbled.

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

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

"I wouldn't count on it, old man."

"Oh, yes, one last request," he said with a false sweetness. "Be a dear and trip on the stairs and die!"

"Papa, as I remember, you were always partial to soup, weren't you? Well, for lunch I have a surprise for you. A nice bowl of cold, watery soup. No crackers, though. Bad for you, you know. Too much sodium."

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

All at once a sudden weakness washed over him, and he clutched at the arms of his chair. He fought it, knowing what caused it. His outburst at Lucretia. Lately when he overexerted himself, spells of dizziness hit him. He knew what came next. If he didn't get proper nourishment, he would begin blacking out. For short periods at first, then he would become too

weak to lift himself into his chair. Before long someone would come down and find nothing but bones in his bed.

* * * *

As Lucretia climbed the old stone steps, she remembered when her world began to crack. He was always a demanding man, even before his accident, but afterward he was impossible to live with. His constant bellowing began cutting into her head like an ice pick. Her days were filled with him barking out orders. She was no longer his daughter but a servant, and nothing she did was right. And then she began hearing voices in her head, in the shadows, swirling around her everywhere. The voices told her that her father was going to send her away. She was insane with worry. She couldn't let it happen, so one dark night she planned an accident—an accident that had been a miserable failure. What she had intended to be a dead body laying beneath the balcony was nothing more than a twisted spine hanging from a magnolia limb. With more money than God, he hired only the best doctors who, after examining him, were certain they could perform nothing less than a miracle.

It couldn't happen!

She envisioned him walking around on a cane snapping out orders, continuing his tyranny. Sure, he ordered her around now, but at least from the chair he was limited. She could get away from him, hide. But not if he gained control of his legs. His cruelty would become limitless.

I had to stop it!

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

The next morning she picked up the phone and called his friends and business associates and told them her father had taken a turn for the worse and couldn't have visitors. When they questioned her as to when they could see him, she cut them off completely by telling them that she planned to put

him in a nursing home where he could get professional care. No, she hadn't made a decision as to which one just yet, but she was looking into it and would let them know as soon as that decision was made.

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

Garret Van Dare had been forgotten.

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

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

Bzzzzzzz—

Bzzzzzzz—

Bzzzzzzz!

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

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz—

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz—

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!

Unable to stand it one more minute, she hurried as fast as she could up to her father's room, grabbed the little box, yanked the wire out of the wall, and threw it across the room and into the yard. With no one's help, she grabbed his wheelchair and managed to hustle him down to the basement.

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

There was only one way to handle the problem.

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

It was only the beginning.

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

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

This was her answer.

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

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

Then Lucretia began to face another problem.

Julita began to grow.

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

* * * *

Being in the basement, Garret could hear what went on upstairs, and sometimes he'd be awakened by thumps and tormented outcries deep into the night. He would lie in his bed, grasping at his ears, trying to keep out the sound of a young child crying out in pain. His first thought was of Julita, but he couldn't tell if the echoing sounds were real or coming from somewhere inside his tormented mind. He pounded on his legs, trying to force feeling into them, but it was no use. He cried, cursing his disability, his wheelchair, and his inability to help his daughter if she was still, after all these years, at the mercy of her older sister.

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

Knowing Lucretia was getting worse, Garret was becoming desperate, so he tried leaving obscure notes on his tray, or making enough noise for someone to hear, but it did no good. When he had been bad, as she used to call it, she would punish him by going out into the woods and killing some small animal and serving it to him on his tray. Then she would stand just outside his door and hear him bellow with horror when he removed the

cover and saw the little thing drenched in blood and staring up at him with dead eyes. He would push the tray away with a tormented howl, and the sound of the metal object hitting the floor would mingle with her maniacal laughter. Helpless tears would stream down his haggard face.

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

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

Chapter Eight

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

What the hell?

His clouded vision raked across the area where he'd slept. Suddenly remembering the night before, he froze, his eyes and mind taking on the clarity of a crystal ball. Jumping up, he whirled around, trying to find the church he'd been in only hours before. The clearing was empty, shafts of early morning sun piercing through the thick foliage of the trees. Where was the church? It had been here, he had seen it. He had been in it!

My God, am I going crazy?

He quickly leaned his head over and raked his fingers through his hair. When he lowered them, his hands were full of dry twigs and leaves. He quickly threw them down and began running as fast as he could out of the clearing and down the path to the inn.

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

When he knew he was out of earshot, he began running down the hall until he found his room. He noisily burst through, then slammed it shut. As if he'd traveled a long distance, he leaned against the door, closed his eyes, and took several deep breaths. When his heart had slowed, he began

stripping and hurried to the shower. Turning on the water, he stepped in, and with a frenzy began scouring his body. While standing with his face turned upward toward the prickling spray, things seemed to come into focus. He decided that it was all a dream and he'd been sleepwalking. It was stress. The captain was right. He needed this rest to clear out his head.

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

He glanced quickly at his watch, spent a few minutes drying his hair, then chose a black cowboy shirt with the collar opened casually, some well-fitted black jeans and even black boots. When he was dressed, he looked at himself in the full-length mirror. He could almost see his father standing there instead of him. Like Shadoe, he was partial to western attire, and wore western boots instead of Adidas. Even though Shadoe's skin was darker in color than his father's, he could see a lot of his father in his face and in the way he dressed, even in his mannerisms. But Shadoe's real individuality came from his Native American heritage. It showed up in his long dark hair, the jade jewel beneath his eye, and a silver string earring that threaded through his pierced ear and dangled on each side of his lobe. He flipped it, gave his collar a slight adjustment, then turned, exiting his room a lot slower than he had entered it.

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

"One for breakfast, sir?"

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

“Would you come this way, please?”

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

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

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

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

“Say, I’d like to speak to someone in the kitchen.”

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

“Oh, no, it’s not that. I’d like to see, well, a young lady.”

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

“Her name is Julita. She’s the girl in the mask. Could you get her for me?”

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

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

“No, it’s her appearance. She’s...I’m sorry, sir, I can’t talk about it. Mr. Van Dare, the owner—”

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

“Dead? Mr. Van Dare? Oh, no,—”

“No?” Shadoe’s interest perked up. “I was told...I mean, I heard about it when it happened. It was all over the news and everything. Are you sure about what you say?”

“Sir, I don’t know what you heard, but Mr. Van Dare is not dead, he occupies a room right here in the inn.”

Shadoe was shocked. He could understand why the girl might not have heard about it. She couldn’t be over eighteen, but he was sure. Even now he could hear Lucretia’s words ringing in his head. *It was owned by my father, but he’s...well, he’s...dead, so I run things.*

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

“Do you know where he is? The old man, I mean.”

“I don’t know which room he’s in if that’s what you mean. No one is allowed in there. She takes care of him herself.”

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

“Sir, do you want...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Treading thin ice was exactly right, Shadoe thought. But this latest information had dropped on him like a bombshell, and he was determined to get at the truth and find out just where the old man was. “By the way, how long did you say your father had been dead?”

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

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

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

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

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

“I see. Well, thank you anyway. I’ll just interview Julita. By the way, where will I find her?”

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

“Anything?” Shadoe repeated, wondering why that sounded like a loaded word when she said it. Lifting his hands, he began counting effortlessly on his fingers. “The father’s not available.” He looked at her and forced a small laugh. “Dead men rarely are, if they are, as you say, dead. The daughter’s not available, and your attitude, if you don’t mind my saying so, Ms. Van Dare, is downright hostile. Now, I ask you. How am I to get my story if I can’t talk to anyone?” He took the edge of the register and pushed it, spinning it around on the turntable. “Well,” he said, watching her bewildered eyes follow the spinning register. “I guess I’ll just have to rely on my own resources. Which, by the way, is what I was doing when you came up and caught me. Now, Ms. Van Dare, I know you’re busy. It must be rough running an inn that brings in the business that this one does, but if I can’t get my story any other way, then don’t be surprised at what turns up in that article.” He made his smile as brittle as hers and his eyes as chilly. “Just a warning.”

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

possible bad review, but having him there was like having a boil on one's backside. Very uncomfortable.

Turning, he decided to order breakfast in his room, so he pushed himself away from the counter and strode toward the stairs. As his foot barely touched the first step of the wide staircase, his eyes just happened to fall on a door nestled beneath the stairway that looked to be hidden by a large stretch of rose-covered lattice. He stopped abruptly and leaned around the towering light fixture that stood at the end of the curling balustrade. The door was so obscured he almost missed it, which he figured was the intent of the strategically placed lattice. He glanced back at the front desk and Lucretia was turned away while talking on the phone. Taking advantage of the situation, Shadoe crept around the side of the stairs and walked as quietly as he could to the door.

What the hell was behind it, he asked himself. He knew it must be the cellar Lucretia told him about a few days ago. But if it was a frequently used part of the inn, why was this lattice hiding it? He knew the answer. She was hiding something down there. But what? His thoughts went back to the night before when he saw her coming out of the dining room with an ax. My God, could it be a graveyard? Bones scattered everywhere? Shadoe's curiosity wouldn't rest until he knew. He naturally assumed she kept it locked, but when he reached out for it, to his surprise, it turned with ease, swinging inward with hardly a push. He hated to close it again, but it would have to be later when no one was around—when the shadows of the inn stretched wide and long, hiding him within their darkness. But what about now? How was he going to get out of here? His eyes darted furtively toward the counter and saw Lucretia's head buried in some paperwork.

The friggin' witch would be at the counter.

She was never around when he needed her, but the minute he gets trapped behind a piece of lattice, she takes root behind that desk like one of her magnolias. Just then he saw Julita come out of the dining room and approach Lucretia. She moved as if she were frightened, hardly able to speak because of her fear.

No wonder she acted the way she did, he thought. She was frightened to death of her sister. Afraid to move, even to speak. Afraid of him—afraid of everyone.

He could see that Lucretia had practically broken her spirit, making her almost unable to speak. Watching them together, he got a clearer picture of the relationship between these two sisters. One cowering and frightened, the other, a bitter, hateful witch who ruled this plush little roost with an iron hand.

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

“Get up to your room! Now!” Lucretia yelled.

“Please,” Julita pleaded.

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

To hell with the witch, Shadoe thought. If they wanted to see each other, she wasn’t going to stop it. And then he reminded himself of what she said about him walking on thin ice. He could almost hear the cracking of that ice right then.

* * * *

Later that night, Shadoe heard a gentle tapping on his door. When he opened it, he saw Julita standing there, her eyes darting around the corridor as if afraid Lucretia would see her. Reaching out, he quickly pulled her in, then stuck his head out and looked around. When he came back in, she grabbed him, burying her face in his chest.

“It’s okay,” he said. “You’re safe. No one saw you.”

“I w-was afraid you wouldn’t be here.”

“Come on, let’s get this off,” he said, and she automatically recoiled at his touch. “What’s the matter?” When she didn’t answer, he said, “Julita, I know what’s under the mask.”

She was still silent.

“Okay, you take it off whenever you feel comfortable.” His eyes angled toward her as he continued. “But keep in mind that I can’t kiss you through it.”

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

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

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

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

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

"Not yet. I've got a surprise for you," she said gleefully.

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

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

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

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

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

Throwing the lipstick down, she ran to the bed, jumped up on it, and lay down. It was all Shadoe could do to keep standing. "Julita, what the hell are you doing?" he asked, looking at the little eighteen-year-old nymph offering herself to him.

"Can I stay here tonight?" she whispered. "I don't take up much room."

"And what if Lucretia comes looking for you?"

She smiled at him like a cute little tart that knew she had him wrapped around her little finger. "You'll hide me."

"Julita—"

"I have a better idea," she said looking at him with her soft, and sensuous bedroom eyes that sparkled beneath dark, sooty lashes that fanned her cheeks, "Hide me in your suitcase and take me away with you."

"Julita, we've talked about this—"

She slowly lifted her lids when he sat down on the side of the bed. As she reached out and stroked his chest, she said, "You haven't kissed me."

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

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

"But I'll get lipstick all over me."

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

When he pulled back, he reached up and touched the bloody smear she'd left on his face. "That was naughty," he said, reaching down and smearing her lipstick all over her face.

The two of them laughed and fought playfully, their faces covered with the reddest lipstick money could buy. But slowly the mischief turned to passion when Shadoe got a whiff of the fragrant smell of the lipstick that covered almost half her face. He playfully pretended he was going to eat her, making her laugh as he licked her hungrily. While they rolled around on his bed, a trail of Kiss's Red Fatale became smeared along her neck, her breasts, and even on her ears. He finally covered her lips with his, and his tongue slipped inside her sweet mouth and danced a carnal dance of desire.

She groaned at the waves of pleasure that passed through her. "Oh, God, Shadoe, do me again," she whispered. "Like you did the other night."

Her words jolted him. He knew she didn't know what she was saying, and knew if he let this damnable attraction between them go on, it would prove perilous. He could feel his passion rising as his hand stroked her silky flesh—flesh so very willing to be ravaged. Like a slithering snake, his hand moved beneath her dress to skim her hips and thighs, searing her flesh with his scorching touch until he found her pussy and stroked it lovingly.

She gasped and spread her legs, her body language begging him to take her.

His fingers moved over her, tearing at her panties until he removed them. As his fingers opened her up, he could feel the slightest dampness and knew she was ready to receive him. She was soft and yielding and trembling with desire. Like a wanton teenager, she pressed herself against him, her pussy opening slightly, tempting him to enter her—tempting him to throw all his good intentions aside while he ravaged this soft, young body.

"Do it now," she begged. "Hurry, Shadoe. I'll die if you don't."

He knew he should refuse to take her innocence again and send her back to her room, but try as he might, with her writhing beneath him, it was more than he could bear. While cursing himself, he frantically unzipped his trousers to allow his anxious cock to spring forward. He quickly took it in his hands and pressed the tip against her pussy. He felt dizzy with desire and released a moan as he felt her cunt surround him like a tight-fitting glove. She was hot, and her woman's elixir bathed his cock lavishly. As she pulsed, it was almost like fingers handling him, or the tongue of a seasoned whore licking and sucking his cock, bringing it such pleasure he felt he was about to burst.

Suddenly, with a moan and a guilty conscience, he made a wild thrust that went deeper and even deeper into her cunt, and began a carnal ride to blissful completion. He felt his desire spiraling upward, deeper into her raging wanton fire that leapt freely, the heat increasing, and getting hotter as his desire sought eruption.

While he kissed Julita's soft neck and her breasts, he felt her writhing beneath him, clinging to him and circling his waist with her legs, drawing them upward higher and higher. Their shared passion possessed him. He closed his eyes, enjoying the soft young flesh beneath him, his breath coming hard and fast. His hands grasped Julita's firm little butt, pulling her upward to meet his thrusts that went in and out of her succulent pussy.

"Oh, God, Shadoe, you make me feel good."

While weak with exhaustion, Shadoe became concerned, and with bated breath he said, "Julita, you haven't told anyone about us, have you?"

"Of course not, silly," she said as she traced his lips with her finger. "I wish I could, though. Fucking with you is the most wonderful thing in the world."

Later, Shadoe was in the shower looking in the mirror at his red face. The lipstick reminded him of blood and the mystery of Scarlet Bay Inn left unsolved. He knew that his affair with Julita couldn't be good. Thinking of where it might lead him, the glowing lipstick seemed to taunt him.

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

Chapter Nine

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

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

“You’ve also slept the morning away,” Lucretia yelled, intruding on her thoughts. “Why? Were you up late, Julita? What kept you up, you little whore? You disobeyed me,” she hissed. “You know what happens when you disobey, don’t you Julita?”

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

“Come back here, you little tramp!” Lucretia yelled.

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

Remembering last night, she felt warm inside. He was so handsome, and his kisses sent her into a world she had only just discovered. He brought feelings out of her that she never knew existed. The warm melting desire she felt deep inside her was something new. She loved his cock, and the way it

made her feel when he pushed it deep inside her. It stirred up a raging fire, and swept her into it. It was a place she yearned to be. A place of utter bliss. Oh, God, even now she wanted to feel it again, experience it. But not with just anyone, only with him. She'd never been so close to someone so handsome. She'd never known anyone like him in her life. A lot of people came to the inn, but never anyone like him. His hair and skin was dark, his green eyes a mixture of good and bad. Danger and excitement radiated from him. Every move he made was one of determination. From the first moment she saw him, strange things happened inside her. And when he touched her, she melted. Again the dread of his leaving entered her, and she knew if he did she'd never see him again.

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

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

But something wouldn't let her.

Something deep inside.

She'd been taught all her life to cower down to Lucretia, but she was slowly becoming tired of the whippings, and the insane way Lucretia made her play the game. She could still hear Lucretia crooning to her as if she were a baby. Putting her hair up in dog ears, and making her fall asleep in her arms. Julita was tired of it. She wanted to be a normal eighteen-year-old. She was too old to be sitting in Lucretia's lap and being rocked. A deep sense of shame filled her. No one knew about that—no one but her and

Lucretia. She agonized, knowing if something didn't happen there would be nothing in her future but more of the same. Where would it end? How would it end? She didn't know how to make it go away.

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

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

Just as she was getting up to leave, she turned and saw a silver tray lying with some other dishes on a busboy's cart. It was so shiny it looked like a mirror. She reached for it, and gently lifted it to admire its beauty when something appeared. Suddenly her hands began to shake, and she dropped it with a clatter.

She saw her face!

Her hand quickly flew up and felt around on her face, but there was nothing there. Had she imagined the horrible zigzag of purple scars? The hideous puckering? She felt like screaming and turned to run through the dining room, through the foyer, and up the stairs. When she got to her room she burst in and ran to her bed and buried her face in the bedclothes. After only moments she began looking around for something, and then remembered—she had left her mask in the dining room.

* * * *

Shadoe tried to sleep, but he had too much on his mind, so he jumped in and out of the shower in record time. Now, while wrapped in a towel, he sat down on the edge of the bed and put in a call to his captain. "Hey, Captain, what's happening up there? Can't solve a crime without me, right?"

"In your dreams, cowboy."

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

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

“Well, don’t get too used to it. I’ll be back, you know.”

“When the hell are you coming back? If something did break loose we’d be short handed.”

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

“Insults, yet. So, where are you?”

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

“Got somethin’ hot goin’ on, huh? Yeah, sure. Nothin’ happenin’ here anyway. At least nothin’ we can’t handle.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, yeah. Headless Horseman territory.”

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

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

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

Rubbing his stomach and frowning, he felt a few hunger pains clawing at his insides, dropped the towel, and quickly got dressed. He glanced at himself in the mirror. Turning his head, he flipped his earring, which was his habit, then smoothed his hair. Just before walking out, he tugged on his buckskin vest edged with fringe, dusted his boots off, and decided that nothing could keep him from getting something to eat.

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

"The dining room is closed, sir. Sorry."

Shadoe looked down at his watch. "It's after eight now. Aren't you open from eight to ten?"

"Yes sir, but it's Daylight Savings Time now. You probably just forgot to set your watch back."

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

"You may order Room Service any time, sir."

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

The maitre d' stepped away from Shadoe and headed toward the kitchen. Shadoe was just about to turn to leave when something caught his eye. He stared at it intently, but couldn't tell what it was, so he walked over and picked it up.

"My God, it's Julita's mask," he mumbled. A sharp stab of fear speared through him. Had something happened to her? He looked down at the mask, knowing how important it was to her. To get it off her was like pulling a stubborn tooth. She would never leave it behind, at least not if she could help it. And that's what worried him.

His eyes darted around quickly, and then he stuffed it into his pocket and headed up the stairs. When he reached the second landing, his eyes fell on a set of winding steps that he'd never noticed before. They were draped in shadow and looked very unpretentious, almost as if they were hiding.

He'd seen Julita heading toward them any number of times. His eyes trailed up into the darkness, but could see nothing until he walked over and looked up into a tower the steps led into. Without thinking he began climbing. His murky shadow climbed with him, step by step, until finally at the top he found a door. It was set in a portion of recessed wall and a shadow covered it. The door showed patches of ashen wood under peeling paint.

It has to be the attic, he thought. One of the places Lucretia had warned him to stay away from.

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

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

It was Julita! He looked at her as if he'd never seen her before. She was dressed in brief, baby doll pajamas and lifted herself to her knees, holding on to the sides of the bed. Her breasts were unbound and jutting. The baby doll, ruffled and short, slid off her shoulders, exposing almost all of her breasts. Ribbons tied each side of her hair, pulled up in dog ears.

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

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

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

"Julita, don't be scared. I'll give it back, but first I need some questions answered."

“What questions? Why are you here? You’ll get into trouble. We both will,” she whispered, frightened.

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

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

“How do I know you’re not just some little seductress who makes money for the inn on the side? You’ve been very friendly to me, offering yourself. How many men have you lured into your little web?”

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

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

“No!” Julita sobbed.

“Why not?” Shadoe yelled. The thought of Julita being a whore tore at his insides. Tears swelled in his eyes, and almost spilled over, threatening to course down his cheeks. “The big hotels do it all over, why not this remote little inn? At least they’re honest about it. Their girls are professionals. They don’t have some little whore running around the halls driving the men crazy. You haven’t asked for money, so I assume I’ll see an extra charge on my bill when I leave. Correct?”

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

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

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

He stared at her for a moment. To Shadoe the tears looked real. It confused him. He didn’t know what to believe, and he couldn’t think because of the heat that burned inside him. He thought of their times

together, when he thought Julita's passion was real. What a colossal fool he'd been. She played the innocent so well. God help him, even knowing what she was, he was still tempted to forget it all and take her away with him.

Slowly she crawled out of the bed and came over to him. He looked down at her bouncing breasts and couldn't think of anything but the aching desire he felt for her. All at once he caught her in his arms and kissed her, his mouth ravishing her face, her neck, then burying his head in the valley between her breasts. He no longer cared what game she played. Maybe he was the fly caught in her web, or maybe she told the truth and she truly was a victim in this mad, insane tale she was telling him.

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

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

With nothing on his mind but having her, Shadoe laid her down on the child's bed and looked deep into her lovely violet eyes. There he saw the most blatant invitation he'd ever seen. He had to touch her, so he lifted his hands, stroked her face tenderly, and then moved downward along her firm flesh until he touched her pussy and handled it hungrily. He felt dizzy. Was it a spell that made him fall into hell with Satan's own whore? At that moment he didn't care. His lips moved downward along her satin-like body, his soft kisses and his tongue licking until he at last reached her naked pussy. He began kissing her, his tongue dancing to a tune he'd never heard before as he teased her wickedly and then pushed his tongue forward and found her dripping clit.

"Oh, God," he whispered. "What are you Julita? You must be a witch who has cast a spell on me, a siren whose song I cannot resist." As his tongue continued to delve into the softness of her warm, delicious cunt, he heard her gasp. He looked up at her, at the lovely face lost in the passion of the moment, and then began to eat her again. He lovingly massaged her clit, his tongue reaching into the dark tunnel of her soul, and with each and every

movement he made she gasped a little louder, her hips pushing wantonly against him. Finally, she grabbed his head and pushed his tongue farther and farther inside her until he felt her shatter. She pulsed and moaned over and over again until she reached for Shadoe and pulled him over her.

“Fuck me, Shadoe. I have to feel your cock inside me or I’ll die.”

It was an invitation Shadoe couldn’t refuse, not if his very life depended on it, even though he knew that any moment Lucretia might come knocking on the door. He didn’t even try to think up all the reasons he shouldn’t do it, but reached down to his already-hardened cock and unzipped his jeans in a frenzy. Grabbing it, he handled it roughly as he hurriedly pulled it out and immediately pressed it inside her.

Julita responded with a wild, uninhibited craving, the feeling compelling her to move her hips forward and back while she hungrily sought that perfect place that would give her what she ultimately wanted. With each and every plunge, she could feel him growing harder and longer, filling her to capacity. His hot breath and his hard body lifted her to new heights, making her desire so potent, she felt her satisfaction already on the cusp and cried out in delight. When she felt him at last spew into her, her wildly pulsing cunt massaged his cock over and over again with wild, wanton pulses of pleasure.

Shadoe had never felt anything quite like this, and all it took was a trip into hell with this beautiful young woman who slept in a baby bed.

“I’m sorry you found out about this,” she whispered.

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

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

“Come on, Julita, tell me the truth. It’ll be all right. I just want to know.”

“I told you the truth. Why can’t you believe that?”

Taking a deep breath, he turned away from her and rose from the bed and straightened his clothes. He had no choice but believe her until he had proof she’d lied. And then she dropped a bombshell.

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

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

“Away from the beatings, the...” She looked around. “Away from this room! I want to live like a normal person.”

Whoa. This is a whole different ball game.

“I want to wear lipstick,” she said, “Pretty dresses.” She looked down at her feet. “Shoes.”

Things were happening too fast for Shadoe. Sure, he might take home some souvenirs, but a whole girl? He gazed down at her violet eyes and still saw innocence there. God help him, how could he leave her behind? Especially if everything she said was true. There was no way he could casually get in his car and go knowing Julita was here still in her misery—still a victim. He reached up and raked his fingers through his hair. Was he being a responsible cop, or was he being led around by the soft, warm, inviting body of a beautiful woman? How would this thing end? Around every corner he found something new. And now even Julita wasn’t who she appeared to be—or was she?

Chapter Ten

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

Then the voices began.

He leaned forward to listen. He couldn't understand what was being said, but his eyes quickened with concern when he discovered it was a man's voice. Something wasn't right. Why would a man's voice be coming from the same place where the music box was playing? The only voices he'd heard coming from that room were Lucretia's. He'd heard crying, something that sounded like razor straps cutting into someone's flesh, but never a man's voice or one he could identify as Julita's. After fifteen years of not hearing or seeing her, he was pretty much convinced that she was dead. Even those times when he heard sobs or crying, it was in his dreams, the sounds echoing all around him as if they were coming from inside a grave.

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

But this was different.

He instinctively knew that this man, whoever he might be, was trespassing in areas of the inn he wasn't allowed. And if that were true, then he must be looking for something. Evidence? Evidence of what? Garret thought of all the midnight diggings he'd heard just beyond these walls. If she was doing what he thought she was, then there must be any number of missing persons out there. People who had checked into the inn and then disappeared. With all the legends and mysterious goings-on connected with the inn, it had most certainly gained a tarnished reputation, but no one had ever run an investigation into the strange happenings here. New hope surged

within him. At last maybe Lucretia was going to pay for her sins. The idea was intriguing enough to keep him listening.

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

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

* * * *

Shadoe’s head jerked toward the ceiling. “What was that?” He looked at Julita. “Did you hear something?”

“No,” she said timidly.

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

“Can you hear me?” Garret yelled. “I’m in the basement!”

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

“Hello! My name is Garret Van Dare, and I’m trapped in the basement!”

Shadoe turned to Julita. “Did you hear that? Did he say he was trapped in the basement?”

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

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

“I’ve never been in the basement. I-I don’t know.”

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

“Lucretia’s the only one that’s been down there,” she said timidly.

“All right, dammit, keep your secret, I don’t know what the hell is going on in this place, but believe me, I’m going to find out.”

"Find out what," she whispered, her face showing confusion. "I don't know what you mean."

"Are you in on it?" he asked, his hungry eyes looking her voluptuous body up and down. "My God, I hope not." He turned to leave the room, then noticed the mask on the floor. He reached down and tossed it to her, but it landed on the floor in front of her bare feet. "There's your mask," he said, his heart hurting for the innocence he thought was lost "By the way, thanks for the fuck. Sorry I have to leave, but I've got other things to do."

Julita looked down at the mask on the floor, crouched down, picked it up, and clutched it to her breast as she stared sadly at the door he had slammed through. Sure, she still wanted to use him to get her out of there, but now there was more to it than that. Now she loved him. How strange that the day she realized that fact was the very day she lost him.

* * * *

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

That's when he would make his move.

* * * *

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

His eyes closed, his thoughts getting lost in his weakened condition. It wouldn't be long now. One way or the other, if someone didn't find him soon, Lucretia would be burying him along with her other victims on the north side of the inn. The yard must be full of foliage or unique-looking statues she used to top graves. On windy nights he could hear her digging and imagined what her wild-eyed scrawny figure must look like in the dark. Even the rain didn't stop her. If someone had to be buried, she took care of it.

Someday it would be him.

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

* * * *

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

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

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

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

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

"Is this Mr. Madison?" she asked.

"Yes."

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

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

“Well, Mr. Madison, that’s because there were so few pictures on the roll.”

“Do you know if they came out all right?”

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

“Could you check for me?”

“Certainly,” she said.

Shadoe could hear paper rattling.

“Let me see now,” she said, shuffling from one to the other. “Yes, they seem quite clear. Pictures of some old house or church in a wooded area—”

“Yes!” he said, almost shouting. So he wasn’t crazy after all. He had proof.

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

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

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

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

* * * *

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

While watching the hands of the clock move painfully slow, the time finally came, and Shadoe grabbed a flashlight and crept out of his room. He took his time, creeping smoothly along, watching for movement other than his own. He hesitated with every step he took, not wanting to run into the same thing he had the other night. When he finally reached the stairway, he crept down, then took a sharp turn and hid himself behind the tall lattice that obscured the door.

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

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

Oh, God, how am I going to get past that?

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

When he finally paused in front of the door, he shuddered, realizing that he was surrounded by the deepest darkness he'd ever known. Feeling like he was in the center of the earth instead of the belly of an ancient old inn, he lowered his hand and carefully turned the knob, wondering what he would find beyond. Would it be another door? Another chamber? The maze in the

belly of this old mansion was intriguing but terrifying. Holding the knob in his hand, he turned it, hearing the old hinges squeak with pain as he pushed it open. Slowly the picture of a flickering light, a bed, and four walls of broken bricks and mortar came into view. Even though the dim light didn't give off much illumination, Shadoe could see someone lying in the bed. As he crept closer, he gasped at the hollow, skeletal face and body that lay almost undetected among a tangle of sheets and blankets.

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

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

Shadoe continued to sweep the light around, and found the ventilator system within its bright circle. Looking back down at the old man, Shadoe's eyes searched his face once more, and was surprised that the old cuss even had the strength to yell. He figured that he must be stronger than he looked. It pleased Shadoe to believe that. It also pleased him to believe that the old man had refused to die, that he had the strength of character to go on. He also knew he was probably a lot younger than he looked. His hair had receded a little but was still thick and curly. It hung below his collar and was uneven, as if the man had chopped it himself. Not completely white, but getting there. His face was not only lined with age, but had the suffering and anguish of many years of torment tattooed upon him. Shadoe looked closely at the old face. Despite all his wear and tear, the old man had an elegance about him that told Shadoe he had been someone at one time. Still looking

down at the near-corpse on the bed, Shadoe knew he had found one more victim of the evil-eyed Ms. Van Dare.

He saw a chair over in a corner, moved toward it, and sat down while thinking about what to do. The sane thing would be to get the old man out of here and to a hospital as quickly as possible, but he needed to talk to him first. If the old man was up to it he would be happy to immediately drop a net over the whole operation, which would mean the inn would be shut down and Lucretia would have to come up with some answers.

Now that Shadoe had found him, he worried about him. What if the old man wasn't as strong as he thought? The idea chilled him. With that thought in mind he quickly rose from his chair and walked over to him. He put a subtle, gentle finger on the old man's pulse and his heart soared. It was strong, very strong. Shadoe looked down at him smiling. He wasn't going to die. Shadoe had an idea the old man was stubborn enough to hold on for years to come.

* * * *

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

He'd been wheeling around in his chair for a bit, when he came to a complete halt, his eyes falling on the young man asleep in the chair. He hadn't had time to react when he heard someone outside the door. He knew it was Lucretia with his breakfast.

My God, she'll see him!

He just had time enough to quickly grab a sheet and throw it over Shadoe when Lucretia entered. The old man quickly wheeled away, not wanting to draw attention to it. He slowly turned his chair around and watched her as she lowered his tray on the mobile table, then wheeled it over to him.

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

“Is this what you call food?”

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

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

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

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

“That does it, old man. I’m not going to stand around and listen to your mouth one more minute. Hell will freeze over before you—” Her words stopped suddenly when she saw his sheet draped over the chair. She turned to Garret, her shrill voice demanding an explanation. “What is your sheet doing draped over the chair?”

“I had a wet dream, and—”

“Oh, I see. You were trying to dry it out before I saw it, right?” She leered down at him. “And you make fun of me! Well, dream on you old bastard because your fucking days are over.” She swept the sheet up, leaving Shadoe exposed, but simply laid the sheet over her arm and stalked out the door.

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

“Welcome,” Garret said. “What the hell kept you?”

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

“My God, she expected you to eat that?”

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

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

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

“She’s been taking care of you for fifteen years?”

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

Shadow was afraid to ask.

“I sit here day in and day out, in the dark, fantasizing about how to kill her.” He sat back, his discerning eyes watching for Shadoe’s reaction. Then with a dark, scowling smile, he said, “It’s better than sex. Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if I had an orgasm.”

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

Garret lifted the cigarette to his mouth and drew the smoke into his lungs. “Believe me, if the day ever comes that I do get to strangle that bitch, it’ll be the best day I ever lived. Maybe I’ll let you watch.”

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

“I’m Garret Van Dare.”

A slow smile spread across Shadoe’s face. “No, you’re not just Garret Van Dare, you’re *The* Garret Van Dare.”

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

“You know for a long time I...hell, everyone outside this inn thought you were dead.”

“I am...so to speak. I just haven’t had the sense to lie down yet.”

“I was kind of young and of out of touch when it happened, so I’m a little vague about the year, but I do remember that it caused a big splash in the news. They were saying all kinds of things. You’d lost your mind and

wandered off somewhere. You were abducted by aliens. One religious nut said you'd been raptured."

Garret's usual scowl twisted into a smile. "That's the world for you."

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

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

"The reason I ask is, normally I'd have you whisked off to the hospital immediately, but I could use your help if you're up to it. Just so you know, I intend to see that Lucretia Van Dare gets all that's coming to her."

Garret's lips stretched into a demon-like smile. "It's funny. I've been wanting out of this basement for fifteen years, but now, hearing you say those words, you couldn't blast me out of here with a cannon."

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

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

"Oh, God," Shadoe jumped up, eager to please the old man, "I'm sorry. What do you want? Anything special?"

"I'll eat anything that doesn't eat me first. Tell you what, a sandwich would be great. A roast beef sandwich. God, I haven't had roast beef in ages." Then the old man frowned. "Hell, you'd never be able to get into the kitchen now, it's—"

"Don't need to. I can order you something from Room Service and bring it down." He looked at the old man. "Is there another way down here other than the door under the stairs?"

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

Shadoe rushed over and opened it. He saw a rope and a flat wooden board. "My God, this thing is older than my grandmother." He stuck his

head in and looked upward. “Where does it lead?” He looked at the old man and smiled sheepishly. “Stupid question. The kitchen, right?”

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

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

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

Shadoe turned and looked toward the door. “Well, it’s for sure I can’t go that way. That witch is always at the front desk.”

Garret looked at his watch. “Just about now breakfast is being served in the dining room. Only the chef and his assistant will be in the kitchen, and he’ll have his back to you. It’s a chance in a million, but you may be able to make it.”

Shadoe looked inside the hole, then down at himself. “I don’t know, is it big enough?” He looked over at Garret. “What do you think? I’m pretty big, I don’t know if I would ever get my legs curled up in there.”

“I don’t know, but it’s either that, or taking your chances on the stairs.”

“Hell, I’ll try anything once.” He pulled a rickety wooden crate over and climbed up on it. Using the rope inside as his leverage, he pulled himself up and managed to just barely fit himself inside.

“Got it?” the old man asked, hopefully.

“I think so.” He shifted a little. “I don’t think I could manage this if it weren’t so old. If they still have these things around today, they’re probably not quite so roomy. You know how the world is,” he said, smiling from within the hole. “Smaller, sleeker, more compact.”

“Good luck,” Garret said.

Shadoe saluted. “Be back as quick as I can.”

* * * *

The shadows of early morning fell across Garret’s face while he watched Shadoe pull himself up into the narrow shaft of the dumbwaiter. Knowing he was at last rescued, his first thoughts didn’t anticipate seeing the sun, feeling cool breezes, or enjoying soft raindrops. His first thoughts went to Lucretia, his oldest daughter.

Where would be a good place to bury her?

Chapter Eleven

Lucretia stood at the front desk staring at the screen of lattice that stood in front of the door leading down into the basement. Something was wrong. It looked as if the screen had been moved. Who could have been back there? None of the guests would have reason to go back there. In fact, guests and employees alike had become completely indifferent to the little touches of decoration that enhanced the beauty of the foyer. It could be no one but the cleaning crew. They must have moved the screen when they cleaned the floor and simply forgot to put it back. But still, she had to be sure. She looked down at the phone, picked up the receiver and buzzed the kitchen. "Send Hank to the front desk."

In only a matter of seconds Lucretia looked up and saw the young man hurrying in from the dining room.

"Have you cleaned the foyer today?"

"Not me, but I put one of our new people on it," he said, looking around as if she'd found dirt somewhere.

"The lattice screen. What about that?"

He looked confused as he looked around. "Which one? I told him to dust between the squares and—"

"That one," she said, pointing.

The young man hurried over and stroked the white wood carefully, seeing no dirt. "Yeah, it's clean."

"That's not what I mean. It's been moved. I told you not to move it...never to move it."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Van Dare. He's new, he didn't know—"

Lucretia breathed a sigh of relief. "It's all right. Just make sure you tell him. If I find it moved again, I'll fire you both."

"Yes ma'am," he said as he backed away, "I'll be sure and tell him." Turning quickly, he rushed back to the kitchen and began dicing some

vegetables. While his eyes darted around the room he whispered out the side of his mouth to another worker. "You won't believe what I just saw."

"Yeah?" she said. "What?"

"The old witch. She just turned into a human being."

"You're nuts," the girl said, then walked away and opened the refrigerator.

"Hey, I ain't lyin'!" he said, following her. "This time she just threatened to fire Mark and me, not cut us up in little pieces."

"Well, don't count on it lasting too long," she said, grabbing something, then going back to the counter. "Crazy people have mood swings, you know. She must've had a good dose of blood for breakfast."

He snickered, then said, "Yeah." When he heard the board buzz and light up, he reached over and pressed the room number and mumbled, "Room Service." He nodded as if the party on the other end could see him. "Yes, sir, right away, sir." He looked over at the chef. "Room twenty-four wants a picnic basket packed. Roast beef sandwiches, chicken, potato salad, the works."

"Comin' up!" the chef called out. Then with a pair of kitchen knives in each hand he struck the glittering blades together like the professional he was and began slicing, dicing, and calling out orders over his shoulder. Within minutes a basket was packed, and on its way to room twenty-four.

* * * *

Shadoe heard the knock and turned quickly to answer the door. "Hey, great!" He dug in his pocket for a tip, then extended the bills. "Good service, thanks a lot."

"Kind of breezy out there," the smiling young man said, as he took the money. "Not much of a day for a picnic."

Shadoe was about to say something, but the young man interrupted. "Hey, if you're interested, I know a spot. Down on the beach on the other side of the bones. It's a little cave-like thing. Good place to take a girl." He winked. "Special girl, ya know? You'll be out of the wind at least."

Shadoe smiled. "Well, thanks. By the way, what's your name?"

"Hank, Hank Swanson."

"Thanks, Hank, I might just check it out."

“Can’t go wrong,” he said, backing up. He lifted his hand with the money in it and said, “Hey, thanks.”

“You bet,” Shadoe replied, watching as Hank headed for the back stairs. When he stepped back into his suite, he looked down at the large basket and wondered how he was going to get it downstairs.

Shadoe pictured the basement in his mind and knew there had to be another way to get down there. He knew houses, even those as big as this one. It would be against some code if there wasn’t another way out of that basement. He knew there had to be windows, high maybe, and difficult to get to, but they had to be there. That was one of the things he noticed about the section of basement where the old man was. No windows. As much as he hated to admit it, that was smart of Lucretia. No windows meant no one could look in and see what resembled a poor man’s bedroom. The windows probably started on the other side of the arched door, then extended all around the mansion. He felt a chill. As big as this mansion was, there must be a maze down there that any vampire in town would feel at home in. The door could be anywhere. He knew it wasn’t in the part of the basement where the old man was, so he hoped it was on the other side where the furniture, boxes, and wine racks were. Just then a bright idea came to him and he quickly pulled the door back open and yelled down the hall. “Hank!”

Hearing his name, Hank stopped and turned around. “Yes, sir!” he said with a big smile as he ran down the dimly lit hall to Shadoe’s room.

“Hank,” Shadoe said, thoughtfully, “I’m doing an article about the inn, and—”

The boy smiled widely. “No foolin’?”

“I’d pay for any information you could give me about the place. I’ve already taken some photographs, and now I need to fill in the story with some information.”

“You can ask me anything. I know about this old place. Been workin’ here since I was sixteen. Part-time at first till I finish school.”

“What about college?”

Hank shrugged. “I don’t know. You don’t have to go to college to be a chef, do you?”

“A chef, huh?”

Hank smiled. “Yeah, Otto’s teaching me all he knows. Then when I get the money, I’ll shoot on up to Savannah to their cooking school there.” He

smiled, looking excited. "I'll make a little money with what I learn there, then shoot on over to Paris. I hear they have some terrific cooking schools. I should learn a lot. Man, I can hardly wait. Hope to own my own restaurant someday."

"Well, that's great," Shadoe said. "A French chef. Sounds good. I wish you luck."

"Thanks," Hank said, and then his face turned inquisitive. "You had a question. Something I can help you with?"

Shadoe hesitated, a frown appearing on his face. "Hank, the basement...how do you get down there? I mean, there must be more than one way."

"Why would you wanna go down there?"

"Oh, don't get me wrong. I don't want to go down there, I just want to make sure there is more than one entrance into it. If there's not, it could be a fire hazard, you know."

Hank smiled mischievously. "Lookin' for ways to report the old bat, huh? Well, don't bother. There's a set of concrete steps behind a door under the stairway that she doesn't think we know about. Then there's a door on the north side of the inn. Leads right in there."

Yes! Shadoe thought. He was right. He dug into his pocket and pulled out a bill. "Thanks, Hank."

The boy looked down at the ten spot and his eyes widened. "Hey, thanks." He pushed it down into his jeans pocket. "Hey, anything else you wanna know, just ask. Like I said, I been here a long time, and I know where the bodies are buried."

The joking words made a chill creep along Shadoe's spine. The boy apparently didn't know how close he had come to the truth, but Shadoe managed a responsive smile to his words and waved as he walked away.

Just as he'd suspected, Shadoe thought while quickly grabbing the basket and heading toward the door. He looked out to make sure no one was around, then caught himself.

Jeez, what the hell am I being so careful about? I have a perfect right to go on a picnic if I want. Been sneakin' around too long, I guess. Comes kind of natural.

He wondered why the old man hadn't told him about the door. Apparently he didn't know, Shadoe thought as he walked. Otherwise he might have managed some way to get out.

Maybe he was wheelchair-bound, but he had the guts of a warrior, which filled Shadoe with respect when he thought of him. After strolling down the steps, he boldly walked to the front door and reached for the knob.

"A picnic? Today?" Lucretia called out. "A bit cool, don't you think?"

"No, not at all. I like brisk weather. Besides, a very lovely weather girl said it would warm up later. I thought I'd take a walk in the woods. You know, make a day of it. Still looking for that waterfall." He lifted his camera as it swung from around his neck.

The moment he said it, her smile fell. "Yes, the waterfall."

Shadoe knew what she was thinking and turned to duck out before she decided to say anything else. Taking a quick glance at the lattice screen that hid the alcove, he hesitated, noticing that someone had moved it a little to the right to cover the door. He cut his eyes toward her and wondered. Apparently she wasn't suspicious.

She looked up and saw him lingering in the doorway. "Something else?"

"No. Just wondering if I'd forgotten anything."

"It's getting a little chilly, do you mind closing the door?"

"Oh, sure," he said. "Well, later."

She ignored him as if he'd said nothing, quickly turning to the phone when it rang.

He closed the door softly, then walked as if he were heading for the woods until he was on the other side of the inn. When he turned he didn't see the door Hank had mentioned and felt a flash of worry.

It must be in the back, he thought, then skirted around the cars, SUVs, trucks, even motorcycles until he saw the welcomed sight of some steps leading down. It seemed very unobtrusive. Six steps were built next to the house with an iron rail around them, and the top of the door had four small panes that had been painted over.

Shadoe stopped and looked around, but didn't see anyone. His eyes narrowed on the cars in the parking area, one by one. He'd been on a lot of stakeouts where he waited in cars all night and part of the day. Someone could hide out in a car and never be detected, especially at night. Most people didn't think about it, only cops and criminals. He had been trained to

look in car windows, and his eyes just naturally sought out anyone that might be sitting in one, hiding or not. The day was bright and breezy, and even though his eyes raked across the vehicles closely, he could tell at a glance that no one was around.

Feeling completely alone, he approached the stairs and began to descend. He kept a lookout while trying to open the door, but it wouldn't budge. It was locked.

"Damn!" he muttered. He should have thought about a key before leaving the inn. Could it have been thrown in some odds and ends drawer and forgotten or could it be as simple as finding it under something? He looked around on the ground, then felt along the door frame above the door but found nothing. He stood wondering if he should break in. He examined the lock closely, finding it rusty and antiquated, and he was afraid if he broke in he might damage the lock. He decided that he would make a brief search first, but if he couldn't find it, then he would have to force it open. He pushed the picnic basket back in a shadowed corner and went up the steps, thankful that the weather was cool and the sun wasn't directly overhead.

Chapter Twelve

As soon as Shadoe opened the door of the inn, his eyes fell on Lucretia. He was disappointed to see her. He hoped he'd catch her away from the desk, but there she was, big as life, as usual, and even uglier than he remembered.

Lucretia looked up, surprised to see Shadoe. "Picnic over already?" "Not quite," he said. "I just thought of something I need to do." He walked to the desk hesitantly, his mind racing as he spied the key rack behind her. His eyes followed the long board, until he came to the very end where a hook with two keys dangled. One well used, the other old and rusty. A word was inscribed above them—*basement*.

"Something I can help you with?" she asked, bringing both his thoughts and his eyes back to her.

"You know the church I told you about?" he said, almost shyly.

"Yes," she said, while working.

"You were right. It wasn't there when I went back." He laughed, trying to act embarrassed.

She smiled, coming under his spell. "I knew it wouldn't be. After all, I've lived here all my life, Mr. Madison. You should learn to listen to people."

"You're right, of course. I guess I must have been dreaming." How the hell was he going to get rid of her? Finally he said, "I came back to get a bottle of wine. Can't have a picnic without a bottle of wine."

"The kitchen is closed, you'll have to order it from Room Service."

"Yes, I know," he said, watching her closely. "You know, I hate to go all the way back up to my room. Could you do it for me since I'll be taking it with me?"

"I suppose," she replied, laying her pen down and picking up the phone. "Any preferences?" she asked, angling her eyes up at him. "White, red?"

“House wine will be fine...red if you have it,” he said, thinking of the roast beef.

Waiting only a moment, she said, “Paula, bring a bottle of the red house wine to the front desk. Yes, thank you.” After hanging up the phone she reached for something, but couldn’t find it. She lifted papers, folders, then looked toward the door behind her.

“Lose something?”

“Yes, would you excuse me? I lost my glasses. I must have taken them off in the back room and laid them down. I won’t be a minute.”

What a break.

“Take your time. I’ll just step over here and wait for the wine.”

He shuffled backward, but kept his eyes angled on her, ready to jump when she was out of sight. Instead she stopped and looked back at him suspiciously. “I can trust you to leave the register alone, can’t I?”

Shadoe forced a laugh as if she’d made a joke, then lifted his hands. “I won’t touch a thing, promise.”

The minute she was out of view he hurried over to the counter. Just as he was about to reach for the keys, a girl appeared around a corner carrying his wine, followed by Lucretia stepping out of the back room, carrying her glasses.

What now? Shadoe thought. Then an idea came to him. “Say...uh...Paula,” he said, suddenly remembering her name. “Could you bring out two glasses and a corkscrew?”

“Sure.” Paula turned and disappeared around the corner.

He jumped inside, precious time passing while he waited for the girl to appear with the items he requested. When she had, he quickly jumped at her, grabbing them from her hands and putting them on the desk with the wine. Then looking at Lucretia, he cleared his throat self-consciously. With the flair of a fine gentleman, he bowed slightly and said, “Ms. Van Dare, may I escort you to a table?”

She looked up from what she was doing. “What?”

“Please,” he said, indicating toward the dining room. “I’d like to speak with you for a moment. May I?”

She frowned and angled a suspicious look at him. “What are you up to now, Mr. Madison?”

He gave her a flirtatious smile. "I assure you my intentions are honorable."

"Why the dining room? Why can't we talk here?"

He frowned in distaste. "Too informal. For what I have in mind we need a social setting."

Unsure why she humored him, Lucretia slowly came out from behind the desk, watching him as if she didn't trust him.

He gently led her to the dining room, then to a table in the corner, making sure it was private and obstructed her view of the front desk.

He pulled her chair out and she became watchful. As she slowly sat down, she said, "I almost expected you to pull it out from under me."

"Ms. Van Da—" His words stopped abruptly, his face softened, and he flashed her his most charming smile. "Lucretia," he continued, his words a sexy whisper as he took her hand in his. "What a beautiful name."

"Mr. Madison, what—?"

"Shadoe. Please, call me Shadoe."

"Is this some kind of joke?" She looked at him in total disbelief, then narrowed her eyes. "Just what are you up to? This isn't your way of getting an interview out of me is it?"

"As a matter of fact..." Unexpectedly, he stopped his flow of words and looked around. "It seems I've forgotten something." He jumped up as if anxious to get on with romancing the witch and hurried to the counter. He glanced up at the basement keys, turned his head and looked back to make sure she wasn't watching. With a quick hand he grabbed them and slipped them in his pocket. Not wasting a minute, he made one giant swoop and grabbed up the wine, glasses, and corkscrew and hurried back to the table. Placing everything on the table in front of him, he made a big deal of opening the wine, poured two glasses, then sat opposite her and made a little speech. "I'd like to make a toast to you, Lucretia, and to the success you've made of this place." His eyes traveled over the structure, then returned to her and tried to look apologetic. "I know I've given you a hard time, even tried to find something wrong with the inn, but I've been unsuccessful. It really is a four-star establishment, and I just want to say I'm sorry for the way I've acted. From here on in I'm just going to enjoy myself and give the inn a top-notch review. What do you think about that?"

"Well...you didn't have to do all this, I—"

"No, no, I've been a royal pain, I know, and I just wanted to bury the hatchet." Bad choice of words, he thought, remembering what he'd seen in the foyer the other night.

"Yes, you have," she agreed. "But...well, your apology is accepted. Now, I really must get back to the desk."

"But we haven't had that toast yet."

As if to indulge him, she lifted the glass to her lips.

"No, no," he said, "first we clink the glasses." He lifted his glass toward her.

"I thought we already did that."

"No, not yet. I know, let's do it like they do in the movies."

"Whatever you say," Lucretia said, and watched him as he made the toast.

"To this first-rate establishment and its very charming owner," he said, then winked. Somehow it seemed like an intimate gesture, and when their eyes met, he had to force himself not to turn away, sick to his stomach.

All he needed now, he thought, was for this witch to fall in love with him.

When she just sat there staring at him, he said, "The toast has been made so now we clink and drink." When she still didn't move, he said, "Go ahead. You know, the way they do it in the movies."

"Oh...yes," she said, as she moved her glass close to his. Their glasses touched, clinking softly in the hushed atmosphere of the dining room. While watching him sip his wine, she carefully put the rim of the glass against the crimson line of her snakelike lips and opened slightly. She drank one short sip, then put it down. "There," she said, her midnight eyes still holding his captive, "how was that? Okay?"

"Just like Joan Crawford," he said, almost spewing his own wine when he made the comparison. *Mommie Dearest* was a pussycat next to this witch. He looked down at his watch. "Hey, I didn't realize it was so late. I guess I'd better get going." He jumped up and pulled out her chair and helped her around the table.

"Well," she began, "enjoy your picnic."

"Thanks," he said as he slipped through the dining room door, praying that she wouldn't notice that the basement keys were missing.

Again, he hurried toward the path in the woods until he was around the side of the mansion and out of sight. Doubling back, he skirted the cars once more, his cop training still in overdrive as he found himself staring into the dark interior of the car windows. He hurried down the short flight of steps, his basket still waiting for him. He thought of ruined roast beef and gave thanks that the weather was almost cold and that the chilly little shadow had kept the basket as cool as any refrigerator. Drawing the keys out of his pocket quickly, he tried first one, then the other, finally feeling the doorknob give way.

But he was immediately faced with another problem.

Something was jammed tight against the door. He pushed as hard as he could, but it moved only a fraction of an inch. He turned to push with his back, heaving and shoving and breathing heavily as he scowled, strained, and grunted, but the door had only moved a few more inches. He stopped for a moment and looked at the tiny opening, then down at himself. Knowing this was a battle he couldn't lose, he took a deep breath and tried again, this time trying to force his beefy frame through sideways. It took a while, but once he worked his way in between the door and the frame, it gave him leverage. Working slowly with the strength of his body and his arms, he finally managed to push the door open wide enough to get both himself, and the picnic basket through as well. Once he was in, he got busy restacking the boxes in another spot away from the door, giving him a hasty entrance and exit from the basement. Exactly what he needed.

The windows overhead allowed for just enough light to let him see that this side of the basement was filled with broken furniture, boxes, trunks, and old appliances. But at least he was in. He coughed, inhaling dust, and fighting cobwebs as he set the basket aside and began making a pathway for himself to get to the old man. When he'd almost made his way through, he could see him napping in his chair.

But something wasn't right. He was too still.

His breathing...my God, he couldn't tell if the old man was breathing or not. Coming closer, a shot of fear traveled up his spine. Was the old man dead? Rushing over to him he began to shake him. "Garret! Garret!" Oh, God, he wasn't responding! He immediately put two fingers on his pulse and felt only the slightest response. He looked around wildly, wondering what to do, when he spotted the sink. He rushed over to the sink and wet a

ragged old washcloth, then brought it back and began hurriedly stroking it along his face and neck. "Garret," he yelled, "Garret, wake up! You've got to wake up!"

Slowly the old man began moving, his heavy lids fighting to open.

"What the hell is it, Garret? Are you okay?"

"Thank God you're here," he managed to barely rasp out. Then with lids that were still heavy, he tried to pull his shirtsleeve up to show Shadoe his arm. Shadoe reached over and pulled it the rest of the way up. He found a pin prick surrounded by a slight bruising. The old witch had used a hypodermic on him.

"She's trying to kill me," he whispered, his speech slurred. "I'm not dying soon enough for her. She's trying to kill me."

"What did she give you? Do you know?"

"S-sedative, I think. She came down right after you...after you left."

"Hell, she must've given you enough to make an elephant sleep for a year." He pulled at the old man's collar, shaking him. "You've got to fight it off." The old man was limp, hardly any life in him at all. Desperate, Shadoe reached out and grabbed the basket and put it on his lap in front of him.

He pushed it away. "I can't eat...appetite gone."

"You're going to eat, you old bastard. Now sit up and chow down." Shadoe wrestled with him, slapping his cheeks and trying to force his lids open. "Has she done this to you before?"

"No...leave me alone...want to sleep."

Shadoe knew the effects of a sedative. He wouldn't want to do anything but sleep, and his appetite would be gone. She wouldn't give him enough to kill him, just keep him so drugged up that he'd lie down here and eventually starve to death. He reached into the basket and pulled out a roast beef sandwich. Without unwrapping it, he waved it under his nose. "Wake up, I've got food for you." It didn't seem to help, so Shadoe began pleading with him while he continued to wipe him down with the washcloth.

"Garret," he said, his voice almost a whisper. "Don't let that witch win. Eat so you can get enough strength to fight back." He finally grabbed the bottle of wine he had shared with Lucretia. He threw the cork aside and put the rim to his lips when he suddenly stopped. "What the hell am I doing?" He looked at the bottle of wine. "He's full of medication. I could kill him." Suddenly he jumped up, ran to the sink and poured the wine down the drain.

When it was all gone he rinsed the bottle, then held it under the flowing water. Rushing back over, he grabbed Garret and forced the water down the old man's throat. He gurgled, the water overflowing his mouth and dripping down his chin to his hollowed chest. "Where does she keep these drugs, do you know?"

"I don't know," he said, trying to keep his eyes open. "Her room, I suppose."

"Which one is it?" When the old man didn't answer right away, Shadoe shook him. "Garret, stay awake. Which room?"

"Room tw-twenty-nine...near the...attic."

The attic, Shadoe thought, then wondered whether she gave Julita drugs as well. While Shadoe's mind was on Julita, suddenly the wine bottle was grabbed from his hands. "Hey, watch it. Don't drink too much. I wish to hell I'd brought some coffee."

"F-Food" the old man muttered. "Give me some food."

Shadoe dug down into the basket, pulled out the roast beef sandwich he'd waved under his nose earlier, and gave it to him.

The old man grabbed it and began eating.

"Hey!" Shadoe yelled, half laughing. "Take the wrapper off. It'll taste better that way." He reached up and pulled the shredded paper out of the old man's mouth, then off the sandwich and let him go at it.

The old man almost growled with pleasure as he ate.

"You know, you'd better take it easy at first. Too much might make you sick. Your stomach's not used to it."

"Don't worry about me. How about opening up one of those beers?"

"It's not beer, it's juice. We'll get you some beer when the drugs are out of your system. Until then the juice will have to do." Once the old man was taken care of, Shadoe settled back with a chicken leg and watched the old man guzzle down three bottles of apple juice along with cheese, wine, potato salad, and a few pieces of chicken. It did his heart good to see the old man eat, but laughed when all at once Garret fell back and moaned. "Hey, I have no sympathy for you. I told you."

The old man looked at Shadoe and said, "Thanks. I haven't had a full stomach in years. By the way, how'd you get down here?"

Shadoe lunged forward. “Oh, my God, I forgot to tell you. Do you know there’s a door back there?” He pointed past the wall that partitioned off the two sides of the basement.

“Sure, I know about it, but it’s been sealed up, or something.”

“No, it hasn’t been sealed, just locked with a load of boxes and furniture piled against it.”

“Are you saying you got in through that damned door? How’d you do it?”

“I stole the key, then managed to push a few things out of the way. The best part is, I don’t have to use the friggin’ stairs anymore or the dumbwaiter.”

“Do you think you could make a path wide enough for me to get out?”

“I’ve already started. But just outside the door is about six steps. You’d never get up them unless someone helped you.”

“Hey, that’s what you’re here for, right?”

“You got it, pops,” he said and winked.

The old man looked at him, giving him a scowling, but intelligent smile. “You young bastard. I wouldn’t let anyone but you call me that.”

Chapter Thirteen

The two men were just finishing up when suddenly Lucretia's angry voice shattered the silence.

"What's that?" Shadoe said, looking around.

Garret put a thin finger up to his lips. "Shhh," he whispered, then nodded his head in the direction of the ventilator. "It's Lucretia. She's in the attic."

Shadoe inclined himself closer and cocked his head to hear better.

* * * *

"You filthy little whore! He was here, wasn't he? What did he do? Did he touch you?"

"No," Julita lied, her voice trembling with fright. "He brought...he brought my m-mask."

"You mean he saw you without your mask on?" Lucretia shouted, insane fury showing on her face.

"I left it—"

"You ugly little monster," Lucretia snapped, her midnight eyes squinting at her with hate. "You had your mask off outside this room?" Lucretia's voice dropped to a low, threatening tone. "You will never leave this room again, do you hear? You will *diiiiie* in this room." She hissed the hateful word, setting it apart from all the others. "Just like your father in the basement." Her lips thinned, then viciously coiled. "Who knows? Maybe he's dead already."

"What?" Julita's usually timid voice was strong as she mounted to her knees. "You told me my father was dead."

"Did I? A lie, to keep you in your place."

"Then he is down there," she breathed softly.

“Yes, he’s down there, but you’ll never get to see him. He’s weak, starving to death. If the bastard won’t eat what I give him, then let him die! He’s been a pain in my ass long enough.”

* * * *

Julita felt a sweep of anger such as she’d never known blossom inside her. She remembered Shadoe saying he’d heard something. A voice, a weak voice coming up from the basement. She hadn’t been sure at the time, but it was true. He had heard something. It had been her father calling out for help. Tears welled in her eyes. She wanted to jump at the witch and scratch her eyes out, but she knew the danger of moving on Lucretia. Instead she watched every move she made, waiting for an opportunity. Lucretia had been the closest thing to a mother Julita had ever known, and now she found she’d been lying to her. What else had she lied to her about? She reached up and touched her face, not feeling the scars Lucretia had convinced her were there. Suddenly she realized her mind was crisp and clear, not muddled by drugs. She could reason, think things out.

She looked around her room for a mirror. The fear she’d felt was suddenly gone and she wasn’t afraid to see what her face might look like. She wanted to know the truth. Why wouldn’t Lucretia allow mirrors in her room? She couldn’t believe her evil sister would be so kind as to want to spare her the hurt of seeing her ugly face. She knew if there was something horrible to see, Lucretia would quickly push her face into the mirror and gloat on her scars. No. None of it made sense. Maybe that was why Lucretia had stripped her room of mirrors and forced her to wear a mask outside the room. She was afraid Julita would see her face—and know the truth!

Julita remembered the beatings she’d received through the years. When Lucretia wasn’t hitting her she was twisting her limbs, pulling her hair, and knocking her around. Lucretia’s tyranny left Julita beaten down, existing night and day with a fear that to her was a living, breathing thing. An ugly monster she couldn’t see, but could feel everywhere. All the lies had been so deeply ingrained into her that they weren’t easy to put aside now that she was grown.

In all that time the question of looking into a mirror was foreign to her. Lucretia had said no, so she didn’t. She had thought about it a few times, but

would cringe at the prospect, because she knew if she ever saw the face Lucretia described to her, she would never get over it. She felt secure in her mask and tugged on it many times during the day to make sure it still hid her face. Now that she had found out Lucretia had lied about her father, she knew it was possible that she lied about so many other things, even her face.

It had to end.

The lies, the tyranny, the beatings, it all had to end!

She wanted to see her face, her father, and she wanted help, help she knew she could get from Shadoe. Without him, she didn't know how well she could manage, but she would try. She could hardly believe her father had been imprisoned in the basement all these years. It suddenly dawned on Julita that through the years she had been imprisoned herself. Maybe not physically, but she'd been subject to Lucretia's insane whims.

She looked down at herself, her eyes at last open, and for the first time really saw the ridiculous costume Lucretia made her wear. The large, shapeless dress, the binding, the dog ears. She'd never even owned a pair of shoes. She'd been robbed of the chance to grow up as other girls had. To go to school, have boyfriends. Instead Lucretia had imprisoned her in an attic nursery, controlling her with drugs and lies, teaching her only the merest facts to get along.

She had to be able to read to help out around the inn, so Lucretia taught her. Some of the others had taught her about numbers—how to add, subtract, multiply, but she hadn't learned any more than that. She listened to some of the others talk about high school and college and a yearning would fill her. She stole magazines and read them, looked at the pictures. She knew there was so much to learn, to experience, to see, and she wanted to, but knew she never could while she was trapped here in Lucretia's insane world.

All at once she picked up her mask and threw it at Lucretia. "I won't wear it anymore," she yelled.

"What do I care?" Lucretia snapped. "You'll never leave this room anyway." She leaned toward Julita. "Do you understand, you filthy piece of trash? You're going to die!" A small smile tilted Lucretia's snake lips and a look of wonder filled her eyes as she shifted them and looked away. "And I'll be free," she hissed. "It's time. Yes, it's time," she said, looking once again at her sister. "I've met someone," she said, giggling like a schoolgirl. "It's the big, beautiful cowboy. You know, the one you were so hot to

have?" She snickered. "Poor little Julita, he was only playing with you, don't you know that? But now he's made his choice. And it's me!" She saw what she construed as jealousy on Julita's face. "Did I tell you I drank wine with him today? Yes," she hissed, feeling triumphant over her beautiful sister. "Me. Ugly Lucretia. And the way he looked at me." She looked away, remembering his eyes, "It was oh, so intimate." She cut her eyes back toward Julita. "It's time both you and Papa were out of the way. I've taken care of you long enough. Now I have my own life to live. At last I'll be rescued from this crumbling old inn." Her eyes drifted down and looked at Julita. She began speaking as if engaging her in a sisterly chat. "He's from New York, you know. We'll live there...in the big city. I would invite you to come and visit, but—" she hesitated, furtively sliding her hand into her pocket, "—you'll be dead!"

"No!" Julita whimpered, shaking her head as she watched Lucretia's hand grope around in her pocket.

"Oh, yes!" Lucretia said, walking toward Julita, the long, glinting hypodermic needle dripping with poison as it pointed toward the ceiling.

"No!" Julita cried desperately, inching back in the corner of her bed, "No!" When Lucretia kept coming, Julita's gaze rose to the ceiling when she suddenly remembered the ventilator. "Help!" she screamed, desperate.

"Be good, now, and take your medicine," Lucretia said, her voice soft yet threatening. She stepped toward Julita, her eyes shining with dementia. "You need a nice, long, nap," she whispered. "A nice *long* nap," she said again, with a raised eyebrow.

* * * *

Shadoe heard a sob and looked at Garret. The old man had tears creeping down his thin, wrinkled cheeks. "My God, it's Julita," he sobbed, his face in his hands. "My little Julita." He cast a pleading look at Shadoe. "She's alive after all, and that witch is going to kill her." He pounded on his legs. "Damn these legs!"

Suddenly a loud sound brought their eyes back up to the ventilator.

* * * *

A rattle of furniture sounded as Julita suddenly jumped off the bed to the other side. Lucretia was between her and the door. Julita lifted the cradle and threw it at her. She saw Lucretia fall backward and bump into the vanity, which sent the music box crashing to the floor. This gave her the chance she needed, so she quickly skirted around Lucretia while watching her grope for the hypodermic she dropped. Finally grabbing the doorknob, Julita flung the door back, but Lucretia was immediately behind her and slammed it closed. Julita was trapped against the door, looking fearfully at the hypodermic in front of her eyes, poised and ready for penetration. All at once she raised both arms, one knocking the hypodermic to the floor, and the other rapping Lucretia in the chin, causing her to stumble backward.

When Julita saw Lucretia sprawled on the floor, she flung the door open, lunged through it, and quickly ran down the steps. She didn't know where to go. The only place she could think of was Shadoe's room, so she sprinted down the hall. When she found the door, she rapped on it, not with her usual timid knock, but with a pounding of her fist. She knew she didn't have much time, and rapped again, and again while looking around for the first sign of Lucretia coming for her. But still there was no answer. Realizing he wasn't there, she tried to turn the knob and found it locked. She turned with a start when she heard a scrambling sound coming from the attic stairs. It was Lucretia. Where could she go? She looked around frantically. She saw the back stairs and turned. Scrambling down them, she found herself in the kitchen, only steps from the back door.

* * * *

"I've got to do something," Shadoe yelled as he heard the grappling between the two women. "Will you be all right while I—?"

"Yes! Yes!" Garret yelled. Go!"

Shadoe turned and headed out through the maze of boxes and broken furniture. He slammed through the door, ran up the steps and around the mansion just in time to see Julita burst out the back door. Before she could get away, he lunged and grabbed her. At that instant a wail rose from her throat and Shadoe reached around and clamped his hand on her mouth. She struggled and kicked against him, but he held her secure as he dragged her down the cellar steps and inside.

Julita continued to struggle, scratching at him like a wild animal.

“Julita!” he yelled. “Stop! It’s me, for God’s sake!”

Julita struggled so hard she didn’t hear him. He finally grabbed her wrists and pinned her hands behind her, holding them with one hand. With his free hand he buried his fingers in her hair and jerked her face toward him and quickly closed his mouth over hers.

* * * *

Slowly the struggle stopped and the hurried bruising of her lips turned to a melting, delicious sensation. Her hands slowly crept up around his neck until she remembered the cruel things he had said to her and pulled away, wiping at her mouth and looking at him with fearful eyes.

“What’s wrong?” he said, watching her back away from him. “You’re safe, do you understand? I’m not going to hurt you.”

Her head turned, her eyes taking in the dusty, dirty, crowded room.

“This is the basement.”

“The basement?” she repeated. Her eyes darted around. “Where is he?” she whispered, “Where’s my papa?”

“Come with me.”

“No!” She yanked at his hand, then leaned over and bit him.

“Ouch!” he yelled, breaking his hold.

She quickly turned and ran.

He chased after her, grabbing her from behind boxes where she tried to hide. When he had her tight within his grasp, he circled his arm around her waist while he pulled her along with him.

“Let me go!” she yelled as she reached out, grabbing at boxes or furniture, anything to help her pull away from him. But it was no use.

He continued to pull her through the maze until they rounded a corner and came out into another part of the basement. Suddenly all the fight went out of her when she saw a grizzled old man in a wheelchair and knew the stranger must be her father.

“Papa?” she whispered.

“Yes, baby, it’s me.” Tears coursed down his ragged old cheeks while he held out his hands to her. Just then Shadoe released her, and she ran to him.

The very second she crawled into his lap, pictures flashed through her mind of a younger man with dark curly hair, a strong body, and handsome features. Now he was weak and old, his body emaciated from years of starvation and torment. She could feel his hands trembling as they touched her, and she knew he must be very weak. Being afraid her weight might be a burden on him, she pulled away, but he wouldn't let her go.

With a happy, secure feeling at last, she nestled in his arms.

Chapter Fourteen

"I...th-thought you were dead," she said shyly. "Lucretia...she told me—"

"I know, baby. She told me the same thing about you." He turned toward Shadoe. "She never actually told me she was dead, she just alluded to the fact, keeping me in torment, not knowing. Being trapped down here, it's hard to know what's real." Turning back to Julita, he pulled back, a frown etching his face. "What in hell is that on your face?"

Julita reached up and touched her skin, realizing her father was seeing her without her mask. "I—"

"Lucretia's handiwork," Shadoe interrupted. "Damn, that woman's a piece of work."

Garret grabbed Julita's face and turned it back and forth. "My God, it looks like someone has drawn scars on her face." He looked up at Shadoe. "What the hell is going on?"

"It's a long story, Garret."

"Yeah? Well, for some reason I find my calendar empty. No meetings to go to, no phone calls to make, hell, all I have is time. Now, I want to hear it, damn it."

"You'll hear it all, I promise, but before all that we have some plans to make."

"I suppose you're right," Garret growled, "but don't make me wait too long. I'd like to have just one more reason to cut her heart out and serve it to her on a platter."

* * * *

As Julita nestled in her father's arms, she tried to keep her eyes off Shadoe by looking around the dark basement for something of interest, but it

did no good. Ultimately her wayward eyes would shift back to him, making her remember how she felt while in his arms. She was like an addict that needed his dark beauty to live, to breathe. She had always thought watching him was like watching the leading man of a wildly sensuous movie. She thrilled when the two of them began to kiss, her eyes closing while the music surrounded her. His presence was so strong he took her breath away, and then their bodies would begin to meld.

Not so long ago she didn't know what lay beyond the kisses—until he showed her. When she asked him to teach her, he did—every chance they got. It was a feeling so dark and dangerous, she couldn't seem to get enough. Her eyes moved up to his, their green glow reminding her of something primitive and untamed. She'd never known a man, at least not one like Shadoe. He reminded her of the ones she'd seen in magazines and on TV westerns, yet he was so much better. He was the good guy, the one who came in and saved everyone. The one who all the girls fell in love with. Having him here made her feel as if he'd stepped right off the screen just to save her. The only thing was, the TV cowboys were flat, unreal. Not him. He felt like a man—even smelled like one. He had a presence that was forceful and compelling, almost formidable. She shivered as she nestled in her father's arms, timidly watching the man she'd given herself to time and again, and still hadn't had enough. He was a dark stranger, the leading man of her fantasies.

* * * *

“So what have you got in mind...” Garret began, but his words faded when he saw the two of them looking at each other as if no one else were in the room.

The looks in their eyes gave Garret a sudden jolt. His gaze darted from one to the other as he realized for the first time what was going on. His body may have been frail, and he might have had to sit on an ass so bony it almost cut into his flesh, but his eyes were sharp—and he didn't like what he saw. Being very quiet, he observed them, knowing all too well what Shadoe was thinking about his daughter. He looked back at Julita, and the look she gave Shadoe triggered something inside him. Anger? Maybe, but also jealousy. He hadn't felt it in a long time, and it was as surprising to him as it would be

to either of them if they knew. But there it was. A bitter, sharp bile that pushed up into his throat so hard that he thought he might choke on it. His eyes narrowed when they darted back to Shadoe, trying to see what Julita saw. Strong body, rippling muscles, and a handsome face. His eyes moved along that handsome face, taking in his dark skin, the imbedded jade jewel and long hair. He could easily picture Shadoe in Indian attire—feathers all over him. Another sensation rose up in him, and the word *half-breed* whirled around in his mind. It was an ugly word to be sure, but to him he was just calling it the way he saw it. And he'd be damned to hell for all eternity before he let his daughter get mixed up with a dirty redskin. In that instant he felt a huge rush of determination in among the fresh red blood that filled his veins. He already felt like his old self—a big, bawdy, harsh businessman who commanded others. No one told him what to do. He came and went as he pleased and did what he pleased. For some people having money meant a lifetime of leisure on beachfront property, boats, and perpetual golf games, but that wasn't for him. He put his money to better use. It could be turned into a weapon, an enticement, even a threat. He didn't let anything get in the way of what he wanted. His eyes narrowed on Shadoe, knowing this was one of those little irritating things he would have to take care of—and he would, he sure as hell would. But not now, the time wasn't right. Right now he had to play along, let the Indian call the shots. But not for long. So, with great effort he pushed these feelings aside and asked again, "So, what have you got in mind?"

Shadoe looked at him, his eyes dazed. "Huh?"

"I said," Garret repeated a third time, a twinge of impatience settling over him, "what have you got in mind?" When Shadoe didn't answer right away, he looked down at Julita. "Honey, this is..." His eyes slid back up at Shadoe. "How much of the truth does she know? I mean—"

* * * *

"She knows me," he said softly, his warning gaze telling her not to say anything to her father about their relationship. He couldn't believe in all the time they'd been seeing each other that he'd never told her anything about himself. It seemed that all his time was spent asking the questions instead of answering them.

"I've seen him around the inn."

"You should probably know that he's—"

"Let me do this, Garret," Shadoe interrupted, his gaze settling intently on Julita. "Julita, I'm Lieutenant Shadoe Madison with the New York Police Department. My job as an undercover cop leads me into situations just like this one. I masquerade as someone else until I get the lowdown on my target, then close in with an arrest."

"You mean, like in the movies?"

Shadoe shrugged. "Yeah, I guess so. Except we use real bullets. When you see blood spurt, it's real. No special effects and no actors. When you're dead, you're dead. No getting up and walking around the next day."

Her eyes widened, looking at him in a different way. "Really?"

"Yeah, really." Shadoe chuckled at the childlike quality he still found appealing.

His eyes turned toward Garret and he began explaining. "When I first came here I knew something wasn't right, but I had the crazy notion that Julita was the dangerous one." His eyes shifted to Julita. "Now I know I was wrong." His gaze became soft and delved deeply into hers, holding them captive. "Wrong about a lot of things."

"Hell, Shadoe, how could you think—?"

"I don't know," he answered apologetically, still looking at Julita. "I saw a lot of things...the markings on her face, the mask, the way she dressed—"

"Whoa, back up here. What does a mask have to do with any of this?"

"It was something Lucretia made her wear."

"A mask?" Garret repeated as if he thought he might have heard wrong. "What...I don't understand."

"I didn't either. It was like a puzzle, but the pieces weren't fitting together. And then when I found her room quite by accident, I thought I had the answer. I couldn't believe anyone could live like that. I figured it had to be a hoax, an act of some sort. I thought the two of them were..." Hesitating, he took a deep, agonizing breath. "Oh God, I accused her of some awful things." His eyes reluctantly slid from Julita toward Garret. "You might have heard me."

"Not all of it. That ventilator has turned into a regular mystery box. When the inn is full like it is now, I never know what I'm going to hear."

Sometimes I'll be listening to a conversation in one room, then it gets interrupted by a loud TV in another room, or people arguing at the top of their lungs. It's pretty frustrating." He laughed and winked. "Especially when I've just tuned in on something pretty juicy."

Only half listening to Garret's words, Shadoe responded with a slight smile, then looked away from him and into Julita's eyes. Picking up her hand, he said, "I'd like to apologize for the way..." He felt her hand withdrawing. "No, Julita, listen to me. I need to apologize for the things I said. You didn't deserve that. I know that now."

"It's okay," she finally managed, her eyes downcast.

"Thank you," Shadoe said, squeezing her hand. "By the way, now that you're here, you're going to have to stay."

"Here?" she said, her gaze darting around the basement.

"Of course here. You can't go back to her and expect things to continue as usual. She tried to kill you."

"But where will I sleep?"

"I'll fix up a place for you and make sure you and your father are well fed."

"He's the good guy, Julita, and a cop to boot. He knows what he's doing, sweetheart, so listen to him. Okay?"

Julita nodded, looking back at Shadoe with a strange depth in her striking violet eyes—eyes that made Shadoe a little weak in the knees.

Looking over at Garret, Shadoe said, "Well, I guess the next move is to get you and Julita out of here as soon as possible. I can call the local police and have you out of here in a matter of hours."

"And then what?"

"What do you mean?"

"That witch upstairs. She gets off scott free for what she did to me and Julita?"

"Garret, there'll be an investigation, the inn will probably be shut down—"

"You'd better rethink that decision, my friend. There are things you don't know."

"Okay, so tell me."

For two hours Garret told Shadoe all about Lucretia's late night digging parties, leaving out nothing.

"My God," Shadoe mumbled and looked over at Garret. "You've just confirmed what I've already seen." He hesitated. "Well, it's your call. What do you want to do?"

"Before all this goes down I'd like a little payback. Maybe I'm a selfish old bastard, but I'd like her to get just a little bit of what me and Julita have had to put up with for fifteen years. I'd like to scare the hell out of her."

Shadoe shrugged. "Are you sure you feel up to it?"

"Sure I do. What'll it take another day or two? I think I can manage that. Besides, just knowing that witch is going to pay will be just the tonic I need to get up out of this damned wheelchair."

"Okay," Shadoe began and then looked over at Julita. "As I see it, Lucretia will continue looking for you unless she has reason not to."

"What do you mean?" Garret asked.

His eyes darted back to Garret. "Well, I've been thinking..." His words faded as he rubbed his jaw, considering what he was going to say. Finally he looked up into the old man's watery blue eyes. "I think we should make it appear that she has drowned in the ocean."

Julita gasped, her eyes full of fear.

"I'm sorry, Julita, but the only way Lucretia is going to stop searching for you is to believe you're dead. Otherwise she'll continue looking, and eventually make it down here."

"He's right, sweetheart. If we're gonna do this, let's do it right. If she finds us down here together there's no telling what she'll do." He looked over at Shadoe. "Any other thoughts?"

"Our next problem is you. We can't allow her to shoot you up again, so we have to stage your death, make it look like you've slit your wrists."

"Now you've lost me."

"We know she'll eventually make it down here to check on you. When she comes in, you're slumped over the basin, blood everywhere. Your eyes will be open, your skin pasty. I've got everything we'll need out in my car."

"You do come prepared don't you? Why in hell would you have something like that in your car?"

"I keep it there in the trunk. Like I told you, I specialize in undercover work. My schedule usually keeps me hopping from one job to another, not much time in between. It's easier to keep it there instead of spending my time packing and unpacking. I've got all kinds of gadgets. Theatrical

makeup, disguises. I've even paraded through haunted houses as a ghost lots of times. Actually in my line of work you have to be an actor...sort of."

"I don't know," Garret began with some hesitation. "There are too many things that can go wrong, What if Lucretia feels for a pulse?"

"She won't. The scene will be too gory. Keep in mind she only has to see you for a few seconds. If my guess is right, she'll turn and run."

He snorted. "You don't know Lucretia."

"Think about it. The basement is dark. Cobwebs hanging, and in among them is a corpse dangling over the basin. You're pale, your eyeballs have rolled back in your head. If she doesn't run from that, she's not human."

"Eyeballs rolled back? Pale? How will we do all that?"

"Just leave it to me."

"You mean she'll just leave me lying there?"

"Let's hope she does, otherwise she'll find out it's a fake."

"Damned bitch. It'd be just like her to leave me lying there until I'm nothing but a lot of bony remains." He looked up at Shadoe. "Not even a proper burial in sanctified ground!"

"Garret, hell man, you'd better hope she hates you as much as you say she does, otherwise we're in deep shit. One finger on you and that's all she wrote. Nobody would believe a warm corpse no matter how bad they look.

Garret scowled and scratched his head. "Why? I can understand staging Julita's death, but why mine?"

"Garret think a minute. What has been her reason for coming down here before?"

"To make my life miserable," he answered hotly.

"To see how close to death you were. Sure, she fed you—"

"Fed me? That slop?"

"Exactly. She knew you couldn't eat it. She was just watching and waiting. Then when you weren't dying fast enough she gave you the hypodermic. That one was only a sedative. You can bet the next one will be full of poison."

"I wish I was as sure about this as you are. I still think a funeral—"

"Garrett, how long have you been down here?"

"You know how long. Fifteen god-awful years."

"Then why would she have a funeral at this late date? She's told Julita you were dead. The guests think you're dead. She slipped up when she

didn't tell the same story to the help, but thank God she didn't, otherwise I'd never have known she was lying. To everybody who counts, you're as dead as the goddamned bricks in the wall. The nine-to-five crowd comes and goes, here one day, gone the next, so what they believe is not important. But for the others...the ones who stay, the ones who ask questions, the ones who believe you're already dead...hell, man, it would be insane to have a funeral for a fifteen-year-old corpse. I doubt she'll even have a memorial service for Julita. If I know Lucretia, she'll probably tell everyone that she had to send her away. Whatever the story, it'll be something she can get out of the way as soon as possible to get on with her life."

"What are you going to do in the meantime?"

"Stay the hell away from her if I can. She already thinks I have a thing for her, and I don't want to encourage her. Maybe I can think up something that'll tighten the screws in her coffin." Shadoe paced, thinking. "She gave you the hypodermic this morning, so she'll probably come down and check on you a little later. That's when she needs to see you hanging over the basin." When Shadoe turned back, he saw Julita staring longingly at the picnic basket. "Julita, are you hungry?"

Julita nodded timidly, pulling her eyes away from the basket.

"Garret, is there anything left in the picnic basket?"

"I don't know. I think we drank all the juice." He stretched his neck. "I see some cheese there."

Shadoe knelt by the basket and moved the cloth back. "Bingo," he said, bringing some chicken and cheese out. He put them on the mobile table and Julita scooted out of her father's lap and sat on a stool in front of the table. She grabbed up a piece of chicken and began eating voraciously.

"When was the last time you had anything to eat?" Garret asked, looking at her with a curious scowl.

Julita shrugged while looking at him and munching on a chicken leg. "Two nights ago I had a sandwich."

Garret's eyes sparked with anger. "Two nights ago? Isn't Lucretia feeding you?"

Julita shook her head. "Not anymore. I sneak in the kitchen at night."

Garret looked at Shadoe with fear in his eyes. "My God, she's already started starving her."

"I'll feed her, Garret, don't worry." Looking back over at Julita, he didn't see the mask anywhere. "Where's your mask? Did you lose it again?"

"That's the second time you've mentioned some kind of...what...mask? Is that what you said? What the hell are you talking about?"

Shadoe looked at Julita as if she should be the one to tell the story.

Garret's gaze slid toward Julita, waiting for her to speak.

"My face," she mumbled, her mouth full of food, "it's all scarred and everything. Lucretia makes me wear a mask. She made it for me. It hides my face."

"Who told you that?" Garret asked curiously.

"Who the hell do you think?" Shadoe answered.

"But she can see—" Garret began.

"Garret, don't tell me you didn't know," Shadoe began. "Julita's been living in a world of lies, drugs, beatings, you name it."

"How the hell would I know? I've been down here for fifteen years." He indicated to the ventilator. "That's not a friggin' TV, you know. I can't see a thing, and can hardly hear some things. And if I do happen to hear a familiar voice, it gets interrupted by somebody's loud TV or argument."

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize. Actually I just found out about all this myself." He gazed at Garret with a somber look. "Apparently Lucretia has brainwashed her into thinking she has scars on her face. Mind control. I've seen it before. Someone becomes obsessed, takes them prisoner, uses hypnotism, mind-bending drugs. That's why all the crazy marks you see there. It's my guess she got a head start on Julita. Must have started when she was young. Can you imagine? The only thing that saved Julita is growing up and having a mind of her own. She was brave enough to burst out of her shell and fight Lucretia. Suddenly being free became more important to her than the scars she still believed she had on her face."

"My God, she's crazier than I thought. It must have started the minute she put me in the basement. Julita was three." He looked back at Julita. "Did it start then, sweetheart?"

Julita shrugged. "I guess. It's just always been that way. Way back as far as I can remember." She had just opened her mouth to take another bite of chicken when she happened to look up at Shadoe and saw him staring at her. She quickly dropped the chicken, wiped her hands on her dress and lowered her eyes. "What is it?" she managed when he kept staring.

Shadoe leaned toward her and took her arm. "Come with me." He led her to the sink, picked up a wash rag and saturated it with soap and water.

"No," she said, struggling with him when he took her face in his hands.

"Julita, please. I just want to show you how beautiful you are. I'm not going to hurt you."

She shook her head and recoiled, afraid.

"Julita," Shadoe urged, then looked at her father. "Garret, tell her."

"Julita, baby," Garret said while looking at her with a gleam of love in his eyes. "You can trust Shadoe. He's here to help us."

"You want me to Papa?"

"Yes, baby, I do. I wouldn't tell you to do something that would hurt you, sweetheart. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, Papa," she answered. He had to be telling her the truth, she could see it in his eyes. Slowly she forced herself to turn toward Shadoe, looked down at the dripping cloth, and then murmured, "Okay."

* * * *

Shadoe approached her slowly, careful not to frighten her. He wanted to kiss away her fear, take care of her, but after a lifetime of abuse, she was fragile. Being very careful, he cupped her face in one hand while he rubbed with the other. Several minutes passed, and when her face was finally clean of the macabre drawings, it was like the sun just came out from behind a dark cloud. Large, violet eyes, lips that were full, pink and pillowed into the sweetest softness he had ever seen. Dark, sooty lashes seductive, lazy lids, and her brows fanned up into an intriguing arch, making her face hers alone, not like millions of other women. Shadoe felt all along that she was different, and she was.. Her creamy, heart-shaped face went well with her red-gold hair that tumbled around her face, the last few riotous hours pulling it out of a rubber band at her nape. He wanted to kiss the loveliness, the innocence, but instead, slowly turned her to the dingy mirror. She stared, but her face was shadowed and indistinct. It seemed to get lost within the gloom of the room and the dark patches where the silver backing had worn off the mirror. Realizing the problem, Shadoe quickly plunged his hand in his pocket and retrieved a lighter, then placed it near her face and struck it. The flame revealed a perfect face. No scars—nothing.

"I can't believe it," she whispered, while lifting a hand to her face and feeling around on it. "Am I pretty?" she asked while still mesmerized by her reflection.

"No," Shadoe said. "Not pretty."

"Oh," she said sadly.

"You're beautiful," Shadoe whispered intimately.

"Really?" she said happily. With eagerness she reached up and pulled at the rubber band releasing her hair, and letting it fall into a bouncing, red-gold, glossy curtain. She smiled when it fell well below her shoulders to her waist. "Look, my hair, it seems different than most. What color do you call it?"

"A beautiful reddish blonde," Shadoe answered while looking into the mirror where her face was framed. He looked back at Garret. "She seems to be in love with that mirror. I think we might have started something here."

"So what?" he said with a grumpy voice. "She deserves to know she's beautiful."

Julita was still staring at herself, her violet eyes luminous and bright, and her creamy skin perfect. "She told me I was ugly...that I had big, ugly, puckering scars on my face." She hesitated for a moment, thinking, and then looked up at Shadoe. "And...and I believed her...about everything. My face, the animal in my cradle that scratched my face—"

"She scratched you face!" Garret roared. "She was the rotten, low-down animal that got in your cradle. Did you know that? Did she tell you that? And then she threw me off the balcony!" Garret lowered his head, "How God could let a woman like that exist in this world is a mystery to me!"

"I'm sorry, Papa." Julita kneeled before her father's knees.

Garret sobbed. "It isn't your fault, baby. I'm sorry I yelled." Then he looked up at Shadoe. "I can blame a lot on Lucretia, God knows she's evil, but it's my fault as well. I made no secret of the fact that I hated her. Hell, I could hardly stand the sight of her, but I needed her. She helped in the inn, took care of both Julita and me. For a seventeen-year-old, that's a pretty full plate. And then Lucretia told me that my consultation with the doctor fell through."

"Why the hell didn't you follow up on that?" Shadoe asked. "You must have known you couldn't trust Lucretia."

“Hell, I don’t know. Something happened to me. Lucretia was feeding me good then.” He hesitated, and then looked up at Shadoe when he realized the truth. “My God, I’ll bet she was treating my food. Never in my life have I given in to depression. I’ve always been strong, come out fighting, but I just gave up and Lucretia took over. I have to admit, though. I gave her hell.

“When she’d taken all she could, she put me in the basement and I...Julita too, I suppose, began a descent right down into hell. A small child...well, it would have been easy to twist her mind, but me, that’s how I wound up in my new home. She’s a cruel woman. Crazy. She’s been that way since the moment she was born, getting worse every year she lived. She didn’t kill me because she wanted me to suffer. The only thing is, she suffered as well. That’s another thing she blames me for. Her misery. She resented me for loving Julita, and she resents Julita for having the beauty that she has wanted all her life. It stands to reason she’d try to keep that beauty hidden. Apparently she brainwashed the child, conjured up an ugly-looking mask and a story to go along with it.” He looked over at Julita who was still eating. “Look at the way she’s dressed. I’ll bet that child hasn’t had a new dress her whole life. It’s my bet that Lucretia lives that night over and over.”

“But why?” Shadoe asked, mesmerized by the story.

“Because it was the night of her triumph. She still sees the blood on the child’s face, the scratches that were superficial and sits in the rocking chair as she did that first night, rocking the baby. I’ve heard her, night after night, the rocking chair squeaking, that damned music box playing.

“But to go to such lengths—”

“Hell, she’s crazy. Crazy people do that. I don’t know. To them I guess it makes sense.”

“But why the nursery, the baby bed, the way she makes Julita dress. Did you know she bound up her...well, you know,” Shadoe said, indicating to his own chest.

“Don’t you see? It’s clear enough to me. She wanted to keep Julita just as she was that night, but nature ran its course, causing the whole thing to become macabre. She couldn’t let Julita grow up because that would mean freedom, a mind of her own. And worst of all, competition. She had to keep Julita young to keep her dependent on her. She couldn’t kill us. Death would mean freedom. She wanted to keep us alive to torture us, hold us captive,

feel the evil satisfaction of having us dependent upon her. But now that we're in her way, she wants to get rid of us."

"Then why wouldn't you have known about the mask?"

"Hell, I don't know. Back then I didn't even know if Julita was actually alive. I never heard her voice, only Lucretia's. Knowing how crazy the bitch is, I thought maybe she was up there all alone living in a fantasy world. The sounds come and go. Sometimes it's hard to hear, other times it seems like the volume is turned up. I think it's my hearing. You know, old age and all that." Garret became angry. "It doesn't matter what I knew then or didn't know. The bottom line is, Lucretia stole her life, and I couldn't do a fuckin' thing about it. It's all over."

"All over?" Shadoe said. "She's only eighteen. She has her whole life ahead of her. The best part at least." His eyes shifted to Julita, and he saw her looking in the mirror again, caressing her skin, mesmerized by what she saw.

My God, he thought, it's the first time she's ever seen herself.

While looking in the dingy mirror, her eyes caught his and they locked. She was unsettled, things were happening so fast, and she still wasn't sure of him. But for Shadoe, her beauty caused a warm, electrifying heat to pulse through him. He still wanted her like no other woman he'd ever known. Had he ruined that with his accusations—his stupidity?

Chapter Fifteen

Lucretia huddled at the edge of the ridge, the hard, raw wind whipping around her. She watched the seagulls as they wheeled through the air, their excited cawing sending out a warning of bad weather. The clouds were dark, roiling, and close to the earth. There was a storm at sea and it was heading in. The water was choppy, and cold, causing the waves to crash against the rocks, sending the chilling spray high into the air.

Julita had been missing for hours, and now it was getting late and cold. How could the girl do this to her? How could she disappear like this? Didn't she know it would worry her? She had to find her soon or she'd be caught in the storm. Where could she be? She had searched the woods, the beach, even the underground caves—at least the ones she could get to. Julita was nowhere to be found.

Just as Lucretia was about to turn and go back to the inn, her eyes caught something moving on the rocks below. It seemed to float upward, swirling in the incoming tide, then fall against the craggy rock as the tide withdrew.

Something was down there, caught on the rocks.

She lifted a hand to shield her eyes from the pelting spray and squinted. Her pulse began pounding. There was something familiar about it. The colors, the movement. She had to know what it was. She looked over at the steep incline that led to the beach. It would be suicide to try to climb those rocks in this weather only for a piece of rubble. No, not rubble, she decided. A piece of material. Not hesitating another minute, she quickly turned and ran toward the trail. When she reached the bottom she left the well-worn path and took a sharp turn toward the rocks that resembled bones. She quickly discarded her shoes and stopped only a moment to look at the chilling site.

As she entered, the bones surrounded her—large and hideous.

She felt like she had stepped into a science fiction film and walked through the remains of some fabled giant that had been dead for centuries. She saw a large, horrifying skull half buried in the sand, eye holes, grinning teeth, a line of vertebrae, then the joint of what looked like an elbow that seemed to attach itself to the tall rocks that resembled the ulna. Extended from it were five bony fingers that splayed out along the ridge as if it were trying to climb up. The scene was morbid, sending chills spiraling through her.

Suddenly she stopped when she saw where she was.

My God, she thought. Ribs stood like trees around her, casting cloudy day shadows. It was a human jungle that housed a slow-crawling creature. It was too much! She wanted to scream and run away, but amazingly she stood her ground.

The sight was horrifying. Macabre. She felt death in the air as she crept through it, her hands holding fast to the rib bones when the waves threatened to wash her out to sea. Up ahead the rocks crowded together and she began climbing. The rocks were craggy and sharp, her feet finding footholds while her toes sunk into the crevices. The waves drenched her, forcefully moving her body as she hung on dangerously, climbing higher and higher. She caught her breath when she looked down and saw her feet bleeding as they struggled to hold their grip against the forceful waves. Still she kept climbing, being driven, and feeling a chill when she saw the waves wash her blood out to sea. Every giant wave that came crashing in brought her to a standstill. They collided against the rocks and were tall and savage, flooding the bones, racing between them, then receding, slapping, spraying, becoming so violent at times that she felt herself almost slipping off into the ocean.

And then she reached it.

The rock where she'd seen the bit of material. She suddenly felt foolish. She couldn't believe she was putting her life in danger just to get a closer look at the strange piece of useless debris that had probably drifted in from the ocean—but still she didn't give up. Her pulse raced as she climbed. Her breath was coming hard. Most of her hair had escaped from her chignon, the ravenous waves plastering the dark strands to her face as they slapped across her gaunt features. She hurried. Quicker now. Her hands became blood red, being scratched raw as she tried to hold on to the jagged edges of the

boulder's mysterious shape. Was it still there or had it come loose from the sharp edges that had held it fast? She stumbled several times before she got to the top, almost falling, but finally—before she knew it—there it was.

“Oh God,” she gasped. It was Julita's dress. It was ripped and water soaked, but she recognized it as it lay on the rocks where her body must have been. Lucretia darted around as if afraid someone was watching, then reached out and snatched it. She turned it in her hands, looking closely at the torn cloth, the familiar print, the shapeless style that Lucretia had made her wear. Then she looked out into the vast ocean, all doubt that she had disappeared into the pounding surf, gone.

Before turning to go, she lifted her eyes toward the top of the ridge and gasped when she saw someone. A dark silhouette stood against the roiling clouds. The girl was young, wind whipping at her hair, and she was naked! She stood perfectly still, watching Lucretia struggle along the rocks. The figure was far away but it looked like—oh, God, it looked like—Julita. No, it couldn't be, that was impossible. She must be dreaming. The roaring of the sea was in her ears, and a sudden splash of saltwater hit her in the face. She closed her eyes and wiped the brine from her face, but only for an instant. When she looked again the girl was gone. Lucretia's eyes raked along the edge of the ridge, but she had disappeared—as if she'd never been there.

Had she just seen Julita's ghost?

She looked down at the dress in her hands, then back up to where the naked girl had stood. An eerie feeling washed over her, and she became convinced that it had been Julita she had seen. What had happened? Had she jumped? No, Julita wouldn't jump. She must have slipped, ventured too close to the edge, the violent weather being too much for her. Once she hit the rocks a dead body would be swept out into the raging ocean in no time. Yes, she must have been swept off the rocks and into its depths.

Her sister was dead and her ghost—

She looked back up at the ridge. Her ghost had been here, watching her. The wind's fierce growl and the constant battering of cold spray sent a chill deep into Lucretia's soul. A paralyzing fear coursed through her. She seemed to be frozen clear through and suddenly wanted to feel the warmth of the inn around her. She couldn't stay here another minute. She had to get back. She'd be safe at the inn. She had probably been missed already. She

finally managed to move and began to climb down, more quickly this time, and ran, stumbling through the bones, her sobs choking her. She didn't realize the death of her sister would affect her so deeply. It was a shock, a jolt, that was all. She was glad it had happened. It would save her the trouble. Julita had become too hard to handle and was just in the way. Now the only thing Lucretia had to worry about was her father.

And she would take care of him tonight.

* * * *

The murky daylight was dying, slowly sinking the basement into a shadowy stage.

The atmosphere was right, Shadoe thought. Wind keening outside, and if he was lucky there would be a lot of lightning and thunder to go along with the scene he was setting up.

He hurriedly worked on Garret, applying stage makeup, fake blood, and directed him as to how to put on the contacts that would make his eyes look as if they'd rolled back in his head. He positioned the old man over the sink, had a bloody knife hanging out of Garret's hand, spread fake blood and cobwebs around, trying to make the scene as gruesome as possible.

"Where's Julita?"

"She's in back, waiting for her cue." He looked at his handiwork. "God, Garret if you could see yourself, you'd run screaming."

"That's because I'm human," Garret said, his sightless eyes looking at Shadoe. "That witch isn't human."

"Well, that's something we're about to find out," he said, whispering. Suddenly he gave a start. "Did you hear that?"

"Oh, goddamn it, she's coming down!"

"Quick, slump over the sink, and remember everything I told you," he hissed. "Don't move, don't even breathe. If you need a breath do it like I told you. Very small, shallow breaths that won't heave your chest and stomach."

"Shit...I don't know—"

"Don't worry, she'll be in and out of here in a second. The minute she sees you, she'll turn and run. I can almost guarantee it." Thinking everything was set, he furtively receded back into a shadow and waited.

In only seconds the door moved slightly, scraping noisily against the floor. Shadoe stood silent, his shifting eyes making one last check over the scene. All at once he gasped. The picnic basket was in plain sight. “Oh, God,” he muttered, then took a lunge and kicked it, sending it into the other part of the basement before sinking back into the darkness. Lucretia wouldn’t be able to see it from where Garret was, but if she stepped farther into the basement, she couldn’t miss it.

His eyes looked back at the door and he heard the rusty hinges let out a painful squeal. When he heard it he almost laughed out loud. The scraping door, the squeal, it was perfect. It was just what he needed to bring the whole scene together, and Lucretia had provided it.

* * * *

She entered slowly and stopped dead in her tracks. Her eyes raked across the dark basement, sensing something wasn’t right. The scene—the whole thing—it seemed too elaborate. The eerie feel, the hush, the undulating candlelight that gave the shadows a monstrous quality seemed to have all been staged. But why? And then she saw him—the old man laying over the sink, covered with blood.

She stared, her throat moving as if trying to swallow the fear she felt. Forcing herself, she began to walk toward him slowly. She couldn’t believe it. Was he really dead? Could she be that lucky? Both of them gone in one day and not at her hand?

Make sure, she told herself, while hesitantly putting one foot in front of the other. The sound of her soles scraping on the hard, dirty cement was chilling. With each carefully placed step, she could see the horrible scene draw near, but she wouldn’t stop—couldn’t stop—not now.

She remembered the night he fell and felt like she did then. Weak at first, but then stronger. Now her eyes burned into the old man. He had to be dead. He was pale, like a corpse! With a hesitating, trembling hand she reached out to touch him, but before she laid a finger on him he moved quickly and grabbed her wrist. She opened her mouth to scream but nothing came out. Her throat closed, choking her. She tried to pull away, but he had her wrist in his strong grip. Suddenly his head jerked around and she saw his eyes—oh God, his eyes! He looked at her with a twisted, evil scowl creasing

his deathly gray face. His ashen lips stretched into a malicious smile, showing a mouthful of dingy teeth. “Hello, Lucretia. I’ve been waiting for this day, you dirty bitch!”

She watched him lift the bloody knife toward her and opened her mouth in a scream that wouldn’t come. She looked around to find a weapon, then scoffed at her own stupidity. What good would a weapon be against someone who was already dead? Realizing she was helpless, a slow, cold, agonizing terror slithered up her spine as she tried to struggle free. Suddenly she heard a sound, something moving from the other side of the basement. She lifted her eyes and saw a naked Julita shuffling toward her slowly, her hair and body drenched with ocean water.

The pale zombie stiffly held out her hands as she shuffled toward Lucretia. Her eyes glowed like two burning coals. Seaweed was caught in her hair. “Lucretia,” she said, her voice echoing as if coming from her watery grave. “Come with me. We can be together.”

“No!” she rasped out of a constricted throat while shaking her head. She finally jerked her hand away from the old man so violently, his wheelchair toppled. She began backing away, watching as he reached for her while he pulled himself along on the floor with his hands. She looked from one to the other. Julita’s stiff gait, walking and reaching, and her father pulling himself along on the floor.

“Stay away!” she cried, then quickly turned away from the horrible sight that was strangling her in its deathly grip.

“We need you, Lucretia. Who will take care of us?” they said in ghastly unison.

She stumbled backward, flailing her arms as she staggered. “No! Go away!” she rasped while bumping into walls and tables as she stalked erratically toward the door.

She grabbed it. Like a lifeline. But before she stumbled through, she looked back to see Julita and Garret still coming, still reaching out. One dripping seawater, the other, dripping blood.

She desperately climbed up the stairs on her hands and knees, struggling, scratching, pulling herself up until she got to the door at the top. She managed to crawl up, grab the knob, open it, and fall through. She looked around the foyer, but everything seemed normal. No one in sight.

She jerked around when the phone rang, and she lifted herself up and went to answer it.

“S-Scarlet Bay I-Inn,” she said, leaning her head down into her hand and closing her eyes. She jerked her head up when she heard the voice on the other end.

“Lucretia,” the voice whispered, the echoing voice sounding weak as if coming from a great distance. “Come back down. I want to see you...touch you...*kill you!*”

Lucretia sobbed, banging the receiver down, looking at it as if it were a snake about to strike. Suddenly, she heard the little box behind her begin to screech even though there was no connection in the basement. Yet now it screeched, telling her that her father wanted her. Suddenly the room was full of noise. The ringing phone, the screeching box. Faint voices coming from the ventilator. She clamped her hands over her ears. She was going out of her mind. All at once she turned, skirted the desk and ran up to her room. As soon as she opened the door she heard her phone ringing. She looked at it for a long time, listening to the pleasant chime that had suddenly turned hollow and insistent. The sound filled her ears, plundering her eardrums. She had to stop it, so she grabbed at it and picked it up.

“H-hello.”

“Lucretiaaaaa,” the voice hissed. “Cooooome baaack.”

She quickly banged the receiver down, only to hear the constant chime again, and again, and again! She couldn’t stand it, she had to stop it, so she yanked the wire out of the wall and welcomed the silence—but not for long.

“Lucretiaaaa, I’m waaaaiting.” The hoarse sound of her father’s voice floated in the air.

She whirled around. Where was the voice coming from? Her eyes finally lifted to the ventilator that snaked through the mansion all the way down to the basement. The faint voice kept urging her while she clamped her hands over her ears.

“Shut up, you bastard! Shut up!” she yelled.

Then in desperation she picked up pillows, knickknacks, anything she could get her hands on and began throwing them toward the ventilator. But the voice continued, indestructible. She began backing up, shaking her head, trying to escape the rasping voice. After several seconds she couldn’t stand

it anymore and became dizzy, everything going black. She slumped to the floor.

* * * *

They all looked at the ventilator, listening to the sudden quiet. Julita, with a sheet wrapped around her, and Garret peering through his sightless eyes. After a while, Shadoe turned around, looked at Garret and winced. “God, Garret, get those things out of your eyes.”

“Oh, yeah.” He leaned over and stretched each eye, managing to pull each lens out, then laid them in his palm. “I forgot they were there. I didn’t know you could see through them.”

“Well...a little. It’s like wearing sunglasses. Especially when you wear the kind Julita had on.” He reached over and took the lenses from each of them, then smiled. “You two surprised the hell out of me.” He looked down at Garret. “What a move that was, Garret. Why the hell didn’t I think of that?” He turned to Julita. “And you. God, I’m proud of you, Julita. I didn’t know if you could go through with it or not, but there you were...uh...” his eyes lowered, devouring her breasts, “big as life, if you’ll forgive the pun.”

“You’d better stop right there,” Garret said, slightly scowling at him. “How come I wasn’t informed of this? You think I want my daughter parading around naked as the day she was born?”

“She’s come a long way since then.”

“Enough with your insults.”

“Hell, Garret, that wasn’t an insult. This is exactly why I didn’t tell you. You wouldn’t have approved. Appearing on the ridge unsettled Lucretia. She needed to be convinced of Julita’s death, putting her in the right frame of mind to accept yours. Besides, Julita was only to come out if Lucretia didn’t immediately turn and run. I didn’t know you were going to do a little scene of your own.”

“Well...neither did I. When I knew she was going to touch me I had to think up something, and that...well...it just happened.”

“It was a hell of a good move. And the wheelchair falling over. I almost swallowed my tongue when that happened, but you made it work. I’ve gotta hand it to both of you. You two are pros.” He looked at Julita, reaching over and plucking the seaweed from her hair. “Thanks,” he said, winking while

he chuckled her under the chin. “You’d better go get dried off and get some clothes on. I think I saw a box of old rags in there before. Not very fashionable maybe, but I’m sure you can find something.”

She turned to leave, but before she entered the other part of the basement she hesitated, looked back, and saw his eyes following her. She put a hand up on the small width of the arch, and looked at him, her lids almost closed, her lashes making a tangled shadow across her face.

Her naked silhouette beneath the sheet haunted him, causing his hands to open and close in anticipation of touching her all over. He looked down at the old man and wondered when he was going to bed, and if he could count on his hearing to be as bad as he needed it to be.

Chapter Sixteen

The old man began getting ready for bed. "So what's our next move?"

"No next move, yet," Shadoe said. "I think it's about time we talk about getting you and Julita out of here, but I'd like to build up your strength a little first. You're weak, both of you, and I don't want to haul two corpses out of here when the time comes."

"I'm too tired to argue with you," the old man said with a weary voice.

Shadoe helped him into bed and fussed over him until he was comfortable.

"I'll say good night now," he said, looking up at Shadoe through tired eyes. "Julita must be asleep by now. Why don't you go on upstairs? We'll be all right until we see you in the morning."

"I'll leave as soon as I check on Julita."

The old man nodded, then turned his head, nestling it into the pillow.

Instead of leaving, Shadoe silently crept into a chair and sat for a few moments. Leaning forward with his elbows resting on his thighs, he waited in the darkness for him to fall asleep. He felt a certain guilt spread through him, knowing he was waiting to seduce the old man's daughter. What would Garret think if he knew? Would he like the idea of Shadoe and his daughter getting together, or would he somehow object? Shadoe wrung his hands, then put them up to his face and rubbed as if trying to rub the guilt away. The longer he sat there watching the old man, the more restless he became, his gaze darting past the arch in the wall where he knew Julita waited. Finally he leaned back, trying to relax. He knew he might as well get comfortable because it would be a while before the old man was fast asleep.

As he sat, slowly his eyes drifted to a close. He told himself that he wouldn't fall asleep as he listened to the soothing night sounds of cicadas chirping, night birds calling, and the surf pounding just outside the high windows. Before he knew it Garret was shaking him awake.

“What the hell? Did you stay down here all night?”

Shadoe lunged forward, looking around. He immediately knew what had happened. In waiting for the old man to go to sleep he had drifted off himself, his night with Julita never happening. He raked his hand through his hair while trying to quickly think up an excuse. “I...well, I was worried.”

“About what? That witch upstairs? Don’t bother. We scared the pants off her, that’s for sure. She won’t be back down here. Hell, you said so yourself.”

“Yeah,” he gave a soft, sheepish laugh. “I did, didn’t I.” He quickly rose from the chair and stretched. “Is Julita up yet?”

“I don’t think so. I haven’t seen her.”

“Are you hungry?”

The old man angled a frowning look up at him. “Is the Pope Catholic?”

Shadoe laughed. “Okay,” he replied, punching his escaping shirttail back down into his jeans. “I’ll get us all some breakfast.”

Snatching up the picnic basket, he made his way through the arch to the back door, taking a small detour to the little nook he’d fixed up for Julita, far back in a secluded corner. Boxes were stacked on both sides of the old water-stained mattress, erected to give her some privacy. Looking in he saw her sleeping, using little cover. Her hair spread wide over the pillow, and her naked body beneath the thin sheet taunted him. The play of light and shadow over her form had his mouth watering.

He felt like a king-sized jerk. The flashy beast falls asleep with a woman, hot and ready, waiting for him just a few feet away. If the guys back at the precinct knew this, he’d never hear the end of it. His male ego, and his sexual prowess had definitely taken a nosedive. The worst part was, he might not get the chance again. Looking at her now, so innocent, he wondered if it had even been an invitation. Maybe he’d placed too much emphasis on the look. Hell, she was young, had lived a sheltered life. She hadn’t been schooled in the ways of the world. And yet the look she had given him last night had all the earmarks of a woman who knew exactly what she was doing. It had him sizzling in his boots. Only a fool would have fallen asleep after a look like that.

* * * *

Following a quick shower, a change of clothes, and a big breakfast order, Shadove came slamming through the basement door with the picnic basket. He could see the anticipation on the faces of both Garret and Julita. He opened the basket and brought out eggs, bacon, hash brown potatoes, and pancakes. "I'm sure the kitchen help thinks I have a tapeworm," Shadove remarked, passing everything around. "I just hope no one gets suspicious. The odd thing is, they've never asked about the picnic basket. I think they forgot that I still have it."

"Well, don't go trying to explain," Garret said, digging in and shoveling the food into his mouth. "Nothing makes a man look guiltier than when he's stumbling through an explanation that nobody's asked for, or even cares about."

"Yeah, you're right. The only one I really have to worry about is Lucretia. As long as she's in the dark, to hell with everyone else." While making Julita comfortable and then settling down with his own breakfast, he continued. "I suppose I ought to put in an appearance upstairs, though. Other than the little scene in the dining room the other day I haven't been around. Since I was a royal pain in the ass up until then she might think it's a little strange. It sure as hell wouldn't do for her to start looking around."

"Be careful," Garret said, looking at Shadove with his familiar scowl in place. "She's a sneaky one. If she finds out you tricked her, she'll have you for breakfast."

"Thanks for the tip," Shadove said, barely listening while gobbling down food.

Following breakfast, Garret settled back with a cigarette and a cup of strong, hot coffee. Patting his stomach, he said, "Hell, I'm supposed to be a corpse. Whoever heard of a corpse gaining weight?"

"I know what you mean, I'm..." Shadove's words faded when Julita rose and excused herself to go to the back.

* * * *

Garret watched Shadove's eyes follow her. Besides the surge of jealousy it brought forth, it also reminded him of his plan. In an effort to distract him,

he said, "I'm feeling so damned good, I'm looking forward to the day I can get out of this damned basement. A stroll outside would be just the ticket."

"Whoa," Shadoe said, putting up his hand as if to slow Garret down. "That's a whole new ballgame. I want you out of here too, but I can't just go wheeling you around outside. We'd be seen."

"Hell, Shadoe, just let me sit out in it. Breathe in the fresh air, feel the wind. What about tonight? Think we can venture out on the ridge? Take a stroll along the beach?"

"All right, I'll see what I can do, but we're taking a chance. It'll have to be late, after the inn shuts down for the night. It makes me nervous just thinking about it, but I guess we can give it a try."

That night, knowing that he shouldn't, Shadoe took the chance and wheeled the old man out. He managed to get him up the stairs, then out onto the ridge, letting him sit a while, taking in the moon on the ocean.

"This'll have to be it, Garret. I don't want to have to wheel you down that incline to the beach. We'd never get back up."

"Hey, this is fine," the old man said, looking with awe out at the moon on the water. "God, this is beautiful," he said, listening to the crashing waves. "The wind, the spray, I never realized how much I missed it."

While the old man sat there, every once in a while his eyes would dart toward Shadoe, until finally he spoke. "I sure as hell hope you don't have any interest in my daughter, because as soon as possible, I'm going to get her into a school, move up north, and put all this behind me." Hesitating, he continued. "I'm afraid that includes you."

Shadoe was silent for a moment, then chuckled derisively. "So that's what this is all about. Hell, you didn't care anything about fresh air and friggin' sea spray. All you wanted was to get me away from Julita so you could—"

Garret lunged forward in his chair. "All right, so I had an ulterior motive, but you're wrong about the fresh air and sea spray. I love it. It just gave me the opportunity to do what I knew I had to do. Besides, what choice did I have? I saw something going on between you two and couldn't talk in front of her."

"You didn't need to say a damned thing. Sure, there was something between us, but the time to do anything about it is long past. You should be having this talk with Julita, not me."

“Julita? Why?”

“Because she’s the only one who’ll listen to you, that’s why. I don’t give a good goddamn what you say, old man. You might as well know that if she gave me the slightest indication that she was still interested, I’d take it. And to hell with you!”

“Sure you would. You’re a fuckin’ son of a bitch who doesn’t care that she’s nothing but a baby. Too young for someone like you.”

“I know,” Shadow said, the truth hitting him square between the eyes. “I know.” Hell, he shouldn’t be thinking of Julita in a romantic way. If he had a few more years on him, he’d be old enough to be her father. He looked at Garret and could understand his worry. “Don’t worry,” he said regretfully. “I’ll stay away from her.”

“Well, thank you for that. Now that we’ve got that settled, how about getting me inside? The wind is beginning to get a little chilly.”

* * * *

That night, once again seeing that Garret was comfortable in his bed, Shadoe sat, thinking about what he said out on the ridge. Mulling it around in his mind, he knew the old man was right, but he wanted to hear from Julita. They hadn’t been together since he had found her in her attic room, and wasn’t sure if she still felt the same way. Moving his gaze upward, he watched the old man until he could tell he was breathing easily. With slow movements, he rose from his chair and walked through the arch into the other half of the shadowed basement. If Julita had changed her mind about him it was just as well because Shadoe had felt a rising guilt every time he thought of going behind the old man’s back to be with her. Now he carefully crept around the boxes to check on Julita, and saw her sleeping soundly. Seeing that she was all right, he turned to leave.

“Don’t go,” a deep, silky voice said.

He turned and saw her leaning up on one elbow and clutching the sheet to her breasts with her other hand. “Sorry if I woke you. I just wanted to check and see if you were all right.”

* * * *

Julita looked at his solid frame, his dark hair, glowing green eyes, and remembered the times they'd been together. He was so exciting. She never knew what to say to him. She didn't want to sound like a kid. She just wished she knew the right words a woman used to seduce a man. It was totally her call now, so how did she get him to stay? She wasn't used to this. She didn't know what to do, how to perform a seduction. What words should she use? What mannerisms? She saw him waiting for the magic words, the seductive look, that one elusive thing that all men looked for, but she didn't know what they were.

"I...I'm sorry, I don't know what to say."

"About what?"

"Well..." she said shyly. "I haven't been out in the world, so I guess I don't know how to tell you that I like you."

Shadoe smiled easily. "You haven't had that problem so far. Remember the times we were together? How about the time you called me a flashy beast?"

"It seems like a million years ago. Suddenly I feel different. Not so much like a kid."

"You're not a kid anymore, Julita. When you come close to death it does something to you."

She smiled shyly, knowing that wasn't what changed her. It was being with him. He had turned her into a woman with his whispered words, his kisses, and his wild, exciting lovemaking. Her eyes raked across his sturdy body beneath his open shirt, which exposed his muscled chest, and she felt the old stirrings inside of her. The stone tucked neatly into his skin made him look even more exotic than she remembered. "You are, you know."

"What?"

"A flashy beast."

"I guess I should say thanks, that is if you meant it as a compliment."

"I guess you could call it a reaction to your..." her eyes continued to rake down his well-muscled body, "to everything...everything I see."

"Well, I've been called a lot of things, but you're the first to call me a flashy beast. Very original."

"I didn't hurt your feelings, did I? I didn't mean to."

"Oh, no, of course not."

Julita's eyes widened when she saw him walking toward her. She pulled the sheet up a little higher, and pushed herself back away from him. His closeness—his dizzying closeness was doing things to her. She tried to quell the hammering of her heart and the flush of heat that swirled like a tiny tornado deep within her groin. She felt confused by his presence, thinking she'd die if he touched her, yet knowing she'd die if he didn't.

"Are you afraid of me, Julita?"

"I...I seem to be," she said, trying to keep her voice from trembling.

He reached out to stroke her arm. "I won't hurt you. I would never—"

"I know."

"Just tell me," he said, his voice soft. "Do you want me here, or do you want me to go?"

When she hesitated, he started to move. She reached out, grabbing his arm. "No, don't go."

"But if my presence—"

"No, it's okay."

"You know I won't do anything you don't want me to," he whispered while stroking her cheek. Finally his hand lowered to the sheet, his eyes savoring the uncovering of the round, luscious breasts Lucretia tried so hard to hide. He felt his mouth tingle. He looked back up at her, delving deeply into her violet eyes. "I'll go slow," he whispered, almost as if he were begging her. He knew he was lying again. With her beneath him there was no way he could go slow. If he were in his right mind he'd stay away. She was too young, too innocent. Pulling his hand back, he said, "Maybe I should go."

"N-no," she whispered. "I just don't know how to...well, tell you that I'm willing...I just don't..."

There it was—the word he'd been waiting to hear. Willing. It was invitation enough for him. He leaned forward, placing his hand on the back of her neck, and drew her to him, covering her full lips with his own. He drew her closer and closer until she lay between him and the mattress.

His kiss sent her stomach into a wild swirl, and she responded with a surrendering sigh, melting against his body.

He wanted her. God how he wanted her, but he pulled back grudgingly. All the things he knew were wrong with what he was doing played and replayed in his mind. But he couldn't escape those violet eyes. They made

him do things he might not otherwise. Like tug on his shirt, then his trousers, his arousal straining to be released. His hands moved faster and faster until he was finally undressed and sinking down onto the mattress beside her. With his heart pounding, he pulled the sheet over him, and their bodies melded together, burning for release.

He lifted himself over her and planted a tantalizing kiss at the hollow of her neck. Then his lips made a hot, burning trail downward, climbing each mountainous breast, seeking the tantalizing buds that had swollen to their fullest. Once he was there, he cupped her breasts in his hands and covered each nipple with his mouth and suckled like a starving man. His hunger caused a deep growl to escape his throat as his lips scoured her body, bringing her to a fevered pitch.

She arched her body against him, feeling sensations she had never felt before. His lips opened and drew on her flesh while he held her captive, imprisoned in the web of his arousal. Flesh against flesh, man against woman, his cock, large and heavy, pressed against her abdomen. First it excited her, then frightened her. It was as if her body were half ice and half flame.

All at once, she felt his fingers on her thigh. While he sought the center of her soul, he whispered calming words to her, as if sensing her nervousness. She felt him open her up, gently, like the petals of a flower. Then his fingers caressed her, playing as if he'd found a new toy. She gasped, her desire shimmering upward until she felt an exploding release. She opened her eyes to see the tiny stars she felt had fallen around her but only found his lovely silhouette hovering above her.

He was potent, dangerous, a school girl hero, a movie idol, the man who filled her most ardent fantasies. She felt a thrill spiral through her and submitted to the probing hands that lifted her knees, opening her wider. Then she felt his cock gently press against the tiny bud just inside her. His hardness electrified her, causing her to twitch and jerk, the flames of ecstasy attacking her again.

"Are you ready, Julita?" he whispered.

"Yes," she answered, her breath coming in gasps, her heart throbbing out a pitter-patter of erotic pleasure.

She felt his cock enter her, then plunge deeper, causing a moan to escape her lips. She clung to him, her legs surrounding him, wanting—

urging him closer and deeper until she sucked in a breath that mingled with his.

The beast within him surged forward and his plunges became hard and fast, taking her upward to an elusive plateau. With each plunge, she moaned loudly, her voice almost rising to an erotic scream. He clamped his hand over her mouth, his thoughts of Garret just behind the wall, and plunged again, over and over into an erotic feast of pleasure he'd never known before. She was tight, God, so tight. But she opened to him, enclosing his shaft in her velvety little cunt. Her sweet, sensual surrender melted against him, her fragrant breath coming to him in long silky moans against his face.

All at once the point of no return was there, sweeping both up into its heavenly sphere. Their bodies jerked, rolled, and slapped against each other. Their breath panted, their skin sweated, etching their faces into determined passion. Together they rode the swirls of lust that locked their bodies in synch until they crashed into waves of hot, burning release. And then came a shower of scorching passion, deeply satisfied, spreading through them. Shadoe stiffened as his lusty fountain spewed within her, then at last he slumped over her, savoring the warmth of satisfaction.

They stayed in each other's arms for several minutes until she broke the silence by speaking very softly and breathlessly. "You really are a flashy beast."

Chapter Seventeen

Shadoe felt like a worm sneaking out of the basement while Julita was asleep, but if Garret were to catch him there, it might make him start asking questions. He didn't want to go another round with him like he had on the ridge. The old man was sharp, and one false move would give it all away.

Later, again filling the picnic basket with the enormous breakfast order he had sent for, he made his way back down to the basement, and the three of them enjoyed the inn's famous Southern Country Breakfast of hearty biscuits and gravy with crumbled sausage, and eggs, potatoes, and three kinds of breakfast meats.

"You know," Garret began, while shoveling the food in, "I'm going to repay you for all this, don't you? Hell, you must've spent a lot of money on all this."

Shadoe almost strangled on the food in his mouth. "No, no," he said, coughing with a napkin pressed against his mouth. His guilt immediately brought up visions of his night with Julita. He knew if Garret had any idea what had gone on between them, this conversation wouldn't be taking place. "I don't expect to be paid back. Besides, you've got enough to worry about just dodging that witch upstairs. Let's just try to get you out of here alive, okay?"

"But it seems unfair. Me with all my money and you having to foot the bill on all of this."

"Garret," Shadoe said, finally clearing his throat and finding his voice. "It's taken care of, okay?"

Garret shrugged, but continued eating. "Whatever you say." After consuming the food in short order, Garret took a deep breath, pushed his empty plate away, threw his napkin down, then lit a cigarette to have with his coffee. "You know, with all that makeup and stuff you've got stashed

away, I'd love to be able to get out of this chair and *really* scare the hell out of Lucretia. It'd serve her right. She'd lose what little mind she's got left."

Shadoe's eyes fell to Garret's legs. "How much can you feel? You know, if we could swing it, I'd love to take you to a specialist and see what difference a little therapy would make on those legs."

"Hell, there's nothing wrong with my legs. It's my back that's the problem."

Shadoe's brows lifted in surprise. "So you're saying if we get the back straightened out, then the legs would be okay?"

"I assume so. They'd be weak at first...I mean, I haven't walked on them for almost eighteen years. The only time I've come close to getting up on these legs again was the other night when Lucretia pulled me up out of my chair. I fell, but not before I took a couple of steps in her direction."

"A couple of steps?" Shadoe looked at Garret with surprise. "Where the hell was I? I didn't see that."

"You probably had your beady eyes on my naked daughter," Garret rasped, his voice low while he slid his eyes toward Julita who sat in a far corner eating. "I'm sure you would've loved seeing me go down on my skinny ass..." His words stopped abruptly and his eyes shifted toward Shadoe, meeting them with intensity. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Shadoe smiled. "I sure as hell am. How is your back? Any pain? Can you move around all right?"

"My back is fine. I haven't had pain in my back for years."

Shadoe's face slowly stretched into a happy smile. "Why, old man, you're not paralyzed, just damned lazy. Put that coffee down and let's get you up on your feet."

Garret smiled as he placed the cup in the saucer. "Now you're talkin'."

Shadoe folded the footrests away, then jumped up and began tugging on Garret. "Did it ever occur to you that Lucretia might have known that? Hell, maybe that's why she wanted to keep you weak. She must have known you weren't completely paralyzed."

"Damned bitch. I tell you, Shadoe, if I ever get my hands on that woman I'll strangle the life out of her!"

"I've got you now. Try to take a step. By the way, how much do you remember about that night? Did the doctor—?"

“That damned doctor. I can’t believe he’d let her intimidate him like he did. He couldn’t do anything without her approval, and she sure as hell wasn’t giving it.” He stumbled while trying to move his legs. “I could hear them talking. I think they were outside the room. I don’t know, maybe the door was open or something. I had been sedated, and they must have been far enough away to keep me from hearing everything, but I distinctly remember him trying to get her to approve surgery. He tried to make it clear that it might not be necessary, but he needed to examine me, take tests to know for sure. I don’t know all of it, but I remember he mentioned a walker, and a cane...yeah, that’s it, a cane. He said I’d eventually be using a cane.”

“And the mysterious Ms. Van Dare knew all along she wasn’t about to let you be examined or have surgery. She didn’t want you out of that wheelchair.”

“Yeah, she knew, that damned bitch knew. I remember trying to say something. My mouth moved, but nothing came out. I even struggled to get up, but I couldn’t move a muscle. I think it was then that I got the idea in my mind that the paralysis had taken hold and there was no hope.”

“God, your whole life wasted.”

“Yeah,” Garret said, a menacing look on his face as his fiery eyes pierced the ceiling to the upper floors. “But I’ll get my revenge if I have to crawl to do it.”

“Why not walk?”

Garret looked at Shadoe as if he’d lost his mind. “Sure, make fun of an old—”

“Garret, you’ve been standing alone for several seconds.”

“What?” Garret said, and looked down at himself. Seeing himself standing there shocked him, and he immediately fell back in his chair.

“I’m proud of you, Shadoe said, then knelt down in front of him. “You know what did it? Your anger at Lucretia. Whatever you do, don’t get in a forgiving mood when you think about her. Stay mad and someday you’ll be walking again. Now, how about letting me look your legs over?”

“Only if you don’t start lusting after me.”

Shadoe snickered. “Sorry, but your daughter’s already stolen my heart.” Shadoe was sorry the minute he’d said it. His hands stalled and he looked up into Garret’s heated stare.

The two men's eyes met and held, a long silence stretching between them until Garret said, "Yeah? Which one?"

The silence became charged with memories of the night on the ridge hanging between them. Shadoe knew he could smooth it over, but he stayed silent, tired of pretending he didn't feel something for Julita. Besides it would be better if it was out in the open. They needed to deal with the problem and reason it out. But with someone as stubborn as Garret Van Dare, it wouldn't be easy. He'd never met a man so set in his ways.

* * * *

Garret watched Shadoe as he gently pushed up his pants legs. The man was one of the good guys, no doubt about that, so why wasn't he happy about Shadoe's infatuation with Julita? After all, the man had saved his life, or what was left of it. And now Shadoe wanted his daughter. His gaze stabbed Shadoe critically while he still felt around on his legs. Dark skinned, Indian heritage. Handsome devil, though. Good guy, as good as they come. But if he had to hand over his daughter for his freedom, the price was too damned high!

"God, your legs are skin and bones."

"What the hell did you expect? Betty Grable? Oh, sorry," he said sarcastically, "you're too friggin' young to remember her."

"I've heard of Betty Grable. Great lookin' dame. Some legs." He looked back down at Garret's legs, feeling around on them. "You're not going very far on these, though. We'll just have to build you up."

Something drove Garret as he observed the dark-skinned savage rubbing his legs. He knew he was being unfair, but he couldn't stop himself. "You're really into this touchy, feely stuff, aren't you? Julita's not enough for you. Now you're after her old man. That it?"

Shadoe jerked his head upward, and looked at Garret with a frown. "What the hell is wrong with you? I'm straight as an arrow—"

Garret couldn't stop himself and barreled on. "Yeah, you'd know a lot about arrows, wouldn't you?"

"What the hell does that mean? I'd much rather be feeling around on Ju—"

“Leave my daughter alone, you savage.” Garret was fuming. He knew he shouldn’t say anything with Julita around, but he couldn’t seem to keep his mouth shut. He leaned forward, trying to keep his voice down. “I thought we went through this on the ridge. She’s off limits!”

Ordinarily he might try to defend his relationship with Julita, but he’d only heard one thing—savage. He’d heard it before, many times. His anger sprang to life, and his tone was low and threatening. “Are you saying you resent my heritage?”

Garret suddenly realized what he was doing, and lowered his head. “No...yes...hell, I don’t know.”

“Come on, Garret, just say it. I’ll get you out of this goddamned basement no matter how you feel about me.” He indicated toward the outside. “But in that world out there you’re going to be walking around again one day. Will you resent me then? If I try to see Julita, if we fall in love, how would you feel about that?”

“Fall in love?” Garret yelled, then looked hard at Shadoe. “Have you had your hands on my daughter? Touched her?”

“You know who you sound like? That bitch upstairs!”

“Stay away from her,” he snarled, “do you hear?”

“Yes, I hear.”

He lowered his eyes sadly, his anger draining away, turning to hurt. Why couldn’t he stay mad at the old man? Instead he felt like he’d been shot in the heart with an arrow. Hell, why should he be surprised? Bigotry had become part of his life. He’d faced it before, and he’d face it again. In most cases he’d learned to live with it, but sometimes it reared its ugly head in the strangest places. This was one of those places. Except for his obsession with his daughter, Garret seemed like such a right kind of guy, he never thought he’d hear it coming from him.

* * * *

The silence in the basement was strained while Shadoe pulled the pants back down over his legs. “We’ll have to build up those legs. Tomorrow we’ll start an exercise regimen. We’ll get you up on your feet again, you should...” His words faded as his eyes drifted up to Garret and saw the old man looking at him, his hands crossed in his lap, his permanent scowl back

in place. Somehow he knew there would be no tomorrow, and found himself wanting to apologize. But for what? His Indian heritage? He wasn't ashamed of his heritage, and he certainly wouldn't apologize for it. Besides, a man apologized for things he could help, things he could have done differently, not those things he had no control over.

"Garret, would you rather me bow out now? We've done what we planned to do, so there's no reason to prolong this. I'll contact the local P.D. and have you out of here in a matter of hours."

"Now he tells me," Garret retorted.

His eyes flickered at the smart retort. "This was your idea, you old coot, not mine! I could have had you out of here a long time ago, but no, you didn't want to play it by the book, because you wanted that witch upstairs to pay for what she's done to you and Julita. It didn't matter what my heritage was then, did it? Just as long as your stomach stayed full and I got you out of this goddamned basement. Right? What suddenly changed your mind? Me and Julita? Can't stand the thought of a half-breed savage touching your daughter, much less joining the family? Sure, I'm good enough to feed you and help you scare the pants off Lucretia, but not quite good enough when it comes to your daughter. Am I right?"

"Keep your voice down, you bastard. Where's Julita?"

"She can't hear us, she's in the back."

* * * *

But Julita had heard it—heard it all. She was about to come around the corner when she heard them talking, but stopped dead still when she realized they were arguing. How could her papa treat Shadoe like that? Not only had he gone to great personal expense to come to their rescue, he had turned her into a woman with the passion of a tiger. The way they felt about each other should be the important thing. Not what he was or where he came from. It didn't matter to her that he was a half-breed. He was beautiful and good. And her papa had hurt him.

And then Shadow's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"You don't have to worry, Garret. I'll get you out of this basement. Then you and Julita can go live on the moon for all I care."

"Shadoe—" the old man began.

“Hell, no, Garret. Don’t say a thing. I’ve been through this hundreds of times. Why should I expect anything different from you?”

* * * *

Garret saw Shadoe get up from his crouch and stack their dirty dishes in the picnic basket. He had to hand it to the boy. He hadn’t thrown all the help he’d given them in his face. He’d just cut it off clean and neat. Garret felt a certain sadness about what had gone on between them, but somehow he couldn’t change his mind. He knew there were a lot of things about himself that were less than desirable, but he would never have admitted to being a snob.

* * * *

Shadoe banged through the back door of the basement on his way around the inn to get to the back stairs. He didn’t want to see Lucretia and figured she’d be at the front desk as always.

But he was wrong.

When he went to rush up the stairs, he found her coming down. Both stopped on the steps and looked at each other. A smile twitched at her lip.

“Why, hello, Mr. Madison.” Her eyes lowered to the basket. “Another picnic? At this hour?”

He looked at her robe. It seemed strange to see her in anything but the high-collared dresses she wore. “I’m an early riser. I like to eat outside,” he said, feeling the answer was a stupid one.

“Why are you coming in through the kitchen? I really must ask you to come in through the front. This is off limits to the guests. It’s only for deliveries and such. I’m sure you understand.”

He forced a smile. “Oh, sure, I certainly do.” He indicated toward the door. “I was just walking down by the beach. Thought I’d save a few steps.” Placing the picnic basket on the floor, he walked up a few steps as if to go around her, but she didn’t move.

“Got any wine in that basket?”

“Don’t drink wine for breakfast.” His eyes darted up to her, then quickly away. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get upstairs.”

"You should try it sometime," she said, still blocking the stairs.

"What...try what?"

"Wine for breakfast. Wine is not like hard alcohol. Many people drink it for breakfast."

Hell, yes, if you're a wino, Shadoe thought, looking at the woman as if she'd lost her mind. "Maybe I'm just not worldly enough," he muttered.

"Oh, I think you are."

Oh, my God, she's flirting with me. This cadaver in a light blue robe is flirting with me! "Yeah, well, look I'm in an awful hurry, would you excuse me?"

Her smile faded and a cold look crept into her eyes. "Yes, of course." She turned sideways to let him pass.

He had climbed a few steps, then hesitated. Finally, turning back to her, he said, "Say, I was wondering, I haven't seen the girl in the mask around lately. What happened to her? Seems like she just disappeared into thin air. Kind of strange." His eyes narrowed on her to get her reaction to his question.

Lucretia stiffened. "I...she...I had to send her away. You were right, of course."

"Right? About what?"

"When you suggested she wasn't quite right. I thought about it a lot and finally had to commit her to an asylum. Yes, she was becoming a danger to herself and to the guests." Her smile was nervous when she looked at him. "I want to thank you for your professional observation. It was just what I needed to take another look at Julita. One that wasn't biased since she was my sister."

"Too bad," Shadoe said, thinking that the notorious Ms. Van Dare certainly was practiced in the art of deception. "What was it that unbalanced her? Her face, perhaps?"

"Yes, I think that might have played an important part in it. She's had to wear the mask since she was a baby, and...well, you can imagine how something like that can play on your mind."

"You mean wearing the mask day in and day out?"

"Yes...and the scars. Ugly, puckering things. Living with something like that day after day is bound to unhinge a person." She angled a nervous

look at him. “I thought you had seen her without her mask once. Did you get a look at the scars? Ugly things.”

“No, I didn’t,” he assured her. “I would have liked to though. I still say a good plastic surgeon—”

She breathed a little easier, a satisfied smirk playing around her mouth. “Really, Mr. Madison, in Julita’s case she couldn’t have benefited from it. I’m afraid her face was too badly damaged.”

“Oh, I see. Well, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get my camera. I was going to take a few shots of the bones down below the ridge.” He saw the blood drain from her face.

“Yes, well, be careful.”

He turned, hoping the conversation had done a little bit to stamp out any romantic notions she’d had about him. As soon as he reached his room, he picked up the phone.

“Give me the local P.D.”

* * * *

With the report burning in his ears, Dan Simmons, Chief of the Scarlet Police Department, immediately applied for a search warrant. After it was procured, someone from the judge’s office tipped off the media.

“I’ll handle this myself,” Simmons said, then turned to two other officers. “Wilson, you and Dodd back me up. Sounds like the inn is at it again.”

The two squad cars peeled out, their tires burning rubber and their sirens causing a piercing scream to split the mist-shrouded morning. Revolving blue and red lights cast a moving rainbow of color on the trees and shrubs that lined the road until they reached the famous Scarlet Bay Inn. The caravan of squad cars, news vans with their station’s logos emblazoned on the side, and an ambulance, took a sharp turn and bumped up into the famous crushed-shell drive.

Before the vehicles even came to a halt, doors were thrown open, and several people spilled out, some in uniform, others carrying camcorders, lights, and high-tech equipment. This was a small town and a story like this didn’t come along often. They carted their equipment out of their vans, swarmed into the yard, and ruthlessly fought their way into the crowd of

officers who were constantly pushing them back, yelling for them to get out of the way.

* * * *

Hearing the noise, Lucretia quickly ran to a window. Her eyes widened at the crowd of uniformed officers and news vans. Having no idea what was happening, she let the drape drop and made her way to the front door and swung it open. She rushed out and stood on the curve of the portico, watching as Shadoe Madison preceded a line of uniformed officers walking toward the inn.

“That’s her,” he said, pointing her out.

The lead officer walked up to her. “Are you Lucretia Van Dare?”

“Yes,” she said, hardly looking at the officer as she made her way around him to get to Shadoe. “What has happened? What are all these policemen doing here?”

Before he could answer, the officer who had approached her, barked at her from behind. “Ms. Van Dare!”

She turned. “Yes. What do you want?” she asked impatiently.

He extended a folded piece of paper toward her. “I’ve got a search warrant to search your basement.”

“What?” she said, looking down at the formidable document he waved in front of her face. She looked back up at him. “Wh-why...I—”

“We have a report that you’re keeping a man, I believe he’s your father, prisoner in your basement. Is that correct?”

Her face paled. “No, it...it’s not true, it’s simply not true.”

“Then you won’t mind if we look.”

“No, you can’t come in here upsetting my guests. I...my father is...he’s dead.”

“Please step aside.”

“No!” she shouted in his face. “You can’t!” She looked around at the milling crowd. “I don’t understand any of this!”

“Ma’am, charges have been filed against you,” the officer said. “You understand that, don’t you?”

“But who—?”

“Lieutenant Shadoe Madison of the NYPD.”

Lucretia felt as if the wind had been knocked out of her. “H-he’s a c-cop?”

Just then she saw Shadoe being pursued by a reporter with a microphone while he directed the other officer, a medic, and a police photographer around to the back. She sidestepped the officer and ran toward Shadoe. “You bastard! Coming in here, masquerading as a goddamned photographer, then a journalist. What is this? Is this another disguise you’re wearing?”

“Afraid not,” he said, “what you see is what you get.”

“That mouth of yours...I should have thrown you out when I had the chance, you scummy bastard! I want you out now, do you hear? You will not spend another night in this inn.”

He turned and looked down at her, a smirk on his face. “Neither will you, lady.”

She gasped at his words, then turned to the crowd. “Just a minute,” she shouted, but no one listened to her. “This is my home, and you’re on private property. What do you want here?”

Suddenly a microphone was pushed into her face and blinding lights spotlighted her. “Miss Van Dare, we received a report that you have people held captive in your basement. Any truth to that?”

Lucretia’s face drained of any blood while squinting at the lights. “Where did you hear such lies? Really, that’s preposterous.” Her eyes widened when she recognized some of the guests streaming out of the inn to see what was happening. “No one is in my basement,” she said to the reporters and other faces she didn’t recognize. “I don’t know what you’re talking...” Her voice faded when she heard a noise and everyone began running toward it. “Who are these people?” she shouted, watching the crowd tramping around on her property. She began crying. No one would listen to her. No one...*God, what was happening?*

* * * *

A reporter stood in front of a camera just a few feet from Lucretia, who could be seen in the background whirling around wildly and screaming obscenities at the people around her. “As you can see,” she said, “Lucretia Van Dare, and the latest scandal at Scarlet Bay Inn has just made headlines...again!”

* * * *

Garret turned with a start when he heard a commotion outside the basement door. Within seconds the door banged open, leather shoes scraped on dirty concrete, and clamoring voices all talking at once preceded the crowd that rushed into the room. He jerked himself around, looking at the unfamiliar faces. All at once he was surrounded, and had to hide his eyes as flashbulbs exploded in his face.

“What is this?” he demanded, trying to see past the assaulting flashes of light.

“My God,” someone said in a hushed tone, “he’s skin and bones. The man is starving to death.”

“You Garret Van Dare?” the officer asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “Who are you?”

“I’m Chief Dan Simmons, and my second here is Officer Galen Brecc. We got a report that you were being held prisoner in this basement. Any truth to that?”

Garret knew immediately what had happened. Shadoe had called in the authorities just as he’d suggested. “Yes,” he said, sounding tired. “Thank God you’re here.”

Just then a medic with a stethoscope hanging around his neck pushed through. “I need to examine him.”

“This is Medical Examiner Druce Aldrich,” the chief said to Garret. “He needs to check you over. Then we’ll remove you from the premises.”

“I understand,” Garret said, then saw Julita making her way through the crowd from the other part of the basement. He held his arms out and she went into them. “This is my daughter, Julita. It’s okay, baby,” he whispered when he heard her sobbing and felt her body trembling with fear.

Officer Brecc, taking in Garret’s gaunt face and bony frame, turned to the doctor. “How is he, doctor?”

“Very strong for someone as undernourished as he is. What did you live on?”

“Not much. Rotten food, mostly. That’s all my daughter would give me. After a while it started tasting pretty good...until she didn’t want me around anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, she gave me food mixed with roaches, ants...God—” his stomach lurched, “—sometimes alive, crawling...” He hesitated for a moment to get his nausea under control, then continued. “When she was upset with me she would put a dead animal on my plate. After a while the food became sparse, undercooked, if cooked at all.”

The medic looked at him with a face mixed with compassion and disgust. Trying to stay objective, he forced his voice to maintain its authority. “Sir, we’re going to transport you to the nearest hospital.”

“Yes, thank you,” Garret said, grateful that his torture finally came to an end.

The medic looked at Julita. “Is this the child who suffered abuse?”

Garret looked down at her, tears shining in his eyes. “Yes, she was beaten, drugged—”

The medic reached for her arm, but Julita shrunk back.

“It’s okay, baby,” Garret said. “Let him see your arm.”

“Two daughters?” the medic asked, while looking at the bruises on Julita’s arm as well as the rest of her body. “Is that all you have?”

Just then Garret looked up and saw Shadoe.

When their eyes met, Shadoe made a mock salute and said, “Be seein’ you, pops.” His gaze shifted and lingered longingly on Julita for several seconds, then turned away.

* * * *

Garret looked after him, remembering the last angry words he had said to Shadoe in this room. He should be relieved, happy to be out of this prison, but instead, a sadness enveloped him. Would he ever see Shadoe again? Would he have a chance to say thanks? Was this just another case Shadoe was putting behind him? Why couldn’t Shadoe understand why Garret had acted as he had? He respected Shadoe, trusted him. There were very few men on this earth he felt that way about, and Shadoe was one of them. Indian or not, he was a good cop. Knew what he was doing. Hard not to respect a man like that.

He knew he’d overreacted, using Shadoe’s heritage like a weapon against him. Garret had done wrong, but could he really say he was sorry? It

wasn't Shadoe's heritage, not entirely. Garret just wasn't ready for his daughter to belong to anyone but him. He'd been robbed of her presence in his life for fifteen years and had a lot of catching up to do. To see her in someone else's arms—he just wasn't ready for it. She was only eighteen. She needed to grow up, live a little, buy new dresses, take a trip around the world, catch up on all the things she'd missed. And he wanted to give her all that. He wanted to be her teacher, her mentor, the only love in her life right now. There'd be plenty of time for men later on.

"Mr. Van Dare, please."

Garret's thoughts dissipated like so much smoke when he heard the medic's voice. "I'm sorry," he said, looking up at the man, "what was the question?"

"You have two daughters, is that correct?"

"Yes," he said, "Lucretia runs the inn, and Julita here was living upstairs in the attic...."

"The attic? Was she held prisoner?"

"No, not in the way you mean. She was tortured, made to wear a mask...really, officer," he said turning to the chief, "can't this wait until later? I'm feeling very weak."

"Of course," he said, then nodded at the medic. "Better get him out of here. The daughter can go—"

"She stays with me," Garret said, possessively.

The chief signaled the uniform who had his hand on Julita's arm, subtly telling him to check things outside.

The crowd made way for the gurney Garret was on to pass. He held Julita's hand as she walked beside him. When they turned the corner of the mansion he saw Lucretia struggling while being taken into custody.

When Lucretia saw him, she ran up to him, yelling in his face. "You bastard, you tricked me. Well, this is not the end, do you hear?" Her eyes shifted, looking up at Julita. "You and your precious little whore will rue the day you—"

"Come on Ms. Van Dare," the police officer said, "don't make threats on top of everything else you've got stacked against you." With that, he began pulling her toward the squad car.

"Bastard!" she yelled out at Garret while resisting the officer who had his hand on her head, pushing her inside.

Garret saw her glaring at him from inside the car. With the play of light and shadow on her face, making her ugliness even more sinister, he could almost hear the obscenities she mouthed at him. He was finally rolled into the back of the ambulance and heard the sirens scream as they made their way out of the drive and sped back down the coastal highway.

* * * *

Back at the inn, several digging instruments clanked loudly as they were thrown down in the yard. As soon as the ambulance had left, the chief and the other officers began digging. By late afternoon they had found several corpses while cameras whirled, the grisly pictures scheduled to be broadcast all over the country.

* * * *

The day came when Garret had to testify at Lucretia's trial and was wheeled in front of the courtroom. He knew how he looked, and didn't blame some for the shock in their faces when they saw him. His hair was still a chopped-up mess, and his limbs were weak. His voice, when he tried to speak, was raspy, but the courtroom was held in rapt silence as he described in detail the story of his accident and his fifteen-year plight in the basement at the mercy of his insane daughter. Murmurs, gasps of shock, and even tears fell from those who saw his pain.

The day that Julita's sad story was told, a sobbing woman separated herself from the crowd and ran toward Lucretia. "You bitch!" she yelled, before anyone could stop her. She reached out to attack Lucretia as she hovered behind her lawyer. The press immediately hopped on this, bringing a flurry of reporters surging toward the front and crowding around the attack. They aimed their cameras at the two females while the judge banged his gavel for order. She was finally pulled away while screaming obscenities at Lucretia and led outside.

* * * *

When Shadoe got up on the stand, he told the court all about his initial suspicions, then his covert activities to find out the truth. He described in detail about how he found Garret held prisoner in the basement trying to exist on rotten food and living in conditions a rat would find offensive.

“The old man was almost dead,” he said, looking over at Garret and seeing the scowl he had come to know so well. “I had to feed him, build up his strength. Moving him in that condition would have been too dangerous. Until that time, I had to make Lucretia believe they were dead to keep her out of the basement. If she had any idea what was going on, it would mean death for all of us.”

He avoided talking about the falling out between him and Garret, saying only that he took a couple of days to build up his strength. He added that he was just about to start Garret on an exercise regimen when he realized that a professional therapist would do a much better job than he could.

“Every minute we spent there was taking a chance that Lucretia might begin to get suspicious and find them, and I just couldn’t take that chance. That’s when I decided to bring in the local authorities.”

* * * *

When the trial was over, and the whole story hit the press, Shadoe’s face, along with those of the Van Dare family, was plastered on every front page, detailing the story again and again. When it was over, Lucretia was surrounded by an explosion of flashbulbs, shouts, and rushing bodies before she was finally handcuffed and carted off to the State of Georgia Lunatic Asylum.

The day that Lucretia rode up to the building, her eyes raked over the aged, chipped façade of the crouching old hospital, and felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. When she walked through the doors and encountered the cold, impersonal stares of the staff, the ripped linoleum on the floors, and walls that had lines of rust stains running down them, something inside her rebelled. She refused to be shuffled aside by those who hated her and be buried and forgotten in this hell!

Chapter Eighteen

One year later, New York City

It was early evening and the night slowly became brightly decorated with neon lights and strange creatures oozing from the shadowy cracks of the city. Shadoe hadn't been the same since Lucretia's trial. He was moody and silent, and thinking a lot about Julita.

He and his partner were cruising down Broadway when he heard gunshots coming out of a little shop that did body art. He skidded the squad car to a halt and the two of them spilled out. Shrieking people, running in every direction, erupted from the brightly lit shop, followed by an older man who came staggering out while holding his stomach, blood seeping through his fingers.

"Freeze!" Shadoe yelled, seeing two youths running away from the scene. He drew his gun and fired a wild shot, but the youths kept going, melting into the shadows of the night.

"You stay here," he yelled at his partner. "Get on the radio and get this man to a hospital. I'll try and catch the bastards!" He turned quickly and raced toward the two bodies that by now were nothing but tiny specks in the distance.

Later he and his partner walked into the station, a pair of handcuffs on a lanky boy of only sixteen with a pierced body. Shadoe pushed him into a straight-backed chair beside the desk of a sergeant with a scowling look on his face.

"All right, what's the story?" the tired sergeant asked.

"Book the bum for burglary," Shadoe said, "and possible attempted murder. Two perps. One got away. Don't know yet who did the shooting. Victim's in the hospital. If he lives he'll identify our guest here." Jerking the boy around, he peered into his face threateningly. "But I have a feeling this

little son of a bitch is gonna spill his guts. Right?" The boy gave Shadoe a *go to hell* look and Shadoe laughed. "I think we know which one of us is going to wind up in hell."

Shadoe walked toward the back of the room while rolling his aching shoulders. It wasn't easy trying to work out twelve hours of wrestling down thieves, murderers, and drug dealers, running helter-skelter through alleyways and shooting at shadows in the dark. Finally he picked up a reasonably clean mug and poured himself a cup of stale coffee.

Parenti looked at Shadoe closely. "Hey, it's been...what, a year since we last had to kick you out of here? What the hell is with you? You didn't kick, yell, or curse once. Don't you feel like plowing down the population since the other kid got away?"

The cup hovered in front of Shadoe's lips as they curved into a smile at the jibe. "Not this time."

"Well," Parenti smiled, "glad to hear it. Looks like you finally got your head on straight."

"Can't win 'em all, I guess," Shadoe said, wincing at the foul-tasting coffee as he slumped into his chair.

Parenti perched on the side of Shadoe's desk. "So what's the latest on the gruesome Scarlet Bay mystery? The father and daughter just seemed to vanish."

Lifting his feet and resting them on top of the desk, Shadoe said, "I don't know. Haven't heard anything."

"Something strange there."

Taking a sip, Shadoe scowled while looking into his cup. "God, why do I drink this stuff?" Setting his cup down and pushing it away, he looked up at his partner. "Okay, so what is it that's so strange?"

"That bastard didn't even say thanks. All through the trial he didn't speak to you once. Didn't even try to make contact later. Something's wrong."

"Hell, Parenti, I didn't do it for thanks, I did it...well, hell, I couldn't not do it. You know how I am. I see something's not right, and I have to stick my big ugly nose in it until I can make it right."

"Yeah, but the man owes you, Madison. If someone had rescued me from the hell he endured, I'd be down on my knees kissing his feet."

"You don't know Garret Van Dare the way I do. He's..." He gave a slight shrug. "I don't know...not the gooey type. The man probably chews razor blades for breakfast to sharpen his bite."

"Face it, Madison, the old man's a jerk. He could have at least given you a big chunk of change. The old bastard could easily afford it. He's richer than God."

"He doesn't owe me a damned thing. I did what I did because somebody had to. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time." He shrugged. "That's all there is to it. Case closed." He picked up the cup and handed it to his partner. "Here, do something with this," he said, swinging his legs off the desk. "I need to get in to see the captain, see what he's got for me."

"If you say so," Parenti remarked, then took a sip out of the cup and frowned. He quickly threw it out, then nodded toward the captain's office. "He's in now, looks like."

Shadoe picked up a pencil and began looking at his own teeth marks, evidence of his past stress. "How about the man that got shot? How bad was he hurt?"

"Huh? Oh, he'll be okay. Lucky son of a bitch. Only got a flesh wound. Lot of blood, though. Scared the hell out of me."

"Him too, I'll bet," Shadoe quipped as he threw the pencil aside and stood up. "See you around." Turning, he headed for the captain's office and stuck his head in. "Hey, Captain, if you don't need me anymore, I'm checkin' out."

"Come on in. Got something to go over with you."

"Yeah? What's cooking?"

"I might need you to go into the Leopard Club as a bouncer. Seems there's some drug dealing going on there."

"Drug dealing, huh?"

The captain looked up at him, observing his laid-back attitude. "Not, drug dealing, you wimp," he said with a whiney voice, "fuckin' *drug dealing!*" he growled, his voice digging deep into his throat.

Shadoe smiled. "Oh, I see. The big time."

"You're damned right, the big time. Nobody but you can handle this one. You up for it?"

"I'm there. When do you want me?"

“Not for a while yet. For the time being keep riding shotgun with Parenti. I should be getting something solid in the next few days.”

“Where’s Delaney?”

“Had an emergency. Family thing. Had to go to Vermont...mother died or something.”

Shadoe’s brow creased at the bad news. “Too bad,” he murmured, then looked up. “Okay, well, you need me anymore tonight? I’d like to get out of here.”

A surprised look crossed the captain’s face. “You mean you’re going to walk out that door without me kicking you out?” He gave Shadoe a slow grin. “My God, has the Earth toppled off its axis?”

Shadoe smiled. “Okay, so I deserved that. Now, if you can bring yourself to act like a responsible law enforcement officer, I’d like an answer to my question. I need to unwind a little. Me and Parenti have been here for twelve friggin’ hours for God’s sake. Give me a break. Hell, give us both a break.”

“Hellfire, Madison, you’re not foolin’ me. You forget how long we’ve known each other. It’s a woman, isn’t it? You always start acting like this when you’re thinking about a woman. You become distracted, moody—”

“You’re so damned cold, you’re spittin’ icicles,” Shadoe denied hotly.

“Yeah? Something tells me I’m not.”

“Hey, am I out of here or not?”

“Sure, go ahead. You might as well leave since you won’t be doing the department any good until you get her in the sack. Who is she? Someone you just met? Good-looking, huh?”

Shadoe stood up, and turned. “I’m outta here. You need me, you can get me on my cell phone.”

“Hey Madison!” he yelled. “Do her once for me, okay?”

Without looking back, Shadoe lifted his hand and gave his captain the finger.

* * * *

“Bastard,” the captain muttered to himself. “Why the hell do I put up with that son of a bitch?”

“I give up. Why?”

The captain looked up, surprised to see one of his officers standing in the empty doorway. "Because he a damned good cop, Sosa. You'd be doing yourself a favor if you took lessons."

"Can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Hey, somebody's gotta be the slacker," he said jokingly. He lifted his hands, palms up, and moved them up and down counter to each other. "Balance out the precinct, you know?"

"And you do it damned well," he said, frowning up at him. "Now, what the hell do you want?"

"Little penny-ante burglary on the Southside. Want me and—"

"You and Nash get on it."

"You got it."

"By the way, tell Parenti to get his ass out of here," he said, then mumbled, "It's a sad day when Madison is the voice of reason around here."

* * * *

Shadoe slammed into his Toyota Land Cruiser, turned the key, recklessly backed up, and then charged out of the parking lot. As soon as he was on the street he reached back and pulled the strip of buckskin out of his hair and let it blow free in the strong breeze. He drove fast, trying to get the cobwebs of the past out of his mind, but it didn't help. Thoughts of Julita came creeping back. During the trial he'd tried to talk to her, but both Garret and their lawyer held on to her, keeping her safe within their circle. It was easy to see why. She was probably overwhelmed by all that had happened, and the press didn't play favorites. They pursued all of them relentlessly. She still wore the large clothes that hung limp on her curvaceous body, her face hidden behind red-gold strands of hair. He couldn't forget her frightened, darting eyes. When her face could be seen, it was without color and without expression, except fear. She stayed in the arms of the lawyer who had gained her trust. It was a tight circle, the three of them, Garret in his chair, the lawyer, and Julita. From that circle of safety, she looked out on the throngs of people as if afraid they would eat her up.

Shadoe reached over and pulled a piece of ragged material out of the glove compartment and handled it gently. It was a piece of the evidence he

had lied to get. Now, looking at the dingy handcrafted mask he held in his hand, he thought about her once again crouching in that damned baby bed with her hair in dog ears and dressed in provocative baby doll pajamas. Out of all the familiar pictures of her he carried around, he couldn't seem to get that one out of his head.

Shadoe stopped by a liquor store and stocked up on scotch, bourbon, and beer, then slammed into his apartment, throwing his keys on a table and his jacket on a chair. He dug out the bourbon, opened it and looked around at the dirty dishes, "Must be the maid's day off," he wisecracked to himself.

Since all the glasses were dirty, he took the bottle, peeled off his shirt, then strolled over to an open window and sat on the ledge. While looking out on the busy, brightly lit city, he could feel the cool wind on his overheated body. Lifting the bottle, he drank until he wasn't good for anything but sleeping it off. Eventually his eyelids fluttered to a close while haunting shadows played on their blank screens.

He saw himself surrounded by trees. He could hear the wind rustling the leaves, the screeching call of the night birds and the lonely sound of serenading cicadas. It was all so familiar—as if he'd been there before. All at once an eerie voice lifted on the night wind.

"Shadoe, please come! Please help my baby. She's in danger! He's going to hurt her!"

He thrashed along, working his way through the foliage, then stopped and looked up, seeing the moon, perfectly round in shape and shining down on something. What was it? He pushed the low-hanging branches back and saw an old church. He'd seen it before, but why was he thinking about it now? He'd pushed it so far back in his memory, he'd forgotten. But there it stood, the spiral reaching up as if to pierce the moon. It might have stood tall and proud at one time. On some corner where believers came to gather, its stained glass letting in sunlight that painted the walls in rainbow colors. A bell in its proud steeple must have clearly chimed out every Sunday morning just as services began, but now it was dead, its walls holding some restless spirit that cried out in pain for her baby.

"Bring her to me! Bring my baby to me," the voice urged just before Shadoe lunged forward, finding himself still on the window ledge.

Some kind of knowing suddenly filled him up inside, and he knew now what the woman was saying. "In danger," he repeated. "He's going to hurt

her,” he muttered, mulling the words over and over in his mind. Julita. Garret. “He’s going to hurt...oh my God,” he muttered. “It’s Julita. She’s the baby.”

Shadoe knew a little of the history. He knew that her mother had died in childbirth, never getting to hold her daughter, never even getting to name her. Could it be Julita’s mother crying out in the night? Capturing someone’s dreams, calling for help?

“But not Garret,” Shadoe reasoned. “Garret wouldn’t hurt her. Why would...” And then suddenly a burst of understanding filled his mind and Shadoe finally realized the truth.

Garret hadn’t had Julita with him for fifteen years, even thought she might be dead. Now that they’re together, he’s reluctant to let go. He didn’t resent Shadoe for his heritage, that was only his excuse. He would resent any man who tried to take her away from him. Had Julita went from one obsessive situation to another? Would Garret even resort to murder to keep her with him?

He raked his fingers through his hair, arguing with himself. “But why? Why would he? He loved Julita. He lov—” His words stopped abruptly when he remembered that Lucretia loved her too!

Oh God, he thought. She had been left in the hands of the enemy! He had to find her. Would they have gone back to Scarlet Bay? No, he didn’t think so. Garret wouldn’t want to face the memories. It would be too much to bear for either of them.

A thought came to him. *Charlton Memorial*.

It was the hospital where Garret had been taken. He knew they would have the Scarlet Bay address, but hoped their records would be extensive enough to include any referrals for treatment, names of surgeons, chiropractors, everything he needed to know to find Garret. Shadoe jumped up and grabbed his jacket and his keys when he realized his shirt was gone. Looking around, he saw it, put it on, and ran outside.

As Shadoe drove, he called the precinct, but got an answering machine. “Where the hell...?” he muttered. Someone was always there. When the sound indicating the recording had begun, Shadoe began speaking. “Captain, it’s Madison here. I’ve got somebody to track down. I might be gone a few days. Sorry, gotta do this.” He clicked off, threw the phone down, and watched as his headlights invaded the thick darkness, their

brightness revealing a ribbon of road that wound long and lonely through the cold night. His sturdy SUV cut through the wind that whipped at his window, making a moaning sound, giving him a chill. The long, narrow road cut through tall pines, gradually giving way to flat farmland, and now he passed a cemetery where the tombstones stood cold and white, like old bones in the moonlight.

What the hell was he doing? he asked himself. Had he gone mad? What would he say to Garret once he found him—If he found him?

Shadoe moaned at the absurdity of his actions and closed his eyes for half a second, but that was all it took. In the next minute he saw himself careening down the side of a cliff and then nothing.

Later—he didn't know how much later—he opened his eyes, but everything moved at such a rapid pace that he became dizzy. He could feel hands on him, strong hands, jostling him. He mumbled, trying to speak, but his mouth was dry, and his lids heavy. His short glimpse revealed people running everywhere through revolving lights that lit up the night. They hurt his eyes, sent a piercing pain into his head. A million hands, it seemed, worked around him. One gave him oxygen while another stabbed his arm with a needle. Suddenly a wicked siren stabbed his ears—just before everything faded.

Chapter Nineteen

Julita, dressed in the most beautiful negligee she'd ever seen, sat on the edge of her bed while she hung on to the post of her bed, crying. Big tears rolled out of her, deep and hot, a flood that wouldn't stop. Her father had just left, his horrible words ringing in her ears.

"No, dammit! I'm not letting that dumb-assed cop get anywhere near you. He's out of our lives and he stays out. Do you understand?"

"But why, Papa? You seem to forget all he did for us. He took care of us, and you didn't even say thank you."

"You know the reason, Julita."

"Because of me? Because he liked me?"

"He'll never have you, Julita. I won't allow it!"

"No? Well, I've got news for you, Papa. He's already had me!"

Garret whirled around and slapped her, knocking her against the lamp that fell to the floor and broke.

As she lay there looking at her father, for the first time ever, she hated him with all her heart. With tears falling down her cheeks, she spoke through her sobs. "I loved our time together, Papa, and I love him, and if he ever comes back into my life, this time I won't let him get away."

Now, as she stood before her bedroom mirror, she gazed at her reflection. Who was the woman staring back at her? She didn't know who she was anymore. Her thoughts went back to the day Lucretia's trial was over and the smirk of triumph that etched her father's face when they carted Lucretia away to the sanitarium. Their life had been front-page news. Every secret they'd ever had was a secret no longer. Their dark closets had been swept clean of skeletons—all except one.

She saw people staring at her. What did they see? A head full of stringy hair, frightened eyes, and a big, shapeless dress. She'd been so ashamed. She hadn't realized she'd looked so different until the piercing eyes of the

public looked at her—watched her, their eyes raking up and down her as if she were an odd piece of debris that had just washed up on the shore.

Garret's operation had been scheduled for soon after the trial, and it had been successful. He slowly gained strength with round-the-clock care that did wonders for him. He had regular meals and daily doses of high potency vitamins. He went through physical therapy, gaining strength in his legs, and after months on a walker, he graduated to a cane. The muscles in his legs were firming up and he was beginning to get around almost as well as before.

And then he moved them to New York and made preparations to send her to an expensive charm school in Paris. She was frightened at first, and it would have been very easy to beg off, but she knew her father had spent a lot of time and money on it, so she strengthened her resolve and forced herself onto the plane bound to a place she'd only dreamed about.

It was there that she became educated on the ways of the world. It was a strange sort of schooling for her, especially since she had never gone to college. Instead of lofty subjects like art history, medicine, or philosophy, she learned how to carry herself correctly. Her movements became gracious and her walk, a seductive sway. She worked on her speech, enunciating clearly. Carrying on conversations with her dialogue coaches taught her how to speak softly and like a lady without having everything come out in a hesitant stutter. This made it necessary for her to be up on current events, learn who was who in the social circles, and know high fashion. She knew what colors looked best on her, how to apply her makeup, and how to dress in the most beautiful and expensive clothes available.

She remembered the first time she put on a dress that actually fit her. She looked wide-eyed at her curving form, her long, lovely legs, and had to gasp. She knew in an instant that all of this was what Lucretia had been trying to hide under those pitiful things she called dresses. The worst part was that Julita had let her. But what choice did she have? She remembered the rebellion she had felt, and a chill crept down her spine when she knew the price she might have had to pay if the events in her life hadn't taken a sudden turn. Her innocence and total gullibility had put her in a cell without bars. She might have been trapped in a world of pain and torment, but at least it was familiar, and better than going out alone in the big bad world that lay just beyond the front door of the inn.

After almost a year, she returned to her father, a different person. Her beautiful red-gold hair was cut in the latest fashion—a blunt cut, parted on the side, and falling into deep waves. She let the full side fall down, covering one eye seductively. She remembered the day she walked in the door and saw her father for the first time in almost a year. She opened her arms and they embraced. Then she paraded before him while he looked her over. He seemed speechless, his eyes roaming over her as if he couldn't believe the change. Finally, he sat her down and went on and on about the traveling they were going to do, and all the things he was going to give her—but it wasn't what she wanted.

While in Paris, the love capital of the world, she had learned another very important lesson. She learned about love, about men. She listened to her coaches while her mind wandered, looking out the window. She watched Paris bloom around her, Parisians lazily flourishing in love, couples walking down the street in an embrace. She heard lovely old romantic songs play freely in the streets. They made her smile, lonely for the closeness that could be shared by two people.

It made her think of him.

His long, thick mane, so dark it was as blue as the night. So tall he towered above her. She remembered the first time she'd seen him and the feelings that came alive inside her. He'd made her realize she wasn't a little girl anymore but a woman. And now, after Paris, it all made sense.

He was a man—and she was a woman.

When she went to sleep at night, the city of Paris glittering outside her window like a thousand jewels, she relived the time they made love. Seeing his face above her, seeing his glowing green eyes and the intriguing little stone that twinkled just beneath the corner of his eye. When she hugged her pillow, it wasn't just a pillow—it was him. She would close her eyes and feel the swirling sensation of something hot melting inside her, settling in the deepest part of her. She wouldn't rest until she found him again, to see him, to have him love her like he had so long ago.

Someday she would—in spite of her papa.

* * * *

Garret backed away from her door and stood silently, feeling as if the bottom had fallen out of his world. Julita wasn't the only one who had changed. His curly hair was fashionably styled, a sleek mustache adorned his top lip, and he dressed in only the best. He looked around at the lush elegance and riches that he'd surrounded her with, all of it done with her in mind. Shining blond wood, floor-to-ceiling windows that stretched across the walls, bringing the twinkling city of New York into their living room.

He could look out and see moving marquees all the way down Broadway and the lush vegetation of Central Park dotted with street lamps. He enjoyed seeing the carriages wind around the broad paths, men in tuxedos, women in glittering dresses. He wanted Julita to wear clothes like that. To be among the magnificent, glittering crowds that streamed into clubs and restaurants in a city that never slept. Yes, he wanted to give New York to Julita and all it had to offer. To have her cling to his arm, and hear her squeal with delight. But he had no intention of stopping there, next would come the world. City by city, continent by continent.

When he looked at Julita now, he didn't remember the basement, the mansion, and fifteen years of imprisonment. He saw the future and all that he could give her. The haunting in his soul, the memories, old hurts, bad times, were gone, not just dimmed through drink. She was the blinding light that revealed the future and cloaked his past in shadows.

His face might have lines, his hair may be sprinkled with gray, but he was strong and healthy and loved everything about her. Her look, her smell. It was like having his life back again. And then, when she asked him for one thing—only one—he'd taken away her happiness instead of giving it to her.

Now his daughter—the daughter whom he loved more than life itself—hated him, and his world was coming apart, ravaged as if it had been through a war. How could he live another minute, another day, with this on his conscience?

He stumbled, and the old music box fell to the floor. The haunting tune of *Pretty Baby* filled the room. Angered at the reminder, he picked it up and threw it. The small round box shattered the glass that covered a portrait of Greta hanging above the fireplace. His eyes shifted, catching a glimpse of himself wearing a lush, red smoking jacket in a mirror across the bar, and he hated himself. On the surface he saw lust, greed, and depravity, and when he looked deeper, he saw a corrupted soul.

His eyes darted back, traveling up to the lines of the broken glass that filled Greta's beautiful face with wrinkles. As he stood there looking at her, the flesh of her face slowly melted away and turned to one of skeletal proportions. The teeth spread into a bony grin, and the eyes, cold and dark, became hellish whirlpools of death. They looked at him accusingly, as if they were damning him to hell. Guilt washed over him as he hid his face in his hands. In his drunkenness, he stumbled toward the balcony, the tinkling tune still madly playing in the background.

Pretty Baby, pretty baby—

While the haunting tune echoed, bouncing off the walls of his soul, Garret stood at the French doors open to the black night, the twinkling city of New York at his feet. He stumbled out on the balcony and grabbed the baluster. He looked down, his eyes plunging all the way down the thirty-four flights. He swayed, leaning dangerously over, imagining what it would be like to finally end it all.

No more pain, no more guilt.

His eyes closed, and in his mind he went over, imagining it would be like flying. The wind in his face, soaring into the darkness, the lights of the city strung out below him like so many glittering stars. It seemed like heaven, and he wanted to go to heaven.

His cane clattered as it fell to the cement, and he lifted one leg. He wanted to be out there, among the stars, but something was stopping him. It was the railing. It was too high and it was hard to lift his leg that high. But he must. A little higher...just a little—

Just then the doorbell rang.

The chime sounded again and again before Julita came out of her room, looking around for her father. When she didn't see him, she went to answer it. She opened the door and looked up into a familiar face that made her gasp. They both turned just in time to see Garret hanging along the balcony.

"Papa!"

Julita's scream shattered Garret's dream and he opened his eyes. He was almost all the way over, looking down into a tunnel of balconies, one piling on top of the other. The ground rose, then fell, as a whirling dizziness encompassed him. He felt himself falling forward as if he were top heavy, but suddenly heard rushing footsteps behind him and felt two large, strong hands pull him backward. He turned to see who it was that saved him, but

before the face appeared he lost consciousness. He only remembered two glowing green eyes—the eyes of a panther. There was only one person he'd ever known with eyes like that. It was someone from out of his past.

It was Shadoe Madison.

* * * *

Shadoe carried him to the couch and crouched down beside him while he took his pulse. "He'll be all right," he said to Julita. "He's had a shock. What happened here tonight?"

Julita quickly became defensive and shrugged. "I don't know what you mean. He's been drinking, that's all."

"Did you two have an argument?"

"Maybe," was all she said as she paced, a drink in her hand.

Shadoe followed her with his eyes. He'd never seen her like that. So worldly, so sophisticated. He could tell at a single glance that this wasn't the same Julita he'd known at the inn. Something had happened to her. He couldn't deny she was beautiful—her hair, her makeup, the way she carried herself. Coming to a halt in front of him, he saw her look down at him with a hot, moist look of sex he'd never seen in another woman's eyes.

"What the hell has happened to you," he whispered.

She gave him a brazen smile. "I've been educated, Lieutenant. Educated and initiated into a world of pain and suffering." She looked down into the dark liquid. "I sometimes think I was better off not knowing a damned thing." She lifted it quickly, drank it down in one gulp, then winced when it burned her throat.

Shadoe watched her, amazed. She talked without stumbling, and fear was a thing of the past. Now she faced the world head-on—and dared it to try and hurt her again.

"Julita, alcohol's not the answer."

"Isn't it?" she asked sarcastically, looking down at the empty glass in her hand. A frown suddenly appeared on her beautiful face. "How do you go back, Lieutenant? Back to ignorant bliss?" Her eyes became cloudy as she looked at something in her mind that he couldn't see. "It's no problem going forward. Anyone can learn, become someone else, but how do you go back and get something you've lost? A certain innocence, a purity." She shifted

her amazing violet eyes, which reflected pain and sorrow, toward him. “The answer?” she asked, while reaching for her father’s bourbon and making a big production of pouring herself another drink. “You can’t,” she said coldly, looking at the stream of liquid as it flowed from the bottle’s neck and into her glass. “You have to live with it.” She lifted the full glass, and they both looked at it. “And this is how.”

“And what is it you have to live with? You’re rich, beautiful. You could have the world at your feet.”

She looked toward the balcony and made a flourish with her hand that held the drink, her full, red lips forming a smile without depth. “Apparently I do. All of New York is out there. And I live on the very top floor of an ivory palace my father built for me. No one can touch me.” Tears glinted in her eyes. “He’s here when I wake up, and he’s here...” she paused, a sob catching in her throat, “he’s here when I go to bed. His tapping cane, his raspy voice, his bourbon breath, and his...” Her eyes shifted, settling on his reclining form, wondering how it would be if he never woke up again. Suddenly she dropped the glass and began crying, burying her face in her hands.

Shadoe rushed up to take her in his arms. “My God, Julita, has he hurt you?”

“Take your goddamned hands off my daughter!”

The two of them whirled around, and they both looked at Garret as he pulled himself up off the couch. “Is that what you came here for? To molest my daughter?”

A heat of anger flooded Shadoe. He never suspected this. No wonder Julita was bitter. Suffering first from Lucretia’s obsession, now from her father’s.

Garret leaned on his cane, looking at Shadoe after so long a time. “I’m surprised you haven’t been around sooner. Why now? Why come looking after all this time?”

“I did, but a car crash stopped me. I was on my back for several weeks. Concussion, cracked ribs, almost died.”

The old man gave him a twisted smile and a scowl. “Too bad you didn’t.”

“I gave up then, decided to hell with you, but I’ve been...”

Garret stood looking at Shadoe, waiting for his next words. “You’ve been what? You know, it’s bad form not to finish what you’re saying. Is that what they taught you in the police academy?” he asked sarcastically.

“As I said, I decided to hell with you, but there’s someone out there that won’t let me forget.”

“Someone? What are you talking about?”

“Garret, I’m taking her away.”

His sarcastic leer fell, and one of murder replaced it. “You’re what?”

“You heard me, old man, I’m taking her away.”

“And I’ll see you in hell first.”

“It’s not what you think. I have to take her back to Scarlet Bay. There’s someone there she has to see...someone who wants to see her.”

“You must be nuts to think I’d let you take her away from here...from me!”

Still standing within the circle of his arms, Julita spoke up. “I’m going with him,” she rasped, “and you can’t stop me, Papa. I’m nineteen, almost twenty now, and I can do what I want.”

“But the man doesn’t have a cent,” Garret said, stumbling forward. “He wants your money, Julita. Don’t you see?”

“Oh? I’m so repulsive no man would want me without my money?”

“Of course not,” he sputtered. “Julita, don’t. He’s...hell, you deserve better!”

“White man speak with forked tongue,” Shadoe said, his voice deep in his chest.

Garret whirled on Shadoe. “You shut your mouth, you filthy red—”

“Don’t say it!” Shadoe shouted, a look of war on his face. “Don’t even think it!” He hesitated for a moment, then said, “Look, I don’t want a dime of her money or yours. I’ve got something to do and I need her with me. After that she can come back here to you and both of you can go to hell for all I care.”

“And what’s in Scarlet Bay that’s so damned interesting, you bastard, or is this just some pitiful excuse you’re using to get her away from me?”

“It’s her mother. I’m going to take her to see her mother.”

* * * *

Garret's breath caught in his lungs, a graveyard chill gripping his spine. "Are you crazy? Greta is dead."

"I know. And I realize it sounds crazy, but the only way her mother can rest in peace is to see Julita one last time...to know she's safe."

"How do you know it's Julita she wants to see? Maybe it's me."

"All I know is what she said." He looked down at Julita, the tone of his voice growing softer. "Will you come with me, Julita? Will you come and meet your mother?"

"I don't understand what you're saying, but...I'll come. I'll do anything to get away from him." She looked over at her father. "And after that I'm getting my own place, Papa. Away from you. I'm going to live my own life."

"I'll cut you off!" he shouted. "Not a dime will you give to this bastard!"

"You can't scare me, Papa. I'm leaving now and if we pass on the street, please don't acknowledge me." A sob caught in her throat. "I'm...I'm not your daughter anymore." Her eyes were filled with tears and she looked at him through a teary smudge. "I wanted a father...I wanted you, Papa, but you want to own me. I—" she sobbed, emotion crowding her throat, "—I belong to myself, Papa. Don't ask me to give that up."

The words she said crushed him just as surely as if a death sentence had been pronounced over him, and he grasped his stomach. "I'll kill myself, Julita," he rasped with great effort. "I will, so help me God. I'll jump—"

Her voice was low and cold. "Do what you have to do, Papa, but remember one thing. If you do there'll be no one here to stop you this time."

Suddenly all the elegance around him meant nothing. It was so much tinsel and glamour that glittered brightly as it sifted through his fingers. "If you have to go, then go, but do one thing for me." He hesitated for several heartbeats, and then said, "Take me with you. If Greta is there, I want to see her."

"It's up to Julita," Shadoe said.

"I don't care," she hissed with a chill in her voice, "but just stay away from me."

They each packed a bag, then went out to Shadoe's Land Cruiser.

Garret took one look at it and said, “That mountain climber? I wouldn’t be caught dead in that thing. Take my Bentley.” He threw the keys to Shadoe and they climbed in.

As a blur of headlights whizzed by them, Garret sat in the back and watched the two people who he knew were still attracted to each other. “I’m watching you,” his steely voice said to Shadoe, “so keep your goddamned eyes on the road.”

Shadoe was oblivious of the fact that a gun was being pointed toward him, and that the only thing between him and sure death was the plush seat—and Garret’s itchy trigger finger.

Chapter Twenty

Lucretia's dark, scrawny silhouette stepped away from the shelter of a massive magnolia tree and began to walk toward the ruin that was once Scarlet Bay Inn. It was her world she looked at, and no one had a right to take it from her. It waited for her. She watched the mansion slowly advance as she walked closer and closer, her bare feet muddy from running through wet grass and puddles.

From the moment she had sneaked out of her room and ran barefoot and almost naked through the cold halls of the asylum, she had crawled and scratched her way here. Thrashing through brush, running through grotesque trees that reached up like hands to the cloudy sky, climbing muddy hills, sliding down steep inclines, and hitching when she could.

She could hardly remain standing as the wild wind roared and shrieked, crashing the savage waves against the bones, then bleeding back into the ocean. According to the myth, the wind was the breath of the gods, playing through the chanter marks. It played to the sea, and the sea applauded with large fists of crashing foam, spewing as high as the ridge where the spray fell away and scattered over the rocky terrain.

The bones would walk—soon

She looked in the distance to where the old mansion stood. She could see now that the sign with the elegant swirl stood swaying in the wind, one leg almost completely broken in two, while the other creaked eerily in the wind. The inn was dark and haunting, no inviting golden glow spilling out onto a perfectly combed lawn. No guests walking along the paths that led to gardens and ponds, and no lovers walking arm in arm as they strolled the grounds. Now the dark rooms were filled with furniture that had a heavy covering of dust, cobwebs that tangled around the dead leaves of the plants, and a collection of ghosts that refused to leave.

She felt a chill as a sky full of black clouds roiled behind the mansion. Rain would be coming soon. She must get in before it began, and stepped up on the portico.

Reaching up, she felt around in the dry, dead, crackling leaves of the planter that hung close to the door and found the key. She quickly turned it in the lock, making the door creak as she opened it. Inside it was black as a cave, so she quickly felt for the protrusion beside the door and flipped on a switch. Lights from the twin posts that stood on each side of the first step of the staircase burned brightly, but as her eyes followed the steps, the leaning shadows that gathered at the top looked mysterious and dark.

Like a mechanical doll, she walked the familiar path to her room, but just as she grabbed the doorknob, she stopped and slowly turned and looked toward the attic stairs. Her gaze followed the darkness to the top where a door was hidden. Beyond it was a room that she still sees in her dreams. She was good at making her guests think that she was something she wasn't—everyone but him—Shadoe Madison—the cop who managed to make his way into her dark and complex mind.

Deep into the night, after she had fallen asleep, she heard a sound of scuffling feet and murmuring voices. She looked up at the ventilator, knowing it was carrying the sound.

Someone is here, she thought, trying not to panic. But who could it be? Oh, God, it had to be the hospital. They'd discovered her missing, and come looking for her.

She ran to a window, seeing a car. It was shiny, elegant, the metallic silver color glittering like tiny stars in the heavens. It seemed large to her, the pale color the same as the asylum van. It was them. The burly orderlies who pushed her around, some pushing their ugly faces into hers, enjoying the thrill of terrorizing her. Surely they hadn't found her here.

They'll be coming up, she thought, looking around. She had to hide, but where?

She thought of the basement and cringed, but she had to go somewhere. She'd kill herself before she'd go back to that mad house! She crept out of the room and made her way down the back stairway and out the back door. Once outside she ran. Would the outside door to the basement be open? It had to be!

But it wasn't.

She rattled it, pushed, pounded, but it wouldn't open. She looked around. She was trapped. She could get to the basement by the other door, but it was in the foyer and they'd be there by now. She looked around, out toward the choppy sea. The only other place she could think of where she would have shelter were the caves, but they were on the other side of the bones. It would mean climbing, possibly getting drenched by the surf. Still, it would mean she would at least have shelter until the van left. She turned and began to run, her thin garment whipping around her legs. When she reached the jungle of bones, she hesitated, looking at the gigantic freak of nature, then entered hesitantly.

It was flat at first, the sand deep as she picked her way around the giant skull, thinking of the legend that said the bones were those of a mighty warrior of the past and that this portion of beach was his grave. She looked up at the moon that was almost completely round and stepped through the shadows the bones cast in the spectral light. She believed none of it, but had heard that the gods of the sun, moon, and wind mourned his death. On the nights of the full moon, its silvery rays spotlighted the giant, causing the sea to turn and pound upon the rocks. Then the wind savagely blew the breath of life back into the giant. When the eerie sound of the chanter marks would begin to play, the surf that was his heartbeat, would pound harder and harder until the bones began to move. Slowly and laboriously at first, clattering together as he walked the beach.

"Stupid legend," she muttered as she climbed, battling the waves that crashed against the rocks until she came out on the other side. Sure the wind whipped and the surf pounded, but it only meant a storm was heading in from sea. It certainly didn't mean that a clattering giant would be walking the beach.

Seeing the first cave, thoughts of the legend left her and she ran in, thankful for the shelter. It seemed dry enough, but it was cold. She cursed, knowing if she had to stay out here any length of time she'd have to somehow sneak back in and steal some matches, candles, and anything else she might need to make this cave livable. She thought of the bones and how hard it was to get past them. The rocks were easy enough to climb, it was the force of the pounding surf that made it so impossible.

* * * *

Shadoe led the way up to the portico with Julita and Garret following. Garret passed him the key, but the door gave way before he turned it. "The door is open," he whispered. "Has anyone been in here since you left?"

"Not that I know of."

Feeling suddenly defensive, Shadoe's hand rested on his gun as he walked in, the flashlight in his hand piercing the darkness. A sudden sound caused them to halt in their tracks.

"What was that?" Garret rasped.

"I don't know. Someone might be in here."

They stood still, but no other sound came, so Shadoe said, "Garret, do you have any candles around here?"

"What the hell do you want with candles?"

"What the hell do you think? We need light."

"Why don't you use the light switch?" he said, reaching over and flipping a switch.

"What're the lights doing on? You've been away from this place over a year."

"The utilities are automatically drawn out of the account. It helps when you move around a lot. Don't have to worry about having your utilities turned off and on." He became irritated. "Why the hell am I explaining anything to you? And why is everyone whispering for God's sake? I own the place. I have a perfect right to be here."

Shadoe looked around, his suspicious eyes digging into every shadow, and behind every piece of furniture. "Everything looks pretty much the same except for a thick layer of dust and dead plants."

"All right, so when do we get this little shindig under way?"

"When the time comes," Shadoe said irritably.

"You mean we can't get this over with tonight?"

"Hell no!" Shadoe yelled. "We can't go until the time is right."

"And how do we know when the time is right?"

"She calls me. It may be tonight, or it could be a month from now."

"What?" Garret barked. "We've got to spend a freakin' month in this dump?"

"Look, I can't help it. It's the way it is."

"Why the hell didn't you say something about this before we left?"

“Look, nobody forced you to come, old man. You can go back anytime you want to.”

“I’m not going back without my daughter!”

Shadoe didn’t say anything. Just stood there while his anger cooled, then looked at Julita. “It’s up to you, Julita. If you want to go back with your father, I can’t stop you.”

“But if I don’t stay, what will you do?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I’ll have to stay. I know it’s hard to believe, but there is a church out there and a woman who mourns for her baby. If you refuse to see her, someone has to do something to put her at rest.” He cut an angry eye at Garret. “It’s apparent that her husband couldn’t care less if she’s at rest or not.”

“It’s not me she’s calling for,” he growled at Shadoe.

“She knows you better than I thought,” Shadoe retorted.

“But you need me, don’t you?” Julita asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve got my camera. I could take a picture of you. Maybe it’s all she’ll need...just to get a look at you.”

She seemed to be thinking. Then she slowly looked up at her father. “I’m staying,” she whispered. “You can do whatever you want. My place is here.”

“With him, you mean? Is that what you’re saying? Julita, don’t be stupid. He’s probably insane on top of everything else.”

“Papa,” Julita said, sounding completely annoyed, “how can you treat him like that? He saved you from being buried in that basement. You’d still be trapped there if not for him. Why can’t you be gracious and at least say thank you?”

“Julita, please,” Shadoe said.

“No!” she shouted at him, then turned back to Garret. “I would never have thought it of you, Papa. The way you treat people. The way you treat me. You’re a selfish bastard, Papa. What is it that makes you like this? Your money? You think the laws don’t apply to you. Not even the laws of God.”

“What can I say? I’m sorry. You can bring home any friggin’ man you want, but not this bastard!”

“Any one except the one I want, is that what you’re saying?” Not waiting for an answer, she picked up her suitcase and turned to Shadoe. “Where will we sleep?”

“Take your pick. I’d rather we be close together, though. I’ll need to know where you are every minute, so don’t wander off.”

Garret stumbled forward, his face scowling in rage. “If you think for one minute I’m leaving my daughter up here alone with you, you’re crazier than you look.”

“You might as well know, old man, if Julita and I want to get together, we will. And there’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

“No?” Garret asked. “If you think that, you’re stupid as well as crazy.” He picked up his suitcase and shuffled toward the elevator, got in, then ascended slowly, his blistering eyes burning a hole through the two of them. There was only one reason why he hated Shadoe, and that was because he was a contender for his daughter. He saw the way they looked at each other, the way they’d always looked at each other, and he couldn’t stand it. The thought of another man’s hands on Julita caused his killer instincts to come out.

* * * *

While Shadoe and Julita climbed the stairs, their talk was soft and hushed, Julita enjoying his handsome looks, and him still living with the haunting taste of her lips and breasts in his mouth. When they arrived at room number twenty-four, their pace slowed, remembering that it was the same room he had stayed in before. When he looked down at her, he noticed she was smiling.

“I remember the morning I brought coffee to this room,” she said.

Shadoe smiled. “It was rather a milestone.”

“As I remember it, my binding burst, and I ran out scared to death.”

“I’ll never forget seeing what I thought was a little girl of about twelve turn into a woman before my eyes.”

“God, I was so dumb,” she said, then raised her lashes, giving him a sensuous look. “You may as well know, I fantasized about you. I was like a little girl fantasizing over a movie star. I longed for you to talk to me but when you did I became tongue-tied and ran away.” Silence for the space of a few heartbeats passed. “But still I dreamed of the moment...” Her words died and her face turned pink.

“The moment?” he urged.

She smiled a slow smile. "I think you know what I mean, Lieutenant."

"Julita," he whispered, "my name is Shadoe. We've had some pretty intimate moments as I recall. Don't you think we know each other well enough that you can call me by my first name?"

She was silent.

"That is...if you're comfortable with it. I don't want to do anything that makes you uncomfortable."

That brought tears to her eyes. "I can't tell you how kind you've been." She reached up to brush away the tears. "I know Papa will never say thanks, but—"

"Please, Julita, you don't have—"

"Please, Lieu—Shadoe, let me say this."

Nodding, he listened.

"I think we both know how stubborn Papa is, and you'll wait a long time before he ever says thanks, but..." She looked up, her eyes soft, and shimmering with tears. "I'll say it for both of us. If it hadn't been for you, I'd still be wearing those silly dresses, binding myself up, and Papa would...we'd probably both be dead by now. I don't know how to—"

He drew her to him and placed his fingers gently on her soft lips, halting her words. "You don't?" he whispered, their lips almost touching, their heated breath shared.

"Shadoe, you know you were my first and since then I've never known another man." She looked deeply into his eyes. "You do believe me, don't you?" Suddenly her shoulders began to shake, and her tears flooded down her cheeks.

"Julita, don't."

All at once she went stiff in his arms and turned away.

"Julita, what's wrong?"

"I...I have my own battles to fight, and you..." She looked across the hall. "I'll stay in twenty-five."

"Julita," he said, jerking her around. "Talk to me. Tell me what's bothering you."

"Don't you see?" she interrupted, trying to turn away. "I've changed so. I'm a totally different person now. Are you sure you still want me?"

He jerked her around. "Julita, you're letting it happen again. You're letting the actions of one person beat you down. I love the new person

you've come to be. A woman with a mind of her own, a woman who knows what she wants out of life. You've made a good start in this fight, don't cave in now."

Suddenly she broke away from him. "You don't know how it is!" she cried, her breath turning to jerking sobs as she ran across the hall and slammed the door.

Just then the door down the way opened and Garret stepped out, looking at Shadoe, as he leaned against his cane. "Struck out, huh?"

"She thinks her life is ruined."

"It would be if she hooked up with you."

"I couldn't do her any more damage than you have."

His eyes narrowed angrily. "I've damaged her simply because I'm choosy about the man she ends up with? There was a day when I would have been called a responsible parent."

"Julita is a bright young woman who can make up her own mind. She doesn't need you, or Lucretia to make it up for her."

"How dare you couple my name with that harpy's!"

"There's only one thing I want you to remember. Julita is your daughter, not a plaything. She's not a beautiful doll that you can buy clothes for, shower gifts upon. She's a woman who is separate and apart from you, a woman who wants nothing more than to live her own life her own way, make her own decisions—and choose her own mate. You think you can remember that?"

The look in Garret's eyes turned to nasty rage. "I'm sure if I don't, you'll be here to remind me." He stepped back and slammed his door.

The nighttime wind whipped and moaned as Shadoe stepped into his room, wondering if the ghost bride would summon him tonight.

Chapter Twenty-One

Shadoe found Garret in the study the next morning mixing a drink. “You’re drinking this early?”

Garret didn’t turn, but continued pouring his drink. “Nothing else to do. No food, nothing in the house.”

“Hell, you’re right,” Shadoe said while raking his fingers through his hair. “Well, where’s the nearest place to shop? I’ll run down and pick up a few things.”

Garret turned, the ice in his drink tinkling as he moved the squat Old-Fashioned glass toward his mouth. “How the fuck would I know? I never shopped. I had people to do that.”

“Don’t use that kind of language around Julita.”

Garret’s eyes shot fire, glaring at Shadoe as if he were a disobedient servant. “You’re telling *me* what to do? In *my* own house? With *my* own daughter?”

“You got it, you bastard. Because right now you’re not capable of making those decisions.”

Garret’s face immediately twisted into an amused scowl. “Well isn’t it fortunate we have the—” his voice turned sarcastic “—expertise of Lieutenant Shadoe Madison with us since, apparently, I’m as crazy as my loony elder daughter.”

“I didn’t say that,” he began with contempt, “but I wouldn’t dismiss the idea.”

“You bastard! There was a time when I thought you hung the goddamned moon. Anything you said, anything you did had to be right.”

“Oh, hell, Garret, drop the ceremonial crap. You never thought any such thing. You were just using me to get out of that goddamned basement. When I started talking about exercising your legs you’d had a bellyful by then. I

wasn't moving fast enough for you, so you played out the little scene in the basement attacking my heritage. Hell, you knew I'd call the authorities."

The glass of dark liquid stopped suddenly on its way to Garret's smirking mouth. "And just when did you figure that out?"

"It didn't take long."

"Not entirely wrong, I have to admit," Garret said, his eyes darkening as they met Shadoe's. "I wasn't worried about getting out, the main thing was to get you away from Julita. The way you two looked at each other, a blind man could have seen that."

"Is that why my part in this whole charade was played down by your lawyer? Garret Van Dare went out in a blaze of glory and wanted to come back the same way. To do that you had to stay in the limelight. I remember now. It's always been your habit to crush your competition under your heel."

"So that's it. The good lieutenant wants a pat on the back." Garret chuckled. "I would have never thought it of you."

"I didn't want anything from you then, and I don't want anything now. I didn't even expect it. But it became crystal clear to everyone in my crime unit that you were a bitter old man bent on making himself a saint in the eyes of the public and you wanted no competition."

"Listen, you empty-headed do-gooder, I simply wanted my place back in society with my daughter by my side!"

"Well, you got it, you old son of a bitch. You were put on a pedestal. Sympathy poured out like wine and made you drunk. You have the mistaken idea that the world owes you for what you went through. It was hard for me to open my eyes to what you really are, so I kept making excuses for you." Shadoe raked his fingers through his hair, an embarrassed flush rising into his face. "God, when I think of the way I ran around in circles trying to please you. You must have had a good laugh."

The old man's smile turned to an amused scowl. "Better than TV."

"Well, I'm through making a fool of myself for you. Get your entertainment somewhere else!"

Garret's eyes narrowed to a slit. "You say you don't want anything from me, and yet I see the way you look at Julita. It seems to me that you want something very precious from me."

"The fact is, what I feel for her is none of your business."

“You’re a bastard, Shadoe. I almost wish you’d never come down to that basement. I would have found a way out.”

“After fifteen years? Half dead? No way. And what about Julita? Could you have helped her? Of course not. If anything good came out of this it was her escape from Lucretia.”

Garret looked pensive. “When I was hauled out of the darkness of that hell, I thought I’d never see you again.”

“I felt the same way. And if it weren’t for this dream I keep having, you wouldn’t have.”

He lifted his glass as if toasting Shadoe. “Well, with any luck we can get this over with and never have to see each other again.”

Refusing to let it drop, Shadoe looked at Garret, detecting the lack of soul, the twisted morals, the darkness that resided in the old man. “When we first met I thought you were just a crusty old man. Hell, I even liked you. I had no idea your hard veneer hid a dark, twisted side that included running your daughter’s life.”

Garret didn’t lash out as Shadoe thought he would. Instead he looked down into his drink, swirled it in his glass, then began talking. “Lucretia moved me down into that basement when Julita was only three years old, and I didn’t see her again for fifteen years.” He looked pensive, then moved toward the fireplace and stared down into the low-burning flames. “One day she comes strolling in like a stranger. Hell, if I had passed her on the street I wouldn’t have even known her.” He took a sip of his drink. “To me Julita was dead.”

“But you told me you heard the music box.”

“I did,” he said, turning, “and Lucretia had even spoken about Julita many times, sometimes saying she was dead, other times telling me about her latest escapade. But hell, she was crazy. It was confusing, I admit, but since I heard only Lucretia’s voice come out of the ventilator when she was in the attic, I had my doubts and thought she was only acting out a fantasy. I never heard Julita say a word. I wasn’t aware that Julita was so intimidated that she never spoke above a whisper.”

“So you’re saying you forgot your daughter.”

“In a sense.”

“What the hell do you mean, ‘in a sense’?”

"I simply mean that when someone dies after a while they also die in your memory. That's why their face slowly becomes blurred in your mind until you can't even remember what they looked like. It doesn't matter how close they were, after a while they leave you. You'll never forget they were here and how much you loved them, but both you and they, have to move on." He looked up at Shadoe. "Now that I know my daughter is alive, my rights as a parent have returned."

"There's one slight difference. I have a right. You don't!"

"Right?" he said, dumbfounded. "*Right?*" he shouted louder. "What *right* do you think you have to my daughter? Just because you saved her from her sister?"

"I mean, you bastard, that I'm not her brother, her father, or even a distant cousin. That gives me the right of a man to want her, desire her, and yes, fall in love with her!"

Garret stumbled toward Shadoe, his cane holding him up. "You have no rights, as I see it, and I resent the fact that you think you do."

"And I suppose you do?"

"As her father—"

"Crap!" Shadoe shouted. "She's over eighteen and fully able to live her own life."

"With you, I suppose."

"With someone! You're going to have to accept that, Garret."

"Just because you say so?"

"Garret," Shadoe pleaded, "don't you realize if you keep this up you're going to drive Julita away from you?"

"Don't you think I know that? It haunts me, but I can't stop. She means the world to me. What would I be without her?"

"A man with no morals, a selfish man who wants what he wants, when he wants it!"

"I can't help that. As long as I can remember no one has refused me anything. Because of my money I lived the way I wanted to, had anything I wanted. Now it's hard to take no for an answer. I can't sit back if I feel she's ruining her life. A father takes control. It all comes out of love, not obsession. Can't you see that?"

Shadoe didn't answer, only looked at him for the space of a few seconds, then said simply, "Now get this straight. I consider myself in

charge here. I don't care whose house this is, or whose daughter she is. I'm looking out for her best interests."

Garret's words quickly spewed from his mouth. "And I'm not?"

"Smothering her with your love is not in her best interests." With those damning words he left, slamming out the front door.

Garret stumbled to a window and looked out. "I hope you fall into the ocean, you bastard!"

"Where's Shadoe going?"

Garret's head whirled around, his words bitter. "Your *boyfriend* has gone out searching for food." He walked back to the bar and mixed another drink.

"Papa, don't start."

"Don't start what?" he said, turning to look at her. His eyes dropped to her yellow ballerina sweater and her black skin-tight leggings. "My, you look pretty this morning. Since I know you're not dressing for me, it must be for the lieutenant."

"Do you have to start drinking so early in the morning? Why can't you at least wait until after you've had your breakfast?"

"How sweet," he said sarcastically. "She's worried about my health. Don't worry, baby, I added an olive."

"I'm not a baby, not anymore, so don't refer to me as one. Julita's my name. You should know, you named me yourself."

"So I did," he said, the dark and disturbing memories flashing through his mind as he turned back to the window. He remembered lifting a beautiful pink and gold baby in the air and whispering her name over and over again, like a chant. *Julita, Julita, Julita!* He smiled. *Yes, that's your name, my little love. It means "young." With a name like that you'll always be young and beautiful.*

As the scene faded, he felt the pain of another arrow piercing his heart, her long-ago squeal ringing in his ears as he lifted her in the air.

Interrupting his thoughts, Julita said, "How long will Shadoe be gone?"

Garret turned, the ice tinkling against the glass. "I don't know. How long does it take for an idiot detective to find food?" He laughed. "We may never see him again."

Knowing her father was in his usual bad mood, she turned to leave.

“Julita, just what do you see in that hundred-dollar-a-week cop? Don’t you realize what I could give you?” The hand with the drink lifted and gestured as if encompassing the world. “Anything in the world you want. Clothes, cars, minks, diamonds, jewels, trips around the world. Tell me, sweetheart. What is it you want?”

She stepped backward, bumping into a chair. “I want a father! Can you give me that?”

“Sweet Julita,” he said, laughing as if she’d made a joke. Suddenly the smile fell from his face and he backhanded her, knocking her to the floor. “Now listen to me. You’re my daughter, and you’ll do what I say. You will never in your wildest dreams be anything more to Shadoe Madison than a case folder with a number on it. We’re leav...”

Suddenly Shadoe ran in and saw Julita on the floor with a bruise on her face and a bleeding lip. “Why you bastard!” he yelled and turned on Garret, knocking him to the floor. He quickly turned to Julita. “Julita, are you all right?” Without saying anything she scrambled up and disappeared around the door. Fuming, Shadoe turned back to Garret, his nostrils flaring in anger. “You know, old man, maybe Lucretia’s not so crazy after all. I’m tempted to put you in the basement myself.”

“Does this make you feel like a big man?” Garret spat, looking up at Shadoe from the floor. “Hitting a crippled old man who can’t defend himself?” He quickly grabbed at his cane, wielded it upward, then with a grimace on his face, he brought it down on Shadoe’s husky shoulders with all his strength.

Shadoe managed to catch the thin spindle of wood and broke it in two. “You’ll have to do better than that, old man,” he said, throwing the two halves of the cane on the floor. “Get up,” he said, looking down at Garret.

“You know I can’t...not without—”

“You’re lying,” Shadoe said. “Come on, get up and show us how you can walk. Is that the way you get sympathy? Hobbling around on a cane you don’t need, feeding on the admiration of those who don’t know you? Have you told them how you made your money? Not through a national jewelry empire, but through cheating, underhanded stock investments,” he yelled. “Through the blood, sweat, and tears of those weaker than you, that’s how! Did you tell them that, you old bastard? Do they know you for what you really are? How many times have you told the story, huh? Lying about

everything, and painting yourself as a hero. Even sold the film rights to your story, didn't you?" Shadoe's face revealed disgust. "You make me sick."

Garret looked at him with narrowed eyes, hating him at that moment because he seemed to be able to see right through him. It was as if everything inside him—his darkest thoughts, the twisted workings of his mind, even the place where his black soul lay—were revealed through nothing but a thin veneer of flesh and skin. "This is an all out attack. I should bring charges against you for this," Garret said as he struggled up by hanging on to the furniture.

"Don't waste your time. If I can persuade her, Julita will be bringing charges against you." He looked at Garret with a smirk, his words digging into the old man's pride. "Tell me, old man. When the truth comes out, whose hero will you be then?"

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lucretia waited on the beach for hours it seemed, watching the old mansion's massive silhouette loom forebodingly against the deep blue of the night sky. She'd already sneaked in once, creeping around and stealthily grabbing the things she needed. She'd even tried the interior basement door, but found it locked. It surprised the hell out of her. Why would anyone lock an inside door now that the inn was empty? She had to get in the basement some way, it was killing her to stay in the cave. She'd tried to make it habitable with the things she'd taken so far, but could still feel the cold dampness creeping into her bones.

The night they came, she hid out until dawn, waiting for them to leave, but they didn't. Finally, she crept around the house and found the shiny new Bentley and knew immediately who was there. Only *he* would drive around in a rich car like that. It didn't take long to learn who he'd brought with him, either. It confused her at first, not knowing why they were there. Then it dawned on her that they were there waiting for her. All three of them. Knowing she'd escaped, they must have come here, waiting, the cop with them. Sure, that was it. The bastards at the hospital must have called, and they came down to trap her. Of course, it was a trap. She knew it.

Well, I'm not going back—I'll die first!

Standing there in the wind, feeling the wet kisses of the mist on her cheeks, she shivered as the fog continued to creep inland. She tugged on her sweater, watching the few lights that glowed in the darkness even though the hour was late. As the minutes crept by, the lights slowly became fuzzy in the gathering mist, but still she waited. And then suddenly a light clicked off, then another.

Hurry, she urged silently and paced, rubbing her arms against the cold.

The mist continued to thicken and swirl around her, making her restless. She was freezing in the wet cold and just about ready to give up and go back

to the cave when she looked up and saw the rest of the lights click off one by one.

And then the last light went dark.

Her feet began moving, slowly trudging along the sinking sand until she came to the incline just this side of the bones. One foot after the other gained footholds as she began climbing the steep wall. Once she had reached the top, she stood on the windswept ridge, silent for a moment as she looked toward the mansion. She knew they would have locked the back door, so she dug around in the pocket of her sweater for the key she'd dug out of the planter when she arrived, and headed for the front door.

* * * *

Julita stood at her window looking out at the ocean. She thought she'd seen someone down on the beach, but looked around when a voice, steeped in husky sensuality, spoke to her.

"Hey, I'm over here," Shadoe said.

She looked over at the bed and smiled, seeing Shadoe resting on his elbow. It was inevitable that the two of them would find a way to be together. What started out as the meeting of expressive eyes, hot, melting stares and the sensuous brushing of hands and bodies, had turned to burning kisses, heavy breathing, then at last, the bedroom.

Now, she turned and sat down on the side of the bed and allowed him to tug at her until she was lying beside him. "You're worried, aren't you?" she whispered as she stroked his jaw. "I can see it in your eyes."

He laughed softly. "Sure, I can protect you from your father, but who's going to protect you from me? Right?"

"So who wants to be protected from the big, handsome cop? Not me."

"I'm serious, Julita. You're not afraid of me, are you? If I ever thought you were submitting to me out of fright, I couldn't live with myself."

"The only thing I'm afraid of is that you won't make love to me," she whispered, her tongue lightly licking him.

"Mmmmm," he said, as her tongue stroked him sensuously. "Those weren't your feelings the other night. What happened?"

She looked up into his glowing green eyes. "I couldn't get you out of my mind," she said, stroking his lips. "You're not only my flashy beast,

you're my gallant warrior, my prince, my defender. And it doesn't hurt that you're as handsome as the very devil himself." She smiled wickedly. "That's enough to make any girl swoon."

He leaned down and took her lips with his own, and she wound her arms around his neck while breathing his name with a moan. As usual, his kisses were like a drug. The more he gave, the more she wanted. "Oh, God, Shadoe, I do love you." Her eyes flew open immediately, and she tried to pull away from him, embarrassed.

He pinned her to the bed. "Where the hell are you going? Especially after a statement like that."

"I...I'm s-sorry, it just seemed to slip out somehow."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, Julita. Maybe you do love me, and maybe I love you, too. We'll find out someday."

Reclaiming her lips, he crushed her to him, and she parted her lips to receive his kiss, responding with a hot, new fervor. The delicious sensation he awakened in her spread from her lips down through the dark tunnel that held her heart and filled her groin. She moved beneath him, arching herself upward, feeling his delicious weight, his closeness, and loving his manly smell that was as wild as the wilderness. Just touching him, feeling him touch her, made her imagine the dark woods she loved, the wind, even the ground soft with leaves. With him she felt free—free to become wild like him. She felt his kisses spreading a scorching trail over her, and the heat he ignited caused her to spread her legs as he mounted her. Her hips cradled him, and she felt his hot, heavy arousal against her. His weight on her became forceful, his passion moved his lips from her neck to her breasts, causing tiny gasps to escape from her throat. And then he pushed her legs farther apart, pressing the tip of his cock to her and causing her cunt to throb with desire. Then suddenly a low growl emerged from his throat and he began to move with savage intensity, pressing himself farther in until he filled her. Her thighs rose, her legs encircled him, holding on as he rode her. Deep and hot, in, then out, pulling from her a naked desire that wanted more and more of him. His hands cupped her buttocks, pulling them closer to him as he delved even deeper inside her. It took her breath away. Her hands splayed across his back, clinging, scratching, clutching. The two of them rolled, becoming tangled in the sheets. He became hot and demanding, the bed shook with the intensity of their jerking movements. Then suddenly the

pleasure burst, pure and explosive. Lights exploded in her head—stars fell around her—heat infused her very being. Then she felt his lusty fountain let go, filling her to capacity. It was over, they had been satisfied, but still she wanted his touch, his nearness, his kisses, his whispers, his love—yes, she wanted his love.

* * * *

Later, while Shadoe slept, Julita saw the same dark figure standing on the ridge. She could hear the waves becoming savage and shivered when the cold, wet wind keened through the cracks in the trembling window frame. She stared for a moment, seeing the wind buffet the figure about, then recognition widened her eyes. “Oh, my God,” she gasped, pressing her fingers against her mouth. “It can’t be. She’s locked up.” When the dark figure began moving toward the ridge, it seemed to float in and out of the mist.

It’s a ghost. It has to be. No one would be out on that ridge at this time of night.

She turned away from the window and went to Shadoe to wake him. “It...it’s Lucretia!” she said, her words lapsing into their nervous stutter. “She’s out there,” she said, pointing to the window.

Shadoe jumped up, but by the time he got to the window, the figure was gone. He turned her to him and gently held her shoulders in his hands. “It was probably your imagination.”

“But I know it was her. S-she was there, I saw—”

“Julita, think about it for a moment. Lucretia is locked up for God’s sake. How would she have gotten here? And as for anyone else, the inn is closed, and too far from town for anyone to be walking along the ridge.”

“Well, m-maybe it was a...I don’t know, a homeless person.”

“Would it make you feel better if I take a look around?”

“If you would, I—”

“It’s no problem,” he said as he turned. “I’ll be right back.”

“Can I...?” she flinched, knowing she was using bad English. She’d been working on herself for so long and had been doing so well, but she was scared. She wasn’t thinking about how to talk, walk, or carry herself, she had been dealt a jarring blow. Like seeing Lucretia—or at least thinking

she'd seen her. Just the possibility was enough to turn her into a stumbling idiot for sure. Finally she took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "M-May I come with you?"

"No, you stay here," Shadoe said. "If I do find someone I don't want you in any danger." He was just about to leave when he heard the words she'd said, ringing in his ears.

Oh, God, Shadoe, I do love you.

She'd said it in a fit of passion, but it had made a stab of guilt spear through him and opened a whole floodgate of emotions—emotions he had chosen to ignore for as long as possible. She looked like a goddess in the moonlight, but Shadoe could tell she was fragile, needy, probably the clinging-vine type.

And he didn't want it—didn't need it.

He didn't like needy women. Soft, feminine, cuddly, sure. But not needy, and there was a difference. "I'll be back soon," he whispered. "Why don't you get in bed and try not to worry. It's probably nothing."

"B-Be careful."

Shadoe was moved by her concern and smiled, but just as he turned to leave he heard Julita sobbing softly. He looked back, and saw her hiding her face in her hands. He rushed over and knelt before her, wiping the tears, stroking her hair, and trying to think of something to say. But she pulled away, embarrassed.

"It's okay, Julita, I understand."

Tears glistened on her face. He knew she wanted him to kiss her, and she swayed toward him. Normally the next step would be a deep, sultry kiss, but Shadoe held back.

Oh, God, Shadoe, I do love you.

Needy, Shadoe kept reminding himself. She was too damned needy. And she was young. Too young. She needed someone, but not a thirty-four-year-old burned-out cop like him. Maybe he'd been a cad for taking her to bed when he knew he could never be what she wanted. Hell, she needed a kid in his twenties. Someone just starting out. Not someone that had been through the wringer like he had.

He wasn't near good enough for her and he knew it.

Now he was thankful for the darkness that hid his face. Getting to his feet, he said, "Guess I'd better check out—"

Julita caught his hand in hers stopping his words abruptly. He hesitantly looked down at her questioningly.

"I don't know what's wrong, Shadoe, but, well, whatever it is, with my past I'm in no condition to judge anyone. I wanted you to kiss me, but you wouldn't. I don't know why, but your story couldn't be any worse than mine."

"Hey," he said, trying to act cocky. "I don't know what the fuck you mean, Julita. I'm a cop. I deal in the underbelly of humanity. Hell, in my business you never know if the next bullet that's fired is the one meant for you. That's why I can't get too close to those I'm trying to help, that's all. I'll be moving along soon, and I'd like the satisfaction of knowing that you're better off when I leave than you were when I found you."

"Of course," she whispered, her words almost inaudible as she dropped his hand and rose from the bed. She stood at the window looking out when she realized he hadn't moved. She turned around. "You'd better go and check the place out...Lieutenant."

Shadoe couldn't see the tears that glittered in her eyes, or hear the thoughts that rummaged through her mind. He had made it clear to her that she was no more than a good roll in the hay. No involvements. Very cold, calculating, and impersonal.

He made his way downstairs hating himself, but knowing that the best cure for love was having her feel that he was a heel hiding behind a cop's badge.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Shadoe vaulted down the back steps, then out the back door, turned, and headed toward the ridge. The circle of brightness from his flashlight floated around, exposing the heavy, smoky mist. He ran toward to the edge and looked to the right where he could see the beach spread out below him. When he saw nothing, he thought Julita must have been imagining it. He made a half turn, about to go back in, when he looked straight down into the giant warrior bones and saw movement. He trained the light on something but could barely see the small shadow. He was convinced that someone was down there. He turned and quickly ran to the incline, sliding down most of the way. He then made a sharp left turn and found himself at the entrance to the bones. His eyes squinted, trying to see through the mist surrounding the jungle of bones and could just barely make out a dark shape ahead of him.

Who in God's name would be out here, and where were they going? Maybe it was an animal. Sure, it had to be. No human being would be out on a night like this fooling around inside these petrified bones. He entered the hideous jungle very carefully, keeping his eye on the dark figure that climbed in and out until he came up behind it. The fog was so thick, and the ocean raged, crashing in and out, that even at this close range he couldn't tell who or what it was. Just then the dark figure turned around, looking, as if it knew it was being followed.

His flashlight illuminated the face that looked back at him.

It was a scowling, ghastly, scarecrow face, corpselike in the night, but full of fear and animal instinct as it stared back at him. It jolted him. The scars that covered her—evidence of what she'd been through on her long trek from the asylum to the inn—gave her the look of the walking dead. But like an animal, the determined look on her face was full of survival instincts.

"My God, it is Lucretia," he muttered, then hurried, seeing her come out on the other side and run toward one of the caves. He chased her, hindered

by the sinking sand and the constant spray of the crashing ocean waves. After climbing over sharp rock crevices, losing his footing many times, he finally came upon the wide mouth of the cave and looked in. He saw only darkness. "Lucretia," he called out softly, "are you in here?" Hearing no reply, he pointed his flashlight, again illuminating her face.

"Get away!" she screeched.

Shadoe kept his eyes on the mass of darkness hovering against the craggy, uneven wall of the cave. Even though there was nowhere to go, she tried to move away from him, the light glittering in her dark eyes.

"Lucretia, my God, is that you?" he asked, squinting in the darkness.

"Get away," she hissed. "Get away, get out and leave me alone!" As she moved along the wall, terror was etched on her face. Her wild eyes darted from him to the entrance to the cave, trying to figure out a way to get past him.

"What in hell are you doing here?" As was his habit, he shot question after question at her. "How did you get out? Are you all right? How did you get here?" He looked around at the cave, seeing a blanket that she'd stolen from the mansion, and some matches she'd grabbed to build a campfire. "Don't you know you can't build a fire here? It's too wet. You'll die out here." He tried to edge closer to her. "Let me help you—"

"Stay away. Besides, what the hell do you care?" she hissed. "You sent me to that place! You, my father, and that...that tramp."

Shadoe could hear her labored breathing sawing in and out. "Lucretia, you've got to listen to me. Staying in this cave is sure death. Come back with me to the mansion."

"So you can call the authorities? Get out of here and let me be. I'd rather die than go back."

"But I can't leave you here. Inside it's warm, comfortable. There's food."

"And a telephone."

"No. I won't turn you in, I swear. Just let me take you back up to the mansion where it's warm. We'll talk things through."

"I told you I'm not going anywhere with you, so get the hell out!" She began sobbing as she slid down the wall, hiding her face in her hands. "Leave me alone to die."

“Won’t you...” His words faded and he sighed, realizing it was no use. “All right, damn it. Whatever you say, but first let me make you comfortable. I can hear you shivering all the way over here. Come on and sit down at least and let me put the blanket around you. I’ll even try to build a fire.” He moved the flashlight he was holding around, trying to find a few dry twigs when he saw the things Lucretia had gathered together. In among them was another flashlight that apparently she had brought out of the mansion. He quickly reached for it. It was the heavy-duty type and a careful flick of the switch lit up the small cave with a luminous glow. He looked around the cave. At the other end was a vertical tunnel that looked as if it led somewhere, but it was too small for a human body to climb through. “God, Lucretia, this is impossible. You’re stuck here. You can’t even get deep enough into the cave to stay dry. That space is way too small for anyone to get through.”

“There are other caves,” she said bitterly. She hadn’t moved from where she sat, and Shadoe could see her huddling to keep warm.

“Yeah? And how long do you think these things will last? The batteries will eventually go dead, the matches will run out. Lucretia, don’t you see that you can’t live in these caves forever? You have to come back with me.”

“I’ll find a way,” she said, glaring up at him.

“You’ll get sick. It’s wet, cold. You’ll be dead before spring.” He saw her head lower into her hands. “Lucretia?” he urged, then heard her sobs. They seemed suppressed, as if she were trying to keep him from hearing. As was his usual habit, he was moved immediately upon hearing a woman cry. He grabbed her away from the wall and closed his arms around her, bringing her close to his chest. “You’re shaking. You’re scared, cold, and—” When he felt movement, he looked down and saw a kitchen knife heading toward his stomach. He reached out and grabbed her wrist, forcing the knife to fall into the dirt. “You bitch!” he yelled jerking her face toward him. He saw the evil in her eyes. “You are crazy! I’m here to help you, but you try and kill me. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I hate your guts! That’s what’s wrong with me!”

Shadoe released her abruptly, sending her stumbling backward. He reached down and picked up the knife and turned away, stalking angrily toward the mouth of the cave. When he reached the opening, he stopped and looked back. “All right, “Lucretia, you win. Stay out here and die. No one

cares. No one will even miss you.” He turned then and ducked out, knowing his intent was to get back to the mansion and call the authorities.

“No!” she yelled.

He stopped, looked back in and saw her cringing in the light of the flash.

“Don’t leave me here,” she sobbed. “I can’t st-stay here. I j-just can’t.”

“Lucretia, you’re dangerous. I can’t take you inside where the others are. I’d be putting them in danger. You don’t have to worry, though. I’ll call the authorities and have you out of here before morning.”

“No!” she yelled, reaching out with her skinny arms in desperation. “Don’t call anyone, please. I’m sorry. It w-won’t happen again.”

“Look, you crazy bitch, I’m not taking you inside, and that’s final. You’d lose your temper one time, and—”

“I won’t, I promise,” she cried, her sobs sounding erratic and deep. She cringed, pulling the blanket around her arms while her teeth chattered in the cold. To stay warm she sank to the ground, wrapping her arms around herself. “I just want...I just want to be warm again, sleep in a soft bed.” Her shoulders trembled and heaved with fresh sobs. She looked up at him. “If I have to stay here, I’ll run into the sea and drown myself. I know I will.”

Shadoe walked deeper into the cave, wondering if he could trust her. If he took her back, then she’d be his responsibility. He could keep her locked in her room, or even in the basement if that didn’t work. At least she’d be out of the elements.

“Who’s with you? Is Papa—”

“Just the three of us. Me, Julita, and Garret. No one else.”

“Why d-did you come back?”

Shadoe thought about the church. “You know the church I told you was in the woods?”

She nodded, sniffing.

“It’s there, Lucretia. I mean, it’s not always there, it’s a ghost church, a—”

“A dream,” she said harshly. “I told you that. A figment of your imagination.”

“No, it’s not. Anyway that’s not important. If you want to come with me, you’d better gather that stuff up and come on.”

“No.”

He looked at her, puzzled.

“I mean first I need to tell you something. Warn you.”

“Warn me? About what?”

“It may not be me who you need to protect yourself from.”

“What in hell do you mean?” He crouched down in front of her.

“It’s Papa,” she said softly. “I know you thought it was me, and I guess...well, it was in some ways, but Papa is the one you should really watch.”

Believing her words held some truth, he became interested. “What do you mean?”

“Well, Papa was always cruel to everyone. Even Mama. He held nothing sacred, not even family. He was always selfish, only thinking of himself. He’s a hedonistic old bastard, living his life only to satisfy himself. I always knew that, but when Mama died I had no one else. I wanted him to love me so bad, but it was Julita he loved. Papa liked beautiful things and was partial to fresh young beauty. Any child he saw, or young girl that he considered extremely beautiful, became the recipient of his attentions.” She hesitated, then looked up at him. “Like Julita.”

Shadoe thought about Julita and the horror she had already been through with Garret.

“I grew up loving my papa...even though I knew something about him wasn’t right. When Mama died giving birth to Julita, I turned to Papa.” She lowered her head and her voice softened. “But he hated me.”

Shadoe saw new tears coursing down Lucretia’s face at the memories.

A sob caught in her throat. “I wasn’t beautiful enough.” She wiped at her face. “Knowing how he felt about Julita, I blamed her, yet I couldn’t help loving her because she was my sister, I guess. Anyway, that love—that tiny spark of love—was the only thing that kept me from killing her. But still, I felt I had to do something to make her ugly. That’s when I sneaked into her room and scratched her face. I was a child, I didn’t know any better. I thought she’d be scarred for the rest of her life. Papa tried to kill me that night, but instead he stumbled and fell off the balcony and suffered a twisted back. That put him in a wheelchair. When Julita was three I’d had enough of Papa and his demands. I couldn’t make him happy, no one could. So, I moved him down to the basement. That’s when my plan began coming together. Getting Papa out of the way left me free to begin working on Julita’s mind.”

"I know. I've heard that story, but it's not that easy. How in hell did you know what to give her?"

Lucretia shrugged. "I didn't. I mean, I read a little, and I guess I learned some things, but the rest was easy. I went to the doctor and described the symptoms set out in the book I'd read and he prescribed just what I needed." She cut her eyes up at him naughtily. "I even stole some things out of his office." She looked pleased with herself. "I'm sure he must have noticed, but he never traced it back to me." Her half smile held dark secrets as she angled her eyes up at him and said, "Anyway, I managed, going from doctor to doctor until I amassed a fortune in drugs and medication." She shrugged. "I guess it sounds strange, but when desperation sets in, fear no longer lives. I did what I had to do."

"Very well, apparently."

His words seemed to please her. "Yes. So you can see, Lieutenant, you're not dealing with an idiot here."

"I never thought you were an idiot. Only crazy."

Her sinister eyes darted back to him. "You stupid bastard, listen to me! I'm trying to warn you. Do you want to hear this or not?"

"All right, I'm sorry. Go ahead."

She turned her head, her eyes seeing much, but staring at nothing. "I knew I was playing with Julita's mind, but I had to stay in control, so I kept her a child as long as I could. When she began growing up, I guess I went a little crazy. Reality and insanity warred within me constantly. And then she began to fill out, become a woman." She turned back to him. "That was when I knew I'd have to kill her."

"Which is what you tried to do."

"Yes. All my life I struggled with both love and hate for both her and Papa. I was already mentally unstable, hell the whole Van Dare family was. But the struggle I went through with both of them tipped the scale, and I guess I went over the edge." She looked up into his eyes. "And then you came along. I realized for the first time what it might be like to have someone..." She sobbed and dropped her head. "To love me," she said under her breath. Then she lifted her glittering eyes and stared straight into his. "Papa made me feel like a servant. His demands were...well I think he did it on purpose."

"What do you mean?"

“Demanding, always demanding. Make his bed, vacuum his carpet, not a speck of dust on his furniture. His food had to be prepared in a certain way and steaming hot when he ate it. I don’t know how many times I traipsed up and down those stairs cooking and re-cooking his food to perfection. There could be no spots on his utensils, he—”

“You think he was doing this to get back at you because of his accident?”

She nodded. “I’m not saying anything I did was right, but Papa was wrong too. It’s just that when everyone saw his condition, they sympathized, treating me like so much dirt under their feet. I don’t know. Maybe I deserved it. All I know is after almost three years of constantly waiting on him hand and foot, it got to be too much. He had a lot of visitors, phone calls—” She stopped speaking suddenly, her eyes reflective. “But it was the doctor who made my mind up for me. I found out that Papa had set up a consultation with him regarding his back. I knew what would happen. He’d be out of that wheelchair making my life even more miserable. That’s when I thought up the idea of the basement, telling everyone he was dead—”

“By the way, why did you tell the guests he was dead, but not the help?”

“Because of the extra food. I had to tell them something, so I told them he was a recluse, disabled. I explained that I took care of him and never let them get near his room. Besides, except for the chef, the help consisted mostly of school kids. No one came to stay. The turnover was rapid, but that’s the way I liked it. No one ever stayed around long enough to get curious.” She looked up at him, her eyes saying what her lips didn’t.

“Until I came along. I know.”

“That’s why I told the guests he was dead. The plan seemed like a good one at the time. After all he’d done to me, I admit I took a sadistic pleasure in hauling him down to that basement. Then when I staged his funeral, I invited all his acquaintances and business colleagues. It seemed to work. The visits stopped, and the phone calls. He was hidden down there the whole time. During the funeral, the condolences, the news media announcing the untimely death of the Garret Van Dare. It was wonderful at first, but from there everything went downhill. Now that everyone thought he was dead I went a little crazy. I knew that nothing I did to him would ever be discovered and found that I delighted in torturing him.”

“Paying him back for everything, right?”

“Exactly,” she said. “But when I think of Julita and how vulnerable she is. He’ll eat her alive. Warn her. Tell her everything I’ve told you.”

“Julita’s fine. She hasn’t even been around him for at least a year. He sent her to some kind of charm school in Paris. It not only made her a different person, it opened her eyes to a lot of things. When I found them, Julita was holding her own, fighting back. Just like she did with you. She’s stronger than you think.”

“That bastard doesn’t deserve to live,” she rasped, her anger causing her chest to heave. She cut her eyes toward the knife. “He needs to have his heart cut out!”

“Lucretia, don’t even think that way. Hell, I agree that Garret is a bastard, but I can’t take you up to the mansion if I can’t trust you.”

She bowed her head, then reached up and pulled her fingers through her hair. “Okay, okay. I’m sorry.”

“I’m taking care of Julita now, but she’s getting stronger and won’t need me much longer.”

Suddenly she began crying. “Oh, God, I’m so sorry for what I’ve done. Oh, I don’t mean the things I did to Papa, but Julita. I ruined her life.”

“She’s still young. She’ll get along fine.”

She cut her gleaming eyes up at him and said, “He won’t leave her alone until he’s dead.”

“Then we’ll have to put our faith in Julita. Will you help me with her?”

She jerked her head up. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“When she sees you she’s going to be very frightened. All the old memories, the hurts might come back. Julita will feel overwhelmed with two people plotting against her. You’re going to have to convince Julita that you’ve changed. It won’t be easy, but you have to try. You can win her over, I know you can.”

“What about Papa? You’re worried about me, but what about him? The minute he sees me, he’ll want to kill me.”

“I’ll take care of Garret. You just do as I asked, okay?”

She let out a sigh that told Shadoe she thought it was hopeless. Then she gave a small shrug. “I’ll try.”

“Lucretia,” he said, not happy with her answer.

“All right, I’ll do my best, but you want the truth, don’t you? All hell is going to break loose. Now that the devil is out of his hole, he’s going to wreak havoc on all of us.”

“We’ll work together to see that doesn’t happen. Agreed?”

“I suppose,” she said.

He drew her attention when he halted his movement in response to her answer and gave her a reprimanding look.

“Okay, sure,” she finally agreed. “But don’t expect too much.”

“Let’s get this stuff gathered up so we can hurry.” He gave a shiver and looked over at her skinny frame. “God, I can’t even stand this wet cold. How the hell did you think you were going to live here?”

“I didn’t intend to live here, I was only going to stay as long as the mansion was occupied.”

“Why the hell didn’t you stay in the basement? The bed and everything is still down there, isn’t it?”

Smirking at his stupid question, she said, “The door is locked, Einstein, I couldn’t get in.”

“Hell, that’s no excuse. You could have found some way in. I did.”

“I suppose I would have eventually. It’s hard to think when you’re cold and hungry.”

They worked in silence for a few minutes, then stepped out of the cave to begin their journey through the bones.

Just then a rogue wind blew up and a haunting tune began playing through the chanter marks. Shadoe, leading the way, halted abruptly, then reached out to hold Lucretia back. They stayed still for a moment while the unearthly tune skipped down their spines in a chilling arpeggio.

“Oh, my God,” Shadoe muttered, remembering the legend.

“What’s the matter?”

He couldn’t tell Lucretia that the bones were about to walk. “I don’t know. Nothing, maybe, but I thought I saw something move.”

“My God, did you see that?” Lucretia whispered.

“Be still,” Shadoe urged. “Don’t say a word.”

“But the bones...they—”

“Shhh!” he hissed, his arm still flung across the front of her body to keep her from moving forward.

With chills of terror still running rampant along his spine, Shadoe pulled his eyes away from the bones and looked out at the ocean, the pounding coming harder and harder—like a heartbeat. Suddenly a deep moan sounded as the bones continued to stir. He backed up, seeing them slowly gather themselves together under the haunting sound of the song that echoed on the wind.

The wind seemed to be infusing life into the scattered bones until they were completely assembled. The picture was awesome. The enormous creature picked himself up off the sandy beach and stood mythically tall and large, a sword being held in his bony hands. Slowly he moved, the giant skeleton clattering as it moved away from its resting place and walked through the tunnel of winds that had become shrill with triumph.

The two of them watched quietly while the towering giant waved his sword in the air as if entering a battle.

“Come on,” Shadoe whispered.

“What? Now?”

“His walk is slow and labored. If it’s his intention to walk the entire beach we can be out of here and upon the rise before he comes back.”

“I can’t believe this. The legend is true? It’s preposterous.”

“Lucretia, we can talk about all of this later. Right now we have to get out of here before he gets back. Otherwise we may become his next battle.”

“I can’t go through the place where his bones were lying. I can’t, I just can’t!”

“Yes you will unless you want me to leave you here. Now come on.”

He grabbed her arm and pulled her along beside him as he headed for the giant’s resting place. Lucretia hurried to keep up, but couldn’t help noticing that the sand had been broken, disturbed, as if the bones had been deeply buried.

“Come on, will you?” Shadoe urged, turning around to see what was keeping her.

“It’s hard to walk,” she said, constantly falling into the sandy holes.

All the time they walked, Shadoe kept his eyes on the giant that clattered along the beach, looking for a war to engage in.

Lucretia stumbled and fell. “Shadoe! Wait!”

At the same time that Shadoe heard her, he noticed that the giant halted in his tracks and looked back.

“Oh, my God!” Shadoe said, throwing the things down that he’d been carrying, then yanking Lucretia up off the sand. He hoisted her up in his arms and ran to the incline. He stumbled, climbed, slid backward, then desperately gained toeholds until he was at last at the top. He put Lucretia down and ordered her to run, but when he tried to follow, he found his ankle caught beneath the root of a tree. He tugged, but it wouldn’t come free. He pulled at his leg, struggled with his foot, all the time watching the giant gain on him, his sword raised, and hellish flames spitting out of his eyes. The height of the giant didn’t quite reach to the top of the ridge, so he reached out with his bony fingers, trying to grasp Shadoe. Shadoe managed to duck out of his reach, then saw the creature’s sword swing through the air. Shadoe had nothing to fight him with, so he fell on the ground, ducking and rolling out of the way as the sharp instrument sliced through the air.

Feeling like David in the battle with Goliath, he scratched along the ground picking up several large rocks, the only weapons he had. He stood then and hurled them at the giant, seeing them whizzing in between the rattling bones. Finally one sharp, well-placed, baseball-sized rock managed to hit him on his skull, knocking the giant to his knees.

Shadoe dropped the remaining rocks and looked around to see where Lucretia was. He saw her huddling beneath a tree and gave one more strong pull, finally managing to jerk his foot free. But when he began to run, pain shot through his ankle and he stopped, moaning in pain. He found he couldn’t bear much weight on it, so his progress was slow, but he finally reached her. With pain etching his face into a scowl, they both turned and began a slow hobble back to the mansion, she helping him more than he was helping her.

After walking only a few feet, Shadoe hesitated and looked back, seeing the mammoth creature nowhere around. What had happened? Had he simply disappeared? It was hard for him to believe he had actually felled the giant with one small blow to the skull, but suspected hysterics might be the answer. Come morning he was sure the bones of the giant would look as if they hadn’t moved an inch. Maybe he was part of a walking nightmare, or maybe the highly suggestive words in a brochure simply made him believe something that wasn’t there—like when he had seen the church. But whatever the answer, Shadoe didn’t question it, but simply turned and continued his limp back to the safety and warmth of the mansion.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Garret had risen early and sat in the library reading, a smoking cigarette clasped between the fingers of one hand and a glass of his usual early-morning brandy held in the other. The room was dim, only one lamp lit, its brightness spreading across the old man and the book he read. The smoke that circled above his head was disturbed when he turned slightly at the noise he heard coming from the kitchen. He quickly put out his cigarette, put the book down, and set the glass down on the coaster. With the help of his cane, he pulled himself up. He made his way toward the dining room to see what the confusion was.

By that time Shadoe and Lucretia were inside. He drug up a straight-backed chair for her, then found one for himself. He was leaning over, rubbing his throbbing ankle, then cut his eyes toward her. "You okay?"

Lucretia was unresponsive while huddling in her chair, shivering.

Knowing she must be chilled through and through, he forgot his ankle for the time being and pulled himself up, quickly scanning the walls. "Where's the damned thermostat?"

"It's in the f-foyer behind the front d-desk," Lucretia answered with chattering teeth.

He didn't think it wise to leave her alone while he searched for it so he turned to the stove, turned the oven on, and pulled the door open. "To hell with it. I'll turn it up later. This'll have to do for now." He put his hands up to feel the heat that was coming through, then looked back at her huddling across the room. "Come on, get a little closer." She began moving, but seemed to be having a hard time. Watching her struggle, he finally asked, "Can't you do a damned thing for yourself? I'm the one with the bum ankle."

"I'm okay," she muttered, managing to drag the chair across the floor and up to the heat.

Shadoe looked at her critically. “You need a hot bath and dry clothes. Get those off.”

She stared at him, shocked.

“Lucretia, those clothes have to come off. They’re soaked and heavy with wet sand.”

“Here? With you—”

“Luc—” he began, then stopped. He’d started to give her a lecture on one’s survival not being the place for modesty, but decided against it. “Okay, well,” he finally said, looking down at her while dragging his fingers through his hair. “I’ll go up and run you a bath and get you some dry clothes. Where’s your room?”

“What’s all the damned noise?” a deep, grumbling voice asked from the doorway. They both looked up to see Garret standing there, leaning on his cane. His harsh eyes cut toward Lucretia, the sight of her turning his face to pure hate. “What the hell...? What is she doing here?” he demanded.

Lucretia looked away quickly.

“I don’t want any trouble, Garret,” Shadoe said, urging himself forward, then halted his steps when he felt a nudge in his stomach. He looked down to find Garret’s cane punching him.

“Stay right where you are,” Garret warned, then indicated to Lucretia. “I don’t know how she got here or what the fuck she’s doing here, but I want that bitch out of my house.”

Shadoe forcefully pushed the cane away and glared down at it. “Where the hell did you get that?”

“I have several canes. A collection in fact.” He lifted it up and showed Shadoe the handle and the tip. “Pure silver.” He turned the handle around and looked at it, then shifted his gaze to Shadoe. “Could be used as a weapon if I ever need one.”

“I’m not interested in what your money can buy, but I am interested in keeping Lucretia alive. Hell, Garret, she’ll die out there.”

“Out where? Where did you find her?”

“In one of the caves.”

His face melted into a scowling smile as his gaze cut into her. “Hiding out, huh?” Then he looked back at Shadoe. “Well, I don’t care. I endured fifteen years of hell at that woman’s hands, and she’s not staying in this house one minute longer.”

“Whatever she’s done, Garret, she’s your daughter, and she needs help.”

“What the hell are you, daft? She’s insane, a killer! Let her live in a cave like an animal. She’s not welcome here.”

“That would be murder, Garret, pure and simple. You put her out and I’ll see that you go to prison for her death!”

“And just what the hell is your interest in her?”

“She’s a human being, Garret, and deserves to live like one.”

“Like I did in the basement? Like Julita did in the attic?”

* * * *

Lucretia’s lips thinned. Getting Shadoe’s promise not to turn her in hadn’t done any good. She’d forgotten about her father, and how anxious he would be to get her out of here. One phone call from him is all it would take. She looked at the door and thought about what was beyond it. She couldn’t go back, she’d die out there. She needed to regain her strength, think, plan. But he wouldn’t send her back. She’d kill him first. If she had to kill every one of them, she wouldn’t go back. Not to that place. Never again. Her eyes lifted, roaming over the room. This was *her* home, not theirs. She’d taken care of it for more than fifteen years, and she belonged here, not them. Never them. Finally her thoughts quieted and she listened while Shadoe continued his argument for her safety.

“Garret, my God, she’s your daughter. I would think you’d be able to scrounge up a little compassion for her.”

“Compassion?” he growled. “Where the hell was her compassion when I needed it? Answer me that! And what about Julita? Do you think she’s going to welcome the sight of her tormentor? I don’t think so!”

“Lucretia stays,” Shadoe said, the muscle in his rigid jaw wrenching with anger. “At least long enough to build up her strength. We have no choice. She’s not fit to travel in her condition.” Pushing past Garret he walked into the dining room and out to the foyer.

“Where are you going?” Garret barked, stumbling after him.

Shadoe halted in his tracks, his eyes closing in annoyance. He was tired of having to report his every movement to Garret. “To run Lucretia a bath, get her some dry clothes, and wake Julita. I need her help.”

Garret moved forward threateningly, his cane supporting him. "You'll stay away from Julita."

Shadoe turned toward the old man. "For God's sake, Garret, I'm not going up there to get in bed with her. I need her help. Lucretia needs her help. Now if you'll excuse me, I have things to do."

Garret squinted at him. "Not until you answer some questions for me. Why in hell do you insist on helping someone like Lucretia? She needs to be locked up. She's insane, a killer. My God, she was plotting to kill her whole family. Probably still is!"

Shadoe's annoyance apparent, he raked his hand down his face, still feeling sand sticking to him. "She'll be locked up in due time. Right now she needs food and sleep. As soon as she's stronger, I'll call the authorities."

"What a boy scout you are," Garret said, derisively.

* * * *

Shadoe had finally reached his limit. "Hell, Garret, we can talk this out later. Right now Lucretia needs a hot bath and dry clothes." He nodded toward the shivering lump that was still sitting in the chair. "After I get some food down her, I'm going to find a place for her to sleep. I hope I can trust you to control your emotions and stay away from both women."

"I'm getting sick and tired of you giving orders in my house."

"Well that's just too damned bad," he retorted, then abruptly turned away from Garret and headed for the staircase, finding his weak ankle stronger now.

Shadoe was about halfway up the stairs when he stopped dead still. Coming down the steps was Julita wearing a flimsy nightgown. Her eyes were open but glazed. She seemed to be looking at something in the distance.

"My God, what's she doing? What's wrong with her?"

"Sleepwalking," Shadoe answered in a soft voice.

All at once she reached out and cried, "Mama! Don't go, Mama, please! I'm coming!"

Watching her come toward him, Shadoe began to back down the stairs, speaking softly so as not to frighten her. "Julita, where are you going?"

"I have to find my mama. She needs me, wants me." Julita kept reaching, following someone.

Shadoe watched her, knowing from his own experience that whatever she saw, it wasn't in the real world but the world of the dead. She would follow this ghostly figure as it darted in and out of the trees until she saw the clearing, an ethereal light spotlighting the church, and then—maybe death. He couldn't let her go to her mother like this, it might prove fatal.

"Don't just stand there, do something!" Garret said sharply.

"Get back!" Shadoe shouted. "Get out of the way!"

"Oh, hell, she's coming toward me!" Garret said, frightened.

"She doesn't see you. Move, Garret. Goddamn it, move! If you wake her, it could be traumatic."

"What the hell's happening?" he asked. "Where's she going?"

"She's dreaming!"

"Why isn't she in her bed?"

"Shut up, Garret. If you wake her up, she might do damage to herself."

Just before she reached the door, she shouted, "I'm coming, Mama. I'll be there. No, don't!" she screamed. "Wait for me!" All at once Julita slumped and fell to the floor.

Shadoe rushed to her while Lucretia came to the door to see what was happening. "What's going on?"

Shadoe felt for a pulse, then touched her forehead, making sure she wasn't running a fever. "She's okay," he said, pushing her hair out of her face. Then he picked her up in his arms and carried her toward the stairs. Seeing Lucretia, he paused. "Lucretia, what the hell, go back into the kitchen. When I get back I'll help you upstairs. I just have to—"

"My baby," Lucretia crooned, "what's wrong with my baby?"

Shadoe and Garret's eyes met in a knowing look, then Shadoe turned back to Lucretia. "Don't worry about her, she's just sleeping. You just take care of yourself right now, okay?"

"You're sure?" she asked, then shivered, her teeth chattering. "Ohhh, someone must be walking over my grave."

"I'd like to walk over your godda—"

"Garret!" Shadoe shouted, then shot him a scathing look.

"And you," Garret began, his deep, grumbling voice speaking to Shadoe with authority. "After you get her to bed, I want to see you in the library."

Shadoe's nostrils flared with anger. "I'll be there as soon as I have the two women down."

"I want you there immediately," Garret snapped.

Clenching his teeth, he looked at Garret with fury burning in his eyes. "Get the hell in line, okay? I've got my hands full here, can't you see that? Why can't you stop thinking of yourself for one fucking minute? After I get Julita back in bed, I need to see to Lucretia. She's freezing for God's sake. She needs food, a bath, and dry clothes. I think that whatever the hell is bothering you can wait a few minutes."

"Why, you impertinent, dumb-assed cop," Garret growled. "Okay, so go and do your good deed for the day, but if you know what's good for you, you won't waste a minute. I have some things to say, and you will listen. Do you understand? You *will* listen!"

* * * *

Shadoe laid Julita down gently, covering her carefully. He ached when he looked at her. His eyes shifted down to her lips. God, how he wanted to drink in her kisses, be buried so deeply inside her that the throbs of ecstasy would never stop. It was true. He did love her. But he couldn't tell her that. He couldn't saddle her with a dumb-assed cop who might be dead tomorrow. Besides, if they did somehow get together it would only be half a marriage. She deserved more, not a husband who went a little crazy when he'd seen too much. He would leave this place and never see her again, never letting her know how much he really cared. She'll find someone someday, someone better than him.

"I'm sorry, my love," he whispered, backing toward the door. "But Garret is right. I'm not nearly good enough."

You really are a flashy beast.

The words brought a sheen of tears in his eyes, and he smiled a sad smile. "That's right, that's all I am. Go get someone that has more to give you than just flash and glitter. You don't want tinsel, you deserve pure gold. I'm sorry I can't give it to you."

He turned away, his heart hurting.

Chapter Twenty-Five

After getting Lucretia settled, Shadoe was on his way to Julita's room to check on her before heading for the library to talk with Garret. Trying to stay quiet, his steps were slow and careful, but when he heard a series of muffled sounds coming from her room, his stride quickened, knowing she must be having another nightmare. With his hand on the doorknob, he put his ear to the door. The sounds he heard were very soft at first, but began to rise, the garbled words edged with panic. He pushed the door open quickly, and saw her tossing about in her bed. Rushing to her, he sat down and leaned over her. "Julita," he whispered, shaking her gently. "Wake up."

* * * *

Julita slowly opened her eyes and looked at him. She could feel his gentle strength and wanted to stay in his arms. Something about his presence reassured her. With him there she felt protected, warmed throughout her body. All at once her trembling stopped, and she felt something—some kind of weird sensation curling through her. As the feeling spread she could feel a low, throaty laugh wanting to gurgle up her throat accompanied by a kind of brazen defiance that spread throughout her, daring to stamp out her fear and shyness.

While smoothing the covers over her, Shadoe noticed her eyes following him. The look on her face—her features. They had physically changed somehow. She seemed older, more experienced—brazen.

Julita's lids had lowered, a tiny seductive smile playing at the corners of her mouth. Just looking at him caused gusts of desire to whip through her. She wanted him to make love to her and turned her violet eyes on his, capturing them boldly. He was so handsome. A dark and dangerous hero coming to her in the shadows of early morning, the scar on his cheek

lending a sinister touch. She reached up to touch it, but he caught her hand and pulled it away. “How did that happen?” she whispered, her voice deep and throaty.

“A bullet kissed me,” he said simply.

“A kiss? By a bullet?” She laughed softly.

Her hand moved along his cheek, her eyes anchoring lustily on his tempting mouth. “Perhaps you would prefer a kiss from a woman,” she whispered, tracing the tip of her finger along his soft pillowy lips.

“Maybe I would,” he answered.

She waited while his bold stare searched her face. “Well, come and get it,” she said with a naughty look in her eyes.

But just as he came so close that his hot breath warmed her face, her lips moved away from his and kissed the scar lightly, then made a sensuous trail from the seductive slash to the edge of his mouth.

Slowly, teasingly, her fragrant lips finally reached his and parted erotically.

* * * *

He was in a haze, eagerly waiting their dizzying, heated crush that brought with it an assault on his groin. The savagery in his blood quickly responded to the lush, succulent, sensuous, and passionate message in the kiss, making his Indian blood boil. The kiss, together with the mysterious scent of musk she was wearing sent the pit of Shadoe’s stomach into a wild whirl. With one quick movement, now he was the one holding her, his breath coming erratically, his cock becoming rock hard in only seconds. He knew he shouldn’t, but he was a man goddamn it. His mouth opened wider and covered hers hungrily, his tongue pushed forward, urgent and exploratory. He felt himself plunging deeper and deeper, his lust for her getting out of hand. When he felt her responding with fervor, he mumbled, “Julita,” his eyes just barely catching a look—a look that wasn’t Julita’s. Feeling a chill cut to his bones, he stopped, his hands releasing their hold. “Julita, what’s wrong with you?”

She ignored his question, arched her back, then pushed her breasts, firm and round, against his chest.

He tried to resist, but finally a spurt of hungry desire spiraled through him. His hands grabbed her roughly, roamed over her body, a wayward thumb pressing against the side of her breast, causing his fingers to tingle. He wanted to touch their sweet softness, to have the taste of her nipples on his tongue. With his eyes closed in passion and his lips opened in hunger, he tasted the softness of her neck, nipping at her earlobe, then down to her breasts. He wanted to bury himself inside her. Deep, so very deep—

Suddenly they pulled apart when a noise sounded outside her door. They both turned and looked, but the sound went away. “The wind is high,” she whispered. “It’s just the house settling.”

He turned and looked at her, again his eyes filled with confusion. Those weren’t words Julita would say. She’d be afraid, hold tight to him, but this woman—whoever she was—

All at once she pressed herself to him and his mind clouded. With her so close he couldn’t think straight, feeling only her hot breath on his neck, her body willing and trembling beneath him.

“Stay with me.” She whispered the invitation against his ear, soft and sensuous.

He looked down at her. He liked what he saw—and yet he didn’t. He didn’t know how he felt. She was different, yet he wanted her—to take her in wild abandon. To have her so deeply and completely that their heated flesh would go up in flames together. But something else—something inside told him to go—not to touch her.

“No,” she whimpered as he pulled away from her.

Her hands grabbed his shirt, refusing to let go. She scratched and pulled, but he managed to wrench them away. He stared at her as he backed toward the door. Never had he seen this kind of wild desire in Julita’s eyes. They had become hard, pointed, almost like an animal’s. And the way she looked at him, her lids half closed, the sensuous half-smile turning to one of base sensuality. The sweet Julita was gone, and in her place was a wanton woman.

“Come back!” she yelled, then rose up on her knees, crouching like an animal and growling like a tiger. “Stay with me or I’ll tell Garret that you raped me!” Her voice had dropped an octave as she hissed out the threatening words.

Shadoe couldn't believe what he saw. "Another time," he mumbled, catching the doorknob and turning it. He opened the door and backed through it, feeling something wasn't right here. The way she looked at him, the hunger in her eyes, the way her breasts bounced—God, he wanted to stay, how he wanted to stay. But if he did—if he kissed her once more he would be in bed with her—in bed with *whom*? But instead he said, "Get some sleep" and closed the door. Standing there, he heard her fling a mouthful of curses at him, together with an object that hit the door.

He turned and made his way toward the stairs, but Julita's actions nagged at him. In only seconds she had turned from a timid nineteen-year-old to someone much older. Had her experiences with Garret somehow tarnished her? She'd acted bold and raw, even brazen. So different than before when she cowered at the very sight of him. Not that he wanted her to cower and stutter like a village idiot, but the innocence she'd had then was beautiful and pure. He hated to see it sullied by life. He realized she couldn't stay a child forever. She had to grow up, and both Garret and the school had done their part in making that happen. But apparently her schooling in life had been too abrupt and much too cruel. He touched the lips she had kissed and wondered.

Had she learned too much in too short a time?

Just as Shadoe reached the bottom step of the staircase, the wind blew the front door open. He rushed over and struggled against the wind to close it. After he had it securely closed and locked, he turned to see Garret standing at the library door.

"What the hell was that?"

"Another storm brewing."

"This line of coast has more storms than I've ever seen anywhere. You'd think the gods were angry about something."

"Gods?" Shadoe questioned as he turned to follow Garret into the library. "Do you believe in such things?"

"Not really. It just seems we get our share of storms here. There must be a reason. Some meteorological mumbo jumbo, I suspect."

Shadoe thought about the giant's bones that lay beneath the ridge and felt his ankle ache. "What about the legends surrounding this place?"

"A bunch of nonsense."

He thought about arguing the point, but finally sighed to himself, letting the subject drop. He had too much on his mind to get into that weird tale. Julita had once told him that the trees had eyes. He looked toward a window and saw the swaying of limbs against it. Hell, maybe the trees did have eyes. Maybe they did walk. He wouldn't have believed a bunch of bones could come to life during the full moon, but they had. Either that or he was as crazy as the rest of them. He walked over to the bar and mixed himself a drink. "So what's on your mind, Garret?"

"The fact that you've made me wait, among other things." He banged his cane on the floor in anger. "I'm not accustomed to waiting for any man, and certainly not waiting for some woman to be taken care of before me."

"You're not only a selfish bastard but a chauvinist and a goddamned snob," Shadoe muttered.

"I don't give a good goddamn what you think of me. You're going to have to learn a few things. I do not wait!" Again his cane smashed against the floor.

Shadoe's eyes cut toward the cane the old man used like a weapon and then up at him. "You waited for fifteen years, Garret. Another few minutes, more or less, are not going to matter." Saying that, he upended the glass, then bared his teeth and cringed when the liquid made a burning path down his throat. He leaned his head over and shook it. He needed that drink. He needed that one and a lot more.

Garret watched his reaction to the strong drink. "You planning on getting drunk?"

"This sure as hell would be the time for it, don't you think?" While mixing another drink, he said, "All right, Garret, I'm here. No more waiting. Let's get this out on the table. I've been up almost all night and I'm tired. What did you bring me in here for?"

"I want to talk to you about Julita."

Oh, God, here it comes.

"Okay, so what the hell did I do this time? Go ahead, goddamn it. Rant, rave, have your say, but be quick, will you? I'm tired."

His eyes cut into Shadoe. "All right, I guess I deserved that, but..." He hesitated, concern showing in his eyes. "It's nothing like that."

Shadoe frowned suspiciously. "What is it then?"

Garret frowned. "I'm getting concerned. She's...well, she's acting strange. I know you won't believe this, hell I can hardly believe it myself."

"By 'she' you mean Julita I take it." Shadoe heaved a sarcastic snicker. "After what I've seen tonight, I'd probably believe just about anything." He looked at the old man, waiting. "All right, so get to it, Garret, I can hardly hold my eyes open. I've been up almost all night, and I ache like hell. The girls, too. Don't look for any of us before noon."

"You, of course, are aware of my relationship with Julita."

"Relationship?" Shadoe chuckled softly and stared down into his drink. "Relationship," he kept repeating.

"What the hell are you laughing at?"

"The word. It's a nice, normal word. Doesn't seem to fit into this conversation." He tossed back another drink.

"You're either drunk or so tired you're silly. As I was saying, my relationship—"

Shadoe tried to stifle a laugh, but couldn't. When he saw Garret scowling at him, he straightened his face. "Sorry."

Garret let out a big sigh. "Hell, I know my conduct has been less than perfect," he rasped. "In my saner moments I'm sorry for it, but sometimes she acts different. Especially when she, well, when she—"

Shadoe had managed to compose himself. "When she what, Garret? Spit it out for God's sake."

"It's her eyes," he finally managed. "She looks differently out of them. Not all the time and not at all in New York, but just in the couple of days that we've been here, she's been different. Her actions are so much like those of my late wife. The way she smiles, the look in her eyes, even the way she walks, her mannerisms." He scratched his head as if trying to figure it out, then turned to Shadoe. "At those times she calls me Garret, not Papa."

Shadoe's eyes widened. He could hear her words now.

If you don't stay, I'll tell Garret that you raped me! I'll tell Garret...Garret...Garret!

He didn't notice it at the time, but now—

"I tell you, Shadoe, something's wrong with her. She's no longer Julita, she's...hell, she's Greta." Garret took a drink from the glass he held, then turned back to Shadoe. "Well, Mr. Big-Time-Cop, what do you have in your magic bag to take care of this little twist in the plot?"

Shadoe was unusually silent, Garret's words confirming what he had experienced with Julita upstairs. Finally, he turned to the old man. "Magic bag, my ass. Just do us all a favor and stay away from her. There. Problem solved."

"Try to understand, dammit! Hell, I'm—"

"Crazy!" Shadoe yelled. "*Crazy* is the word you're looking for, Garret."

"I'm not crazy," he lashed out. "I just...well, my emotions battle against each other."

"You're a scream, Garret, you know that? Standing there telling me you're warring inside yourself. An angel on one shoulder and the devil on the other, huh? I'll tell you what's wrong with you. Your control is nonexistent, and you have no morals!" Looking down at his glass Shadoe noticed the liquid had gone. He stepped up to the bar to mix another, listening as Garret rattled on.

"I know what I am, but I'm talking about Julita. I think she's—"

Shadoe waited for several seconds, then turned on Garret. "What?"

"I think she's...possessed."

Suddenly the clinking ice stilled, and Shadoe held his breath.

What a goddamned bombshell, Shadoe thought as he stood grasping a bottle so tightly he thought it might burst in his hand.

He hated to admit it, but it would explain everything. And it wasn't any more idiotic than anything else that had happened around there. He looked upward as if he could see past the high-boarded ceiling into her room. Was she possessed as Garret thought? Sure, he knew she acted differently. But possession, the idea never occurred to him. But it had to be true. She'd always been shy, even after Paris. He could tell she was different, but different in her own way, more savvy, more worldly, not acting like a damned—

"Greta was trash," Garret said, interrupting Shadoe's thoughts. "I didn't know it when I married her, but hell, I probably would have anyway." He leaned against the mantle of the fireplace and stared down into the leaping flames thoughtfully but didn't see. "I loved her. I didn't care a whit about her faults. I had my own. She knew about them, too. I figured if she was willing to forgive me of mine, then I was willing to overlook hers. After all, I'm no white knight. I'm as dirty as they come."

"Apparently her mother's been playing with her since she's been here," Shadoe said, his voice almost inaudible.

Garret shifted his eyes toward Shadoe. "I think we need to get her out of here."

"No," Shadoe said quickly. "Now that we're here we have to play this out. If we don't..." He turned an icy stare toward Garret. "I hate to think what might happen." His voice lowered warningly. "And Garret you're going to have to watch what you say to her. Don't demand, don't insist, and, above all, don't raise your voice."

"Back to that again? Hell, I just told you—"

"Garret, it's gone beyond that. Greta is here in our midst, and she's angry about something."

"But what?"

"I'm not sure, but I think she blames you for being dead."

"How the hell do you know all of this? I've never told you the whole story."

"I don't know, damn it, I'm just speaking from things I've heard, read, even feel. A lot of it's intuitive." Hesitating for a moment, he said, "There's something else."

Garret waited, and then said, "Well, what for God's sake?"

Shadoe cut his eyes toward Garret. "She came on to me upstairs."

Garret's jaw jerked in anger. "She what?"

"You heard me. Julita...only it wasn't Julita. It was her mother. I'm sure of it. I was passing by her room and heard her. It sounded like she was having another nightmare, so I went in. She was thrashing about on her bed. I managed to calm her fears but then she..." He looked at Garret, seeing the anger on his face. "She kissed me, and I...I responded."

"You bastard!" Garret said, limping toward him on his cane. "How far did it go?"

"It was only a kiss, a few words."

"Are you sure it wasn't Julita?"

"No, I don't think so. Julita's never...well, she's never acted like that. So brazen, raw."

Garret's eyes narrowed on Shadoe. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I haven't got it all figured out yet." He rubbed his forehead. "Hell, I just don't know yet."

“Have you had any of the dreams you were having for a while?”

“No and I don’t think I will. It’s a whole new ballgame now. She’s concentrating on Julita, but with the whole family here, I think she intends to make an appearance and soon.”

“And she’s using Julita to do it,” Garret said thoughtfully.

“That’s the tough part. She wouldn’t hurt her. The woman I saw in the church loves her daughter, wanted to see her, warn her.” Shadoe turned to Garret and looked him in the eye. “She said you wanted to hurt her.”

Garret’s brows lifted in shock. “Hurt Julita? Me? I would never hurt Julita.”

Shadoe’s eyes lowered slightly as if he were remembering. “No, she didn’t mean that. I know that now. She meant...” His eyes found Garret’s once more, but couldn’t get the words out. “Never mind, I know what she meant. I didn’t know then, but now—”

“It’s changed now, hasn’t it?”

“Yes. What Greta wants now is...” He couldn’t finish.

“Come on. What are you thinking?”

He looked at Garret, feeling for the first time that Greta’s ghost was aiming at him. “Revenge.”

“What? Revenge? On who?”

“You. Be careful, Garret. Stay away from Julita. Greta may be using her to get back at you somehow.” He looked around. “Are there any weapons around here besides my Beretta?”

"You brought a fuckin' gun?"

"I'm a cop. I'm never without it."

“I have a stupid little handgun I brought to scare you with, but other than that there’s nothing in the house.”

“I don’t care how stupid it is. If it’s got bullets in it, and it shoots, it’s dangerous. Lock it up. Keep it out of sight and away from Julita.” He put his glass down, then continued. “I’m not sure how, in what form the revenge will come, but just stay on your toes. I think we both need to get some sleep now. I’ll be able to figure this thing out a whole lot better after a little rest.”

“It seems to me somebody ought to stay awake and watch out for Julita.” He looked down at his watch. “I slept a little last night. Besides, I don’t think I could sleep now. I’m too damned keyed up.” Turning, he went

back to the bar and began rattling glasses. “You’ve been through a lot. You need your sleep. I’ll call you if anything happens.”

Shadoe wondered for a moment if he could trust Garret. He seemed different tonight, and since he was dead tired, he decided to take the chance. A man couldn’t stay up twenty-four hours a day if he had ghosts to catch, spells to destroy, and crazy people to see too. Speaking of crazy people, how did he know that Lucretia wouldn’t take up her trusty hatchet and plunge it toward his neck? Hell, at this point he didn’t care. He’d be asleep. Maybe it would be fast and painless.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Garret sat under a dim light in the library, a pipe in his mouth, a smoky haze hanging above his head, and a drink tinkling in his hand. He stared down at the book he was reading, the words meaningless as his mind wandered. The wind whistled around the old mansion, causing a chill to settle in his soul. His eyes slowly lifted from the page and looked around. He could feel something. Something strange, creepy. No sooner had the thought formed in his mind than he heard the familiar tinkling sounds of the music box playing. The melodic tune was soft and familiar, and then the words began, soft and breathy as they echoed around the room.

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

Garret jerked himself around looking everywhere, his eyes wide, his heart jumping in his chest. The words, the voice, he knew them. But it was impossible. It couldn’t be.

“Hello, Garret,” the voice said, her chilling voice soft and cutting. It echoed as if rising from a dark, deep grave—from the caverns of hell—from another world.

“Greta, my God is that you?” he said, still looking around. All at once, a white, glowing specter appeared. She seemed to float, her shroud moving in a nonexistent wind.

“Who else would know your favorite song, sung by that wimpy little blonde bitch with the legs. And then you had the gall to put that song on my daughter’s music box. You pathetic old man, mooning over a dead woman that wasn’t even part of your generation. You even played it for Julita so she would hear it night and day.”

“But y-you can’t be here. You’re dead. I just can’t believe—”

"You'd better believe it," she said, her sarcastic tone turning treacherous, "*because I've come for you.*"

"For me? What do you mean? I've done nothing to you."

"Nothing?" she shrieked. "*You killed me, you bastard, and blamed it on childbirth! Do you remember?*" she hissed, her eyes narrowing on him. "*My contractions had started and were getting closer and closer. I was bleeding profusely. I begged you to get me to the hospital, to call a doctor, anything, but you laughed.*" She hesitated, looking at him with eyes of loathing. "*After you delivered the child you left me there to bleed to death!*"

"You were having problems. I didn't know what to do. I was frightened. I had to see to the child, make sure she was taken care of."

"*That wasn't it, Garret, and you know it.*" She moved toward him, her shroud trailing after her. "*I was growing older, and you liked youth and beauty.*" She smirked. "*You still do. Poor Garret. I wasn't young and beautiful enough for you any longer, was I? And then the child was born. She was just what you wanted, wasn't she?*"

"It might please you to know that I didn't get to enjoy her for long. I suffered at the hands of that demon of a daughter you gave me, and I've been a cripple almost since Julita was born. She put me in the basement," he rasped. "I wasn't locked in, but I might as well have been. I didn't have legs and couldn't get out. So you see, you have your revenge."

"*No, that wasn't the revenge I sought, but it gave me time. I knew you were safe from Julita down there.*"

"What about Lucretia? Don't tell me she escaped your wrath!"

"*No, she'll pay. But at least she had an excuse.*"

"What? Her dementia? She knew what she was doing. She's only crazy when it serves her purpose. She's here now. She just escaped from an asylum, did you know that?"

"*Don't change the subject, you slimy bastard!*"

"I don't have to stand here and listen to this," he growled, pulling himself up on his cane and hurriedly stumbling toward the door. But before he took two steps he was slammed back against the wall and couldn't move.

She watched him for a moment savoring his fear, then continued. "*For fifteen years she was safe—*"

"Safe! With Lucretia?"

"Shut up!" she shouted, then continued. *"Then the stranger came, upsetting everything. I knew I had to do something, so I tried to use him to get Julita to the church. I wanted to warn her, to warn both of them! But as usual you interfered, made your way out of the basement and back on your feet. Then the inn was shut down, everyone gone!"*

Garret cast her an incredulous look. "My God, you were the woman in the church Shadoe keeps talking about?" He was stunned. "Why a church? What was the significance?"

"Significance? I don't know. Because it was dead, I suppose, like me. Damaged beyond repair. Once beautiful, loved. Now lonely and forgotten. But I needed it mostly for the shock value. What would a church be doing in the wilderness?" She hesitated, then said decidedly, *"Yes. It was out of synch, misplaced. That was the significance, and it worked."*

"Even dead you're as crazy as a loon. I don't see that any of this has accomplished anything."

"You're wrong. I found that he's a good man, Garret. He let you, the very devil himself, out of your cage because he's a good man. You always have been prejudiced, but you fooled him into thinking you liked him. Then when you were ready, when you had Julita firmly in your grasp, your mask came off. You used him."

"Who was hurt, huh? Who the hell was hurt?"

"I want him for Julita. She needs him. I'm not sure either of them know it yet, but they're in love."

Garret's jaw tightened at that statement. "Over my dead body!"

"That can be arranged," she hissed ominously. *"I wouldn't make any long-range plans if I were you. Some day very soon you're going to pay for your sins, Garret!"*

"You don't scare me, bitch."

"That's too damned bad, because I'm going to repay you for every moment of hell both me and Julita have endured at your hands. I still haven't forgotten the moment you grabbed the child from my arms. I reached out to hold her, but you took her away. My arms were empty and remained empty. For years, Garret, I had no child to hold, no child to love, no child to fill my empty arms."

"What do you mean? You died right after she was born."

"I was there, and I've been there every day and every night since."

Garret suddenly remembered hearing the music box playing at odd hours. It haunted him—the music whirling around in his mind. His dreams were dark and chilling, and filled with a pale, sorrowful woman looking down at a child wanting to reach out and touch her, to hold her, but knew she couldn't.

Greta's ghostly face became etched in sorrow, her words tearful and faint. *"But I couldn't do anything for her. I couldn't even protect her from you or Lucretia. I couldn't do anything but watch her torment. Until now!"* All at once her face changed to one of hellish determination as she looked up at him, her once dim, cloudy eyes now alive with the flames of hell. *"I've watched you make her miserable with your demands. I've watched you yell and threaten her. You think you've saved her from some kind of hell. Well, I have news for you, Garret, she's still in hell, it just has a different address!"*

The words kept beating him like sharp stones.

"You won't stop until you're dead, will you, Garret? As long as you're alive, Julita will never be safe."

"You bitch," he said, his voice trembling in anger. "So I'm not perfect, so what? What about you? You were nothing but a whore."

"Only because you liked me that way. Remember the games I had to play to keep your interest? They were disgusting and sick."

"You have a lot of nerve casting blame on me. You've taken possession of Julita several times. You think I can't see your miserable presence in her?"

"For a very good reason, Garret. I knew the only way to fight you was through her. That spoils the game, you see because after all these years I know how to handle you. You have to be in control, Garret, the one in power. A strong woman is a threat. An unnecessary challenge. You'll back away every time. You wait until her defenses are down, and then you zero in. You like the weak, the defenseless. I knew if you saw me in her, you'd back away like a scared dog."

"What about tonight when you tried to entice Shadoe?"

"That wasn't entirely me. I had entered her for another task, but he interrupted and something inside Julita began to react to his closeness. I had to take over and act out of character to get him out of there. I knew he would figure out the truth, but it also helped me to learn something about their relationship."

“There won’t be any relationship. I’ll see to that.”

“You won’t ruin it between them,” she hissed. “He already thinks he’s not good enough. He’s willing to give her up so she’ll have what he feels she deserves. That’s how much he loves her. But they’ll be together. I’ll see to it. And you? You’ll be dead!”

“You’re talking crazy. What have I done that’s so bad? I am what I am, a man of the flesh, always have been. There are millions in the world.”

“There are also millions in hell. But don’t worry, there’s a place for you.”

“If there is a hell, why aren’t you in it? Besides, I don’t believe in hell.”

“Your hell is inside you, Garret. You hold nothing sacred, not even your wife. When you did take me, you took me by force, just as you take everything you want.”

Trying to find words that would hurt her, he spat out, “Even at your best you were never as good as other women I’d had.” He knew the only way to get back at Greta and the words began rolling off his tongue. “Young, beautiful women with soft, hot little cunts. Tight and luscious. I remember so well,” he whispered. “When I enter I can taste the sex as well as feel it. They gave—”

“Stop it!” Greta yelled, her sobbing voice pleading.

“Even those that gave begrudgingly were good,” he continued, his voice taunting, “but that’s the way I like it, so I take—no I steal, plunder, ravish until I reach that summit where I become a fountain, spewing forth my hot, hellish, burning seed!”

“You’re a liar,” she rasped, her nostrils flaring with anger. “I’ve seen your pursuit of those you had your eye on and all were faster than you. I almost felt sorry for you limping along, trying to catch them. You made a fool of yourself, Garret, and you know it. I promise you this. You’ll never get another chance,” she cried.

“Oh? And what makes you so sure? I may be up in years, but I still consider myself in my prime.”

“I’m going to kill you, Garret, that’s why. For your blatant unfaithfulness, for Julita, for so many things.”

He looked at her with loathing in his eyes. “To think I loved you at—”

“Stop lying!” she shouted. “How could you love me when the word is foreign to you? You never loved anything in your life.”

"All right, so I admit it! I never loved you. The nearest I ever got to love was Julita."

She looked at him as if he were scum. *"If anyone deserves hell, Garret, it's you."*

"Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not going to hell or anywhere else, so get out!" He pushed himself away from the wall and limped across the room and got as far as the door, then stopped when he heard her voice but didn't turn to acknowledge her.

"Haven't you found it strange that I keep referring to Julita as my daughter?"

He turned quickly. "What do you mean?"

"I mean she's not yours."

Garret's face suddenly paled, and he whirled around. "What the hell are you trying to say?"

"Remember the oil man from Texas? He came up to sell you stock in his oil wells. Blond, rugged, and beautiful. We—"

"You bitch!" he bellowed. "Behind my back, you—"

"So what?" she hissed. "You weren't interested! We weren't even sleeping together then. I'm surprised you didn't figure it out for yourself. But you were so sure that no woman would choose another man over you that you never considered the possibility. What a pompous ass you were! Still are! The years haven't changed you at all."

"Then Julita's not, and never was, my daughter? But why are you telling me this now?"

"Hasn't it struck you strange that everyone in the Van Dare family is insane? You. Lucretia. Well, you'll be happy to know that Julita has escaped the Van Dare insanity curse. Belonging to another, she will live a long and productive life with the man she loves without the threat of someday going mad. You see, this is my way of setting her truly free."

All this time I thought..." He looked at the apparition, hate glittering in his eyes. "This is a lie. It has to be. I know my own daughter!"

"You know nothing!"

"God, I wish you were still alive so I could have the pleasure of killing you all over again!"

"Sorry," she said, with an echoing whisper, *"now it's my turn."*

"Yeah? And just how do you intend to do it?"

"I'm not going to tell you," she said, her voice faint and breathy. "I'm going to make you wonder. Will it be today, tonight, in the next moment, or a year from now? Will it be—?"

"You think you can beat *me*? Garret Van Dare?" he said, turning crazily, lifting his eyes and shouting into the dark spaces of the dome.

She was silent for several seconds, then the damning words came. *"Why don't we put it to the test?"*

"Ridiculous," he muttered, feeling his defiant streak rise up. She was dead, what hold could she possibly have over him? All of a sudden he felt himself being thrown through the air, landing against the four walls time and again, over and over until he was weak and bruised.

But no one was in the room.

In only seconds the musty smell of wet grave dirt rose on the air just before the front door was flung open. Walking over to close it, he looked outside and saw Greta's garment trailing behind her as she seemed to float through the bushes and trees blowing in the high winds. Where was she going? He had to know, so he followed her, limping as he ran, and crazed with fear.

"What the hell is going on?" Shadoe said, running with Lucretia and Julita down the steps. They followed Garret, watching as he ran after Greta and fighting the wind as it howled.

Garret looked around for her while the overcast sky rumbled, the clouds low, darkening the day almost into night. From out of the corner of his eye he saw something glowing. The vision was white, and drifting. Somehow he couldn't take his eyes off it and followed as it led him to the ridge. The figure stood on the edge, her soft white arms waving for him to come closer. He could see it was Greta, and ran crazily toward her as if he had lost his mind.

When he neared the edge Shadoe yelled for him to stop, but he kept running, stopping only when he had almost reached the edge. Greta was there, her white, trailing garment blowing in the wind, her hair lifting and becoming tangled. Behind her was the restless ocean. The wind whirled, the waves crashed, and the mist that had come in from the ocean stayed low to the ground.

"You don't listen very well, do you Garret?" she called out, trying to be heard above the whistling wind.

“Get back in your grave, you bitch. I killed you once, and I can do it again!”

“Show me, Garret. What can you do to me now?”

He heard the challenge and anchored his eyes on her undulating form, shifting from her to the edge of the ridge, then out to the raging ocean, then back to her again. Slowly he began walking toward her.

“You’re a coward, Garret Van Dare, and you know it,” she said, egging him on. *“All cowards are the same, you know. They love to torment women. See them cry, beg, and plead. Like you, Garret, they need to feel in control.”*

A chuckle came from deep within his throat. “But that’s not cowardly, my love. That’s entertainment!”

“I forgot to tell you. Secretly I liked it. Your force, your energy, your constant drive. Oh, yes. I wanted it even more than you.”

“That’s a lie, you bitch! You were terrified, on your knees in fear, many times. You trembled, shook, there’s no way—”

“It was all an act, Garret. So you see, you weren’t in control at all. I was.”

“It’s not true, damn it!”

“But it is, Garret. Every minute I knew what you were thinking,” she said, inching backward as he came forward.

It’s now or never, he thought just before he ran toward her. “You fucking whore,” he yelled. Not realizing he was only a few feet from disaster, he lunged forward to push her off and found himself stumbling, his hands pushing through nothing but mist. No substance. He became unbalanced, his arms flailed, grabbing at her, but only a chilly mist greeted him just before he went over.

“Haaaaa haaaaa haaaa!” came a maniacal laugh that echoed in the wind, and became lost in the mist as a flailing body descended toward the waves and crashed against the bones.

* * * *

“Oh, my God!” Shadoe yelled when he looked around and saw Julita running toward the edge. “Get the hell back!”

While they were struggling, Lucretia made her way carefully to the brink, loose rocks tumbling over the edge as she knelt, crawling toward it.

"I've got to see!" Julita yelled, struggling with Shadoe. She finally freed herself from his grasp and ran closer to the edge and looked down. She saw her father skewered face up, one of the giant's rib bones sticking up out of his stomach. He hung there, his dead body being buffeted by the wind and waves.

Her scream pierced the air like a bolt of lightning.

Shadoe lunged into action, catching her just as she turned her head away from the grotesque sight of Garret's body hanging limp, being eerily moved by the elements in a dance of death, his blood dripping down the huge bone.

Her shoulders heaved while wracking sobs flooded through her trembling body. "He's gone, my papa's gone, dead." She looked up at Shadoe. "Why did he jump off the ridge, Shadoe? He seemed to be shouting at someone. Did he go crazy at the end?"

Shadoe scowled down at the tragic sight, then turned his head away sharply. "No, not crazy," he muttered. Even though the old man was a monster, Shadoe had tears in his eyes as well. It didn't take a genius to know what had happened. He had been skillfully maneuvered to the edge by Greta. His insane ramblings were at her. She must have taunted him until he lost control and tried to kill her once again.

She finally had her revenge.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Oh, Shadoe, I just wish it could've been different. All those years that I thought he was dead, I wished for a father. I even remember crawling up into his lap when I was little. And then," she brushed at her tears and looked up at him, "when I found out he was alive, I was out of my mind with happiness. I thought I had someone to protect me, someone to love me, someone to go to when I was afraid."

She suddenly quit speaking, and Shadoe felt her body stiffen. He looked down and saw her looking out into nothingness.

"My baby, my pretty, pretty baby."

"Mama?" she whispered, "Is that you?" Julita jumped up and ran toward the edge, the wet, displaced rocks causing her feet to slip. "Mama!"

"Don't come any closer, Julita. The ridge, it's..."

"I can see you," Julita called out. "Oh, mama, you're so beautiful."

"Julita, don't come—"

"Shadoe, I can see her. Can you see her? Isn't she beautiful?"

Shadoe followed Julita's eyes to the edge of the ridge and saw a floating apparition. While his eyes were averted, she began walking faster, reaching out, and then she stumbled, her arms flailing, her body falling down on the edge. She scratched, grasped at anything, but she kept slipping over the edge.

"Julita!" Shadoe shouted, running toward her. By the time he reached the edge he saw her dangling from a tree root, but he couldn't reach her. Desperate, he called out to the apparition floating beyond the ridge. "She was coming to you," he pleaded. "I can't reach her, but you can. Don't take her with you. I love her. I want her with me always."

Greta's heart went out to him. She heard Julita call out to Shadoe to help her and knew she belonged with him. She shifted her eyes and saw the young man's face, the passion, the love as he begged for her life through tears.

A scream pierced the air when Julita lost her grip and began falling. Greta gasped, seeing Julita plunging to the ground. Fear grabbed her, and she quickly moved forward and caught her, carrying her in her arms to safety and placing her on the ground with her back resting against a rock.

Greta lingered over her, caressing her cheek and running her fingers through her hair. Hungry for the sight of her daughter, her eyes searched her face. Finally she leaned forward, placed her misty lips on Julita's cheek, and whispered, *"Good-bye, my love. Be happy. I will see you again someday."* Before she left, Greta turned to Shadoe. *"Thank you for being there when Julita and I needed you."* She turned back to Julita and gazed at her lovingly. *"She'll be all right now. Stay with her and never let her go."* As she backed away from her daughter, Greta waved her arm over her, taking the ugly memories of falling, and seeing the ghost of her mother away.

Julita awoke soon after in the warmth of Shadoe's arms. "Shadoe, I'm frightened, and cold. Please take me back to the mansion." Her arms encircled his neck as he lifted her and headed for the warmth of the mansion. "Don't ever leave me, Shadoe. I love you."

"I won't, Julita. I'm here for you, my darling. Forever."

* * * *

Watching them, Greta smiled, then turned and looked over at Lucretia who was still huddled near the edge.

Only one more thing left to do, she thought while lifting her hands and orchestrating the winds.

In a sudden fury, a blast of cold, wet air circled around Lucretia, making her sneeze, and giving her a chill.

Yes, Greta thought. That will do for now.

Lucretia didn't know it—but her hell had only begun.

Epilogue

Lucretia could taste death on her lips.

She'd been feverish for the last few days and could see the shrouded phantom lingering in the shadows of her room. It had come for her as it had come for her father. She was not afraid of dying. She invited it. She wanted to be snatched from her misery. From seeing the two people she hated most whispering together, stealing kisses, and locking themselves in their bedroom. Even now she could hear their heavy breathing, kisses, and moans. She had worked her whole life to prevent this, but she had failed to hide her sister's beauty.

Even though she had nothing left, she had still won her escape from that tomb where people crazier than she merely existed. With death on her doorstep she would never have to go back.

As her illness worsened, her vision clouded and the room around her blurred. People surrounded her bed. They spoke words that echoed in her brain, but she couldn't understand their meaning. Faces floated above her, hands wiped her brow, eyes looked deep inside her, lips curled in strained smiles. The room smelled of alcohol and soap. Dim lights undulated, making grotesque shadows on the wall.

Maybe she was in hell.

No. She could hear the ocean outside her window. Water. Cool water. She struggled to rise from her bed, but hands from out of nowhere pushed her back down. She wanted the water. It would cool her raging fever. She muttered something and the edge of a glass was put to her lips. She pushed it away, trying to get to the balcony where the sheer curtains fluttered in the cool air like a ghostly vision.

Later, when the house was silent, and all the hands were gone, she woke from a dreamless sleep and stumbled to her balcony. She looked out at the restless ocean, longing for it—reaching toward it. She didn't know how she

got there, but she found herself walking along the beach, feeling the sand between her toes. Slowly the sand became wet and she could feel the icy water on her toes, her ankles. She welcomed the cold water, its coolness now riding up around her, washing along her hips, then her neck, her head. And then she felt a floating lightness as a comforting darkness curled around her, holding her like a beloved child in a warm blanket while she eased into death.

They say the dead are cold and empty, but she smelled the flowers, heard the sobs of the sister she had tormented. Where is the forgetfulness? Where is the peace? Even in death she can't forget. Her thin, smoky form walks among the living, confined to the foreboding old inn with its tall tower, its maiden's walk and magnolia trees. The statues seem alive, even the trees. Their eyes, their murmurings, their monstrous shadows flung long and frightening over the manicured lawn.

The inn is open again, run by the two lovers who finally found each other. The laughing guests come and go, but they don't see it as she does. They know nothing of the horror and fear that took place within its walls. To her, the cursed old inn is dark and foreboding, as cold and hard as the gravestone that stands above her head. Someday the old inn will crumble into dust, but she will not leave. She will continue to haunt the restless coast of Scarlet Bay—*until she is cast into flames!*

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Audrey Godwin is one of the most critically acclaimed romance authors on the scene today. She is a fan of the Gothic, and brings that ambience into the 21st Century. As a result her books are dark, mysterious and atmospheric. Her writing style is exotic and highly sensual, and has been compared with the dark, lush descriptive phrases of Anne Rice, and the hot, sizzling love scenes of Jackie Collins. Her writing style has been described as, "Danielle Steele—with a twist!" She's known for taking chances, boldly coloring outside the lines and digging deep inside herself in order to give her readers everything she has. Passion, excitement, romantic tension, emotion and tears. Her novels are gutsy, earthy and gritty and her endings are sometimes happy, sometimes bittersweet, and sometimes surprising. Good will always overcome evil... *even though it might have to take a dark twisted path to get there!*

Frankly speaking, Audrey is known for her writing of smut in the adult world. She writes gritty, lust-in-the-dust sex in stories that has plenty of substance to them. If you choose to take a bite... be prepared for a mouthful!

Hey, thanks for daring to delve into the dark and wonderful world of erotica writer, Audrey Godwin. If you want to know more about me, just click into my website and (wink) I'll be there.

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